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WALTER RODNEY REMEMBERED

How Europe Underdeveloped Africa at 40

Michael O. West

How Europe underdeveloped Africa. That is a statement, not a question. The book that bears that name, like so many other notable literary events, is something of a historical accident. But for circumstances beyond the control of the author, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (HEUA) likely would never have been written.

A revolution of sorts happened in and around 1968, a revolution that was global in scope. HEUA may be seen as a lineal descendant of that revolution. Its author, theretofore a little-known lecturer in African history recently out of graduate school, appeared on the stage of history in 1968, not as an interpreter of historical events but as an actor in them. Black Power was part and parcel of the revolution of 1968. Through no particular fault of his own, except perhaps his involvement in Black Power, Walter Rodney, at the tender age of twenty-six, emerged as both scribe and subject of history.

It is in vain, however, that one peruses the Preface to HEUA for an acknowledgment of the directors of the drama that landed its author on the historical stage, namely the government of Jamaica. Had the Jamaican authorities not ejected Rodney from Jamaica, and then so rudely, HEUA cannot have taken the form it actually did, if indeed it would have been written at all. It is a product of a particular time, and a particular place, that book. It could not have been composed at the University of the West Indies at Mona, Rodney's alma mater and the institution from which, now as a faculty member, the Jamaican government booted him in 1968.

Nor could HEUA have been written at Ibadan. The premier center of African historical studies in early postcolonial Africa, the University of Ibadan, or rather the work then being done there, strongly influenced Rodney's SOAS dissertation. The Ibadan school stood out for its loud rejection of the colonial master narrative and, alternatively, its unrelenting emphasis on indigenous self-consciousness and self-organization. In fine, Ibadan became synonymous with African agency, as iconically inscribed in K. O. Dike's 1956 book, *Trade and Politics in the Niger Delta*.

The Ibadan approach is everywhere evident in Rodney's dissertation, which appeared in book form in 1970 as *A History of the Upper Guinea Coast*. Dike's opus had focused on a single nation-state in formation, notably Nigeria. *A History of the Upper Guinea Coast* was more adventuresome, roaming freely along the upper West African littoral, and crossing Portuguese, French and British territories with cheerful abandon—too much abandon, it turned out, for the chiefs of African studies, as always fleet of poison pen, which they gleefully unsheathed in reviewing the book of the now infamously radical Rodney.

Indeed, given the spatial and epistemic parameters of his intellectual project, Ibadan would have been a natural fit for Rodney as a freshly-minted PhD. But it would not come to pass. The Nigerian coup of 1966, soon to be followed by the civil war, foreclosed for Rodney the Ibadan option. With or without the civil war, though, Rodney a priori had ruled out taking a job in Nigeria. He abhorred

Nigerian politics, which (then as now) was riddled with opportunism, corruption and neocolonial intrigues.

On leaving graduate school, Rodney went to the University of Dar es Salaam. Viewed from the standpoint of historical scholarship, and more particularly Rodney's specialty, West African history, Dar was a poor substitute for pre-civil war Ibadan. But Dar repaid politically whatever historiographical – I dare not say intellectual – loss Rodney's absence from Ibadan may have entailed. Dar offered a window unto the experiment in African socialism then underway in Tanzania, where Rodney arrived in 1967, the year of the Arusha Declaration, perhaps postcolonial Africa's most original political document. Tanzania offered a budding Rodney a unique opportunity to merge, on African soil, his learning and his politics.

But it was in Jamaica, to which he decamped after not quite a year at Dar, where Rodney really set out, in his own locution, to put African history in the service of the black revolution. That was his main subject, in and out of Mona, where he joined the faculty at the beginning of that fateful year of 1968. The same subject, African history in the service of the black revolution, also became the focus of Rodney's address to the Congress of Black Writers in Montreal, Canada, in October 1968.

The Jamaican government loathed the one nearly as much as it did the other, African history and the black revolution, seemingly confirming Rodney's thesis of an indissoluble link between the two. In a corresponding antithesis, Rodney was declared a prohibited immigrant on returning to Jamaica from the Congress of Black Writers, the government refusing to even allow him off the plane on which he had arrived from Canada, lest his contagious Black Power feet again should pollute Jamaican soil. It remained for the Mona students, soon to be overtaken by less decorous urban youths, to supply the synthesis. Rodney was back in Canada, but the so-called Rodney riot, as the rising his banning sparked became known, was underway.

It was not the first time in living memory that a rebellion in the Caribbean had taken on the name of a particular individual. There were, for instance, the 1937 Butler riots in Trinidad, named after the activist Uriah Butler. In or out of the Caribbean, however, history has likely recorded few instances of an academic, and then one as young as Rodney, being accorded a similar eponymous distinction.

Turned out of Mona, where he had sought to repay a debt to the Caribbean masses, to whose toil and taxes he said he owed his education, Rodney returned to Dar. Three years later *HEUA* appeared. It was an intellectually vibrant place, Dar, during the period of *HEUA*'s gestation. The university hosted a Babel of expatriate academics from all over Africa and the world, many of them drawn to Tanzania by the Arusha Declaration and what it represented. Like Rodney, a number of these individuals were so many castaway stones, having been refused by the builders of other universities in other countries. In combination with others, they coalesced into the core of the social sciences at Dar, the chief cornerstone of the university in its radical incarnation.

Tanzania, however, was not just a magnet for loose-footed academics. The country also served as a base for practically every African liberation movement east of the River Congo. Freedom fighters from South Africa, Namibia, Zimbabwe, Mozambique and Angola flocked to Tanzania. Some of those freedom fighters were men and women of higher learning, even academics, such

as the FRELIMO leader and Syracuse University PhD Eduardo Mondlane. In the lingo of the era, Tanzania was a frontline state. This fact, as much as the cosmopolitanism of the university, formed the prehistory of Rodney's book. The conjunction of forces, intellectual and political, explains why *HEUA*, as we have come to know and love it, could only have been produced at Dar.

In the Preface, Rodney explained that his objective was "to try and reach Africans who wish to explore further the nature of their exploitation, rather than to satisfy the 'standards' set by our oppressors and their spokesmen in the academic world." He succeeded wondrously in both endeavors. In and out of Africa, explorers of the nature of African exploitation erupted in cries of hosanna. As anticipated, too, *HEUA* greatly displeased the oppressors of Africa and their academic handmaidens. Publicly, the chiefs of African studies met *HEUA* mostly with stony silence. The poison pens that greeted *A History of the Upper Guinea Coast* remained sheathed this time around, replaced by a conspiracy of silence. The few Africanists who deigned to speak up, generally protested that *HEUA* had compromised standards, if not abandoned them entirely, most appallingly in the neglect of that fetish of western academic historiography, the footnote; and abjured the book's supposed tendentious character and polemical tone, the very qualities that so electrified activists.

The carping condemnations were academic, in more ways than one. Rodney had written nothing less than a historical manifesto of the African revolution. And revolutionary chronicle, Rodney had learned at the feet of his teacher and interpreter of revolution, C. L. R. James, is too urgent and hallowed to bow before the golden calf of academic objectivity. Speaking in 1971, the year before *HEUA* appeared, James had noted: "you can't write a well-balanced history of a revolution, because a revolution is something that creates disorder and unbalances everything. And if you are going to write on both sides, you write nothing!" How Europe Underdeveloped Africa is not nothing. It is something. It is, in fact, something else. Then, as now, it has something to say to struggling humanity in and out of Africa. Now, as then, its message ought command our attention.