

A meaningful approach to manpower policy and planning in a developing economy must take into account the two crucial dimensions of the problem: quantity or number, and efficiency.

Review Article

The Use of African History
How Europe Underdeveloped Africa by Walter Rodney

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Walter Rodney's recent paperback on African history¹ is too important to be allowed merely to stagnate in the review sections of tiny academic journals. Rodney's credentials as a serious historian² and as a political activist³ alone entitle him to serious attention; so does the intrinsic worth of this book. He is a Guyanese Marxist with a doctorate in African history, extensive university teaching in Tanzania, and an expulsion order from Jamaica. In the unique atmosphere of socialist Tanzania, what is unthinkable almost everywhere else in Africa is not only thought, it is occasionally practised. It is exciting to know that Rodney has been stimulated by that atmosphere. But he went to Tanzania as a radicalized West Indian, and, out of what he would no doubt call the dialectic interplay of those two influences, emerged the heightened consciousness which this provocative book demonstrates.

How Europe Underdeveloped Africa is a political action. Not for Rodney the spurious neutrality of the social scientist. He knows why modern Africa is in its present shabby state, and his title says it all. Nor does he engage in the bleeding-heart controversies which dissipate the energies of so many historians. The function of history is clear and simple: it is to enable us to understand the present in order that we may act knowledgeably upon the future. Finally, he eschews pretensions to be a mere purveyor of data. His considerable learning has led him to the bold conclusion that "African development is possible only on the basis of a radical break with the international capitalist system, which has been the principal agency of the underdevelopment of Africa over the last five centuries". (p. 7) The book is designed to justify this assertion—Rodney would disdain the word 'hypothesis'—and that attempt merits summarizing.

Rodney sees the unfolding of human history in basic and conventional Marxist terms. Europe's bourgeois class, through its technological supremacy, has been able to dominate and exploit Africa (and the rest of the third world), denuding it of its surplus wealth and thus precluding it from accumulating capital for its own development. This unequal relationship accounts for Africa's present level of underdevelopment, rather than more traditional explanations involving race or geography. Rodney neatly sums up this neo-colonial situation:

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¹ *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (London: Bogle-L'Ouverture Publications, and Dar es Salaam: Tanzania Publishing House, 1972), 316 pp., \$3.75.

² *A History of the Upper Guinea Coast* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970).

³ *Groundings with my Brothers* (London: Bogle-L'Ouverture, 1969).

"in the absence of direct political control, foreign investment ensures that the natural resources and the labour of Africa produce economic value which is lost to the continent." (p. 31) Such is the power of modern capitalism that African economies have been integrated into its very structure. Africa has become a satellite, structurally dependent upon the metropolitan powers, that is, Europe and the United States. And this economic dependence has been reinforced by the powerful socializing force of Western religion and schooling, which have helped to create a foreign, and dangerously dysfunctional, frame of reference for African achievement. These are the factors responsible for Africa being, by comparative standards, an underdeveloped, and *underdeveloping*, continent.

Rodney believes that the source of this dilemma must be traced back to the initial contacts between Europe and Africa. His description of African society prior to the earliest European penetration at the end of the fifteenth century is not as eloquent as, say, Basil Davidsons'.⁴ Still, it will be a revelation to anyone coming to it for the first time. And the initiated will be usefully reminded that Africa, like the rest of the world, was comprised of societies of dramatically uneven development—from the pygmy hunters of the Congo forests to the Muslim rulers of the Western Sudan.

The significance of the point is crucial: "looking at the most advanced social formations [in Africa], one would appreciate the potential of the continent as a whole and the direction of change." (p. 41) According to Rodney's Marxism, "the process of dialectical evolution" leads "from lower to higher social organization". Obviously, however, this process is not immutable. In Africa's case, as he vehemently insists, European intervention prevented the fulfilment of Africa's potential. It is less clear under what conditions the process functions in the prescribed Marxian manner.

We now know that the original development gap between Europe and Africa was far less profound than we were all taught only a decade or so ago. Nevertheless, Europe plainly had a decisive lead in commercial, military, and technological terms. Africa, which Rodney situates not very helpfully at a level "below mature class-ridden feudalism", was no match for the more innovative and dynamic emerging bourgeoisie of sixteenth century Europe. As a result, the interaction between the two was tragic for Africa. Over almost five centuries of continuous contact, Rodney claims, "Africa helped to develop Western Europe in the same proportion as Western Europe helped to underdevelop Africa." (p. 85) As an exact equation, the statement is foolish. As a general proposition, it is critical.

European capitalism created the slave trade which in turn helped make capitalism viable and ultimately dominant. Both J. S. Mill and Marx understood that European capitalism tied together Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean as satellites of Europe. In Marx's words, "the discovery of gold and silver in America; the extirpation enslavement and entombment in mines of the

4 Any of Davidson's dozen books on Africa make refreshing reading. Perhaps the most popular is *Africa: History of a Continent* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1966).

aboriginal population; the turning of Africa into a commercial warren for the hunting of black skins, signalled the rosy dawn of the era of capitalist production".⁵

In return for this vital contribution, African development was retarded by countless generations, even by centuries. In every way the slave trade was destructive of Africa's interests. Untold millions of its healthiest young men and women were lost to it. Alone in the world, Africa's population failed to increase significantly between the seventeenth and nineteenth century. "Quite apart from the moral aspect and the immense suffering that it caused, the European slave trade was economically totally irrational from the viewpoint of African development." (p. 109) Where would England be today, Rodney asks, had millions of its citizens been sold abroad into slavery?

He dismisses with proper scorn and contempt those who dare argue that, its immorality apart, the slave trade produced certain economic benefits for Africa. Indeed, Rodney demonstrates the applicability to Africa of the thesis which Gunder Frank has evolved for Latin America.⁶ The slave trade led to the abandonment in much of Africa, for example, of the traditional practice of iron smelting, a patent instance of technological regression or, in Frank's phrase, "the development of underdevelopment". Equally important, it stultified any spirit of scientific inquiry which might have existed and which in contemporary Europe was a superstructural concomitant of early capitalist development. Europe's era of invention and discovery was paralleled in Africa by an era—still, alas, very much with us—of stagnating self-contempt.

The two, of course, were inextricably related. By the colonial era, whatever dynamic economic groups remained in Africa—the Yao of Malawi and Mozambique, the Swahili of East Africa—were associated with and dependent upon foreign trade. A 'multiplier effect' was at work in both continents, but with diametrically opposite consequences for each.

It is true, it must be added, that the slave trade did not sweep through Africa like a bush fire, as Senegal's Senghor once claimed, leaving nothing standing. Political organization especially advanced, particularly in those areas affected only peripherally by the slave trade. Yorubaland, Dahomey, Zululand and the Islamic Caliphate of Sokoto are only the most prominent of the expanding units whose remarkable history Rodney summarizes.

Still, continuing to feed off its African satellites, European development was infinitely greater. Finally, the evolution of European capitalism led it to a stage of development where it needed—and had the capacity—to extend its universal dominance in a more systematic and all-embracing manner. Even we in the West have learned that it is acceptable to label this the age of imperialism (which simply means capitalist expansion) in which the process of exploitation reached unparalleled levels of sophistication.

The relative ease with which Europe colonized Africa was a function of the way consciousness was distorted on both continents as a result of their

5 Cited by Rodney on p. 93.

6 Andre Gunder Frank, *Capitalism and Underdevelopment in Latin America: A Historical Study of Chile and Brazil* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1969).

interaction. Europe was infected with a virulent racism which helped rationalize injustices of the grossest magnitude. The equivalent African phenomenon was manifested in at least three related ways. First was the creation of a tiny but effective class of Africans in whose short-term self-interest it was to act as agents (or, in the jargon, compradors) of European commercial interests. Then, well before the formal colonial period, there began to evolve the conviction that European education was the *sine qua non* for acquiring the white man's obviously superior skills, and his values as well.

Finally, while there was serious (if futile) physical resistance to the imposition of colonialism by numerous African groups, many rulers chose to forge alliances with a European power against their own local enemies. A sensible decision from their narrow perspective, this strategy almost invariably proved to be self-defeating. In the end, it made little difference whether the invading imperialists were resisted or accommodated: all of Africa was reduced to a greater or lesser degree of impotence and dependence.

One of the obvious functions of imperialism in Africa was the extraction of surplus capital, a function equally true today. Europeans grabbed control of virtually all of Africa's tremendous natural resources and repatriated substantial profits back to Europe. African miners and plantation workers were paid scandalous wages, while African cash crop peasants were totally dependent on prices set by the monopolistic European trading companies and usurious interest rates charged by local businessmen, usually from alien lands such as Lebanon or India. At the same time, of course, the prices of imported goods were also set in Europe.

The colonial Governments were cooperative partners in these arrangements. Predictably, there was considerable lateral mobility among politicians, civil servants and businessmen. In the colonies, the best possible conditions of stability and order were created in the interests of maximum surplus extraction. European Governments often benefited directly. During World War II, as the Colonial Secretary of the Belgian Government-in-exile later acknowledged,

... the Congo was able to finance all the expenditure of the Belgian Government in London, including the diplomatic service as well as the cost of our armed forces in Europe and Africa, a total of some £40 million. In fact, thanks to the resources of the Congo, the Belgian Government in London had not to borrow a shilling or a dollar, and the Belgian gold reserve could be left intact.⁷

There continue to exist today respected scholars who hold that colonialism benefited Africa at least enough to create the preconditions for its becoming a 'developing' continent.⁸ In fact, as Rodney shows, the very opposite is closer to the truth: "the colonization of Africa and other parts of the world formed an indispensable link in a chain of events which made possible the technological transformation of the base of European capitalism". (p. 190) As a result of this massive advance in scientific technique in the metropolis, the gulf between

⁷ Cited by Rodney on p. 188.

⁸ For example, L. H. Gann and Peter Duignan; see the introduction to the volume of essays they edited, *Colonialism in Africa*, Vol. 1 (London: Cambridge University Press, 1969).

African and Western European levels of productivity widened enormously by the end of the colonial period. In the words of George Padmore, the West Indian turned pan-Africanist, "The black man certainly had to pay dear for carrying the white man's burden".⁹

Even now that formal colonialism has ended, that burden remains great. Nkrumah was right in seeking first the political kingdom. But political independence, while a necessary condition for African development, was far from a sufficient condition. The new African leaders and their ubiquitous white advisers, including the minority of radicals of both races, failed to grasp the real nature of Africa's underdevelopment, and consequently proceeded to exacerbate it. They understood, needless to say, that colonialism had been a bad thing, but in a real sense believed the problem to be that there was not enough of it. Was large-scale private investment necessary for growth? Then make independent Africa even more attractive and profitable for Western investors than colonial Africa had been. Did the new Governments need greater working capital? Then seek substantial loans from abroad regardless of the mounting debt and dependence. Did the West need African extractive exports? Then concentrate on expanding that sector, regardless of the distorted nature of a monocultural economic base.

Few perceived that these policies largely reinforced the very causes of underdevelopment. Foreign investment was part of the problem—a very major part—not part of the solution. After centuries of Western domination, Africa had been tightly locked into an international political economy; its development was overwhelmingly determined by the patterns of production and consumption of the United States and Western Europe. The objective consequence of post-independence strategies in Africa has been to perpetuate this situation, only now under the aegis of Africans themselves. That is the meaning of neo-colonialism: structures of oppression and domination are not undermined, they are merely indigenized.

We can now usefully summarize—although Rodney unfortunately does not—the major components of Europe's legacy to Africa: the development of economic patterns directing the flow of capital abroad; the diversion of productive labour into producing commodities for export; the reliance on international trading patterns controlled by the West; the alienation of much of the best land to foreign ownership; the division of the continent into artificial national entities; the creation of one-crop economies; the creation of dependence upon foreign capital and technology; the creation of a largely non-productive, non-investing, local middle class; and the transplanting of an alien frame of reference and value system. Africa, like most of the non-socialist third world, has been mystified into believing that development means westernization, or becoming as much as possible like us, through the same means that were effective for the West. Whether or not the goal is desirable, the nature of third world underdevelopment makes it quite simply unattainable.

This is Walter Rodney's argument. If he is right, and if he is read,

ignorance will no longer be an adequate excuse for Africans to collaborate in their own ongoing underdevelopment, or for progressive Westerners to support the trade, aid and investment policies of their respective Governments. It is necessary to ask, therefore, first how good his book is and secondly how useful can we expect it to be?

I think Rodney has put together the most important book we now have on the history of Africa. The perspective he offers has never before been applied across the whole history of the continent. His book is a major step in providing an initial analysis of historically-rooted structures of domination in Africa, and must on that account be enthusiastically welcomed.

So it is the first such book of its kind. And it is very broad in its scope. And it is, as I already noted, a political action. Sympathetic readers will see these facts as excusing some of the book's weaknesses. Rodney explicitly aims his work at African students and no doubt will disdain criticisms of a more academic nature; still, one wishes he had deigned to use an occasional reference or two so that the several unnamed historians whom he execrates would become less anonymous. Some of his larger generalizations, especially those describing early African societies, demonstrate considerably more confidence than the evidence now available would ordinarily permit. Similarly, certain key assertions are made altogether too facilely. Philip Ehrensaf's criticism of Gunder Frank is equally applicable to Rodney:

To state, for example, that the surplus gained from England's participation in the slave trade and slave plantations or her conquest and colonization of India was utilized for and greatly facilitated the Industrial Revolution is an historically documented proposition. Contending that surplus from the periphery was *necessary* for industrialization is a far more complex proposition requiring a rigorous theoretical and empirical demonstration which Frank, for example, does not present to his readers.¹⁰

Nor does Rodney, and perhaps in terms of his own purposes in writing the book it was not necessary for him to do so. As he must know, he has left himself open to academic attacks on any number of conventionally accepted grounds: sweeping generalizations, glib assertions, selective evidence, and the like. The cumulative impact of all such criticisms would not, however, serve in my view to discredit Rodney's overall argument. I therefore want to look at some weaknesses of the book in terms of the political functions it was designed to play.

In the first place, much of the writing is sloppy and dull. It appears to have been written in great haste—undue haste. Especially since he claims to be addressing himself to students, a major rewriting job was called for. Moreover, the tone is often unduly shrill and strident, occasionally defensive. A Jamaican colleague told me that she could *hear* Rodney haranguing a crowd back home as she read the book, and for her it therefore made sense. But a young African reader, I would guess, would find that tone, and therefore the controversial arguments it is expressing, far less comfortable and acceptable.

10 Philip Ehrensaf, "Semi-Industrial Capitalism in the Third World: Implications for Social Research in Africa," *Africa Today*, January 1971, p. 52.

Nor is Rodney's credibility enhanced by his effusive treatment of the Soviet Bloc. Not satisfied merely to indict the West, he finds it necessary to extol the virtues of what he insists on calling the "socialist nations". In his Manichaean universe, the capitalists are bad and the 'socialists' are good. It would have been legitimate simply to omit any references to the Soviet Union and its satellites, but Rodney could not bring himself to do so. He thereby quite gratuitously establishes himself an apologist for left totalitarianism, and it is fair to say seriously undermines his own major conclusion. What Africa must find is a new pattern of development based on indigenous needs and values. Yet Rodney makes it possible to infer that Africa need merely substitute one alien model of development for a different one.

This is not helpful. It is indeed as alienating as the jargon and concepts he continually employs in the name of Marxism. These are alienating not because they are Marxist, but because they are often sloppy and gratuitous. They frequently neither add to nor illuminate his analyses. What is the usefulness, for example, of the concept of the dialectic, when by it Rodney often means nothing more than the process and consequences of interaction? What is the usefulness of philosophical materialism, when he is pleased to point to a geographer and an archaeologist—neither of them Marxists—as showing "an awareness of the material environment"? Perhaps out of haste, perhaps because intellectual precision succumbs to political motivation, Rodney's particular use of Marxism seems dubious both as an analytic tool and as an organizing concept. As he uses them, his Marxist words and phrases function as often as not as mere slogans, and vitiate thereby the force of many of his arguments.¹¹

In sum, then, this could have been—and should have been—a very good as well as a very important book. What about the impact we can realistically expect it to make? I would judge that Rodney's book, first, will be relatively little read in Africa; secondly, that it will only marginally influence those who do read it; and finally, that it will frustrate the few whom it influences. Let me elaborate on these statements.

It is a safe prediction that few African Governments will allow the book to be used in their secondary schools. In any event, it is plainly too advanced for all but a minority of secondary students. Accordingly, the book has its largest potential audience at the university level. Most African Governments do not yet ban books, but it is a real question whether Rodney's publishers are equipped for widespread distribution to universities throughout independent Africa; south of the Limpopo River, of course, its existence will remain unknown. Those are two serious constraints. Then, in universities the book does reach, its dissemination will depend largely on professors of history and political science. How many of them can be expected to encourage their students to pay it close attention?

But above all, given the nature of their socialization to that point, including their elitist expectations which intrinsically function to reinforce the

11 For a much more meaningful and sophisticated use of Marxism in analysing African development, see Giovanni Arrighi and John S. Saul, *Essays on the Political Economy of Africa* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1973).

conditioning process, why should the tiny minority of Africans who reach university accept Rodney's analysis? As members of the ascriptive elite, the apocalyptic implications of his book fly in the face of their obvious class self-interest. Ordinarily, it is surely fair to suggest, Rodney would be the first to dismiss this class as objectively counter-revolutionary. It is to the revolutionary potential of peasants and workers that he ought to be addressing himself. Yet they assume no central role, no large role even, in his conclusions. There is no indication how, or even if, they can be mobilized for radical political action. Instead, the inference can reasonably be drawn that the students must form the revolutionary vanguard. In the end, the only strategy that can be inferred from Rodney's book—he himself explicates no clear strategies—is a Leninist one: the confrontation of the ruling elite by a new radical elite.

Rodney's long chapter dealing with education gives him away. It is the least satisfactory section in the book, the only one in which he fails to draw the logical conclusions from his own analysis. As a conventional critique of education as introduced in Africa in the colonial period, it is predictably and properly damning. But strangely enough, it lacks a larger structural dimension. Although he does, to be sure, indicate how institutionalized education serves further to underdevelop Africa both in cultural/psychological and in manpower terms, in the end he seems to see the need for only one major reform in the present system: the replacement of its comprador managing class with his new revolutionary managers. They would, presumably, substitute books like his own for those of, for example, the Rockefeller crowd, who dominate the university, it is true, even in socialist Tanzania. It is almost as if Rodney is suddenly retreating back from Marx to Hegel. But since his proposition is circular, it is all quite ambiguous: it may be that structural transformation is necessary to create the new class of young, anti-imperialist Africans, or that such a class is necessary to effect structural changes.

But as a Leninist, Rodney seems to be emphasizing the second, at least in the area of schooling. He is opting for the Soviet model, wherein the content of socialization was turned on its head, rather than the Chinese or Cuban model, wherein the nature of the education process has begun to be transformed. This is, in my view, a crucial error, for the very institution of schooling as it functions in Africa reinforces neo-colonialism. No upgrading of teachers, no token class on political education or work on the adjoining shamba, no Africanization of the syllabus, will overcome the value system inherent in the structure of the present schooling system. It inculcates elitism, authoritarianism, and ultimately dependence. It perpetuates, in short, the process of underdevelopment, and would continue to do so in Rodney's revolutionary Africa as surely as it has done in the Soviet Union.

These comments are harsh, but their harshness I think is ultimately in reaction less to Rodney than to the realities of present-day Africa. Perhaps Rodney himself is awed by the magnitude of the task ahead of anyone concerned to reverse the development of African underdevelopment. Although he speaks of strategies to escape underdevelopment, after all, in fact he offers none. There is only his sweeping conclusion: "African development is possible

only on the basis of a radical break with the international capitalist system. . . ." (p.7) He appends, alas, no final chapter on 'What Is To Be Done Now'. That is why I judge that this book will frustrate those Africans who accept, as I do, the validity of that conclusion. The recent coup in Chile legitimizes such frustration and apparently justifies pessimism. But it is obvious that Walter Rodney, for one, is not yet prepared to capitulate. Perhaps he agrees that his next task is a book that is much more prescriptive, and at least somewhat less Leninist. For a political action requires not only the reflecting on history, but the acting on it.