

OBITUARY - Walter Rodney

In 1963, when Walter Rodney arrived as a post-graduate student fresh from the University of the West Indies, the weekly African history seminar at the University of London was perhaps at the height of its influence. Roland Oliver and Malcolm Guthrie were together fashioning their major hypotheses concerning the problem of Bantu origins. John Fage had just left to start the Centre of West African Studies in Birmingham, but he was still closely connected with the seminar. Its sessions were almost invariably full and lively, and it was attracting students of Rodney's calibre from many parts of the world. It provided a focus which at that time was still unique.

After he had attended the seminar for two terms, I asked Walter for his impressions. We were sitting at a café in Lisbon where he was to start archival research, and I was astonished to hear that he was harshly critical of the seminar's whole approach to African history. He felt we were blithely disregarding what should have been our principal pre-occupations. At the time, I dismissed his remarks as naively impatient and brashly overconfident. Later, as I saw the draft chapters of what was eventually to become his History of the Upper Guinea Coast (1970), I began dimly to realise that he was fully capable of developing and substantiating his critique.

Instead of being interested primarily in the inter-relations of African trade and politics, as many of us were at that time, Walter focused his attention on the agricultural basis of African communities, on the productive forces within them and on the processes of social differentiation. As a result, his research raised a whole set of fresh questions concerning the nature of African social institutions on the Upper Guinea coast in the sixteenth century and of the impact of the Atlantic slave trade. In doing so, he helped to open up a new dimension. Almost immediately he stimulated much further writing and research on West Africa, and he initiated a debate, which still continues and now extends across the whole range of African history. To these insights which were linked with his detailed research, Walter brought a mastery of English and great abilities in synthesis and clarification, powers which were notably displayed in his wide-ranging contributions to the Cambridge History of Africa (1975).

Yet more significant than these intellectual gifts and achievements, with their challenge and stimulus to fellow scholars, was the fact that Walter was a gloriously consistent individual, a wholly integrated personality. There was no ivory tower for him, no division between scholarship and the problems of daily life. His discoveries were valid for him only if he could communicate them to his less-learned, less-privileged brothers. In his first term as a research student he was already exploring whole-heartedly this relationship at a weekly forum in Hyde Park. When teaching at the Universities of Dar es Salaam and the West Indies, he launched and sustained a large number of discussion groups which swept up and embraced many who had had little or no formal education. As a writer, he reached out to contact thousands in The Groundings with my Brothers (1969) and in his influential How Europe Underdeveloped Africa (1972).

On his return to Guyana in 1974, he was prevented by government pressure from taking up his appointment as a professor in the University. Increasingly he was involved with his political vocation, yet he remained deeply attracted to academic research. He worked hard on various aspects of the social history of his homeland, and during a visit to London as a Research Fellow in 1977 he began to formulate his findings with characteristic thoroughness, vigour and originality. Already, however, he calmly and clearly recognised the stark and terrible dangers that he faced in his country. He was acutely conscious of the sacrifices to which he might be called. His anguish, though generally hidden, was profound. On the one side, there was his close attachment to his young family whom he dearly loved and to the academic career which he vainly longed to be able to pursue; on the other, his steadfast response to that commitment to the poor and the oppressed which distinguished all his life and activities.

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