

Development in Decolonization: Walter Rodney, Third World Developmentalism, and “Decolonizing Political Theory”

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Developmentalism is the idea that progress entails the temporal movement of societies along a universal trajectory. Prevailing accounts conceptualize Eurocentric developmental discourses as ideological weapons of imperial domination, specifically because they defer colonial claims to popular self-rule. Rejecting the idea that these historical entanglements exhaust the meanings of developmental thought, this article sheds light on anticolonial debates over developmentalism. Turning to Guyanese scholar-activist Walter Rodney, it reconstructs what I call “popular anticolonial developmentalism,” as a way of construing popular legitimation in actual contexts of anticolonial and postcolonial politics. From the premise that capitalist-imperialism “deflected” the historical motion of colonized societies, popular anticolonial developmentalism places the agencies of progressive transformation with democratically empowered popular subjects. Shifting the lens of “decolonizing political theory” from epistemic critique to worldly anticolonialism shows how developmentalism became a primary idiom for contesting and reimagining anticolonial futures. In turn, anticolonial practices reshaped developmentalism’s very conceptual parameters.

The idea that progress entails the temporal movement of societies along a single or convergent universal trajectory has now been subject to many critiques. Influenced by postcolonial studies, historians of political thought have examined the ways that conceptual schema framing human history as successive stages with the West at the apex became central to the justification of European imperial rule. Political theorists of empire and imperialism have shown how this “stadial” model of social development has frequently served as an organizing ideological framework for racial and imperial domination by projecting Europe as the pinnacle of civilization and translating non-European difference into (sometimes redeemable, sometimes irredeemable) backwardness (Allen 2017; Anghie 2005; McCarthy 2009; Mehta 1999; Muthu 2003; Pitts 2010; 2006; Tully 2009). This literature has generated the powerful insight that developmental discourses from J. S. Mill to Darwin have served as primary ideological weapons of Western imperial violence through which self-designated “advanced” societies have invented obligations to rule, civilize, preserve in traditional form, or save “backward” societies earlier on the temporal scale of civilization.

These insights into the imperial functions of developmentalism in Western political thought are persuasive. Yet, these critiques elide a different “problem space” that arose for *anticolonial* actors (Scott 2004, 3–5). Often, anticolonial actors had *already* diagnosed Eurocentric developmental discourses as ideologies masking imperialism’s coercive fabrication of colonial underdevelopment. For them, the principle questions hinged instead on how independence movements could

themselves conceive legitimacy without resorting to similar developmental logics. For example, must a people figured as underdeveloped first attain certain material or cultural prerequisites to authorize its own self-government?

The canon of anticolonial thought indicates three broad approaches to this dilemma, which Nazmul Sultan (2020) has recently illuminated as the “colonial problem of peoplehood.” A first response among anticolonial nationalists has been to reframe developmentalism in institutionally anticolonial terms by affirming the postcolonial state’s right to assume the mandate of imperial guardianship over the colonial population. This approach embraces the continued legitimacy of framing the mass population as the *object* of development, now to be lifted out of externally imposed forces of imperial underdevelopment. As a consequence, however, this resolution clashes with the normativity of democratic autonomy by way of anointing a postcolonial elite on the basis of the claim that the people lack some prerequisite qualities for self-rule. Such logic is the ancestor of the idea of the postcolonial state as a “developmental state” (Anghie 2005; Pahuja 2011).

A second intervention can be found in a figure like Gandhi, who rejected the developmental premise that the Indian people needed “preparation” for collective self-government. Seeking to eschew the entire framework of developmentalism, Gandhi’s interpretation of *swaraj* appealed to the immediate moral power of the individual subject as locus of “self-rule.” The ingenuity of this resolution was also the source of its institutional intractability, insofar as Gandhi renounced basic problems of collective organization in sidestepping the developmental problematic (Sultan 2020, 87–92).

Through a reading of the Guyanese scholar-activist Walter Rodney (1942–1980), this essay reconstructs a third relatively unattended frame of response, what I call “popular anticolonial developmentalism.” The notion of popular anticolonial developmentalism

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captures diverse ideological-political projects that place the imperatives of progressive social and political transformation (itself understood as the recovery of temporal movement in history) with the agency of a democratically empowered popular subject. This kind of approach is typically animated as a counter to the first resolution of the colonial problem of peoplehood when popular mobilizations seek to expand or wholly transfigure the democratic limits of top-down projects that take the population as a mere object of developmental intervention.

The reason I interpret this form of popular politics as developmentalist is that Rodney consistently figured such a politics in developmental terms as a way of reinheriting and reigniting the progressive movement of colonized peoples' histories. This claim was premised on the notion that those histories had been forced onto distorted or dislocated trajectories precisely through hierarchical structures of domination resulting from capitalist-imperialism, transatlantic slavery, and colonial expropriation. Altogether, Rodney affirms a developmentalist emphasis on the movement of colonized societies *through* history via their active self-fashioning and reflective inheritance of disrupted histories in radically democratic popular struggles. In doing so, this framework already disavowed the notion that "progress" coincides with the replication or unfolding of a singular Eurocentric history.

Why Rodney? Rodney is best known as a figure of revolutionary Black Power in the Caribbean and the author of the groundbreaking *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (HEUA) in 1972 (Rodney 2018a). He left an indelible mark on activist and academic circles throughout the Black diaspora and the global South, yet he rarely surfaces in political science. Here, I interpret Rodney as a thinker who played a critical role in critiquing notions of development and in reinterpreting development as a central aspect of popular democratic practice within the transnational circuits of Third Worldist and pan-Africanist thought that underlay (trans)national liberation struggles.

WHAT IS DECOLONIZING POLITICAL THEORY?

Scholarship in the political theory of empire and imperialism and later efforts to "decolonize political theory" have primarily critiqued the Eurocentric legacies of Western political thought by placing them in imperial contexts. Among these, developmentalism has served as a recurrent example of an intractably Eurocentric conceptual field that derives from a range of Western, post-Enlightenment political vocabularies. Rather than accept that developmental thought is *prima facie* Eurocentric given these historical entanglements, I join recent work examining anticolonial developmental discourses in their more specific political and intellectual contexts (Marwah 2019; Sultan 2020).

My study's attention to this relatively occluded political-ideological terrain makes three contributions to debates on development and developmental discourses in political theory and the history of political thought.

One consequence of the frequent treatment of developmentalism as necessarily synonymous with Eurocentric universalism has been the tendency to view imperialism in Western political thought as a problem to be addressed by diagnosing a set of pathological *epistemic* assumptions. The task is to dissect the assumptions built into European thinkers' cognitive maps of the world, such as those about progress and civilization (Allen 2017). Accordingly, the decolonization of political, social, and cultural theory has largely proceeded as an enterprise directed at a critique of the parochial viewpoints of Western political theorizing (Mills 2015; Tully 2020). Consequent strategies promoted have included the need to transgress, move away from, or chip away at the edges of Eurocentric universalist developmental categories (Chakrabarty 2008; Mignolo 2010; Wynter 1996). Despite disagreement as to how to do so, these debates feature significant theoretical investments in leveraging an epistemological critique of conceptual categories that have been deemed Eurocentric—and, so, perniciously misplaced—in their universalism.

This article reveals the limits of understanding "decolonization" in the first instance as the refutation and critique of Eurocentric universalism. More strongly put, I want to suggest that the presumption that developmentalism as one such set of discourses is irredeemably Eurocentric—and, thus, must be "decolonized"—may work *against* the study of actual *political projects of decolonization*. I venture that this is the case because the study of developmentalism in the vein I described inadvertently reifies a domain of contestable political vocabularies as *Eurocentric* that actors at the peripheries reworked for their own purposes. In such cases, the critique of Eurocentrism can discredit the very possibility of anticolonial interpretive originality.

Accordingly, I suggest that the decolonization of political theory ought not to be a search to decontaminate Western political theory of a set of assumptions that are taken to be Eurocentric in themselves or with some projects of comparative political theory understood as leveraging "non-Western" political thought for a critique of the provincial character of "Western political thought." To the contrary, I argue that what is "decolonizing" about the projects I detail were their efforts to rework developmental categories in service of worldly projects of decolonization in practice. Indeed, Rodney and others drew on and disagreed upon the traction of developmental languages in comprehending the specific dynamics of the colonial situations they lived, with the goal of using their analysis to envision and build "postcolonial forms of political modernity" (Mantena 2016, 301).

A second contribution here is historiographic and pertains especially to how such epistemological interpretations of the task of decolonizing political theory may implicitly circumscribe the study of the circulation of ideas. In particular, the historical-intellectual field of contestation around notions of development in the post-World War II era is my focus here. In this context, the prevalent critique of the dominance of Western philosophical and political categories has tended to *narrow* the history of development to "a story of the

diffusion of theories and practices from the Global North to the Global South” (Macekura and Manela 2018, 11). Historiographic emphases on developmentalism’s unidirectional influence—in this case, U.S. Cold War ideology’s export to the Third World—*mirror* framing assumptions of those seeking to tell a triumphalist Western-centric history. In both cases of critique and triumphalism, the non-West or subaltern play a reactive role and the varied ends to which these actors deployed developmental categories stay obscured or are read as unreflective mimicry of monolithically colonial categories (Adelman 2018, 331).¹

To this end, my approach to Rodney follows recent historians of development who commend greater attention to the global and “multidirectional pathways” through which many actors deployed developmental idioms in the twentieth century (Macekura and Manela 2018, 11). Consequently, I examine how developmental discourses served as a critical and sometimes paradoxical set of idioms that traveled within and across Third Worldist projects. Alongside “self-determination,” development stretched far beyond its Western origins to become among the most important shared languages for social theory and political visions of the terms of anticolonialism—if not global order as such—in the latter half of the twentieth century (Rist 1997). Much as notions of self-determination featured hegemonic and counterhegemonic variants (Getachew 2019; Lightfoot 2016; Manela 2007; Massad 2018; Simpson 2012), the politics of development was likewise a site of intense conflict over the stakes of progress, the state, and modernity, in decolonization (Macekura and Manela 2018, 11).

Finally, a third intervention this study makes is my focus on debates *within* anticolonial thought about developmentalism by delineating the contours of Rodney’s popular anticolonial developmentalism as one among other anticolonial resolutions to the exclusionary developmental paradigms justifying the deferral of colonial self-rule. This emphasis favors inquiry seeking to apprehend the specific conditions of anticolonial and postcolonial politics over efforts to capture “difference” primarily in terms of divergence from and critique of the west (Getachew and Mantena 2021).

My argument proceeds as follows. The first section contextualizes debates about and within Third World developmentalism. The subsequent sections turn to Rodney, contending that he challenged Eurocentric developmentalism in ways recognizable to contemporary political-theoretic critique, but he also drew from alternative modes of developmental social theory and developmental idioms to forge a constructive account of popular anticolonial developmentalism in

ways neglected today. Altogether, this essay offers an examination of developmentalism *in* concrete projects of decolonization. What is more, it seeks to provoke a broader shift in the overarching enterprise of “decolonizing political theory” toward scrutinizing the dilemmas of situated theorizing in postcolonial and anticolonial contexts.

THIRD WORLD DEVELOPMENTALISM

The stadial models of historical progress that informed twentieth-century developmentalism have deep roots in Enlightenment political thought (Ince 2019). Yet, the idea of “national development” as a future-directed trajectory for the modernization of a political-economic space demarcated as self-evidently national was, at the earliest, a late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century product: It resulted from early phases of anticolonial nationalist movements (Goswami 2010; McVety 2018), as well as the (failed) efforts of the British and French empires to relegitimate colonial rule as “development” in response to interwar labor uprisings throughout the West Indies and Africa (Cooper 2004).

During the interwar period, Pan-African intellectuals such as W. E. B. Du Bois (1915; 1943), C. L. R. James (2012), and George Padmore (1936; 1971) theorized the international system as a structure of racial hierarchy predicated on the subordinate integration and enslavement of the nonwhite global masses. Inspired by labor revolts throughout the West Indies and Africa against colonial subjugation (Cooper 2004; James 2012), they articulated the anticolonial project as an “international class politics” predicated on abolishing the enslavement of the colonized masses. These interventions were foundational in staking the anticolonial claim that colonial underdevelopment resulted from transatlantic slavery and postemancipation semi-slavery, imperial domination, and resource extraction (Getachew 2019, 145).

The radical analysis of imperialism that influenced anticolonial national liberation struggles and regionalisms competed in the 1950s and 1960s with development economics and modernization theory to explain the “economics of underdevelopment” (Agarwala and Singh 1958). I shall focus on the anti-imperialist Saint Lucian economist W. Arthur Lewis, who created a foundational model for development economics that became prominent in the first wave of development theory and later came under direct challenge by dependency theorists in the 1960s, including Rodney (Tignor 2006).

In early writings, Lewis used the tools of neoclassical economics to answer the question of why the returns to labor in the global South paled in comparison to those of the global North. He argued that the relative composition of agriculture and industry determined the wage rate of agricultural workers in the global South. Without the agricultural revolution that had already occurred in the global North, the relative incomes of agricultural workers in the “tropical regions” remained too low to move them to more disciplined regimes of

¹ “Postdevelopment” scholars study the “development regime” as a Eurocentric *discursive regime* empowering experts to intervene in an “underdeveloped” world they represent through lack (Escobar 2011; Esteva and Prakash 1998; Wynter 1996). Much like the political theory work critiquing developmentalism, this turn neglects the malleability of developmental idioms by its focus on critique of the West’s *constructed image* of the “Third World.” For an alternative, see Adalet (2018).

wage labor, in contrast to the “unlimited supplies of labor” who continued to grow cash crops such as cocoa (Lewis 1954). Lewis’ technical prescription for the underdeveloped countries was to initiate a state-led set of policies to spur both an agricultural revolution and—with a newly productive agrarian sector now equipped to feed a burgeoning urban proletariat—industrialization (Lewis 1955).

This “dual sector” model implied a temporal scheme in which the “traditional” sector of the economy is characterized as insular and premodern, as subsistence-based agriculture remained static and nonexpansionary. Here, the agrarian traditional sector is unchanging because it lies outside of the dynamic demands of global capitalism. It is isolated and independent of the small modern sector, the latter of which is integrated more intensively with the global economy. In this respect, underdevelopment in the sense of the disproportionately agrarian character of the West Indies economies places them at a backward historical stage that is temporally prior to development. Because impediments to economic growth were incentive based and not structural, postcolonial societies could escape these conditions through properly managed planning. The role of postcolonial states, Lewis argued, was to create the right Keynesian-style policy mix so that the stagnant productivity—and, thus, the flat wages—of the agrarian sector could be increased.

As with other development economists, Lewis’s model shifts away from evaluating international hierarchies to focus near-exclusively on the domestic, internal blockages to development. Though designed to account for the factors that stemmed from the historically distinctive configuration of underdeveloped economies, the model also embraced a temporal historicism that posited that traditional sectors of underdeveloped societies were rough analogues of earlier stages of the West’s (in particular, England’s) historical experience.

Lewis’s model shared several of the core assumptions of US-based modernization theorists, whose approaches gained prominence in the 1950s. Modernization theory, however, embraced a less sectoral notion of tradition, exemplified in the wholesale classification of decolonizing nations as premodern in their political-economic systems and sociocultural attitudes. Leading proponents such as Edward Shils (1960), Walter Rostow (1956; 1960), Gabriel Almond (1956), and Lucian Pye (1956; 1958) theorized “development” as an interdependent process of wholesale transformation by which traditional societies proceeded through stages towards the U.S. model, posited as the apex of world-historical progress.² One particularly influential study, Rostow’s *The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto*, focused on the conditions of “take off” from the stasis of agricultural subsistence

to the dynamic “self-sustaining growth” of modern consumer societies (Rostow 1960, 36, 67).

In summary, the modernization-based models treated underdevelopment as a temporal condition of not yet being developed. Underdevelopment was equivalent to—or caused by—features inhering in a “traditional society” with minimal exposure to modernizing processes (Phillips 2019). The assumption of these models is that “modernization” was a process endogenous to the West, which had excluded the non-West. Whatever the previous harms of empire, they were irrelevant to understanding the domestic factors internal to traditional societies that were really at fault for underdevelopment. The implication was that the outward expansion of these endogenous modernizing processes—which colonial rule had helped along (Rostow 1960, 27)—would initiate analogous transformations in the formerly colonized world.

RODNEY ON UNDERDEVELOPMENT

The success of struggles for national liberation and experiments with postcolonial regional federations in the “pan” movements of the 1950s and 1960s accompanied a set of new state-led modernizing efforts. There was radical optimism about the material gains modernization could bring to newly self-governing peoples. The modernizing elites of the early Bandung regimes—including Nehru (India), Sukarno (Indonesia), Nasser (Egypt), Nkrumah (Ghana), and their successors of the 1960s—conceptualized the postcolonial state largely as the vehicle for economic development. In this understanding, development was the path through which formal self-determination and the principle of international sovereign equality would become a material reality. It was also a primary source of internal postcolonial state legitimacy (Anghie 2005).

Many of these new leaders of postcolonial states, then, embraced a vision of state-led planning that partially agreed with the modernization theorists’ characterization of significant swaths of their populations—or at least their economic situation—as “backward” and in need of international coordination and assistance denied them under imperial rule for the purposes of economic advancement (Pahuja 2011, 48, 54–9). Anticolonial nationalists such as India’s Nehru and Egypt’s Nasser supported quasi-socialist projects committed to the postcolonial state as a vessel for modernization—a project that overlapped considerably with a push for rapid industrialization (Berger 2004, 17). The specific mechanisms and sequencing of development varied, but was often carried out through strategies of “import substitution industrialization,” nationalization of major industries, and, in some cases, the expropriation of land belonging to colonial settlers and multinational corporations.

Yet, despite important gains in social welfare, there was also growing disillusionment already by the mid-1960s at the persistent deck-stacking of global political-economic institutions against the Third World (Bockman 2015; Prashad 2007). As a result, radical

² Working from institutional perches connected to the U.S. Cold War foreign policy apparatus (Latham 2011), these thinkers cast the US as the end-point of modernization within a new global imaginary of nation-states on a convergent path from “underdeveloped” to “developed” status (Gilman 2007; Kamola 2019, 54–61).

intellectuals in Latin America, the Caribbean, and Africa such as Rodney began to turn away from the linear progressivist account of modernization in order to explain the frustrating survivals of imperial domination that mapped economic deprivation onto longstanding geographies of racial and colonial hierarchy. These efforts accompanied the efflorescence of what is sometimes referred to as the “second generation” Bandung regimes, the Marxist revolutionary regimes in Cuba and Vietnam and the anticolonial internationalism whose point of departure was the 1966 Tricontinental Conference in Havana.

In particular, dependency theorists and cognate thinkers posited that the subordination of the Third World ought to be rethought as the consequence of the simultaneous and causally connected interdependence of developed and underdeveloped spaces (Saldaña-Portillo 2003, 51). Argentine economist Raúl Prebisch’s writings laid the groundwork for the subsequent explosion in the 1970s of more analyses questioning the unequal exchange faced by the Third World through a varied set of theoretical lenses. As head of the UN Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean and later secretary general of the United Nations Conference on Aid and Development, Prebisch developed an analysis of the “declining terms of trade.” He contended that the terms of trade decline due to the greater gains in productivity accruing to the north via its monopoly over industry in comparison to the Third World, which remained suppliers of raw materials. The consequence was that their disadvantage would increase over time, as they would need to make more to receive the same amount of manufactured commodities than they had the previous year (Prebisch 1950; 1959). Far from tradition or atavistic holdover, underdevelopment was a thoroughly modern product of some fundamental external constraints exercised upon nations with weakening leverage in international institutions.

Such systemically produced inequalities could be spatially mapped as the interdependent aspects of globe-spanning social systems divided between a “core” and “periphery.” This spatial turn not only redirected attention to the disavowed external power relations that constrained formally sovereign postcolonial countries but also allowed theorists to question the very underlying coherence of the “stagist” narrative that colonized societies were temporally prior at all to the modern West. Indeed, dependency theorists noted the way that what otherwise looked like temporally prior modes of production had, in fact, been (re)fashioned as structurally interdependent sectors integrated into the global economies of empire.³

Central to these interventions was the rejection of the notion of “underdevelopment” as a prior historical stage. However, this insight did not give way to the notion that “underdevelopment” is simply a racialized, Eurocentric *representation* of “backward peoples” to be critiqued. Rather, in the succinct formulation of German economist Andre Gunder Frank (1966), there was a “development of underdevelopment.” That is, development and underdevelopment were interactively produced as *structural features* of the global political economy understood as a complex, interactive whole. This kind of model decisively indicated that European or North American histories were not repeating themselves and, as interdependent entities, could not logically repeat themselves in the experience of the Third World. In fact, the Third World was experiencing different historical trajectories that stemmed from foundational processes of colonial modernization, which called for an analysis of a diversity of societal paths.

Walter Rodney’s account of colonial underdevelopment undoubtedly benefits from the dependency theorists’ rebuttal of the stadial historicism of modernization theory (Rodney 2018a, 86; 2001, 80). Yet, his more historical and politically grounded engagements with Marxist and pan-Africanist thought also introduced novel insights. My discussion of Rodney begins by addressing his social theory of development, before connecting this more theoretical register to the arc of developmental ideas in his political thought. To introduce his social theory, it is useful to turn initially to his landmark 1972 *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, where Rodney (2018a, 15) briefly lays out what he means by “development” and “underdevelopment.” Here, Rodney agrees with Marx’s postulate that human beings create their social world (and their own historically variable “nature”) by laboring on their environment. In doing so, humans also expand possibilities for freedom: “Members of society potentially had greater choice over their destinies” (Douglas 2017, 252–3; Jackson 2012, 97, 196; Rodney 2018a, 7).

Rodney (2018a, 12) nevertheless cautions against equating this humanistic schema with the viability of a stadial theory of development in which societies proceeded through linear “successive stages” of “modes of production.” First, Rodney (2018a, 8) observes that modern development has been riven by contradiction at its foundation, because European imperial expansionism and the imperatives of relentless capital accumulation have been the motor of African underdevelopment and source of the accumulated wealth of the West (Rodney 2001, 80; 2018a, 86). Imperial expansionism generated a globally structured system characterized by the “dynamic relationship” between development and underdevelopment (Rodney 1970b). Accordingly, systems of exploitation exhibiting varying practices of “extraeconomic coercion”—such as slavery, debt peonage, and serfdom—manifested as parts of a larger whole in a simultaneous and interdependent relationship with the more veiled coercion of market forces often identified with

³ This position would become central to dependency theories as advanced by Andre Gunder Frank (1966; 1969), Cardoso and Faletto (1979), and Marxist analyses of the “uneven development” and unequal exchange constituting a global regime of capitalist accumulation, such as Rodney, Samir Amin (1974), Arghiri Emmanuel (1972), and the world-systems approach of Immanuel Wallerstein (1974).

modern industrial capitalism as it originated in western Europe. In short, modern chattel slavery, colonialism, and capitalism rendered the abstract possibility of a singular trajectory of global development invalid.

If development is no longer universal, how can it be rethought? Rodney never dispenses with the language of development entirely. Instead, he attempts to “set the record straight” on the status of precolonial Africa as a prelude to narrating how colonial capitalism vitiated more universal possibilities of human development. Far from static, “Asian and African societies had been developing independently” prior to the slave trade and colonialism (and many developed, he emphasizes, in spite of these). Rodney (1970a; Rodney, Kapepwe, and Sago 1983, 5) noted that precolonial African societies were diverse. Some were stateless societies. Others were class-stratified societies organized around hierarchal social relations, state formation, and religious-ideological “superstructures.” Accordingly, Rodney categorized most African societies prior to the European slave trade as “communalist” or “feudal” in their mode of production. The racialized anthropological claim that Africa is poor because precolonial societies were static and “tribal” ideologically disavows how chattel slavery eviscerated precolonial development (Burden-Stelly 2019; Rodney 2018a, 25–26, 36).

To capture these dynamics of exploitation, Rodney (2018a, 15; Rodney, Kapepwe, and Sago 1983, 27) adapts Leon Trotsky’s theory of “uneven and combined development” (Kelley and Benjamin 2018, lix; Trotsky 1932; Zeilig 2022, 136). The theory posits that comparative “levels of development” are themselves transformed through intersocietal relations characterized by grossly disadvantageous forms of exploitation, hierarchy, and colonial domination for the purposes of capitalist enterprise (Makki 2015; van der Linden 2007). Rodney’s contribution is his analysis of the advent of the transatlantic slave trade as a disavowed motor for this unevenness (Rodney 1979).

Rodney theorizes transatlantic slavery as a world-negating mode of social violence requiring the advent of inherently disruptive institutions in Africa to facilitate the warfare, capture, and transport of the enslaved. In fact, “When one tries to measure the effect of European slave trading on the African continent, it is essential to realize that one is measuring the effect of social violence rather than trade in any normal sense of the word” (Rodney 2018a, 107). Indeed, Rodney theorizes underdevelopment as a full-scale *reversal* of self-generated civilizational motion, a regressive negation of (actual and possible) sociopolitical worlds: “previous African development was blunted, halted, and turned back. In place of that interruption and blockade, nothing of compensatory value was introduced” (Rodney 2018a, 270).

A second important modification that Rodney makes to developmental social theory is to trace racialized institutional forms across routes of colonial modernization. These comprised the specific experience of modernity in the Caribbean New World and Africa as connected sites of underdevelopment. Colonial

modernization included uneven development and underdevelopment as among its central structural features, not a contingent aberration to an otherwise singular universal historical path. By emphasizing the *transnational* institutionalization of these specific trajectories of underdevelopment in particular, Rodney’s approach goes beyond dependency theory’s regionally bounded, overly static languages of “core” and “periphery.” Accordingly, Rodney offers a multidirectional and more concretely historical picture of uneven development. In doing so, his efforts to renew pan-Africanism as a political project premised on structural critique also address the layered consciousness of Black diasporic identities between Africa and the New World (Henry 2000, 214; Hill 2015).

Rodney’s specification of the racialized political economy of underdevelopment follows the work of fellow Caribbean nationals Lloyd Best (1968) and George Beckford (1972; Hill 2007) of the New World group, who theorized Caribbean societies as “plantation societies” (Getachew 2020; Girvan 2006; Rodney 1981a, 217). These scholars argued that the plantation model created specific trajectories of rural agrarian capitalism. These historical paths arose out of the plantation as a founding institution with “the typical function of aggregating large quantities of relatively unskilled and cheap labor under a regime of rigid industrial control” (Rodney, Kapepwe, and Sago 1983, 7). Rebutting Lewis’ interpretation of the agrarian sector as “traditional,” they theorized the plantation as a modernizing invention central to Caribbean capitalism and its monocrop, export orientation vis-à-vis the global political economy. Moreover, the dominance of the plantation in the West Indies gave rise to enduring social hierarchies, notably the racial and caste distinctions originating in chattel slavery and the import of indentured Indian, Chinese, and Portuguese laborers postemancipation (Rodney 1966; 1978). Rodney (1970b; 1973; 1985) extended this analysis to Tanzania and Guyana by studying the institutionalized coercive labor control that shaped the “colonial economy” across these sites.

Rodney’s ultimate concern was how these concrete dynamics of development and underdevelopment shaped contemporary anticolonial political struggles. Though his critique of dominant developmentalism is more extensively explored among Rodney scholars, my argument underscores how Rodney did embrace certain dimensions of developmental discourses. For one, Rodney (1986) pointed out that Marxist thought is developmental but in ways that could be useful for anticolonial liberation struggles when it is “domesticated” to examine structures of capitalist domination and exploitation in local variants of globalized hierarchies. By rejecting presumptions of developmental *uniformity or inevitability* across contexts, Marxist points of departure such as the analysis of modes of production and competing social forces are useful in determining societies’ specific “laws of motion” (Rodney 1972a; 1978; 1990; Lewis 1998, 112, 141). In Guyana, this meant examining hierarchies of race and class forged in the production relations of

the Caribbean.⁴ Equally important, Rodney examined practices of strikes, sabotage, and peasant village formation that composed a disavowed collective heritage of working peoples’ resistance to the plantation order. In Tanzania, Rodney evaluated conditions at the point of production in a largely agrarian society. For example, in lectures delivered at the University of Dar es Salaam during 1970–71, Rodney (2018b) examined the Russian and Chinese Revolutions as illustrative examples for Third World societies building from an agrarian basis. More globally speaking, Rodney followed figures like C. L. R. James, Claudia Jones, and Oliver Cromwell Cox in tracking the global institutionalization of “white racism” as an integral element in the material reproduction of capitalist social relations (Rodney 1978; 1981a; 2018a, 103–4).

My point here is that, for Rodney, context-sensitive developmental theories could be of use for anticolonial politics in analyzing both structures of domination and strategies of resistance. In this way, the developmental motifs in Rodney’s thought entailed neither sociological replication of a universal history nor a normative investment in emulating the institutional arrangements resulting from it. As Robin D. G. Kelley and Jesse J. Benjamin (2018, xxxv) observe, Rodney’s “work exemplified a political economy that was literally grounded in the specificities and complexities of the communities and people he lived with and researched.” Laying hold of the creative *and* “scientific” impulse of pan-Africanism and Marxism hinged on the analysis of concrete political situations for radical democratic struggles grounded in the experiences of oppressed communities (Adeleke 2000; Burden-Stelly 2019; Campbell 1981; Davies 2019; Rodney 1972a; 1986). Rodney’s analysis of capitalism as a “living mode of production” called for attention to the particularities of development, which meant refusing to reify the stadial, developmental categories that (Rodney observed) Marx himself had recognized as theoretical extrapolations from his “specific historical and cultural setting” (Hill 2015, 143; Rodney 1986).

RODNEY’S POPULAR ANTICOLONIAL DEVELOPMENTALISM

One inference that might be drawn from Rodney’s powerful critique of Eurocentric developmentalism as a manifestation of “European cultural egocentricity” is that he rejected developmental frameworks entirely as instruments of imperial and racial domination (Rodney 2019, 59). Though it is true that Rodney framed popular anticolonial developmentalism against projects of development understood as imperial and/or postcolonial elite dictates directed at governing “backward” (post)colonized subjects, Rodney nevertheless reworked developmental idioms throughout his

political thought in the effort to forge new meanings of “progress” that diverged from dominant models.

To trace this reinterpretation of development, I move chronologically from Rodney’s time in the Jamaican Black Power movement (1968) to then explore the debates he participated in during his second stay in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania (1969–1974).⁵ Altogether, my reconstruction of Rodney’s popular anticolonial developmentalism surfaces three primary elements: First, already addressed in the previous section is Rodney’s account of “underdevelopment” as what he calls a “deflected” course of colonial modernization resulting from entrenched systems of capitalist and imperial (and subsequently neocolonial elite) domination (Rodney 2019, 61). Second, Rodney affirms a constructive vision of development as a set of political practices through which the masses iteratively authorize themselves as the agent of a set of political-economic and cultural-ideological ruptures from intertwined systems of international and domestic elite domination. In this sense, development refers both to those acts of creating the mass democratic “grounds” or “space” for this rupture *and* to the subsequent temporal movement forward in history made possible by breaking with inherited relations of political-economic and racial domination.

Third and finally, this understanding of “development” names a relationship of *reflective inheritance* integral to progressive social and political transformation against prevailing relations of deprivation and domination, *not* a movement away from the stasis imputed on colonized societies by modernization theorists.⁶ In this way, “to develop” is actually a nonlinear process, calling for reflection on the recoverable elements of distorted historical trajectories in practices of democratic self-activity and organization as a key to movement “forward.” Altogether, popular developmentalism interprets popular politics as a task of already-historical subjects fashioning a world in which they can (re)affirm progressive historical paths as their own, in contrast to the racialized depiction of not-yet-historical subjects crossing a threshold into linear history for the first time.

After finishing his PhD in London and teaching for a year in Tanzania from 1966 to 1967, Rodney returned to the Caribbean to teach African history at his undergraduate alma mater at the University of the West Indies in Mona, Jamaica. While in Jamaica, Rodney organized radical “groundings” among Black unemployed youth and Rastafari in the Kingston dingles, collected thereafter in the 1969 Black Power classic *The Groundings with My Brothers*. These practices helped to ignite the Black Power movement in the Caribbean: His being denied entry back into Jamaica by the Hugh Shearer administration in October 1968 after traveling to the Montreal Congress of Black writers—on

⁴ This approach eschewed binaries between race and class, which scholars such as Alex Dupuy (1996) mistakenly attribute to Rodney.

⁵ For reasons of space, I will not focus on Rodney’s return to Guyana from 1974 until his tragic assassination in 1980. However, I believe that my argument would also apply to his political thought from this period.

⁶ On “negotiated inheritance,” see Suell (2020).

suspicion of provoking a “Castro-type” insurgency—ignited the popular protests known as the “Rodney riots.”

Key interpreters read the practice of grounding as a model for a radically democratic intellectual practice (Adeleke 2000; Davies 2019). I supplement this interpretation by focusing on grounding in connection to development. Namely, the spatial democratic practice of groundings becomes the basis for development understood as progressive movement in time. In his nine months in Jamaica from January to October 1968, Rodney pursued what Anthony Bogues (2009, 135) calls “a radical political education program on African history, radical politics, and society.” In Rastafari terminology, the verb “to ground” with others meant a practice “of meeting that breaks ... constructed barriers of race, class, and education” (Bogues 2003, 129; Rodney 2019, 67). In defiance of academia’s formalized hierarchies, grounding presumed anyone’s capacity to offer insights into politics (Lewis 1998, 120n22).

To lay out the developmental frame central to Rodney’s intervention, it is first necessary to sketch the terms of the Jamaican situation in 1968. Rodney (2019, 3) analyzed the oppression of poor Black Jamaicans postindependence under the rule of “a narrow, middle class sector” that was “merely acting as representatives of metropolitan-imperialist interests.” Since independence in 1962, the Jamaican government promoted the myth of a harmonious multiracial society and was profoundly hostile to Black internationalism, whether Garveyism, Rastafarianism, or the U.S. Black Power turn represented by Malcolm X and Stokely Carmichael (Campbell 2008). Rodney (2019, 3, 64) contended that this “justificatory myth” of a “harmonious multiracial society” obscured *de facto* white supremacy, typified by state-sanctioned Black dispossession to free up land for bauxite mining and tourism, police harassment and repression of poor and Rastafari communities, and widespread unemployment and consequent out-migration (Campbell 2008; Ledger 2008). Rodney argued that this neocolonial state apparatus would never be responsive to mass structural exclusion without sustained popular mobilization.

In Rodney’s formulation, the “Black Power” movement sought “the break with imperialism which is historically racist; the assumption of power by the black masses of the islands; the cultural reconstruction of the society in the image of blacks” (Rodney 2019, 24). It was primarily in these grounding practices that Rodney (2019, 3) found signs of developmental potential in the “creative social expression on the part of the black oppressed masses.” In doing so, he sought to confront the limitations of his own academic training and *de facto* place in “the establishment” with the insurgent reasoning of the Rastafari community, who had generated a profound critique of Jamaica’s institutionalized politics and its place in the white world order. Rodney drew on their conceptual schema, powerfully captured in their critique of these systems as a profane, oppressive form of “Babylonian captivity” (Lewis 1998, 86–7; Shilliam 2012, 349–50).

Indeed, Rodney saw in the Rastafari movement’s rejection of Caribbean neocolonialism as structural inheritor of slave societies an “advanced” material analysis of the Jamaican situation. He also contended that their sophisticated political-theological investment in African history and liberation struggles via regard for Ethiopia’s Haile Selassie (His Imperial Majesty) as a Black messianic, anticolonial figure was a crucial “weapon in our struggle” in “freeing and mobilizing black minds.” These living traditions are crucial because they “expunge the myths about the African past” integral to “cultural aspects of white imperialism,” which “act as a drag on revolutionary activity in the present epoch” (Campbell 2008, 128). Rodney (2019, 62, 71) sought to “listen to”—and critically engage—these Afro-Caribbean projects of “self-expression” and “self-revaluation.” In turn, these would strengthen movements committed to unleashing and redirecting historical paths by taking the development of the productive forces of Jamaican society under popular political control and bringing them under ideological alignment with the values and needs of the excluded majority.

In this moment, Rodney’s idiom of racial consciousness is more prominent than the term *development* *per se* (Henry 2000, 214), but there are nonetheless striking developmental motifs that link the lens of historical consciousness and subject formation to the struggle against white supremacist political-economic domination. The *obstacles* to development—that is, what makes Jamaican society “backward” in Rodney’s sense—are not the masses but the regressive postcolonial “petit bourgeoisie” (including intellectuals such as himself): “You [i.e., the intellectual] can learn from them what Black Power really means. You do not have to teach them anything” (Rodney 2019, 67). The most oppressed who suffer and survive also miraculously “create” and “have produced all the culture that we have.” By contrast, the mainly Afro-European elite had “produced nothing” and fostered narrow political hopes: They imagined hegemony in terms that erase the cultural and ideological influence of the African diaspora and prop up a white supremacist, authoritarian, and capitalist model of political leadership (Rodney 2019, 73).

In counterpoint, Rodney (2019, 67) prescribed a path that entailed interclass alliance making and learning from the oppressed, which required that the “black intellectual, the black academic, must attach himself to the activity of the black masses” (Austin 2013; Rodney et al. 2013). As Rodney puts it, “If we, the blacks in the West, accept ourselves as African, we can make a contribution to the development of African culture, helping to free it from European imperialism” (Rodney 2019, 36). Here, consciousness of the disrupted historical alternatives constitutive of uneven development (i.e., “accept[ance] of ‘ourselves as African’) strengthens struggles to adapt a genuine form of needs-based political-economic development that breaks from the assigned parameters of the capitalist-imperialist system, the very system that generated

this “deflected course of their historical advance” in the first instance (Rodney 2019, 61).

What makes this form of popular politics specifically “developmentalist” is that the spatial democratic practice of grounding sets in motion the temporal process of “development” to “break the chains which bind us to white imperialists” (Rodney 2019, 27). Put otherwise, this is a set of iterative practices by which a self-authorizing social formation reorients its collective historical direction that had been diverted by colonial domination. In short, though developmentalism and radical democratic politics often pull in different directions, Rodney’s approach seeks to bring them together by conceiving the turn inwards to the cultural and agentic resources of the colonized themselves—always supplemented with the new—as the basis for the historical movement of colonized societies in time. Altogether, Rodney pursues a way of framing progressive social and political transformation rooted in conceptual terms and under political auspices that the people themselves can author and experience as their own.

Rodney then returned to Tanzania for his second stay from 1969 to 1974 as a lecturer at the University of Dar es Salaam, during which time the concept of development is pivotal to his intellectual production and the debates swirling around him. Tanzania had become the unofficial center of Black internationalist solidarity with ongoing liberation struggles in southern Africa. There, Rodney became an influential participant in radical student and faculty activity at the University of Dar es Salaam campus in the shadow of the socialist state-building project undertaken by Julius Nyerere (Campbell 1986; Maddox 2019; Markle 2017; Harisch 2020). Rodney’s writings during this time reflect an appreciation of Nyerere’s efforts to pursue development grounded in popular traditions and pan-Africanist solidarity (Rodney 1969; 1972a).

“Self-reliance,” the core of the policy and philosophy first articulated in Tanzania’s 1967 “Arusha Declaration,” encapsulated the idea of building a non-aligned socialist society whose external independence did not hinge on Western (or Soviet) aid or investment. While maintaining socialist emphases on national ownership of the means of production, the politics of self-reliance rejected earlier state-led developmentalist emphases on industrialization such as Ghana’s Kwame Nkrumah.

In a lecture delivered at the University of Michigan in March 1972, Rodney (1972b) argued that Nkrumah had pursued a development strategy that was “urban-directed and oriented towards industry, which was viewed as a panacea....it was an incorrect strategy for socio-economic development, because it ignores the majority population and was encouraging further ties of dependence with the outside world rather than self-reliance, as is Tanzania’s goal.” His critique was two-fold: first, choosing industrialization as the main prerogative rested on a failure to look at the specific needs and sociocultural forms of the people; second, the industrialization-focused policy was undermining the avowed goal of cutting the cord with the very external dependency relations that Nkrumah (1966) had

highlighted in his own theory of neocolonialism as a structurally subordinated condition of (merely) formal self-determination.

As in his writings in Jamaica, Rodney’s assessment of “development” in the Tanzanian socialist project hinged on connecting political economy and culture. On the one hand, development necessitates the exercise of choice in harnessing collective democratic political economy to satisfy domestic needs. On the other hand, development meant cultural rebellion against racial oppression to rediscover and create new conceptions of self that colonial violence eviscerated. The two moments are connected in Rodney’s evaluation of Tanzania: Rodney initially admired how Nyerere’s TANU party sought to bring these arenas together explicitly to build a self-sufficient society from the bottom up, through the “people and their hard work, especially in agriculture” (Lal 2015; Nyerere 1967). Nyerere’s philosophy of *Ujamaa* (Kiswahili for “family-hood” but often translated as “socialism”) connected agrarian communalist production with the project of erecting cooperative, democratically governed rural villages, *Ujamaa* villages (Nyerere 1966).

At the core of this idea was that development entailed a form of postcolonial self-sufficiency. Relative self-sufficiency would enable dignified freedom from imperial rule, grounded in political-economic arrangements that “fit” domestic social formations. More than framing robust postcolonial economic sovereignty (e.g. permanent sovereignty over national resources and nationalization of major industries) as just a *pathway* to needs-based economic growth (or vice-versa), “self-reliance” and the renewal of more egalitarian forms of (disrupted) interdependencies with the rest of the Third World became thought of as partly *constitutive of* development. Activity diminishing or breaking the bonds of an unjust condition of subordination and dependence was not just a precondition but itself an *aspect of* development understood as a practice of freedom for postcolonial societies. Rodney (1972b; 1974c) referred to this as “disengagement” and Samir Amin (1987) later called it “delinking.” Both theorized these as practices enabled through a robustly bottom-up politics based on popular peasant–worker alliances knitted together in internationalist solidarities.

At a number of junctures Rodney uses the term underdevelopment to connote the forcible destruction of *indigenous* criteria for and popular-participatory guidance of the terms of social and political transformation. Notably, Rodney (2018a, 271) argues in *HEUA*, to be forced “to relinquish power entirely to another society” is “in itself a form of underdevelopment” because it entailed the loss of and ability to “set indigenous cultural goals and standards.” This emphasis on development as a question of power made popular self-determination central to deliberating the very *direction* of postcolonial governance and political economy, and it is particularly visible in Rodney’s writings on education. Rodney (2018a, 271, 293; 1974b) argued that the colonial education system functioned “for subordination, exploitation, the creation of mental confusion, and the

development of underdevelopment.” Here, Rodney follows key influences like Frantz Fanon and Amílcar Cabral in extending the idiom of underdevelopment to indicate how colonial violence and capitalist exploitation erode social bonds and create extreme cultural and social alienation, which in turn shape socialization in areas like education: “Both the formal school system and the informal school system of colonialism destroyed social solidarity and promoted the worst form of alienated individualism” (Rodney 2018a, 312; see also Austin 2013; Rodney et al. 2013). In short, Rodney tracked underdevelopment as a shorthand for the way that slavery and capitalist imperialism constitutively denied the colonized opportunities to build not only a domestically oriented political economy *per se* but also one that the majority could experience as inheriting and renovating native sociocultural forms for present-day struggles.

Rodney’s use of developmental languages linking political economy and culture upends the explanatory and normative story central to modernization theory. Specifically, Rodney theorizes progress or the forward movement of history as an *outgrowth* of reflectively inherited civilizational potentials. Progress is not an erasure or maturation out of backward “traditional values” as hindrance to modernizing trajectories. Accordingly, Rodney (2018a, 57) understands development as a purposive, democratic project whose forward-looking impetus emerges from peasants and workers, “a matter of building upon what is inherited or dancing slowly, provided that no one comes to ‘civilize’ you.” For example, in a search for progressive and historically resonant models for the new African universities, Rodney noted the diversity of precolonial indigenous educational models. He was active in setting up the new Development Studies curriculum at Dar and in efforts to build universities to serve East Africa that would reject the colonial educational model directed at creating an upper class distant from the majority population (Campbell 1986; Rodney 1968; 1974b).

In his important essay “Tanzanian *Ujamaa* and Scientific Socialism,” Rodney (1972a) further defended Nyerere’s vision for *Ujamaa*, arguing that the philosophy “looks toward the socialist organisation of peasants and seeks to revive and perpetuate the collective principle of production and the equalitarian nature of distribution which characterised communalism.” Rodney argued to a Eurocentric international left that the effort to eschew wooden doctrine and to ground socialism in Tanzania’s context—its agrarian social conditions and forms of life—constituted a more “scientific” form of socialism than did the rigid application of preformed, mechanistic developmental models. Moreover, in the context of Rodney’s adaptation of the theory of uneven development, his appreciation of context gave political license to dispense with models that insisted on the necessity of creating a European-style industrial proletariat as a prerequisite “stage” prior to socialist transformation in an agrarian society like Tanzania.

Focus on (re)establishing a relationship of *inheritance* to the past—“dancing slowly”—means that

development as a practice connects consciousness to transforming global structural hierarchies (James 1981; Rodney 1972c, 118–28). More than economic strategy, “development” in the Rodneyian sense requires the *political conditions* in which there are genuine possibilities to practice collective autonomy and to exercise reflective judgment. Rodney urged in a 1972 lecture at UCLA entitled “Problems of Third World Development” that the core obstacle to realizing such possibilities for the Third World was the fact that global political-economic subordination made it impossible to assess development strategies on the basis of adopting “the technology that is most relevant to their own needs”: “when you fail to exercise choice, imperialism will foist on you those aspects of technology which are beneficial to the development of the imperialist economy, and which might have no rationale with respect to the needs of the particular Third World country” (Rodney 1972c, 132). Rodney’s account prioritizes creating a (relatively) autonomous space for postcolonial societies to deliberate what forms of economic integration they ought to pursue and what ought to count as “needs” that resonate with the mass majority as progressive extensions of the latent, attenuated potentials of, and reflective grappling with, indigenous histories, norms, and social institutions.

Despite his and his university students’ significant conflicts with the TANU administration, Rodney continued to hold out hope for a time that the Tanzanian project could fulfill this kind of vision. Rodney interpreters have tended to focus more on this early admiration of Tanzania reflected in the pages of *HEUA*. Yet, his ultimate disillusionment with the Tanzanian state-building project actually better reflects the divergence between popular anticolonial developmentalist struggles and the state capture of bottom-up mobilizations under authoritarian nationalist domination.

The signal divergences between Nyerere and Rodney and his comrades at Dar are reflected in Isaa Shivji’s classic essay “Tanzania: The Silent Class Struggle” (1973), which originally appeared in the University Students African Revolutionary Front’s magazine *Cheche* in 1970. Shivji (1973, 22) posited that, unlike the explicit social contradictions in violent anticolonial revolutions, Tanzania was experiencing a “situation of flux—a situation of latent but definite class struggle.” Specifically, Shivji argued that the growing state bureaucracy such as the National Development Corporation, which been created to implement putatively socialist policies like the nationalization of foreign corporations, had actually collaborated with the same corporations to dictate domestic investment patterns. This was a “neocolonial situation” with a statist, and ultimately capitalist, bureaucratic veneer. Rather than emphasizing structural transformation of the economy toward production for domestic needs and self-reliance, as articulated in the Arusha Declaration, such policies were tailored toward satisfying the commercial demands of international markets.

Rodney agreed with the essentials of Shivji’s analysis and contended that these new institutions blocked progressive, grassroots efforts to disengage from

imperialism and to build alternative institutions of self-reliance—namely, cooperative *Ujamaa* villages and structures of industrial worker self-management. As in Rodney’s assessment of Jamaica, he observed that members of the petty bourgeois class now faced a choice: align themselves with the project of self-reliance and the single party TANU headed by Nyerere or install themselves as permanent managers with interests and governance prerogatives distinct from the party (Rodney 1974c, 65–7).

This “slow rate of disengagement of the Tanzanian economy from the imperialist world-economy” (Rodney 1974c, 65) also entailed a stalling out of the forward historical motion that distinguished development as a practice of freedom grounded in the self-activity of the masses from the underdevelopment and dependence resulting from neocolonial subordination. “In the final analysis,” Rodney argued (1974c, 67), it was primarily the self-activity of the majority that would create those conditions: “it is the peasants who have to disengage from imperialism, so that the value of their labour would be used for providing themselves with goods and services.” His critique of the Tanzanian state became sharper over the course of the 1970s, as the state made the *Ujamaa* villages compulsory and disciplined wildcat strikes directed at worker self-management that themselves drew upon official state socialist discourses (Zeilig 2022, 273–98). He also criticized how the guise of pan-Africanism allowed Tanzania to practice what amounted to conventional interstate diplomacy among majority Black states favorable to authoritarians in the Caribbean (Bogues 2003; Rodney 1975; 1980).

Rodney continued to draw on his critique of dominant developmental discourses in order to posit alternative linkages among internationalist struggles against capitalist imperialism and the self-activity and self-expression of excluded masses. The postcolonial state itself ought to be evaluated as source of domination, so “we must examine the class nature of [state] power.” Accordingly, Rodney (1974a, 40) saw the need to recraft pan-Africanist struggles through civil society mobilization, “We must begin to conceptualize the problem of forging links with social groups ... solidarity between the Caribbean peoples and the African peoples.” Rodney returned to Georgetown, Guyana, in 1974 to organize the Working People’s Alliance, a multiracial working-class party demanding “people’s power, no dictator” (Rodney 1981b). He helped to initiate a struggle against the authoritarian “pseudosocialism” of the Forbes Burnham regime (Henry 2013; Taylor 2020). He was brutally assassinated at Burnham’s direction in June 1980.

CONCLUSION

This interpretation of Rodney’s political thought provides a substantive and methodological counterpoint to current efforts to predicate the decolonization of political theory on a critique of the Eurocentric assumptions of Western political ideologies. The argument shows that imperialism held no monopoly on developmentalist

ideologies. The conceptual field of developmentalism is not intrinsically bound to Eurocentric origins or Eurocentric frames of analysis. Instead, by reconstructing Rodney’s theory and praxis as one among the multiple transnational perspectives of anticolonial political actors taking up post-Enlightenment discourses, my focus reinterprets developmentalism as one of the central ways of dealing with questions of popular legitimation in actual contexts of anticolonial and postcolonial politics. In this sense, developmentalism became one of the primary languages through which actors contested and reimagined anticolonial futures. In turn, those debates within the complex ambit of Third World developmentalism and even earlier in the career of anticolonial nationalisms refigured some of the most basic conceptual parameters of developmentalism itself in ways that still remain relatively occluded from the landscape of political-theoretic critique today.

In reconstructing Rodney’s theoretical praxis as a window onto these debates, this essay compels a reevaluation of the basic question of what it means to “decolonize political theory.” My approach here commends shifting decolonization to an inquiry into those worldly anticolonial projects in which concepts like “development” enter a terrain of still-unfinished popular struggles. Even when anticolonial actors like Rodney were making what can be readily identified as a critique of Eurocentric categories, including stagist developmental schema, they did so for worldly, political purposes the context of which too frequently falls out of current debates: to invent or repurpose interpretive categories so as to navigate the specific constellations of power they were seeking to transform. The freezing of developmental discourse into just another Eurocentric, racialized specter actually does a disservice to many of the intellectual inheritances that attempted to bring out these alternative notions of progress and to what might be made of them today. Openness to anticolonial originality across contexts requires study of the traction that even apparently irredeemably exclusionary ideas garnered when anticolonial critiques of Eurocentric logics have operated in close proximity with the concrete demands of situated political thought and mobilization.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

ETHICAL STANDARDS

The author affirms this research did not involve human subjects.

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