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AMY AUSTIN-HOLMES, STEFAN SCHMALZ
From Africa to Asia: The Intellectual Trajectory of
Giovanni Arrighi¹

As chance would have it, this introduction is being written during the Arab Spring of 2011. The revolutionary uprisings which are currently shaking the Middle East and North Africa may be the single most momentous events in the region since what Samir Amin refers to in this volume as “the glorious time of the liberation movements.” As Giovanni Arrighi spent the better part of the 1960s in Tanzania and the former Rhodesia, he lived through and – sympathized with – the anti-colonial struggles in Africa and other parts of the global South. It is a shame that he is not alive today to witness the uprisings that, within a matter of weeks, have toppled decades-long-entrenched and US-supported dictators in Tunisia and Egypt. The outcome of the ongoing upheaval is uncertain, and yet it is clear that the sound of millions of voices chanting “al-sha‘b/ya-rîd/is-qât/al-ni-zâm” (“the people demand the downfall of the regime”) has resonated far beyond Cairo and Tunis: It is again a glorious moment of liberation.

In this editorial we provide a brief overview of Giovanni Arrighi’s life work, while also introducing the articles to this volume, each of which represents original contributions by the authors, but also way stations along Arrighi’s intellectual trajectory. We begin in Africa. Giovanni Arrighi accepted a position at the University College of Rhodesia and Nyasaland (UCRN) in 1963, after having finished his PhD in economics at the University of Milan. He described his experience there as a “true intellectual rebirth” which triggered a “long march from neo-classical economics to comparative-historical sociology” (Arrighi 2009: 22). In one of his earliest publications, *The Political Economy of Rhodesia* published in 1966, Arrighi challenged the dominant modernization paradigm head-on: rather than seeing the transformation of peasants into wage laborers as necessary for capitalist development,

Arrighi argued that the full proletarianization of the Rhodesian peasantry in fact created problems for capital accumulation (Arrighi 1966: 39ff). As long as the subsistence-based peasant economy survived, it could subsidize capitalist development by allowing workers to be paid less than a “living wage.” Once they became fully proletarianized, it became more difficult to exploit labor.

Together with nine other lecturers at UCRN, Giovanni was arrested for political activities and deported in July of 1966. From Rhodesia he then went to Dar es Salaam, where he met intellectuals such as Samir Amin, Immanuel Wallerstein, John Saul, and Luisa Passerini, as well as activists from the Black Power movement in the United States. In Dar es Salaam he continued to work on the problem of African development.

In his contribution, Samir Amin gives a broad overview of the academic and political concerns that he shared with Arrighi. Of all the contributors to this journal, Samir Amin knew Giovanni Arrighi the longest: their scholarly exchange, based on mutual friendship and respect, spanned almost four decades. Perhaps most fundamentally, both Amin and Arrighi agreed that the so-called ‘underdevelopment’ of some countries and the development of others was based on interdependence. As Amin underlines in his article: “Instead of the current theory of development economics what is needed is a theory of accumulation on a world scale.” This was why, as Giovanni Arrighi would later articulate, the industrialization of a number of peripheral and semi-peripheral countries did not result in their “catching up” in terms of income (Arrighi et al. 2003b).

After almost six years in Africa, Arrighi returned to Italy in 1969, during the height of the student and labor movements. Together with Romano Madera and Luisa Passerini, Arrighi founded the Gruppo Gramsci and began developing the idea of *autonomia operaia* – the intellectual autonomy of the working class, which which was picked up on and taken in a different direction by Antonio Negri. The intention was not to replace the unions or political parties, but rather as students and intellectuals to support the development of workers’ autonomy. In his interview with David Harvey, Arrighi’s explanation of how he engaged with both the national liberation struggles in Africa as well as the working-class struggles in Italy was characteristic of his humility: “The two experiences had in common the fact that, in both, I had very good relations with the broader movements. They wanted to know on what basis I was participating in their struggle. My position was: ‘I’m not

going to tell you what to do, because you know your situation much better than I ever will. But I am better placed to understand the wider context in which it develops” (Arrighi 2009: 67). Specifically, the workers in Italy were being told that they should give up their struggle due to the economic crisis of the early 1970s. This prompted his article “Towards a Theory of Capitalist Crisis” (ibid.: 67, 1978b).

In Italy he also collaborated with Fortunata Piselli, who contributed the second article in the volume. His research in Italy was innovative for several reasons. First, rather than applying European models to the periphery as many development scholars were inclined to do at the time, he investigated to what extent his research in Rhodesia was applicable to Italy. Second, Arrighi and Piselli found three different relations of production in the same peripheral region of southern Italy. Instead of a linear progression from one to the other, they existed simultaneously. Furthermore, of these three relations of production, the path of development where labor was fully proletarianized (the Crotonese) was also the least stable. Due to the extreme polarization of the class structure, the Crotonese was shaken by an explosion of labor unrest after the end of World War Two which had no parallel in other parts of Calabria. As Piselli concludes: “To retain their viability, capitalist relations of production in a peripheral context must either develop a symbiotic relation with subsistence activities, or supplement the invisible hand of the market with the visible hands of the repressive apparatus, or both.”

In their paper Çağlar Keyder and Zafer Yenal, a colleague and graduate student of Arrighi’s from Binghamton, also analyze the issue of labor supplies and agrarian transformation. They find that semi-proletarianization rather than full proletarianization was the norm in Turkey, and persisted throughout the postwar period despite various developmentalist projects. The authors distinguish between three patterns of proletarianization: semi-proletarianization by informal means, part-lifetime proletarianization under globalization, and dispossession by force, which applies in particular to the Kurdish population after the 1980s. In other words, most urban households maintained ties to the countryside, with the dispossessed and deruralized Kurdish population being an exception.

In 1979, Arrighi moved to the United States. There he joined the Fernand Braudel Center at the State University of New York at Binghamton, a center that would become synonymous with world-systems analysis. During his

period at Binghamton, Arrighi collaborated with scholars such as Immanuel Wallerstein, Terence Hopkins, and Beverly Silver. His research focused on different theoretical problems related to world systems analysis. One of his major areas of concern was the remaining income gap between core, semi-periphery, and periphery (Arrighi/Drangel 1986; Arrighi 1990; Arrighi et al. 2003b). For instance, in an article in *Review*, coauthored with Jessica Drangel (1986), he focused on the stratification of the capitalist world economy in core, semiperipheral, and peripheral zones. By empirically comparing the position of the most important states in the world economy, the authors identified that 95% of these states “were in 1975/83 still on or within the boundaries of the zone in which they were in 1938/50” (ibid.: 44). Accordingly, the global income distribution remained unchanged even after half a century of developmentalist projects. Moreover, the catch-up processes of several nations such as the East Asian states during that time did not “significantly affect the differentials in economic command that separate the different tiers of the world economy” (ibid.: 59). Arrighi and Drangel also challenged Wallerstein’s notion of semiperiphery and criticized it as too ambiguous, because it refers to both an intermediate position in the division of labor as well as in the interstate system (ibid.: 15ff). They introduced instead an alternative concept of semiperiphery which exclusively refers to economic activities: arguing that semiperipheral states enclose within their territory a mix of core-peripheral economic activities (ibid.: 23). Even though some of them manage to upgrade the technological and industrial structure, the single states are embedded in an overall zero-sum game-structure that implies a downgrading of other semiperipheral states. As a result, a system-wide rise of semiperipheral states to the core zone seems to be impossible.

In his contribution, Thomas Reifer, a former student of Arrighi, refers to this “developmentalist illusion” (Arrighi 1990) when he looks at the recent growing divide of world income equality. He argues that the debt crisis in the early 1980s followed by the breakdown of Soviet socialism led to a bifurcation in the world system. While in particular the East Asian region significantly benefitted from the change in the system, in other regions such as Latin America, Sub-Saharan Africa, and Eastern Europe, the share of the average global GDP per capita fell dramatically. From this perspective, East Asia’s rise tends to be the exception from the rule derived from Arrighi’s notion of semiperiphery and worldwide income distribution. Due to this

singularity, the East Asian experience became one of Arrighi's major research interests throughout the last twenty years of his life (Arrighi 2009: 78f).

In the late eighties, Arrighi began to work on a book to trace the trajectory of American hegemony. His aim was to illustrate its development from America's rise in the late 19th century until its current decline. He hereby could build on his earlier works on the nature of capitalist crises and imperialism (Arrighi 1978a, 1982). However, Arrighi began to widen the temporal scope of his research, mainly due to his observation of recurrent patterns in capitalist development that go all the way back to the 14th century (Arrighi 2009: 73ff). The result was his opus *The Long Twentieth Century*, which was published in 1994. Arrighi himself considers *The Long Twentieth Century* as the first part of an unintended trilogy which eventually also comprised his more recent works *Chaos and Governance* (co-authored with Beverly Silver in 1999a) and *Adam Smith in Beijing* (2007). On a theoretical level, Arrighi challenges the notion of capitalist development developed by both Immanuel Wallerstein and classical Marxists such as Robert Brenner. Instead, he follows Braudel's conceptualization of capitalism as being primarily defined by finance capital, and as having historically developed from the city state system as the incubator for the emergence of the system of nation states. As a result, he develops a separate variant of world systems analysis, which completely differs from Wallerstein's or Gunder Frank's approach.

Arrighi's theory is characterized by at least three central features. Firstly, one of Arrighi's main theses is that historical capitalism is defined by a recurrent pattern of systemic cycles of accumulation that follows Marx' general formula of capital (MCM'): "The central aspect of this pattern is the alternation of epochs of material expansion (MC phases of capital accumulation) with phases of financial rebirth and expansion (CM' phases). In phases of material expansion money capital 'sets in motion' an increasing mass of commodities [...] and in phases of financial expansion an increasing mass of money capital 'sets itself free' from its commodity form, and accumulation proceeds through financial deals" (Arrighi 1994: 6). In other words, phases dominated by the expansion of productive capital are superseded by periods of capitalist accumulation structured by mobile finance capital and vice versa. Historically, four such cycles can be identified: a Genoese-Iberian cycle, from the 15th until the early 16th century; a Dutch cycle, from the late 16th through most of the 18th century; a British cycle, from

the second half of the 18th century until the early 20th century; and, finally, a US cycle which began in the late 19th century and is now in its financial phase. Accordingly, the different cycles overlap at their beginnings and ends: what appears as a starting point in one place (Holland, England, the United States) is at the same time the result of long periods of capital accumulation in previously established centers. Hence, during financial expansion a fundamental spatial reorganization of the capitalist world system takes place. Also, financialization is not a new phenomenon of the late 20th century, as some Marxist scholars have argued, but a recurrent feature in the historical development of capitalism. In fact, it is a “sign of autumn” (Braudel 1984: 246) of the predominant systemic regime of accumulation.

Secondly, Arrighi (1994: 33f) distinguishes between a territorial and a capitalist logic of global capitalism. The logic of “capitalism” as the accumulation of capital, and of “territorialism” as the accumulation of power are intertwined. However, from Arrighi’s (2007: 229) point of view, they do not refer to the “accumulation of power and capital *within states*, but to the accumulation of power and capital in an evolving *system of states*. Global capitalism expands in the system of states and thereby follows the formula MTM’ (money – territory – more money).” Consequently, for capitalists, territory is a means to accumulate additional capital: “Capitalist rulers tend to increase their power by piling up wealth within a smaller container and increase the size of the container only if it is justified by the requirements of the accumulation of capital” (Arrighi 1994: 33). However, on a systemic level, the capitalist world system expands continuously and, therefore, depends on spatial fixes of ever increasing scope and scale. Reflecting on this need, Arrighi follows Anthony Giddens’ (1987) definition of the state as a “container of power” that houses the “headquarters of capital” (Arrighi 2007: 235). Each systemic cycle of accumulation is controlled by larger state-business-complexes. Thus, there is a historical “progression from a city-state and a cosmopolitan business diaspora (the Genoese); to a proto-national state (United Provinces) and its joint-stock chartered companies; to a multinational state (United Kingdom) and its globe-encircling tributary empire; to a continent-sized national state (United States) and its world-encompassing system of transnational corporations, military bases, and institutions of world governance” (ibid.: 235).

Finally, Arrighi has a specific notion of capitalist crises. In an early debate with Amin, Frank, and Wallerstein, he emphasized (1982: 71f) the

relation between the economic crisis of the early 1970s and the decline of US hegemony. More recently, Arrighi inserted the crisis of the 1970s into his theoretical framework and re-interpreted it, together with the Vietnam War, as the “signal crisis” of US hegemony (Arrighi 2007: 178). According to Arrighi, the MC-phase of a systemic cycle of accumulation ends through such a breakdown and the CM’ phase starts due to a system-wide aggressive competition for liquid capital. Through this, the hegemonic power is able to accumulate new power resources in the financial sector. However, in the long run, the growth of the financial sector and the neglect of the industrial base go along with the emergence of new production centers in other regions. The structure of the world market is eventually shattered by an even bigger financial crisis and the hegemonic power is further weakened. It is the “terminal crisis” of a structural cycle of hegemony and the starting point of a new cycle of accumulation. Consequently, today’s financial crisis might be interpreted as the “the terminal crisis of US financial centrality and hegemony” (Arrighi 2009: 90).

Predicting US decline, Arrighi spent the last years of his life working on the current hegemonic transition. As early as the first half of the 1990s, he had begun to analyze East Asia’s rise in the world system and the possibility of the region replacing the US as a new center of global capital accumulation. In *Chaos and Governance*, Giovanni Arrighi and Beverly Silver (1999c: 35) focused on a comparison of the present hegemonic transition with earlier transitions. The chapters of the book analyzed different aspects of these transformations such as the social origins of world hegemonies or the relation between business and governmental organizations of hegemonic powers. One of the most important results of the book was the insight that one of the true novelties of the current situation is a “bifurcation of military and financial capabilities” that “decreases the likelihood of an outbreak of war among the system’s most powerful units” (Arrighi/Silver 1999b: 275). In previous transitions, the hegemon was challenged by a rising power which possessed both a more robust military and economic capacity. Today, there is no military challenger of the United States. In fact, the US remains the dominant military power, but at the same time, it has become the largest debtor nation in world history and is highly dependent on East Asian creditors. These findings raised further questions that had to be addressed. For instance, for the first time in global capitalism, the West is being challenged

by non-Western states. Thus, Arrighi was interested in the East Asian development model as well as in the historical framework of Asian ascent (Arrighi et al. 2003a; Arrighi 2007: 309ff).

Finally, Arrighi identified China as the major driver and the potential winner of the current hegemonic transition (ibid.: 277-308). Reinterpreting Adam Smith and Kaoru Sugihara, Arrighi put forward the thesis that China as well as most of East Asia went through an ‘industrious revolution’ “as a market-based development that had no inherent tendency to generate the capital- and energy-intensive developmental path opened up by Britain” (ibid.: 33). Instead, China followed a highly labor-intensive and inward-oriented growth model that finally merged with the Western growth model. The result is a model which is very close to a Smithian market-based economy. Constant over-accumulation, cut-throat competition among Chinese capitalists resulting in downward pressures on the rate of profit, the specific role of collectively-owned Town and Village Enterprises and a high level of state control, all led to a situation where rapid economic development has been achieved (ibid.: 359ff). From Arrighi’s point of view, China did not only significantly gain from the wane of US power during the Iraq war, but, today, also offers a viable alternative in global political economy to the US. Due to its foreign policy of non-interference and South-South cooperation, China’s rise might lead to a “Beijing Consensus” that results in “the formation of a new and more effective Bandung – i.e., a new version of the Third World alliance of the 1950s and 1960s better suited than the old at countering the economic and political subordination of Southern to Northern states in an age of unprecedented global economic integration” (Arrighi/Zhang 2010). Furthermore, Arrighi considers China’s rise to be much more subversive of the global hierarchy of wealth “than all previous East Asian economic ‘miracles’ put together.” Whereas the rise of the so-called East Asian tigers represented cases of upward mobility within an otherwise stable hierarchy, the rise of a country representing one-fifth of the world’s population could fundamentally change the pyramidal structure of global inequality (Arrighi 2010).

In his paper, Walden Bello discusses the thesis regarding Chinese ascent and the state of China’s economic performance. Bello challenges Arrighi’s position, since he concludes that China’s economic success has been built on low wages and the marginalization of the countryside in favor of a strong export orientation. In addition, even after the huge stimulus package to

counter the global economic crisis of 2008, the export-led growth model forms an obstacle for further growth that has yet to be overcome. To make matters worse, the retreat to export-led growth in several world regions might even lead to a global deflationary process caused by higher competition among the world's largest economies.

The guest editors of this journal knew Giovanni during the later part of his life. Stefan spent the fall 2008 semester at the Sociology Department of Johns Hopkins as a postdoc and Amy studied under Arrighi and Silver from 2002–2008, who both served as her PhD advisers. In August 2008 Giovanni was diagnosed with cancer. On June 18, 2009 he passed away at the age of 71. He lived a full life and inspired many people. The contributors to this volume have described him as a comrade, a dear friend, an invaluable mentor, and “like a father.” In her tribute to him after his death, Amy described what *The Long Twentieth Century* meant to her: “I never told Giovanni this, but for me reading the book was like gazing upon a Breughelian painting: you could see the passage of time, the structural changes, the hands of the laborers and the jewels of the king, every minutiae of every detail could absorb one for hours, and with a theory to explain it all. It was dazzling” (Holmes 2009). It is with admiration and gratitude that we dedicate this journal to his legacy.

1 We thank Beverly Silver for her comments on the first draft of this editorial.

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