

Frail Visions

A review of Immanuel Wallerstein, *UTOPISTICS*. New York: The New Press, 1998
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Jim Dator

For some reason, I was sent a copy of *UTOPISTICS* (Yes, that's the title. More on that below), a new book by Immanuel Wallerstein. The subtitle is "Or, Historical Choices of the Twenty-first Century." (The publisher is the New Press of New York, 1998. ISBN: 1-56584-457-2). It is only 90 pages long and composed of three chapters.

The first chapter, titled, "The failures of the dreams, or paradise lost?" is a brief, brilliant history of the capitalist world-system over the last five hundred years, to the present. The chapter title tells it all: the 500 year long capitalist world-system has triumphed over each and every secular progressive movement against it, and resulted in (among other things) the most inegalitarian society in the history of the world because, in spite of the fact that there are large numbers of very rich who are richer than even the richest few could be previously, there are vastly more very poor, probably poorer than any were previously.

Chapter two, "The difficult transition, or hell on earth?" shows that the present world-system is in terminal crisis. It is not sustainable--neither socially nor environmentally. It is collapsing (and the fact that we are entering the A-side of a new Kondratieff wave merely makes matters worse, not better). There are increased possibilities for even more extensive war and violence over the next fifty years--the period of transition to "something else".

Chapter three, "A substantively rational world, or can paradise be regained?" is Wallerstein's attempt to state his "preferred future," as well as his analysis of all the ways his preferences probably won't be achieved and a world worse than the present will emerge.

I offer here a few additional comments:

1. By "utopistics", Wallerstein means what most of us would call our "preferred future"--our "eutopia" in contrast with our "utopia." He only uses the terms a few times in the beginning (but it IS the title of the book) and then never mentions it again.

These words are from the second paragraph of chapter one:

"Utopistics is the serious assessment of historical alternatives, the exercise of our judgement as to the substantive rationality of alternative possible historical systems. It is the sober, rational, and realistic evaluation of human social systems, the constraints on what they can be, and the zones open to human creativity. Not the face of the perfect (and inevitable) future, but the face of an alternative, credibly better, and historically possible (but far from certain) future."

In other words, as I said, what futurists call a "eutopia" in contrast with a "utopia" or a "dystopia."

Why didn't he say that. Why this very clumsy new term, especially as a title?

2. There are MANY things worth my quoting for your consideration. Here is only one. Wallerstein states that the period of transition from the collapsed capitalist world-system to another world-system "...will also be a period in which the 'free will' factor will be at its maximum, meaning that individual and collective action can have a greater impact on the future structuring of the world than such action can have in more 'normal' times, that is, during the ongoing life of an historical system." (Second paragraph, Chapter 2)

Wallerstein later returns to and stresses the extraordinary and important role which "free will" (individual and collective vision and action) can have during the period of transition, towards the end of Chapter 3.

3. Like everyone else, Wallerstein is a whole lot better at history than he is at futures visioning, and a whole lot better at saying why his preferred future won't be achieved than how it could be. It is clear he hasn't read much futures material very carefully, and his presentation is weakened because of that.

But the book is very well worth reading by everyone.