

A Review of Walter Rodney's How Europe Underdeveloped Africa

Seyi P. Obafemi

Department of Political Science, University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Nigeria

Abstract

The debate surrounding the development and underdevelopment trajectory evidence in Africa continues to attract attention from scholars, development practitioners, and even students of politics. Walter Rodney's book 'How Europe Underdeveloped Africa' remains one of the most consulted by those who opposed the modernization school of thought. By providing a sequential analysis of this book, this review makes a foray into the major argument of his brilliant piece. It further elaborates on the contemporary relevance of his book in the 21st century.

Keywords: Africa; Development; Europe; Walter Rodney; Underdevelopment

1. Introduction

Many students of politics usually have a date with Walter Rodney's book *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* especially when they start to take courses on development and underdevelopment. However, one of the important challenges most face, is the worry of reading the entire text without getting out of touch with major arguments and debates that shape the writing of the book. This review caters for such challenges for development practitioners, students of politics, freelance readers and individuals who are interested in the book but need a summary of its major postulations. To cap this escapade, the reviewer provides a contemporary relevance of his thoughts in the face of present 21st-century realities in Europe and Africa.

Rodney's Position on Development and Underdevelopment

Rodney started his book by opening a debate on the issue of development by contextualizing the meaning of the term and not the general overview as espoused in many works of literature before him, as he makes succinct that the term development is multidimensional in meaning and interpretation. Although the common perspective on development may be attributed to economic improvement and infrastructure, a comprehensive view of development to Rodney involved many pointers.

At the individual level, it may be termed an increase in skills and capacity coupled with what can be referred to as human emancipation. The improvement in the ability of a social group to regulate its internal and external relationships vis-a-vis the conflict that could arise from it is also termed development but on the societal level according to him.

Walter Rodney attributed the development that occurred in the history of the world from the stone-age era up to this modern world of machines, not only owed to the fact that human beings have the ability to engage in group relations; invariably those beasts in the wild can also do this, but to him development sprang up because of the inherent tendency of man to follow a successive stage of development through the use of tools and how to manipulate them to their own ends (ROAPE 2016).

Thus, the use of tools and the very extent man organises themselves in an effort to use them are the main factors which determine his acclaimed indices of development. Using Europe as an example, he further outlines the stages of economic development in Europe as provided by Karl Marx, which involves communism, slavery, feudalism, capitalism and socialism and so on. He further explains that all these stages outlined brought some measure of observable development to Europe in their epochal history.

Walter Rodney's Position on Underdevelopment

To Walter Rodney, underdevelopment is not the absence of development, because if development is viewed from the perspective of the ability of individuals or communities to subdue their natural environment and bring out what they can survive on, then every society is developed because evidently, every society has moved from the primitive hunting and gathering stage of development.

But often scholars in academic circles usually talk of underdevelopment in the strict economic sense which involves comparing one economy to another using some self-invented indices of development. However, if the outcome of such analysis in either quantifiable or non-quantifiable form shows that some countries are wealthier than others, then an investigation or even more a debate may be generated as to the causes of the wealth of nations such as the great economist Adam Smith did.

Therefore, to Walter Rodney comparative analysis is crucial to understanding the term underdevelopment in modern literature is generally misleading. Another component that can be easily tied to its antithesis; underdevelopment, is exploitation (Campbell 2005). One could wonder how this exploitation occurs within the context of Europe and Africa. , he explained this was done through the relationship that occurs between the underdeveloped world and the developed countries at the start of the molding of global economic relations which leads to the export of surplus, as this will be reviewed later as chronicled in his book.

Walter Rodney shows some indices of underdevelopment in the underdeveloped Global South countries as;

- i) Low per Capital income
- ii) Low foreign direct investment
- iii) Low Agricultural output and use of Crude methods.
- iv) Low industrialisation
- v) Lack of Balance diet
- vi) High infant mortality rate.
- vii) Low-qualified personnel

He however avers some salient issues on Africa's underdevelopment grabbing the reviewers' attention that includes.

- a) An attempt to checkmate the causes of underdevelopment must be a cause-to-effect analysis, for example, colonial writers may say *The causes of underdevelopment in the Africa continent is because they have low qualified personnel*, but in the first place low qualified personnel will invariably lead to underdevelopment.
- b) The term *developing* is now used to pamper the underdeveloped world, but, if this part of the world is in a state of underdevelopment and is still being retrogressive, we should better call a spade a spade by calling it underdeveloped.
- c) Although the misfortune of the underdeveloped world is largely externally driven, the countries in which these mishaps have occurred have not engaged in any formidable effort to improve their own standard of living except some countries like Singapore, Malaysia and China, which took on the step of development after Water Rodney wrote his book, but most of them are still enmeshed in corruption and a large proportion of their income is still being spent on areas that would not improve their economy. e.g. remuneration of public servants and politicians.
- d) European writer from the capitalist perspective has rationalised the underdevelopment in Africa through various means, some even Biblical allusions.

Is Africa Developed Before the Coming of the Europeans?

If Walter Rodney was trying to provide how Europe underdeveloped Africa as the focus of his book, a controversial debate may be generated as to whether Africa is on a developmental trajectory before European intrusion. Thus under this section of the review, a recovery of how Walter Rodney perceived Africa as a developed continent before the coming of the Europeans will be debated.

First, to talk of development in an early stage of human development is not to talk about civilisation to Walter Rodney, because many European writers will be eager to subject any form of civilisation evident on the African continent to comparison with what is obtainable in Europe at that time, but his object of comparison to bring out what development entails during this stage of human development was be centred on Culture and not Civilisation.

On this note, in both tangible and intangible cultural development, Africa has a rich culture, as evident among all nations and continents of the world at this period. In fact, the art of Egypt, Sudan and Ethiopia was known to the rest of the world at such an early date.

On religion an important subset of Culture, both Christianity and Islam have homes on African soil at their inception, so they could not be referred to as western religion to a very large extent, the indigenous African religion has considerable similarities with most religion found anywhere in the world at this particular point in time.

The only difference observed is the fact that, through the thoughts and intellectual conviction of some European scholars in demystifying the divine nature of the church in Europe, human life and society began to narrow down, and religion only played a part it, this is what we call in modern day as secularisation, religion thus was freed from other spheres of life; politics, geography, science and medicine unlike in Africa in which the influence of religion was still persuasive before the coming of the European.

Secularisation sped up the growth of science and capitalism in Europe at this time as he opined that, for example, belief in prayers for the intervention of the gods could easily constrain innovation design to control the impact of weather and environments like crop production, navigation at sea and natural disaster.

In areas of manufacturing before the Europeans, if manufacturing was termed as what is produced by the hands and other crude tools during this period rather than factories and machines as conceived in the modern day, then Africa is developed, as they have developed their own tool of manufacturing such as farming tools and weapons (Rupert 1998).

One way of evidently arguing about the developed nature of Africa before the European intrusion is that African products which are also produced in other parts of the western world possess more quality than their European counterpart, local cotton in Guinea were stronger compared to the ones made in Manchester, while leathers from Africa were more superior to European leathers, In fact when European came to Africa for the purpose of trading, they were astonished by the items displayed for sale by African traders (Lewis 1998).

The only difference as this will not be hidden is the scale of goods produced, due to the communal living evident in the African continent which discouraged specialisation and division of labour to promote mass production.

How Africa Contributed to the Development Observed in the Western World

In an attempt to examine how the African continent contributed to the development observed in the western world, a foundational basis must be provided for how Europe gained control of the international economic relation at its inception and how they have used it to their own advantage, to develop their continent.

As explained by Rodney, the first strategy behind the control of international economic relations was the control of waterways, sea routes as well as the law regulating what is being transported on these waterways, furthermore they create a linkage between Africa, Europe and the west indies and further to South America.

More to this, the superiority of the vessels and cannons of the European coupled with the monopoly of knowledge about how international economic relation works, due to the Capitalist mode of production being institutionalized that provides a vantage to understand its own workings, all contributed in helping the European gain control of the international economic relations at its inception (Coiler).

Therefore, this made Europe to have undue advantage to dictate what is being required from each of the continents in an effort to facilitate the continuity of international economic relations, making them the satellites, as a major role played by the African economy, based on what Europe is prepared to buy and sell.

Another foundational basis that we cannot ignore in Rodney's book was the hegemony of the Europeans in the face of military prowess, for African communities seeks to disrupt and disengage from this web of exploitation, but were overcome by Europe through the sophisticated military prowess which is more advanced than the ones in Africa. For Example, as chronicled by Rodney, Queen Nzinga of Angola seeks to restrain the activities of the Europeans on the coast of Kwango but was later suppressed through the intense activities of the Europeans in 1648.

Another example that points to this fact according to Walter Rodney is the Baga town in Guinea, with a leader named Tomba, who seeks to secure an alliance to stop the incessant menace of slave trafficking, but he was defeated by local Europeans through their military prowess.

Furthermore, Walter Rodney sight the example of Agaja Trudo, Dahomey's greatest king, who foresaw that demands for slaves in his territory was detrimental to the development of his territory and Africa at large, thus he destroyed forts, slave camps, and other pathways. But he was later forced to agree because his kingdom was blocked from the purchase of firearms from Europe.

Succinctly put, the inability of none of these African states to emancipate themselves from this web of exploration is because Europeans had in areas of controlling of waterways, the content of what is being transported and traded on them, and the sophisticated military weapons in the coffers of the European.

To Walter Rodney after this foundational basis has been created, it is pertinent to measure the contribution of Africa to the development of Europe during the exploitation era, succinctly this will not be expressed in figures because records are subjected to padding and under-reporting after the slave trade era. The enormous gains that Europe accrued during the exploitation period in Africa cannot be over-emphasised, although modern European scholars have tried to deny that Africa contributed to this development seeming it to be independent and self-paced, claiming that pre-capitalist individuals have just engaged in unprofitable activities by participating in the slave trade.

But as Rodney stressed that it is worth noting that some traditional European scholars like J.S. Mill have celebrated the importance of African labour to the development of Western Capitalism, when he averred that *'without Africa western indices were valueless because although these regions have good soil texture and gold reserves, without no worker to till the land and slaves to mine the Gold into coins, they would have been unexplored.*

As an example, to showcase that this profit where overwhelming, Rodney provided an instance in which a man named Hawkins gets enriched just on a one-time slave stealing in the African continent to sell in America, to the extent that this forced a monarch into large scale extraction of slaves by giving him a

vessel to improve his booming business. Another example is the fact that African gold was significant to the growth of financial Capital in Europe, to the extent that a new gold coin in Amsterdam was named Guinea, which was after its source.

Seaports rose in Europe because of the gains in slave trafficking, namely Liverpool, Nantes, Bordeaux, and Seville, these ports were connected directly or indirectly to the manufacturing centres which gave rise to Industrial Revolution. As mentioned by Rodney, individuals such as Alexander Barclays who enriched himself with the slave trade created the Barclays bank.

James Watt also used the finance from the West Indies slave owners to extend gratitude back to them by promoting his scientific technology of steam engines from a laboratory drawing board prototype to the factories where they function thereby reducing the demand and need for human manpower in Industrial production.

How Europe Underdeveloped Africa

Slave Trade

The main focal way through which Europe's underdeveloped Africa is arguably through the slave trade, the contact and all form of trade relation that occurs between the two parties for over 400 years is nothing to escape within the context of the Slave Trade.

Therefore in this section, the author will argument Walter Rodney's position that made us clearly understand that the shipment of Africans to other parts of the world, is solely controlled by the Europeans and to their own interest.

To make this section coherent and non-repetitive, a sequential analysis of Rodney's view on the slave trade will be presented.

- To talk of the European slave trade in the view of those without extensive research and those who perceived it in general terms as a normal trade which involves buying and selling of human cargo is extremely faulty, but succinctly, there is more behind the scene as it is a case that before slave trade could be accomplished, a lot of kidnapping, marauding, trickery, banditry would have taken place. Thus the societal violence effect must be considered when discussing the slave trade.

- The total amount of Africans transported to the European countries on the basis of the slave trade has become a subject of debate, the queens' scholars in an effort to project that the slave trade is not useful as tried to decimate the number of slaves to the ones that landed alive in European soils, but a critical and close examination of the logic involved may outnumber and multiply this population tendered by the European scholars considering the following points.

- i) Those that would have died on their pathways to the port of shipment.

- ii) Those that died on board in the process of shipment to the west indies.

- iii) The conflict and social violence would have claimed many lives of the communities involved as a result of the fact that no community will lie low to be enslaved by another.

- Slave trade was detrimental to the African labour force, as able-bodied men were the target of the European, the shipped the healthier wherever possible, this labour force if they are to put on a counterfactual statement. ' if this population were not lost to slavery, what would have been the present development pace of Africa as a continent.
- The important nexus between socio-economic development and population has been inevitably short-changed by the Europeans, as population growth enhances the labour force and the labour force in turn if increased will lead to the expansion of a market. This has been evident among the Africans event before the coming of the Europeans, as rulers of communities were conscious of the fact that population was more important than other factors of production.
- From the biological point of view, the population loss in Africa hindered development because a population density already used to a geographical area may become difficult to inhabit if the population were reduced. For example, tse-tse fly and mosquitoes may become more rampant and the inhabitants of these areas may be forced to abandon this geographical entity, this caused large populations to lose the battle to tame and harness nature which is at the root of development.
- In conclusion to this subset of slavery, Walter Rodney notes that European scholars have pampered the evils of the slave trade and further state that it was beneficial to Africa. Despite the fallacious nature of this argument, our dear friend which we are trying to review his work mentioned that attention must be paid to them.

Firstly, they claim the slave trade was a trade involving exchange, thus Africans too gain something tangible out of it, it is important to argue against such a statement in simpler terms, that the exchange rate was unequal in terms of the irrelevant goods used as an exchange to human cargoes.

Secondly, they claim it led to the introduction of new staple foods to the African continent, but it is important to make it clear that the logical nature of human flexibility is expressed in the mobility of staples as most of what is eaten today in Europe and then are not indigenous to the continent, yet human cargoes was not used as an exchange for the spread of such staples.

The most fallacious of these arguments is that the slave trade saves Africa from the menace of hunger which would have ravaged the continent. All this argument may seem ridiculous! because why would a population exported to produce a surplus for another continent suffer starvation on their own land when living in peaceful coexistence?

Technological Stagnation and Distortion of Africa Economy

Another root of underdevelopment as pointed out by Walter Rodney is the stagnation of the African pace of technological development by Europe, Europe did all their means to kill any form of technological innovation in Africa.

The situation of technological development in 14th-century Europe was not in any way different from what is evident in other parts of the world, as already established the global economy trade at its first instance was profitable in relation to what was obtainable in Africa, moreover, an important factor that contributed to inventions in all parts of the world is the financial capital earn from the crude hand manufacturing and the subsequent trade that follows, all this profit are needed to be re-invested into the

crude manufacturing industry which promotes the spirit of technological innovations, that is the drive to improve on how tools can be used to produce what hands formerly do effectively (Nathan 2011)

Succinctly Europe stagnated every iota of technological innovations in Africa by re-investing what is gained in the trade with Africa into their own crude manufacturing industry which allows some technological advances to appear in Europe in the 18th century.

A clear example of this is cloth making, formerly Africans rely solely on indigenous cloth making and its demand was exclusively high, but with the appearance of looms powered by engines in Europe which were borne out of their re-invested financial capital, Europe began to source raw cotton from Africa and manufactured cloths in the industries became cheaper which are sent down to Africa.

The availability of cheaper clothing led to lower demand for clothes indigenously produce in Africa and craftsmen in Africa have to close down their businesses, the point here made by Rodney is that, despite the crude nature of the technology used in producing clothes in Africa, if it continues and the demand was relatively high over a long period of time, the technology will evolve over time just as in Europe, this is just an example of the numerous ways in which the European have stagnated African technology.

Colonialism

It is no doubt that Europe used Colonialism as a means of exploiting Africa, it is worthy of note that under Colonialism the exploitation was more acute and backed up by the use of force and legal rules. The exploitative tendency of Colonialism was explained by Walter Rodney in the following ways.

The exploitation of African Wage Labourers During the Colonial Era

After territories were officially acquired by Europeans in the scrabble for Africa at the Berlin Conference in Germany, exploitation in Africa took a new dimension as the wage labour in Africa was the turn to be exploited. During this period African wage labourers were dangerously underpaid and the exorbitant profit of the colonial master was sent to Europe to develop Industrial capital.

This petty wage was compared by Walter Rodney in terms of the amount paid to the typical African wage labourer vis-a-vis his white counterpart, these wage labourers such as low-category civil servants, port workers and mines labourers were highly exploited this exploitation was enormous to the extent that the amount paid to these workers could not cater for their continued existence let alone paying taxes which are also collected.

The exploitation of African Peasants

During the colonial period, the exploitation of African peasants was numerous and notorious in all ramifications, from the price of goods that were underpaid, to exchange for petty cash by force, all this exploitation was backed up by the law, as the price of raw materials were regulated by the colonial government.

Walter Rodney further identified that the existence of middlemen made this exploitation more intolerable for African peasants because it makes this exploitation go through a process in which a series of actors try to squeeze their own gains out of the African peasant.

Taxes made the situation worse as the African peasant were over-taxed and this money was used in expanding the network of European development, rail and roads built are not constructed to the benefit of Africans but only to lessen the burden of transporting surplus out of Africa (Gbenga 2009).

Finally, the law and governance coupled with the administration of the colonial masters were all formed to benefit the capitalist they represent in Europe, the observance of law and order are mere means to subjugate Africans and extract from them.

Contemporary Relevance of Rodney's Book

After a thorough review of Walter Rodney's book has been undertaken, it is pertinent to provide a justification of if his work has contemporary relevance., Rodney's work has been much articulate, one would wonder how such a historian would put together such voluminous combination on the subject of development and underdevelopment. Reading through his book many things crossed my mind, first, the book is a masterpiece to understand the interwoven nature of the global economy and how a nation can play its card in a way that it would benefit at the expense of other nations.

Secondly, the historical perspective which Walter Rodney used in engaging our minds on the content of this book provides a recreational activity which is more interesting than the jargon full in the bulk of the economic piece which tries to explain the notion of underdevelopment and development within the context of Europe exploitation of Africa (Ojo 2015)

Although his argument that Africa was developed before the intrusion of the Europeans is still valid even with numerous pieces of evidence through which he argued in his book, with the help of relevant artefacts, written records, and oral tradition in history, we are made to understand that there is no sharp distinction between the European and African at their first contact, this is different from the assumption of earlier scholars in Europe who posit that nothing was on the African continent than unedifying salvage of barbaric culture with nothing but gyrations. Evidently, all of Walter Rodney's postulations are to a very extent factual and not contestable, but to aver that all these arguments are relevant to this contemporary world will be faulty (Stanley 2010)

A couple of reasons motivated my position, one, Walter Rodney was obsessed with the fact that Europe underdeveloped Africa, but can we also hypothetically reverse this statement to *How did Africa underdevelop Africa?*, the Europeans left the shores of Africa long ago, a point here is that how have Africa themselves try to move from this position of underdevelopment?, post-colonial African governments have been enmeshed in corruption, military coups, unstable governance, selfish regimes and a lot more, which have continued to put Africa in this underdeveloped position (Coiler & Gunning 1993)

Another reason for recognising the fault in Walter Rodney's work is that in his escapade in presenting how Europe underdeveloped Africa, Rodney fails to dwell on the role played by Africans themselves in making colonialism, slave trade, and neo-colonialism a successful adventure for the Europeans.

For example, it is on record that only a few European came to Africa continent to engage in the slave trade, the same record has it that between 1807, 3 million slaves were shipped out of Africa, and before 1867, about 9 million to 10 million of people are carried into the Atlantic slave trade.

One would wonder, are the European magicians who bewitched this African into slavery, how could a handful of Europeans capture millions of Africans?, what strategy do they employ to achieve such tremendous results, therefore the answer without much research is that Africans themselves connived with the Europeans to sell their brothers out of their own selfish interest and economic advantage.

In this 21st century, it is evident that Walter Rodney's work has been given a backlash by the action of African Leaders who have continued to promote neo-colonialism, as soon as they mount the corridor of power, they destroy all roots of opposition and starts to romance with western leaders by looting their treasury and keeping them down in Swiss banks instead of using it to develop infrastructures and projects that would secure jobs for their own citizens (Stephen 2011)

Another reason why I do not wholly subscribe to Rodney's position is the trend that some nations have moved from being underdeveloped to developing as just as they were colonised and exploited as the Africans. As prime minister Lee Kuan Yew transform Singapore from being a third-world country to a developed world, Malaysia also garnered the resources it had to come out of this shambles of poverty and underdevelopment coming back to compete with its colonial masters as it once became the fastest-growing economy in the world. But Africa has always bent on blaming the reason for their misfortune on the doorstep of another continent (Stanley 2010)

Competing Interests

This book review was written by the author solely for the purpose of this publication, it has not been submitted for publication or published elsewhere and is the original literature owned by the author.

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