

## ***Book Reviews***

**Is there Hope for Uncle Sam? Beyond the American Bubble.** By Jan Nederveen Pieterse. London and New York: Zed Books, 2008, pp. 216. ISBN: 9781848130227 (Hardcover).

Reviewer: Habibul Haque Khondker, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Zayed University, Abu Dhabi, UAE. E-mail: [habib.khondker@gmail.com](mailto:habib.khondker@gmail.com)

The books on America are either flattering or over-critical. Either the US is presented as a shining model of democracy, a beacon of pluralism, civic participation and freedom or are books of the doomsday nature, i.e., America is the “evil empire” and so on. Jan Nederveen Pieterse’s book is an important addition to a critical reflection of the American society. It is neither adulatory nor overly critical. Nederveen Pieterse, a Dutch anthropologist turned sociologist, and currently Mellichamp Professor of Global Studies and Sociology at the University of California, Santa Barbara and an important figure in globalization studies, brings an European detachment, objectivity and fairness in his critical intervention of American society.

He privileges society over economy but it is not the conception of society that is disjointed from other spheres of life. He presents a reflection which is critical but not berating America, and he is not shy to mention the good side of the American politics, its contribution to social movements and civic activism. Yet, he is not hesitant in criticising the mortgaging of the US future to Israel lobby by pointing out – ironically, that criticisms of Israel that are acceptable in Israel are taboo in the US. Nederveen Pieterse gives the example of Anne Frank’s *Diary* and criticises the holocaust industry that is nurtured in the US, thanks to the strong pro-Israeli lobby. He points out that in the Netherlands, where Anne Frank hailed from – the Anne Frank Foundation is dedicated to anti-racism and sends a message against

discrimination and prejudices against minority (not just anti-Semitism) which includes Muslims and other new immigrants. In America, however, this is strictly used as a shield against anti-Semitism and service the holocaust industry. Nederveen Pieterse, being a Dutch, brings a keen European comparative perspective.

In this regard, Pieterse also takes on the lionisation of World War II and the role of the US in this war as an ideological discourse because it erases from the memory American aggressive wars such as in Vietnam and Korea. True, the US played the role of the good guy in the two world wars but the US also has its share of chequered history of interventionism and imperialism which needs to be put in perspective as well. The author, in particular, is critical of the George W. Bush doctrine of pre-emptive war.

The book is more sociological rather than political or economic in tone. The sociological reflection helps understand the underpinning of political and economic crises and malaise. The subtitle of the book, “beyond the American bubble”, captures the main thesis of the book.

A number of books have been published explaining the 2008 economic crash following the financial crisis of the Wall Street, which in matters of weeks morphed into a global financial crisis. Nederveen Pieterse’s book appeared just as the crisis was unfolding. It explains the crisis with a longer term perspective starting in the 1980s with the Reagan era. It all began as a cultural backlash of the civil rights movements of the 1960s and 70s. The cultural counterattack, and the resultant political backlash that saw the rise of Ronald Reagan first as Governor of California and then as President of the US in 1980 marked the beginning of roll-back of social reforms and progressive liberalism in America. The social consequence of such a roll-back has been a huge growth of socio-economic inequality in American society. While social inequality is one of the structural problems of American society the other is the problem of political hegemony and Nederveen Pieterse contends that these two main problems are connected.

Because of its geographical isolation and reinforced by an ideology of narcissism, America over the years has created a bubble in which it is solidly perched. The US also got used to a delusory

monologue that turned out into a babble – Nederveen Pieterse’s discussion of this in a long chapter, “The American Bubble,” puts the connection of culture, politics and economy in a clear light giving primacy to cultural but mainly political cultural transformation that has taken place since the Civil Rights movement in the United States giving rise to what he calls the Dixie politics.

Nederveen Pieterse argues that the US is marked by a decline and non-participation of civil society. He makes the claim by drawing attention to the growing impotence and irrelevance of American trade unions and marginalisation of social movements. As the American society is moving from an industrial to a service economy, trade unions have become further weakened. This gives the corporate leaders absolute power. A competitive industrial capitalism in America has been replaced by service-oriented crony capitalism. Politically, too, the US democracy, has been veered towards authoritarianism. On both fronts, America has lost its competitive edge. Here, Nederveen Pieterse quotes Daniel Bell to show the irony of political-economy of the cultural contradiction. According to Bell, the cultural contradiction in capitalism is caused by the permissiveness of the Sixties that led to the rise of hedonism which in turn created a culture of consumerism that sustains capitalism. It was ironical in the sense that many following Weber’s Calvinistic thesis believed that asceticism rather than hedonism was a catalyst for the emergence of capitalism. Nederveen Pieterse points out an additional irony that the conservatives are critical of permissiveness.

It is often unnoticed that over the years productivity of the American workers has increased manifold, yet their wages in real income have gone down, the phoenix-like rise of corporate salary in America has been scandalous to the extent that it invited opprobrium from the US President Barack Obama.

This is a telling evidence of growing income and social inequality in America. American inequality is not a feature of capitalism *per se* rather it is a product of a new brand of capitalism steeped in the ideology of neo-liberalism and financialisation of capitalism. Earlier brands of capitalism in America coupled with social welfare provisions which came out of new deal have been rolled back under the ideological pressures which caused or, are at least, lies at the base of the present crisis.

Nederveen Pieterse's discussion of the rise of the Dixie politics and its role in Dixie capitalism make an interesting argument. Tied to it is the rise of moral majority and the born-again Christian movement which cuts across both the Democratic and the Republican Party lines. The undue hold of Christian Right in both parties and the overall grip of religion in American politics have been subjects of several recent studies on American politics. Nederveen Pieterse does not go deep in that direction into an already crowded field which is fine because the main thrust of the book is the cultural and social underpinning of the US decline in political and economic terms. The influence of the American South and its animosity to the Northern (Yankee) liberalism is historically situated. How far this hypothesis is valid is a matter for American historians to ponder.

In chapters four, five and six, Nederveen Pieterse explores the issue of hegemony and the role of the US as an empire pointing out the contradictions of neo-liberalism and empire status. Here the author is in his elements. In an elegant summary on page 100 (Table 5.2) he collates the various strands of thesis on US hegemony and its likely future. This summary is invaluable to anyone interested in understanding the US and its role in the world. These positions range from "grand strategy" as espoused by *Foreign Affairs*, *National Interest*, which features authors such as Scowcroft, Kissinger, Brzezinski *et al.* steeped in realism through the position of "liberal hawks" such as Ignatieff, Friedman, and Zakaria to the position of "hegemonic decline" championed by Kennedy, Wallerstein and Amin, Arrighi and Soros. Nederveen Pieterse identifies the contradictions of many of these strategies and positions. As he says: "neoconservatives gloss over the cost of interventions. Liberal hawks face the problem of wanting to replace the bullet by the ballot via the bullet. Neoliberals face the contradiction of establishing free markets by coercion;..."(p. 101). Neoliberal globalisation and imperial war are contradictory goals and the US seems to be entrenched in this contradiction. As early as 1999, Richard Hass, a senior US State Department official, observed that US hegemony will fail in a globalised world that tends to diffuse power to diverse groups. It will create a situation, "that would make the costs of hegemony all the greater and its benefits all the smaller." (Hass quoted on p. 105).

Backed by statistics, Nederveen Pieterse goes at length to dwell on the US war on Iraq and its inhuman consequences and calls the bluff of US mission of spreading democracy in the Middle East and elsewhere in the world. With impressive marshalling of statistics, Nederveen Pieterse shows the decline of the US economy and the emergence of rival super powers in the making such as China, India, Russia and Brazil known as BRIC but also the emergence of sovereign wealth funds in China and the United Arab Emirates and so on. The author concludes that American decline is a by-product of American hegemony as he quotes an author, “America’s military bark is louder than its economic bite” (Varzi, quoted on p. 166).

The message is clear: the world is no longer unipolar. The US military unipolarity is juxtaposed by growing economic and political multipolarities in the world. How does the US deal with the situation? Is there a way out? The author suggests reinventing New Deal policies and a return to progressive social policies and commitment as a likely solution.

But is capitalism as a system in crisis? Nederveen Pieterse, a critic of neoliberal capitalism, concedes that what is happening is realignment and reorganisation of capitalism rather than a crisis of capitalism as predicted by Karl Marx in the mid-nineteenth century. A likely scenario is a roll-back of the criticism of the state and a partial return to a Keynesian economics. In this situation, we will be better off reconciling with the variety of capitalisms with multiple centres than with singularity of neoliberal capitalism and unipolarity.

The author will find his position vindicated by the fact that in the recovery of the financial crisis that has begun in Asia (China, Korea, Singapore, Indonesia, etc) as of July and August 2009, the state plays a critically important role.

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**Diplomacy: Theory and Practice in Islam.** By Wang Yong Bao @ Ahmed Musa. Kuala Lumpur, International Islamic University Malaysia Press, 2009, pp. 243. ISBN: 9789833855971 (Paperback).

Reviewer: Wahabuddin Ra’ees, Department of Political Science, Kulliyah of Islamic Revealed Knowledge and Human Sciences,