

Lifelong Battle against Neoliberalism: André Gunder Frank, 1929-2005

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One of the most prominent intellectuals of the 20th Century has passed away. Andre Gunder Frank has left an indelible mark on political economy, the study of World history and more generally the deep-seated social crisis which has marked the contemporary era, including the devastating impacts of globalized “free markets” on working people throughout the World.

His writings which span more than half a century have provided a detailed understanding of the post-colonial era, its historical evolution, from the early post-War period to the turn of the Century. Gunder Frank was among the few intellectuals of the contemporary era who challenged mainstream economics and gave meaning to the study of political economy.

Mainstream economics is in crisis because it distorts real life situations. It formalizes economic relations which are imaginary, which have nothing to do with the real World. It serves as an ideology with no analytical content. Gunder’s writings show how the truth is distorted. Science without facts and facts without theory: the mainstream, according to Frank, prevents an understanding of real life economic processes and how economic processes affect the livelihood of millions of people.

These were not abstract formulations for the sake of theory, Gunder Frank understood in very practical terms that theory could not be divorced from class struggle, and his writings have certainly given a concrete meaning to social struggle. His writings have been an inspiration to social movements throughout the developing World.

Andre Gunder Frank was born in Berlin in 1929. He was the son of the prominent Germany writer Leonard Frank, who was closely associated with Bertoldt Brecht, whom Gunder had met when he was a child. Andre Gunder Frank left Germany, with his parents escaping the Nazi regime and emigrated to the US in 1941.

He later studied economics at the University of Chicago, which at the time was a nest of neoliberal economics under Milton Friedman. It is from Chicago and his training in neoclassical economics that Gunder developed his powerful critique and refutation of mainstream economics.

Andre Gunder Frank contributed, in many regards, to revolutionizing the discipline of development economics. He was the key figure, in fact the architect, of what was known as the “Dependency School”. Frank’s historical analysis of colonial economies, centering on Brazil and Chile, refuted the mainstream “stages of economic growth” approach which pervaded the discipline during the Cold War era, namely that that “developing countries” in the post-colonial (neocolonial) era could progress, going through the same stages, in the

same way as the countries which had colonized them.

Frank developed the so-called center-periphery model, namely that former colonies would remain colonies unless they severed these ties of dependency. He later focused his attention on the analysis of crises and undertook to analyze the long-term historical development of the world economy.

Gunder Frank was a living encyclopedia. Well before the advent of the internet, he kept detailed files of newspaper articles. He had a formidable understanding of World events. He understood that there was no theory without a detailed factual knowledge of social and economic processes. Conversely, he understood that there were no facts, in terms of a meaningful empirical analysis without conceptualization and a historical perspective.

Modest in his speech, often shy in his assertions, gentle and always respectful in his relations with his friends and academic peer, Gunder had all the historical facts and details underlying complex World events at his finger tips.

There was no theory without a wealth of empirical evidence, carefully documented and conceptualized. In this regard, Frank broke with many of his neo-marxist contemporaries whose analysis was often confined to Marxist philosophy and the discourse of political economy.

This sense for detail in historical analysis enabled Gunder to tackle both short term macro-economic policy issues as well as long term historical processes, and to move with ease from one to the other, to see things which most scholars would normally overlook. Shortly before his death, Gunder was working on the economic dimensions of the war on Iraq and its impact on World currency systems.

I had first read his writings on the “Development of Underdevelopment” in the 1960s at graduate school. I later incorporated his books into my economic development courses when I started teaching at the University of Ottawa. His focus and understanding of developing countries had marked me profoundly.

Several years later in the wake of the 1973 Chilean military coup, we met, after having corresponded for several years. We developed a life long friendship.

Gunder had written an extensive critique of the role of the Chicago Boys in Chile and how a country had been impoverished by the “free market” reforms adopted by the Pinochet regime. I had written, shortly after the 1973 military coup, when I was teaching at the Catholic University of Chile on how the price of bread rising four times over night upon the accession of the Pinochet regime had created mass poverty.

Gunder responded to the “Chicago Boys” by writing his “Open Letter to Milton Friedman”, who was the teacher and mentor of the Chilean Chicago Boys and whom Gunder had known from his student days at Chicago University.

Gunder Frank’s lifelong work and publications will live on. He remains in the hearts and consciousness not only of those who knew him personally but those who read his writings, translated into more twenty languages.

He will go down in history as one of most powerful and courageous intellectual figures of the

20th Century, who has marked the development of economic thought



Michel Chossudovsky, June 2005

André Gunder Frank's recent writings published by Global Research:

Coup d'État in Washington: Silent Surrender in America and the World by André Gunder Frank, 24 June 2003

<http://globalresearch.ca/articles/FRA306A.html>

America's Spiraling External Debt and the Decline of the US Dollar, Why the Emperor has no Clothes by Andre Gunder, 12 January 2005, :

<http://globalresearch.ca/articles/FRA501A.html>

Coup d'Etat in Washington and "The Dollar Paper Tiger", Fiery Dragon in Asia and the Pacific by Andre Gunder Frank, 3 June 2004,

<http://globalresearch.ca/articles/FRA406A.html>

Geopolitical Catch 22: Uncle Sam's Paper Tiger Dollar by André Gunder Frank, 18 January 2005,

<http://globalresearch.ca/articles/FRA501B.html>

Oh Canada, Eh! Save the World and Thyself by André Gunder Frank, 12 March 2003,

<http://globalresearch.ca/articles/FRA303A.html>

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