

**Department of International Studies, Political Science and History**

**4 MAIS**

**Walter Rodney and African Politics**

Date: 19-02-2021

Time: 3:00 p.m. to 5:00 p.m.

The Department of International Studies, Political Science and History, CHRIST (Deemed to be University) recently conducted a seminar on Walter Rodney and African Politics for the students of 4 MAIS. The lecture was delivered by Dr Leo Zeilig, a researcher, activist and writer who has extensively written on African Politics and History. Dr Zeilig is also an editor of the Review of African Political Economy, a journal focused on African Studies. Dr Fr Jose CC, Pro-Vice-Chancellor, CHRIST (Deemed to be University) delivered the welcome address. Dr Venkatanarayanan gave a generous introduction to the speaker as well as the event.

Dr Zeilig, in his lecture, gives an outline of Walter Rodney's life, his politics and his principal contributions. Dr Zeilig opines that Walter Rodney is one of the greatest radical thinker and activist of his generation and goes on to speak about his life. Walter Rodney was born on 23rd March 1942 in Georgetown, Guyana during the time of British Colonialism. His parents were keen and active members of the anti-colonial organizations which had a profound influence on him. As a youngster, he took part in anti-colonial movements by distributing leaflets and pamphlets for the People's Progressive Party. He was a brilliant student who won a scholarship to study history at the University College of West Indies, Kingston Jamaica in 1960. At this point, his radical perspectives and political ideas, although not clearly formulated, began attracting the attention of the colonial intelligence services.

In 1963, he moved to London to pursue his PhD in African History from the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. It was during this time that he meets his wife Patricia Rodney and gets married in 1965. Walter Rodney completes his PhD thesis in less than three years, which according to Dr Zeilig is remarkable. While in London, Walter Rodney joins a study group which is run by Caribbean radical Marxists C.L.R James and Selva James. Dr Zeilig believes that Walter Rodney had an excellent rigour for thought and analysis; without any shortcuts, he examined every source, original text thoroughly before arriving at a conclusion. He also expected his students in Tanzania and elsewhere to reference everything in their academic works. Dr Zeilig then quotes the Walter Rodney scholar Jesse Benjamin emphasizing Rodney's relentless quest for truth.

In the late 1960s and early 70s, Walter Rodney moves to Tanzania to teach at the University of Dar es Salaam where he develops a close relationship with his students. He stays there for a very short period of one-and-a-half years and then moves to Jamaica to teach African History at the University of West Indies. He is very active on and off-campus, especially among the Rastafarian community who are committed to the transformation of society. He delivers several talks in the poor communities and shantytowns of Jamaica which are then published in a form of a book, 'The Groundings with my Brother'. For his work among the

poor communities and his radical political perspectives, he was declared persona-non-grata and expelled from Jamaica. He was not allowed to set foot when he returns from Canada after delivering a talk. Riots and rebellions break out across Jamaica and these riots are called the 'Rodney Riots'.

Walter Rodney, with his heart set in Jamaica, reluctantly returns to Tanzania and takes up teaching again at the University of Dar es Salaam. Africa during the late 60s undergoes decolonization in many parts of the continent. Walter Rodney calls the decolonization process in Africa 'Briefcase Revolutions' having no meaningful social transformations. He is also supportive of Tanzania's State-led economic model which nationalized many industries during this period. As a teacher in Tanzania, he developed a close relationship with his students who were sometimes radical in their approach. In 1972, he writes 'How Europe Underdeveloped Africa', which is considered one of the greatest works on African history, politics and economy. The book soon became a sensation and turned into a movement that inspired many activists across the continent of Africa.

In 1974, Walter Rodney and his family decide to move to Guyana from Tanzania. Rodney secures a professorship in History at the National University, Georgetown. But due to political pressure, loses his appointment. Rodney was determined to stay in Guyana despite being unemployed and receiving invitations from various other institutions with an offer to teach. He is immersed in the work of the Working People's Alliance, a coalition of different radical organizations to bridge the gap induced by the historical and colonial divisions among in the Guyanese society. He worked extensively to unite the Indian and African communities in Guyana and his work comes under the scanner of the government. Rodney did not have a regular salary, he earned his living by giving public talks and through temporary lectureship. He travelled widely across the world. In 1978, he was invited to the University of Hamburg to give a lecture on African History.

In the late 70s, Walter Rodney had reached his pinnacle of political activism. His work of uniting the people of Guyana and erasing the colonial divide went against the political interests of the ruling elite. On 13th June 1980, Walter Rodney was assassinated in Georgetown. He is survived by his wife Patricia and his three children: Shaka, Asha and Kanini. The works of Walter Rodney are preserved by the Walter Rodney Foundation which has helped many scholars to write on the life of Walter Rodney as well as deeply understand his political perceptions.

There were many interesting questions from the audience during a very interactive Q&A session. The questions of the audience revolved around the relevance of Walter Rodney's work and contribution to contemporary African Politics. This enlightening session on Walter Rodney and African Politics came to an end with Dr Madhumati Deshapande, HOD, Department of International Studies, Political Science and History proposing the Vote of Thanks.

*Report by*

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