Groundings in Cuba: Echoes of Walter Rodney Today

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Editor’s Note: This article first appeared as “Walter Rodney Hoy” in the journal Anales del Caribe (Havana, 2018), pp.15-25. http://casadelasamericanas.org/publicaciones/analescaribe/2018/1.%20Walter%20Rodney,%20paradigma%20emacipatorio.pdf. It is printed here with permission for the first time in English translation.

Abstract: This brief essay places Rodney in the context of the development of trans-Atlantic African Diaspora consciousness and culture, and the development of non-Western contingent Marxist theories from dependency to his underdevelopment thesis. Rodney’s biography and intellectual development are contextualized in their Caribbean, Latin American and Diasporic Black contexts, and in the context of Rodney’s engagement with people, pedagogy and political processes in Jamaica, Tanzania, London and Guyana. Specifics of his Cuban sojourns and evolving conceptions of the revolution, his work on a book while there, and his placement within Cuban research and broader Caribbean and Latin American tendencies are examined.

Keywords: Walter Rodney, Cuba, Cuban Revolution, Pan-Africanism, Marxism, decolonization, African historiography, underdevelopment, dependency, Latin America, epistemologies

The dialogues and transfers of ideas that, on both sides of the Atlantic, replicate or reconstruct legends, lullabies, children’s stories, sayings and proverbs, are among the most fascinating findings of sociocultural anthropology. Scholars of the popular orality of the peoples of America often
attribute such similarities and symmetries to the cultural processes associated with the transatlantic trade and slavery in the Americas, as well as the migrations of Europeans and Asians that led to the “discovery of the New World.” Much less attention has been paid to the globalization of thought itself, the borrowings, modifications and reconstructions that – overcoming the obstacles posed by geography and linguistic diversity – have erected, level by level, the great edifice of human knowledge.

In the small and connected world of Antiquity, the transfers of knowledge and arts between North Africa and the Greek world were so natural that today is has become impossible to know how much of the productive practices, applied mathematics, astronomy, chemistry, medicine, pharmacology, sculpture, painting or architecture produced in Egypt were part of the splendor of Greece and Rome.¹ But after the sighting of American lands, the conjunction of imperial and business interests enthroned slavery as a productive system and encouraged the need – cultural and political – to deny the humanity of Africans. The so-called “Western Culture” not only ignored Africa as the cradle of the human species and tried to make its influence invisible, but it also systematically hid Egypt’s Africanity and relegated the philosophies and worldviews of those born on that continent to the status of backward regions.

Until well into the twentieth century, the intellectual history of humanity was restricted to the narratives of the former European metropolises and their opportunistic extensions to North Africa and the ancient Eurasian empires. The vast territory south of the Sahara was hardly recognized as a contextual reference in the historical-literary corpus of the colonial powers of yesteryear. Consequently, in the dictionaries and encyclopedias of the social sciences and humanities treasured by European and American universities, almost no surnames of African descent appeared. Nor were there entries related to the forms of Black consciousness of the Diasporic communities that, between the end of the eighteenth and the mid-twentieth century, wove transnational intellectual networks to articulate movements of identity and vindication, such as Negritude, Black Power, Pan-Africanism and Rastafarian culture.


For Rodney, knowledge of history was a fundamental weapon for the definitive emancipation of pan-African peoples, that is, of Africans and their descendants throughout the world. The need to reinterpret the past from present circumstances is spelled out nicely in “African History in the Service of Black Revolution,” the most important of Rodney’s three presentations at the Black Writers’ Conference held in Montreal in October 1968,³ in which he outlines the thesis that he developed, four years later, in his most important and well-known work, How Europe Underdeveloped

¹ El-Nadury and Vercouter 1983: 147-182.
² Oculi 2018: 45-58.
Horace Campbell is correct in attributing to Rodney the conviction that the study of African history, by itself, would not equip the exploited workers of the Caribbean with the racial/class consciousness and political culture necessary to initiate a transformative process. The Guyanese intellectual still viewed history as a pillar for the forging of Black self-awareness of one’s place in the world, and as a foundation from which to rebuild a past generative of self-esteem that would stimulate racial and class solidarity. Rodney was able to experience the decolonization processes from both sides of the Atlantic, their convergences and divergences, opportunities and challenges. As a student at the University of the West Indies, he witnessed the beginnings of Independence in Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago in 1962, one year after Tanzania and Sierra Leone and in the same period as Burundi, Rwanda, Uganda and Kenya. The complexities of this long-awaited pan-African liberation process fueled his anxiety over the ravages of colonialism and new forms of domination being introduced by imperialism in Africa, Asia and the Americas.

Rodney’s life journey took him from Guyana to Jamaica and from there to the United Kingdom, where his interest in deepening his knowledge of the trans-Atlantic trade and slave system led him to earn a doctorate in African history from the School of Oriental and African Studies at the young age of 24. His thesis, published in 1970 under the title *A History of the Upper Guinea Coast*, explored how Africa was impacted by the slave trade after its development process had been interrupted and dismantled. Before academia had produced and invented the term “globalization,” Rodney set out to explain history from one side of the Atlantic without losing sight of its other side.

Rodney acquired his formal specialization in London, where he was a member of the study group that operated in the house of Cyril and Selma James, in an environment of deep, comprehensive and passionate immersion in the evolution of the peoples of the Caribbean, the history of philosophy and Marxist analysis of the political and social problems of the moment. Such were the nutrients of his creative method for comprehending social reality and his dialectical perception of the relation between theory and practice. Thus, wherever he was, Rodney would teach, learn and then systematize his experience. His book *The Groundings With My Brothers* contains the reflections of a popular educator who, whether in the classroom, the street or the dungle, learns and transmits what he himself knows.

4 The other presentations made by Rodney in Montreal were: “Statement of the Jamaica Situation,” a text written with the Jamaican Robert Hill, then a student at the University of Toronto; and “The Groundings With My Brothers,” a reflection on the emancipatory battles of Black peoples and the Rastafarian movement in Jamaica, which was later included as the sixth and final chapter of the book of the same name.

5 Campbell 2016: 193.

6 David Austin, author of *Fear of a Black Nation. Race, Sex and Security in Sixties*, underscores the importance of this fórum in the ideological formation and the creation of Black consciousness among the many Afro-Caribbean youth who studied and worked in the British capital. He identifies among its participants in its discussions and debates, organized by C.L.R. James, Rodney, Norman Girvan, Orlando Patterson and Robert Hill, among others. All would become critical figures of contemporary Caribbean thought.

7 This work collects some of the conversation Rodney had with students, workers and residents of the dungles (dumps) of Jamaica. Published in 1969, its themes draw into focus the social and political problems of the time and reflect, in turn, the maturation of Rodney’s learning as a popular leader.
Throughout his brief and rich life journey, Rodney reiterated his conviction that “the history of Africans is intimately linked to the contemporary struggles of Black peoples.”8 Historicity as a principle is thus embodied in the idea of the ongoing bankruptcy and historical amnesia induced by colonialism, while his cultural thought radically questions Western civilizational paradigms, the dynamics and hierarchies established by ruling powers, by defining culture as the totality of a way of life: what people ate, how they dressed, walked and spoke, how they treated the dead or how they welcomed newborns.9

But Rodney was not only a historian. Such specialized knowledge would not have been sufficient to write How Europe Underdeveloped Africa, an essay difficult to classify from a disciplinary perspective in which the materialist philosophy of history underlines the narrative, and the historiographical perspective is aided by recourse to the tools of economics, sociology and demography to support his arguments. The exceptional nature of the time in which he lived made it possible for Rodney, a man in his early thirties, to accumulate vital experiences and sufficient knowledge with which to undertake a work of such magnitude.

The book was born of a historical period characterized by debates on the inability of developmental strategies to break dependency and modify the structural deformation of the nations represented at the Bandung Conference of 1955; the deepening of unequal exchange between the former metropolises and their colonies; the still imperceptible but incessant growth of foreign debt; the strengthening of the political control of imperialism through military dictatorships and puppet regimes; and the first global experiments of the capitalist culture industry to standardize social practices, aesthetic references and consumption.

Although less widely distributed internationally, the texts that Rodney produced during his stay in Tanzania stand out for their quality. Referenced by prestigious historians such as the Nigerian, Godfrey N. Uzoigwe and the Kenyan, Henry A. Mwanzi,10 these works added greater diversity to their studies on the modern history of Africa.11 He was already a recognized Africanist when in the mid-1970s, UNESCO asked him to join the International Scientific Committee in charge of writing a General History of Africa from the perspective of Africans.

In the fourteenth chapter of the seventh volume of this history, Rodney analyzed the impact of the resistance of African peoples during the gradual unfolding of the colonial economy between 1880 and 1910; development conditions in the key plantation and mining sectors; the gradual monetization of trade; the unequal exchange derived from the asymmetry of power and the organizational and technological weaknesses of African producers; the new slavery implicit in the temporality and mobility of the workforce, often recruited under duress; the ways in which capitalist economic structures transcended the arbitrary territorial limits imposed by politics, operating in favor of the most powerful colonial metropolises; and the structural factors that led to economic dependency, disequilibrium and underdevelopment in Africa.12

Rodney viewed it as misleading to conceptualize the colony as a dual economy, a differentiation between “modern” and “traditional” sectors, given that there was a dialectical

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8 Rodney 1969: 54.
11 Rodney 1971a, 1971b, and n.d.
relationship of interdependence between the supposedly dynamic modern enclave and the traditionalism of the village. This is perfectly reflected in the conflicts that animate the characters of Nigerian poet and narrator Chinua Achebe (1930-2013), author of the extraordinary “African Trilogy.”

In “Itineraries of an Anticolonial Trajectory: Intellectual Production in Frantz Fanon and Walter Rodney,” Chilean researcher Elena Oliva analyzes Rodney’s movements through space. She demonstrates that the lessons he learned in each area helped him articulate a Marxist, Third World and Pan-African perspective, which seemed to follow in the footsteps of the triangular trade that sustained European modernity.

Aware that the oppressed must join ranks in the face of power, which in capitalist societies is always the same albeit with differing nomenclatures, Rodney was always attentive to the intellectual production and political achievements of the Latin American Left and African-American struggles, at a time when Oliva writes, “the circulation of ideas in the peripheral world, at that particular moment of the 20th century, brought together Afrodescendants and Africans, Africans and Latin American/Caribbean peoples, Black and indigenous peoples, in short a good part of the world’s colonized.”

The criticism of American structural racism articulated by leaders of the Black Power movement, their application of Pablo González Casanova’s theses on “internal colonialism” to the specific situation of the United States, the anticolonial discourse of the 1968 Cultural Congress of Havana and his denunciation of the role of capitalism in fostering underdevelopment, as well as discussions regarding the function of intellectuals in the anti-capitalist battles of the time, are all present in Rodney’s work at the end of the 1960s.

Rodney was a Marxist thinker who out of his own free will distanced himself from reigning intellectual orthodoxies. His broad reach compelled him to read everything and to dialectally incorporate all relevant fields. Some scholars have placed him within the intellectual field of those who argued that structural dependency was the root of economic social problems in nations with a colonial past. One of them, the Chilean historian Eduardo Devés-Valdés in a valuable monograph dedicated to vindicating “peripheral thought” and its contributions to the intellectual heritage of humanity, places him with the school of “African dependency.”

I do not believe, however, that his work fits entirely within the dependency paradigm. In Rodney’s work, the interdisciplinarity of his model of analysis, his persistent calls for attention to the psychological dimensions of colonialism and neocolonialism, and the vindication of culture as the driving force behind the revolution, transcend the analytical “gameworks” of this academic tradition. I agree with González Casanova’s evaluation, reiterated by Oliva, that “Rodney combines the approaches of pan-Africanists and African revolutionaries, of the dependentistas in Latin America, and classic Marxists of Europe in a dialectical fashion.”

14 The “African Trilogy” consists of Things Fall Apart (1958), No Longer At Ease (1960) and Arrow of God (1964), renowned novels by Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe. Due to the sociological acuity and literary mastery with which the author exposed the contradictions and conflicts generated by European colonizers, and the paradoxical entrance of African peoples into Western “modernity,” Achebe is recognized as the founder of contemporary African literature.
16 Devés-Valdés 2014: 652.
An example of the dynamics that characterized the circulation of ideas at the time is the coherence between the theses formulated by Cuban critic Roberto Fernández Retamar in the 1968 Havana Cultural Congress on the “developed nations’” role in promoting underdevelopment, which are similar to the arguments presented by Rodney on the same topic at the Montreal meeting nine months later. Fernández Retamar’s text, entitled “Responsibility of the Intellectuals of Underdeveloping Countries,” was published by the magazine Casa de las Américas in its second issue of 1968. Quickly translated into English, it appeared in October of that same year in a special issue of the I.KON: Art and Revolution magazine out of New York dedicated to the Cuban Revolution.17

The author of this unexplored intellectual affinity between Walter Rodney and Roberto Fernández Retamar could have been C.L.R. James. The Trinidadian intellectual – Fernández Retamar recalls – was in the audience when he briefly spoke at the Havana convention. For his part, Rafael Acosta de Arriba, who rescues from oblivion and historically contextualizes the Havana Cultural Congress, specifies that James was among the protagonists of the dissemination and promotion of the conclave’s conclusions among a small group of Marxist intellectuals in London:

There, a group of Caribbean residents of the British capital held sessions to analyze the resolutions and documents of the Congress. Two symposia (one on April 5 and the other on May 3, 1968) were organized by John La Rose along with Andrew Salkey, C.L.R. James, Edward Brathwaite, Douglas Hall, and Irving Teitelbaum.18

The above quote and allusions contained in Rodney’s texts to the new life that the Revolution offered to Cuban Blacks, as well as the writings of Che Guevara and recently published literary works,19 reinforce my presumption that Cuba constituted for Rodney, whose first contact with the unrepentant island was in 1962, a source of inspiration and new knowledge regarding the future of Latin American and Third World revolutionary thought.

It is known that the Prime Minister of Jamaica, Hugh L. Shearer, fearful of the levels of awareness generated by Rodney’s political activity, prohibited him from returning to the country after the conclusion of the Montreal Congress of Black Writers. This decision originated the most virulent popular protest in Jamaica’s political history, as the city of Kingston was the scene of several days of riots led by university students and Rastafarian youth, and a wave of resentment and unrest spread to other Caribbean territories.

Some time ago, Armando Entrelago, who was the Cuban ambassador to the Republic of Ghana between 1963 and 1966, had extended an invitation to Rodney to broaden his inquiries

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17 This edition of I.Kon: Art and Revolution highlighted the 1968 Congress of Havana. A substantial article by Margaret Randall, who appears to have been influential in conceptualizing this issue of the magazine, chronicles the event’s activities and provides valuable testimony from some of its participants. Also translated into English were Haydée Santamaría’s farewell letter to Che Guevara, poems by José Lezama Lima, Pablo Armando Fernández, and Miguel Barnet; The Night of the Assassins by the playwright and storyteller José Triana, winner of the Casa de las Américas prize in 1965; and an article by Santiago Álvarez entitled “Cinema and Revolution.”

18 Acosta de Arriba 2015.

about Africa and its links to Europe. The offer was accepted. His second stay on the island lasted from November 1968 until June of the following year, a period during which, according to Horace Campbell, he concluded the research for *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*.20

One of his Cuban friends pointed out that in those months, “Walter studied Spanish, did research and read a lot,”21 while Patricia, his widow, remembers that “he worked on a manuscript, entitled ‘Black Struggles’ based on the Jamaican experience.” The lack of paper, one of many manifestations of the material precariousness that characterized Cuban life at the time, did not prevent Rodney from persevering in his work, “so he wrote on whatever paper he had in his hands, mainly on napkins.” Unfortunately, that manuscript was lost and with it, the expected conceptual follow-ups to his book *The Groundings With My Brothers*.

My sense is that the possibility of studying *in situ* the Cuban political and social system, and the direction of the island’s relations with European socialist countries and postcolonial states of Africa and Asia, fed his musings about pseudosocialism, a theoretical construct that Rodney did not complete but employed creatively in his analysis of the “cooperative socialism” implemented by Forbes Burnham in Guyana. “Socialist” at the onset, in order to mark his break with Cheddi Jagan’s communist-oriented Popular Progressive Party (PPP); collaborationist with United States policies between 1966 and 1970; self-declared “Marxist-Leninist” after the National People’s Congress (PNC) proclaimed the Cooperative Republic of Guyana in 1970; and opportunistically incorporated into the Non-Aligned Movement launched that year,22 Burnham’s winding trajectory deserves more careful study. Walter Rodney was among the first to appreciate the ideological and political regression that cooperative socialism signified within the emancipatory process of the Guyanese people.

In a talk given a few months after Rodney’s 1980 assassination and published in 1981 under the title “Walter Rodney and the Question of Power,” C.L.R. James criticized the man he regarded as a son and disciple for having returned to Guyana without there being a “revolutionary situation” or conditions for a popular insurrection. Certainly, the social and political context of Guyana in the mid-1970s was not characterized by an accumulation of tensions comparable to that of Jamaica between 1937 and 1938 or of Trinidad and Tobago in 1970.23

However, I believe that Rodney counted on the mobilizing force of the Working People’s Alliance (WPA), created in 1974 to bring together the oppressed Guyanese peoples of Asian and African descent, and his experience with mass consciousness-raising work, the effectiveness of which was on display in Jamaica; at the same time, he underestimated the perception of danger that his political activity generated in the Forbes Burnham regime and its determination to physically eliminate him.

Rodney’s fiery, familiar speaking style stopped being heard 41 years ago, silenced by an explosive device that sliced through his body and turned his car into a coffin. His legacy, however,

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20 Furé Davis 2007.

21 Testimony provided to the author via e-mail by Osvaldo Cárdenas, who was the Cuban ambassador to Jamaica and Suriname and a friend of Walter Rodney until his death.

22 Tennyson Lee 1989.

could not be detained because his life and trajectory and intellectual work serve as a link between geographies, cultures, and strategies of struggle that, differing among themselves, continue to confront the same oppressive power: that of globalized capitalism and its countless mechanisms of coercion, alienation and subversion.

At a time when the tradition of pan-Africanism was articulated by prominent international leaders, alive in congresses and festivals, Walter Rodney tried to set into motion a pan-Africanism of peoples so that the common person could become the protagonist of Afro-America’s social transformation (Campbell 2005). In an era characterized by Marxists’ distrust of Rastafarian culture and its characterization of it as “false consciousness,” he would say, referring to the Rastas with whom he fraternized on the streets of Kingston: “(A)bove all I would like to express my heartfelt gratification for all the experience they shared with me. Because I learned. I got knowledge of them, real knowledge.”24 This humanistic and heterodox perception of the historical subject is developed in The Groundings With My Brothers.

Other topics place Rodney at the forefront of the Pan-African thought of his time. For example, the arguments he presented at the Montreal Congress of Black Writers and the 1974 6th Pan-African Congress in Tanzania on what we today refer to as Afro-reparations; his warning calls about “cultural imperialism” and its refined techniques of domestication; and his meditations on the risks of bureaucratization and elitization of the socialist project when social welfare and empty rhetoric inhibit the participation of women and men in the transformation of their own lives.

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