



# Trumpism, the world system and multipolarism: a perspective from Giovanni Arrighi's thought

Gennaro Imbriano<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

This article offers some reflections from the Italian sociologist, economist and philosopher Giovanni Arrighi, with particular reference to his theory of the succession of global accumulation cycles and his theory of hegemonic transitions. Using Arrighi's categories, Trumpism could be interpreted as a symptom of the crisis of the global hegemony of the United States of America and the problematic condition of the hegemonic transition. As Arrighi predicted, each transitional phase could involve war and increasing financial and military tension among competing regional powers: from the transition a multipolar world of peace can emerge, but also a new “systemic chaos”.

**Keywords** Giovanni Arrighi · World-system theory · Hegemonic transition · Trumpism · Systemic chaos · Global governance

## 1 Introduction

During his career as a scholar of the “world-system” theory, Giovanni Arrighi presented a theory capable of describing the individual components of global capitalist development, while simultaneously addressing both its historical genesis and its long-term developments and trends (Azzolini, 2018). The conviction driving this essay is that this theory, which is complex and layered, developed over various phases and with numerous empirical studies, is also able to effectively describe the dynamics of the past few decades (Reifer, 2009).

This is particularly relevant in relation to the issue of the relationship between the United States of America and the People's Republic of China, and the transformations

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✉ Gennaro Imbriano  
gennaro.imbriano@unibo.it

<sup>1</sup> Department of the Arts, University of Bologna, Bologna, Italy

concerning the configurations of the world-system, specifically the relations between these two countries. Therefore, we will first outline the theoretical framework and the historical context in which Arrighi's theory arises and develops, and then examine more closely some theoretical aspects of this proposal that seem particularly illuminating in demonstrating the current configuration of international relations within the world-system (Robinson, 2011). A configuration – which we anticipate right now – that, for Arrighi, is not static but can evolve, in its current ambiguity, in at least two directions: the persistence of a chaotic and disordered condition marked by war and hostility, or a transition to a new phase in the organization of international relations.

## 2 The American decline

Before exploring whether Arrighi's perspective can help in understanding international relations today, we must bear in mind that the current scenario is generally considered to be the result of a now consolidated trend in the global framework, characterized by the growing crisis of American hegemony. The scientific literature has widely discussed the reasons for American decline, from the perspective both of international relations and domestic politics, using different interpretive paradigms and identifying its cause in a wide range of factors (Wallerstein, 2003; Anderson et al., 2008; Acharya, 2014).

The growth of strategic competitors to the United States, coupled with the latter's own internal crisis, has led to, amongst other things, to the ascent of Donald Trump to the presidency (Heermans, 2017; Regilme, 2019).

What we might call "*Trumpism*" is a complex phenomenon that cannot be reduced to a single factor. If we focus on the plane of international relations (rather than looking at its significance for domestic politics, social policy, the relationship between state and capital, domestic civil rights policies, etc.), we can understand Trumpism as an ambiguous attempt to relaunch American hegemony through a repositioning of military and commercial power in the American continent, as well as an authoritarian shift within the liberal system (Ikenberry, 2017; Barker & Tamble, 2022) and an attempt to curb the economic and military rise of competitor powers, particularly the People's Republic of China (Regilme, 2023; Foot, 2013, Ikenberry 2013).

There are two key elements to this strategy: disengagement and strategic withdrawal from various conflicts; the increasing presence of NATO on Europe's eastern borders, as well as the trade war against China (Foulon, 2018; Parisot & Lin, 2024).

Trumpism is essentially an attempt to hold back what scholars have long called the crisis or decline of U.S. hegemony in its confrontation with emerging global powers. Various approaches (ranging from liberal to neorealist, from constructivist to Marxist) have understood this situation as potentially going in two directions: either toward conflict or toward a peace guaranteed by commercial and geopolitical agreements between the U.S. and its competitors (Arrighi & Silver, 1999; Regilme & Parisot, 2018).

### 3 Dependency, core, and periphery

What new perspectives emerge when we interpret this scenario using the categories offered by Arrighi's theory? Arrighi's theory is developed in constant dialogue with the prominent figures of "world-system theory" and "dependency theory", particularly with the works of Gunder Frank and Immanuel Wallerstein, with whom he had the opportunity to collaborate and engage in discussion (Bergesen, 1980; Chase-Dunn & Grell-Brisk, 2019; Chirot & Hall, 1982). These analyses enable economic theory – and, more generally, political science and sociology concerning international relations and the relationships between states – to move beyond the generally political level, which identifies states as the sole actors in international action, and frames the world as a unified system in which, in reality, there are various levels of action and, therefore, various actors involved (So, 1990). The focus, therefore, shifts to those economic actors – the corporations – which, in the advanced stage of capitalist globalization, have developed the capacity to be political actors as much, if not more, than the nation-states themselves (Wallerstein, 2004). These actors naturally develop a privileged relationship with the state that enables their development, at a level that is closely tied to economic growth.

The article will first discuss dependency theory, which specifically intends to analyze the relationship of dominance and colonial dependency between countries in different parts of the world. In the framework developed by Gunder Frank, the relationship between states is understood through the category of dependency. Some nations in the world-system are central, while others are peripheral, meaning they are in a condition of dependency. All of this has a precise historical origin, which Frank traces back to the world capitalist system that emerged starting in the 16th century (Frank, 1967).

The central element of this theory lies in the idea that it is impossible to study a state-based or sociological phenomenon in isolation, as every single moment of the system is connected to the systematic logic and depends on it. Frank explains the relationship of dependency in light of the core-periphery dynamic, based on a purely extractive logic of exploitation. In other words, the core powers extract the fundamental resources and raw materials from the peripheral nations, which, once imported, fuel the industry of the central power, generating its industrial wealth. The finished products are then sold not only in the central market but also in the peripheral countries' markets, at exorbitant prices for the peripheral nation, which, in turn, is condemned to underdevelopment since its own industry does not develop, as the local market is flooded with products manufactured elsewhere (So, 1990).

Thus, here is the relationship between core and periphery: the underdevelopment of the periphery is functional to the development of the core, and vice versa. The colonial practice, therefore, develops the local economy according to the principle of monoculture, making it functional for the exportation to the mother country of a resource that is then processed and refined in the core, thereby making the colony dependent on the mother country. A typical example of this colonial practice is the cultivation of tea in India or other peripheral countries, which thus remain dependent on the sale of these goods to the core countries. Meanwhile, local industry does not develop, and the market in peripheral countries is flooded with products from the core

countries, which thereby control the needs of the peripheral country (Frank, 1969). Another system identified by Frank for maintaining the dependency relationship is the exploitation of low-cost local labour through production relocation, and finally, the system of loans, which makes peripheral nations dependent on the core ones (Frank, 1967, 1969).

Already in the theoretical developments of the critics of dependency, particularly in Latin America (Cardoso & Faletto, 1969; dos Santos, 1972, 1978, 2000; Marini, 2022; Prebisch, 1950, 1959), the element of dependency is transcended through some established practices. The first is isolation, which is functional to the creation of an internal industry capable of developing the domestic productive system (China). Additionally, another system is detaching from the hegemonic power when it begins to weaken (India), and replacing imported industry with domestic industry (Latin America), or, finally, through a socialist revolution (Cuba) (Amin, 1976; Arrighi, 1983; Chase-Dunn 1982).

Recent research on the subject clearly shows that trade and economic relations between Latin American countries and China have increased in the last few decades, which has also led to a significant decrease in the dependency of Latin America on the United States (Jenkins, 2018). The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has allowed for economic and infrastructural development that has led to significant economic growth in the Latin American countries. At the same time, the Trump administration is trying to reduce and contain the relations between China and Latin America. (Serrano-Moreno, 2024).

However, this growth is still marked by the hegemony of the Chinese model of importing raw materials and exporting industrial products, which has not always favored the development of domestic industry (Gallagher & Porzecanski, 2010; Li & Bernal-Meza, 2022).

#### **4 The world-system from the perspective of Immanuel Wallerstein and Giovanni Arrighi**

These acquisitions are also the foundation of Wallerstein's theory, which builds upon them and develops his theory, particularly in the four volumes of *The Modern World-System* (1974–2011) (Wallerstein, 1974, 1980, 1989, 2004). There are important continuities between dependency theory and world-systems theory, but also some important differences. The most significant difference is that dependency theory is primarily interested in providing a description of peripheral countries at the national level, whereas world-systems theory starts from a supranational framework. Furthermore, on a methodological level, the dyadic core-periphery dialectic is replaced by a tripartite categorisation, which also includes semi-peripheral countries (So, 1990, p. 195). Wallerstein combines various methods and sources. Marx is central for his analysis of capitalism; Braudel is also fundamental, especially for his analysis of long-term processes, as well as the theory of dependency (So, 1990, 172–73).

Regarding the world-system, Wallerstein distinguishes between world-empires and the strictly capitalist world-system. In the former case, these world-empires are centralized. Taxes are collected from the periphery and redistributed to the core. The

capitalist world-system, on the other hand, which emerged in the 16th century, establishes a new relationship between core and periphery. The periphery serves two functions: it provides raw materials at low cost (or at most semi-processed goods, which will then be fully processed and produced only in the core); and it also provides low-cost labour in cases of relocation. The finished products at the core are then resold to the peripheries at exorbitant prices, creating the conditions for underdevelopment. Wallerstein identifies, between the core and periphery, the semi-peripheral countries (Brazil, India, China), which aspire to become the core and are increasingly moving closer to it (Hopkins & Wallerstein, 1980, 1982).

Giovanni Arrighi collaborated with Immanuel Wallerstein, Gunder Frank and other authors in the development of world-systems theory (together Wallerstein, he wrote some articles: Arrighi, Hopkins, & Wallerstein, 1980), when he worked in the Sociology Department and the Fernand Braudel Centre at the State University of New York, which became known as the main centre of world-systems analysis, and at the Department of Sociology of Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore (Evans et al., 1985; So, 1990). Arrighi was carrying out his education in Milan, worked in the United States, but an important period of his intellectual work took place in Africa (in Rhodesia, now Zimbabwe) and in Southern Italy, at the newly established University of Calabria in Cosenza in southern Italy, where he taught for several years (Azzolini, 2018). During this period, he developed a comparative-historical sociology, which contains a philosophical theory of history, he formulated his theory of historical capitalism, in which he described a series of systemic cycles of accumulation dating back to the fourteenth century, with financial expansions marking the beginning/end of each systemic cycle of accumulation. Arrighi conceptualized these periods of financial expansion as phases of major systemic reorganization in which, among other things, the geographical epicentre of world capitalism shifted (Arrighi, 2010).

Following Wallerstein's and Arrighi's world-systems theory, China's industrial development over the last few decades can be considered to be the result of specific policies that allowed it to develop from a semi-peripheral country towards an economic model capable of challenging U.S. primacy. This model was originally based on industrial production aimed at export, at a time when the Western production model (U.S. and European) was dedicated to deindustrialization and offshoring (Li, 2008). After China's entry into the WTO, the export of manufactured products allowed Chinese industry to expand and develop a financial power that subsequently meant it was even able to finance U.S. external debt. The Trump administration's response is aimed at trying to interrupt this process as much as possible and initiate a reindustrialization of the United States, intended to halt the hegemonic transition toward China (Li, & Bernal-Meza, 2022).

## 5 The long twentieth century

His studies of the origins and evolution of global capitalism were developed by Arrighi in a series of articles and books. I would particularly like to highlight the framework present in two of Arrighi's works: *The Long Twentieth Century* (published in nineteen ninety-four (1994), with an important postscript in 2009) (Arrighi, 2010);

and then *Adam Smith in Beijing* (Arrighi, 2007). In the first book Arrighi reinterpreted the evolution of capitalism and argued that the origins of capitalism were to be found in the marriage of Iberian political power and the financial power of the Italian City of Genoa. In the second one he compared Western and East Asian paths of development and explored the late-twentieth-century shift in the epicentre of capital accumulation to East Asia and China's rise as an economic power.

Arrighi's hypothesis is that there is a long history of global capitalism (with reference to Braudel's concept of *longue durée*) articulated in several systemic cycles of accumulation. What is a systemic cycle of accumulation? A cycle is a process that starts with the expansion of the capitalist production, with money being invested in a specific production, which is then functional in creating an accumulation of commodities to sell on the market. At a certain moment the cycle reaches its full expansion and, having created a surplus of money, ceases to be expansive. It enters into crisis, and then a new systemic cycle takes over (through a hegemonic transition). In this transitional phase, capitalism becomes essentially financial, as the accumulation of money made in the previous phase serves as capital that is lent to initiate a new cycle (Arrighi, 2010).

Arrighi identifies four cycles in the history of capitalism, corresponding to four long centuries:

- The long century that goes from the end of the 15th century to the beginning of the 17th century, marked by Genoese hegemony.
- The Dutch long century, which spans from the beginning of the seventh 17th century to the mid-18th century.
- The English long century, which goes from the mid-18th century to the end of the 19th century.
- The American long century, which extends from the end of the 19th century to the end of the 20th century (to the crises of the 1960s and 70s).

Usually, in the phase of hegemonic transition, it happens that the hegemonic power of the previous cycle, having accumulated large amounts of money, transforms its economy into a financial economy; that is, it becomes a lender (through public debt) to the emerging power. This foreshadows the end of its hegemonic cycle and the transfer of leadership to the new emerging power.

As Arrighi shows in *The Long XX century* (Fig. 1: Arrighi, 2010, p. 220), each expansive phase is indicated with the Marxian acronym M–C, that is to say, money–commodity (this formula by Marx indicates productive capital: Marx, 1976). The critical phase, which always follows a crisis, which Arrighi calls a “signal crisis”, which has the function of foreshadowing the end of the cycle, but not yet the end of hegemony, is indicated by the Marxian acronym C–M', that is to say, commodity–money (this formula by Marx indicates the transformation of productive capital in monetary capital) (Marx, 1976).

In this figure (Fig. 2: Arrighi, 2010, p. 375) we can see the development of Arrighi's perspective. The various cycles are always based on a progressively larger state unit, from the city-state of Genoa to the American world empire. Moreover, some cycles (Genoese and British) are characterized by *extensive* development, while the

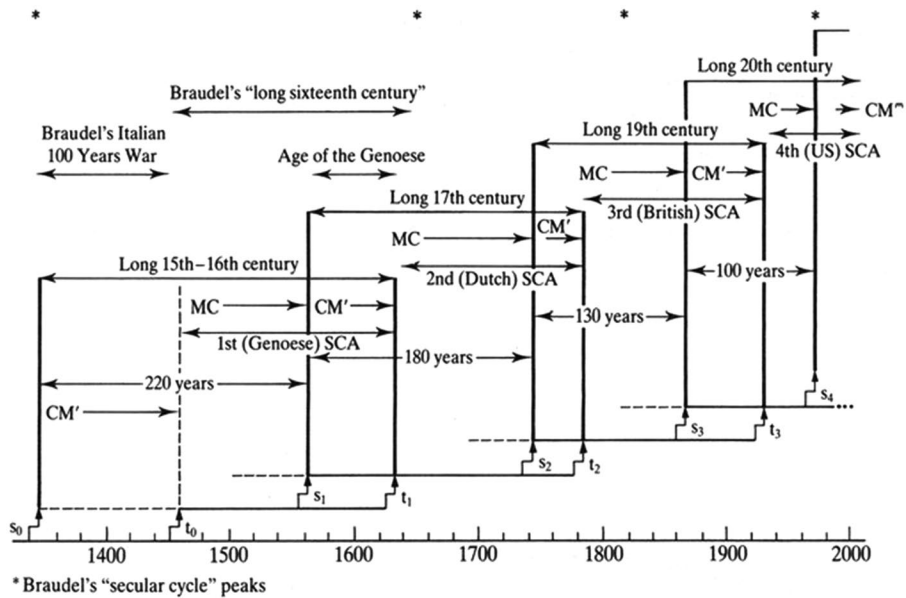


Fig. 1 Long centuries and systemic cycles of accumulation (Arrighi, 2010, p. 220)

subsequent ones are characterized by *intensive* development (Dutch and American). Additionally, there is a progressive internalization of political and economic functions. While Genoa is a purely commercial republic, from the Dutch cycle onward, the subsequent powers become autonomous in ensuring their own *protection, production, and transaction costs*.

## 6 A new transition?

What happens at the end of this period?

According to this diagram, therefore, the subsequent transition must be led by an economic power able to develop a new expansionary cycle and also ensuring the reproduction of its system from a financial point of view.

The long American century begins with the English crisis and is consolidated by the two world wars. The first signal crisis occurs in the 1970s (with the Vietnam war), which led to the financialization of the American economy. At that point, a new expansionary phase seemed to be emerging, but in reality, that is the phase of transition to a new balance, marked by the emergence of new powers (initially Japan, but Arrighi indicates the China as the new protagonist of this new expansive and productive phase) (Friedman, 1982; Goldfrank, 1979).

Arrighi argues that there are two anomalies in the new phase of transition. The first one is the separation between the economic power of the new hegemonic power and the military power of the decaying power. The second one is that the new hegemonical power can develop the new phase of accumulation in a way that isn't a capitalist one. The development of Chinese hegemony indicates, according to Arrighi, the pos-

| Leading Governmental Organization | Regime Type/Cycle |           | Costs Internalized |            |             |              |
|-----------------------------------|-------------------|-----------|--------------------|------------|-------------|--------------|
|                                   | Extensive         | Intensive | Protection         | Production | Transaction | Reproduction |
| World-state                       |                   | US        | Yes                | Yes        | Yes         | No           |
| Nation-state                      | British           |           | Yes                | Yes        | No          | No           |
| City-state                        |                   | Dutch     | Yes                | No         | No          | No           |
|                                   | Genoese           |           | No                 | No         | No          | No           |

Fig. 2 Evolutionary patterns of world capitalism (Arrighi, 2010, p. 375)

sibility of building a new system in which emerges the mutual respect for cultures and the possibility of a multipolar world government system.

This possibility implies in Arrighi point of view that the power at the end of its cycle, the United States of America, accepts the hegemonic transition peacefully. Otherwise, war and chaos will dominate the transition phase. Where the transition may lead and how the transition will it unfold, it's a question that stays open.

In another work (Arrighi, & Silver, 1999), Arrighi and Silver highlight that hegemonic transition is not the only possibility that the system has during a period of transition. The shift to a new order can be problematic, prolonged, and not always feasible. The governance of the world can be temporarily replaced, for more or less long periods, by perspectives of chaos, or by war as a system of governing the transition. A long-lasting crisis, spread across various areas of the planet, that shows no sign of ending and could shape international relations for a long time. The crisis of hegemony of the United States and *Trumpism* as a product of this crisis, in fact, lead to a state of ambiguity, the knots of which have not yet been untangled, and which, in effect, leaves both hypotheses open (chaos or a new world governance), as elaborated by both world-system theory and Arrighi's theoretical perspective.

So returning to the question that motivated our discussion, can Arrighi's version of world-systems theory offer a convincing interpretation of the current global scenario?

As recent studies show, Trump's international policy is a reaction to the hegemonic crisis of the United States. But this response appears to be entirely insufficient: the threat of a trade war does not currently affect the development of the economic strategies of U.S. competitors. The attempt to stop the hegemonic transition by trying to revive a new industrialization on American soil appears to be very complicated (Janusch & Mucha, 2017; Janusch & Lorberg, 2020). The relations between the United States and Europe appear to be equally complex. An alliance with the United States obliges many European countries to interrupt economic and commercial relations with Asian partners and with Russia, which does not seem to correspond to Europe's interest in achieving full development (Maher, & Schöfer, 2024).

If, as stated, we hypothesize (in accordance with the literature cited here) that, on the level of international relations, the rise in Trump's power expresses an attempt to hold back the crisis of American hegemony, whether through aggressive commercial war policies or through disengagement from conflicts and the construction of new commercial scenarios, then Arrighi's systemic theory offers a hermeneutic perspective that allows us to grasp the complexity of the present, in at least two senses.

Firstly, it offers a view of the international political landscape that looks at deep and long-term structural transformations, which goes beyond the superficial level of the political dimension to include sociological and economic analysis. Secondly, it allows us to understand conflict and peace not as mechanically determined but as different possible outcomes of the evolution of the present transition.

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## Declarations

**Conflict of interest** The author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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