

## **Walter Rodney – Selected Quotes**

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“The villages were self-governing units....They were not merely units of production... Primarily, their function was to guarantee that life could be reproduced within that physical space called a village, and that the Africans themselves had the power to decide how that space was to be policed, and how the rates and taxes that were produced were going to be spent to maintain sanitation and so on within the village.

They exercised this political power for about 25 years after freedom in 1838. Then in the mid-1860s, the colonial power awoke to the realization that a whole alternative political centre now existed, that local government was in the hands of a different class – the rural proletariat combined with a few peasants. This was untenable because they were coming into conflict with the central government which was still controlled by the planters. At this point in the 1860s, the central government moved to curtail the exercise of local government. But for some 25 years, the working class had organized itself as a political class because it was exercising political power at the local government level.” Published as “From Niggeryard to Village” by WPA, May 1, 1988

“While Cuba has moved since 1958 to conquer heights and sometimes failed, we still see the Caribbean as one of the great backwaters of imperialism today. We can still turn to the neighbouring islands of Puerto Rico, Haiti, Jamaica, the rest of the English, Dutch and French speaking islands of the Caribbean and bear in mind that they have not begun even to grapple with some of the problems which Cuba has been grappling with consistently since 1958. Therefore, the Cuban achievement is to be measured, not only relative to where Cuba was, but also to the lack of success in dealing with the stagnation which characterizes the Caribbean region today”. Address to meeting of the Afro-Asian Cultural Society, Sussex University, June 1977

“For a small nation, Guyana has produced a discouragingly large number of lackeys and stooges who hide in the shadow of the “Comrade Leader”. Guyanese constantly complain of “square pegs in round holes”. The square pegs are the misfits and soup drinkers who flourish because each one is prepared to be his master’s voice. There is a double tragedy in this situation. First there is the tragedy (with some mixture of comedy) of the incompetent, the mediocre and the corrupt making a mess of things. Secondly, there is tragedy in which men and women of ability and integrity have been dismissed or they have run away or they have been reduced to silence. This part of the tragedy involves honest police officers who must condone corruption, doctors who must heal without drugs, managers who are not allowed to manage and workers who are not permitted to produce and then are forced to consume a diet of lies and deceit.”  
*People’s Power, No Dictator*, Walter Rodney, 1980

I was brought up not very far from here, in a typical range yard in Bent Street. And there, amidst the poverty, looking back now, I can see in my mind’s eye ordinary black people who were worth everything, who were human beings who had strength, who had character. Never mind he may have been a cartman, never mind the woman may have been taking in washing. When you stop to think about it, they had character. Some of them were miracle workers, because it’s a miracle how they used to bring up families on what they earned. And now I cannot accept that such people must be put to do some dirty political skullduggery – coming to court, lying, to get another man convicted of murder. That is insane, from my point of view. *From speech by Walter Rodney, 1977, campaigning in defence of Arnold Rampersaud who was accused of the murder of policeman James Henry*

...as I said before, you start with one thing, you end with another. The system doesn't stop at racial discrimination. Because it is a system of class oppression, it only camouflages its class nature under a racial cover. And in the end, it will move against anyone irrespective of colour. In the end, they will move even against their own. Because, don't believe if you are a member of that party today, that you will be protected tomorrow from the injustices. Because when a monster grows, it grows out of control. It eats up even those who created the monster. And it's time that our people understood that. *From speech by Walter Rodney, 1977, campaigning in defence of Arnold Rampersaud who was accused of the murder of policeman James Henry*

*My political role in that situation was fairly well-defined: to stay within the university walls, first and foremost, to develop and struggle at the level of ideas, to relate to the student population. For me, being a non-Tanzanian, it meant that I had to relate to the indigenous Tanzanians, indigenous intellectuals and students within the university, and only secondarily to Tanzanians outside the walls of the university. I draw that distinction. Many people will say, well, it's a spurious distinction and it's part of the elitism of the university, or something of that sort. I don't think so. One must recognize certain limits in any given political situation: limits of culture, limits of one's legal and citizenship status, limits that come from the fact that we were speaking in the university in one language, which is English, and the people of Tanzania were speaking Kiswahili. And one must take all these things into account, along with the historical record – the Tanzanian people, like other African peoples, had constantly been subjected to harangues from outside as part of cultural imperialism. It was necessary, therefore for these historical reasons, that we as progressive individuals (the majority of whom, indeed, initially were non-Tanzanians in the university), play our role mainly within the university.*

WALTER RODNEY IN WALTER RODNEY SPEAKS, 1990 pp.39-40

*Development was universal because the conditions leading to economic expansion were universal. Everywhere man was faced with the task of survival by meeting fundamental needs; and better tools were a consequence of the interplay between human beings and nature as part of the struggle for survival. Of course human history is not a record of advances and nothing else. There were periods in every part of the world when there were temporary setbacks and actual reduction of the capacity to produce basic necessities and other services for the population. But the overall tendency was towards increased production, and at given points in time the increase in the quantity of goods was associated with a change in the quality or character of society.*

**WALTER RODNEY, HOW EUROPE UNDERDEVELOPED AFRICA, 1983 EDITION**

*“Years now people don’t address me as Dr. Rodney and Professor Rodney; it is only since I’ve come back to these parts. I’m accustomed to relating to students and the common title is Comrade; that’s all. It doesn’t matter whether one is student or staff. Now, if a Comrade is afraid of victimization, part of my duty is to ensure he doesn’t get victimized because I would have some access to things like the examination meetings and the like. I have the right if necessary to say, ‘I would like to see the script of candidate No. 2743’ because I have already been warned by one of the students or I have reason to believe (sometimes, even, we know) sometimes we have overheard some staff members who say they are going to fix up certain students. We know it before the student in fact, and we are on the lookout to see that the student doesn’t get victimized.”*

**RODNEY – INTERVIEW WITH INSIGHT (STUDENT PUBLICATION OF ST.AUGUSTINE, UWI) 1975, cited in Rupert Lewis, 1998, p. 132.**

*"I trust that my use of the words such as 'capitalism', 'imperialism', and 'neo-colonialism' will not be deemed as a cover for sinister intent. My indulgence in those terms is aimed at opposing a system which is barbarous and dehumanising – the one which snatched me from Africa in chains and deposited me in far off lands to be a slave beast, then a sub-human colonial subject, and finally an outlaw in those lands. Under these circumstances, one asks nothing more but to be allowed to learn from, participate in and be guided by the African Revolution in this part of the continent; for this Revolution here is aimed at destroying that monstrous system and replacing it with a just socialist society."*  
*Rodney in letter in the Nationalist newspaper (Tanzania) 17<sup>th</sup> December, 1969; cited in Issa Shivji, 1980*

#### ON RETURNING TO GUYANA IN MAY 1974 with family

*Going back to Guyana was like a culture shock to them. First, people didn't greet each other; in Tanzania everybody greets you in the morning. They were going into a culture they did not understand. They knew this is where their Mummy and daddy came from; even though they had gone on vacation they were too young to understand. So they didn't like it; they missed Tanzania. To begin with, Shaka had a lot of problems in school because he was already 9, and his first language was Kiswahili. He had to relearn English, the children feel he spoke differently, he had an African name which was still not the thing.; they all had African names. But they were confident. I remember Kanini insisted that they were Africans but their father and mother were Guyanese, so they were always proud of their heritage. When children said to Asha, 'you all hair braid like snakes', Kanini would say, 'because we are Africans we are different, you know', and always too positions about their father' work and what he was doing. But initially I would say they didn't like it. (Pat Rodney, 1989)*

Right now in Guyana, the past few years, it has not been possible to do a great deal of academic work, and yet, at the same time, I feel fairly satisfied that I've done as much as could possibly be done under the circumstances, the circumstances being very backward material conditions for carrying out any research and scholarly activity. For example, I've done historical research in the archives of Guyana; but I'm sure they must rate as the most poorly kept archives in the world. This is no exaggeration and I'm not blaming any government. I'm just reflecting on a fact that they're pretty bad. And the conditions are also hostile to creative work because of the general philistine atmosphere which exists, the way in which the government has moved against the university. The whole spirit of mendacity which prevails in the society could hardly be compatible with the search for truth and producing serious scholarship, although I will concede that historically there are times in the depths of the most backward systems that great literature has been produced.

Rodney, "Will the World Listen Now? Interview by Margaret Arkhurst, Guyana Forum, June, 1980

...more than one political party has been responsible for the crisis of race relations in this country. I think our leadership has failed us on that score. I think external intervention was important in bringing the races against each other from the fifties and particularly in the early 1960s. But I am concerned with the present. If we made that mistake once, we cannot afford to be misled on that score today. No ordinary Afro-Guyanese, no ordinary Indo-Guyanese can today afford to be misled by the myth of race. Time and time again it has been our undoing.

Walter Rodney, Speech printed, "In Defence of Arnold Rampersaud", (booklet, 1982.

“..let us take the fact, that over the last decade, Indians and Africans, in Guyana, have been at each other’s throats, for a variety of reasons, internal and external, and that there is a tremendous amount of ill-will and suspicion, on both sides; let us take that fact. Now, some people try to deny this, and talk about racial harmony, but it just is *not* so. It may be submerged, but it is there; it has to be there; the system ensures that. But, what can we do about it? I feel that there are, at least, two levels at which one must try to organize against the prevailing condition of racial antagonism. One must organize within the African community, within the Indian community, too, to build different forms of consciousness, different types of social bases, which will ultimately be the forms of the new State and simultaneously, one must begin to find effective revolutionary integrative mechanisms, both organizational and ideological, in terms of people, purely and simply people, you know, as contributors to the new concept of group consciousness, group power, as for example, like putting six persons, three Africans, three Indians, not just in terms of a symbolic show,(they have, of course, to be ideologically consistent and so on), but putting them in a meaningful, nationally powerful position of leadership, and as a unit.”

Interview with Dr. Walter Rodney: Andrew Salkey, Georgetown Journal, 1970.

In the 1960s we had seen the phase of electoral politics, where people were lining up on one side or the other – the PPP if one was Indian and PNC if one was African. That was very clear. I recall very well, as late as 1961, being very confused on the question of whether one went for the PPP or the PNC. As I listed the pros and cons, I said, well the PPP says it’s a Marxist party but it’s not operating that way and it had Indians. On the other side, the PNC didn’t even claim to be Marxist or even a serious socialist party. Yet it had the Africans. And for those of us Africans who were struggling for some clarity, struggling to take a progressive position, it was extremely difficult. Many who had joined the PPP as the better of a bad choice actually had to leave the party. And ultimately,

because of those racial questions, a generation of us have actually stayed clear of the two dominant political parties. The whole history of the 1960s was a history in which our political choices were fundamentally dictated, not by any class position but by the ongoing race conflict. And it made it extremely difficult for any progressive, African or Indian, to intervene in the Guyanese situation, because it was already so formed that the moment one intervened, one was doing so in a ready-made context of Indian versus African. In this respect I was actually more comfortable in Jamaica because there the confrontations were clear. Class and ethnicity ran along the same lines.

Rodney, "The Politicization of Race in Guyana: a conversation with Walter Rodney", Black-World View 1, 1976.

An idea that has been gaining prominence in my mind as I have moved around from one institution to another in this country is the idea of intellectual struggle. All these huge concrete and glass buildings rising up into the sky are a little different from my normal environment. It does strike me so at any rate (I don't know about who live under it permanently), as representing architecturally the power of the ruling class. These institutions are powerful; we can't underestimate their power. The United States as a whole is powerful. It must have appeared that way to the Vietnamese. Portugal must have appeared that way to the Mozambican and the Guinean people that this 30 story building appears to me, as I come onto one of these university campuses, and I stand up and stare upwards and I see this tremendous structure which I know doesn't belong to us. Everybody knows it doesn't belong to us.

Black people are here in these institutions as a part of the development of black struggle, but only as a concession designed to incorporate us within the structure. I use the term 'guerrilla intellectual' to come to grips with the initial imbalance of power in the context of academic learning. Going beyond the symbolism of the building, I'm thinking also of the books, the references, the theoretical assumptions, and the entire ideological underpinnings of what we



have to learn in every single discipline. Once you understand the power that all this represents, then you have to recognize that your struggle must be based on an honest awareness of the initial disparity. And that's how the guerilla operates. Walter Rodney Speaks: the Making of an African Intellectual. 1990. pp. 111-112