

Joe R. Jones Notes
on
Sheldon S. Wolin,
Democracy Incorporated:
Managed Democracy and the Specter of Inverted Totalitarianism
[Princeton University Press, 2008]

Sheldon Wolin is Professor Emeritus of Politics at Princeton University and is the author of the magisterial work on Western political theory, *Politics and Vision: Continuity and Innovation in Western Political Thought*, expanded edition, 2004. As the title of this present work indicates—“Managed Democracy and the Specter of Inverted Totalitarianism”—Wolin is deeply critical of political developments in the U.S. in recent decades, but especially exemplified in the War on Terror and the Presidency of George W. Bush. Important Question: does Wolin’s diagnostic analysis and critique throw light on the present deep conflicts in American political life?

Preface:

Concept of **Totalitarianism**: a system of power that is:

- 1) invasive abroad
- 2) justifies pre-emptive war as official doctrine
- 3) represses all opposition at home
- 4) cruel and racist in principle and practice
- 5) deeply ideological
- 6) openly bent on world domination
- 7) as totalizing, it is obsessed with control, expansion, superiority, and supremacy.

Concept of **Inverted Totalitarianism**: project power inward.

Represents the *political* coming of age of corporate power and the *political* demobilization of the citizenry.

Critical questions for this book:

- 1) what causes a democracy to change into some non- or anti-democratic system?
- 2) what kind of system is a democracy likely to change into?

Definition of **Superpower**: the projection of power outwards that is:

- 1) indeterminate;
 - 2) impatient with restraints;
 - 3) careless of boundaries;
 - 4) capable of imposing its will at a time and place of its own choosing.
- Superpower represents the antithesis of constitutional power.

Ch. 1: Myth in the Making

pp. 4ff.

Sept 11, 2001: the bombing of the World Trade Center and the Pentagon.

Cf. the co-option of Xn religious images:

“The mythology created around September 11 was predominantly Christian in themes. The Day was converted into the political equivalent of a holy day of crucifixion, of martyrdom, that fulfilled multiple functions: as the basis of a political theology, as communion around a mystical body of a bellicose republic, as a warning against political apostasy, as a sanctification of the nation’s leader, transforming him from a powerful officeholder of questionable legitimacy into an instrument of redemption, and at the same time exhorting the congregants to a wartime militancy, demanding of them uncritical loyalty and support, summoning them as participants in

a sacrament of unity and in a crusade to 'rid the world of evil.' Holy American Empire?" 9-10

Ch 2: Totalitarianism's Inversion: Beginnings of the Imaginary of a Permanent Global War 15ff.

Using the concept of a '**political imaginary**', Wolin avers that a political imaginary gains a hold on the ruling groups and becomes a staple of the general culture and the political actors and the citizens become habituated to that imaginary and identified with it. 18

[An example, in my diagnostic language, of a construal of the future that is politically formative and informative of a political community's discourses and practices about who they are and what they are to become. The concept is important for Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, 2004.]

Wolin sees two contrasting political imaginaries in contemporary American politics:

- 1) **constitutional imaginary**: prescribes the means by which power is legitimated, accountable, and constrained.
- 2) **power imaginary**: seeks constantly to expand present capabilities and powers.
The inherent desire for power as control over and increasing control over.
Thomas Hobbes: fear drives the citizenry to agree to be ruled by an absolute power in exchange for protection from enemies and domestic peace. 19

The problem is that the power imaginary may override the boundaries of the constitutional imaginary justified by a special mission: defeating communism, terrorism, e.g.

Amidst much lying and misrepresentation, empire is construed and imagined as a precondition for the preservation of democracy. 20

Historic American Imaginaries:

- 1) FDR's liberal version of a social democracy.
- 2) The Cold War against Communism:
- 3) Global War on Terror

Wolin argues that both the Cold War and the War on Terror have been sold as requiring the sacrificing of the social democracy of FDR.

These created the imaginary of total war, involving the extension of executive power to the right and responsibility to exceed constitutional limits in the interest of protecting the nation. 28

Note how the media are co-opted to perpetuate the imaginary.

Loyalty oaths, anti-communism/pro-free enterprise capitalism, anti-liberal and social programs. Herein is the emergence of a Totalitarian imaginary. 35

Ch. 3: Totalitarianism's Inversion, Democracy's Perversion 41ff

Wolin reminds us: Bush claims that the US is the greatest power in the world and Wolin asks: how is this greatest power constituted and legitimated in relation to the original Constitution?

How do we get from democracy as a system of government by which the citizenry delegates power to the gov't—and has only those powers thus delegated—to an acquisition of power unanticipated in its founding Constitution? 43

Hence, Wolin invents the concept of **Inverted Totalitarianism** to name a new type of political system that succeeds by encouraging political disengagement rather than mass mobilization and relies on private media to disseminate propaganda reinforcing official versions of events. 44

Superpower is the possession of unprecedented and unequalled strength and influence as global power. A new identity as global power.

Yet for Wolin, **democracy proposes a different understanding of 'power' as first and foremost rooted in equality: equal sharing of burdens and benefits.**

"the political" involves the commitment to finding where the common good lies amidst a welter of interests.

But superpower is dependent on capitalism and corporate power, not on equality and the common good. 60-66

Ch. 4: The New World of Terror

“Terrorism is both a response to empire and the provocation that allows for empire to cease to be ashamed of its identity.” 70

Had to create the **imaginary of the terrorist** as simply irrational violence without apparent cause or reasonable justification; absolute evil is assigned to the terrorist and allows superpower to cloak its power in innocence. 71

Hobbes: the sovereign power is to protect the citizens from what they fear most—not death, but violent death. 76

See marvelous quote from D’Tocqueville on how a benevolent despot might seduce the citizenry. 79-80

Ch. 5: The Utopian Theory of Superpower: The Official Version

Superpower is primarily an attempt to reconstitute the nation’s identity. 82

There are three recurring elements in utopian visions:

- 1) the founders of utopia possess special knowledge concerning the right social order.
- 2) the utopian must imagine it possible to possess the powers capable of establishing and realizing the utopian order.
- 3) the opportunity of bringing utopia into existence and the skill in seizing and exploiting the moment. 83

Republican utopia couples together freedom, democracy and free enterprise, in which it is the economy of free-enterprise-capitalism that has the power to create and distribute goods---a system of power greater than the Constitution.

[Wolin will explore capitalism and corporate power later.]

The **opportunity** for the capitalist vision and realization is the invasion of Iraq: to impose on Iraq the utopian vision of democracy dependent on free enterprise.

Yet in Iraq, Superpower succeeded only in providing an answer to the question of 9/11: “why do they hate us so?” 93

Ch. 6: The Dynamics of Transformation

Explores the transformation that appears decisively in the election of 2000, the Florida debacle and the Supreme Court, and the response to 9/11.

Here is where we get **managed democracy**.

In contrast to collectivism, Inverted Totalitarianism idealizes individualism and adulates celebrity to paper over the fact that instead of a sovereign citizen-body there is only a “lonely crowd”. To give this crowd a sense of belonging together, superpower provides a mix of patriotism and nationalism, and unthinking loyalty to the troops. While corporate power and its ethos are incorporated into the structure of the state, the patriotism, nationalism, and unblinking loyalty of the citizenry connect the constitution for preservation to the constitution for increase. 112.

Ch. 7: The Dynamics of the Archaic

‘Archaism’: the fondness of singling our privilege moments in the past when a transcendent truth was revealed, typically through inspired leader, a Jesus, a Moses, a Founding Father. 117

Two texts are identified as twin absolutes—unchanging universal truths—of political order:

1. the Bible
2. the Original Constitution

Joined with reverence for the *invisible hand* of free enterprise capitalism.

Archaism in Wolin’s mind tends to support republicanism rather than democracy as a system in which the responsibility for saving the Many devolves on a selfless elite, an elect though not necessarily elected! 121

Wolin tries to explain the migration of evangelicals to the Republican Party but with considerable puzzles along the way.

Ch. 8: The Politics of Superpower: Managed Democracy

Wolin aims to show that the republican embrace of free enterprise as the prime distributor of goods is empowered by the corporation as the model of the prime organizer of economic and political power—the corporation as not only good economical organization but political as well.

Argues that the ethos of the corporation is:

- 1) Competition
- 2) defeating the competitor
- 3) managed from the top down by an hierarchical elite.
- 4) in order to survive the corporation must be continually expanding—new markets.
- 5) the governing norm is profit
- 6) historically tends to move profits into the hands of the managers rather than either the workers or the shareholders.

Wolin argues that the ethos of the corporation is antithetical to the ethos of a democracy as a cooperative enterprise of equals.

Proposes that:

- 1) Republicans embrace the corporation model and ethos as the rule by the elite
- 2) Democrats are more attuned to the model of civic responsibility in the context of equality of citizens.

In the words of Reagan: Republicans believe that government is itself the prime problem, while democrats believe the state has the interests of all the citizens in its work and responsibilities.

The Republicans have institutionalized a counter-democratic state. 157

Ch. 9: Intellectual Elites Against Democracy

Studies that sort of elitism rooted in a sense of entitlement reinforced by elite education and corporate business.

Aims to undermine a democratic sense of equality and thereby supports the privileges of education and corporate leadership which entitle one to benefits that democratic equality would seem to question.

Comments on Leo Strauss—a political philosopher who accentuates the givenness of inequality and justifies a political economy that rewards the elites; the elites are the ones ready to lead without having to please the *demos*—the citizens, the people.

Also on Samuel Huntington, *The Class of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order*.

Ch. 10: Demotic Politics in the Era of Superpower and Empire

Inverted Totalitarianism does not seek unanimity but divisiveness: not the rule of the many as one, but the rule of the coordinated Few. 185

The key components are corporate capital, the very rich, small business associations, large media organizations, evangelical Protestant leaders, and the Catholic hierarchy.

The aim is to control politics.

The contemporary Republican Party is both antidemocratic and illiberal—it is not conservative but radically oligarchical and organized to preserve inequalities of opportunity and wealth. 187

Why is democracy bearing the stigma of empire? 189

Wolin—the Vietnam War defeat was a victory of domestic politics, but for the advocates of Superpower it was a defeat that must be reversed.

Bush I and Bush II both thought of Gulf War as the breaking of the Vietnam syndrome and the Iraqi war as the righting of the reluctance to use overwhelming power in national interests globally pursued. 190-91

Question: can imperial power aim to dominate beyond the nation without also dominating the citizenry?

The fact that empire and imperial politics were taboo subjects in the 2004 election argues that the electorate has been subdued. 192.

Empires are not about justice; concurrently justice has disappeared from the vocabulary of domestic politics. 193

Power by lobbies, deregulation of the market, and intimidation of media are signs of the imperial rule over the demos.

In place of the citizen-participant the new politics courts the viewer-consumer; creates followers who want to feel secure rather than being participants

Antipolitics is expressed as patriotism, antiterrorism, militarism. 198

[patriotism needs enemies and threats and fears]

The fundamental political question is whether democracy can cohabit with imperial Superpower. 207

Ch. 11: Inverted Totalitarianism: Antecedents and Precedents

For Republicans supporting democracy means supporting free enterprise, without regard for any principle of equality.

Good discussion of political history in the US 218-225.

Wolin's critique of the Founding Fathers and the Constitution 225ff

Framers aimed at establishing a strong central gov't--a national power.

The framers were not interested in democracy shaped by the principle of equality as citizens and were suspicious of the interests of the *demos*, who were subject to 'passions contrary to their own true interests.'

The American political system was not born a democracy but of anti-democracy sentiments.

The people reigned but did not rule.

The framers understood that democracy meant in some sense majority rule as the essential means for expressing the popular will. But such expressions needed to be hedged in.

The framers fashioned a variety of devices in order to filter the majority will.

They limited popular elections to only one branch—the House.

They created checks and balances that made it difficult for a majority to control all branches of gov't.

The president and the Senate were to be elected indirectly.

Neither the Original Constitution nor the Bill of Rights contained any provision guaranteeing the right to vote for national offices.

[Note: liberal theorists often praised the checks and balances as prophylactics to vengeful or xenophobic demos; Wolin thinks it plays into the hands of property owners as the real powers of governance.]

Madison deliberately intended to create a disaggregated demos—similar to current Republican policies.

Ch. 12: Demotic Moments

See discussion of the various meanings of 'democracy historically'. 242-44, 248-53.

Ongoing tension in American politics:

1. politics and political power defined by economic status: **politics of exclusion**

2. politics and political power defined by equality of citizenship: **politics of inclusion** 249

Note Wolin on "**fugitive democracy**": if a demos were to form it would have to form outside of and against the current system. 254

Republican theory from the beginnings was about the rule by the competent elite who were wise and able to disregard and rise above immediate self-interest.

Republican theory was a counterforce to demotic power. 256.

Wolin argues that today the meaning of democracy can be regressed by affirming:

1. the primacy of Congress
2. curbing the growth of presidential power
3. enforcing an austere system of campaign financing. 258

Ch. 13: Democracy's Prospects: Looking Backward

Wolin thinks Superpower and Inverted Totalitarianism have turned the demos into spectators instead of participants. But willful and compliant spectators.

Consider some of Wolin's remarks about **Democracy, Lying, and Truth-Telling**; 260ff.

"If democracy is about participating in self-government, its first requirement is a supportive culture, a complex of beliefs, values, and practices that nurture equality, cooperation, and freedom. ...a crucial need of a self-governing society is that the members and those they elect to office tell the truth. ...Self-government is, literally, deformed by lying.

It is only mildly hyperbolic to characterize lying as a crime against reality. Lying goes to the heart of the never-ending questions, what is the world really like? what is in fact happening?

In a preliminary way lying can be defined as the deliberate misrepresentation of actuality and the substitution of a constructed 'reality'. The problem today is that lying is not an isolated phenomenon but characteristic of a culture where exaggeration and inflated claims are commonplace occurrences. For more than a century the public has been shaped by a relentless culture of advertising and its exaggerations, false claims, and fantasies—all aimed at influencing and directing behavior in the premeditated ways chosen by the advertiser. The techniques developed for the marketplace have been adapted by political consultants and their media experts. The result has been the pollution of the ecology of politics by the inauthentic politics of misrepresentative government, claiming to be what it is not, compassionate and conservative, god-fearing and moral.

Lying is more than deception; the liar wants the unreal to be accepted as actuality, so he sets about to establish as true what is not actually the case, nor really real. A lie by a public authority is meant to be accepted by the public as an "official" truth concerning the 'real world'. At bottom, lying is an expression of a will to power."

The principle of thoughtful participation is fundamental to democracy and is dependent upon:

1. the availability of knowledge in the form of reliable factual information.
2. a political culture that values and supports attempts to reach judgments that promote the best interests of the whole society.
3. intellectual integrity. 262

Consider now Wolin on Democracy and Capitalism: 268ff

"Put starkly, the crucial political issue of our times concerns the incompatibility between the culture of everyday reality to which political democracy should be attuned and the culture of virtual reality on which corporate capitalism thrives. ...there is no political affinity between democracy and a system that assumes inequality among investors and reproduces inequality as a matter of course, depends on individual self-interest as an incentive, practices a politics of misrepresentation, and hence is inconsistent with such democratic values as sharing, caring, and preserving.

The fate of democracy is to have entered the modern world at the same moment as capitalism, roughly during the seventeenth century. As a consequence the course of each became intertwined with the other. This meant, among other things, that attempts to establish a democratic culture were an uphill struggle. At first democracy and capitalism were occasional political allies pitted against the stratified order of monarchy, aristocracy, and established church. Then, as each became more politically self-conscious, more aware of divergent concerns, each began to define an identity and pursue

strategies that reflected the reality of opposed interests, contrasting conceptions of power, and disagreement as to what degree of equality or inequality each could tolerate without compromising their respective systems.

The persisting conflict between democratic egalitarianism and an economic system that has rapidly evolved into another inegalitarian regime is a reminder that capitalism is not solely a matter of production, exchange, and reward. It is a regime in which culture, politics, and economy tend toward a seamless whole, a totality. Like the regimes it had displaced, the corporate regime manifests inequalities in every aspect of social life and defends them as essential. And like the old regimes the structure of corporate organization follows the hierarchical principle of gradations of authority, prerogative, and reward. It is undemocratic in its structure and modus operandi and antidemocratic in its persistent efforts to destroy or weaken unions, discourages minimum wage legislation, resist environmental protections, and dominate the creation and dissemination of culture (media, foundations, education).”