

## Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

IMMANUEL WALLERSTEIN, *Alternatives: The United States Confronts the World*. Boulder and London: Paradigm Publishers, 2004, 173 p. Index.

*Alternatives: The United States Confronts the World* is produced by the Fernand Braudel Center. It is one of a series of books published under the direction of Immanuel Wallerstein, best known for his exposition of world systems theory. This particular volume is far less sweeping, dealing particularly with recent American foreign policy. Familiarity with Wallerstein's larger body of work will provide more knowledgeable readers with a useful background, but less familiar readers will also find the book informative and provocative.

The book is comprised of three parts. Part one (Terrorism: The Bush Fiasco) places the terrorist attacks of 9/11 within the broader context of American political and economic decline. Wallerstein argues that American strategy during the thirty years leading up to 9/11 involved "soft multilateralism" – what might be termed multilateralism if necessary, but not necessarily multilateralism – in an effort to slow down its decline. By contrast, American strategy since 9/11 has revolved around "the vision of an imperial America always on top, always impregnable, virtually by moral right" (p. 3). Hence, the successive wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the wider program of perpetual war envisioned by Washington's current Hawks and enunciated in the Bush Doctrine. Wallerstein views this latter strategy as ultimately doomed to failure because America's decline is structural; indeed, argues Wallerstein, the Bush administration's strategy will actually hasten America's decline as it is creating and emboldening a host of oppositions, notably a Paris-Berlin-Moscow axis, but also China, south Asia, and Latin America.

Part two (Bush Encounters the World) reprints a series of commentaries on the state of the world Wallerstein published on his website (<http://fbc.binghamton.edu/commentr.htm>) between January 15, 2001 and February 15, 2004. This is the weakest part of the book as it suffers the afflictions common to collections of this sort: repetition, datedness, and (with hindsight) obvious misdiagnosis. Yet, this section also contains some gems: discussions of splits within the Republican party, the shared problems of left-centre parties in the western democracies, and most particularly a discussion of the U.S.-Iraq war as seen from the "longue durée." In the latter instance, Wallerstein displays his usual facility for sifting through the minutiae of singular events to get at the big picture.

Part three (The Possible and the Desirable) recapitulates the earlier thesis of part one and examines future scenarios. In brief, it argues that the period of American “soft multilateralism” has come to an end and cannot be recreated. The rest of the world no longer trusts the United States and is gradually (quickly) marshalling alliances against it. His statement (p. 148) shares with others such as Will Hutton and Benjamin Barber the plaintive hope that the United States will abandon exceptionalism and come to see itself as a part of the world community:

The United States -- its government but, even more so, its people -- has to stop thinking of itself as the greatest country in the world and start thinking of itself as one mature country among many, one that has had both greatness and things to repent in its past, as have most of the others.

But the section does not describe merely geo-political limits to the American imperial project. Instead, Wallerstein also examines the growing structural strains of the capitalist world-economy in general (declining capital accumulation and popular demands). He concludes with a brief discussion of the competing visions offered by the World Economic Forum at Davos and the World Social Forum (Porto Alegre). It is clear Wallerstein sides with the latter, viewing the WSF as perhaps the last, best hope of stopping a slide into even greater worldwide conflict.

This book is a quick read suitable for undergraduate students, particularly for courses in political science, sociology, and anthropology. But lay readers will also find it an easy and informative book.

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