

# Remembering Andre Gunder Frank While Thinking about the Future

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Andre Gunder Frank's very long itinerary as a critical social scientist was marked by one unbudgeable constant. He was always committed to a left political agenda, and he was always analyzing the evolving current world situation as a left scholar-activist. I believe that the best tribute I can offer him is to do the same. Gunder's father, Leonhard Frank, a distinguished novelist and man of letters, wrote toward the end of his life a novel based on his own life. Its title was *Links, wo das Herz ist* ("My Heart Is on the Left"). This would have been the most appropriate title for Gunder's own never-written autobiography.<sup>1</sup>

Left agendas are actually complicated things to construct. For one thing, they are really constructed in three different time frames, which I shall call long-term, medium term, and short term. Many of the arguments that pervade left discussions about left strategies confuse the three time frames, and therefore debate at cross purposes. I shall try to talk about all three time frames but keep them separate. When I speak however about the next twenty-five years, I am speaking about the middle term, which I think is the crucial period to clarify.

To make any sense of this discussion, we have to think first about the world-systemic context within which an agenda of any kind can be constructed. I have been arguing in many recent articles and books that the capitalist world-economy, our modern world-system, is in a systemic crisis, by which I mean something that is quite different from one of its repeated economic downturns or stagnations that are a built-in feature of the way it functions, or the kinds of processes that allow for the emergence of new hegemonic powers.<sup>2</sup> What I am calling a systemic crisis occurs *only once* in the life of a historical system. It occurs when the mechanisms that exist to bring the system back to some kind of equilibrium no longer function adequately, and the system can be seen to be moving far from equilibrium, thereby becoming "chaotic."

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Chaos is here a technical term that describes a situation in which a system fluctuates wildly, erratically, and severely. At that point, the system “bifurcates” and there ensues an acute struggle over which of two alternative paths to new systemic order it might take.<sup>3</sup> The outcome of such a struggle is intrinsically unpredictable. Or to put it another way, it is equally possible that, in the end, the bifurcating system will take one path or the other. The struggle is thus not about whether or not to retain the current capitalist system, since it cannot survive, but about what kind of world-system (or world-systems) will replace it. I call this struggle, for reasons I shall elaborate, the struggle between the spirit of Davos and the spirit of Porto Alegre.

I believe that we are already in this systemic crisis and that within twenty-five (or twenty-five to fifty) years, the issue of the choice of a replacement will be resolved. We shall find ourselves in some other kind of system, one that might be better but also one that might be worse than the present system. The long term is what will come out of that historic choice. It is therefore about that other world that is possible, to use the slogan of the World Social Forum (WSF). The long term is what has been delineated in multiple designs of utopias. Personally, I think it is possible to discuss the long term only in very general terms. I define a better world-system as one that is relatively democratic and relatively egalitarian. Historically, no world-system has been either democratic or egalitarian in any meaningful sense. One that would have these characteristics would be distinctively different from all previous historical world-systems.

I don't think we can say much more than that. Specifically, I do not think that we can define in advance the institutional structures that would result in a more democratic, more egalitarian world. We can draft whatever utopian models we wish. I don't think it matters, because I don't think that drafting such models will have too much impact on what actually emerges. The most we can probably do is to push in certain directions that we think might be helpful.

The short term is more interesting. We all live in the short term. Everyone is concerned, indeed very concerned, about the short term. We eat, dress, work, sleep, make love, and survive in the short term. We also are happy or sad, give offense or are hurt, entertain or are entertained in the short term. The short run is what most people think of as life. And for a large number of people, perhaps even for most people, the short term is not a political phenomenon. This is probably an error in perception on the part of those who think of themselves as apolitical

since in fact the pluses and minuses of our lives are very much and continuously determined by changing political realities.

Among those who debate political agendas, there exists a long list of decisions to be made about the short term, that is, this year and the next at most. Shall we vote or not, and if so for whom or for what party? Shall we sign a petition, or write a letter, or participate in a demonstration? Shall we strike, or support a strike? Shall we speak out to our neighbors or to other persons about our political views, or not? Shall we organize about this or that? And if we do organize, shall we do it locally or in a wider arena? Shall we acquire arms? The list goes on and on. It is a long list. Plus, the debates about what we should or should not do in our everyday lives are quite passionate. We tend not only to pursue our own views about appropriate decisions, but quite often we denounce those with whom we do not agree, especially if they too claim to be “on the left.”

Yet, we cannot avoid these daily decisions. Abstaining from any of these decisions is itself a decision. Willy-nilly, the political arena is pervasive, continuous, and quite often overbearing. Some of us are “activists”—the very word is instructive, active as opposed to what? I suppose as opposed to “passive.” But activists are normally only a minority of the world’s populations. The larger majority seem to allow themselves to be carried along by the tide. This may be deceptive. The persons in the passive majority are often angry and sullen, and under certain circumstances, may erupt and become very active indeed. In fact, full-time activists count on this possibility of popular eruption, even if our experience has shown that such popular eruptions tend to occur unexpectedly and not usually as a result of activist prodding.

Still, if at any point we who are activists reflect on the decisions we made a few years back, we are often dismayed at how foolish they were. The consequences are often quite at variance with what we expected. This adds grist to the mill of those who recommended other decisions at the time. Denunciations abound. Those who advocated what are called “reformist” or “statist” decisions are said to have sold out to establishment forces. And those who advocated what are called “radical” or “insurrectionary” decisions are said to be “infantile leftists.”

In this repartee, sober analysis tends to recede into the background. We seldom do in-depth analysis of why particular short-term options did not pan out the way we had hoped. So, let me put forward two arguments that will no doubt be unpopular. The first is this. In the short run, not only should we support the lesser evil, but there is no

other choice available, ever. Everyone, without exception, chooses the lesser evil. We just disagree about which choice is that of the lesser evil.

We surely don't want to choose the greater evil. Of course, what the lesser evil is in any particular situation depends on the situation. There is no formulaic answer. Often, it is to vote for a left-of-center party against a right-of-center party. Sometimes it is to support a "left of the left" party whose strong showing in an election might have an immediate impact. And sometimes it might be that abstention from voting is the least evil. Choosing the lesser evil always has the flavor of holding one's nose, and being "realistic." This choice of the lesser evil in the short run is not only about voting; it applies as well to strikes, demonstrations, and armed struggle. So, if someone denounces you for choosing the lesser evil, know that this person too is choosing a lesser evil, just making a different choice from yours.

The second argument is this. No movement with a middle-run left agenda will have any chance of obtaining the popular support it needs if its advocates refuse to choose the lesser evil that meets the needs and expectations of the larger populace. People live in the short run, first of all. And most people are quite "realistic" about what they need here and now. No amount of promises about the middle run will wash with most people if their needs in the short run are ignored. Furthermore, we all have to be honest about the fact that we are choosing what we consider to be the lesser evil. We have in effect to say two things. It is the lesser evil for this or that reason. And choosing it, while necessary in the short run, will have no measurable effect on the middle run. We do not dance in the streets because our lesser evil choice prevails. We heave a sigh of relief, but that's all.

It is the middle run where the significant action concerning a left agenda is located. And strangely enough, it seems to me that the middle run is the arena that has been historically the most neglected in the discussions concerning left agendas. Action in the middle run is less exhilarating than debating the long run, and less seemingly active than action in the short run. The middle run involves a combination of continuous preparatory work (what is called political education) and constant pressures on the powerful (what is called the construction of movements) with a deep patience about seeing the fruition of all this work. Gramsci's famous slogan, "pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will" is exactly right. For the optimism pushes us to engage in what the pessimism tells us often seems to be and sometimes really is

a Sisyphean task. As Eqbal Ahmad has commented: “Pessimism of the intellect is a call to genuine realism in comprehending reality, and optimism is a call to commitment to the common good.”<sup>4</sup>

The rules about the middle run are precisely the opposite of the rules about the short run. If in the short run, we are all into the business of compromises (many of them unsavory), in the middle run, we should make no unsavory compromises. We should push only for that which matters in terms of transforming the system, even if the rewards are not immediate. It is only by being truly militant that we can have any effect at all. Militancy requires realism too, but realism of a quite different kind than the choice of the short-run lesser evil.

Realism in comprehending reality includes both reading history (in particular, past efforts at transforming the world) and reading the impact of past history on the social psychology of both popular forces in general and activist cadres. We have lived through at least two hundred years of attempts to transform the world—either via what are called “revolutions” or via attempts to use the ballot box to vote oneself into power in the states and thereby legislate transformation. One cannot say that overall either of these strategies has been very successful.

There have been (quasi-)insurrectionary revolutions, some by movements calling themselves communist, some by so-called national liberation movements. And there have been countless political victories by non-insurrectionary social-democratic movements. It is difficult to consider that either kind of attempt has succeeded in transforming the world. This is not to say that they haven’t accomplished some positive things. They have quite often been in the short run the lesser evil. But we no longer dance in the streets, retrospectively, because of either kind of victories. Or at least, most of us do not. And today, in the twenty-first century, the number of persons who put their faith in these essentially nineteenth-century strategies is rather small.

The turning point in my view in perceptions of workable strategies was the world revolution of 1968. It seems to me that the revolutionaries—whether in the pan-European world, in the erstwhile socialist bloc, or in the South—were all expressing their deep skepticism about the success of these strategies and about their viability for future success. They were not rejecting the utopias of the long run. They were rather calling for a new look at strategies for the middle run.

In the years since 1968, there has been much debate about such strategies. This debate has suffered from the failure to distinguish explicitly between the three time frames I have suggested as essential for clear

thinking. It is only with the creation of the WSF in 2001 that there has come into existence a structure within which an alternative strategy for the middle run may possibly be developed.

The WSF is a very strange kind of organization, if it can be called an organization at all. It claims to be a “horizontal” structure. It says that its basic principle is that it is an “open space.” The term “horizontal” is used in opposition to the term “vertical.” The argument is that the major national and international organizations of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were all “vertical” in that they were hierarchical structures, with bureaucracies and officers, with official statements of political position, and with members. The various organizations might have differed in the degree of discipline that prevailed within them and in the degree of internal collective debate they permitted, but they all were political organizations dedicated to some kind of action in the political arena.

These vertical organizations had a second feature. They insisted on a loyalty that took precedence over any other loyalty, and laid claim to primacy in the political arena. If there were other organizations with specific agendas (say, women’s or youth organizations, or peace movements), these organizations were considered legitimate by the general vertical organization only if they placed themselves within its fold as a subordinate and specialized group. The primacy of such general vertical organizations implied that their relations with any other organization in the same geographical arena, but not in their fold, could at most be one of temporary tactical alliance.

As opposed to this mode of organization, the WSF as a horizontal structure is constructed as an open forum. That is, it is a structure without officers, without (or with only a skeleton) bureaucracy, with no public proclamation of political positions, and with open and constant debate. As a result, it claims to be inclusive of everyone. Well, not quite everyone. The WSF defined itself as a meeting ground of all those who rejected “neoliberal globalization and imperialism in all its forms.” It also excluded, at least in theory, political parties and armed movements. These specifications constituted to be sure a political position, but it was a very loose one, and by virtue of its horizontal nature the WSF has very little control over who actually attends its meetings.

What was the point of such a curious animal? The argument went as follows. The WSF was permitting all organizations that wanted basic change in the world-system to assemble together, to exchange views with each other, to learn from each other, and perhaps above all to learn

to tolerate each other. The organizations might be international, continental, regional, national, or local. The discussions would take place within a multitude of large and small sessions which, by the third WSF meeting, were all organized from the base up. That is, any organization, alone or in conjunction with others, could organize a session on any theme it thought important, choose the speakers or panelists, and invite all and sundry to attend.

What has been the outcome of this kind of structure? The first outcome has been its replication at other levels. There now have been convened countless continental, regional, national, and local social forums, as well as so-called thematic forums. These other forums have all been self-organized and have not needed the permission of the worldwide WSF to do what they wished to do. It was assumed that they would all be horizontal open spaces. And most, if not all, have replicated the organizational model.

The second outcome has been the geographical widening of participation in the worldwide WSF itself, as well as an increase in the numbers of persons who actually attend. The first WSF was largely Latin American and West European in composition, and some ten thousand persons came. Successive ones have come to involve participants from North America, South Asia, East Asia, and Africa, and the numbers have gone as high as two hundred thousand. There are still nonetheless geographic gaps—inadequate participation from East-Central Europe, Russia, and China. But the circle has been steadily widening.

The third outcome has been a continual improvement in the way the worldwide WSF has been organized—the organization of panels from the base up (as I mentioned), the increased transparency of how the inevitable organizational decisions are being made, and the creation of explicit spaces for “networks” of organizations to meet and to organize joint activities.

The WSF is a tumultuous arena—less because of political differences than because of arguments about strategy. There have been, from the beginning, those who chafed at the horizontality of the structure. At the least, some feel, it has been exaggeratedly horizontal. They have said that the WSF must do more than “talk”; it must act. And for many persons, action means moving in the direction of verticality—explicit political stances and explicit organization of political actions. Those who have resisted this demand have said that inevitably this means that, like all the previous “internationals,” the WSF would then move

toward exclusions, and would thus fall into the strategy that, in their view, has so manifestly failed historically.

The debate has been continuous and strong, if not yet acrimonious. And there seems to be emerging a compromise solution—keeping the WSF itself an open forum, while permitting specific networks to function within it, networks that would in fact take positions and organize political activity. I am not sure what will be the outcome of this debate, and whether or not the WSF will continue to be the central locus of world left activity or become what one person has suggested has been merely a “moment” in the history of world left activity. I think that, rather than trying to predict or prescribe a future for the WSF, it would be more to the point to discuss what kinds of political activity would in fact be meaningful in the middle run.

When I speak of the two opposing camps in the struggle to determine the outcome of the bifurcation as that of the spirit of Davos and that of the spirit of Porto Alegre, I mean something quite specific. Davos, or the World Economic Forum, has been meeting since 1971, which is just after the world revolution of 1968. It seeks to bring together the elite of the world-system—capitalists, political leaders, major media figures, politically-conscious celebrities, and establishment intellectuals. It too is an open forum of sorts and, especially recently, the debates within it have been at least as strong as those within the WSF. The spirit of Davos is to preserve a world that is hierarchical and inegalitarian. And to the degree that capitalism as a system can no longer guarantee those principles, the more sophisticated of its members are clearly ready to envisage alternative systems. Neither private enterprise nor economic growth constitutes the bottom line, only political, economic, and cultural guarantees for the upper strata of the world-system. The spirit of Porto Alegre is precisely the opposite. The spirit of Porto Alegre incarnates today what we can possibly mean by the world left.

If we want a world that is relatively democratic and relatively egalitarian, then we must build it, or the likelihood of achieving it, by pushing for more democratization and more egalitarianism. Let's look at each of these concepts. Democracy means in terms of its etymological origins “rule by the populace.” The populace is not a specific group within it; it is supposed to mean everyone. And whatever goes on today, it is hard to say that the political decisions that are made are made as a reflection of the will of everyone, or even of a majority of the people. We have representative parliamentary systems at best, in which the voters (who are usually defined in some way as less than the whole adult populace)

choose, every  $x$ -number of years, a small group of people who make decisions as they think preferable, bearing in mind most often the likelihood that they can be re-elected—for which, as we know, they need among other things much money.

Now what would push in another direction? It is quite obvious that organizing those that have been historically left out of the equation is an essential element of doing this. And of course, particularly in the last forty years or so, there has been a lot of this—organizing women, ethno-racial and religious understrata, sexual and age-based understrata, and indigenous peoples. But there has not been nearly enough of such building of social movements. To the extent that such groups speak loudly and make their voice felt, it weakens the existing undemocratic political structures within which we live. And this in turn strengthens the social psychological resolve of these groups. This is generally what is subsumed in the word *empowerment*.

Now there is an obvious danger here. One is that these groups will count their achievements in terms of admission of their particular group to high political posts rather than in greater voice for the demos as a whole. And the second is that there will be a competition of the oppressed with each other, each demanding its partial voice at the expense of or prior to the achievement of partial voice by other understrata. It is only by solid alliances at the local level of these various groups that one can effectively wear away at existing monopolization of social and political power by dominant groups.

The “majority” has to be expanded and become more inclusive across the board. Strangely enough, it is by defending the rights to socio-cultural autonomy (which may also be socio-political autonomy) of the various understrata that the majority can really be expanded. And this can only really be done to the degree that the members of any particular understratum question the often obscure and hidden decision making of their own leadership.

Of course, none of this is easy and the shoals are many. That is why any kind of overall vertical structure is inherently self-defeating. What is needed is thousands of constant local actions by multiple different groups. It is in this way and this way only that undermining the pseudo-legitimation of the existing structure can be achieved. This has been the principal virtue up to now of the WSF. But of course the world of the WSF has been manifestly insufficient.

What these groups are fighting for is a realistic definition of rights—all those rights enshrined in the multiple liberal constitutions that

today almost every country has enacted, and which are constantly ignored, abraded, or violated outright—by the legislatures, executive powers, and the very judiciary that is supposed to defend and enforce them. What is called for is pressure, more pressure, uncompromising pressure for all those rights that theoretically have already been acquired. And then pressure, more pressure, uncompromising pressure for whatever rights are not yet enshrined in these documents.

Of course, this involves loading and overloading the demands for distribution. This is where the egalitarian thrust comes in. The basic egalitarian demands over the past two centuries have been for (1) education, seen as the route to rewarding and rewarded work; (2) health services, seen as the prevention, care, and cure of biological malfunctioning; and (3) lifetime income guarantees, seen as the maintenance of a lifelong level of decent income, from infancy to very old age. What the left wants is more of each, and more of each now, at the social expense of other expenditures.

To come anywhere even near this requires not merely redistribution of existing wealth but change in the perceived social priorities of expenditure. It is here that the demands must be raised concerning geopolitics, peace, ecology—all of which have movements that push these concerns. But if these movements do not integrate their demands with the basic underlying egalitarian thrusts that are located in the popular movements, and even more in the popular subconsciousness, then these movements are not helpful.

And here we come to a crucial variable—the ideology of growth as opposed to the ideology of plausible and sufficient distribution. Unbridled growth is not a solution to our dilemmas but probably the primary cause of them. And questioning the ideology of growth is a central element in realistic middle-run organizing.

Are there other things we can do? No doubt. In a previous discussion of a left political agenda, I suggested such tactics as making the liberal center fulfill its own theoretical premises, making anti-racism a defining feature of democracy, and moving to the degree that we can towards the decommodification of activities now commodified as well as preventing the commodification of things we have traditionally considered non-commodifiable (such as access to water, or human reproduction).<sup>6</sup> What is important about each of these is the strong organized push in these directions. Even if this doesn't accomplish immediately their realization, it affects the overall political

ambiance and therefore the balance of power. It makes more possible tipping the bifurcation in the direction we want.

Personally, I learn each day of other things that various groups are suggesting or trying out or getting ready to try out. The organizational imagination of the multiple understrata of the world-system is quite considerable, provided that we don't act ourselves to suppress it. It is hard for activists to allow themselves to be advised by the demos whom they tend to consider to be too passivist and inadequately politically informed. But if we awaken the sleeping giant, it might turn out to be a very constructive sleeping giant.

The middle run is an arena of political struggle, in reality of class struggle—provided we have a relevant understanding of who and what are the classes in struggle. Class is more than a matter of occupation or wealth or mode of remuneration for work. Race, gender, and ethnicity are not separate elements from class, nor are they substitute analytic entities. Race, gender, and ethnicity all constitute part of the complex social composition of the classes. But once class is thus redefined, we are indeed in a class struggle. And this is why it makes no political sense at all, for example, for a structure like the WSF to enter into discussions, debates, and social compromises with the components of the World Economic Forum at Davos. We are not searching for the lesser evil here. We are in a struggle over the transition to a different world-system.

So let me try to resume my imagery of what it is we have to do to achieve a left political agenda. We have to define the long-time objectives in meaningful but still very general terms. We do not have, and cannot have, a precise idea of appropriate structures for the better world-system we want to construct. And we shouldn't pretend that we have. That was one of the great historic virtues of Marx. He never claimed he could design what the "communist" world would actually look like in institutional terms.

As for the short run, we have to keep in the forefront of our minds that there is never anything but the lesser evil. And we have to be ready to participate at all moments in pursuing the lesser evil, as it is defined by the oppressed populations of the world. If we do not, we shall have the greater evil, and there always is a greater evil. Work in the short run is primarily defensive. It is to keep things from getting worse. It is to preserve gains already achieved.

But, most important of all, we must remember that in the middle run, the next twenty-five years, we are living in a time of transition. In

this transition, the issue is no longer whether or not we want to sustain a capitalist system, but what will replace it. And we have to work very hard, and very uncompromisingly, to push in the direction of a more democratic and more egalitarian world-system. We cannot construct such a system in this middle run. What we can do is to make possible the multiple political activities that will end up tilting the balance against a richer, better organized, and far less virtuous group—those who wish to maintain or even reinforce another variant of the hierarchical, polarizing systems we have had heretofore. Their system will not be capitalism; it would probably be worse.

We have to remember finally that the outcome of the struggle during the present chaotic transition is not in any fashion inevitable. It will be fashioned by the totality of the actions of everyone on all sides. We have only a fifty-fifty chance of prevailing. One can define fifty-fifty as unfortunately low. I define it as a great opportunity, which we should not fail to try to seize.

### Notes

1. I say “never written” although there exists on the Web a short item called “personal is political autobiography” and in his “online essays and other archives,” there is a section called “autobiographical essays” which contains ten items. But there is no full-fledged autobiography.
2. See “The Global Possibilities, 1990–2025,” in Terence K. Hopkins and Immanuel Wallerstein, coords., *The Age of Transition: Trajectory of the World-System, 1945–2002* (London: Zed, 1997), 226–43; “The Modern World-System in Crisis: Bifurcation, Chaos, and Choices,” chapter 5 of Immanuel Wallerstein, *World-Systems Analysis: An Introduction* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 76–90.
3. I use these terms in the sense that was given to them by Ilya Prigogine. See his *The End of Certainty: Time, Chaos, and the New Laws of Nature* (New York: Free Press, 1996).
4. Eqbal Ahmad, *Confronting Empire: Interviews with David Barsamian* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2002), 152.
5. I have argued this in detail in my *Utopistics: Or, Historical Choices for the Twenty-First Century* (New York: New Press, 1998), especially chapter 1.
6. Immanuel Wallerstein, “A Left Politics in a Time of Transition,” *Monthly Review* (January 2002): 17–23.



Which comes down to saying that the salvation of Europe is not a matter of revolution in methods. It is a matter of the Revolution—the one which, until such time as there is a classless society, will substitute for the narrow tyranny of a dehumanized bourgeoisie the preponderance of the only class which still has a universal mission, because it suffers in its flesh from all the wrongs of history, from all the universal wrongs; the proletariat.

—Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*