

CHRONICLES OF THE WIDELY ANNOUNCED DECLINE

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Review of 'Alternatives: The United States Confronts the World (Fernand Braudel Center Series)', 2009, by Immanuel Wallerstein.

The book 'Alternatives: The United States Confronts the World', by the prominent social scientist Immanuel Wallerstein, is devoted to the overly examined topic of the decline of US hegemony. The fact that the first edition of the 'Alternatives' was published in 2004 can, to a certain extent, excuse the triviality of the topic. The 2009 edition is one and a half times thicker than the first and is based on a great number of historical examples. The main difference setting Wallerstein's work apart from a dozen other political speculations on the decline of America is that it rests upon the concept of world-system theory developed by this American sociologist. The world-system theory is based on the groundwork laid by the great French historian **Fernand Braudel**.

According to this concept, the contemporary world-system emerged in the so-called long 16th century (about 1450 – 1650) and gradually swept the whole world. Up until that moment, there had been a great number of other world-systems in existence in the world. Wallerstein categorises these world-systems into three different types: mini-systems, world-economies, and world-empires. Mini-systems were typical of primitive societies. World-economies and world-empires were characteristic of complex agrarian societies. World-economies are systems of societies united by close economic relations, which act as certain evolving entities but are not actually clustered into a single political body. According to Wallerstein, all pre-capitalist world-economies have sooner or later turned into world-empires through their political unification under the domination of a single state. The only exception to this rule was the medieval European world-econo-



my, which was not transformed into a world-empire but instead turned into a modern capitalistic world-system.

For a long period of time, the leader of the capitalistic world-system was the USA. According to Wallerstein, the peak of the United States' power was in 1945 and in the early post-war years when America was remaking the capitalistic world according to its own standards.

In 'Alternatives' Wallerstein demonstrates how the gradual decline of the USA commenced following this period (the process is said to have begun in the 1970s) and how hard the Presidential Administration of George Bush Jr. attempted to reverse this long-term trend. In doing this, the leadership, however, ended up choosing a path that was disastrous – both for the future of the country itself and the world on the whole.

Criticism of the policy promoted by Bush Jr. is a measurable part of Wallerstein's book. The author thinks that the messianic-like attempts of Bush Jr. to change the course of history (which is objective from the viewpoint of world-system

theory) made a bad service to future US presidents. The vigorous efforts to build a unipolar world under the domination of the single superpower have not only damaged the image of America in the eyes of the world's humanity; they have made it very difficult to return to the doctrine of 'soft multi-polarity', which has been successfully used by US leaders in the past.

All of these thoughts would be quite trivial if it weren't for some interesting conclusions that refer to the consequences of the US conflict with the rest of the world. This is a conflict in which America will inevitably (though not immediately) lose. According to Wallerstein, one of these consequences will be **'the death of globalisation'**, which he deduces from the inability of the USA to dominate in the contemporary economic sphere. A question that seems to lie on the surface, but is in fact quite unexpected, becomes clear. **Will the process of globalisation where the USA does not play a leading part be the same globalisation we have become used to in the last twenty years, or will it be a completely different trend?**

The USA as seen by Wallerstein is a 'lonely superpower deprived of real power. It is a world leader followed by no one and respected by few. It is a nation which is drifting dangerously amidst the chaos it is unable to control'. Of course there is a way to break the deadlock, it is in the redefining of the role of the USA's place in the world-system. This should be a non-aggressive role based on the search for its own identity. In this sense, Wallerstein's book can be considered as a message to the Obama administration, which is being called upon to remedy the disastrous consequences of George Bush's struggle with the inexorable course of history. ■