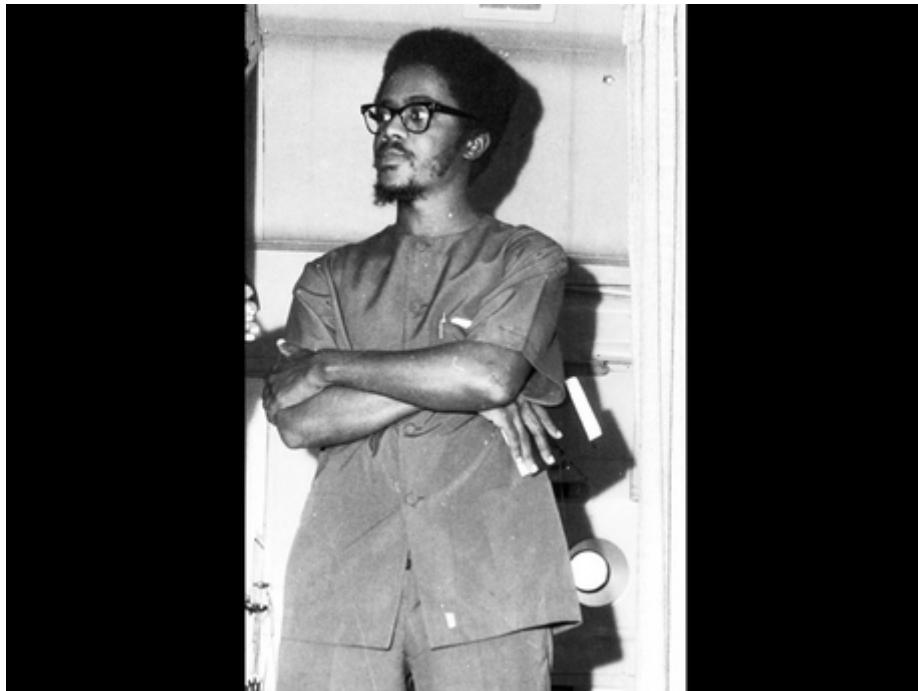


## Walter Rodney

**By Derek Gideon | August 17, 2017**

Historian and labor activist Walter Rodney (1942-1980) is a figure of two major internationalist discourses which operated in the anticolonial movements of the 1960s and 70s, pan-Africanism and Marxism. Alfred López writes in the inaugural issue of *The Global South* that the Global South can be found in “the mutual recognition among the world’s subalterns of their shared condition at the margins of the brave new neoliberal world of globalization” (2007, 3). As a movement intellectual deeply engaged with both grassroots organizing and scholarly research, breaking down barriers between the two across continents, Rodney stands at the center of earlier such moments of “mutual recognition.” His classic historical work *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* was a major intervention into the discourse of development and influenced the formation of world-systems theory as a means of understanding North-South inequalities.

Rodney lived, taught and was politically active in Guyana, Jamaica, and Tanzania, and saw the political struggles against oppression by African and African-descended peoples as deeply intertwined. His 1969 *The Groundings with My Brothers* is a powerful statement of Pan-Africanist commitment. Rodney analyzes black oppression in Jamaica, evokes the slogan “Black Power” emerging in the United States, and argues for the slogan’s relevance in Jamaica. He also advocates for the study of African history as part of revolutionary struggle, and describes the creativity and vitality of black, working-class Rastafarian communities in Jamaica, based on his own personal relationships with them. Rodney’s commitment to Marxism also shapes the politics of *The Grounding with My Brothers*. Rodney presents the Russian and Chinese Revolutions as major blows against Black Power’s opposite, “White Power,” arguing that even if Russians “are white and have power,” they nonetheless “are not a colonial power oppressing black peoples” (1990, 18).



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The example of Rodney's grounding of Marxist analysis in multiple colonial and neocolonial contexts supports Robert Young's analysis in *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction* that for anticolonial revolutionaries, "Marxism supplied a translatable politics and political language through which activists in very different situations could communicate with each other" and that "the very translatability of Marxism was itself subject to a process of translation that was not necessarily transparent" (2016, 169). However, for Rodney, the application of Marxist theory was not straightforwardly a matter of translation. In his 1975 lecture "Marxism and African Liberation", Rodney does briefly refer to the formulation of Marxist analysis in new contexts as a "translation in terms of time and place" (Rodney 2017, par. 47) However, he also distinguishes between Marxism as a "method" which is "independent of time and place" (Rodney 2017, par. 19) and Marxism as a set of conclusions derived from the application of that method. The common mistake, according to Rodney, is to think "Marxism is not merely a certain methodology applied to Western Europe, but is itself an ideology about Western Europe, about capitalism in the 19th century and cannot transcend those boundaries, when clearly Marx was doing the job he had to do" (Rodney 2017, par. 6). Rodney's characterization of Marx's "job" could as well describe his own scholarly work, using Marxism as a method to understand African, Caribbean, and South American realities.

In his essay "Ujamaa and Scientific Socialism," Rodney examines Tanzanian President Julius Nyerere's non-Marxist *Ujamaa* vision of African socialism and takes on the ambitious project of both analyzing *Ujamaa* in Marxist terms and arguing that *Ujamaa* has the potential to become a localized form of Marxist "scientific socialism" in practice, even if not in theory. Rodney makes this argument by way of an elaborate comparison between the situation of post-independence Tanzanian leaders and the Russian *Narodniks* or Populists who wrote to Marx in the nineteenth century, asking whether the Russian peasant commune could be the basis for a socialist society, without the need to pass through a capitalist stage of development.

Writing at a time when questions of development and underdevelopment were a central part of the discourse for decolonizing nations-states, Rodney tackled the question head-on in his classic historical work *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*. Rodney's major intervention in this work is to look at "underdevelopment" as a political condition inflicted on Africans by European colonial rule, challenging the discourse of "modernization theory," in which underdeveloped countries are presented as needing to "catch up" with developed countries. Rodney's wide-ranging account draws upon Latin American dependency theory, examples of the diverse forms of social organization and economic activity in pre-colonial Africa, and histories of the slave trade and colonialism to argue that "African economies are integrated into the very structure of the developed capitalist economies; and they are integrated in a manner that is unfavorable to Africa and insures that Africa is dependent on the big capitalist countries" (Rodney 1974, 25). Manning Marable cites Rodney as a major influence on his similarly titled historical work *How Capitalism Underdeveloped Black America*, noting that many African American activists of the early 1970's encountered Rodney in Dar es Salaam or in his visits to the United States. (Marable 2015, xxxi).

Rodney's activism cultivated in his return to Guyana and founding of the Working People's Alliance political party. His lifelong political commitment and death in a 1980 bomb explosion widely suspected to be the work of the Guyanese government have made him a worldwide symbol of the martyred revolutionary intellectual. Two major tributes to Rodney have subsequently been published, with contributors from three continents, all of whom either knew Rodney or were influenced by his work. The 2016 collection of oral interviews *Walter Rodney: A Promise of Revolution* contains contributions from African American poet and activist Amiri Baraka, Tanzanian legal scholar Issa Shivji, and Guyanese novelist Brenda Do Harris, all of whom knew Rodney personally through political work. The 1982 essay collection *Walter Rodney, Revolutionary and Scholar: A Tribute* likewise contains a wide range of contributors, including noted Trinidadian scholar-activist CLR James.

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