Andre Gunder Frank

The distinguished economist and sociologist, Andre Gunder Frank has died of cancer aged 76. He was a product of a culture and a way of thinking about economics that refused to divorce its technical aspects from their political and social circumstances and implications. His boldness in exploring and extending radical political economy made Frank a well-known figure far beyond development economics in which he based most of his work.

Andre Gunder Frank was born Andreas Frank in Berlin on the 24 February 1929. Four years later, with the assumption of power in Germany by the Nazi party, his father, a novelist and pacifist, sent his son to a Swiss boarding school. He joined his parents in the USA in 1941. He finished Ann Arbor High School in Michigan, and entered Swarthmore College in Pennsylvania to study economics. At the end of his studies he had become a Keynesian. He went on to the University of Chicago to study for a PhD, at which point he rebelled against the straight-jacket that an economics discipline, isolated from the other social sciences, imposes on the systematic analysis of economic problems. Despite this, his doctoral thesis, on Soviet Agriculture in the Ukraine, was accepted by the University of Chicago in 1957. He secured a job at Michigan State University. Already at Chicago, he had been introduced by the anthropologist Bert Hoselitz to the social aspects of development in poor countries. This inspired him to put behind himself the provincialism of American universities emerging from MacCarthyism and, in 1962, he started teaching at the University of Brasilia. This led to teaching in Mexico and eventually, through the good offices of Salvador Allende, to a chair in sociology at the University of Chile in Santiago. Following the Pinochet coup, he found refuge in Berlin, and taught at various universities in Europe. Between 1978 and 1983 he was Professor of Development Studies at the University of Amsterdam. From 1981 until his retirement in 1994, he held a Chair at the University of Amsterdam.

Frank is best known as an exponent of dependency theory. According to this theory, developing countries are not poor because they are behind the advanced capitalist countries in the process of economic modernisation, through successive modes of production in the Marxian version, to an advanced state of material well-being. Rather they are poor because they are incorporated into an international economic system in which weaker, poorer countries, are exploited by stronger, wealthier countries. In Frank’s version, this theory was rooted in a critique of modernisation and its creation of artificial needs in poor countries in order to perpetuate a condition of dependency. This aroused fierce criticism from Marxists as well as advocates of capitalist development, who decried Frank’s ambiguity about traditional economy and society, and the analytical roots of his analysis in international exchange. From the 1970s Frank developed his work into a critique of international capitalism that he saw as sliding into crises that bore most heavily upon the poor in the developing countries. A more academic interest in the last two decades of his life was a study of world economic systems, that he believed first emerged some five millennia ago. He came to regard capitalism as a feature of a Euro-centric phase of development that neglected previous and possibly future dynamism in regions of the world outside Europe and the countries of European settlement.

Frank was a prolific writer, and author of over forty books, as well as numerous articles and edited volumes. His international reputation was founded upon his willingness to challenge accepted opinion and to embrace radical approaches to global social inequalities. The price he paid for this distinction was his professional insecurity in a world that expects its economists to be business-friendly and deferential. His extensive output, historical vision, and iconoclastic opinions will ensure that his ideas will continue to be discussed long after the contributions of more respectable economists have sunk into decent obscurity. He leaves behind his third wife, Alison Candela, and two sons, Paul and Miguel from his first marriage to Marta Fuentes, who died in 1993.

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