



Paradigm making while paradigm breaking: Andre Gunder Frank

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Paradigm making while paradigm breaking: Andre Gunder Frank

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As Thomas Kuhn pointed out, most science is puzzle solving and paradigm breakers and paradigm makers are rare. Gunder was among them, and besides, such a contrarian that he was a renegade also of many of his own positions.

His contributions to dependency theory broke with the paradigm of modernization theory and with orthodox Marxist views according to which Latin America was steeped in semi-feudalism. In contrast, he argued that Latin American economies had long been part of capitalist accumulation networks ('Sociology of underdevelopment and underdevelopment of sociology', Frank, 1971). In the 1970s he moved beyond dependency theory, ('Dependence is Dead! Long Live Dependence and the Class Struggle', 1972) and collaborated with Immanuel Wallerstein and his world-system theory, along with Samir Amin and Giovanni Arrighi. The grand theme at the time was crisis and several of Frank's books on global capital accumulation developed this perspective. Another keen interest at the time, new social movements, resulted in a paper written together with Marta Fuentes ('Nine Theses on Social Movements', Frank and Fuentes, 1987) with a sensibility that predates the World Social Forum, as Samir Amin notes in his obituary in *Monthly Review* (Amin, 2005).

The next phase of his work, co-authored with Barry Gills, took the development of the world system back not just centuries (as Braudel had suggested and Janet Abu-Lughod had done) but millennia (Frank and Gills, 1993). As Gunder noted: 'I now find the same continuing world system, including its center-periphery structure, hegemony-rivalry competition, and cyclical ups and downs, has been evolving (developing?) for five thousand years at least' (Frank, 1996, p. 41).

Like many dependency thinkers in the 1980s, Gunder turned his attention to Asia, but where most did so to question the viability of the development of the East Asian Tigers, Gunder took the route of history, not just

economic history but critical and institutional history. Together with Samir Amin, Gunder made a research trip along the ancient Silk Road, which led to an intriguing essay on 'The centrality of Central Asia' (Frank, 1992). His Asian studies produced his final major work, *ReOrient* (Frank, 1998), which joins the growing stream of revisionist historians who not merely criticize but also overturn Eurocentrism. Janet Abu-Lughod on the Middle East, Marshall Hodgson on the world of Islam, K. N. Chauduri on South Asia, Kenneth Pomeranz, Robert Temple and Bin Wong on China, Eric Jones on Japan, Anthony Reid on Southeast Asia, and many other studies and regional histories. Frank's book focused on East and South Asia and had a major impact.

His latest work includes (besides an unfinished sequel study, 'ReOrient the 19th Century') take-no-prisoners critiques of American imperialism and war that center on US economic overstretch (Frank, 2002) and anticipate a dollar crisis (Frank, 2005) and were published online.

Frank's sometimes-gruff manners ('You always call me at the wrong time, I was in the bathroom') were frank, and in their directness showed vulnerability and personal warmth and often humor and mischief. At a large professional conference (International Sociological Association, Montreal) he strolled around with a banana in his vest pocket and though featured as a speaker he had not registered, so he was smuggled past the gatekeepers.

Repeatedly, Gunder went beyond his own paradigm constructions, deconstructing them as he went along. He was one of the most vocal and distinctive dependency thinkers – but parted with dependency theory. He contributed to world system theory – and moved on. Most of his scholarly work was concerned with mapping the development of capitalism and most of his political life was concerned with critiquing capitalism – but he abandoned capitalism as a central explanatory category, not an ordinary move among Marxists or world system thinkers. At times he abandoned paradigms because the riverbed ran dry (his books on crisis in the early 1980s found little resonance) but mostly because research led beyond theory.

A striking feature of Gunder's work is his titles, which from the start took on a contrapuntal form: *Sociology of development and underdevelopment of sociology*, *Lumpenbourgeoisie: Lumpenddevelopment*, *Dependence is Dead! Long Live Dependence* (Frank, 1972), *Critique and anti-critique* (Frank, 1984), *No end to history! History to no end?* (Frank, 1991), etc. Gunder certainly has been a master of titles and *ReOrient* is another instance. His dialectical, spiraling titles display a supple approach to theory and a joking relationship with concepts, not taking them too seriously, though good enough to play on the riddles of history. They suggest that what enabled Gunder's paradigm breaking and making was his willingness to think questions through without becoming tangled up in the categories that 'contain' them,

his ability to treat concepts as instruments and theories as tools, not ends in themselves, the ability to think beyond concepts and theories. In what may be his most thoughtful essay, written for the Festschrift for his 65th birthday, he noted that his historical work eventually led him to abandon capitalism as a central explanatory category:

Far from arguing that capitalism is five thousand years old, I suggest that we should dare to abandon our belief in capitalism as a distinct mode of production and separate system. Why? Because too many big patterns in world history appear to transcend or persist despite all apparent alterations in the mode of production. It therefore cannot be the mode of production that determines overall development patterns. . . . World history since 1500 may be less adequately defined by capitalism than by shifts in trade routes, centers of accumulation, and the existence/nonexistence and location of hegemonic power. (Frank, 1996, p. 44.)

This implies a profound challenge to critical political economy; it suggests that many explanations that are held to be fundamental are in fact conjunctural and reflect not just limitations of geography but also limitations of the timeframe. Global political economy may overcome the limitations of geography, but the limitations of time are of a different order; it makes a profound difference whether the timeframe of explanation is from 1800 or from 1000 BCE or 500 CE. This is one of the questions that Gunder, heterodoxy personified, leaves us with.

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