

Afterword: Reflections on “Capitalist development in hostile environments”

Beverly J. Silver 

Department of Sociology, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, Maryland

Correspondence

Beverly J. Silver, Department of Sociology, Johns Hopkins University, 3400 North Charles Street Mergenthaler Hall 513, Baltimore, MD 21218.
Email: silver@jhu.edu

Abstract

This afterword places the long essay “Capitalist Development in Hostile Environments” in the context of Giovanni Arrighi’s overall intellectual trajectory. It highlights several crucial theoretical and methodological contributions to debates, including on the relationship between proletarianization and capitalist development, and between labour migration, class formation, and class conflict; on the interrelationship between “internal” and “external” processes in the explanation of social change; and on the distinction between economic progress, “catching-up” development, and popular welfare. It concludes with a brief discussion of ways in which Arrighi’s later theorization of the *longue durée* evolution of historical capitalism provides a robust conceptual framework for ongoing studies of proletarianization and capitalist development.

KEYWORDS

activist-intellectual, class conflict, Giovanni Arrighi, method, peripheralization, proletarianization

1 | INTRODUCTION

Giovanni Arrighi and Fortunata Piselli’s “Capitalist Development in Hostile Environments,” published in 1987, marks the midway point in Arrighi’s intellectual trajectory, almost exactly halfway between the publication of his first book (*The Political Economy of Rhodesia* in 1966) and the publication of his final book (*Adam Smith in Beijing* in 2007). It can also be seen in many ways as a substantive midpoint in Arrighi’s intellectual development, as it builds on insights gained from his time in Rhodesia/Zimbabwe and Tanzania (1963–1969), his involvement in the mass upsurge of labour unrest in Italy via the *Gruppo Gramsci* (1969–1973), and a decade of engagement in the intense *debates* around the development of world-systems analysis taking place at the Fernand Braudel Center (at the State University of New York Binghamton, USA) beginning in 1978. At the same time, the article predates Arrighi’s theorization

of the *longue durée* evolution of historical capitalism as a succession of “long centuries” or “systemic cycles of accumulation”—a theory that he introduced and developed over the course of the second half of his intellectual trajectory—from *The Long Twentieth Century* (1994) and *Chaos and Governance in the Modern World System* (1999) to *Adam Smith in Beijing* (2007).

Arrighi would occasionally lament that “Capitalist Development in Hostile Environments” was largely overlooked. He would be happy to know that it is getting fresh attention—in this special issue of *Journal of Agrarian Change*, via the international conference held in Calabria in June 2017, and with its publication in Italian as a book with a new introduction by Marta Petrusiewicz and epilogue by Fortunata Piselli (Arrighi & Piselli, 2017). To be sure, Arrighi and Piselli’s (1987) article has had a major impact on many of Arrighi’s students (and the students of his students)—some of whom are authors of the articles in this special issue. It also had a significant impact on Philip McMichael, who read “Capitalist Development in Hostile Environments” as a model of the research strategy of “incorporating comparisons.”¹

Nevertheless, it is also true that the piece’s powerful interventions in a long list of scholarly and political debates—including the hot debate between Wallerstein and Brenner—went largely unnoticed. One can speculate on reasons, but in part, it might be because the article was (consciously) written in a nonpolemical fashion. Due to the understated style, it is easy to miss its contributions to a wide range of debates.² The Introduction to this special issue (Bair et al., this issue) and the other articles in this collection do an excellent job of distilling key elements of what they call an *Arrighian* approach to agrarian political economy. In what follows, I touch on a few of the article’s contributions that have been particularly significant for my own thinking, placing them in the context of Arrighi’s overall intellectual trajectory.

2 | PROLETARIANIZATION, CLASS CONSCIOUSNESS, AND CLASS CONFLICT

Arrighi arrived at the University of Calabria in 1973, at the tail end of a major wave of labour and social unrest in Italy. For a “brief but intense period,” writes Marta Petrusiewicz (2017), the newly established University of Calabria became a space for “experimentation, theoretical reflection and research,” informed by the raging political debates of the time. Upon arrival, Arrighi established a research group and seminar—composed of faculty, students, and independent intellectuals—focused on processes of proletarianization, migration, and class conflict in the Calabrian context. This new project was profoundly shaped by insights gained from his research and writing on proletarianization, migration, and class formation in Rhodesia/Zimbabwe (Arrighi, 1970).

The initial direction of the Calabria research was also profoundly shaped by Arrighi’s involvement as an activist intellectual enmeshed, from 1969 to 1973, in the wave of labour unrest in the factories in northern Italy. The main protagonists of these workers’ struggles were migrants from southern Italy, including large numbers of migrants from Calabria, who, in previous decades, had constituted a supply of cheap and docile labour helping to fuel industrial expansion in the north of Italy and Europe. This prompted one of the animating questions of the Calabria research: What explained the transformation of the Calabrian migrants from cheap labour to vanguards of labour militancy?

In answering this question, Arrighi and Piselli point us away from making a simple association between wage labour, proletarian status, and working-class consciousness/conflict. To be sure, sometimes they “all go together” as

¹Personal communication with P. McMichael in 1990 in Ithaca, New York (USA). Although reference to Arrighi and Piselli’s essay fell out of the published version of McMichael’s (1990) article, he saw their synchronic analysis of the variation among the three roads of agrarian transformation in Calabria, as corresponding to what he called the “singular form of incorporating comparison,” whereas their diachronic analysis of the emergence, unfolding and eventual collapse of the three roads from the mid-19th to the mid-20th century, corresponded to what he called the “multiple form of incorporating comparison.”

²Arrighi (2009) begins to make some of these implicit interventions more explicit in the retrospective interview on his intellectual trajectory published in *New Left Review*. See also Arrighi (1998).

was the case in the Crotonese in the late-19th and first-half of the 20th century—the area of Calabria, where capitalist latifundia predominated. Characterized by “a landed bourgeoisie with a tight monopoly over the means of production and a landless proletariat with access to the means of subsistence only through the sale of labor power,” participation in wage labour was “the expression of the *full proletarianization* of the formerly peasant household.” Full proletarianization, in turn, went together with extreme polarization of the social structure, impoverishment of the majority of the population, and “an endemic state of class struggle” between the landed bourgeoisie and the landless proletariat (1987, pp. 653–654).

But in the same historical period, “next door” in the Cosentino region of Calabria, wage labour took on a totally different meaning. Participation in urban-industrial wage labour through migration was aimed at temporarily “raiding the money economy” for resources to be saved for the purchase of small plots of land and other means of production. As such, in the Cosentino—the area that Arrighi and Piselli (1987, pp. 652, 656–661) dubbed as the “migrant-peasant (Swiss) Road”—participation in wage labour facilitated the consolidation and reproduction of a relatively prosperous small-scale peasantry, employing primarily family labour and engaged primarily in subsistence agriculture. Here, wage labour, Arrighi and Piselli argued, was more an expression of a process of *petty accumulation* than *proletarianization*. Moreover, rather than being associated with extreme polarization and endemic class conflict (as was the case in the Crotonese), participation in wage labour via migration facilitated a decades-long process of “leveling of the social structure” and the withering away of class conflict in the Cosentino.

Likewise, Arrighi and Piselli (1987, p. 720) break away from an assumed correlation between wage labour, proletarian status, and working-class consciousness/conflict in order to explain the transformation of Calabrian migrants from “cheap labour” to vanguards of labour militancy in the urban-industrial sites to which they migrated. As long as the migrants saw their participation in urban-industrial wage labour as temporary—as a strategy of petty accumulation that would allow them (sooner or later) to purchase land in their home area and exit from the wage labour force (as was the case for a significant portion of the migrants from the late-19th century to the mid-1960s)—they tolerated a pace and conditions of work “that could hardly be sustainable over a full lifetime.” However, in the post-war decades, as a complex set of transformations in capital accumulation on a global and national scale led to the collapse of subsistence agriculture in the Cosentino, and a corresponding collapse of the migrant-peasant strategy of petty accumulation via labour migration, wage labour took on an entirely new meaning. Although earlier waves of migrants did not expect wage labour to provide them with full-lifetime status and subsistence, “this was precisely what the bulk of migrants of the late 1960s expected and did not get.” It is in this context, that they became the protagonists of “a wave of labor unrest of unprecedented spread, intensity, and length” (Arrighi & Piselli, 1987, pp. 720–727).

This approach to understanding major waves of labour unrest can be traced back to Arrighi's (1970, p. 224) analysis of “the proletarianization of the African peasantry” in Rhodesia/Zimbabwe.³ In explaining the “unprecedented intensity and scale” of labour unrest in the late 1940s, Arrighi pointed to a complex set of transformations in the nature of capital accumulation on a global and national scale. These transformations were incompatible with the migrant-labour system, leading to the stabilization of a compact working class in urban-industrial areas, who, in turn, began to see themselves and to struggle within the capitalist sector as “proletarians rather than migrant peasants.”

Although there is a parallel between the two stories, the roots of these two migrant-labour systems could not have been more different. In the Cosentino, participation in the wage labour market was founded on an informal victory of the peasantry over the landlords, a victory that was consolidated over time as savings from wage labour were used to purchase land from absentee landlords. In colonial Rhodesia, the migrant-labour system was the result of a crushing defeat of a subsistence peasantry who had little or no prior interest in wage labour, as they were able to satisfy their need for money income through the sale of surplus agricultural products on the market. The heavy hand

³This approach can also be found in Arrighi's writings on the timing, character, and interconnections among major waves of labour unrest in the United States in the 1930s, Western Europe in the 1960s, and rapidly industrializing semiperipheral countries such as Brazil and South Africa in the 1970s and 1980s (e.g., Arrighi & Silver, 1984).

of the colonial state—in the form of coercion, extreme dispossession, and discriminatory policies favouring European settler farmers—was required to elicit a supply of wage labour (Arrighi, 1970).⁴

3 | THE HEAT, THE STONE, AND THE EGG

Although Arrighi and Piselli lay out in detail three different subregional paths of agrarian transformation in Calabria in the late-19th century⁵—characterized by different forms of integration into labour and product markets, welfare outcomes, and patterns of social conflict—this is not a prelude to a standard comparative analysis in which the three subregions are treated as independent “cases” to be compared. Instead, they make two key methodological moves.

A first methodological move points to the importance of the relationships *among* ostensibly independent “cases”; that is, how processes linking the three subregions of Calabria were key in the initial production (and reproduction) of the differences among them. Arrighi and Piselli (1987, pp. 685–686) show how the viability of each of the three roads “was dependent on the [intra-regional] flows of labor that linked them.”⁶

It is hard to conceive, for example, how the landlords of the Crotonese could have established their twofold monopoly over the use of land and of violence without the strong competitive pressures brought to bear on the local rural proletariat by the seasonal labor supplies of semiproletarians and nonproletarians from the neighboring areas. Nor is it easy to imagine how small-scale commodity production could have taken off in the Plain of Gioia without the initial inflow of permanent immigration from the areas of the interior. And the peasant-migrant road in the Cosentino probably would not have taken shape so rapidly and firmly, without, one, the initial relief from demographic pressures brought about by the permanent emigration of the poorest peasants, *proietti*, and deviants to the areas of small-scale commodity production, and, two, the easy opportunities for procuring money means through the sale of seasonal labor supplies in neighboring areas of small-scale and large-scale commodity production. (Arrighi & Piselli, 1987, pp. 685–687)⁷

The second methodological move is to take seriously “the dynamics of the world-economy and the national-state” in explaining “how [the three roads] came into being [in the mid-19th century], how they unfolded, and how they came to an end [in the mid-20th century]” (1987, pp. 677–678). Arrighi was fond of referring to Mao Tse-Tung’s (1937) “Essay on Contradiction” in which he uses an analogy between the effects of “heat” on a stone versus the effects of heat on an egg, in order to explain the simultaneous importance of “external” and “internal” factors in the determination of social change. Mao wrote:

Changes in society are due chiefly to the development of the internal contradictions in society, that is, the contradiction between the productive forces and the relations of production, the contradiction between classes and the contradiction between the old and the new; it is the development of these contradictions that pushes society forward and gives the impetus for the supersession of the old society by the new. Does materialist dialectics exclude external causes? Not at all. It holds that external causes are the condition of change and internal causes are the basis of change, and that external causes become operative through internal causes. *In a suitable temperature an egg changes into a chicken,*

⁴More generally, Arrighi and Piselli (1987, pp. 733–734) emphasize that Calabria—as a peripheral region within a semiperipheral nation-state (Italy) with preferential access to core regions of Europe—had advantages not available in most peripheralized regions of the world-economy.

⁵In addition to the “Junker Road” in the Crotonese and the “Swiss migrant-peasant Road” in the Cosentino, discussed in the previous section, Arrighi and Piselli (1987) identify a third “American or farmer Road” of agrarian transformation in Calabria in the Plain of Gioia Tauro.

⁶Hough (this issue) and Martinello (this issue) both point to the importance of relations among the subregions in Colombia and Uganda, respectively, in producing and reproducing differentiation among them.

⁷Arrighi’s sensitivity to the explanatory importance of relational processes across “cases” can be traced back to the mentorship of the social anthropologist, Jaap Van Velsen (1967), who had a profound influence on Arrighi during their joint time as Lecturers in Harare/Salisbury in the mid-1960s.

but no temperature can change a stone into a chicken, because each has a different basis. (Mao, 1937, emphasis added)

Thus, for Arrighi, systemic processes—a totality that is more and different than the sum of its parts—are crucial for understanding local outcomes. However, these systemic processes do not act as a steamroller, transforming social relations at the local level along a theoretically predefined path. Rather, geography and prior history do matter. Moreover, transformations of the system—in the intensity and nature of the heat—ultimately can only be explained by tracing the impact of local agency (in specific times and places) on the system as a whole (Arrighi & Silver, 1999, pp. 26–31).

4 | CORE AND PERIPHERY

In an essay written a decade after the publication of “Capitalist Development in Hostile Environments,” Arrighi directly engages with what he calls “the non-debates of the 1970s” between Brenner and Wallerstein. He wrote: “I have long been convinced that class relations and conflicts are not reducible to core-periphery relations, just as the latter are not reducible to class relations and conflicts”; he cites the Calabria article as an empirically grounded refutation of any such simple equation in either direction (Arrighi, 1998, p. 120). This does not mean that Arrighi thought that processes of peripheralization were irrelevant. Quite the contrary.⁸

The theoretical formulations around core and periphery in “Capitalist Development in Hostile Environments”—in particular, the clear distinction they make between social change and economic progress—are strongly influenced by research Arrighi conducted in the mid-1980s on “the stratification of the world economy” (e.g., Arrighi & Drangel, 1986). Two key findings from that project shape Arrighi’s interpretation of the Calabria research. The first finding was an amazing stability in the relative command of wealth among countries from 1938 to 1983 (measured as relative long-term GNP per capita). With few exceptions, there was no upward or downward mobility in the global hierarchy of wealth; rich countries stayed rich (i.e., in the core), poor countries stayed poor (i.e., in the periphery), and those in the middle likewise stayed put (i.e., in the semiperiphery). The second finding was that this stability in the global hierarchy of wealth occurred notwithstanding rapid and dramatic social transformations in semiperipheral (and later peripheral) countries, generally associated with modernization and development. Local action aimed at “catching up” development was undermined by world-systemic processes of core-periphery polarization.⁹ Arrighi summed up 20th-century development efforts as a process of “running fast to stay in the same place” (Arrighi & Drangel, 1986, p. 60).

The Calabria piece intersects with and provides support for Arrighi’s evolving critique of (Left and Right) prescriptions for development, which assumed that certain forms of social change (proletarianization, industrialization, and urbanization) were necessary and sufficient conditions for economic progress. The Calabria piece also intersects with and provides support for Arrighi’s evolving alternative prescription for development. A key point made in “Capitalist Development in Hostile Environments” is that, although differences in social structure did *not* matter in terms of catching-up development—that is, all three roads were paths to deepening peripheralization in Calabria—the differences in social structure “had important implications for the welfare of the peoples involved.” Their finding that welfare outcomes (ranging from health indicators to levels of societal violence) were far better in the Cosentino—the area of widespread direct access to the means of production, including land—and were far worse in the

⁸“We have been arguing that relations of production in Calabrian agriculture developed along paths that were not inherently ‘peripheral’ in the sense that they could have been, and in different historical instances actually were, associated with ascent to core position. This argument should not be understood to imply that a given path of development is not affected by its association with coreness or peripherality. On the contrary ... peripherality leaves its mark on all such relations ...”; on their “social evolution” and their “historical limits” (Arrighi & Piselli, 1987, p. 697).

⁹Arrighi identified three different forms of peripheralization: transfer of surplus, unequal exchange, and direct surplus appropriation. In Calabria, the main form peripheralization took differed in each of the three subregions: Transfer of surplus was predominant in the Crotonese, unequal exchange in the Plain of Gioia, and direct surplus appropriation in the Cosentino (Arrighi & Piselli, 1987, pp. 687–697).

Crotonese—the area characterized by extreme dispossession and full proletarianization—was an insight that Arrighi carried forward into his analysis of the East Asian developmental path, with his emphasis on the role of land reform/redistribution, “industrious revolutions,” and “accumulation without dispossession” in explaining the relative success of the East Asian development path (Arrighi, 2007; Arrighi, Aschoff, & Scully, 2010).¹⁰ It was also an insight that informed his sympathy for the fast-track land reform in Zimbabwe.¹¹

5 | HOSTILE (AND OTHER) CONJUNCTURES

Arrighi and Piselli end their story in the 1970s, in the aftermath of the wave of social conflict waged by Calabrians in the factories of the north and the urban centres of the south.¹²

These relatively successful redistributive struggles brought to an end the process of *transformation of the Calabrian peasantry into a waged and salaried labor force*. No peasantry to speak of was left in Calabria. There still were farmers and agricultural workers, to be sure. But there was no numerically or socially significant group of low-status cultivators that attached importance to the land as a source of full-lifetime status and subsistence. *Our story may therefore end here*. (Arrighi & Piselli, 1987, p. 733, emphasis added)

Does ending the story with “the transformation of the Calabrian peasantry into a waged and salaried labor force” and the contemporaneous wave of strikes mean that an Arrighian theory of capitalist development is a story of linear proletarianization after all—albeit one that specifies multiple paths to full proletarianization? For that matter, is Arrighi’s (1970) “study of the proletarianization of the African peasantry in Rhodesia,” which ends with the post-Second World War wave of strikes and the contemporaneous transformation of a portion of the “migrant peasants” into a compact proletariat living with their families in urban areas, also a story of linear proletarianization—albeit a far more violent story in its origins than the Calabrian one? My answer is no.

In both studies, full proletarianization of the peasantry (or at least apart of the peasantry) is not “the end of history,” but rather the endpoint of the phase of capitalist development under consideration. Indeed, both studies conclude by pointing to the fundamental incompatibility between historical capitalism and generalized full proletarianization. In the case of Calabria, northern Italian industrial capital responded to the long wave of labour unrest with an aggressive and precocious pursuit of automation; as such, it is notable that Arrighi and Piselli’s story ends with full proletarianization *and* mass unemployment, pointing to a set of fresh contradictions that, they argue, were somewhat mitigated by Calabria’s favourable position as a peripheral region within the core of the capitalist world economy (1987: fn 55 on p. 728). In the case of post-Second World War Rhodesia/Zimbabwe, Arrighi (1970) argues that, although the colonial state and capital had finally succeeded in creating “unlimited supplies of labor in Lewis’s sense ... the capitalist economy had become structurally incapable of absorbing them”; thus, fundamental political questions related to land, labour, and livelihoods were left unresolved.

Yet there is a large degree of indeterminacy in the conclusions with which Arrighi ends these stories. In Arrighi’s writings up through the 1980s, he emphasizes that capitalism had reached an impasse, a deep crisis of profitability rooted in both the strengthening of labour vis-à-vis capital and of the Third World vis-à-vis the First World. Efforts to resolve the crisis—for example, through automation, the geographical relocation of capital, or the creation of

¹⁰The implications for welfare outcomes are a theme further developed by Zhan (this issue) and Hough (this issue) in relation to China and Colombia, respectively.

¹¹Personal communication with Giovanni Arrighi, 2008.

¹²As emphasized in the introduction (Bair et al.) but largely sidelined here, waves of social conflict play a key role in the historical trajectory described by Arrighi and Piselli. They stress the role played by waves of social conflict at each key turning point from the mid-19th century to the 1970s. Throughout, the “peasants of Calabria, and their semiproletarian and proletarian successors, have not at all been passive pawns in the hands of state and capital. Their history is in fact a history of resistance against all kinds of exploitative tendencies. Sometimes they lost and sometimes they won, and the outcome determined the path of social change for generations to come” (1987, p. 736).

compact urban proletariats separated from a sea of increasingly impoverished and/or partially proletarianized peasants—only succeeded in shifting the contradictions of capitalism in time and space. Thus, a phase of capitalist development had ended in crisis, but there was no clear path out of the crisis for capitalism (Arrighi, 1978; Arrighi & Silver, 1984).

Arrighi made a major step towards overcoming this indeterminacy with *The Long Twentieth Century* (1994), in which he theorized the evolution of historical capitalism over the *longue durée* as a succession of “long centuries,” each beginning/ending with a major financial expansion. In so doing, he provides a robust theorization of the systemic conditions (“the heat”) under which processes of proletarianization, migration, and class conflict unfold at the local level. Although it is beyond the scope of the present essay to engage in a detailed discussion of how this more robust theorization of the “external” conditions would affect our reading of “Capitalist Development in Hostile Environments,” two brief points are in order. First, for Arrighi, the late-20th century financial expansion was not only a sign of the exhaustion of the latest major phase of world capitalist development; it was also a *temporary* way out of the seemingly irresolvable impasse of the 1970s crisis. In the course of the financial expansion, the crisis was transformed from one whose costs fell primarily on capital and the First World to one whose costs fell primarily on labour and the Third World. But as in past financial expansions, the resolution of the crisis—that is, the restoration of power and profits—was (paraphrasing Fernand Braudel) a sign of “autumn” rather than a “new spring” for the U.S.-centred regime of accumulation; it was a prelude to a long period of “systemic chaos” (Arrighi, 1994; Arrighi & Silver, 1999). Thus, in the early 21st century, the geopolitical dynamics of the current “hostile conjuncture” are fundamental to understanding contemporary processes of proletarianization, migration, and class conflict.¹³

Second, financial expansions are not only periods in which old regimes decay; they have also been periods characterized by the interstitial emergence of new regimes of accumulation. As such, the shift towards “informalization” since the 1970s (which is itself associated with a shift in the centre of capital accumulation to East Asia) fits with a long-term pendulum swing pattern identified by Arrighi (1994) in which formal/intensive/corporate regimes of accumulation (Dutch, US) alternate with informal/extensive regimes of accumulation (Genoese, British). If historical capitalism is indeed characterized by a pendulum swing between formalization and informalization, it would have significant implications for how we think about the “endpoints” of proletarianization and capitalist development.

One consistent thread in Arrighi’s writings over four decades is his thesis that major turning points in capitalist development have been intertwined with major waves of social conflict. This brings us back to the fundamental incompatibility between capitalism and full proletarianization—meaning, among other things, wages that cover the full costs for the daily and generational reproduction of labour power. Across the four long centuries of historical capitalism, the costs of reproduction of humans *and* nature were “externalized”—reaching an extreme level during the long 20th century. For Arrighi (2007), the survival of humanity, not to mention a new “long century,” presupposes the implementation of a radically different model of development. He saw this as an imposing task whose outcome was ultimately in the hands of movements of protest and self-protection from below.

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ORCID

Beverly J. Silver  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2731-7855>

¹³A succession of hostile (and not so hostile) conjunctures are at the centre of the analyses put forward in this issue by Karatasli and Kumral for Turkey and by Hough for Colombia.

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