

### **André Gunder Frank: From the ‘Development of Underdevelopment’ to the ‘World System’**

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André (or Andrés as we called him in Chile) was an extraordinary person. He had a fertile, incisive and critical mind. He was a most prolific and polemical social scientist. In total his output numbered over 1000 publications in thirty languages, including dozens of books, over 160 chapters in books and hundreds of articles. He probably inherited this gift for writing from his novelist father, a well known socialist and pacifist, who fled Germany with his family in 1933 as the Nazis consolidated power. Frank never wavered in his ethical and political commitment to social justice and human rights. He always spoke his mind and had a direct and honest manner in dealing with people which did not endear him to all. But many respected him for that. His knowledge was encyclopaedic and he wrote on a vast array of topics, from Mexican agriculture to new social movements, from Latin American to Asian and East European affairs, from historical topics to contemporary political and economic issues, and much more. But his central contribution lies in his analysis of the ‘development of underdevelopment’ and world-system theory.

Frank was at his best when criticizing received wisdom and orthodox theories. His critical thinking appealed in particular to radical students, to all those inspired by the Cuban revolution and to liberation movements in the Third World. His writing became extremely popular at the height of the student movement in the late 1960s and the 1970s. He seemed to take great satisfaction from the influence of his work, as he carefully recorded all references to it, including the criticisms.<sup>1</sup>

Ever since I first met him in 1966 in Santiago de Chile I had been puzzled by his name. While at school and university in the USA he called himself Andrew and I only recently discovered that his first name was originally Andreas. A librarian at the UNESCO-sponsored Research Centre in Social Sciences in Rio de Janeiro asked him in 1963 whether the bibliographic

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1. He frequently updated the (ever increasing) list of his writings as well as those of others who made reference to his work. See, for example, Frank (1991b) and Chew and Denmark (1996: 363–404). His engagement with critics can be followed, for example, in Frank (1984).

references she had to publications by Andrew and to Andrés were to the same person. To avoid confusion he decided to drop the last letters of his original German name (Frank, 1996: 27). He added Gunder, the nickname given to him by his high school sports team, later in a self-deprecatory gesture. The original 'Gunder' was the Swedish runner, Gundar Haag, 'then holder of world records in five events, who like me was always separated from the rest of the field, the difference being that he was a half track ahead and I was a half track behind the others' (Frank, 2005). According to Gills, Frank later explained 'Unfortunately, I did not know how the name was spelled' (Gills, 2005: 1). While as a runner he may have lagged behind the field, as a thinker he was miles ahead.

Frank may not have minded the Gundar label, but he did dispute some of the other labels attached to him. On more than one occasion he asserted that he had never claimed to be an orthodox, neo- or any other kind of Marxist. Nevertheless, he was certainly much influenced by Marxist ideas and his denial was partly a response to those Marxist critics who faulted him for some weakness in what they interpreted as his Marxist analysis.<sup>2</sup> Frank's first book (1967a), which launched his reputation as a radical and heterodox thinker, is dedicated to Paul Baran and Paul Sweezy, probably the two most outstanding US Marxist economists and thinkers. His travels to Latin America in the early 1960s and his marriage to Marta Fuentes, a committed Chilean left-winger and feminist, certainly radicalized him further. In his book preface he already mentions that 'even before coming to the underdeveloped countries, I had always maintained some kind of progressive outlook and political position . . . I was, in the words of the title of my father's autobiography, "on the Left, where the heart is" ' (Frank, 1967a: xiii).

Frank staked out his theoretical and radical position in the first sentence of his pioneering book, 'I believe, with Paul Baran, that it is capitalism, both world and national, which produced underdevelopment in the past and which still generates underdevelopment in the present' (Frank, 1967a: vii). While Baran certainly had a pre-eminent influence on his thinking, his decision to travel to Latin America in 1962 had a defining impact on his writings and politics. He first taught at the University of Brasilia. In 1965 he worked at the National Autonomous University of Mexico, then went to Canada for a couple of years, and in 1968 became a staff member of the Centre for Socio-Economic Studies (CESO) at the University of Chile where we became colleagues. On his travels through Latin America, including visits to Cuba, he met and interacted with key social scientists and political personalities. In my view, Frank tends to underestimate the influence which Latin American thinkers had on his own intellectual development and in this sense he was quite self-centred. When quizzed by me on this point, he

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2. See, for example, Laclau (1969) and Marini (1972).

argued that he had had more influence on Latin American thinkers than they had ever had on him. Be that as it may, the revolutionary upheavals in Latin America and elsewhere at that time certainly influenced him. Many intellectuals expressed similar sentiments to his, when he wrote in a preface:

These essays were written to contribute to the revolution in Latin America and the world, and they are collected here in the hope that they may help others to contribute more to the revolution than the author has been able to. The essays arise out of the author's attempt, like that of millions of others, to assimilate the Latin American revolution and the inspiration it finds in the Cuban Revolution, whose tenth glorious anniversary we celebrate while writing these lines. (Frank, 1969: ix)

Times have certainly changed!

It is no coincidence that Frank settled in CESO, a hotbed of dependency theory and Marxism in Latin America. CESO attracted prominent Latin American exiles such as Theotonio dos Santos, Ruy Mauro Marini, Vania Bambirra, Tomás Vasconi, Emir Sader and Marco Aurelio García, as well as Chilean scholars like Marta Harnecker, the liberation theologian, Gonzalo Arroyo S. J., José Bengoa, José Valenzuela, Roberto Pizarro and Orlando Caputo, among others. Marta Fuentes was CESO's librarian. Prominent left-wing scholars and activists, such as Eric Hobsbawm, Alain Touraine, Paul Sweezy, Fernando Henrique Cardoso, Anibal Quijano, Lelio Basso and Rossana Rossanda, visited CESO. With the military *coup d'état*, which overthrew the socialist government of Allende on that earlier 11 September, in 1973, practically all staff were dismissed, many having to seek asylum in embassies for fear of their lives. Most staff went into exile, some for the second or even third time in their lives. At this point Frank, after forty years' absence, returned to Germany where he first had a visiting professorship at the Free University of Berlin and shortly afterwards became a Research Fellow at the Max-Planck Institute in Starnberg near Munich. In 1978 he took up a professorship in the School of Development Studies at the University of East Anglia.

Under Pinochet, Chile became the first laboratory of neoliberal economics as economic policy was placed in the hands of a tight-knit group of Chilean technocrats, dubbed the 'Chicago boys' as most of them had pursued postgraduate studies at the University of Chicago. Milton Friedman and Arnold Harberger, key figures of monetarism and neoliberalism, were at Chicago University and helped shape their thinking and support their policies in Chile. Needless to say Frank, who had received his PhD in economics from the University of Chicago in 1957, was not infected with the neoliberal virus. From his early years he had shown an independence of mind which remained a constant throughout his life. However, having been at Chicago and being acquainted with the key figures, Frank was in a good position to write a scathing and passionate critique of their involvement in the Chilean neo-liberal experiment (Frank, 1976).

Frank's reputation as a radical thinker began with his seminal article 'The Development of Underdevelopment', published in the independent socialist magazine *Monthly Review* whose editors were Paul Baran and Paul Sweezy. Frank (1966: 18) wrote: 'The now developed countries were never *underdeveloped*, though they may have been *undeveloped* . . . Contemporary underdevelopment is in large part the historical product of past and continuing economic and other relations between the satellite underdeveloped and the now developed metropolitan countries'. The phrase 'the development of underdevelopment' which he coined is now a key concept in development theory and in a way can be considered as the parting shot of dependency theory.

His reputation as a radical thinker was further enhanced, especially among young sociologists and anthropologists, by his devastating critique of modernization theory, the dominant perspective within the sociology of development at the time. In his (1967b) article, which was rejected by many mainstream journals and eventually published in a little known magazine of the University of Buffalo, he systematically critiques the main premises of the modernization thesis made by such prominent figures as Talcott Parsons, Bert Hoselitz, Wilbert Moore, Everret Hagen, Daniel Lerner, David McClelland and Walt Whitman Rostow, among others. Frank took them to task for their dualism, challenging their thesis that the now developed societies were once underdeveloped and that underdevelopment is the original stage of what are supposedly traditional societies. He also criticized their diffusionist thesis according to which the underdeveloped countries with their traditional societies would gradually become developed and modern countries by engaging with the developed capitalist economies and modern societies. For Frank those linkages between the developed and underdeveloped countries were not the solution but the problem, perpetuating the underdevelopment of the latter. Thus he turned modernization theory on its head and opened the way for new analyses of the relationships between developed and underdeveloped countries.

While I certainly recognize Frank's contribution to dependency theory, I am critical of the way in which Anglo-Saxon development theorists focus almost exclusively on Frank, thereby ignoring the rich vein of dependency thinking in the South, especially that which emanated from Latin America. Many of the criticisms which social scientists from the North level against dependency theory tend to refer almost exclusively to Frank, thereby neglecting other contributors to dependency, whose writings were not always translated into English, and who may themselves have been critical of some aspects of Frank's work. Thus many of the critiques of dependency theory in the Anglo-Saxon world were actually misplaced.

Frank certainly did not like my characterization of himself as 'a reluctant and short-lived *dependentista*' who is better placed within world system theory (Kay, 1989: 155), although he admits that his wife concurred with my view (Frank, 1991a: 139). I had intended this as a compliment as, in my

view, one of the limitations of many dependency analysts, as with many theorists of imperialism, is that their analysis tends to be one-sided — either on the imperial countries or on the South. By embracing the world system theory and adopting the global system as the unit of analysis, Frank avoided such a pitfall and the associated internal–external determination *problematique*. Marta Fuentes, his companion until her premature death in 1993, was certainly familiar with all his writings and Frank valued her opinion. From the mid-1960s onwards Frank was concerned with the historical processes of capital accumulation, first in Latin America and later in other regions, principally Asia, which he always placed within the global context. He was one of the main founders of world system theory together with Immanuel Wallerstein, Samir Amin and Giovanni Arrighi. Indeed Frank can be considered as the world system theorist *par excellence* given his many writings on world accumulation.<sup>3</sup>

While many dependency writers remained locked within the confines of their southern vision, Frank saw earlier than most the importance of the world economy. His viewpoint on the possibility of autonomous development in the South changed correspondingly. Thus he reflected many years later that:

The importance of the central theme of the world economy and of its interdependence . . . has become ever stronger. What has changed is my belief, which was largely implicit in the idea of dependence, that a state of independence, or at least non-dependence, could be achieved through de-linking from the world economy through concerted political actions in the Third World countries or regions. On this last issue, I suppose I have changed the most, especially since the *coup* in Chile. Experience has shown it to be extremely difficult, if not impossible, for voluntarist political action to de-link particular countries from world economy. (Simmons, 2001: 2)

His longest academic stint was at the University of Amsterdam which he joined in 1981, remaining there until his ‘retirement’ in 1994. While at Amsterdam he was invited on more than one occasion to give a seminar at the Institute of Social Studies in The Hague. At one such talk, I remember Marta Fuentes and Frank presenting their critical views on the new social movements’ literature (Fuentes and Frank, 1989). By 2001 his views on the new social movements had become more appreciative, although he still pointed out their limitations. His ambivalence towards Marxism remained:

I don’t want to say that I am or am not a Marxist. I want to be practical. To be practical we should look to see where the action is. Where is the action today? All around the world there is fast growth in what has been called the ‘new social movements’ which have become the dominant moving force in society today. There is a vast activity among these social movements, which someone has compared to termites. Each has no power on its own, but an army of termites is often able to completely eat through the essential structure of a building

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3. For some of his writings on world capital accumulation, see Frank (1978, 1980, 1981, 1993 and 1998).

or, in this case, of a society. What is notable about these social movements is that very few of them . . . seek to capture state power. Instead of capturing state power, they seek to carve out for their members a different kind of social existence within the possibilities that are offered to them. Many of these social movements are more defensive than offensive. (Simmons, 2001: 5–6)

Frank's last major book was *ReOrient: Global Economy in the Asian Age*, published in 1998, thirty years after his path breaking book on *Capitalism and Underdevelopment in Latin America*. His canvas was indeed the whole world and his analysis was long-term, going back as far as 1400 if not earlier. In *ReOrient*, Frank — in typical Frankian fashion — turns the Eurocentric view of the world economy on its head by arguing that Asia was at the centre of the world economy centuries before the industrial revolution and the rise of the West, thereby challenging the views of Marx, Weber, Polanyi, Rostow, Braudel and Wallerstein, among others. Needless to say, *ReOrient*, like his first book and the rest of his work, sparked many controversies among Marxists, non-Marxists and anti-Marxists. Frank, who certainly had his flaws, was a man of many gifts, the like of which is increasingly rare in today's narrower and more specialized academic world. He combined scholarly work with a deep and enduring commitment to the people's emancipation in an increasingly unequal world. His writings were an encouragement to all those who wanted to transform the world, and his *oeuvre* will continue to inspire many generations to come.

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Most of Andre Gunder Frank's early work on the nature of underdevelopment focused on one region: Latin America. Here he broadened his canvas and traced the world-wide effects of the process of capital accumulation from the period just prior to the discovery of America to the industrial and French revolutions. It is Frank's thesis that "the world has experienced a single all-embracing, albeit unequal and uneven, process of capital accumulation centered in Western Europe," which has been capitalist for at least two centuries. | more