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Walter Rodney and Working Peoples' History

- A webinar hosted by Anti-Imperialists for Global Justice (AIGJ)
- Saturday 26 June, 5:00-7:30pm UTC+1
- Eventbrite: <https://tinyurl.com/4bnkh7w6>
- YT Livestream: <https://youtu.be/OGuKL1PRmr4>

PROGRAMME

Walter Rodney (1942-1980), the son of generations of Guyanese “workers by hand” and himself a superb “labourer by brain,” combined unflinching revolutionary activism with the writing of historical political economy. The last period of his historical work movingly captured the story of the digging (especially by those grand *shovel-men*), damming and field-slave labouring of his Afrikan ancestors, by whose hand modern coastal British Guiana (now Guyana) was brought into being. The creative and richly cultured peoples who had earlier mastered Guyana’s varied environments were elbowed and genocided aside by white pirates and ‘privateers’ seeking to gorge on the gold, silver, diamonds of *El Dorado*. Instead, they settled for the sugar plantations’ *white gold*.

When Atlantic enslavement was downed by Afrikan resistance, economic forces and a belated (and somewhat bogus) euro-humanitarianism, capital’s quest for profit still ruled. Its need for cheap labour would then be met by those pushed out of India by the British system of private land ownership which would cause dispossession and mass starvation; by “poor whites” driven from Portuguese Madeira and from European elsewhere; and even by Afrikans 'rescued' from now ‘illegal’ slave ships. Structured in racism, the brutal colonial system of plantation and mining extractivism went on to make divide and rule the order of the Guyanese day.

Despite but also because of that history, a united workers and peasant movement would come to office at mid-20th century Guyana. Hyper-democratic Britain instantly overthrew it by military invasion and colonial state-terror. The system shamelessly invested in and fomented Indian vs Afrikan discord and eventual violence. This paved the way for alternating ‘ethnic’/‘racial’, Afrikan/Indian dictatorships. The first of these - under Forbes Burnham - murdered Walter Rodney.

Guyana is clearly a unique socio-historical formation. Yet, after half a millennium of capitalism-imperialism, it shares key similarities with territories of the Caribbean and Continental Afrika that seem to be, on the surface, quite distinctive. **Walter Rodney & Working Peoples’ Histories**, a webinar to take place on Saturday June 26th, 2021, will explore the path Walter Rodney forged through his revolutionary approach to finding and then recovering the ‘peoples’ history’ from the colonial archive. Rodney’s examinations of working peoples’ history stretched from Guyana to Jamaica, from path-breaking works on the system of Atlantic Slavery to the underdevelopment and scarring of Continental Afrika, and back again. And from the time of his assassination in 1980: this path has given rise to new, penetrative histories of the Guyanese, other Caribbean and Continental Afrikan working peoples, written from below, which we aim to celebrate here.

Timing	Session
5:00 – 5:10	Opening Comments
Panel 1: Walter & the Academy	
5:10 – 5:25	<p>Lloyd D’Aguilar (People’s Campaign Against Corruption), “Rodney: Revolutionary Theory and Practice versus Academics.”</p> <p><i>Lloyd D’Aguilar is a human rights activist, film-maker and radio producer. He currently coordinates the People’s Anti-Corruption Movement in Jamaica, and is leading the ongoing Tivoli Gardens Campaign for Justice.</i></p> <p>The University of the West Indies is financed by the governments of the Caribbean and as to be expected, the curriculum must be pro-state.</p> <p>The lecturers, professors have a degree of intellectual freedom, obviously, but ultimately they recognize that it is the state which calls the shot – in terms of what they teach.</p> <p>Walter Rodney was influenced by Marxism and was prepared as a revolutionary to not only challenge the state theoretically and but practically as well. His stint as a professor in Jamaica and later in Africa records him going outside the class room to engage with some who were in political struggle or victims of the capitalist system: marginalized youth for example.</p> <p>This is not a normal practice for University professors and for that Rodney was banned from Jamaica, refused University appointment in Guyana where he was born, and eventually assassinated.</p> <p>The question therefore arises: What are the political imperatives for teachings on the slave trade, race relations between colonized Africans and Indians, and the social consequences of economic underdevelopment? Was Walter Rodney an academic or a revolutionary? What is the significance for us today?</p>
5:25 – 5:40	<p>Shantel George (University of Glasgow), “Problems of Reading Walter Rodney at SOAS.”</p> <p><i>Shantel George is a historian of the transatlantic slave trade and slavery, with a particular focus on the British Caribbean. She is currently Lecturer in Transatlantic Slavery at the University of Glasgow.</i></p> <p>In March 2021, Adam Habib, SOAS’ newly appointed director, was suspended following his use of the N-word in an online forum. In an attempt to defend himself, Habib—a South African of Asian heritage—stated: ‘context matters.’ Responding to Habib, a student evoked the work of SOAS alumni, Walter Rodney, who gained his PhD at the mere age of 24. The student stated: ‘Our own alumni, Walter Rodney have written why people, non-Black POC and white bodies shouldn’t use the ‘N-word’ because when it comes from that perspective then it’s a whole different story from our own perspective which is autonomy, agency and the reclamation of our own history.’</p> <p>This presentation will draw on personal experience as an undergraduate at SOAS, excerpts from Walter Rodney Speaks, and the historiography on Western Africa, to consider the ways in which Rodney’s historical work and legacy is remembered within the institution. Firstly, it argues that the Habib incident is emblematic of the apathy shown towards Rodney and his work, and students of African heritage by the institution. Secondly, it demonstrates that the evoking of Rodney reflects the intellectual and political inspiration students, especially of African heritage, draw from the life and work of Rodney. The presentation concludes by considering recent changes in how SOAS as an institution has remembered Rodney.</p>
5:40 – 5:55	Questions & Discussion (15 minutes)

Panel 2: Walter in Continental Afrika

5:55 – 6:10

Chinedu Chukwudinma (ROAPE Editorial Working Group), “The Petty Bourgeoisie, the Peasants and the Workers: Rodney’s analysis of class formation, class contradictions and resistance to imperialism in Tanzania and East Africa.”

Chinedu Chukwudinma is a member of the Socialist Workers Party (UK) and an Affiliate to the Editorial Working Group of the Review of African Political Economy. He writes on African politics, popular struggles and the history of working-class resistance on the continent.

This presentation will examine a selection of Rodney's writings on class formation and contradictions in Tanzania and East Africa during the late 1960s and 1970s. I will argue that Rodney's Marxist analysis of class enables him to explain why the leadership of the anti-colonial movements of the 1960s ultimately failed to challenge imperialism in East Africa. I will also show that Rodney's analysis provides insights into the weakness of Tanzanian state-led socialism. I will start by discussing Rodney’s disillusionment and changing views on the nature and role of the African petty-bourgeoisie (or intelligentsia). I will then present his remarks on the peasantry in relation to the petty bourgeoisie while linking his ideas to those of Frantz Fanon, Amilcar Cabral and FRELIMO. Finally, I will focus on Rodney’s growing appreciation for the revolutionary potential of the embryonic African working class, which presented a challenge to the rule of the petty bourgeoisie in Tanzania.

6:10 – 6:25

Hamza Hadji (African Leadership University), “Walter Rodney on the Colonial Epistemology of Education and Its Impact on Current Afrikan Youth on the Continent and Abroad: Language, Tradition and the Brain Drain.”

Teaching Fellow in the Communicating for Impact team at the African Leadership University, graduated from Kingston University London with a degree in Politics and International Relations. Experience working as a consultant for SMEs and support worker for university students with disabilities. Self-taught Pan-Africanist. A passionate African and a strong believer that change for Africa lies in building a better education system, on a mission to decolonize the curriculum for Africans at home and abroad.

This address will focus on two main statements made by Rodney in his revolutionary book “How Europe Underdeveloped Africa”. In the first instance, the revolutionary scholar stated that economic development is defined by a society’s member’s ability to control the environment within which they find themselves. And in the second instance, he declares that educational systems are created to become props to a given society, and those educated within such a system, especially from the young age groups, are expected to automatically carry over the values learned and use them as a basis when their turn comes to make decisions in the society. There will be an assessment of the cultural identity crisis on the continent and among the diaspora when it comes to language and tradition in the educational sphere, based on the historical legacies of colonial education still present in our educational systems today. Additionally, a connection will be made between the issue of contextualization of education with the brain drain that has been experienced on the continent for decades and is clearly increasing. Taking into account the experience of teaching in the first year of a university program on the continent, an analysis of the promise of a sizeable young and active workforce for the coming decades will be made to address the possible failures of this generation.

6:25 – 6:40

Questions & Discussion (15 minutes)

6:40 – 6:50

Screen break (10 minutes)

Panel 3: Working Peoples' History in Guyana

Kimani Nehusi (Temple University), "Walter Rodney in the Historiography of Guyana."

Dr. Kimani Nehusi is Associate Professor of African American Studies at Temple University in Philadelphia. He is a multi-disciplinary scholar with strong interests in language and linguistics, history, culture and research methodology, whose research interests include Afrika and its diasporas from ancient to modern times, the Caribbean and Guyana.

The single most decisive force that has shaped the history of the world for the last six hundred years has been the birth and development of European capitalism, especially through its internationalization as enslavement, colonialism and neo-colonialism. Each of these latter represents a different stage in the evolution of this single phenomenon, which has touched and usually shaped the life of every person who has lived on this planet in this period.

The scholarship of the world has reflected the location of the scholar in relation to capitalism and may be identified as, roughly, anti-capitalist, pro-capitalist or confused. Walter Rodney is one of the most gifted, clear sighted, resolute and productive scholars who understood capitalism, its many and differing manifestations, its possibilities and its dangers, and fought against them all.

This presentation will attempt to locate Rodney primarily in the context of writing the history of Guyana, though, for reasons that ought to be obvious, a rigid separation of his scholar-activism concerning this country of his birth from his engagement with the wider world, particularly Afrika, will be counter-productive to this objective. Rodney himself always emphasized the international nature of the force that afflicted the people of his primary concern. These are the working people, the toilers who produced most of the wealth that is seized by the owners of land, tools, factories, capital and other means of production. In this system, the toiling majority has remained poor, hungry, disease ridden, ignorant of their history, etc., while the owning and exploiting minority has enjoyed the fruits of these toilers' labour.

Rodney was not the first scholar to identify these major outlines of society fashioned by capitalism in its own interests, the interests of the exploiting minority. He was not, either, the first to concern himself with the condition and interests of the exploited majority. His contributions are best understood as developments erected upon antecedents that were unfolding before his time.

Other issues, trends and developments that will be examined include Eurocentrism as the attempt by Europeans to universalize their cultural standards and norms, including classism and sexism, and the consequences for the Guyanese society dominated by Europeans, including racism, colourism, Christianity and other aspects of ideological monopoly and their consequences in self-ignorance, mutual hostility, division and other weaknesses among the labouring masses.

The nature of history and the historical process, other questions and issues raised by Rodney, and the current condition of scholarship and activism in the Guyana context will also be ventilated.

6:50 – 7:05

Wazir Mohamed (Indiana University East), "Walter Rodney and Recapturing the History of the Working Peoples of Guyana."

Wazir Mohamed is an Associate Professor of Sociology at Indiana University East in Richmond, Indiana. He is a Guyanese and former colleague of Walter Rodney in the struggle for a multi-racial Guyana. As a member and leader of the WPA, Dr. Mohamed spent 25 years of his young life and rose to the rank as Co-leader of that party before leaving to pursue graduate studies in Binghamton, New York in 2000.

When Walter Rodney was Assassinated, he had just begun to dissect the history of the Guianese Working People and was engaged in a project to reanalyze the history as a means of raising the levels of consciousness across the multi-ethnic divide to as it were move the society to a reengagement of peoples' power. It is noteworthy that as we examine the history of Guyana, the disunity that emerged after 1955 represented a break with the

7:05 – 7:20

	<p>undulating struggles for people’s power that emerged on the plantations, and which was given new meaning with the village movement (1838-1848), the development of local (village) democracy after 1950, the 1905 riots, and the formation of trade unions and political movements before 1950. My presentation will concentrate on the challenge to the newer scholarship and the need to finish the unfinished business of rewriting the history of the working people from the bottom-up.</p>
7:20 – 7:35	<p>Cecil Gutzmore, “Walter Rodney, Revolutionary Historian against Imperialist Divide & Rule in Guyana.”</p> <p><i>Cecil Gutzmore is Afrikan-Jamaican. He is a retired academic and remains a fully committed activist in the struggle for race, class and gender liberation.</i></p> <p>Amongst the leading Revolutionary Pan-Afrikanists of the 20th century, Walter Rodney spent the last six/6 years of his life in his birthplace, the Cooperative Republic of Guyana, where he bravely and brilliantly pursued his rich praxis. This combined his work as an academic historian (despite being deprived of his professorship by the Burnham Government) and his unflinching engagement against bourgeois and petty-bourgeois power positions (specifically neo-colonial state power) and ideology (particularly those masquerading as academic history and also backward forms of nationalism). Rodney’s historical output on Guyana - always based on impeccable archival research - embraced both the popular (his speeches and children’s book, Kofi Baadu: Out of Africa & Lakshmi: Out of India) and the highly theoretical. His masterpiece of the latter kind is his book, A History of the Guyanese Working People, 1881-1905.</p> <p>In that book Rodney set out to explore a period in the relations of domination-exploitation between imperialism (as racist colonial capitalism) and the Guyanese masses, principally the African survivors and descendants of chattel enslavement and Indians (South Asians) brought in under Indenture. This had produced a second mode of the ‘racial’ interaction in the territory: namely “inter-ethnic” relations between Afrikans and Indians, which were manipulated by White Power via divide and rule practices. It is a matter of regret that Rodney neglected to pursue either groups into the extended time and place before and beyond arrival in Guyana. To have done so would have opened up the actually primordial connections between Continental Afrikans and Hindustanis where the evidence discloses a phenotypically Afrikan population before the protracted ingress of groups broadly identified as Aryan.</p> <p>The major reactionary political-ideological idea, (then and largely still the academic historical orthodoxy), that Rodney confronted as a historian of Guyana was that the inter-“ethnic”/-“racial” conflict between the main sections of the Guyanese working class was primordial; had been considerable; and “culminated” in the significant violence of the Cold War era. Rodney challenged and intellectually overthrew this position. Holding instead that antagonistic contradiction (arising from significant relations of exploitation) was absent between Afrikans and Indians; that the archival evidence and sound socio-historical theory reveal only “piddling” instances of violent inter-group conflict; that the violence of the post-PPP victory and imperialist intervention was deliberately fostered in that Cold War moment; that popular as well as scholarly output propounded - consciously or otherwise - the false pro-imperialist view of the inter-group relations involved. Sadly, on this as on other historically important issues, Rodney’s theoretical achievements have been largely ignored: the price has been unnecessary disunity within the Guyanese masses and their intensifying exploitation.</p>
7:35 – 7:55	Questions & Discussion (20 minutes)
7:55 – 8:00	Closing Comments

To join us on June 26th ...

- **Join the YouTube livestream** which will start promptly at 5pm London time (GMT+1): <https://youtu.be/OGuKL1PRmr4>
- If you planning to attend from outside the UK, **check your local start time** on the table to the right or visit Time and Date.com's [World Clock](#).
- We will have three rounds of Q&A, at the end of each of the three panels. During the broadcast, **leave any questions** you have for our panellists in the live chat, which will be moderated. Be sure to clarify whom your question is meant for, and it will be directed to that person at the appropriate moment.

 Terre Haute, IN, USA* EDT (UTC -4)	Sat, 26 Jun 2021	12:00	●
 Philadelphia, PA, USA* EDT (UTC -4)	Sat, 26 Jun 2021	12:00	●
 Kingston, Jamaica EST (UTC -5)	Sat, 26 Jun 2021	11:00	●
 Georgetown, Guyana GYT (UTC -4)	Sat, 26 Jun 2021	12:00	●
 London, United Kingdom* BST (UTC +1)	Sat, 26 Jun 2021	17:00	●
 Kigali, Rwanda CAT (UTC +2)	Sat, 26 Jun 2021	18:00	●

UTC Coordinated Universal Time - the international basis for other time zones.
Same time as for GMT (Greenwich Mean Time) and Zulu time.
Note that United Kingdom is not on GMT during summer.

To keep in touch ...

- This event is the fourth in series of seminars and publications on the work and thought of Walter Rodney. To keep abreast of our future events
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 - **Email** us at a4globaljustice@gmail.com

What I am trying to say is simply this: The revolution is made by ordinary people, not by angels, made by people from all walks of life, and more particularly the working class who are in the majority. And it is a sign of the times, the sign of the power of revolutionary transformation, when a street force member is developed into a fighting cadre in a political movement.

From Rodney's last speech, Georgetown, Guyana, 6 June 1980.