



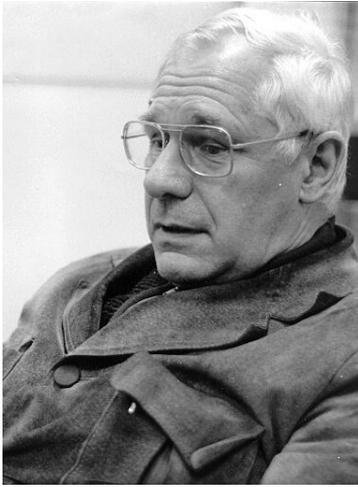
The BIG Thinkers

Leaving Certificate Politics and Society

Andre Gunder Frank

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(1929 to 2005)



Andre Gunder Frank was a left-wing economist and political activist who wrote widely in the fields of economics, social and political history, development studies and international relations. A German national, he is best known today for his work on what he called *'the development of underdevelopment'* or *'dependency theory'*. He also commented critically on what he called the *'world system'* of the 1970s and 1980s that maintained inequality in the world.

Frank's main argument was that in our interconnected, globalised world, some countries are winners, whilst others are losers. According to dependency theory, the people of less-developed countries are not to blame for the failure of their societies to develop. Instead, he suggested that Western nations deliberately failed to develop these countries. He argued that historically, *'core'* nations such as the USA and UK, who made up the elite *'metropolis'*, exploited *'peripheral'* nations by keeping them as satellites in a state of dependency and under-development. Developed nations become wealthy by exploiting the poorest nations and using them as a source of cheap raw materials and labour. He claimed that this exploitative relationship was evident throughout the course of history (e.g. in the practice of slavery and in Western colonisation of other parts of the world) and was maintained into the twentieth century through Western countries' domination of international trade, the emergence of large multinational companies and the reliance of less-developed countries on Western aid.

In an article entitled *'The Development of Underdevelopment'* which set out his main thinking, Frank declared:

Underdevelopment is not due to the survival of archaic institutions and the existence of capital shortage in regions that have remained isolated from the stream of world history. On the contrary, underdevelopment was and still is generated by the very same historical process which also generated economic development: the development of capitalism itself.

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Historical perspective

Frank's ideas about underdevelopment originated in his study of history, which he regarded as essential to understanding development issues. He criticised modernisation theorists (such as Walt Rostow) who argue that development happens as countries move from being traditional to modern economies and as they take on the values and practices of the developed countries. He argued that such theories of development failed to take account of how the capitalist system was *a cause* of underdevelopment, not a solution. He claimed that there was an assumption that underdeveloped countries were simply 'behind' the developed world and needed to catch up. He said that this view, where underdeveloped countries were assumed to be at a stage of history that developed countries had passed through long ago, was ignorant. He claimed that this simplistic view failed to take account of the impact on underdeveloped countries of their relations with developed countries who colonised them throughout history.

Furthermore, Frank challenged the assumption that the underdevelopment of a country was due to its own economic, political, social, and cultural structures and that the only way to develop such a country was to '*diffuse*' (i.e. distribute and spread) capital, structures, systems, even values, from a developed, capitalist hub or '*metropole*' to replace those that existed in the underdeveloped country. He argued instead for the exact opposite approach: that the only way for such underdeveloped countries to experience economic development was to become independent of what he called '*the politics of diffusion*' and to challenge the idea that the developed centres of capitalism would somehow come to the rescue by 'diffusing' their capitalist features to the underdeveloped world.

Frank also rejected the '*dual society*' theory which related to countries where inequality of income or differences in culture were evident. According to this theory one part of society was viewed as relatively progressive, modern and developed (i.e. urban cities or metropolises) while the other part was more isolated, rural or primitive. The part that was developed was seen to have benefitted from the influence of capitalism, while the other part still needed to have the benefits of capitalism diffused to it. Frank warned that if policy-makers acted upon this theory, which assumed that capitalism was a positive force for good, they would only strengthen the conditions of underdevelopment.

The development of underdevelopment: *satellites* and *metropoles*

Frank based his ideas on a close study of the effects of capitalism in history. For example, in looking at inequality and underdevelopment in Latin America in the 1960s, Frank examined the privileged position of cities in that region that first emerged during the 16th century conquest by Spain and Portugal. The city might seem to be an example of the success of capitalism in the underdeveloped world. But Frank claimed that the city's function at this time was to economically dominate the indigenous population who lived in surrounding rural communities. He said that the city was the '*metropole*' that dominated the '*satellites*' around it. In the same way, these metropolises were themselves satellites to the domination of the European colonising country. Frank said that over the course of history, this chain of exploitation in the form of a 'metropolis-satellite' relationship has been maintained, so that resources continue to be taken from satellites and fed back to the dominant metropolis. He said that his study of the history of countries like Chile and Brazil backed up this theory, where the chain of '*satellite underdevelopment*' was evident in these countries' relationship with Europe, and within their own domestic economies, where the 'satellite metropolis' relationship existed at various levels so that the most remote area of Latin America were part of a chain that existed to benefit capitalist Western countries.

Historical perspective

Frank's study of history led him to make three major claims:

1. While the major industrialised nations are not satellites to any other power, cities and countries in the under developed world were limited by their satellite status and were under the domination of the developed world economies.
2. Satellites experienced their greatest economic development at times in history when their ties to the metropolis were weakest. Frank pointed out that industrial development was strongest in countries like Chile, Argentina, Brazil and Mexico during the two World Wars and the Great Depression that occurred between the wars, when ties to the West were at their weakest.
3. Those regions that were seen as most under-developed and economically backward in the twentieth century had the closest ties to the developed world in the past. He gives the examples of regions that were once major exporters of primary products for the world metropolis (e.g. the West Indies which exported sugar, parts of Latin America which mined and exported silver) but were subsequently abandoned when business fell off.

Criticism of dependency theory

Critics of the dependency theory argue that this dependency is exaggerated. They also say that the theory focuses too much on economic factors and does not take into consideration the country's political, social, cultural and environmental factors that might be contributing to underdevelopment. Critics also argue that dependency theory is very pessimistic and unrealistic. Critics say that the suggestion that a developing country can disconnect from capitalism and go its own way is impossible in our globalised economy. However, Frank's ideas and the huge volume of writing that he completed continue to be debated.

Related thinkers:

Karl Marx

Walt Rostow

Useful weblinks:

- Andre Gunder Frank: 'The Development of Underdevelopment' (published in Monthly Review Sept 1966), retrieved from http://www.colorado.edu/geography/class_homepages/geog_3682_f08/Articles/FrankDevofUnderdev.pdf
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JN6LIMY2ApQ>: a description of dependency theory
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WfcNcoP957M>: a perspective on the structure of the contemporary world system