

Walter Rodney Day - A Day to Commemorate Social Activism

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Walter Rodney

Since 20 February 2009, the world has commemorated the International Day for Social Justice - a day dedicated to promoting social activism, tackling inequality, and addressing global injusticesⁱ. However, this 16 October 2023, the African Caribbean Institute of Jamaica/Jamaica Memory Bank (ACIJ/JMB) will be celebrating *Walter Rodney Day*, in commemoration of the life and legacy of Walter Rodney as an activist for social justice across the Caribbean and Africa. The 16th of October 1968 marks the anniversary of the Walter Rodney Riots in Kingston, Jamaica where University of the West Indies (UWI), Mona students, along with frustrated Jamaicans, demonstrated against the then Jamaica Labour Party (JLP) Hugh Shearer-led government for placing a ban on Walter Rodney as *persona non grata* to Jamaica. According to Rupert Lewis, “Rodney’s expulsion by the Jamaican government was based on fears that his interaction with the leading figures of the grass-roots could lead to the emergence of a radical political ideology”, which could result in an oppositional political threat to a newly independent Jamaica.ⁱⁱ

According to the Walter Rodney Foundation, Rodney was a Guyanese historian, scholar and activist, born in Georgetown, Guyana in 1942 to a Marxist-oriented father who was active in the

People's Progressive Party of Guyana.ⁱⁱⁱ Rodney's early life was influenced by politics and the anti-colonial movement of that time. After pursuing and completing higher education in the United Kingdom, Rodney taught in Tanzania at the University of Dar es Salaam in 1966. Later, while living and lecturing in Jamaica at the UWI, Mona campus, Rodney spent much of his time seeking to understand the plight of the working class, especially those living in the community of August Town, St. Andrew, by visiting and engaging in discussions about their life in Jamaica. Some of the sessions he held among the Rastafarian community in August Town resulted in the writing of his book *Grounding With My Brothers*. Rodney was a visionary who believed in the power of knowledge and activism to reshape the world. His most notable work, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, can be described as a seminal text that exposes the exploitative nature of colonialism and neocolonialism in Africa and the Caribbean. The text critiques systemic injustice and economic inequality - factors which are both evidenced in the race/class hierarchy present in post-colonial societies.

Rodney's discontent with merely theorising about social justice led him to true activism, for which he advocated. "The Black intellectual, the Black academic, must attach himself to the activity of the Black masses"^{iv} are words that Rodney lived by. He actively engaged in conversations with the lower classes, in and around Jamaica while at the UWI, Mona. He engaged in political movements and organisations aimed at challenging oppressive regimes, both in Guyana and Tanzania. His activism knew no bounds, and he championed social justice causes on a global scale, and attended international conferences around black lives and liberty.

Rodney's Legacy and the International Day for Social Justice

As we reflect on social justice and activism, let us remember Walter Rodney and the enduring relevance of his ideas and activism. His work reminds us that the fight for social justice is not confined to any particular nation or region - it is a universal struggle. Rodney's legacy continues to inspire individuals and organisations worldwide to address global inequalities and injustices.

On the 16th of October, let us honour Walter Rodney's memory by reaffirming our commitment to global equity and fairness. Let us, as intellectual activists, take action in representing causes that promote social justice, and facilitate discussions that challenge the status quo. By so doing, we keep the spirit of activism alive, ensuring that the principles that Walter Rodney held dear remain at the forefront of our global efforts for a more just and equitable world.

Recognition and Commemoration

In 2006, the Rodney family formed the Walter Rodney Foundation to share Rodney's works and legacy with the world. Rodney is recognised and commemorated in the following international

conferences and symposiums: University of the West Indies, Mona, Annual Walter Rodney Conference; Centre of Caribbean Studies, Warwick University, Walter Rodney Seminar Series; Boston University, Walter Rodney Seminar Series; University of Dar es Salaam, Institute of Development, International Conference on Walter Rodney. A Walter Rodney bust created by Dr. Honaret Aguessy, Director of Research Centre in Ouidah, is located in Benin, in front of the library. Walter Rodney is listed on the Black Achievers Wall in the International Slavery Museum, Liverpool, UK. The Walter Rodney Close, in the London Borough of Newham, has been named in honour of Rodney.^v

Endnotes

ⁱ “World Day of Social Justice”, <https://www.un.org/development/desa/dspd/international-days/world-day-of-social-justice.html>. (accessed September 21, 2023).

ⁱⁱ Rupert Lewis, “Walter Rodney: 1968 Revisited,” *Social and Economic Studies* 43, no. 3 (1994): 7, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27865974>.

ⁱⁱⁱ “His Life”, <https://www.walterrodneymuseum.org/about-walter-rodney> (accessed October 4, 2023).

^{iv} Walter Rodney, *The Groundings With My Brothers* (London: Bogle-L'Ouverture, 1975), 63.

^v “His Life.”