

A Long Walk with Andre Gunder Frank

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IN THE EARLY 1980s, I TRAVELED TO MEXICO CITY WITH A TEAM OF SCHOLARS AND activists from the Institute for the Study of Labor and Economic Crisis (ISLEC) to attend a meeting of the World Congress of Sociology. There we met Andre Gunder Frank, who had been a mentor for most of us at ISLEC. Outside of the conference, some of us spent a good deal of time with him walking the streets of Mexico City, searching (often in vain) for places that he remembered from an earlier time there. Although we had learned much from his ideas about world-systems analysis and the development of underdevelopment, politically and intellectually I was closer to the romantic radicalism that he had espoused during the 1970s. With all of the presumptuousness of those who have recently discovered the truth, we lectured to him about his pessimism and cynicism concerning movements in power.

At 35, I was probably the youngest of the ISLEC team, but had come to study Gunder's work via my experience in the Black Liberation Movement. Though the internationalism of the Black Liberation Movement is certainly linked to Pan Africanism, there is a broader internationalism that had been inspired by Gunder and others who had come to intellectual, political, and moral maturity while laboring to understand the world in order to change it in Africa, Asia, and Latin America during the 1950s and 1960s. Gunder was aware of Walter Rodney's debt to him in *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, but there is much more. Anyone who reads the very influential work of Robert Allen, whose *Black Awakening in Capitalist America* was one of the seminal works of the Black Power period, will see the broad influence of Gunder's work and spirit. Anyone who reads Harold Cruse, whose *Rebellion or Revolution* was probably the most important early influence on the Black radicals who came of age during the 1960s, cannot miss the influence of Andre Gunder Frank. As I read those works during the 1970s, as well as those of Gunder, Immanuel Wallerstein, and Samir Amin, I could see the power of an emerging discourse of liberation that simply overwhelmed the intellectual productions of the existing order, including that of the liberal establishment and the old Left. I was impressed with their sophistication and connectedness to the

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wisdom and praxis of the common people from around the world. By then, I had read much of the Marxist classics and could see the evolution of that thought reflected in Gunder's work and in those who had been inspired by him. I had received a paper from Muhammad Ahmad (Max Stanford), then the field secretary of the Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM), and was promised a paper by Omali Yeshitela of the African People's Socialist Party, which I had proposed to the editors of *Contemporary Marxism* as the centerpiece of a thematic issue on the "Contemporary Black Liberation Movement." Both of these activist intellectuals were deeply indebted to Gunder's work.

These authors, as well as others, had adopted Gunder's stance that underdevelopment is not a consequence of the survival of archaic institutions and the existence of capital shortages in regions that have remained isolated from the main streams of world history. On the contrary, underdevelopment results from the same processes that have produced development, and the development of capitalism itself is also the development of underdevelopment. This insight was applied to the Black experience by those who understood and agreed with Gunder's sense that Marx' preoccupation with the productive processes in the metropolis had lead him to postpone confronting the problems of the colony in a theoretical sense; indeed, he never dealt with it in any satisfactory way. Gunder points to Marx' own acknowledgment that his concern was not with the conditions of the colonies, per se, but with the secret discovered in the new world by political economy, namely, that the fundamental condition of the capitalist mode of production is the expropriation of labor.

During our long walks in Mexico City, I looked for a way to express my appreciation to Gunder for his contribution. True, in those days I was confident that our children would continue the "Long March" of social transformation after we had passed from the scene, making his views on the subject seem a bit too pessimistic. Yet, all of the people he had touched could only build on this process. I mentioned as examples Robert Blauner's *Racial Oppression in America*; Don Hammerquist, Noel Ignatin (now Ignatiev), Lance Hill, Eileen San Juan, Phil Rubio, and Ken Lawrence of the Sojourner Truth Organization; my wife Melanie Bush, Laura Benne, and Vanda Sendzimir, all of whom were grass-roots organizers in the San Francisco Bay Area and former members of the Women's Collective Press at McGill University; and Greg Shank (my partner in crime at ISLEC). Also in place was an impressive multiplicity of solidarity organizations and think tanks focused on analytical and policy issues in Latin America, Africa, the Middle East, South Asia, Southeast Asia, etc. Having inspired so many, how could he have anything less than supreme confidence about the future of social transformation? Gunder was dubious that had done all that and was still not convinced that the possibilities I had foreseen were in fact destiny. He, too, had once exuded the kind of confidence that I expressed. Having witnessed so many agents of social transformation make their accommodation with the existing social system, he could only continue to look at the very long-term evolution.

I learned more than I realized from those discussions. Today I embrace some, though not all, of the positions Gunder articulated at that time, having remained, in the estimation of some, very much the romantic radical. Of this I am certain: I will miss this giant of a man.

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