

Andre Gunder Frank : 'Prophet in the Wilderness' (1929 -2005)

Obituary by Barry K. Gills



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(1929 - 2005)

Andre Gunder Frank, perhaps the most prolific and controversial Development Economist and Sociologist of the post-war era, best known as the author of 'Dependency' theory, died on Saturday in Luxembourg, age 76, after a long battle against cancer. His opus includes some 40 books and nearly a thousand articles and other pieces, in numerous languages, spanning fifty years of global political and economic development. His life and work was full of movement, argument, and counter-argument. Always ahead of his time, his

achievement was to repeatedly stand tradition and received theory on their head in field after field (especially Economics, Development Studies, Sociology, and History) and issue after issue. Decades later, many of his ideas have now been generally accepted as events proved his analysis and predictions accurate: the stubborn persistence of Third World poverty and 'underdevelopment' despite foreign investment and because of unmanageable debt-servicing imposed by foreign creditors; the failure of 'really existing capitalism' in much of the Third World as well as the failure of 'really existing socialism' in the former 'Second World' (including China) and their re-integration to global capitalism and subsequent partial 'Third-Worldization'; the reappearance of persistent structural economic crisis and imbalance in the West (including Japan and the US) and in global capitalism as a whole and the ineffectiveness of Keynesian and fiscal stimulatory means to redress this; the polarising and fragmenting consequences of 'globalization', rendering national states largely incapable of offering real solutions and giving rise to new social movements on global scale that now carry forward the hope for progressive change and at the same time of new rightist, nationalist, ethnic and religious fundamentalist movements that may eventually undermine the democratic culture needed by the former; and finally, a profound rejection of traditional 'Eurocentric' theories and understandings of global development and world history in favour of an alternative 'humanocentric' world-historical perspective which views the 'rise of the West' to global dominance as occurring very 'late' and likely to be temporary, and in fact already passing into 'history.'

He was born Andreas Frank, in Berlin, the son of a pacifist novelist who took him into exile at age four to escape Hitler's Germany. The 'Gunder' was added by his high school team mates as a cruel jibe about his slowness on the track field, by comparison with a then famous Swedish runner, Gundar Haag. (As Gunder later explained, 'Unfortunately, I did not know how the name was spelled.') His youthful experiences in Hollywood, USA exposed him to his father's circle, which included Thomas Mann and Greta Garbo. He became a Keynesian while

studying economics at Swathmore College, but by the end of his PhD at the University of Chicago (begun in 1950) he had rebelled against his monetarist tutor Milton Friedman and against all Development thinking of US origin, which he saw as 'part of the problem' rather than the solution. His rejection of mainstream economics, in favour of an 'equity before efficiency' approach focussed on the importance of social and political factors, turned him into a maverick who spent the next fifty years energetically and cogently challenging established wisdom and policy on 'development' around the world. His early work established the concept of 'general productivity' (later known as 'total productivity') and its centrality to measuring 'Human Capital and Economic Growth' (1960). It was his 1967 publication of the essay 'Sociology of Development and Underdevelopment of Sociology' (rejected by a dozen journals) and his first book 'Capitalism and Underdevelopment in Latin America' (also 1967) that catapulted him to international fame, laying the basis for what was to be known as Dependency theory, and its later spin-off, World System theory.

The decisive turning point in his career came when he visited Cuba in 1960 (Che Guevara wrote to Frank asking him for help to transform Cuba's dependent economy) and Ghana and Guinea in Africa. He spent the rest of the 1960s living and working in Latin America, mainly in Brazil, Mexico, and Chile and analysing their underdevelopment. The Peruvian theorist Anibal Quijano introduced Gunder to his wife of thirty years, Marta Fuentes, a Chilean who shared his passion for social justice and dedication to 'change the world'. His students at the University of Brasilia included Theotonio Dos Santos and Ruy Mauro Marini, both of whom later became Dependency theorists in their own right. Frank's trenchant analysis of underdevelopment in Brazil, Mexico and Latin America argued directly against not only Keynesian and Monetarist economics and 'Modernization' theory, but also against orthodox Marxism and communist party theory and policy, as well as criticising the 'indigenous' structural reformism of Fernando Henrique Cardoso (once welcomed by Frank at Santiago airport as he fled from the military coup in Brazil in 1964 and later President of Brazil in the 1990s) and Raul Prebisch of CEPAL/ECLA, and the US sponsored 'Alliance for Progress'. His unrelenting attacks on the inefficacy of existing policies and reformist ideas, and his preference for political revolution (as in Cuba) and socialism earned him a persona non grata status in the US for fifteen years.

He and Marta lived in Santiago, Chile, during the Allende years, where his ideas were coming into favour. Allende, then President of the Senate, met Gunder at the airport to prevent him being instantly deported. Thereafter, their home became a centre of refuge and discussion for intellectuals from across Latin America, until the military coup by General Pinochet on September 11th, 1973 abruptly ended the socialist experiment, democracy, and the lives of countless friends. It was another decisive turning point in Frank's life and career. While Chile became a monetarist 'heaven' run by Milton Friedman's 'Chicago Boys', Frank became (again) a political exile, this time back to Europe (arriving back in Berlin exactly forty years after fleeing Hitler's regime) and dedicated the next twenty years to analysing the global crisis and the rampant failures of neo-liberalism and 'Reaganomics'. It was in this period that he moved beyond Dependency theory, saying that while dependency itself was alive and kicking in the world, its usefulness as a guide to political action had come and gone ('Dependence is Dead! Long Live Dependence and the Class Struggle', 1972). His subsequent work turned increasingly to analysis of the 'global crisis of capital accumulation', in both historical and contemporary perspective. His thinking ran parallel to that of others working in the same track, including his long time friend Samir Amin (who he met in Paris during the 'events' of 1968), Giovanni Arrighi (who first introduced the 'world system' approach to Frank), and Immanuel Wallerstein, who in the 1970s together developed the analysis known as 'World-Systems theory'.

Frank's copious work on 'the crisis' chronicled the disastrous onset of 'market ideology' and the return of 'efficiency before equity' in theory and policy. He predicted (in 1974) that the Third World's response to the global crisis would be predicated upon increasing exports to world markets and that this transition to export led growth would be organised under authoritarian regimes (including in East Asia as well as Latin America), while it would inevitably lead to a deeper global depression and the amassing of gigantic unsustainable debts- i.e. to the Debt Crisis and 'vastly increased foreign dependence'. In the end, Frank felt that 'development' itself had 'all but disappeared' from discussion, replaced by 'only economic or debt crisis management'. He continued to analyse the tendencies of globalization, including the replacement of productive investment by financial speculation and the consequent increase in imbalances between regions and countries of the world economic system. He argued that increasing marketisation and privatisation as responses to the crisis would only further exacerbate underlying poverty, inequality, and marginalization, leading to tremendous pressures on democratic political culture and to the inexorable rise of both new progressive and reactionary social movements to fill the void left by the national state's incapacity and unwillingness to deliver real change.

The final phase of his life and work saw him returning to world development as the main subject of analysis, but this time across all of world history. Working with a co-author (Frank and Gills 1993) he offered an alternative to Eurocentrism which placed the contemporary crisis and globalization in a much longer historical perspective based on the long cycles of world system development going back not only centuries but even millennia. This work led him to conclude, in his final radical rejection of received theories, that we should be brave enough to reject 'capitalism' itself as a 'scientific' concept, as well as 'feudalism' and even 'socialism' as separate 'modes of production' nor should we any longer look for any real historical 'transitions' between them. He argued that 'too many big patterns in world history appear to transcend or persist despite all apparent alterations in the mode of production'. His final position therefore encapsulated a lifetime of movement and critique, including of his own previous positions. In his penultimate and perhaps best work, 'ReOrient' (1998) and in the unfinished 'ReOrient the 19th Century' sequel, he explored the historical method in new directions, again challenging received theory about the 'rise of the West' and the supposed role played by the market and 'free' trade as opposed to coercion and imperialism. His final analysis of global development included the idea that it is the system as a whole that is the inescapable framework of both analysis and practice and that any 'de-linking' from it at 'local' or national level is unrealistic, nor will global development ever be 'uniform' across the world. He felt that shifts in (temporary) competitive advantage (not always achieved by non-coercive or 'market' means alone) and the presence or absence of 'hegemonic power' were historically persistent patterns that in a sense define the long term development of the world system. However, he always embodied the idea of both 'the pessimism of the intellect' as well as the 'optimism of the will' and so left a final admonition – i.e. that the real 'global majority', the disadvantaged of the world, should and would act to protect their lives and interests and to improve social existence. He believed to the end that change for the better remains possible.

As a person, Gunder Frank was principled and uncompromising, yet always willing to listen to the evidence and an opposing argument, and even to accept that he was wrong and to change his views. Above all, he was always courageous and never afraid to be unpopular. He gave people the answers they needed not the answers they wanted to hear, even if they didn't always want to hear them. He could be difficult at times but his life was always about heart, and he was deeply caring and humane and had many longtime friends. Within 24 hours of his death, his family received a thousand email and other messages of condolence and support from around the globe. He was above all a generous man, both to his friends

and to his critics. He was combative intellectually and thrived upon this approach, but he also possessed a wonderful dry sense of humour, that endeared him to all who knew him well. His attitude to life can perhaps be summed up in his phrase, said to his third and final wife, Alison, 'Only two people in this world are always right- the Dalai Lama (who he met and liked, but didn't always agree with) and me', followed by 'and only two people in this world know how to load a dishwasher- the Dalai Lama and me!' Gunder Frank is survived by his two sons, Paul and Miguel and three grandchildren. He was still working until two weeks prior to his death in hospital in Luxembourg on Saturday the 23rd of April, 2005.