Since the end of the Cold War, the United States has expanded and solidified its hegemonic position in the international system. In Dying Empire: U.S. Imperialism and Global Resistance, Francis Shor argues that American global predominance may be coming to an end, pointing to grassroots resistance movements around the globe. This sheds some light on the contradictions engendered both abroad and domestically by great power politics, but Shor’s focus on a specific model of non-violent resistance reveals a liberal bias that ultimately falls short of explaining the dynamics that direct global politics. Nonetheless, Dying Empire provides a refreshing look on US foreign policy and highlights some important aspects of the current political order.

Following the fall of the Berlin Wall and the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the United States remained as the sole global superpower and fulfils that role to this day. This continuing preponderance is facilitated by a range of different factors: American military strength is unrivalled in the world today, the US economy is globally predominant, the dollar is the key international currency and the Americans have been able to influence other countries’ policies via institutions such as the World Bank and the IMF. This unipolar world order represents in many ways the culmination of a long history of power-seeking American foreign policy. Its roots go back to the brutal extermination of the continent’s native inhabitants and they were manifested internationally with the acquisition of new territories after the Spanish-American war of 1898. Interventions in Panama, Haiti, the Dominican Republic and Nicaragua followed as the United States endeavoured to expand its
sphere of influence across the American continent. This pattern was exacerbated after the Second World War, exemplified by the spread of American military bases across the globe, Cold War covert ops and proxy wars as well as the more recent invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq.

Despite the quite obvious parallels with the behaviour of previous imperial powers such as Spain, Holland and Britain, ‘imperialism’ is a word that is usually carefully avoided by Americans. It is true that the US does not typically engage in 19th century style direct government of overseas territories, but imperialism is seldom defined so narrowly, and there is a widely recognised difference between ‘formal’ and ‘informal’ methods of empire. The American political class, however, prefers to speak of ‘leadership’. Nonetheless it is hard to deny the moral and political contradictions inherent in US foreign policy, particularly in view of its often deadly consequences and the negative views held of American actions by a large share of the world population. Sadly, the American public is by and large unaware of—or uninterested in—these dynamics, and in mainstream discussions in the US there is no sign of a waning of the belief that it is good and right for the United States to run the world.

Notwithstanding the absence of a clear change of direction in American popular debates or foreign policy, the title of Francis Shor’s book—Dying Empire—suggests that the tide may be turning. Shor contends that the American empire is in its death throes, pointing to issues such as imperial overstretc h and the recent financial crisis, but he does not argue that this decline will quickly lead to the termination of American hegemony. This appears as a wise choice, for a serious investigation of the antagonisms and contradictions created and intensified by ongoing imperial policies is surely more interesting than political fortune-telling. What the book offers, then, is not a systematic inquiry into the emerging challenges to US hegemony, for example the growing economic power of China or the United States’ failure to impose a stable order in the Middle East, but rather an account of ‘the myriad forms of global resistance’ engendered by US imperial policies (2010, p. 1). This makes it difficult to assess Shor’s main assumption, for it remains unclear throughout the book how severe exactly the crisis of the American empire is. The perspective he has chosen is helpful, however, in appreciating the agency of those people who have been disaffected by American policy, and it tells us more about that policy through the messages returned to its sender.

The book is divided into three parts, each containing a number of separate chapters which, though they do complement one another, can be read as individual essays. The first part is titled ‘imperial constructions and deconstructions’ and it is concerned with efforts to ‘deconstruct’ imperialism at local and global levels. Its first chapter has the ambitious task of giving ‘a concise overview of both the long history of U.S. imperialism … and those ideological challenges to the recent neo-conservative re-articulation of the “New American
One of the most fascinating questions regarding the demise of empire is the interrelationship between internal and external factors; something which Shor implies is of pertinent importance to the United States. Will it be outdone by global competitors such as China and India, or will it ultimately succumb to hubris, decadence and imperial arrogance? *Dying Empire* does not pretend to provide an answer to this question, but one of its most important merits is its highlighting of the interconnections between foreign and domestic policies and the negative consequences of the former on the lives of American citizens. Empire, it seems, is a double edged sword: whilst it can provide enormous spoils for the imperialist power, it can also be a poison that corrupts as surely as any unchecked power does. Unfortunately, the contradictions in American society created by the country’s international disposition are not fully explored in the book, and Shor makes use of the somewhat unconvincing term ‘hectored heart’ to describe the American loss of altruism and love (2010, p. 37). Certainly, one should not discount the moral dimensions of the topic, but a reliance on goodwill puts one at risk of inclining towards too sentimental a point of view. Shor adopts no explicit, overarching theoretical framework, which is probably the reason behind the sometimes surprising—though also refreshing—sources and explanations provided. Luckily the final chapter of the first part, which deals with the tensions within local and global solidarity movements, gets it right. It can be read as an engaging account of the failure of grassroots movements to break through the cognitive limitations of their imperial context and to pressure the state into different modes of action.

The second part, titled ‘Whose Globalization?’ identifies three major ways in which the US has exerted influence over other countries. Through three separate chapters it highlights the ‘subtle interrelationship between coercion and consensus that defines the operation of hegemony as a ruling system. In addition’, Shor argues, ‘this formulation also reveals the critical dialectic between the macro operation of imperial geopolitics and military strategies and the micro functions of imperial capitalism’ (2010, pp. 59-60). Again this is an ambitious task, but it represents one of the main pillars of the book’s analysis and makes a strong contribution to the author’s overarching argument. The second part’s last chapter on cultural imperialism is a weak link, though, for despite the fact that it is well-written and
entertaining to read (it talks about *The Sound of Music*, hamburgers, *Moulin Rouge*, Bob Marley and MTV) it could have benefited from a more solid theoretical structuring; in particular Antonio Gramsci’s theory of cultural hegemony would have been well-suited to fulfil this task. This is not to say that the author should have forfeited his obvious preference for empirical richness over theoretical rigour, but in the case of this chapter it would have been interesting to see in slightly more depth how culture fits into the total amalgam of imperial strategies.

The final part of the book addresses the all too important question: is another world possible? Shor focuses on what he calls ‘transnational counterpublics’—a term borrowed from feminist political philosopher Nancy Fraser, related to nonviolent struggle, social justice, etc.—and states that ‘global networks have emerged that challenge U.S. imperialism while creating new sites of political engagement and resistance’ (2010, p. 110). This perspective seems similar to that of ‘micro revolutions’. It also suffers from the same problem: are these forces of ‘contestation’ potent enough to force those in power to a change of direction? Shor is very much aware of the tensions and limitations, as well as the typical middle-class bias, often present in the kind of movements he describes, but he places much hope in their political potential. ‘Transnational counterpublics and global resistance networks and campaigns’, he writes, ‘have been able to arouse not only other public actors but even, on some occasions and under certain circumstances, governments and international agencies. To the degree that transnational counterpublics can inject compelling voices into the virtual and public sphere … there will be increasing recognition for issues and campaigns that may start out on the political margins’ (2010, p. 123). This is undoubtedly true, but the question is; is this enough? *Dying Empire* espouses a utopianistic vision of building a better world, but in the tragic realm that is politics it might be necessary to fight fire with fire to achieve a more fundamental overhaul of the political constellation. The problem here is that the notion of armed resistance to imperialism is not considered at all, which represents a considerable elephant in the room. Not that violence is necessarily the only or the best method of true resistance, but it certainly is one that merits attention in conjunction with the more peaceable tactics preferred by Shor.

Despite these limitations *Dying Empire* is an impassioned and extremely enjoyable read. Given the breadth of the topics dealt with—each of the chapters would have deserved a full book in its own right—one of the challenges for the author was to balance more general (historical) narratives with detailed examples of grassroots movements. On this account Shor is exceedingly successful, with the result that *Dying Empire* avoids scholasticism in favour of a diverse, colourful and accessible approach. Though it is possible to critique Shor’s thesis from a Marxist or realist point of view, his work deserves credit for addressing some important and often ignored issues. For this reason it is to be hoped that *Dying Empire* will be read not only by
academic audiences, but particularly by a wider public, who will surely benefit from its argument.

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