

An Interview with Immanuel Wallerstein: The Inevitable Decline of the American Empire

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In the course of his visit to the Southern Cone of South America, the American sociologist Immanuel Wallerstein spoke on one of his favorite subjects: the end of the United States' hegemony—which, he believes, will be definitive within the next decade. But he also let it be known that in the course of the next two or three decades we will be living in a post-capitalist world that could either be much better, or worse, than the present one.

The decline of the empire, which had been gradual and inevitable since the "global revolution of 1968" has been accelerating exponentially since 2003, before the predictable failure of the American invasion of Iraq. A country that cannot subdue a small and exhausted nation, after a terrible decade of global sanctions, cannot be in any condition to take the lead in global affairs. This is one of the principle conclusions that Wallerstein outlined during his visit to Montevideo.

The United States moved from imposing "95%" of its will upon the world between 1945 and 1970 to a situation of impotence that manifested itself in the arrival to power of the neoconservatives of George W. Bush in 2001. This was a demonstration of weakness and not, as is usually believed to be the case, a show of strength. For the neoconservatives only a display of military strength can reverse the decline of a power that is no longer feared and, consequently, they will encounter ever-growing challenges.

According to Wallerstein, the causes of this decline are to be found in three challenges that converged between the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s: the economic competition between Japan and Europe, the decolonization of the third world and its subsequent rejection of the bi-polar U.S.-USSR order, and the emergence of a new generation of anti-systemic movements. These three challenges were successful and eroded the hegemony of the superpower that had imposed the Washington consensus, the neoliberal system, and the globalization model as a means of regaining lost power.

Nevertheless, the "global revolution of 1968" or in other words the challenge posed by the new movements is, for Wallerstein, a decisive fact that is not only at the heart of the

hegemonic crisis of the empire but also survival itself of capitalism as a global system. In a revealing text, "1968: The Great Experiment,"¹ he maintains that 1968's events were more important even than the French and Russian revolutions and because of its significance was the only revolution in the world equal to that of 1848. He assures us that although both failed, they changed the world because they were unplanned; rather they were "spontaneous in the truest sense of the word."

The "revolution of 1968" undermined the capacity of the North to watch over and intervene in the South, produced changes "in the power relations between status groups (age groups, gender groups, and 'ethnic' minorities)" that although they occurred "in the hidden spaces of daily life" are lasting and suppose permanent subordination; and civil society and salaried workers showed themselves to be less disposed than before to both passively accept domination and take orders.

Finally the intervention in Iraq failed in its three basic objectives: putting the brakes on Europe's growing autonomy, as well as on countries with supposed nuclear weapons such as Iran and North Korea, and the moderate Arab regimes such as Saudi Arabia that were reticent about a lasting peace with Israel. Four years later, not only has the complete opposite come to pass, but also a major turnaround in what Wallerstein terms "unilateral military machismo." "What was a slow decline for 30 years has become a rapid one in the years since 2003. The last pillar of hegemony was a military superiority so mighty that it could not be challenged by the next 10 or 20 subsequent countries combined. But in Iraq it was made evident that the United States cannot use its military superiority."

Finally, he points out that the "spirit of Davos," a reference to the Economic Forum in Davos, and the "spirit of Porto Alegre" where the first World Social Forum took place are the two main paths humanity faces when choosing a post-capitalistic society. "It could be worse than the present system, or less hierarchical and more egalitarian; but that all depends on us," he concluded.

The interview focused on the emergence of a multi-polar world and the present situation that Latin America finds itself in.

RZ: You state that in the next few years there will be a dozen powers that will be substitutes for the current single-power world; furthermore you suggest that Russia will align herself with Europe whilst the United States will form an alliance with China and Japan.

IW: What I see is that the end of the United States' hegemony will give way to the surge of several regional centers, one of which could be Mercosur. But we will also see Russia, China, India, South Africa and her neighbors, along with, of course, Europe and Japan. There will also probably be minor centers. Furthermore, I think there will be three big associations on a global scale that will be more dynamic "poles" which will be in a position to dictate the direction of the world: the United States, Europe, and Japan. But I do not think that the three associations can remain a reality for an extended period and therefore the weakest of the three will align itself with one of the strongest. I believe that the weakest will be the United States and that for geopolitical reasons I think it will align itself with East Asia where China and Japan will play a relevant role. As for Russia, it could align with Europe, with whom it has always had important relations.

You don't see the possibility of a Russia-China alliance like that which is emerging at the root of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.

In an increasingly chaotic world, anything is possible. But I do not see Russia allied with Japan; I do not believe that to be possible.

Brazil appears to be driving for an alliance with the United States based around the production of sugar cane-derived ethanol. Do you think that this policy could contribute to the strengthening of a Washington-led hegemony in the region?

I believe that the interest of Brazil's foreign policy is to strengthen South American autonomy in order that the region may play a role within a multi-polar world. In this scenario, Brazil positions itself seemingly as a more serious power and I see that the agreements with the United States do not go beyond what Russia or China are doing, that is to say specific agreements without major compromises and with important reservations. I believe that it is an intelligent policy, and possible. Furthermore, even should the right come to power in Brazil, this policy will not change. Now the military is reworking the old policy of the military regime of building nuclear weapons and although the United States is not at all pleased with this, they are powerless to do anything. In Brazil, politics have turned to the center, with no heavyweight far leftwing or rightwing parties and for this reason I think that foreign policy will be more stable. In domestic policy the changes will be slight with very gradual reforms like those currently being seen in Uruguay. These policies, centered as they are on gradual reforms, are typical of global social democracy and I think that these are going to be the solution for the region as a whole.

Do you believe that the interventionist policy of Washington will gain strength in the future? Can operations such as the "Plan Colombia" gain momentum?

If Bush tries to send troops to Colombia he won't succeed because Congress will prevent him from doing so. Alvaro Uribe is the last serious ally in the region. But he is facilitating Hugo Chávez's role as an intermediary in negotiations with the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) in an effort that, if successful, will lead to the growth of his persona on a global scale. Even though the United States does not like it, it can't do anything in this situation either.

I believe that the policy of intervention that lasted a century is already a thing of the past. The United States military is a powerful force but civil society has placed limits on it since the Vietnam War. Previously it was an army of conscripts but now it is a professional one and, furthermore, a good number of the troops in Iraq are mercenaries from private companies. The middle classes no longer join the armed forces; the only ones that do are the poor. In order to augment the number of troops, compulsory military service would need to be introduced, and this would lead to a new uprising from students and other sectors of the population. One of the decisive fronts on which the United States lost the Vietnam War was the domestic one.

Is there a possibility of military intervention in Cuba?

No. If, as everything seems to indicate the Democrats win the election, there will be a significant change in relations. On the one hand there are important commercial interests, especially in the agricultural sector, which would like to increase trade with the island nation. On the other hand, the rightwing Cubans in Miami, the 60s generation, are in decline and are increasingly less influential in U.S. politics. The new generations of Cubans in the United States prefer a "thaw" that would allow them to return to Cuba or establish normal relations.

What I mean is that there is a power void on behalf of the United States in Latin America which allows the governments to hold greater degrees of autonomy. I believe that Mercosur has a great opportunity to establish an alliance with the Andean Community, which will make a significant change in the role that the region might play in the world.

For social movements, the situation is very complex. On the one hand, they tend to feel defrauded by what progressive and leftwing governments are doing, but on the

other, they do not have the ability to propose an opposition front without the result ending up favorable to rightwing parties.

Yes, that's the situation. I have come from Brazil and I see that the Movimiento Sin Tierra (MST) disagrees strongly with Lula because agricultural reform is not progressing, but yet they support him in elections since he is undoubtedly better than Fernando Henrique Cardoso. It is the traditional problem when the leftwing party tied to the movements comes to power. A discussion as to what to do emerges. A head-on collision is a problem, as is not doing anything. In my opinion the movements should take a clear stance: support the better parties but without expecting that they will make fundamental changes. It is a defensive position, but it is a matter of trying to maintain autonomy.

Are these types of problems influencing the World Social Forum?

Yes of course, there are very different positions facing these new realities. But I am hopeful that the Forum will continue to be an open space, a horizontal one, in which hierarchical relations are not built, and where the most diverse of opinions can co-exist. In order for this to happen, it is important to bear in mind that the enemy is not the left.

In a certain way, are you therefore saying that the most mature position is that taken by the Landless Movement in Brazil?

Yes. But the Zapatistas' position is also very important because they have done important work on the question of autonomy, not as a declarative issue but as a genuine construct. I think that the positive relations that the Landless Movement and the Zapatistas have is a vital step forward. It would be very positive for the Forum if in future years the Zapatistas are integrated.

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For more on the role of Latin America in an increasingly multi-polar world see most recent issue of the *NACLA Report on the Americas*: "[The Multipolar Moment? Latin America and the Global South](#)" (September/October 2007).

Notes:

1. G. Arrighi, T. K. Hoptkins, I. Wallerstein, "Anti-systemic movements" ("Movimientos antisistémicos"), Madrid, Akal, 1999.