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Walter Rodney and The Restatement of Pan Africanism In Theory and Practice*

Robert A. Hill

[And] yet 'tis clear that few men can be so lucky as to die for a cause, without first of all having lived for it. And as this is the most that can be asked from the greatest man that follows a cause, so it is the least that can be taken from the smallest.

— William Morris, *The Beauty of Life* (1880)¹

Discovery creates the unity [and] unity is created in struggle and is so much more valid because it is created in struggle.

— Walter Rodney (1974)²

The stimulus that ignited the modern Pan-African consciousness, both in Africa and the African diaspora in the West, was Ghana's attainment of political independence in 1957. Fanned by the winds of decolonization that swept the African continent and its aftermath, Pan-Africanism reemerged as the major ideological expression of African freedom. The nexus of black struggle was also enlarged significantly at the same time as the black freedom movement in the United States deepened and developed. When Malcolm X preached the importance to black struggle everywhere of Africa's strategic position on the world scene, he was building on the consciousness that was the result of a decade and a half of struggle.

There were profound reverberations from this renewal of Pan-African consciousness which were felt in the Caribbean, reawakening not only a sense of racial pride in Africa but also, more importantly, an awareness of the potential for transformation within the Caribbean region. Walter Rodney came of age politically during this time of Caribbean ferment. In the search for some alternative to the emergent neocolonial order in the Caribbean, following the collapse of the West Indies federation, the defeat of the socialist challenge in Guyana, and the liquidation of the popular mass movement in Trinidad in the early sixties, Africa's experience of the process of decolonization became a critical touchstone. Within the Caribbean, the sole exception to the mounting wave of political

reaction was the victorious Cuban Revolution. "I regard myself virtually as a product of a neo-colonial society, as distinct from a colonial society," Rodney recalled in reflecting on his career. He went on to explain that his "consciousness of West Indian society was not that we needed to fight the British but that we needed to fight the British, the Americans, and the indigenous lackeys." He termed this correctly "an anti-neo-colonial consciousness as distinct from a purely anti-colonial consciousness."³

The consciousness of the overlapping domains of popular struggle in Africa, America, and the Caribbean formed the basis of Rodney's essential political mission that guided his career as a revolutionary and scholar. When he was politically assassinated in June 1980 in Guyana, he was deeply involved in the struggle of the Guyanese people, and as the tragic news swept throughout the world, people in large numbers gathered in various countries to honor his name. The many intellectually liberating achievements that he contributed in the fields of history and political economy were everywhere upheld with a deep and abiding respect.

The death of Walter Rodney is one that has echoed and reechoed throughout the Pan-African world like few other events of recent decades. That is ample testimony, if such were really needed, of the popular affection that he attained in the hearts and minds of countless numbers of people. He was a Pan-African thinker and political activist in the fullest sense. At a memorial tribute to his life and work in London on 20 October 1980, C. L. R. James, the venerable Caribbean thinker, declared with abundant truth:

We in the Caribbean have played an important role in the development of the African Revolution. . . . I know nobody, no one more suitable for that position than Walter Rodney. *That's what we have lost.* Furthermore, all over the United States, Walter Rodney is known. I have been in Tanzania three times and I always ask about him, and they have always spoken in the highest terms of him. That communication between the Caribbean and Africa and the United States to bind the people together, *that we have lost. That's what we have lost in Walter Rodney.* We have not only lost a distinguished son of the soil. This is a man who had a role to play in the international development of all our people.⁴

Rodney thus stands out as a unique symbol and embodiment of a Pan-African revolutionary consciousness from the Caribbean. Whereas his own life was significantly shaped by the revival of Pan-African nationalism after 1957, it is equally true that his contribution before he died was no less than the regeneration of the theory and practice of Pan-Africanism within the operational sphere of the Caribbean. It is the purpose of this paper to offer an examination of this new stage of Pan-African struggle enunciated through his life and vision.

The main feature of the Pan-African synthesis that Walter Rodney attained was the fusion of his penetrating scholarly insights in the field of historical research with a deep and profound commitment, as a matter of principle, to participation in concrete movement of the West Indies in 1967-68, he explained that "I understood it to be my role to return to the University of the West Indies (from Dar es Salaam) and to relate to our people on the African question."⁵ The dynamic of "the African question" in his understanding, however, was never abstract or romantic; instead, he sought to define a rigorous examination of African history, on the one hand, while he tested it against the capacity of the people to carry forward their own struggle for liberation. At the forefront of his analysis was always the concern to eschew labels and dogma of any kind and his search for a resolution of problems in actual practice. By his own testimony, it was only by "looking at our predicament" and by "recognizing the essentials of the predicament" that he felt convinced that we would "chart the major lines, not the details, of the paths of emancipation."⁶

As a view of the emancipation of African peoples, Pan-Africanism was no different from other ideologies of struggle. Walter stated in the *Black Scholar* interview in 1974 that Pan-Africanism flowed out of "the possibilities inherent in their (African peoples') own action"; its specific limits, in turn, were set only by their "power and the capacity to overthrow." To chart the precise forms of the historical evolution of Africa, the contemporary African predicament, and the major social contradictions that arose from it and out of which that predicament was also constituted, and to seek to unite with the political and social forces that formed the basis of resolving these contradictions, to do all this was the goal that Walter Rodney originally set for himself. "If one

is dealing on an abstract level with the way the problem (of the Slave trade, for example) came into being," Walter said in his last published interview, "one hopefully tries to conceptualize ways in which these problems can be resolved in actuality," adding "so that is really the leap from History into Politics."⁷

Since the overall predicament consists of many widely divergent social formations, Pan-Africanism was never seen by Rodney as a simple process of mutuality, whereby its force was derived from some mystical racial union. Indeed, since each African struggle possessed differing sets of "possibilities," it followed that the wide arc of Pan-African struggle was, in reality, an external, though significant, feature. The specific "details" of each struggle were what provided the internal dynamic and therefore formed the true substance. It was the struggle in actual practice, no matter how apparently localized it seemed, that was the primary condition and the source of the emancipated consciousness that the concept "Pan-Africanism" describes. The dialectic by which black struggle in other scattered domains of black experience, and in the course of which certain practical experiences and resources of struggle have been transferred between different fronts of struggle—this dialectic is what fundamentally constitutes the proper subject of Pan-African nationalism and its study. The attendant relationships of political and intellectual exchange, by which means Pan-Africanism, broadly speaking, has been attained, merely reflect the empirical necessity that the oppression of Africa and peoples of African descent imposes at particular points of time. An understanding of the specific nature of that oppression will naturally inform an understanding of the necessary terms of struggle that it requires in terms of Pan-African exchange.

The biographical details of the life and thought of someone like Walter Rodney can only be illuminated by reference to this underlying dialectic of struggle and the transformation of oppression. At the end of the preface to his first major historical work, *A History of the Upper Guinea Coast, 1545-1800* (Oxford, 1970), which appeared when he was twenty-seven years old, Rodney expressed the clear-sighted view of this historic relationship:

I have sought to ensure that the integrity of the evidence was respected at all times, for this has always to be demanded from

those who practise the writing of history. Beyond that, the interpreter is himself nothing but a spokesman for historical forces (p. ix).

In each succeeding epoch, however, Pan-Africanism can never simply be assumed as self-evident, since it has to be constantly restated on the basis of real changing, “possibilities” of struggle that arise from constantly changing historical conditions.

In the case of Rodney’s analysis of Pan Africanism this task is complicated. His explicit writings on the subject of Pan-Africanism are rather marginal in comparison with the larger corpus of his published work. The *Black Scholar’s* description of Walter Rodney in the caption of its November 1974 interview as “as a leading theoretician of Pan-African liberation struggle” must also be reconciled with the fact that his explicit references to Pan-Africanism are restricted to only a very few places, posing a serious challenge to any such inquiry.

It is my own view that his feature reflects a different theoretical pertinence to his overall work. Rodney did not produce any extended historical treatment of black struggle comparable to C. L. R. James’s *History of Negro Revolt* (1938; later reprinted as *A History of Pan-African Revolt*) or to his classic work *The Black Jacobins* (1939), which James intended to be used, as he states in the preface to the second edition (New York, 1963), “to stimulate the coming emancipation of Africa.” In an extensive discussion with members of the Institute of the Black World in April 1975, Rodney described at length his indebtedness to the work of C. L. R. James. From his description of the lasting impact of the study group that James also led in London on Marxism and the Russian Revolution experience, a clear sense of James’s distinctive contribution to the analysis of political struggles emerges. Rodney recalled:

One of the most important things in which I got out of that (the study group) was a certain sense of historical analysis, in the sense that C. L. R. James was really a master of historical situations. It was not enough to study *State and Revolution*, it was important to understand why it was written and what was going on in Russia at that precise point of time. It was not enough to study *What Is to Be Done?*, but one must understand the

specific contextual nature of the discussions that were going on in Russia at that time . . . James gave it that added dimension which nobody else in the group could easily acquire in being able to say, that is what Lenin was about, that is what Trotsky was doing; he had just come from this conference or this debate or this was his specific programmatic objective when he was writing and so on. And that was a very important experience which I am still pondering over. I see its significance more as one goes along and I recognize the necessity for us to do much more work of that type.⁸

What we therefore see throughout Walter's work over the ten-year span (1970-1980) of his remarkably productive output is a progressive attempt to uncover the precise historical relations of exploitation which had been imposed on African peoples from the sixteenth century onward. He wanted to locate concretely the basic social forces within African history which would enable Africa to repulse finally this enforced retardation of development by way of systematic exploitation. Walter came closest to realizing those objectives in his enormously influential account *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (London and Dar es Salaam, 1972; Washington, D.C., 1974).

This synoptic account of modern African history was really the central insight of *A History of the Upper Guinea Coast* rewritten for an expanded popular audience. It was published just as the present crisis of the international capitalist system was getting under way. It is interesting to speculate as to what he might have changed in his analysis had that work been written instead in the late 1970s. We can be certain that his already profound understanding of the history of African exploitation would have been enriched and deepened even further by the lessons that are daily being learned by the worldwide crisis of capital. In the preface to *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, he made his position clear: "The phenomenon of neo-colonialism cries out for extensive investigation in order to formulate the strategy and tactics of African emancipation and development. This study does not go that far" (p. vii). It is the contention of this paper, however, that Walter Rodney went far toward "formulat[ing] the strategy and tactics of African emancipation and development, and that the place to find his sketch of them is in his analysis of Pan-Africanism. It is

also my contention that this was not fortuitous, for the distinctive feature of his work was definitely to establish the basic historical trajectory of social and economic formations, their attendant class configurations, and the relations of exploitation.

Where, then, does one turn to find a statement of Walter's views on Pan-Africanism? What Walter has left us consists of his position paper, "Towards the Sixth Pan-African Congress—Aspects of the International Class Struggle in Africa, the Caribbean, and America" (Dar es Salaam, April 1974), and an extended interview following that gathering which appeared in the *Black Scholar* in November 1974. There are also scattered references incidental to Pan-Africanism throughout other parts of his work, and these are illuminating in a variety of ways.

It is essential to recognize, however, that Walter Rodney was a representative figure of a broad Guyanese tradition of thought which has been engaged for many years in elaborating a philosophy of history for an understanding of the African predicament. Indeed, Walter specifically saw his own work as being an extension of this tradition as represented by Norman Eustace Cameron and Eusi Kwayana. Walter paid tribute to Cameron's two-volume history, *The Evolution of the Negro* (Demerara, 1929/1934), in his own essay on "African History in the Service of Black Revolution" in *The Groundings with My Brothers* (London, 1969). He describes Cameron as "a black man from Guyana," who was trying "to revive the pride and confidence of Africans in the New World by pointing to the achievements of African States in the period prior to the European advent" (p. 52). Eusi Kwayana (formerly Sidney King) was and still is a greatly honored school principal in his native village of Buxton in Guyana, as well as the founder of the African Society for Cultural Relations with Independent Africa (ASCRIA), and one of the cofounders of the Working People's Alliance (WPA). Kwayana has analyzed the Berbice Slave Revolt of 1763 as an important link in the chain of the Guyanese liberation struggle, as seen in his essay, "A Birth of Freedom," which appeared in the *New World Quarterly Guyana Independence Issue*, 1966 (pp. 22-27). But Kwayana's influence on Walter extended far beyond scholarship. Walter made a special point of paying tribute to his great significance in his final published interview, when he told the interviewer:

We take great pride in the presence in our ranks of Eusi Kwayana who is also fairly well known abroad, but who is not just an intellectual or a political figure, but who is as a human being a person of tremendous quality, an individual who has remained uncorrupted, uncorruptible within a context of corruption and squalor. He is a tremendous example to those of us who are younger than he is because if he could have moved through the various epochs of struggle, against first colonialism and then against one or another form of racist distortion in our history, and is still as young, as fresh as ever in his presentation of analysis on the contemporary situation and for the future, then it seems to me that we, the younger members of the Party (Working People's Alliance), are not making any greater sacrifice than those who have gone before us have done.⁹

Walter Rodney's appearance on the historical and political stage thus marked a renewed expression of this search by Guyanese intellectuals for a renaissance vouchsafed by the historical predicates of Africa and the Caribbean in the struggle for liberation. He was heir as well as to the more inclusive tradition of the wider Caribbean consciousness of Africa. This tradition extends all the way from persons such as John B. Russwurm, Edward Wilmot Blyden, Theophilus E. S. Scholes, John Jacob Thomas, Samuel Celestine-Edwards, and John Albert Thorne in the nineteenth century, and continues through into the twentieth century embodied in individuals like Marcus Garvey, Cyril Valentine Briggs, Antenor Firmin, Jean Price-Mars, C. L. R. James, Richard B. Moore, George Padmore, Aimé Césaire, and Frantz Fanon.

It is against the backdrop of these numerous "inquiries concerning the African people," in the words of John Jacob Thomas,¹⁰ that we must see the long-term evolution of the life and thought of Walter Rodney. When he spoke about the "hidden dimension—that is the African background to Caribbean history," he admitted that it was "to deepen my own and our collective understanding of Caribbean history in the first place—which pushed me in the direction of looking at West Africa."¹¹ A short time before he was killed he also clarified his Caribbean motivation in turning to the study of African history: "[O]ne problem with History is that one would like to identify with an aspect of 'one's history' as distinct from the rather vague formulation of World History . . . and precisely from that basis a certain triggering-off took place and

sent me off into African Studies.”¹² He found no contradiction in admitting, moreover, in 1974, that “there is a point in suggesting that the struggle of black people in Africa has a certain strategic importance—a greater strategic importance for black people as a whole than, say, what’s going on in the Caribbean.” Walter explained it in the following way:

I feel that to the extent that the African struggle advances and that continent is freed from the web of capitalism and imperialism, to that extent the impact on the Caribbean and, particularly, the United States, the black population here is likely to be decisive. . . . I believe it is an important historical dimension and, therefore, success of the struggle in Africa is likely to be critical with regard to creating new conditions and new avenues for struggle in what we call the New World.¹³

Walter would eventually move beyond that deferential definition of the African parameters of struggle, but it was only achieved through the intense commitment to the Guyanese struggle to which he devoted the last years of his life. It was the characteristic discovery of a revolutionary, one whose vision of Pan-Africanism as a progressive internationalist force was never at any time in question. The same principle also held true to his approach to the theory and practice of socialist revolution. When he was asked whether he defined himself and the WPA as Marxist, Walter Rodney replied thus:

Many of us accept the analysis of contradictions in society in a particular kind of way that seeks to use the dialectical methodology, that seeks to recognize the crucial nature of contradictions between the capitalists and workers, not just in our society but in the international capitalist society. But of course what we’re trying to do is to extend that analysis and indeed go beyond it. The situation has gone beyond the analysis in the sense that we’re talking about capitalism as a living mode of production, which has gone through a lot of changes, and that someone who calls himself/herself a Marxist, presumably people who are trying to understand the multiple facets of the modern world, are starting from a Marxist perspective.¹⁴

This statement makes it essential to understand the theoretical path of Walter's evolution, through which he came to view Pan-Africanism as an analytical and methodological variable of intervention in the processes of struggle. At a theoretical level, Pan-Africanism was employed not as a utopian blueprint of *a priori* racial unity, but rather as the means of forging empirical criteria for assessing the social bases of contemporary African and Caribbean states and the function of their structural integration within the world capitalist system. He spoke realistically, like Frantz Fanon before him, of the inevitable pitfalls "of romantic visions about the African continent." "We have allowed illusions to take the place of serious analysis," he declared, "of what actual struggles are taking place on the African continent; what social forces are represented in the government and what is the actual shape of society."¹⁵ Pan-Africanism for Walter Rodney was a critical tool for analyzing revolutionary new forms of genuine African liberation. This was the value that he placed on Pan-Africanism; it was an essential component, if properly utilized, in recapturing popular initiative against imperialism and challenging the decaying neocolonial regimes of the African and Caribbean state petty bourgeoisie which, for him, represented the negation of Pan-Africanism: all it meant in their hands was interstate collaboration for the advancement of the petty bourgeoisie.

As in everything that he thought and wrote, Walter based his viewpoint of Pan-Africanism first and foremost on a rigorous delineation of the facets of class structure and class struggle that underlay the earlier anticolonial struggles and the distorted social formations that succeeded to formal independence. He steadfastly refused to romanticize African society. "We must draw distinctions," he warned, "Who is who in Africa? What are the state structures? What are the classes?"¹⁶

On a second level of analysis, Walter insisted that in any analysis of Africa or the Caribbean "we are dealing with state power and we must examine the class nature of that power."¹⁷ This concern with the reality of the class formation defining the nature of the state was what allowed him to be completely free of any romantic or idealistic attachment to political institutions, no matter what their ideological guises. He was to spell this out clearly before he died, when he spoke about the crippling alliances

of Marxist movements with states calling themselves socialist-communist. He declared:

There is still a preference among many of the Third World Marxists and/or radicals for orienting themselves toward a very specific body of theory and analysis at an international level to the point where it becomes an identification with a particular nation-state. We [the WPA] have attempted very rigorously to avoid that. We believe it is the correct position, but perhaps the correctness of the position will only show itself in a period of time. We believe that it will be an important lesson for the Caribbean as a whole.¹⁸

At a third level of analysis, Walter recognized as the essential determinant of struggle the intervention *from below* of the popular classes. In this sense, Walter looked upon Pan-Africanism as “a coming together of black political movements, as distinct from governments.” He went on to declare: “We must begin to conceptualize the problems of Pan-Africanism as problems of forging links with social groups. The problem is to develop solidarity between the Caribbean peoples and the African peoples.”¹⁹

The fourth level of analysis to emerge in Walter’s approach to Pan-Africanism was the one that ultimately defined the international dimension of the struggle. “One must see [that] the goal of our international activity,” Walter declared, “is to develop a perspective that is anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist, and that speaks to the exploitation and oppression of all people.”²⁰ The pursuit of any other path, in his view, would lead inevitably to disillusionment with Africa. It became clear, for instance, at the Sixth Pan-African Congress in Dar es Salaam in 1974, that “the class which governs Africa is prepared to ally with the class which governs the Caribbean,” since it was “the same class operating in both societies [so that] still it is the same class that we are dealing with.”

The overriding demand of Pan-Africanism in the present epoch was the requirement for it to function as an ideology of liberation. He firmly believed that “the black predicament today must be resolved within the context of a socialist revolution as distinct from suggesting it was merely a liberation from Europe which left us free to elaborate a capitalist form of society.” Walter insisted that, “if we are to liberate the African people or if the

African people are to liberate themselves, then this liberation must take into account that our enslavement and our colonization were within the orbit of the capitalist system.” And continuing, he said, “that we have existed within the framework of imperialism and liberation means more than just a national struggle — it means a deepening of social struggle and the bringing about of a social revolution.” The conclusion that he reached was a vision of Pan-Africanism as facilitating the breakout from underdevelopment: “I think today to talk about socialism and anti-imperialism is precisely to pose to the African people the path out of the kinds of constraints that capitalism has brought about in the African continent, in the Caribbean, and in America itself.”²¹

The validity of Pan-Africanism thus rested on its ability to advance the struggle against imperialism on the basis of the “unity of the African working masses and the building of a Socialist society.” As a practical weapon in the struggle against imperialism, Pan-Africanism thus constituted one of the important “aspects of the international class struggle in Africa, the Caribbean, and America,” as the subtitle of his paper at the Sixth Pan-African Congress declared. When translated into political practice, Pan-Africanism was viewed by him as instrumental in advancing “increasingly revolutionary strategies for African economic and political liberation,” through the enunciation of which “the petty bourgeoisie must either be pushed forward or further exposed.”²² Likewise, Pan-Africanism in Africa’s postindependence era could not be “left to the tender mercies of the black petty bourgeoisie,” since in its hands Pan-Africanism, like Negritude, simply became “a sterile formulation of black chauvinism, incapable of challenging capitalism and imperialism.”²³ It was in the postindependence era that the African petty bourgeoisie, which was the class that had previously led the national movement, demonstrated in a short space of time its failure to carry out what Walter termed tersely “the historical tasks of national liberation.”²⁴ But this failure of the African petty bourgeoisie did not discredit Pan-Africanism; rather, it exposed the class content of the brand of nationalism espoused by the African petty bourgeoisie. Indeed, to the extent that the African petty bourgeoisie had a progressive character, it was expressed most notably by its support of some form of Pan-Africanism. “Pan-Africanism was one of these [historically] progressive sentiments,” Walter declared,

“which served as a platform for that sector of the African or black petty bourgeois leadership which was most uncompromising in its struggle against colonialism at any given time during the colonial period.” Accordingly, “the most advanced nationalist (Nkrumah, Kenyatta, Nyerere, Kuanda, and Mboya) were usually the most explicit on the issue of Pan-African solidarity.”²⁵ This was not only the distinctive character of the independence phase in Africa; as Walter was careful to note, “from the earlier years of this century . . . the proponents of Pan-Africanism stood on the left flank of their respective national movements on both sides of the Atlantic.” But this, too, did not last, as could be seen in “the way in which the very vanguard of the Pan-Africanist movement (as it emerged from the Fifth Congress) lost its direction and wallowed in bourgeois theory and practice.” What followed was “a corresponding political decline,” best symbolized in George Padmore’s attempt to create “the false antithesis between Pan-Africanism and Communism.”²⁶

In the very process of negotiating constitutional independence, however, Walter explained that “they [the African nationalists] reneged on a ‘cardinal principle of Pan-Africanism: namely, the unity and indivisibility of the African continent.’” He observed:

Throughout the continent, none of the successful independence movements denied the basic validity of the boundaries created a few decades ago by imperialism. To have done so would have been to issue a challenge so profound as to rule out the preservation of petty bourgeois interests in a compromise “independence” worked out in conjunction with international capital.²⁷

It was the class character of the African petty bourgeoisie that, in Walter’s view, imposed concrete limits of the commitment to Pan-Africanism:

the lawyers and place-seekers who eventually took the independence movement in hand were incapable of transcending the territorial boundaries of the colonial administrations. Imperialism defined the context in which constitutional power was to be handed over, so as to guard against the transfer of economic

power or genuine political power. The African petty bourgeoisie accepted this, with only a small amount of dissent and disquiet being manifested by the progressive elements such as Nkrumah, Nyerere, and Sekou Toure.²⁸

In this perspective, what we have is an important confirmation of the idea that “the neutrality and unity of nationalism is illusory,” since, as Walter argued, “in practice particular classes or strata capture nationalist movements and chart their ideological and political direction.”²⁹

The essential theoretical question examined by Walter was “the potential of Pan-Africanism as an ideology of liberation”; in other words, can Pan-Africanism become “a brand of revolutionary nationalism” and thereby “a progressive internationalist force”?³⁰

What this required was that the contemporary theory of Pan-Africanism not only take into account “the balance of class forces on the African continent today at the level of state power.” It must also recognize that, in the epoch of neocolonialism, the struggle for national liberation fundamentally challenges the retention of Pan-Africanism “within its present parameters of inter-state co-operation, based on the persistence of the territorial units and of petty bourgeois control.”³¹ The armed liberation struggle, by calling for the enlistment of material, diplomatic, and moral support, advances, however slowly, popular anti-imperialist struggle everywhere on the African continent and throughout the African diaspora. It is this aspect of armed liberation struggle which in reality gives concrete meaning to the concept of “African,” which because of the flouting of Pan-Africanism by most of the existing regimes on the continent, would, in Walter’s phrase, otherwise be “dead for all practical purposes such as travel and employment,” the result of “restrictive employment and immigration practices” adopted by African states. With the African petty bourgeoisie’s consolidation of state power, the result is that “one African has been further shut off from another during the present neo-colonial phase than was the case during raw colonialism.”³² The Organization of African Unity (OAU) is a good example of how the original ideal was turned into an illusion or its opposite in practice, so that “the OAU does far more to frustrate that to realize the concept of African unity,” since it is now “the principal

instrument which legitimizes the forty-odd mini-states visited upon Africa by colonialism." Walter declared:

At best, the OAU regulates a few internal conflicts between the petty bourgeoisie from different parts of the continent. Beyond that, it is committed to maintain the separation of African people implicit in the present territorial boundaries, so as to buttress the exploitative social systems which prevail on the continent in this neo-colonial epoch.³³

In an effort to regain what Walter referred to as "the momentum of Pan-Africanism,"³⁴ it was necessary for it to recapture the revolutionary initiative, but this time by drawing a sharp political and theoretical line against the enemies of popular struggle, which are the African state petty bourgeoisie and international capital. The class import of this transforming Pan-African vision was uncompromising:

The transformation of the African environment, the transformation of social and production relations, the break with imperialism, and the forging of African political and economic unity are all dialectically interrelated. This complex of historical tasks can be carried out only under the banner of Socialism and through the leadership of the working classes. The African petty bourgeoisie as a ruling class use their state power against Socialist ideology, against the material interests of the working class, and against the political unity of the African masses.³⁵

Within this analysis of African classes and their relationship to the state, Walter was convinced that "the interests of the African petty bourgeoisie are as irreconcilable with genuine Pan-Africanism as Pan-Africanism is irreconcilable with the interests of international capitalism." This was because most African states were, in fact, "engaged in consolidating their territorial frontiers, in preserving the social relations prevailing inside these frontiers, and in protecting imperialism in the form of the monopolies and their respective states."³⁶ Furthermore, the petty bourgeois classes in Africa "maintain themselves as a class by fomenting internal divisions and by dependence on external capitalist power."³⁷ How did this manifest itself? On the one hand, Walter argued, "within the context of the existing African nation states, the African ruling

class has seldom sought to build anything other than tribal power bases, which means that they seek division and not unity at all levels of political activity, be it national, continental, or international."³⁸ On the other hand, the guarantee of the dominance of the African bourgeoisie within their respective ministates was their availability to international capital which used them "to penetrate and manipulate African society."³⁹ The result politically was disastrous for genuine Pan-African solidarity:

The only alliance which the African ruling class now vigorously defends in that with imperialism against the African people. Most decidedly, this power structure does not want to allow the masses wither the consciousness or the reality of unity.⁴⁰

It was the combination of their divisive and dependent character that denied the African petty bourgeoisie "the vision and the objective base to assay the leap towards continental unity."⁴¹ To the extent that "the failure of the African ruling class to effect meaningful unity" arises from its fear that such an enlarged political domain might threaten or negate "their narrow class welfare," Pan-Africanism represents a continental program that is antithetical to the consolidation of the class interests of the African petty bourgeois state. It is little wonder therefore that these neocolonial regimes "can do nothing better than preside over dependent economies with little growth and no development."⁴²

If Pan-Africanism was to play a role in untying the hands of the African masses and thereby allow them to regain revolutionary potential, it was thus necessary to repudiate the leadership of the African petty bourgeoisie by recognizing that "since independence [it] has been an obstacle to the further development of the African revolution."⁴³ Pan-Africanism could provide the ideology of Africa's renewal only by advancing popular struggle against imperialism and its various neocolonial stage appendages, since "the few initiatives towards Socialist transformation on the continent are bound to be stifled by the continued division of Africa into artificial states."⁴⁴ The alternative was for Pan-Africanism to remain "a toothless slogan as far as imperialism is concerned."⁴⁵

In his restatement of the revolutionary potential of Pan-Africanism as an ideology of African liberation and popular struggle, which could alone allow Africa's "recapture of the

revolutionary initiative,”⁴⁶ Walter brought to bear a class analysis that was unrivaled for its clarity and its uncompromising nature. In his penetration and exposure of the position of the petty bourgeoisie in Africa as the real brake of Pan-Africanism, however, Walter was being fundamentally faithful, as was always his custom, to the proletarian class origins in which he was formed and which provided his earliest awakening of class consciousness. “I come off the streets from Georgetown, Guyana, from a working-class district,” he once made it known. He never went about proclaiming this fact nor did he “mislead anyone that I am still functioning as a worker engaged in the process of production.”⁴⁷ His class solidarity with the cause of the working class was all the more remarkable for that; and throughout his professional life he never wavered in his political commitment to the interests of working class struggle. In explaining how this strong feeling of proletarian fealty took shape in him, he informed the *Black Scholar* in 1974:

I could see that our society was differentiated in particular ways, and I could see that people in their daily work, and particularly people like myself involved in teaching, involved in academic and intellectual activities, were giving their loyalties to some faction, group. And I would like to think that to the extent that I could manage it I *did* in the past and I *do* at the present attempt to make what I say and what I do part of a *commitment to working people*.⁴⁸

This was what also made explicable the statement he made in the preface to his first book, *A History of the Upper Guinea Coast*: “My debt is greatest to the irredentist masses of the British Caribbean, who provided inspiration and finances (via the University of the West Indies)” (p. ix). In 1976, in the course of making a plea for intellectuals to recognize the importance for themselves of their participation in the struggle for liberation, Walter also took the opportunity to explain that “to be a ‘revolutionary intellectual’ means nothing if there is no point of reference to the struggle of those who are more directly engaged in production.”⁴⁹

This was always the center of his historical world view, and it was out of this that Pan-Africanism emerged for him as a definite commitment to struggle. It must be stressed that Pan-Africanism

could not supplant that world view; it was only valid to the extent that it represented an aspect of its confirmation: "There are only two world views with which we are faced," declared Walter, "one must deal with metaphysics or the idealist formulation of the bourgeoisie or one must move towards scientific socialism." And he was never in any doubt as to his chosen path.

As far as the Caribbean was concerned, Pan-Africanism provided historically a crucial instance of an early break with "the dependency ethic of the petty bourgeoisie."⁵⁰ To the extent that the early Pan-African activists from the Caribbean were "individuals who sought to aid black political liberation and to build up a tradition of independent black activity on either or both sides of the Atlantic," they could be said to have initiated the process of ideological resistance to the legacy imposed by plantation slavery.⁵¹ But despite their achievement, it was still the case that many people in the Caribbean still lack today "the confidence even to envisage that we can stand on our own feet, because five hundred years of standing, holding on to the apron-string of an Imperialist power, has left this mark (of dependency) upon us."⁵²

Pan-Africanism in the Caribbean, for this reason, was viewed as fulfilling cultural-psychological liberation from the grip of dependency, "certainly not only in the economic sense, not only in the political sense, but in the fundamental, psychological sense [to] which Franz Fanon gives a lot of depth."⁵³ The West Indian middle class, who were "spokesmen of the dominant Eurocentric world-view," could not help but resist "'Black Power,' 'Pan-Africanism' and the like as repulsive and subversive." What Walter was seeking to do was effect the merger of the political with the cultural determinants of popular struggle in the Caribbean. Thus, for example, he saw the "Dreads" in Dominica as the manifestation of "cultural rebellion and struggle in a manner similar to the better-known Rastafari of Jamaica."⁵⁴ It was no accident that Walter's closest political ties in Jamaica, where he was a lecturer at the University of the West Indies, were with the Rastafari brethren.

The appeal of Walter Rodney for the mass of Rastafari brethren in Jamaica, while it appeared to confirm the worst fears of a link between Marxist doctrine and Rastafari religion that the 1960 report on *The Rastafari Movement in Kingston, Jamaica* spoke of, had as its political basis his popular lectures on African history.⁵⁵ What Walter's book about his Jamaican experience, *The*

Groundings with My Brothers, showed most clearly was the actualization of an entirely new mode of political intervention within the Caribbean. His achievement in Jamaica in 1968 represents not only one of his foremost political legacies; more importantly, it poses also a central challenge to the radical movement in the Caribbean, showing that unless the movement can succeed in combining political struggle with cultural wholeness, it will neither progress nor usher in any new stage of popular renewal.

From Jamaica, Walter Rodney returned to teach at the University of Dar es Salaam, where he remained for the next five years. He left Tanzania in 1974 and returned to Guyana after he was offered the position of professor in the history department at the University of Guyana. Many Guyanese looked upon his return as a major national event, and when the Burnham government blocked his appointment at the university, Walter's fellow Guyanese turned out in the thousands to hear him speak. They sensed correctly that a new stage in the history of the Guyanese people was beginning.

At the same time, it is important to recognize that out of his intervention on the side of the people in their mounting struggle against the Burnham-People's National Congress dictatorship, Walter would also begin to reorient his thoughts concerning the past Pan-African involvement of activists from the Caribbean. In the autumn on 1976, he gave a hint of this shift at the conclusion of an extensive interview:

As a general statement about the Caribbean . . . I would say that there is a development which needs to be stressed – a certain localization of the revolution, if you like. I say localization because for many, many years citizens of the Caribbean have become engaged in one revolutionary process or another. We have tended, through force of circumstance, to become involved in what we may broadly call the international revolution, or Pan-Africanism, or something that seeks to hasten the total dialectical change from a capitalist, eurocentric society to one in which our peoples as a whole – whether as working peoples, as African peoples, or Third World peoples – will participate more fully.

However, the present generation recognizes much more that it is extremely difficult to make any of these ideas come to fruition except in a Caribbean context itself.⁵⁶

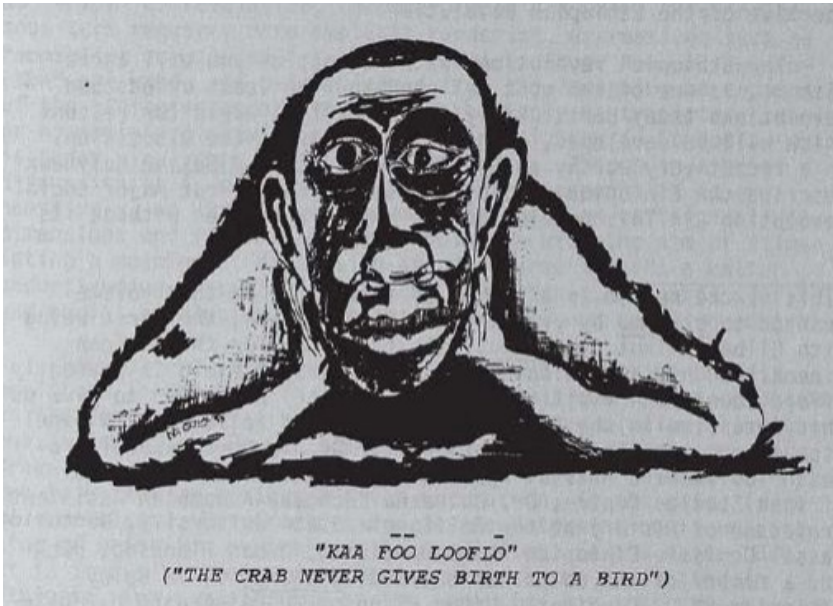
Previously, Walter had intimated this same principle in his address before the Congress of Black Writers in Montreal in October 1968. Speaking on "African History in the Service of Black Revolution," Walter told his audience that the regeneration of the New World African diaspora would not come about by a return to "an African way of life," which he said was "far-fetched, except in the case of the African continent itself." "Applied to New World blacks," he declared, "this means in effect that the history nearest to revolutionary actions will be the history of Africans in their new American environments."⁵⁷

This statement marks a clear recognition by Walter Rodney that a new stage in the Caribbean liberation struggle has arrived. But did his statement mean that he had now abandoned Pan-Africanism? I think that such a conclusion would be a very superficial reading. As the person who helped to force into the open a new approach to the writing of African history, and, moreover, as one who played a key role in clarifying the determinants of Africa's underdevelopment, there is little likelihood that Walter would have abandoned his support for the liberation and unity of Africa. As the same time, as a revolutionary intellectual who was himself always "connect[ed] to a point of struggle,"⁵⁸ he was obliged to follow the overriding logic of the new, supervening stage of struggle.

In his statement, it is my conviction that Walter was announcing that the time had come to reassess the long history of involvement by individuals from the West Indies in the Pan-African movement. The time was now reached, Walter was saying, when we had to put this Pan-African legacy to the test on the Caribbean battlefield, where the struggle could no longer be postponed. What Walter's statement implied, therefore, was that the Caribbean people's link with the liberation of Africa can only now be forged on the basis on the Caribbean struggle's becoming a progressive and internationalist force in the overall struggle against imperialism. It is only within this framework of reciprocity in active struggle that both the Pan-African legacy and the cultural links of the Caribbean with Africa can play a significant role today. This was the clear import of the declaration that he made in 1974, stressing that "unity is created in struggle and is so much more valid because it is created in struggle."⁵⁹ For him, there

could never be any basis of unity, Pan-African or otherwise, except through struggle.

This marked a new stage in the history of the Caribbean people. Shortly before his life was cut down, Walter spoke of his unshakeable confidence in the people, when he observed "the population is always brim-full of talent, provided the people have the opportunity to demonstrate it, to develop themselves."⁶⁰ Out of his original commitment to the people of the Caribbean, he first became aware of Africa and became a participant in its struggle for liberation. Finally, out of his commitment to the struggle of the Guyanese people, he discovered a new basis for the continuing relationship between the Caribbean and African struggles. Moving through successive stages of Pan-African consciousness, Walter Rodney etched out through his life and thought a living legacy of the theory and practice of Africanism for our time.



Notes

* Hill, Robert A. (1983). Walter Rodney on Pan-Africanism. *Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies*, 12(3). international_asc_ufahamu_17138. Retrieved from: <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6b5507c6>. First published in: *Walter Rodney: Revolutionary and Scholar: A Tribute*, eds. Edward A. Alpers and Pierre-Michel Fontaine. UCLA: Center for Afro-American Studies and African Studies Center, 1982.

¹ William Morris, quoted in E. P. Thompson, *William Morris, Romantic to Revolutionary* (London, 1977), pp. 7-8.

² Walter Rodney, "The Black Scholar Interviews: Walter Rodney," *Black Scholar* 6 (November 1974): 46.

³ Rodney, Institute of the Black World (hereafter IBW), MS, "Interviews with Walter Rodney, Amherst, Mass., April 1975."

⁴ C. L. R. James, "C. L. R. James on Walter Rodney," *Race Today* 12 (November 1980): 30; see also William H. Hansen, "Walter Rodney: An Exemplary Life," *Monthly Review* 32 (April 1981): 24-31.

⁵ Rodney, IBW, MS, "Interviews with Walter Rodney."

⁶ Rodney, *Black Scholar*, p. 42.

⁷ Rodney, "Will the World Listen Now? Dr. Walter Rodney: A Recent Interview," *Guyana Forum* 1, no. 3 (June 1980): 2.

⁸ Rodney, IBW, MS, "Interviews with Walter Rodney."

⁹ Rodney, *Guyana Forum* 1, no. 3 (June 1980): 3. Wilson Harris and Ivan Van Sertima have also sought in their work for an understanding of the same historical predicament.

¹⁰ John Jacob Thomas, *Fraudacity, West Indian Fables by James Anthony Froude explained by J. J. Thomas, author of "The Creole Grammar"* (1989; reprint ed., London, 1969), p. 180.

¹¹ Rodney, *Black Scholar*, p. 38.

¹² Rodney, *Guyana Forum*, p. 2.

¹³ Rodney, *Black Scholar*, p. 39.

¹⁴ Rodney, *Guyana Forum*, p. 2.

¹⁵ Rodney, *Black Scholar*, p. 40.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Rodney, *Guyana Forum*, p. 2.

¹⁹ Rodney, *Black Scholar*, pp. 40-41.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 40

²¹ Ibid., p. 41-42

²² Rodney, *Towards the Sixth Pan-African Congress: Aspects of International Class Struggle in Africa* (Atlanta, Ga., 1974), p. 8. The paper was also published in Horace Campbell, ed., *Pan-Africanism: The Struggle against Imperialism and*

Neo-Colonialism – Documents of the Sixth Pan-African Congress (Toronto, n.d.), pp. 18-41.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p.1

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 1-2.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 6. Cf. George Padmore, *Pan-Africanism or Communism* (Garden City, N.Y., 1972 [1956]).

²⁷ Rodney, *Towards the Sixth Pan-African Congress*, pp. 2, 3.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 3, 11.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 4.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 3-4.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, pp. 5-6.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ IBW, MS, "Interviews with Walter Rodney"

⁴⁸ Rodney, *Black Scholar*, p. 46.

⁴⁹ Colin Prescod, "Guyana's Socialism: An Interview with Walter Rodney," *Race and Class* 18 (Autumn 1976): (127).

⁵⁰ Rodney, *Some Thoughts of the Political Economy of the Caribbean* (Washington, D.C., 1972), p. 4.

⁵¹ Rodney, MS, "Labor as a Conceptual Framework for Pan-African Studies," 1970.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁵⁴ Rodney, "Contemporary Political Trends in the English-speaking Caribbean," *Black Scholar* 7 (September 1975): 19. See also Bert J. Thomas, "Revolutionary Activity in the Caribbean: Some Notes on the Dreads Dominica," *Caribbean Studies* 15 (January 1976).

⁵⁵ "In our survey we encountered certain [Rastafari] groups among which the Marxist interpretation and terminology predominated over the racial-religious.

Events in Cuba, China, Egypt and elsewhere endow the Marxist analysis with a pragmatic validity and power. In so far as the political philosophy employs the ideology of Ras Tafari racism, it spreads throughout the bulk of the population is assured unless Government takes positive steps to meet the legitimate needs to the lower classes, including the Ras Tafari group.” M.G. Smith, Roy Augier, Rex Nettleford, *The Rastafari Movement in Kingston, Jamaica* (Mona, Jamaica, 1969 [1960]), pp. 26-27.

⁵⁶ Rodney, quoted by Colin Prescod, “Guyana’s Socialism,” p. 127.

⁵⁷ Rodney, *Groundings*, p. 53.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 128.

⁵⁹ Rodney, *Black Scholar* 6 (November 1974): 46.

⁶⁰ Rodney, *Guyana Forum*, p. 3.