

SAMIR AMIN on ARRIGHI , in NLR 2003

I am in total agreement with the comments on Brenner's « Global Turbulence » and « The Boom and the Bubble » made by Giovanni Arrighi (NLR – N° 20, march-april 2003).

Had Brenner made clear that he was studying exclusively the working of the competition between US, Japan and Germany's manufacturing industries, and that this intercapitalist competition did represent one of the elements constitutive of the history of post war world II economic expansion, but only one, and perhaps briefly indicated the other elements (no less important) that he did not integrate in his study, I would have had no reservation with respect to his rich contribution. But that is not the case, since Brenner intended to offer a full explanation of the move of the global system from expansion to crisis basing his argument on the exclusive intercapitalist competition, therefore considered as the major factor which shaped that history.

I share the view of Arrighi that this is not the case. And that the intercapitalist competition operated in a wider frame which must include at least class struggles (not only in the three considered countries but “everywhere”) and the “North-South” (centre-periphery) as well as the “East-West” complex conflicts. I even believe that these factors have been far more important in the shaping of the “world economy” and to a large extent defined the conditions for intercapitalist competition. I do not need to repeat here the arguments developed by Arrighi, which are strongly and clearly formulated.

I wish to go even beyond the conclusion of Arrighi and suggest widening even more the frame needed not only to explain the past and the present, but more important to identify the contradictions of the system with a view to suggesting at least fragments of political efficient strategies to “change the world”.

Arrighi concludes :

“There are no credible aggressive new powers that can provoke the breakdown of the US-centred world system, but the US has even greater capabilities than Britain did a century ago to convert its declining hegemony into an exploitative domination. If the system eventually breaks down, it will be primarily because of US resistance to adjustment and accommodation”.

I fully share that way of identifying the real challenge. I had arrived at that conclusion, as well as surely Arrighi and quite a number of others, at least a decade ago. My reading of the *political* strategy chosen by the US ruling class, as of the 80s (when the decline of the Soviet power appeared clearly irreversible) was that it had *decided* to turn the world system into an exploitative domination (plunder in fact) to its almost exclusive benefit (minimal sharing with the partners of the triad), not to “adjust and accommodate” and therefore *decided* the militarisation of globalisation. That choice, did I say, compels to move out of the restricted domain of “the political economy of the system” into a domain which has to include plain politics, which moves again at the “commanding positions”. In that frame I qualified the “new” global system as being the “empire of chaos” (title of my book first published in 1991) necessarily produced by the strategy of permanent war it implies.

My point here is that we ought not to restrict “historical materialism” to a mere “political economy”. Moreover I suggested here a concept of “under determination” (as opposed to over determination (cf. S. Amin, Spectres of capitalism, MRP 1998, chap3) whereby the internal consistent logics of the various instances (the economic basis, the political culture, the ideological vision) do not necessarily support one another but might be conflicting, making therefore the future “unpredictable”, even if, a posteriori, history can always be “explained”. Hitler had made, *mutatis mutandis*, a similar choice: compensate the economic deficiencies and limits of Germany by enforcing exploitation through the use of the war. Yet this choice of Hitler cannot be explained by merely the tools of “political economy” (inter imperialist competition in that case). The political-cultural-ideological dimensions became here decisive. Same with G. W. Bush’s choice to day: it cannot be explained if not fully integrating what I call “the American ideology”. The hateful discourse of the US establishment vis a vis France shows that the American ruling class has perfectly understood that the political dimension of the contradiction is now dominant and that it is on its ground that the successful pursuing of that criminal policy is endangered.

That choice operates in the frame of a global imperialist system which, I submit, has qualitatively changed from what it was in the previous stages of its long history.

I submit that imperialist powers do constitute to day an integrated “collective imperialism” of the triad, and offered some hypothesis which could explain that change, focussing on the qualitative change of the level of centralisation of capital. If that assumption is not totally non sense, then the *economic* dimension of the inter capitalist competition has lost much of its vigor (but surely never disappears), and the main dimension of the “international” conflicts is located elsewhere (I submit in the domain of political culture – not “culture” as the” fashion suggests-, which includes perspectives of class struggles).

I also suggest that the “advantages” (“monopolies”) of which the center (s) benefit in their ruling of the global system being no more the “monopoly” of industry, are transferred to other areas (what I called the “five monopolies” : reinforcing technological monopolies, plunder of natural resources of the planet, control of global finance, control of communications, monopoly of mass destructive arms). That explains what Arrighi noted – very correctly – that while a number of peripheries are industrializing at high speed, they do not “catch up” in terms of income. That also is related to the question of “the financierisation of the system” which I analyse as a symptom of crisis not a new stabilised possible stage. My views on this problem, sharing to a large extent those expressed earlier by Arrighi, but with some reservations, have been expressed (cf. S. Amin, RIPE summer 1996).

Second letter (july 2003)

I have received and read your papers. Of course I agree. As you know , I have always considered that capitalist global expansion , at any stage of its development , is polarizing as a result of the functioning of the logics of accumulation. I submitted that the global system at its previous stage was governed by the industrial " monopoly" of the centre. Since the peripheries have moved into industrialisation , this monopoly has been gradually replaced by what I identified as the " five new monopolies" of the centre which make industrialisation unable to achieve " catching up". My argument , as you know , is based on the concept of the "globalized law of value" , that I derive but distinguish from the law of value " in general" , i.e. at its highest level of abstraction . You will find this argument in "Capitalism in the age of globalization" (ZED) , p 3 and 4 (the present world and the 5 monopolies of the centre). More in my books in french . My argument completes yours. I also attach a short paper , in french, on the "technological revolution" and the law of value.



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