

SAMIR AMIN ON GIOVANNI ARRIGHI

1

Giovanni Arrighi, un éminent analyste de la mondialisation moderne

Né en Italie, décédé le 18 Juin à l'âge de 72 ans, Giovanni Arrighi compte parmi les plus éminents analystes critiques du système mondial contemporain.

Echappant à l'arrestation dans la Rhodésie coloniale pour s'être rangé aux côtés du mouvement de libération, Arrighi a approfondi durant son séjour en Tanzanie l'analyse de la dépendance du continent. Il a poursuivi ses travaux sur le système global contemporain au Centre Fernand Braudel de l'Université de Binghamton aux Etats Unis, dont le directeur était Immanuel Wallerstein, puis à l'Université John Hopkins à Baltimore.

Dès la fin des années 1970, Arrighi était de ceux – avec Franck, Wallerstein et Amin – qui considéraient que le capitalisme était entré dans une phase de longue crise systémique, marquée par la chute des taux de croissance dans ses centres dominants (et le système n'a jamais depuis retrouvé les taux antérieurs). L'hypothèse précoce que le capital réagirait par des délocalisations massives a été confirmée par la suite. Arrighi associait cette crise au déclin de l'hégémonie des Etats Unis. Ses points de vue ont été publiés dans deux ouvrages collectifs, *La crise, quelle crise ?* (Maspero 1982) et *Le grand tumulte* (La Découverte, 1991). Analysant les mouvements sociaux associés à la restructuration du système global, Arrighi portait son attention sur les bouleversements du mouvement ouvrier qu'elle impliquait.

Arrighi a par la suite élargi l'ampleur de ses analyses, dans ses deux ouvrages les plus récents (*The long XXth century ; Adam Smith in Beijing*). Arrighi, qui ne confondait pas capitalisme et « économie de marché », savait intégrer la longue durée dans sa vision de la formation du présent. Il analysait donc le capitalisme historique (« européen » d'origine) comme le produit d'une série de vagues successives antérieures, parties de Chine pour parvenir en Europe par le canal des villes marchandes de l'Italie de la Renaissance.

2

Some personal notes

I have met Giovanni frequently in the early 1970's in Dar Es Salam which I visited often in that glorious time of the liberation movements and where I did organise a number of seminars (all of them actively attended by Giovanni) on what I qualified "the awakening (or the revival) of the South" (Bandung's era for Asia and Africa).

My views – which Giovanni shared – were that the major changes in the World (capitalist) system had started to be initiated by the peripheries not accepting anymore their "fate" and that – irrespective of the limits of the social and political systems of Asia and Africa, that we were trying to be aware of and severely analyse with a view to pushing them ahead – this decisive role in the shaping of the future would continue. During the last years I had some fortunate opportunities to discuss again these issues. We were not convinced at all by the dominant discourse of capitalism – end- of – history, laughed at it, and were expecting its breakdown (I personally wrote in 2004 that financialisation was the Achille's heel of that

unstable globalisation and that a financial breakdown should occur “before ten years” – Giovanni knew that, which we discussed).

After the Dar period I met again Giovanni often in Italy, in the times of the Cultural Revolution. We both shared our support to Maoism and the CR, and never moved “back” from these positions.

Giovanni (as well as Frank and Wallerstein) had the benefit of reading other languages than English. Therefore Giovanni was aware of my earlier writings (I am six years older than him, and if that difference loses meaning with age it of course simply “counts” earlier). He knew – we discussed it at large – my views of “*Accumulation on a World Scale*”, written in 1955 (even if published in English only in the 70’s!) and he knew the “Summary” I wrote (in French) as a pamphlet for the 68’s events.

This is its translation:

“*Accumulation on a World Scale* offers a critique of the current theories of development. The author denies that the present “under developed countries” are similar to what were the developed countries at an earlier stage. The “under development” of some and the development of others are intimately inter connected through the integration of all in the same world system, which produces asymmetric relations between the dominating centres and the dominated peripheries. Instead of the current theory of development economics what is needed is a theory of accumulation on a world scale, relating the mechanisms of accumulation in the centres and the peripheries” (my translation).

What Giovanni very powerfully qualified “accumulation by dispossession”, was at that time expressed in another way “continuous primitive accumulation”. I did consider that not only in Southern Africa the pattern was obvious but also in other parts of the continent in other forms (my theses on the three patterns of Capitalist expansion in Africa, presented in the early 70’s in Dar).

The awakening of the South is precisely based on the rejection of this continuous “dispossession”. We had started discussing the probable outcomes of the “China’s revival” and of a possible new South front against imperialist globalisation. I am deeply sad that this debate is now stopped.

3

Marxian economics or historical materialism ?

The so called “Brenner debate” offered a good opportunity to clarify this fundamental question : is “Marxian economics” the tool that allows understanding the development of “actually existing” capitalism ? In this respect 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 two decades 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 the choice that the US ruling class establishment has made at least since two decades : it cannot be explained if not fully integrating what I call “the American ideology”. The discourse of the US establishment shows that this 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). 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 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 . This argument has been developed in "*Capitalism in the age of globalization*" (ZED) , p 3 and 4 (the present world and the 5 monopolies of the centre). My argument completes that of Arrighi..

4

The globalized law of value

The subtitle of *Capital*—“A Critique of Political Economy”—does not mean a critique of a “bad” (Ricardian) political economy, with a view to replacing it with a “good” (Marxian) one. It is rather a critique of so-called economic science, an exposure of its true nature (as what the bourgeoisie has to say about its own practice); and so of its epistemological status, an exposure of its limitations, and an invitation to realize that this alleged science, claimed to be independent of historical materialism, cannot possess such independence. Political economy is the outward form assumed by historical materialism (the class struggle) under capitalism. On the logical plane historical materialism is prior to economics, but class struggle under capitalism does not take place in a vacuum: it operates on an economic basis, and shapes laws that appear economic in character.

My thesis is: (a) that historical materialism constitutes the essence of Marxism, and therefore (b) that the epistemological status of the economic laws of capitalism is such

that they are subordinate to the laws of historical materialism; (c) that under the capitalist mode of production economic laws possess a theoretical status different from that which they possess under precapitalist modes, and even (d) that, strictly speaking, economic laws are to be found only under the capitalist mode; (e) that the economic laws of capitalism do indeed exist objectively; and, finally, (f) that these laws are governed, in the last analysis, by the law of value.

Thus, in my view, the class struggle under capitalism in general, and in the imperialist world system in particular, operates on a definite economic basis and, in its turn, changes that basis.

My readings in Marx certainly brought considerable intellectual fulfillment and convinced me of the power of his thought. Still, I was left unsatisfied. For I was asking a central question, that of the “underdevelopment” of contemporary Asian and African societies, and I found no answer in Marx. Far from “abandoning” Marx and counting him “outdated,” I simply came to the conclusion that his opus had remained incomplete. Marx had not finished the opus that he had set out to complete, and that included not integrating the “global dimension” of capitalism into his analysis. So I have tried to do so. The central axis of the conclusions reached by my efforts is defined by the formulation of a “law of globalized value,” coherent, on the one hand, with the bases of the law of value proper to capitalism as discovered by Marx and, on the other, with the realities of unequal globalized development.

My major contribution concerns the *passage from the law of value to the law of globalized value*, based on the hierarchical structuring—itsself globalized—of the prices of labor-power around its value. Linked to the management practices governing access to natural resources, this globalization of value constitutes the basis for *imperialist rent*. This, I claim, orders the unfolding of really existing capitalism/imperialism’s contradictions and of the conflicts linked to them, so that classes and nations are imbricated, in their struggles and clashes, in all the complex articulation, specific and concrete, of those contradictions. I claim that our reading of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries can be nothing other than that of the emergence—or of the “reawakening”—of peoples and nations peripheric to the globalized capitalist/imperialist system.

My theoretical analysis of the really existent globalized capitalist system starts from the law of value formulated by Marx in Book I of *Capital*. There is no other possible point of departure, because without the concept of value there is no meaning to that of the accumulation of capital—and so we cannot skip over this detour through value in favor of a direct grasp of reality—which is implied by a positivist/empiricist methodology, as revealed through observed prices.

The analysis that I am putting forward thus looks next at the three stages in the transformation of values: (1) into “prices of production”; (2) into “market prices” (oligopolistic prices, in contemporary capitalism); and (3) into “globalized prices” (in the globalized imperialist system).

The first of these transformations, taken up in the first chapters of Volume III of *Capital*, is indispensable to grasping the meaning of the market alienation that governs economic and social life under capitalism and to giving to the laws ruling its systemic reproduction their true stature.

The second of these transformations, that of prices of production into “market prices,” had been partially treated by Marx, also in Volume III of *Capital*, in the instance, among others, when he came to consider the distribution of surplus-value in regard to agrarian landownership. We have next to consider the deformations of the price system linked to the emergence of oligopolies/monopolies and above all to take fully into account the gigantic transformation of the system of expanded equilibrium resulting, after the First, but above all after the Second World War, from the accelerated expansion of a third department—of absorption of surplus surplus-value. Baran and Sweezy, with the concept of surplus that they put forward, replied to the challenge and unhesitatingly extended and enriched Marxian theory. I claim that those Marxists who still refuse to recognize the central importance of Baran and Sweezy’s contribution lack the means to put forth an effective critique of contemporary capitalism. Their “Marxism” thus remains confined to exegeses of Marx’s texts.

The central object of my reflections has been the third transformation, which allows us to go from the law of value, taken at its highest level of abstraction (the capitalist mode of production), to what I have called the law of globalized value, which is operative on the scale of the really extant polarizing system of capitalism/imperialism. It is only this transformation that allows us to take measure of the imperialist rent which is at the origin of the polarization deepened and reproduced by the globalized unfolding of capitalism.

It is impossible to “understand the world” by a realistic analysis of really existing capitalism outside the framework traced by the treatment of these transformations of value. Equally, a strategy aiming to “change the world” can be based only on these foundations. As against this, the positivist/empiricist method of vulgar economics allows us neither to “understand the world” and to grasp the nature of the challenges confronting workers and peoples, nor, *a fortiori*, to “change” it. Furthermore, that vulgar economics does not seek to go beyond capitalism, which it sees as the “end of history.” It seeks only to legitimize the basic principles of capitalism and to show how to manage it.

The current crisis revolves altogether around different possible developments of the social and international relationships that govern the form of the law of value, under the combined effects of popular struggles in the central and peripheral societies of contemporary capitalism and of struggles between dominant imperialist societies and those of the dominated periphery—struggles that call into question the continued dominance of what I call “the latter capitalism of the generalized, financialized, and globalized oligopolies.”