NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY

Sheldon Wolin and Democracy: Seeing Through Loss

A DISSERTATION

SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS

for the degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Field of Political Science

By

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EVANSTON, ILLINOIS

June 2018

Abstract

This dissertation examines the political thought of Sheldon Wolin. Perceiving a crisis of technocratic liberalism in the postwar period, Wolin develops a critique of modernity that emphasizes the loss both of political vision and of local cultures and traditions. His subsequent radical democratic theory identifies a contrapuntal American tradition of local self-governance that he continually fears is being lost. I argue that this approach to democracy offers important insights into recent crises of liberalism by attending to narratives of loss that have largely been harnessed by right-wing populism. At the same time, however, Wolin's tendency to focus on loss means that he often downplays the persistence of white and male supremacist nationalism and the value of modern rights and institutions. The dissertation interrogates the troubling aspects of Wolin's approach through engagements with other postwar critics of liberalism, contemporary theorists of democracy, and critical race theorists. It argues that, although Wolin's understanding of tradition remains too monolithic, he ultimately develops a more complex, "polymorphous" understanding of democracy that combines traditional with transgressive and state-centric elements. The dissertation concludes by examining Wolin's efforts to reconcile his understanding of political theory with his broader notion of political education.

Acknowledgements

For feedback on drafts of this dissertation I wish to thank to my committee members: Mary G. Dietz, James Farr, Joan Tronto, and, George Shulman. Earlier on in the project I benefited from the written feedback of Harlan Wilson and from conversations with Wendy Brown, Anna Terwiel, Alvin Tillery, and the Northwestern University Political Theory Workshop.

I am grateful that, during the early stages of my dissertation research, the late Sheldon Wolin graciously spoke with me about his work and offered encouragement, despite his frailty.

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1. Introduction: Seeing Through Loss

"The struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting."

–   Milan Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*[1]

"The function of memory is not only to preserve, but also to throw away."

–   Umberto Eco[2]

Introduction

The success of Donald Trump's campaign to "Make America Great Again" demonstrates the ongoing power narratives of loss and redemption in American politics. This and other recent right wing populist movements attempt to re-assert, against both political elites and scapegoated minorities, the voices of those who consider themselves losers in an increasingly liberal and globalized world order. Such nationalistic assertions of the popular will are not only bound up with sustaining white and male supremacy but also tend to stoke authoritarianism rather than cultivate political participation beyond the electoral moment. In other words, right wing revolts against political elites tend, ironically, to empower elites further. This is particularly striking in the case of Trump, a person who, while credited for his lack of political experience, was nevertheless born into

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[1] Milan Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (New York, NY: Harper Perennial, 1994), p. 4.

[2] Celestine Bohlen, "A Lover of Literary Puzzles," *New York Times* (October 19, 2002), available online at: https://www.nytimes.com/2002/10/19/books/a-lover-of-literary-puzzles.html.

great economic privilege and educational opportunity that ensured him political

influence. Given these inegalitarian aspects of right wing populism, there may be a

temptation in the aftermath of Trump's victory to spurn any political narrative rooted in a

sense of loss for American democracy's golden age, let alone one that strives for

redemption. Such narratives may seem indistinguishable from a refusal to surrender racial

and gendered privilege, and to counterproductive policy outcomes that materially harm

most working people.

However, arguably, it is precisely the failure of some forms of liberalism to

acknowledge and reckon with the losses of modernity and postmodernity that creates the

political vacuum inhabited by figures such as Trump. Losses indeed abound in neoliberal

and globalized era, as rapid deindustrialization, an ideology of market flexibility, and

political corruption have produced a condition of continual debt, instability, and precarity

for most Americans, not only for white males. For some, the kind of liberalism

epitomized by Hillary Clinton's campaign arrogantly assumes continual historical

progress and disavows not only particular job losses from neoliberal trade deals but also,

more broadly, the powerlessness experienced when society seems increasingly

fragmented, local cultures are eroded, and historical continuities fade.[3] Since Trump's

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[3] One example of the Democratic Party' establishment's seeming disregard for the loss of local roots under neoliberalism is its support for charter schools and willingness to close neighborhood schools in cities such as Chicago. Harold Meyerson, "How the Charter School Lobby is Changing the Democratic Party," *Los Angeles Times,* (August 26, 2016), available online at: http://www.latimes.com/opinion/op-ed/la-oe-meyerson-charter-school-democrats-20160826-snap-story.html; Juan Perez, Jr., "Chicago Public Schools Closing and Consolidation Plan Would Affect Thousands of Students" *Chicago Tribune,* (December 1, 2017), available online at:
http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/local/breaking/ct-met-chicago-school- closings-englewood-south-loop-20171201-story.html.

victory, there has been much hand wringing amongst liberals and Leftists about whether

his supporters were driven primarily by economic despair or, rather, by white and male

supremacy.[4] The truth is likely somewhere in between: that without an alternative vision

that unites enough Americans through a frank acknowledgment of the costs of neoliberal

economic policy and related forms of cultural loss, too many voters will channel a

general sense of disempowerment into nationalistic rage against minorities, immigrants,

queers, and women. For this reason, reckoning with loss may be necessary not only to

grasp the success of right wing populist movements but also to forge a path beyond the

Democratic Party's bankrupt neoliberal agenda.

In the academic domain, contemporary political theorists have ostensibly been

more attuned to narratives of loss than has the DNC. Since the 1980s, theorists on the

Left have struggled to articulate collective aspirations that both accept the limits of

conventional Marxist notions of class and come to terms with the decentering

potentialities of identity politics and postmodernism. Since conservatives can draw

boundaries through traditional exclusions, they are at a natural advantage in articulating

visions of commonality, even if such visions are mostly used to advance economic

policies that serve elites. Accordingly, there have been waves of rumination on the

academic Left regarding how theorists might mourn radical pasts in a way that allows for

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[4] Emma Green "It was Cultural Anxiety That Drive White, Working-Class Voters to Trump" *The Atlantic* (May 9, 2017), available online at: https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/05/white-working-class-trump-cultural-anxiety/525771/

new solidarities and without succumbing to the paralysis of what Walter Benjamin calls "Left melancholia."[5]

As the acceleration of neoliberalism heightened concerns about the decline of collective action and political antagonism, Wendy Brown, Jacques Rancière, Chantal Mouffe and others identified a general condition of "post-democracy" or "post-politics."[6] Meanwhile, globalization and the increasing power of transnational capital also meant the complication, if not erosion, of the state form in which democracy had been understood to operate. Brown thus identified neoliberalism not only with the loss of the democratic imaginary of rule by the people, but also with the loss of its necessary form, arguing that liberal democracy has been hollowed out from within. In one sense, these analyses of "post-democracy" neglect the ongoing power of nationalism and are dramatically challenged by the resurgent right wing populisms of recent years. Interpreted more narrowly as diagnoses of the Left, however, they illuminate the political vacuum that was denied by the Democratic Party establishment and seized upon by Trump.

While the aforementioned democratic theorists recognize the absence of a symbolic framework for the Left of the kind supplied by Marxism or nationalism, they nevertheless often fail to address other losses of the contemporary era. Namely, they neglect the loss of cultural longevity, stable ways of life, roots, and meaning - elements of

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[5] Wendy Brown, "Resisting Left Melancholy," *boundary 2* 26:3 (1999), pp. 19-27; Elizabeth Anker, "Left Melodrama" *Contemporary Political Theory* 11:2 (2012), pp. 130-152.

[6] Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (New York, NY: Zone Books, 2015); Chantal Mouffe, *On the Political* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2005); Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

what Hannah Arendt calls "social texture" – amidst neoliberal instability and precarity.[7] In other words, they identify a general political vacuum in liberalism, but may not sufficiently appreciate the human need to feel rooted in a time and place, to feel at home in the world. Consequently, they are ill equipped to contend with the Right, which has succeeded in tapping into this need amongst some segments of the population by reinforcing age-old white and male supremacist ideologies.

This dissertation argues that, while Sheldon Wolin may be similarly naïve in underestimating the ongoing appeal of right wing populism, he develops a perspective on democracy that is more deeply shaped by an attunement to loss than most contemporary theory. He too addresses the challenge of developing an egalitarian political vision, first in the postwar era in which his thought took shape, then amidst post-Marxist anxieties about identity politics and postmodernism, and up to the twenty first century. Moreover, he ultimately recognizes the erosion of the constitutional state form in a globalized era as a loss for democracy. However, Wolin has also long claimed that the loss of local cultures and historical continuities leads to political disempowerment. He critiques modern societies not only for their liberal individualism but also for the disorientation produced by instrumental rationality and large-scale organizations, a disorientation that he claims only worsens under postmodern globalization. His attempts to acknowledge these losses and revive local democratic participation disclose important aspects of democracy that are often neglected by other theorists. At the same time, he struggles to reconcile this emphasis with an adequate critique of white and male supremacist nationalism, or an adequate appreciation of democratic dynamism, rights, and institutions.

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[7] Hannah Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York, NY: Harcourt, 1968), p. 293.

These blind spots, and Wolin's subsequent attempts to confront them, disclose

ongoing tensions between different requirements of democratic empowerment. For this

reason his work offers unique insights into both the importance and the risks of narratives

of loss for democracy, particularly for democracy in the United States.

In a late essay, "Political Theory: From Vocation to Invocation," (2000) Wolin

discloses his tendency to view political phenomena through the prism of loss, making the

only autobiographical statement in any of his texts. His "confessional note" reads: "My

formative experiences are: a child during the Great Depression, a flier in World War II, a

Jew during the era of the Holocaust, and an activist during the sixties – all, except the last,

experiences dominated by loss."[8] These experiences, he suggests, bestow a general

sensitivity to loss that allows him to grasp forms of powerlessness that might otherwise

by obscured. Indeed, the essay goes on to identify the memorialization of loss as the

primary task of political theory. This tendency is evident in Wolin's early work as he

bemoans the decline of the vocation of political theory. In *Politics and Vision* (1960) he

delineates and seeks to recover a tradition of theorizing dating back to antiquity. He

associates this theoretical crisis with a broader loss of political vision in modernity,

warning that the rise of liberalism and absence of political education may open the door

to extreme, even totalitarian re-assertions of "the political." Crucially, this diagnosis of

modernity also claims that the modern "age of organization" erodes the local bases of

power that would allow for an egalitarian expression of the political.

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[8] Sheldon S. Wolin, "Political Theory: From Vocation to Invocation" in Jason Frank and John Tambornino (eds.) *Vocations of Political Theory* (Minneapolis, MI: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), p. 3-22.

In thus crafting a narrative of decline, and finding in modern trends the seeds of twentieth century catastrophes, Wolin joins other postwar critics of modernity such as Arendt, Strauss, and the early Frankfurt School. These thinkers can all be understood to illuminate aspects of political life not stressed by theorists of more modernist or postmodernist persuasions. All also risk neglecting more promising aspects of modernity. Yet Wolin is unique amongst these theorists, both in the sense that he is the only radical democrat, and in the sense that his writings extend until the twenty first century. For these reasons his work is especially valuable in speaking to current debates about right wing populism and the need for political reinvigoration on the Left.

While Wolin's early work pleads for a re-envisioning of egalitarian political life, it does not offer a political vision beyond a vague call to renew practices of citizenship. However, he soon found inspiration for such a vision in the popular movements of the 1960s, especially his first hand experience of the Berkeley Free Speech Movement. For conservative critics of modernity such as Strauss and his followers, the 1960s was a catastrophe, an escalation of the modern decline of authority and morality. Some on the Left are also skeptical of the legacies of the 1960s, questioning the extent to which its participatory politics were merely expressive or prone to splinter into numerous identity-based antagonisms.[9] Wolin turns such readings on their heads, finding in the 1960s a Leftist political vision that is both conservative in the sense that it preserves customs threatened by modernity, and centered on a sense of commonality. In the 1980s, he draws on this appreciative reading of the 1960s to craft a jeremiad for an American tradition of

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[9] E.g. Todd Gitlin, *Twilight of Common Dreams* (New York, NY: Henry Holt and Company, 1995.)

grassroots democracy originating in the seventeenth century and threatened by both liberal individualism and modern organizational power. He thus locates both the symbol of democracy ("The American People") and the form of democracy (local deliberation) in the past. This feat of imaginative recovery offers an alternative narrative of loss to compete with the right wing conservatism of Reagan. Indeed, Wolin alleges that Reagan's traditionalism is phony and serves as a mere smokescreen for the anti-democratic forms of modern power that his politics advances. In proposing a vision of radical democracy rooted in a sense of loss for American tradition, Wolin stresses the importance of decentralized power, of local memories, cultures, and practices. These aspects of democratic empowerment are minimized not only by neoliberals but also by many theorists' attempting to critique neoliberalism and conceive democracy more radically.

Yet, although Wolin distinguishes his "archaic" vision from conservatisms of the Right, even a genuinely decentralized archaism must reckon with the potential of any nostalgic politics to succumb to parochialism.[10] Any vision of "the people" drawn wholesale from the past, even from the 1960s, inevitably bears traces of white and male supremacy. For most people of color and queers, and for many women, it is imperative that the loss of these aspects of tradition be borne, even celebrated. An inclusive understanding of the demos must be less simple, and more fluid, than the kind of unmediated myth of the past that Right wingers lean on in order to "make American great again."

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[10] "Archaic" is Wolin's term. See, e.g., Sheldon Wolin, *The Presence of the Past* (Baltimore, MD: The John Hopkins University Press, 1989), Chapter 4.

Wolin's turn to the enigmatic concept of "fugitive democracy" in the 1990s is, I argue, partly an attempt to confront these limitations of his own archaic vision. With this conception he ceases to locate the symbol of democracy wholly in the past, advocating instead a "continual self-fashioning of the demos." While still valuing traditional democratic practices of local deliberation, Wolin develops a more ambivalent view of history. With this shift, in fact, he seeks to "bracket" all established identities, including minority identities, which he fears will fracture solidarity on the Left. Alas, problems related to historical memory and identity cannot be resolved so easily. Cultures and practices rooted the past cannot be entirely extricated from identities, often problematic ones. Moreover, minorities and women should not be denied the identity-laden language needed in order to actively address ongoing imbalances of power. While Wolin's work discloses crucial democratic dilemmas related to historical memory and identity, these dilemmas call for a more sustained confrontation with the messiness of identity and a more complex understanding of tradition and of political coalition than his conception of the "continual self-fashioning of the demos" allows.

While Wolin always stresses local deliberation as an indispensible form of democracy, his confrontation with the limits of archaic identity in the 1990s also point towards a more complex, "polymorphous" conception of democracy. First, he increasingly comes to value episodic, ruptural manifestations of democracy for their capacity to challenge sedimented imbalances of power. He struggles with, but does not resolve, the tension between such novel, transgressive politics and settled practices of local deliberation. He still worries that the cultural disorientation of modernity will only worsen in postmodern period and he remains forever hostile to technology.

Second, while archaic localism is at odds with the organizational power of the state, Wolin occasionally acknowledges in the 1990s that a more comprehensive politics is needed to address antidemocratic forces. Then, at the turn of the twenty first century, his appreciation for major institutions and the state grows. He observes the centralized state fusing with transnational capital and claims that American constitutionalism is giving way to imperial expansion.[11] He coins the terms "Superpower" and "Inverted Totalitarianism" to describe this new neoliberal configuration.[12] At this point, while remaining committed to both localist and trangressive aspects of democracy, Wolin expresses a more robust appreciation of constitutional limits and calls for the consolidation of the basic institutions of representative democracy as part of a polymorphous democracy. In other words, he only comes more fully to recognize the value of state institutions and constitutional guarantees once he perceives that they are being lost. Thus, Wolin's later work suggests that, in order to achieve an egalitarian sharing of power, democracy must take different, even perpetually antagonistic forms.

It is of course also in this postmodern context that Trump's right wing archaism has won its victory. On the one hand, Wolin's work validates the sense of loss Trump supporters express regarding the erosion of local cultures amidst rapid economic shifts and social dislocation. It connects more deeply with the expressed losses of these constituencies than do relatively superficial critiques of our "post-political" moment. On

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[11] This chronology is problematic since the US always had an imperial dimension. See E.g. Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States* (New York, NY: Harper Perennial, 1980); Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1993), p. 5.

[12] Sheldon S. Wolin, *Democracy Incorporated: Managed Democracy and The Specter of Inverted Totalitarianism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008.)

the other hand, Trump's campaign has not responded to globalization by affirming institutions and cultivating power at the local level as Wolin recommends. Instead, Trump supporters have, even if unwittingly, further embraced corporate rule and a now brazenly authoritarian brand of racist nationalism.

While some commentators recognize the theme of loss in Wolin's work, they do not fully explain the work that it does in highlighting aspects of democracy neglected by other contemporary democratic theorists.[13] Conversely, the sparse secondary literature has not grasped how the limitations of this focus on loss lead to shifts in his ideas over time, such as his turn to fugitive democracy in the 1990s and his belated appreciation of the state at the turn of the twenty first century.[14] This dissertation is not only an intellectual history but also situates Wolin critically in relation to other developments in contemporary democratic theory and assesses the bearing of his ideas on the current historical moment. In this opening chapter I elaborate and contextualize the central intellectual continuities and shifts in Wolin's work, underscoring his persistent tendency to emphasize the loss of the conditions for democracy. I show how this emphasis on loss

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[13] Brown, Euben and Xenos recognize Wolin's emphasis on loss, but do not explain how this enables him to emphasize aspects of democracy neglected by other contemporary democratic theorists. Wendy Brown, "Specters and Angels at the End of History" in. Jason Frank and John Tambornino (eds.), *Vocations of Political Theory*; Peter Euben, "The Polis, Globalization, and the Politics of Place" in Aryeh Botwinick and William Connolly (eds.), *Democracy and Vision: Sheldon Wolin and the Vicissitudes of the Political* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001); Nicholas Xenos, "Wolin Between Two Worlds" *The Good Society* 24 (April 2015), pp. 180-190.

[14] David McIvor and Jason Frank recognize that Wolin's work ultimately incorporates multiple registers. However, they do not understand this complexity as a result of Wolin's confrontation with the limitations of his own archaism. Nor do they underscore the ongoing tensions between these registers: David McIvor "The Conscience of a Fugitive: Sheldon Wolin and the Prospects for Radical Democracy," *New Political Science* 38:3 (2016) pp. 411-427; Jason Frank "Is Radical Democracy a Tradition?" *Contemporary Political Theory* 16:1 (2017), pp. 76-82.

shapes both his critiques of modern and postmodern power and his evolving

prescriptions for cultivating authentic democracy. The dissertation as a whole is animated

by the conviction that this intellectual tendency or mood yields distinctive and urgent

insights into the failings of liberalism and the requirements of democratic practice in the

twenty first century, insights which are not grasped by other contemporary approaches to

democratic theory. However, as I also indicate in this opening chapter, I seek to

interrogate thoroughly the dilemmas that Wolin encounters in taking this approach. The

chapter concludes with an overview of subsequent chapters, which bring Wolin into

conversation with other theorists in order to elaborate the key shifts in his thought and

assess the ongoing value of his work.

Postwar Losses: The Theoretical Vocation and the Promise of Citizenship

When Wolin's early classic *Politics and Vision: Continuity and Innovation in

Western Political Thought* (1960) was first published, the discipline of political theory

was widely considered to be in crisis. For some, the atrocities generated by

totalitarianism's complete politicization of life pointed to liberal individualism as the

only rational justification for social organization. Particularly within the United States

academy, the Cold War consolidation of this antithesis between totalitarianism and

liberalism produced an atmosphere of public consensus and rendered especially unclear

what task remained for political theory to perform. This crisis of political theory occurred

in tandem with the ascendency of behavioral political science, which eschewed

fundamental reflection on forms of life in favor of accumulating value-neutral knowledge

that could serve incremental policy reform. If theory was not to become dryly

historical or entirely redundant, then, it needed to make a case for the ongoing importance

of a normative, nonscientific discourse on politics. For some, this meant giving liberalism

more intellectual depth. For others, it meant doubting liberalism as an adequate public

philosophy and theorizing citizenship or democracy beyond it (See Chapter Two.)

In *Politics and Vision* Wolin engages this crisis by tracing the alleged modern

decline of "the political" in both theory and practice. He defines "the political" as an

expression of "what is common to the entire community," and claims that theoretical

reflection on it has been lost amidst the intellectual triumph of liberalism.[15] Perceiving "a

marked hostility towards, even contempt" for political theory, he attempts to "make clear

what it is we shall have discarded."[16] He does so by examining theorists from Plato

onwards, shaping a lost object – the great tradition of political theorizing – that brings

contemporary deficiencies into relief. Accordingly, his account of modern political

thought focuses on John Locke's alleged liberalism, while democracy is barely

mentioned and attempts by canonical thinkers such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau to conceive

a common life are either not examined or dismissed as "substitute love objects" for the

political.[17] While critics such as Jeffrey Isaac criticize Wolin's articulation of the

theoretical tradition as illusory, arbitrary or neglectful of marginal voices, others still find

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[15] Sheldon S. Wolin, *Politics and Vision* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), p. 4.

[16] Ibid, p. xxiii.

[17] Ibid, p. 329.

inspiration in the powerful way it harnesses past texts to illuminate mid-Twentieth Century predicaments.[18]

   While Wolin's democratic theory first grows out of this attempt to defend his academic vocation, *Politics and Vision*'s tragic plot suggests not only that scholarly appreciation of "the political" has declined but also that this dimension of human existence has declined in practice. The totalitarian perversion of collectivity on the continent notwithstanding, Wolin follows Louis Hartz in understanding modern American culture as uniformly liberal and devoid of ideologies of collective life.[19] At the close of *Politics and Vision* Wolin even goes on to question the supposed dichotomy between liberalism and totalitarianism, suggesting that the liberal disavowal of the political dimension of experience could have totalitarian consequences, as people "resort to even the most extreme methods to re-assert the political in an age of fragmentation."[20] This focus on the supposed political vacuum of liberalism obscures the white and male supremacist traditions that have thrived in the United States as visions of the political. It also means that Wolin downplays the value of modern rights and representative institutions.

   Politics and Vision suggests that the losses occurring in modernity stem partly from the disenchantment of liberal individualism. But it also suggests that these losses stem from a deep structure of instrumental rationality and, relatedly, imposing forms of

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[18] Jeffrey Isaac, "The Strange Silence of Political Theory," *Political Theory* 23:4 (1995): pp. 636-652; Corey Robin, "Sheldon Wolin's the Reason I Began Drinking Coffee," *The Good Society* 24:2 (2015): pp. 164-173.

[19] Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America* (Orlando, FL: Harcourt, 1955.)

[20] Wolin, *Politics and Vision*, p. 389.

bureaucratic, scientific, technical, and economic power.[21] These aspects of modern

power curtail the conditions for meaningful participation and thus undermine modernity's

promise of a democratic expression of the political. Moreover, Wolin's critique of

modern power applies to both liberal and totalitarian societies, as he claims that they

share organizational features in common. Thus, while he may not go so far as to make

totalitarianism and liberalism two sides of the same coin, his concerns about liberalism's

political vacuum and its organizational affinity with the USSR combine to significantly

subvert the supposed dichotomy between them.[22] And, given that in America the value of

modern rights and elections were widely accepted as essential to democracy, Wolin does

not pause to value them as achievements of modernity. Instead, to compensate for

liberalism's deficiencies and to ward off the totalitarian threat, he considers it the role of

theory to re-conceive common life in a radically egalitarian, participatory vein. Later, in

his influential article "Political Theory as a Vocation," (1969) he more explicitly entreats

political theorists to engage in "epic" feats of imagination and conceive visions of

commonality allegedly absent in the world at that time.[23]

As we shall see through a discussion of Claude Lefort [Chapter 2], Wolin's

refusal to recognize a non-totalitarian version of the political existing in modernity, and

his call for radical imagination, is not shared by all those who identify a crisis of political

theory in the wake of totalitarianism and the rise of the social sciences. This deep

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[21] A parallel critique is found in Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society*. Trans. John Wilkinson. (New York, NY: Knopf, 1964.)

[22] This kind of "Convergence theory" of liberal and communist societies appears also in, e.g., C. Wright Mills, *The Power Elite* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1956).

[23] Sheldon S. Wolin "Political Theory as a Vocation" in *American Political Science Review* 63:4 (1969): pp.1062-1082.

suspicion of modernity is echoed by a narrower set of thinkers, such as Hannah Arendt

and Leo Strauss, who likewise perceive a loss of "the political" amidst modern liberalism,

find continuities between central trends of modernity and totalitarianism, and look to the

past for inspiration (See Chapter Two.) Yet these thinkers subscribe to quite different

conceptions of "the political," Wolin's being the most egalitarian and least prone to

retrieve elitist notions of virtue. While his suspicion of modernity ultimately shapes his

vision of democracy, it is not yet clear in his early work how he might conceive the lost

political treasure that he grieves, given the obviously inegalitarian features of most pre-

modern societies. In *Politics and Vision*, Wolin's only recommendation for resisting

liberalism and rediscovering the political is to embrace our roles as "citizens" of a state.[24]

This leaves unresolved his criticism of modern organizational power, which would

otherwise seem to cast doubt on the bureaucratic state as an appropriate vehicle of the

political.

With the turmoil of the 1960s, and especially the escalation of the Cold War via

the conflict in Vietnam, Wolin's view of the United States further darkens and he comes

to diagnose his political milieu as "systematically deranged."[25] At the same time,

however, the popular movements of the sixties indicate a path out of liberalism and

towards grassroots participation. Through these movements Wolin begins to develop a

conception of the political that exceeds his earlier appeal to citizenship, a theory of

democracy that counters not only individualism but also modern organizational and

economic power. At first, and despite their supposed resistance to modern organizational

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[24] Wolin, *Politics and Vision*, p. 389.

[25] Wolin, "Political Theory as a Vocation," p. 1080.

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power, the movements of the 1960s appear to disclose something novel and creative as

well as conservative. As Wolin would later recall, the activism of the 1960s was his only

formative experience not dominated by loss. In a series of articles co-authored with John

Schaar for the *New York Review of Books*, he examines the tactics of the Berkeley student

movements in detail. He urges activists to build on the Port Huron Statement in order to

generate a "coherent and comprehensive theory" for their "new" politics, and then scolds

their failure to do so.[26]. Wolin would never again engage this closely with youth

movements.

From the 1960s to the Rise of Reagan: Wolin's Archaic Vision of Democracy

Wolin subsequently took up this task, developing a participatory vision of

democracy as the egalitarian sharing of power, a vision at odds with modern science and

technology and increasingly hostile to corporate capitalism and the state. Whereas his

earlier appeal to citizenship assumes the centrality of the state, his participatory vision is

resolutely decentralized, aligning more closely with his critique of modern large-scale

organizational power. Asked later about this shift, Wolin responds simply: "I changed my

mind."[27] By the time his theory of radical democracy crystallizes in the early 1980s, his

appreciation of the novelty of sixties activism diminishes and his sorrowful tone

intensifies. Not only does he observe the politics of the 1960s becoming more marginal in

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[26] John H. Schaar and Sheldon S. Wolin, *The Berkeley Rebellion and Beyond* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1970).

[27] Ronald Beiner, "Democracy and Vision," *Bulletin of Science, Technology and Society* 24:1 (2004), pp. 60-62.

subsequent years; he also comes to associate it with an older heritage he seeks to retrieve. The sixties was, he suggests, the fleeting resurgence of a beleaguered American tradition of participatory democracy dating back to colonial period and championed by the anti-federalists. Against his previous Hartzian reading of American culture as uniformly liberal, he identifies a contrapuntal American tradition of local self-governance, originating in early modernity but in opposition to many of its tendencies, which allows citizens to share in power. This oppositional tradition contrasts also with the less radically egalitarian republican tradition that thinkers such as J.G.A. Pocock simultaneously attempt to retrieve from the American founding.

Wolin's attempts to retrieve a participatory tradition are captured in his short-lived interdisciplinary journal *democracy* (1981-83) and culminated in the 1989 essay collection *The Presence of the Past: Essays on the State and the Constitution*. Here he even refers to America's radically democratic practices as "archaic," coming most fully to realize the anti-modernist tendencies evident in his early work.[28] Of course, in order for Wolin to associate 1960s movements with such a tradition, he must emphasize the elements of these movements that seem to buck trends of modernity – the discovery of shared concerns, and possibilities for decentralized action– over their countercultural elements. Like his earlier efforts to delineate a theoretical tradition in response to political theory's disciplinary crisis, he now shapes a lost tradition of democratic practice in response to what he perceives as America's contemporary democratic deficits.

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[28] Sheldon S. Wolin, *The Presence of the Past* (Baltimore, MD: The John Hopkins University Press, 1989), Chapter 5.

Wolin's archaic vision conceives democracy as local, both in the sense that it develops on a small scale and in the sense that it thrives on customs specific to its location. He finds increasing inspiration in Montesquieu's emphasis on dispersed power, Alexis de Tocqueville's understanding of local self government, and John Dewey's conception of democracy as a "way of life" dependent on habit.[29] More specifically, democracy revolves around practices of deliberation through which "shared and common concerns" are articulated.[30] Wolin considers such democratic practices essential for an egalitarian sharing of power and claims they are put at risk by not only liberal individualism but also large-scale forms of modern organization and corporate capitalism. Whereas modern power makes the generation of power a sui generis act of will, truly democratic power has "diverse origins" in "the family, school, church, workplace": "From a democratic perspective, power is not simply force that is generated; it is experience, sensibility, wisdom, even melancholy distilled from the diverse relations and circles we move within." To prevent the disempowerment of ordinary citizens, we must be attuned to the potential loss of these roots of democratic life, "the manifold origins of power."[31]

Insofar as Wolin's vision of archaic democracy does not prescribe an institutional model it departs from certain aspects of the epic, visionary theory called for in "Political Theory as a Vocation." He does not abandon his commitment to develop a holistic diagnosis of social ills, or his epic aspiration to offer a clear alterative vision. However,

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[29] John Dewey, *Political Writings* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1993), pp. 240-45.

[30] Sheldon S. Wolin, "The New Public Philosophy," *democracy* 1:4 (1981), pp. 23-36.

[31] Sheldon S. Wolin, "What Revolutionary Action Means Today," *democracy* 2:4 (1982), pp. 17-28.

he comes to regard architectonic theories as elitist and hopelessly aligned with modern organizational power.[32] Consequently, his epic theory of democracy is based on a cultural myth rather than architectonic constructions. When reflecting on his theoretical approach he most often identifies with Alexis de Tocqueville, who offers "a conception of theory that [is] epical in form but resigned to being antiarchitectonic in substance."[33] Tocqueville employs an "impressionistic" theoretical style that provides a broad perspective on social reality but is attentive to local custom and, crucially, focused on the imaginative recovery of the past.

While Wolin's archaic vision of democracy is not centered on large-scale institutional forms, it is centered on settled practices and a common culture. Moreover, in the pivotal article "The People's Two Bodies" (1980) Wolin identifies this tradition with "the demos," claiming not only that it allows for common concerns to be articulated but also that it bestows a collective identity – "the body politic" – on the American people.[34] Alas, he claims, this democratic identity has been increasingly marginalized by an alternative identity of "political economy," associated with institutional centralization, rationalization, and corporate capitalism. Democracy's prospects were dealt major blows by the centralizing tendencies of the Constitution and the Civil War, and further curtailed

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[32] Sheldon S. Wolin, *Hobbes and Epic Tradition of Political Theory* (Los Angeles, CA: William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, 1970.)

[33] Sheldon S. Wolin, *Tocqueville Between Two Worlds: The Making of a Political and Theoretical Life* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), p. 181.

[34] Sheldon S. Wolin, "The People's Two Bodies," *democracy* 1:1 (1981), pp. 9-24.

in the 20th Century. In the 1980s Wolin identifies a "crisis in collective identity" as the fleeting hopes of the 1960s fade.[35]

Claiming that the world "owes a historic debt to America for the freedom that has enabled democracy to survive, even if mainly as an endangered species,"[36] Wolin calls the American people back to their best selves. He is aware that attempting to retrieve a lost American tradition may seem problematic given the cultural conservatism being championed by Ronald Reagan and others. However, he dismisses this ideology of the New Right as "pseudotraditionalism," claiming that its supposed commitment to decentralization is a hoax masking Reagan's embrace of centralized power and of rapid economic and technological change.[37] He contests the Right's monopoly on narratives of loss and seeks to reclaim a more authentic conservatism. Indeed, the 1980s saw a broader anti-modern moment emerging among some Left intellectuals in the United States, as evident in other contributions to the interdisciplinary journal *democracy* and elsewhere.[38] Although this Left archaism offers crucial insights about democracy, Wolin would come to acknowledge that it is not cleansed of its potential parochialism simply by distinguishing it from Reagan's allegedly phony alternative.

While in the 1980s American thinkers in other disciplines echoed Wolin's archaic perspective on democracy, political theorists, particularly those emerging from

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[35] Wolin, *The Presence of the Past*, p. 13.

[36] Sheldon S. Wolin, "On Nationalism," *The Nation* (July 15, 1991), pp132-3.

[37] Wolin, *The Presence of the Past*, p. 23.

[38] E.g. Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton, 1979); T.J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture 1880-1920* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1981.)

continental intellectual traditions, often neglect it. Through his archaism Wolin

stresses the local memories, cultures and practices that constitute the "manifold origins of

power" and cultivate genuine self-governance. While he illuminates the local textures of

democracy through a narrative of American exceptionalism, they are significant elements

of democratic empowerment more generally. Yet these elements are often overlooked,

not only by neoliberals, but also by political theorists who attempt to move beyond liberal

individualism and deepen our understanding of democracy. In Chapter three I examine,

for instance, Laclau and Mouffe's alternative approach to radicalizing democracy,

arguing that they are less attuned to the memories, local cultures, and practices that Wolin

claims are part of the democratic experience, or the risks posed to them in modernity.

They thus have less to say to communities struggling with a sense of loss and social

dislocation in addition to the general vacuity of liberalism.

Wolin's tendency to view the political in terms of loss and retrieval, and his

resulting archaic vision of democracy, are simply not shared by most democratic theorists

working within continental intellectual traditions. To be sure, such theorists may be

animated by loss in the different sense that they formulate ideas amidst the exhaustion of

Marxism and its revolutionary promise. Indeed, from Jürgen Habermas, to Jacques

Derrida, to Laclau and Mouffe, many theorists explicitly frame their projects as responses

to Marxism's collapse. There have been related waves of rumination since the 1980s over

how a utopian imagination may appropriately be mourned without succumbing to a "Left

melancholy" that merely mimics its lost object.[39] However, the loss of a Marxist progress

narrative is quite different to the losses that concern Wolin. For him, the modernist

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[39] Wendy Brown, "Resisting Left Melancholy"

Marxist project is not a major preoccupation because, while he draws on Marx for his critique of capitalism, this tradition did not play the historical role in America that it did elsewhere. Instead, Wolin is animated by the perceived loss of a counter-modern American tradition of radical democracy.

Moreover, with the possible exception of figures such as Alain Badiou and Antonio Negri, most contemporary theorists have accepted the loss of the revolutionary possibility and do not attempt to revive it. Post-Marxists such as Habermas and Laclau and Mouffe seek merely to reconceive a form of collective power that incorporates pluralism, so as to sustain a radically egalitarian politics and, at times, a critique of capitalism. While they let go of a Marxist progress narrative, they do not thereby embrace fading counter-modern traditions. Laclau and Mouffe may have a more ambivalent view of modernity than, say, Habermas. But that does not mean they stress the potential loss of the local memories, practices and cultures that Wolin claims are put at risk by modern organizational and economic power. Indeed, even American thinkers such as William Connolly, who seek to elaborate the ethos or micro-practices that sustain radical democratic politics, do not match Wolin's emphasis on tradition and historical memory. More recent critiques of our "post-political" condition by these and other thinkers bemoan the loss of radically democratic hopes amidst neoliberalism, but do not engage the older loss of local cultures stressed by Wolin.

Confronting the Limits of Archaism in the 1990s: Contesting Identity and Form

However, by identifying democracy with a specific local tradition Wolin is inevitably at greater risk than other democratic theorists of condoning parochialism. While conservative traditions counter anti-democratic structural forces of centralization, science, technology and corporate capitalism, they also harbor anti-democratic cultural forces.[40] Ever since his early Hartzian reading of American culture as uniformly liberal and individualistic, Wolin is generally slow to acknowledge that white and male supremacy persist as visions of common life in American culture, as instantiations of "the political." He cannot sidestep this problem simply by asserting that his archaic vision belongs to the Left while Reagan's traditionalism is phony. Such an assertion does not explain how Wolin intends to confront ascriptive historical traditions, the loss of which perhaps ought to be borne, or even celebrated, rather than resisted or reversed. He is particularly ill equipped to confront these issues when he reifies past democratic practices into a unified "identity," even a "body" of the American demos. Such narratives of lost identity are undeniably reminiscent of reactionary discourses on the Right. At the same time as he seeks to revive such an identity, he is also too quick to malign the "identity politics" of women and minorities. Eager to supply a unifying vision, Wolin alleges that such movements divide the Left without sufficiently acknowledging that they are borne from the oppressive white, male identities harbored by majoritarian traditions.

According to Freud, while the melancholic may have "a keener eye for the truth" than others, he clings to an object that, in many cases, is a phantom that cannot even

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[40] George Shulman, "The Pastoral Idyll of *democracy,*" *democracy* 3:4 (1983), pp. 43-54.

clearly be perceived. Unlike the temporary state of mourning, through which a

concrete object is grieved, melancholia has features in common with narcissism.[41] In the

political domain, Walter Benjamin accuses Left intellectuals of harboring such

melancholia for radical traditions, and claims that this amounts to a "negativistic quiet," a

fatalism that can only by afforded by "those who are most remote from the process of

production."[42] While Benjamin is concerned here with the Marxist tradition, one might

accuse Wolin similarly of succumbing to a melancholy for America's democratic

traditions. In order to confront the risks of his archaism, then, Wolin must do more than

cursorily reject archaisms of the Right and their inauthentic appeals to decentralism. He

must also develop an actively ambivalent relationship to the past. Melanie Klein

considers such a posture to be the outcome of healthy mourning, a process that requires

one not to free oneself entirely from lost love objects but rather to incorporate them

partially as sources of growth.[43]

To develop such a relationship to America's traditions it is necessary to recognize

their inegalitarian baggage as well as their democratic promise. It is also important to

recognize that American history includes not only a unitary white- and male-dominated

tradition, but also radically subversive black and feminist traditions. In recognizing this,

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[41] Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia" in Thierry Bokanowski, Leticia Glocer Fiorini, and Sergio Lewkowicz (eds.), *On Freud's Mourning and Melancholia* (London, UK: Karnac Books, 2007), pp. 19–34.

[42] Walter Benjamin, "Left-Wing Melancholy" in Anton Kaes, Martin Jay, and Edward Dimendberg (eds.), *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994), p. 305.

[43] Klein's view of mourning is put to use for political theory by Isaac Balbus, *Mourning and Modernity* (New York, NY: other Press, 2005); and David McIvor, "Bringing ourselves to Grief: Judith Butler and the Politics of Mourning" *Political Theory* 40:4 (2012), pp. 409–36.

one might incorporate elements of the past selectively, retrieving what Hannah

Arendt's calls "rich and strange" "thought fragments" "from what had been handed down

in one solid piece."[44] Such fragments can be creatively reinterpreted and put to new

political uses. While Arendt shares many of Wolin's concerns regarding the losses of

modernity, even claiming that the loss of tradition paved the way for totalitarianism, she

holds, with Benjamin, that this loss of a central tradition is permanent and should not be

entirely resisted. Instead of attempting to "to retie the broken thread of tradition" Arendt

suggests that we discover new perspectives on the past:

"Tradition and past are not the same… With the loss of tradition we have lost the thread

which safely guided us through the vast realms of the past, but this thread was also the

chain fettering each successive generation to a predetermined aspect of the past. It could

be that only now will the past open up to us with unexpected freshness and tell us things

no one has yet had ears to hear."[45]

Such an ambivalent and multidimensional relationship to the past implies also an

ambivalent relationship to the present. It cautions against viewing modernity entirely

through the prism of loss, and instead allows one to see *through* loss in the sense of

seeing beyond it to recognize also the value of the new. In doing so one may resist the

kind of melancholia that merely mimics lost political traditions in ways that are

paralyzing or unsuited to contemporary problems.

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[44] Hannah Arendt, "Introduction" in Walter Benjamin *Illuminations* (New York, NY: Schocken Books, 1968), pp. 50-51.

[45] Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future* (New York, NY: Penguin, 1968), pp. 14, 93.

Wolin does in fact come to partially recognize the limitations of his counter-modern narrative of loss. Even while he defends archaic democracy in *The Presence of the Past*, he concedes, "religious fundamentalism, 'moralism,' and racial, religious, and ethnic prejudices belong to the same historical culture as traditions of local self-government… and sentiments of egalitarianism."[46] He considers these aspects of tradition to be unacceptable, distinguishing radical democracy from nationalism by its insistence that "everyone is 'in.'"[47] Democracy implies an impulse to "reduce and ameliorate the effects of social, economic, *cultural*, and political inequalities," and, he concedes, archaism may be the source rather than the remedy of some such inequalities.[48] Thus, along with his defense of archaism, he counsels remembrance of, and reflection on, the historical injustices that American democracy has allowed.

Taking this more ambivalent perspective on the past, Wolin continues to value archaic practices but lets go of his previous idealization of a settled and unified democratic "identity," rarely matching the boldness of his conception of the American demos in "The People's Two Bodies." When in the 1990s he begins to theorize democracy as "fugitive," he ceases to associate "the demos" with a traditional identity to be retrieved. Instead, the demos emerges momentarily in an improvised and spontaneous fashion, expressing a "common experience rather than in a common life."[49] Wolin entrusts this "continuing self-fashioning of the demos" with challenging the anti-

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[46] Wolin, *The Presence of the Past*, p. 79.

[47] Wolin, "On Nationalism," pp. 132-3.

[48] Sheldon S. Wolin, "Agitated Times" *Parallax* 1:4 (2005), pp. 2-11, emphasis added.

[49] Sheldon S. Wolin, "Democracy, Difference, and Re-Cognition," *Political Theory* 21:3 (1993), pp. 464-483.

democratic forces harbored by tradition.[50] For Wolin, the anti-democratic forces of race and gender must not only be recognized but might also be fundamentally challenged, or "re-cognized."[51] He continues to value archaic practices of local deliberation, and to center them on a unitary tradition, but hopes that this tradition can be divorced from any exclusionary identity. [See Chapter Three.]

In addition to revising his understanding of democratic identity in this way, Wolin comes also to accept that local deliberation may not be the only form of democratic practice suited to confronting some injustices. We may need less settled, more eruptive practices as well. In his discussions of "fugitive democracy," Wolin begins to focus on a more dynamic, ruptural style of democratic politics that is antagonistic to all institutionalization. Such transgressive politics has had moments of triumph in history but is not bound to a particular time and place and is inherently disruptive of convention. At times Wolin's turn to these alternative forms appears to be driven merely by the realization that, given most citizens' lack of leisure time, the kind of sustained, active deliberation required for an egalitarian sharing of power cannot be comprehensively achieved. In this sense, it reads like a complaint that local participatory culture is unsustainable, rather than an acknowledgment of its inherent limitations as a democratic practice. However, the conception of fugitive democracy is so enigmatic because it is also an attempt to come to terms with the fact that settles local cultures and practices can

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[50] Sheldon S. Wolin, "On Rawls' Political Liberalism," *Political Theory* 24:1 (1996), pp. 97-142.

[51] Wolin, "Democracy, Difference, and Re-Cognition."

imply parochialism and Wolin's view that, since democracy "condemns its own denial

of equality and inclusion," such limitations must be overcome.[52]

Some readers take Wolin's turn to fugitive democracy to imply that he comes

fully to embrace an anarchic politics, perhaps similar to the one defended by Jacques

Rancière.[53] However, Wolin's appeal to fugitive democracy ought to be understood in the

context of his broader oeuvre and its persistent themes of loss and localism.[54] While

Wolin ceases to view democratic politics entirely through the losses of modernity, he

remains anxious that transgressive politics will decenter democratic practice in ways that

make sustaining power more difficult. It is unclear how such a politics can sustain power

insofar as it disregards all boundaries and embraces momentariness or rupture. Wolin

claims that, in contrast to the "leisurely pace" of local deliberation, fugitive democracy

reflects the problematic pace of contemporary life, "the temporalities of economy and

popular culture [which] are dictated by innovation, change, and replacement through

obsolescence."[55] His anxiety about these decentering tendencies of transgressive politics

is mirrored by his indictment of much contemporary political theory, which he claims

[52] Sheldon S. Wolin, "Transgression, Equality, Voice" in Josiah Ober and Charles Hedrick (eds.), *Demokratia: A Conversation on Democracies Ancient and Modern* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), pp. 63-90.

[53] Both Nicholas Xenos and, from a more critical perspective, George Kateb claim in the 1990s that Wolin has decided in favor of transgressive politics, placing it above his earlier emphasis on local deliberation [See Chapter Three]: George Kateb, "Wolin as a Critic of Democracy" and Nicholas Xenos, "Momentary Democracy" in Aryeh Botwinick and William Connolly (eds.), *Democracy and Vision: Sheldon Wolin and the Vicissitudes of the Political*.

[54] McIvor and Frank partially appreciate this. McIvor "The Conscience of a Fugitive: Sheldon Wolin and the Prospects for Radical Democracy"; Frank "Is Radical Democracy a Tradition?"

[55] Sheldon S. Wolin, "What Time Is It?" *Theory and Event* 1:1 (1997).

also identifies power inequalities everywhere and so cannot center its critique on state

and corporate power. Contemporary theory continually generates new analyses of power

but does not yield a careful, holistic diagnosis of our condition. It has thus "exchanged

the tempos of deliberation and contemplation for the temporal rhythms of contemporary

culture and economy."[56]

To curb the excesses of transgressive politics, then, Wolin maintains that

democracy must also preserve an important place for the local discursive traditions, even

while their limitations are acknowledged and they are no longer associated with a fixed

identity. He attempts to accommodate both modes of politics, claiming that democracy

operates through numerous styles of politics, all of which may be important but none of

which, perhaps, add up to a settled system. Democracy is "a phenomenon that can be

housed, but may not be realized, within a form"; it is "not so much amorphous as

polymorphous," "embracing a wide range of possible forms and mutations that are

responsive to grievances."[57] Indeed, arguably, Wolin remains primarily committed to the

local deliberative politics that he associates with an American past and for which he

grieves. This continuing emphasis becomes clear in the final phase of his career. As he

confirms in a late essay, "democracy's best hopes lie at the local level of state, county,

and municipality. In those locations the tempo of politics is slower, the opportunities to

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[56] Wolin, "What Time Is It?"

[57] Sheldon S. Wolin, "Fugitive Democracy" in Seyla Benhabib (ed.), *Democracy and Difference: Contesting the Boundaries of the Political* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), pp. 31-45; Sheldon S. Wolin "Norm and Form: The Constitutionalizing of Democracy" in Peter Euben et al. (eds.), *Athenian Political Thought and the Reconstruction of American Democracy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994), pp. 29-58, emphasis added.

Wolin, *Politics and Vision*, p. 602.

stop and think more numerous, and the possibilities for meaningful participation greater."[58] Wolin acknowledges simply that transgressive politics or agitation can remedy localism's excesses, that "mass protest, raucous demonstration, street theater" can be "a means of educating particularism, energizing it to challenge the center."[59] Wolin's anxieties about the decentering tendencies of transgressive politics and his acknowledgment of the parochialism of tradition persist in an uneasy but necessary tension. [See Chapter 4]

Postmodernity: The Redoubling of Loss and a Return to the State

Although in the 1990s Wolin develops a more ambivalent view of the past, tempering his defense of tradition with an appreciation of dynamic, transgressive politics, he still seems quite unappreciative of the rights and institutions of representative government that other theorists consider an essential (if paradoxical) element of modern democracies. Wolin's early work, formulated amidst widespread celebration of America's constitutional democracy, criticizes the US Constitution and the Civil War for their role in the centralization of power and warns that a liberal focus on rights and large-scale institutions may usurp civic activity. As he begins to question his archaic vision, he does occasionally recognize that some injustices cannot be addressed through "backyard politics" and require engagement with the state. However, these concessions are inadequate given, for instance, the primary role that the 14th amendment and federal

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[58] Wolin, "Agitated Times."

[59] Ibid.

legislation have played in confronting racial inequality at state and local levels. In

Wolin's "fugitive" phase, he only further condemns constitutions and centralized power

in general for curbing the transgressive energies of the demos. In the last stage of his

career, however, Wolin comes more fully to appreciate the rights and institutions

established by constitutions. He does so only once they appear threatened by what he

calls "postmodern power" and "inverted totalitarianism." This shift reaffirms Wolin's

recurrent tendency to value political phenomena insofar as he perceives them to be lost or

at imminent risk of being lost.

In the 1980s Wolin condemns a surreptitious increase of centralized power and

the simultaneous displacement of democratic values by an ethos of economic efficiency

and high technology he terms "political economy." By the turn of the twenty-first century

these trends continue, while the globalization of capital and the increasing dependence of

politicians on corporate interests begin to yield a novel kind of "postmodern power." In

the postmodern era, power is "simultaneously concentrated and disaggregated."[60] The

centralized state remains strong but the institutions of representative democracy have

been hollowed out and state power is now fused with boundless transnational corporate

power that bursts through constitutional constraints. Wolin identifies in the United States

an increasingly expansionist foreign policy and the curtailment of civil liberties since

9/11 as signaling the erosion of a constitutionally bounded political form and a turn

towards imperialism.[61] Finally, he worries that greatly expanded communication

technologies and rapidly shifting cultural mores across borders will erode local cultures

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[60] Wolin, *Politics and Vision,* p. xxi.

[61] Sheldon S. Wolin, *Democracy Incorporated: Managed Democracy and the Specter of Inverted Totalitarianism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008).

that sustain democracy, even as they may serve the more transgressive elements of democracy that he strives to appreciate.

While the emergence of postmodern power occurs in seeming continuity with America's political system, Wolin claims that we have actually witnessed a fundamental break, even a "regime change" from the modern constitutional state into a totalizing, imperial, yet formless, power.[62] Postmodernity is even more threatening to democracy than modern organizational power, as citizens are increasingly subject to forces beyond their reach and comprehension, social dislocation accelerates and democratic engagement further wanes. While earlier he had questioned the supposed dichotomy between liberalism and totalitarianism by identifying causal relationships and parallels between them, he now goes further and claims that neoliberalism's "post-political" condition constitutes a new "inverted" kind of totalitarianism. Inverted totalitarianism shares features with classical totalitarianism: aggressive expansionism, a weak legislative body, surveillance, militarized policing and a distorted media environment. It differs, however, in its atomization and pacification of the populace, and in not openly asserting its departure from the existing political system.

Faced with boundless postmodern power, Wolin appears finally to appreciate not only settled local practices and, to a more limited extent, transgressive politics, but also the constitutions that uphold rights and establish institutions. In *Democracy Incorporated* (2008) he expresses dismay that the United States is exchanging the stable boundaries of constitutionalism for imperial expansion. While constitutional democracy does not guarantee participation, and carries the threat of liberalism and bureaucratic ossification,

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[62] Wolin, *Politics and Vision,* p. xvi.

Wolin now seems to recognize that the law-bound sovereign jurisdiction it provides is more conducive to democracy than is boundless postmodern power. Thus, he urges us to defend the constitution as part of a polymorphous democracy, to "renew the meaning and substance of representative democracy," make use of state power, and even "nurture a counterelite of democratic public servants."[63] The secondary literature on Wolin has thus far scarcely recognized how his diagnosis of inverted totalitarianism marks a late shift in his posture towards the institutions of representative democracy.

At the turn of the twenty-first century, Wolin's pens "Political Theory: From Vocation to Invocation," disclosing his formative experiences of loss and suggesting that the memorialization of loss is the primary task of political theory. While this essay is the only instance of explicit autobiography in Wolin's work, the simultaneous release of his long-awaited tome *Tocqueville Between Two Worlds* (2001) may be his most dramatic autobiographical gesture.[64] Here Wolin identifies with Tocqueville not only in the sense that they share an anti-architectonic style of theory, but also in the sense that loss animates their oeuvres. Tocqueville, Wolin argues, is a thinker "burdened with dispossession and haltingly searching for means of retrieval."[65] Whereas Tocqueville supposedly grieves a fading aristocratic world, Wolin now grieves both the archaic democratic practices he has long defended against modern dangers *and* the democratic aspects of modernity itself. "One possible task for today's theorist," he suggests, "is to

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[63] Wolin, *Democracy Incorporated*. p. 291.

[64] As he notes earlier in "The Politics of Self-Disclosure," it is the book form in which the persona of the writer is most at stake. Sheldon S. Wolin, "The Politics of Self-Disclosure" *Political Theory* 4:3 (1976), pp. 321-234.

[65] Wolin, *Tocqueville Between Two Worlds*, p. 7.

ponder [Tocqueville's] example and to undertake the task of retrieving a receding

democratic present in order to counteract even more novel forms of despotism."[66] Despite

Wolin's increased appreciation for transgressive politics and his shifting perspectives on

major institutions and the state, his tendency is to return to the theme of loss.

Conclusion

Since Donald Trump's election as President of the United States, there has been

much discussion among shocked liberals and Leftists about how retrospectively to

comprehend his campaign's appeal. Of course, many are disgusted or frightened by the

brazenly white and male supremacist aspects of Trump's 2016 campaign and his

subsequent administration, and caution against condoning or reasoning with such

elements. However, some have also chastised themselves or each other for failing to

understand the sense of political abandonment and powerlessness felt by voters

frequently dubbed the "white, rural working class." [67] This legitimate grievance, some

argue, was more fundamental than bigotry in driving Trump's success and, if they could

connect with it and redirect it, much political distance could be crossed.

Although Wolin did not live to see this turn of events, his engagement with

narratives of loss in American politics sheds more light on them than much contemporary

democratic theory. In claiming that local practices, cultures and memories are crucial for

democratic empowerment, and that they can be eroded by the rapid economic and

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[66] Wolin, *Tocqueville Between Two Worlds*, p. 9.

[67] See, for example, Arlie Russell Hochschild, *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right* (New York, NY: The New Press, 2016).

cultural changes of modernity and postmodernity, Wolin validates the sense of loss

harnessed by the Trump campaign. This perspective contrasts with what many perceive

to be the liberal arrogance of the Democratic Party establishment and its notions of

progress. It also contrasts with democratic theories that may identify losses in a "post-

political" neoliberal era, and attempt to conceive the formation of popular will more

radically, but without an appreciation of the local textures of democracy that Wolin

grieves. Perhaps the Left would gain ground by connecting with Trump supporters' sense

of loss, and not just their economic suffering, in order to offer a compelling agenda. In

this sense Wolin's tendency to see democracy through loss may be particularly helpful in

undercutting the apparent polarization of American political culture.[68]

Nevertheless, the ways in which the Trump campaign harnesses its supporters'

powerlessness and anger clearly diverge from Wolin's understanding of how to achieve a

more egalitarian sharing of power. The "culturally conservative" aspects of Right-wing

archaism have, amidst anxiety about demographic shifts, been unleashed to generate

brazen nationalism, an urge to dominate. Wolin comes to view such white and male

supremacy as undemocratic aspects of tradition, the loss of which ought to be embraced.

Moreover, despite Trump supporters' legitimate concerns about their loss of power to

political elites, the Right's long held commitment to decentralized power now seems not

only inauthentic but largely absent. Trump has offered no genuine plan to revitalize

hollowed out industrial towns, or to return political power sustainably to ordinary

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[68] For analyses of the polarization of American politics, see: John R. Bond and Richard Fleisher (eds), *Polarized Politics: Congress and the President in a Partisan Era* (Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2000).

people.[69] Instead, he promises merely to use his business acumen to somehow retrieve

lost manufacturing jobs and to halt immigration.

In responding to globalization by scapegoating minorities and entrusting a strong

man to turn back time on trade and immigration, the Trump administration neglects what

Wolin considers the new loss of postmodernity: the erosion of a constitutionally bounded

political form.[70] Trump has shown a disregard for civil liberties, and selected members of

the transnational capitalist class supposedly to help workers already ravaged by its

imperatives.[71] In these ways, Trump's victory signals the tragic culmination of trends

Wolin associates with postmodernity rather than resistance to them, albeit under the guise

of the most crude cultural archaism. If the sense of loss felt by Trump supporters must be

acknowledged, it must also be redirected. Wolin's confrontation with the limitations of

his own archaic vision points towards the need for a "polymorphous" understanding of

democracy, which recognizes the value of local traditions but also the value of cultural

transgression and major institutions.

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[69] Trump's attacks on unions are one indication of the fraudulence of his promises to return power to the working class: Mark Joseph Stern, "Donald Trump, Union Buster" *Slate* (December 19, 2017), available online at: http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/jurisprudence/2017/12/donald_trump_s _union_busting_appointees_just_incinerated_obama_s_labor_legacy.html

[70] Trump's disregard for the rule of law is evident in his critical statements about the judicial branch: Kristine Phillips, "All the Times Trump Personally Attacked Judges – And Why His Tirades are 'Worse Than Wrong,'" *The Washington Post* (April 26, 2017), available online at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2017/04/26/all-the-times-trump-personally-attacked-judges-and-why-his-tirades-are-worse-than-wrong/

[71] David Smith, "Trump's Billionaire Cabinet Could be the Wealthiest Administration Ever," *The Guardian* (December 2, 2016), available online at: https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/dec/02/trumps-rich-pickings-president-elects-team-could-be-wealthiest-ever

Chapter Summary

Wolin's tendency to view political phenomena through the prism of loss shapes both his diagnoses of the antidemocratic forces we face, and his proposed solutions. While the diagnostic aspect of his work is connected to the prescriptive aspect, it is not wholly determinate thereof, and at several points there are notable gaps or even discrepancies between them. For example, in *Politics and Vision* (1960) he critiques the state as an organizational form that is "incompatible" with equality, but nevertheless assumes the state to be the appropriate vehicle for political participation. He subsequently develops a more anti-statist view in the 1970s. Conversely, while he begins to critique the erosion of state sovereignty by transnational capital in the 1980s, he does not match this with a restored appreciation for state institutions until his very last major text, *Democracy Incorporated* (2008).

In Chapter Two I focus on the diagnostic aspect of Wolin's work, especially his use of the figure of "totalitarianism" to diagnose crises of modern liberalism. Wolin strives to expose the gap between our contemporary condition and authentic democracy by stressing the losses that are incurred as a result of modern liberalism, modern power and, in his later work, postmodern power. He often supports these claims by pointing to causal relationships and affinities between modern liberalism on the one hand and totalitarianism on the other. This critical approach was forged in a postwar moment in which he was trying to question and even reverse the widely assumed dichotomy between liberalism and totalitarianism. It remains central to his thought up to his later diagnoses of

"inverted totalitarianism." In Chapter Two I am interested in what aspects of

democracy this approach enables Wolin to emphasize, and which aspects it may obscure.

The chapter begins by looking more closely at the postwar academic context in

the Unites States in which Wolin's thought took shape. This context was characterized by

claims of political consensus around liberalism, the rise of behaviouralism in political

science, and an apparent crisis of political theory. Wolin's diagnostic framework grows

out of an attempt to defend the vocation of political theory against its seeming irrelevance

in this context. The influential *Politics and Vision* (1960) does so by illuminating visions

of canonical theorists since antiquity and tracing the subsequent decline of "the political"

in modernity. For the purposes of this historical-theoretical narrative, Wolin understands

modernity as epitomized by anti-political liberalism, and neglects both the rise of modern

nationalisms and the salutary promise of modern democracy. *Politics and Vision*

ultimately brings into question the relationship between liberalism and totalitarianism,

suggesting that the political vacuum of the former may give way to the latter. It further

undermines the supposed contrast between liberal and totalitarian societies by identifying

forms of modern organizational power common to both.

I show that Wolin's critique of modernity shares features with other postwar

critics of modernity such as Strauss, Horkheimer, Adorno, and Arendt. All these thinkers

suggest that central trends of modernity, such as the rise of instrumentalized reason,

cleared the way for twentieth century catastrophes. In other words, they generate

important critical perspective on twentieth century societies by stressing the losses of

modernity. However, Wolin is the only such thinker committed to develop a theory of

democracy, and is thus uniquely interesting as an anti-modern democratic theorist. At the

same time, Wolin is especially prone to underestimate the persistence of nationalistic, white and male supremacist political visions in modernity, and to undervalue the promises of modern democracy. I illustrate this through a contrast with Hannah Arendt, whose more ambivalent perspective on modernity can grasp the nationalistic antecedents of totalitarianism and the importance of modern rights.

In order to illuminate the stakes of Wolin's critical approach to modernity further, I then offer a comparison with a contrasting democratic theorist of totalitarianism, Claude Lefort. While Lefort is not a straightforward liberal, recognizing in fact that totalitarianism may arise out of the vacuum generated by liberalism, he is more enthusiastic about modernity than Wolin and even Arendt. This is because he takes neither liberalism nor organizational power to be the central phenomena of modernity. Instead, he defines modernity in terms of its great achievement: a symbolic regime of democracy. This striking difference between Wolin and Lefort's perspectives on modernity has important implications for how they conceive the demands of democracy, as I will elaborate in Chapter Three by examining Lefort's intellectual descendants, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe.

Finally, Chapter Two demonstrates that the diagnostic framework Wolin forges in the postwar moment is then reiterated and transformed in his later account of "inverted totalitarianism." Whereas in Wolin's early work totalitarianism is a distant specter that he uses to highlight the deficiencies of American liberalism, later he suggests that the American political system has actually become totalitarian. Wolin identifies similarities between this new totalitarianism and classical totalitarianism, while also pointing to differences or "inversions." Arguably, the persistence of this diagnostic framework

means that he continues to misunderstand the place of white and male supremacist

nationalism in American politics.

Chapters Three and Four interrogate the prescriptive aspects of Wolin's work,

focusing on his attempts to retrieve a localist, "archaic" vision of American democracy

and his subsequent efforts to develop a more complex conception of democracy that he

calls "polymorphous." In Chapter Three I am interested in how Wolin grapples with the

problematic place of identity in his archaic vision and beyond. I first trace how he arrives

at his archaic vision after his engagement with the movements of the 1960s and his

growing hostility to state and corporate power. I delineate the key features of this archaic

vision of democracy and argue that it illuminates important dimensions of democratic

empowerment neglected by other theorists.

Drawing on Laclau and Mouffe as a counterpoint, I show that even radical

democrats associated with a "post-Marxist" moment, who address a lack of viable

understandings of collective power, do not necessarily share such a critical stance on

modernity. Accordingly they do not stress the local memories, practices and cultures that

undergird democratic power. Wolin finds greater appreciation of these elements of

democracy in Montesquieu, Alexis de Tocqueville and John Dewey.

However, Wolin's archaic vision is also problematic, most blatantly in its

assertion suggestion that we ought to retrieve an American democratic "identity." As he

goes on to acknowledge, white and male supremacy are implicated in America's

democratic traditions. His response to this realization is to promote the remembrance of

historical injustice and the "re-cognition" of differences such as race. Accordingly, he

moves away from this identification of the demos with American tradition and turns

instead through his conception of "fugitive democracy" to theorize the symbolic dimension of democracy as a "continual self-fashioning of the demos." While Wolin continues to value an archaic American tradition, his conception of the demos moves closer to postmodern conceptions such as the one advanced by Laclau and Mouffe, if only in its elasticity.

I then demonstrate the inadequacy of Wolin's attempt to remedy the parochialism of tradition by remembering historical injustices, "re-cognizing" difference, and continually fashioning the demos anew. His tendency to downplay white and male supremacist nationalism reappears in the ease with which he assumes differences may be "re-cognized." Racial differences, for instance, continue to have significant anti-democratic effects in the United States. Moreover, they are rooted in white identities that cannot be summarily divorced from the archaic traditions that Wolin traces back to the colonial period. In continuing to value such archaic tradition, but conceptually severing it from problematic identities, Wolin risks simply reinforcing racial hierarchies in the guise of Left colorblindness. He not only makes the unrealistic suggestion that white identity be swiftly "re-cognized," but also demands that the identities of oppressed groups be "bracketed."[72] This crude hostility to so-called "identity politics" denies minorities and women the vocabularies required to mount direct and sustained opposition. It obscures, furthermore, the ongoing political value of oppositional traditions borne from the struggles for racial and gendered equality.

Wolin's inadequate attempts to confront the problematic relationship between tradition and identity point towards the need for a politics that confronts historical

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[72] Wolin, "Democracy, Difference, and Re-Cognition."

vestiges such as race more directly. Such a politics must be coalitional, not bracketing marginalized identities but rather allowing for several axes of struggle. Laclau and Mouffe offer a coalitional politics, allowing for minority identity claims while forging "chains of equivalence" that yield a broader solidarity. If conducted carefully, Laclau suggests, such a politics may bring oppressed identities into play politically while also allowing for their subversion. However, because Laclau and Mouffe do not stress the traditions with which all identities are bound up, they too simplify the difficult cultural politics at work in such a politics. A coalitional politics that positively values historical continuity and cultural rootedness would recognize a perpetual tension between the democratic value, and the dangers, of multiple traditions.

While Wolin fails to recognize how deeply entangled archaic forms are with archaic identities, or to appreciate multiple traditions, his search for a transgressive dimension of politics generates a more complex, "polymorphous" understanding of democracy. In Chapter Four I examine developments in his thinking about democratic forms. I begin by arguing that his archaic vision should be understood as a "form," even if it is distinguished from major institutional forms. This form of democracy is not only neglected by Laclau and Mouffe, but also undermined both by advocates of major institutional forms such as Jürgen Habermas and by advocates of formlessness or rupture such as Jacques Rancière. Whereas debates about form in contemporary democratic theory are often framed in binary terms, pitting major institutions against anarchic rupture, Wolin's archaic vision points towards a different and important aspect of democracy.

However, as Wolin comes to theorize "fugitive democracy" he comes also to value a formless, ruptural style of politics similar to the one championed by Rancière. I

explore the relationship between this new conception of democracy and the archaic vision, arguing that Wolin remains deeply suspicious of transgressive politics and unsure how to relate it to his previous, and seemingly contradictory emphasis on historical continuity and local deliberation. It is not until the late essay "Agitated Times" (2005) that Wolin clarifies the productive tension between localism and transgression and thus realizes a "polymorphous" understanding of democracy.

I then show that, while Wolin's focus on the losses of modernity often makes him unappreciative of liberal constitutionalism and major institutional forms, he ultimately incorporates state-centric politics into his polymorphous understanding of democracy. Already in the 1980s and 1990s he expresses doubt that "rejectionist" politics could fulfill all the requirements of democracy.[73] He suggests that some issues require a more "comprehensive" politics that engages with the state, expresses ambivalence regarding the democratic function of the welfare state, and suggests that labor unions have an important role in centering the Left. Yet it is not until the turn of the century, as transnational postmodern power erodes the state form and American constitutionalism is attenuated, that he fully calls for the shoring up of the major institutions of representative democracy. Although Wolin's naïve and monolithic understanding of American tradition remains problematic, his development of a polymorphous understanding of democracy that incorporates tradition, transgression, and the state is a more helpful response to globalized neoliberalism than totalizing analyses such as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's *Empire*.

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[73] Wolin, "What Revolutionary Action Means Today."

The fifth chapter concludes my reading of Wolin's work through a discussion of his views of political education and political theory. Wolin claims that education is the primary path to democratization. At times, he promotes a broad and egalitarian understanding of political education as a practice through which anyone might reflect deeply on fundamental values, imagine alternatives, and discover greater agency. In his essays on the unrest at Berkeley in the 1960s he praises students for seeking such a political education and credits them with diagnosing the central pathologies of technological society and challenging the hierarchical structure of the university.

However, I argue that Wolin's conception of political theory does not always sit easily with this conception of political education. In "Political Theory has Vocation" (1969) he conflates the "tacit knowledge" characteristic of all political education with a more specific notion of "epic theory." Epic theory not only develops holistic diagnoses of social ills but also offers radically different visions. It is, furthermore, tied to a specific discursive tradition of Western political thought. Similarly, Wolin's formative account of the decline of "the political" in in *Politics and Vision* (1960) is so deeply intertwined with his diagnosis of a specific disciplinary crisis in political science that it is difficult to distinguish one from the other. While his defense of academic political theory has proven popular amongst professional theorists, it obscures the value of other "tacit knowledge." The requirement that epic theorists adopt this as their primary "vocation" imposes a further division between academics and other citizens.

I then revisit how, in the 1980s, Wolin questions some aspects of "epic" theory. He comes to reject the architectonic impulse found in canonical thinkers such as Plato and Hobbes and attempts to reach a broader audience beyond the narrow confines of his

discipline. Nevertheless, he remains committed to a form of theorizing that offers a coherent alternative vision centered on a particular tradition. He thus recovers America's archaic tradition of grassroots democracy as an organizing myth that draws on sources beyond the theory canon. This appeal to a monolithic archaic tradition is still problematic in its inability to address white and male supremacy. Indeed, Wolin's subsequent realization that democracy is "polymorphous" would seem to discredit any such epic theory of democracy, which offers an alternative vision through an appeal to a particular tradition.

Although the prescriptive aspect of epic theory seems dubious, political theorists might still contribute to political education by offering holistic diagnoses of social ills. Yet, Wolin worries that theorists may struggle even to fulfill this role, given the threat posed by "postmodern" critiques of metanarratives. He attacks Foucault's understanding of power relations for obscuring the centrality of state and corporate power and for undermining any possible principle of legitimacy. His defensive reaction to Foucault shores up a "classic" notion of epic theory, re-introduces the notion of "vocation," and insists on a division between theory and practice. Later, Wolin again critiques postmodernists for their inability to diagnose the central power structures of our time and blames them for the proliferation of politically disengaged academic texts. While this critique of the academic Left has some merit, Wolin again reacts in an unhelpful way, defending canonical theory and even suggesting that the only task left for theorists is to grieve.

Contrastingly, Wolin's final works and interviews suggest that professional theorists may still have a political role to play. In *Democracy Incorporated* (2008) he

offers a holistic diagnosis of state and corporate power that does not primarily rely on

the tradition of canonical theory or on an "archaic" tradition of democracy. While

Democracy Incorporated still contains blind spots, I argue and that these could be

addressed by more actively engaging with other intellectual traditions and archives, none

of which are granted a privileged status. When the focus is thus taken off shoring up the

narrow vocation of political theory against postmodern threats, theory can become more

congruent with a broad and egalitarian notion of political education. This might lead us to

revisit urgent questions related to pedagogy and the political economy of education.

2. Crises of Liberalism and the Specter of Totalitarianism

"General Motors Corporation is a triumph of organization; so is the Pentagon; and so is

totalitarianism."

- Sheldon Wolin, *Politics and Vision*[74]

"From a political point of view, the questioning of modernity *means* the questioning of

democracy."

- Claude Lefort, *Democracy and Political Theory*[75]

Introduction

Wolin makes little attempt to define or analyze "totalitarianism" until his last

major text, *Democracy Incorporated: Managed Democracy and the Specter of Inverted

Totalitarianism* (2008). Yet the threat of totalitarianism hangs like a specter over his

entire oeuvre. Instead of conceiving modern "liberalism" and "totalitarianism" as

diametrically opposed political phenomena, Wolin joins other postwar critics of

liberalism in conceiving a more complex relationship between them. In his early work he

argues that the modern loss of "the political" under liberalism creates a vacuum that may

clear the way for totalitarianism. He also tracks the modern rise of organizational powers,

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[74] Sheldon S. Wolin, *Politics and Vision* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), p. xxiii.

[75] Claude Lefort, *Democracy and Political Theory* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), p. 9.

which he claims are common to liberal and totalitarian regimes. Thus, while he does

not define it in detail, he uses the figure of totalitarianism to diagnose shortcomings of

modern liberalism. In the 1980s this diagnostic framework reappears as Wolin observes

the emergence of totalizing forms of American power, culminating in his identification of

a postmodern, neoliberal condition of "inverted totalitarianism." This chapter engages

with this diagnostic aspect of Wolin's work and asks what his approach to totalitarianism

enables him to illuminate about democracy and what it obscures. This sets the stage for

my subsequent examinations in Chapters Three and Four of Wolin's prescriptions for a

more authentic democracy.

In understanding modernity, Wolin emphasizes the threats of anti-political

liberalism and of modern organizational power, while he neglects both the problematic

political visions of modern nationalism and the salutary idea of modern democracy.

These emphases and blind spots emerge from his efforts to trace the history and decline

of the discourse of political thought in *Politics and Vision* (1960). Accordingly, this

chapter begins by examining the postwar context in which this early work took shape.

Confronting an academic atmosphere of triumphant liberalism and the apparent decline

of political theory as a sub-discipline, Wolin sought in *Politics and Vision* to revive the

theoretical vocation through a more critical appraisal of modernity. The text harnesses

readings of canonical thinkers ultimately to condemn both liberalism and modern

organizational power. Taking Lockean liberalism to be the central creed of modernity,

Wolin argues that its focus on individual rights, and consequent disavowal of the political

dimension of experience, creates a vacuum that may invite extreme, even totalitarian re-

assertions of the political. In addition, he recognizes structural parallels between

technocratic liberal states and totalitarian states: both employ similarly undemocratic forms of modern organizational power, which erode the local bases of the participatory democracy that he favors. In these ways, defining and situating the figure of totalitarianism is crucial for Wolin's attempts to illuminate the perils of modernity and the gap between liberalism and authentic democracy.

The historical meaning of totalitarianism has long been such a battleground for liberals on the one hand and various critics of modern liberalism on the other. Wolin shares certain theoretical dispositions with Arendt and, to a lesser extent, other postwar critics of modernity such as Strauss, Horkheimer and Adorno. These thinkers all understand totalitarianism as the culmination of central modern trends rather than as the antithesis of modernity. From different though related angles, they all critique phenomena that they associate with "liberalism," such as the glorification of instrumental reason. Yet Wolin is the most egalitarian of these thinkers and the only one who ultimately identifies as a democrat. His work continually calls into question the supposed opposition between modern liberalism and totalitarianism for the sake of underscoring the requirements of a more authentic democracy.

At the same time, Wolin's understanding of modernity as epitomized by the political void of liberalism in *Politics and Vision*, an understanding that was motivated by an attempt to revive an academic discipline, is especially prone to certain blind spots. Wolin's focus on the loss of the political under modern liberalism and the threat of organizational power leads him to understate the extent to which democratic ideas are central aspects of modernity. It also leads him to downplay the un-theorized, nationalistic versions of the political that flourish within constitutional regimes in the United States

and were precursors to totalitarianism elsewhere. These blind spots haunt the rest of his work. I underscore this through a comparison with Arendt's more ambivalent perspective on modernity.

In order to illuminate further the stakes of Wolin's approach to modernity, I then compare it with another democratic theorist of totalitarianism, Claude Lefort. While Lefort is not a liberal, he is more enthusiastic about modernity than either Wolin or Arendt. He critiques the political vacuum left by liberalism, even recognizing that it may clear the way for totalitarianism. However, importantly, he does not take liberalism or organizational power to be the central phenomena of modernity. Instead, he identifies modernity primarily with a "symbolic regime" of democracy that ought to be celebrated and sustained. This symbolic regime requires that assertions of the popular will be made over and above liberal individualism, but also relies on rights and institutions to preserve the contestability of this will. It is threatened by nationalism and, most dramatically, by totalitarianism. In analyzing totalitarianism, Lefort thus focuses on how it forecloses democracy's contestability, by substantializing the "empty place" of power, rather than on its use of forms of organizational power also present in non-totalitarian modern states. In other words, he emphasizes the discontinuity of totalitarianism with "modernity," rather than its continuity. This contrast between Wolin and Lefort's perspectives on totalitarianism and modernity has important implications for how they, and theorists influenced by them, conceive the demands of democracy. While Lefort largely abandoned the Left in his later work, radical democratic theorists such as Laclau, Mouffe, take up his basic insight into the modern symbolic regime of democracy in order to articulate visions of the political different from Wolin's.

Wolin always criticizes American liberals for assuming a dichotomy between liberalism and totalitarianism and thus obscuring the undemocratic forces in American politics. By the 1980s, however, his condemnation of these forces deepens. He discerns that, in the process of ostensibly fighting totalitarianism through the Cold War, the American political system has undergone further de-democratization. There have emerged totalizing forms of power, as the state becomes even more imposing and advances an ideology of "political economy." By the turn of the twenty first century, Wolin claims that the fusion of the state with transnational capital has yielded a new form of "postmodern power," qualitatively different from modern organizational power and even more threatening to democracy. Wolin then argues not only that this American political system shares some features with totalitarianism, but also that it is starting to constitute an "inverted" version of totalitarianism emerging from within, rather than in reaction to, liberalism. His diagnoses of the problems we face thus continue to hinge on the alleged complicity between liberalism and totalitarianism, and to downplay nationalism. It is only by assessing the similarities and differences between this new phenomenon and classical totalitarianism in *Democracy Incorporated* that Wolin finally comes to offer sustained reflections on the nature of totalitarianism. It is also in this context that he comes finally to appreciate constitutional rights and institutions of representative democracy.

There has recently been a revival of public discourse about totalitarianism in the United States, as people struggle to comprehend Donald Trump's authoritarian political style, his dishonesty, open xenophobia and contempt for basic institutions of constitutional democracy. Booksellers have reported a dramatic surge in sales of Arendt's

classic *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, as new readers seize upon her powerful

descriptions of how totalitarian movements demonize targeted groups, normalize lying,

and disregard the rule of law wherever it conflicts with fact-resistant ideology. However,

there has been less discussion of how for Arendt, as for Wolin, the emergence of

totalitarianism is connected to deep tendencies of modernity, which reach further back in

time and are not entirely separable from the deficits of regular constitutional politics. A

relatively superficial engagement with Arendt's account of the dynamics of totalitarian

regimes can efface this broader indictment of modern liberalism and modern forms of

power. Nor has there been adequate discussion of how authoritarian phenomena have

evolved since Arendt wrote about Nazi and Stalinist regimes at mid-century. We now

face new formations of power, which, while perhaps sharing some features with classical

totalitarianism, differ in crucial respects. Although Wolin does not offer as detailed or

insightful an account of classical totalitarianism as Arendt, his more recent analyses of

postmodern power and "inverted totalitarianism" seem eerily prescient. At the same time,

however, his work continues to be haunted by blind spots regarding nationalism, and he

did foresee the rise of an authoritarian nationalist figure such as Trump. The rise of

President Trump raises further questions regarding the supposed "inversions" of

America's new, neoliberal "totalitarianism."

The Postwar Context: a Crisis of Political Theory, or a Crisis of Liberalism?

Wolin's early thought took shape in the context of, and in opposition to,

triumphant postwar liberalism. It was only in the first half of the twentieth century, and in

explicit contrast to totalitarianism, that the term "liberalism" crystallized as the dominant framework for understanding societies such as the United States and Britain. Societies widely understood to rest on individual rights, limited government, and a capitalist economy were increasingly referred to as "liberal" and opposed to the totalitarian regimes producing atrocities on the continent. This tendency to define liberalism in binary opposition to totalitarianism seemed to imply not only that societies such as America were liberal, but also that liberalism must be defended against extremist threats. Liberalism and totalitarianism were increasingly viewed as exhaustive of political possibilities, and the former held up as the prized essence of enlightened modernity. In the aftermath of the Second World War, Karl Popper's *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (1945) became the quintessential philosophical defense of this bipolar view of modern political possibilities.[76] Popper argued that liberal or "open" societies were consonant with reason and scientific method, whereas closed totalitarian societies were the irrational outcomes of unscientific philosophies of history. He advanced a view of liberalism as a non-ideological form of politics, which accepts human fallibility and pursues piecemeal reform towards greater individual freedom and reduced suffering, instead of implementing grand and inevitably cruel schemes for the unification and perfection of society.

In 1950s America, the Cold War consolidation of rationalistic liberalism as the antithesis of totalitarianism led some commentators to claim that American political culture had reached a consensus around the principles of individual liberty on which its political system was apparently based. In *The End of Ideology: On the Exhaustion of*

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[76] Karl Popper, *The Open Society and its Enemies* (London, UK: Routledge, 1945.)

Political Ideas in the Fifties (1960), Daniel Bell identified a gradual rejection of

"ideologies" such as Marxism and foresaw a future of only incremental adjustment to the

extant system.[77] Daniel Boorstin read this supposed liberal consensus back into history,

celebrating it as *The Genius of American Politics* (1953) to which Europeans ought to

aspire.[78] From a more critical perspective, Louis Hartz argued in *The Liberal Tradition in*

America (1955) that Americans' unique history rendered them largely incapable of

thinking beyond the principles of individual liberty, equality and capitalism, which, he,

without much argumentation, traced back to John Locke.[79] Attempting to explain the

failure of socialism, Hartz understood the United States as a liberal fragment of European

culture, lacking a history of feudalism and consequently lacking the capacity for class-

consciousness. While Hartz actually wished to critique this liberal consensus as a myopic

ideological constraint on the political imagination that fueled McCarthyism, his analysis

further reinforced the image of American political culture as a uniformly liberal one.

Of course, the claim that American political culture had ever been characterized

by uniformly liberal values is, as many critics of consensus history have noted, highly

misleading. The persistence of racial apartheid in America's south during the 1950s

should have sufficed to show that America was home to a nationalistic ideology of white

supremacy contrary to the principles of individual liberty and equality. Nor had

liberalism gone uncontested on the Left during the first half of the century. Radical

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[77] Daniel Bell, *The End of Ideology: On the Exhaustion of Political Ideas in the Fifties* (New York, NY: Free Press, 1960.)

[78] Daniel Boorstin, *The Genius of American Politics* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1953.)

[79] Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America* (Orlando, FL: Harcourt, 1955.)

thinkers such as Emma Goldman, Harry Haywood and C.L.R. James certainly

questioned the capacity of liberal ideals to remedy the racial and economic inequities that

persisted in America's political system. Nevertheless, within the white and male-

dominated academic establishment during the relatively peaceful and prosperous 1950s,

there was an increasing sense that America's political system and intellectual life had

converged on liberal principles, as they had come to be defined in contrast to

totalitarianism.

Within the discipline of political science in the United States, this rationalistic

liberalism was seemingly legitimized by modest aggregative theories of democracy.[80]

Such theories sought to resist the unifying impulses of totalitarianism, condemning as

"ideological" any conception of democracy as the expression of the will of the people

through the state.[81] Particularly influential in Wolin's milieu were theories of "democratic

pluralism" such as the one advanced by Robert Dahl, which understand democracy as a

process of compromise between competing interests groups.[82] Since liberalism and

aggregative theories of democracy seemed roughly consonant with extant institutions, the

increasing acceptance of these normative ideals undermined the ongoing role of

theoretical reflection and provided a ripe intellectual setting for a turn towards empirical

studies of behavior within the extant system. Scholars of politics who were disappointed

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[80] Perhaps the most modest being: Joseph Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* (New York, NY: Harper and Brothers, 1942.)

[81] For this intellectual history see: John Gunnell, *The Descent of Political Theory: The Genealogy of an American Vocation* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1993.)

[82] David B. Truman, *The Governmental Process: Political Interests and Public Opinion* (New York, NY: Knopf, 1951); Robert Dahl, *Who Governs?: Democracy and Power in an American City* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1961.)

with their field's apparent lack of concrete achievements, and driven by a Popperian urge for scientific progress, sought tangible results that might be used in the service of incremental policy reform. Thus the 1950s "behavioral revolution" mimicked the methods of the natural sciences in order to generate value-neutral knowledge about politics.[83] Behaviouralism's supposedly non-ideological method complemented America's apparent political consensus, and displaced historical and normative modes of engaging politics.

Accordingly, many in the academy began to question the ongoing relevance of political theory. If fundamental values were settled, and science was now the proper mode of political inquiry, normative theorizing became mere ideology. At best theorists could offer formulaic histories of political thought, which perhaps put current ideas into perspective but did not radically question them, along the lines of George Sabine standard *A History of Political Theory* (1937.) Bemoaning this inhospitable environment, many theorists questioned whether their field still existed and some concluded that it did not.[84] Isaiah Berlin observed that there had been no commanding work of political theory in the 20th century; Leo Strauss asserted that political philosophy was "in a state of decay and perhaps of putrefaction;" while Peter Laslett announced: "political philosophy is dead."

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[83] Robert Dahl, "The Behavioral Approach in Political Science: Epitaph for a Monument to a Successful Protest," *The American Political Science Review* 55:4 (1961), pp. 763–772.

[84] Peter Laslett, *Philosophy, Politics and Society* (Oxford, UK: Basil Blackwell, 1956); Judith Shklar, *After Utopia: The Decline of Political Faith* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1957); Leo Strauss, "What is Political Philosophy?" *The Journal of Politics* 19:3 (1957) pp. 343–368; Isaiah Berlin, "Does Political Theory Still Exist?" in Henry Hardy (ed.), *Concepts and Categories: Philosophical Essays of Isaiah Berlin* (Oxford, UK: Penguin Books, 1979), pp. 143–172 [first published 1961].

Even empirical political scientists expressed concern about the fate of theory, which previously had been a relatively well-integrated part of their discipline. David Easton warned that, unless theorists "creatively construct a valuational frame of reference," political scientists would be driven by an "implicit and intuitive acceptance of a value framework which they have accidentally acquired."[85] However, there was also confusion regarding how the theoretical enterprise could be revived in ways compatible with newly dominant, scientific methods of studying politics. Easton suggested that theory "assimilate itself to the main current of empirical research in political science" by providing theories they could test. V.O. Key noticed that theorists "are bestirring themselves" but confessed to "some bewilderment" regarding "where they are leading us" and also called for their cooperation with empirical colleagues.[86] Theorist Norman Jacobson, Wolin's colleague at Berkeley, argued that these calls to put political theory in the service of science were really attempts to slay the subfield once and for all, and called instead for an appreciation of theory as an independently valuable enterprise.[87]

In this intellectual context, Wolin's *Politics and Vision* (1960) was understood by some theorists to demonstrate the ongoing value of political theory at the moment that this was most needed. Its opening pages echo Jacobson's sense that theory was under attack. Wolin observes that "in many intellectual circles today there exists a marked

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[85] David Easton, "The Decline of Modern Political Theory," *The Journal of Politics* 13:1 (1951), pp. 36–58.

[86] V.O. Key, "The State of the Discipline," *The American Political Science Review* 52:4 (1958), pp. 961–971.

[87] Norman Jacobson, "The Unity of Political Theory," in Roland Young (ed.) *Approaches to the Study of Politics*, (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1958), pp. 115–124.

hostility toward, and even contempt for, political philosophy in its traditional form," and hopes that his work "may at least succeed in making clear what it is we shall have discarded."[88] He seeks to cultivate such a renewed appreciation for theory by exploring the various ways canonical thinkers have envisioned the "the political." Like his graduate school advisor Hartz, Wolin then argues that modern liberalism disavows the political dimension of experience in problematic ways. Indeed, he goes further and suggests that, without a vision of the political, liberalism may invite the return of the repressed in extreme, even totalitarian forms. Faced with a vacuum in liberalism, people may "resort to even the most extreme methods to re-assert the political in an age of fragmentation."[89] Moreover, he identifies inegalitarian aspects of modern organizational power shared by modern liberal and totalitarian societies. Ultimately he suggests that we must re-imagine an egalitarian form of the political in order to ward off the perverse totalitarian version and counteract the dangers of modernity.

In this way *Politics and Vision* offers a powerful conception of what political theory is, develops an explanation of how it came to appear redundant, and makes a case that its revitalization is urgently important. It does so by complicating, even reversing, the conventional opposition between modern liberalism and totalitarianism. This reversal of the apparent postwar consensus regarding liberalism and totalitarianism remains central to Wolin's ongoing attempts to diagnose our democratic deficits. In too quickly conflating a crisis of academic discourse with a crisis of political liberalism, however, Wolin develops blind spots that haunt his democratic theory for decades to come.

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[88] Wolin, *Politics and Vision*, p. xxiii.

[89] Ibid*.,* p. 389.

<u>The Decline of the Political and the Rise of Modern Power in *Politics and Vision*</u>

In *Politics and Vision* Wolin crafts a history of political thought that both justifies

his vocation and generates conclusions about modern liberalism and totalitarianism. Here,

and throughout his subsequent writings, he defines "the political" as the expression of

"what is 'common' to the whole community."[90] This particular conception of "the

political" is by no means shared by all political theorists, and it shapes the distinctively

radical democratic perspective that he would go on to develop. The opening chapter of

Politics and Vision outlines this conception, suggesting that political theories offer

innovative visions of the common and thus generate indispensible critical perspectives on

a society's central values and institutions. Perhaps it is already clear that this association

of the political with the common, and embrace of political theory as radical critique,

resists the liberal individualism and reformism popular in the postwar period. However it

is only after tracing how the political was invented and transposed in pre-modernity

(Ch.2-6), and secularized in early modernity (Ch.7-8), that Wolin discloses his claims

regarding the erosion of the political under modern liberalism (Ch.9-10.) Wolin examines

political visions of the past not to argue that one ought to be resuscitated entirely but

rather to illuminate the alleged void created by liberalism and the urgent need for new

vision.

The readings of past thinkers in *Politics and Vision* hinge on how each negotiates

the apparent tension between "the political" and "politics." This enduring tension allows

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[90] Ibid., p. 4.

the reader to identify a coherent narrative and substantiates Wolin's claim that political

theory is a tradition of discourse characterized by continuity as well as innovation.

Whereas the political is an expression of human commonality, Wolin understands politics

contrastingly as the conflict between competing interests and opinions.[91] This conceptual

contrast between the political and politics may be unusual, even counter-intuitive. But it

remains central to Wolin's mode of engaging theoretical texts and to his critique of

liberalism throughout his work. *Politics and Vision* suggests that pre-modern thinkers

frequently rejected politics altogether in favor of the political, by appealing to a

transcendent order that could guarantee unity. Conversely, he would come to regard the

postmodern, neoliberal condition as one saturated with "politics" yet devoid of "the

political."

Chapter Two of *Politics and Vision,* "Plato: Political Philosophy versus Politics,"

casts Plato as the "inventor" of political theory. Plato was the first pre-modern thinker to

view human society "in the round" and, accordingly, he offered "the first comprehensive

political philosophy." However, Wolin claims that Plato's vision attempted to mold

political phenomena to a conception of the Good that lay outside the mortal realm.[92] Plato

"consistently tended to obscure the distinctiveness of the political" by denying it

autonomy from morality. This subordination of the political to the moral was driven by

"Plato's obsessive preoccupation with the unity and cohesion of the city."[93] In order to

ensure unity it was necessary to overcome the conflicting interests and opinions of

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[91] Ibid., p. 11.

[92] Ibid., p. 31, 19.

[93] Ibid., p. 35.

politics. And this was achieved by imposing on the social body a belief in a socially

stratified yet harmonious vision drawn from a stable realm of Forms. For Wolin, Plato's

displacement of the arts of persuasion and judgment generates an untenable, if not

dangerous, political vision.

The Romans (Ch.3) were a more practical people who appreciated the political

realm on its own terms and allowed for the flux of politics. They "showed the role that

institutions might play in giving shape and direction to society" and considered the

skillful governing of a state to be a higher virtue than philosophical contemplation.[94]

However, with the expansion of the empire, "the political" lost its necessary form.

Without the bounded form of a polis, popular participation declined while republican

institutions were eroded and replaced by imposing bureaucracies. Ultimately the Romans

were left with a "power organization" rather than a political association. Unmoored from

such an association, political theory degenerated into a "vapid moralism," "reduced to the

status of a subject-matter in search of a relevant context…addressing itself not to this or

that city, but to all of mankind."[95]

Pre-modern and early modern Christian thought returned to Platonism in the sense

that it also attempted to eschew politics through an appeal to a transcendent political

vision, though in a different fashion. While early Christian thinkers such as Augustine

considered religion to be above the political, Wolin argues that they actually reinvented

political thought in a religious guise by advancing a comprehensive vision of collective

life. Later, through the Lutheran radicalization of the notion of religious society,

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[94] Ibid., p. 76, 78.

[95] Ibid., p. 85, 82.

Christian thought came to assert a limited kind of human equality and in this sense to

offer a greater realization of commonality than Plato's hierarchical vision. Wolin reveals

his fascination with the Christians, especially with Calvin, whom he credits with re-

connecting religious society with institutional forms and instructing Protestant man "in

the rudiments of a political education."[96] This admiration reappears later in his work

when he attempts to recover an American participatory tradition rooted in the radical

Protestantism of New England townships, as observed by Tocqueville. Nevertheless,

even for Calvin, "to be a good citizen was not an end in itself; one became a good citizen

in order to be a better believer."[97] Augustine, Luther and Calvin all offered visions of

harmony that depended on a subordination of the political to the theological to ensure

unity and were inherently hostile to politics. Their Christian political equality was "an

equality of mutual subservience" according to which all followers were powerless in their

deference to divine power.[98]

It was therefore left to other early modern and modern thinkers to envision

commonality without relying on the authority of revealed moral or religious truth, and

this would require them to come to terms with politics in more profound ways. Wolin

explains that the growing political control of churches and the growing strength of

national monarchies in the sixteenth century cleared the way for a more "autonomous"

political order and political theory.[99] He identifies Machiavelli as the first modern theorist

to attempt such a political theory. Like the Romans, Machiavelli understood the

[96] Ibid., p. 150.

[97] Ibid., p. 163.

[98] Ibid., p. 138.

[99] Ibid., p. 175-6.

conflictual, interest-ridden nature of politics. But he appealed to worldly institutions

and to secular notions of civic virtue and "national feeling" to cultivate commonality in a

modern city-state.[100] Although "older forms of religious emotion and language had been

carried over and sublimated into the newer imagery of the nation," this was a more

strictly political sense of commonality that did not rely on a transcendent vision of

unity.[101]

Alas, Machiavellian nationalism fails to constitute a "comprehensive principle" or

an adequate "sense of a common life."[102] As Benedict Anderson explains, there is a

fundamental "emptiness" to the type of commonality provided by nationalism, as it is

based on arbitrary exclusion rather than the substance of belief that one would find in a

coherent religious community.[103] Wolin thus contends that, although Machiavelli was

"disdainful of the [hierarchical] hereditary principle," the hollow politics of national

feeling is a mere "substitute" for real economic, social and political equality.[104] Here

Wolin implies that the ideal way for moderns to realize commonality amidst politics

would be through a sufficiently rich, yet secularized, appreciation of equality.

That may be so, but the swiftness with which he dismisses the "manipulative

politics" of nationalism here creates ongoing problems for his diagnosis of modernity.[105]

Wolin's analysis of modernity after the chapter on Machiavelli continues to focus on

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[100] Ibid., p. 209.

[101] Ibid., p. 184.

[102] Ibid., p. 214-15.

[103] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (New York, NY: Verso, 1983), p. 5.

[104] Wolin, *Politics and Vision,* pp. 180, 209.

[105] Ibid., p. 209.

political theory rather than political culture, and even to conflate the two. Given that there are few high theorists of nationalism, it is perhaps no surprise that Wolin does not revisit the notion of national feeling as a vision of the political. Furthermore, he comes to focus on a particular strain of modern political theory: namely, "liberal" theorists and especially Locke. From this choice of theorists he concludes that there has been an overall decline of political vision in modernity. He neglects to examine either more authentically "political" theorists, or debased forms of political vision such as nationalism that may hold sway in actual modern political cultures. If Wolin had remained attentive to nationalism it would have been more difficult for him ultimately to claim that totalitarianism emerged entirely in reaction to a liberal void, rather than partly as a mutation of existing forms of chauvinistic political identification.

The other, more menacing harbinger of modernity in *Politics and Vision* is Thomas Hobbes, who sought to develop an autonomous political theory even more thoroughly de-mythologized than Machiavelli's. Given the reality of human conflict, Hobbes considered it necessary for citizens to relinquish most of the rights belonging to them in the "state of nature" and submit to a sovereign by signing a fictional social contract. After Machiavelli's strategic, piecemeal utilization of institutions and national feeling, Hobbes returns to a more architectonic political vision. He hoped that politics might be kept at bay in a unified community, but one that was, unlike the Platonic moral ideal or the natural religious community, entirely "constructed through human art."[106] Wolin chides Hobbes, and social contract theory more generally, for failing to

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[106] Ibid., p. 216.

acknowledge that such a construction can never create a genuine sense of collectivity: "A contract may establish relationships, but it is not a source of unity nor the expression of commonality."[107] Moreover, although Hobbes' theory of natural right generated a distinctively modern conception of human equality that was absent in Machiavelli, this was a thin conception based merely on individuals' equal freedom and selfishness in the state of nature.

Hobbes' conception of equality enabled him to order all people equally subservient, not to God, but to centralized state power. He was thus not only pivotal in developing notions of equality, contract, and consent that would become central to liberalism, but was also, along with Francis Bacon, a chief forerunner of the modern idolization of instrumental rationality and hierarchical organization. Throughout Wolin's oeuvre, he regularly associates the large-scale organizational powers of modernity with Hobbes. It is this embrace of organization that would become Hobbes' enduring legacy after his despotic political vision was superseded by an anti-political, and less explicitly menacing liberalism. Yet Hobbes also divorced his autonomous political theory from economics, envisioning "a sovereign who sought to overawe the wealthy by waving the sword."[108] Thus, his conception of state sovereignty obscures the likely influence of modern economic forces in the secular despotism he sanctions.[109]

In the final two chapters of *Politics and Vision*, the purpose of the preceding narrative in framing Wolin's critical intervention into the present comes into focus as he

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[107] Ibid., p. 248.

[108] Ibid., p. 256.

[109] Ibid., p. 256.

identifies the decline and sublimation of the political under liberalism and the rise of modern power. Like Hartz, Wolin traces the origins of modern liberalism to Locke. While Locke largely adopted Hobbes' view of human nature as full of conflict, fear and pain, he resisted his absolutist conclusions and instead sought to preserve individual liberty through parliamentary government and the rule of law. Wolin argues that, whereas Hobbes was insensitive to economic power and sought an autonomous political theory, Locke's liberalism was closely connected to an embrace of early capitalism, his civil government tasked with protecting individual life, liberty and, crucially, property.

While Locke was innovative in his attempt not only to recognize but also to preserve individual rights, his notion of equality was still a thin Hobbesian one, based on negative liberty. His appreciation of political participation involved only voting to defend one's individual interests and preserving the right to overthrow an illegitimate government. For this reason Wolin claims that Locke's liberalism was opposed not only to conservatism but also to the richer notion of equality that one might realize through the democratic radicalism present in other 17th century English texts, such as the Putney Debates.[110] Indeed, for Wolin, Locke's liberalism buys individual liberty at the cost of developing any conception of the political, whether through religion, nationalism, sovereign authority, or radical democracy. Instead, liberalism makes only a "desperate effort" to substitute for genuine commonality with social conformity.[111]

While Wolin is at pains to show that classical liberalism was not as rationalistic as later variants, his analysis clearly intends to illuminate how the complacent liberalism of

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[110] Ibid., p. 263.

[111] Ibid., p. 315.

the post-war period and its legitimizing theories such as "democratic pluralism" could also come to obscure the political and, thus, deflate visionary political theory. Motivated in part by a desire to revive this academic discourse, Wolin arrives at a jaundiced reading of modernity with a Hartzian focus on Locke's alleged liberalism. He loses interest in nationalism, barely mentions democracy, and dismisses attempts by thinkers such as Rousseau to conceive the popular will as "substitute love objects" for the political.[112] Moreover, Wolin barely pauses to appreciate in Locke or in modernity more generally the advent of individual rights and representative institutions. His primary ambition is, rather, to craft a narrative of loss that traces the modern decline of the political. This enables him to illuminate certain aspects of the contemporary condition, and to inspire academic political theorists, but it obscures other aspects of modernity and modern political theory.

The final chapter of *Politics and Vision* explores how societies are transformed by industrialization and the rise of large-scale bureaucratic and corporate organizations. Such organizational forms bring Hobbesian-Baconian visions of power to fruition. Organization constitutes a method of social control that makes political life more abstract and sweeps away the local bases for a democratic politics. Wolin claims that this second modern loss, of social roots and texture, is evident in liberal and illiberal societies alike. He draws parallels between the organizational impulses of modern liberal societies and totalitarian societies, provocatively discussing constitutional and American managerial theorists alongside Lenin. According to Wolin, the drive toward large-scale organization is already implicit in constitutional theory: "Constitutional theory is both a variant of

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[112] Ibid., p. 329.

organizational theory and a political methodology."[113] At the same time, "no one saw more clearly than [Lenin] that bureaucracy and large-scale organization were the fundamental phenomena of modern political, social, and economic life."[114] Seeking further to underscore the soft tyranny that is sustained yet obscured by technocratic liberalism, he declares "General Motors Corporation is a triumph of organization," but "so is the Pentagon; and so is totalitarianism."[115] In emphasizing these affinities between the organizational impulses of liberal and totalitarian societies, Wolin tends to de-emphasize their differences, and especially the obvious disregard that classical totalitarian regimes have for maintaining even a semblance of the rule of law.

Wolin further complicates his understanding of modernity by claiming that, in modern liberal societies, the urge towards collectivity is not altogether absent but rather is "sublimated" and diffused as citizens acquire membership to an array of organizations secondary to the central government.[116] In its liberal disinterest in forms of collectivity, the popular theories of "pluralism" advanced by Dahl and others do not interrogate this partial rebirth of the political. They thus fail to acknowledge that such organization inevitably introduces a hierarchical element into society, perpetuating a distinction between mass and elite. Because "organization and equality [are] antithetical ideas," the interest groups competing for government favors cannot realize the pluralists' purported ideal of democracy.[117] Moreover, because membership of organizations is only a

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[113] Ibid., p. 351.

[114] Ibid., p. 379.

[115] Ibid., pp. 317, 351.

[116] Ibid., p. 385.

[117] Ibid., p. 338.

parochial rather than comprehensive form of commonality, it does not substitute for a bona fide vision of the political. There continues to a political vacuum in modern liberal societies.

Wolin warns that the ongoing absence of a bona fide political in liberal societies could have disastrous consequences. He reads totalitarianism as a return of repressed political visions of unmediated unity out of the void of modern liberalism: "Totalitarianism has shown that societies react sharply to the disintegration wrought by the fetish of groupism; that they will resort to even the most extreme methods to re-assert the political in an age of fragmentation."[118] These extreme totalitarian political visions are de-mystified, are utterly hostile to politics, and unleash the awesome potentialities of modern organizational power. Thus, liberalism is complicit in totalitarianism both in the sense that they share organizational impulses in common and in the sense that liberalism creates a void that invites totalitarian regression.

Again, Wolin did not need to look as far as the totalitarian regimes of Europe to observe undesirable assertions of commonality emerging out of, or even within, an ostensibly liberal regime. Because he focuses on American political culture and reads it as largely liberal, he neglects America's white and male supremacist traditions: its garden-variety nationalisms. Such traditions also assert unity at the expense of the degraded and excluded, even if they do not necessitate a full break from liberal institutions and may even serve as the unacknowledged conditions *for* "liberal" societies such as the United States. Instead of acknowledging and directly tackling these traditions, Wolin perceives a political void and claims that "the task of non-totalitarian societies is to

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[118] Ibid., p. 389.

temper the excesses of pluralism" by developing a form of the political that still allows for politics. Throughout his work he maintains this suspicion of pluralism, rooted in its 1950s variants but including its later variants such as the one advanced by "radical democrat" William Connolly.

As I have noted, Wolin indicates at various points in his treatment of past thinkers that a modern vision of commonality should be found through a rich yet de-mythologized conception of equality. However, it is difficult to know in what exactly such equality consists, beyond the claim that it will be genuine rather than a mere "substitute."[119] Wolin's "highly tentative pointer" for achieving genuine political equality is that we ought to participate more actively in our shared responsibilities as citizens. According to Wolin, the experience of citizenship "provides what the other roles cannot, namely an integrative experience which brings together the multiple role-activities of the contemporary person and demands that they separate roles be surveyed from a more general point of view."[120] Whereas membership to organizations fragments one's life experience, citizenship is experienced through the "central referent" of the state.[121] Beyond this, however, Wolin does little to elaborate his solution to the crises of modern liberalism. He does not clarify the relationship between citizenship and "democracy" or explain how it may revive local practices or cultures against the threat of modern organizational power.

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[119] Ibid., p. 209.

[120] Ibid., p. 389.

[121] Ibid., p. 385.

In sum, Wolin draws these readings of disparate canonical thinkers together in order to offer a subversive critique of the liberal and pluralist assumptions of his milieu. *Politics and Vision* demonstrates not only the general capacity of past ideas to put contemporary ideas in perspective, but also the power of understanding these ideas diachronically as part of an intellectual inheritance that shapes the present, and of harnessing this narrative for critique. It is because Wolin regards such an overarching historical sense as a precondition of theoretical imagination that he portrays political theory as a continuous tradition of discourse developing over time.[122] This understanding of "the tradition" is distinct from some other modes of reading historical texts, such as the strict contextualism later championed by Quentin Skinner and the Cambridge School, a mode averse to postulating theoretical narratives across time and space. In both its method and its political intent, *Politics and Vision* contrasts even more sharply with scientific modes of studying politics, which Wolin worries are wholly incapable of generating imaginative insight into fundamental values and institutions. For the eloquence and timeliness with which *Politics and Vision* traces this path out of political theory's existential crisis, William Connolly credits it with having "revivified the energy, confidence, and vision of an entire generation of political theorists."[123] However, it does so at the cost of neglecting certain aspects of modernity, inaugurating blind spots that haunt the rest of Wolin's work.

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[122] Ibid., p. 23.

[123] William E. Connolly, "Politics and Vision" in Aryeh Botwinick and William Connolly (eds.), *Democracy and Vision: Sheldon Wolin and the Vicissitudes of the Political*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), pp. 3-20.

Other Postwar Critics of Modernity

To be sure, Wolin was not the only political theorist of the post-war period to offer a critique of modernity that draws on past political thinkers and targets liberal-pluralist complacency. Several theorists offered critiques of liberalism and organizational power similar in form to Wolin's. Such thinkers, most notably Jewish émigrés Leo Strauss (1953), the early Frankfurt School (1944, 1964), and Hannah Arendt (1958), also condemn central trends of modernity and identify continuities between these trends and totalitarianism. These narratives of modern decline share some features, such as a concern that ideas or experiences with intrinsic value had been eclipsed by the glorification of instrumental reason and technocracy. However, they are in other respects quite different.

Whereas Wolin laments the modern loss of "the political" defined as an expression of "commonality," and critiques the hierarchical nature of organizations, Strauss, Horkheimer, Adorno, and Arendt understand the losses of modernity in less egalitarian terms. Perhaps the starkest contrast is with Strauss, who critiques liberalism from a conservative perspective. In *Natural Right and History* (1953) Strauss condemns the modern decline of an objective sense of right and wrong, defending notions of moral truth and rule by the virtuous.[124] Relatedly, he argues that great theoretical texts hold hidden meanings that only skilled interpreters could identify.[125] Whereas Wolin worries that liberalism and its legitimizing theories of pluralism will fail to deliver sufficient

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[124] Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1953.)

[125] Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (New York, NY: Free Press, 1952.)

equality, seeking a common, secular solution in a thicker notion of citizenship, Strauss worries conversely that the relativism of liberal thought will undermine legitimate authority. Wolin's concern with pluralism and Strauss's concern with relativism are intellectually adjacent but are harnessed for contrasting political ends. Ironically, proponents of Strauss's unapologetically elitist perspective have since allied with right-wing populists and religious fundamentalists who are also concerned to recover established notions of right and wrong amidst cultural upheaval.[126]

Politics and Vision was written in an academic context in which Strauss's contrasting attempt to revive political theory from a conservative perspective was well known. Although Wolin does not mention Strauss by name, he includes a cryptic endnote situating his work in this context, contrasting his own notion of the political as "commonality" with "esoteric doctrines" and insisting that the latter have no place in a discourse of political theory.[127] Wolin's distaste for Strauss's attempt to revive political theory became more explicit in a scathing 1963 book review co-written with Berkeley colleague Jack Schaar. The book under consideration, *Essays on the Scientific Study of Politics*, is a collection of essays written by Strauss and his followers and critiques empirical political science. Wolin and Schaar allege that these Straussians together "produced a volume of such uniform texture that it might have been written with one hand."[128] "Each essay," they continue, "lacks humor, grace, and generosity," and conveys

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[126] See: Mark Lilla, *The Shipwrecked Mind* (New York, NY: New York Review of Books, 2016), p. 63.

[127] Wolin, *Politics and Vision*, p. 608.

[128] Sheldon S. Wolin and John Schaar, "Essays on the Scientific Study of Politics: A Critique" in *American Political Science Review* 57:1 (1963), pp.125-150; Herbert J.

a temper that is "unrelievedly hostile and destructive." Perhaps ironically, given the

tone of the review itself, the Straussian volume is dismissed as "a polemical work,

conducted mainly on political and ideological grounds rather than on the grounds of

philosophy." In other words, Wolin's animosity towards Strauss is so great that the

review ultimately defends empirical political scientists.[129]

Wolin's approach has more in common with the diagnoses of modernity advanced

by early members of the Frankfurt School. In *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944),

Horkheimer and Adorno examine figures such as Bacon to trace the modern rise of an

instrumentalized form of reason, which, while purportedly scientific and non-ideological,

mythologizes human domination over nature and others.[130] The outcome of this tendency

is a "totally administered society," sustained by ideological control and a repressive state,

as evidenced in both consumer capitalism and totalitarianism. In *One Dimensional Man*

(1964), Herbert Marcuse offers a related and highly influential critique of methods of

social control at work in consumer societies.[131] He proceeds in *An Essay on Liberation*

(1969) to call for a Great Refusal of modern power.[132]

However, while the Frankfurt School are thinkers of the Left and Wolin is

sympathetic to their arguments about modernity, he argues in his later essay "Reason in

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Storing (ed.), *Essays on the Scientific Study of Politics* (New York, NY: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc, 1962.)

[129] See also: Benjamin Barber, "The Politics of Political Science: 'Value-Free Theory' and the Wolin-Strauss Dust-up of 1963," *The American Political Science Review* 100:4 (2006), pp. 539–545.

[130] Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1987.)

[131] Herbert Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man* (London, UK: Sphere Books, 1964.)

[132] Herbert Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1969.)

Exile" that they fail to counter the problematic aspects of modernity with a vision of democratic power. Horkheimer and Adorno in particular abandon Marx's commitment to forging a more just political-economic system through collective action and turn to "cultural critique." They ultimately conceive the masses as "a nonrevolutionary subject" with "no motive for revolt," and counsel only individual acts of counter-cultural resistance.[133] This is, Wolin alleges, a critical theory in "exile": disenchanted with modern society but devoid of a concrete strategy that might apply to a local context and resigned instead to mere escapism.

Although Wolin does not discuss Arendt in *Politics and Vision*, he shares most with her of the aforementioned critics of modernity. Both critique the decline of the political and the rise of modern power from a relatively democratic perspective, stressing the loss of the bases of political participation and the importance of practices of citizenship. More specifically, both are influenced by Montesquieu in their critiques of the modern erosion what Arendt calls "social texture."[134] Thus, in "Hannah Arendt and the Ordinance of Time" (1977) Wolin is uncharacteristically effusive in praising Arendt as "a rare union of passion, nobility, and intellect." "To talk at all about politics in fitting ways," he claims, "is to talk the language that she both recovered for us and creatively reinterpreted."[135] However, although Arendt advocates political participation and bemoans the loss of a common "world" in which this might take place, her perspective is

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[133] Sheldon S. Wolin, "Reason in Exile" in Melzer et. al. (eds.), *Technology in the Western Political Tradition* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993.)

[134] Hannah Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York, NY: Harcourt, 1968), p. 293.

[135] Sheldon S. Wolin, "Hannah Arendt and the Ordinance of Time," *Social Research* 44:1 (1977), pp. 91-105.

never as egalitarian as Wolin's. She tends to stress the novelty and individuality of political action more than the assertion of common vision and is averse to any attempt to embody "the demos." Indeed, Arendt at times advances rather undemocratic conclusions, especially in her critique of "the social" and in her descriptions of politics as a self-selecting vocation. For example, in her account of the French Revolution in *On Revolution* (1965), she claims that ''every attempt'' to address questions of poverty politically ''leads to terror.''[136]

On the other hand, Arendt has a more ambivalent perspective on modernity than Wolin, and consequently offers a more detailed and compelling account of the origins and dynamics of classical totalitarianism. As we have seen, in *Politics and Vision* Wolin uses totalitarianism only schematically, as a trope to frame his critique of liberalism. Totalitarianism figures as a still-distant threat that Americans might face if they fail to remedy the political vacuum left by liberalism and the "excesses of pluralism." Arendt, in contrast, shows in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* how such a vacuum actually developed in Europe through the experience of imperialism, the rise of racism, and the decline of the nation state. The nation-state system was incongruous with the bourgeoisie's need for economic growth, she explains, and so as imperial powers expanded, national and sub-national political loyalties became redundant. This eroded "the political," in terms of the concrete worldly ties or "social texture" that stabilized political systems.[137] Instead, imperial expansion provided a blueprint for the mutation of nationalism into unprecedented transnational forms of racism. With the weakening of the party system,

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[136] Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1965), p. 102.

[137] Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, p. 293.

these racist ideologies fueled anti-system mass movements bent on world domination.

She details, furthermore, how the Jews became the primary target for the Nazi movement

owing to their supposed status as a transnational antagonist.

Arendt is hence able to relate and differentiate between totalitarian (transnational)

and merely nationalistic re-assertions of the political in modernity.[138] Wolin's analysis of

the void of modern liberalism lacks this historical nuance. Arendt's analysis further

suggests that the forms of modern organizational power that trouble Wolin were forged

through imperialism. This means that the perverted forms of "the political" that trouble

him did not merely arise from a liberal void, but rather are more deeply connected to the

rise of the modern organizational powers that he observes. Arendt explains, "Race as a

principle of the body politic and bureaucracy as a principle of foreign domination arose

together in the first decades of imperialism."[139]

Arendt provides more insight than Wolin not only into the origins of

totalitarianism but also into the dynamics of totalitarian regimes. Since the totalitarian

perversion of the political is based on the sweeping away of stable political ties, its

progress depends on a "perpetual-motion mania" that disregards laws and institutions

standing in its way.[140] This ceaseless movement is propelled by a fact-resistant

"ideology," which Arendt differentiates from non-totalitarian principles of politics by its

law-like quality. Totalitarian movements then use terror to destroy any remnants of

worldly ties between people, leading to a state of total domination and the annihilation of

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[138] Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism,* p. 417.

[139] Ibid*.,* p. 185.

[140] Ibid*,* 306.

all people deemed enemies. Despite the pivotal role that totalitarianism plays in

Wolin's early work, he offers none of these insights about its origins and dynamics.

Finally, in addition to better understanding the antecedents and dynamics of

totalitarianism, Arendt also maintains a more ambivalent perspective on modernity than

Wolin. Although both thinkers observe the modern loss of tradition and bemoan the

dangerous sweeping away of social texture, Arendt appreciates aspects of modern

individualism, especially civil liberties. Unlike Wolin in his early work, Arendt at no

point takes such promises of modernity for granted. She is a critic of modernity but is

also, as Seyla Benhabib argues, a "reluctant modernist."[141] Certainly, Arendt's work has

its own blind spots. However, she does not share Wolin's blindness either to the varieties

of nationalistic and transnational political identification in modernity or to the salutary

promise of modern rights.

After the publication of *Politics and Vision* in 1960, America experienced an

unprecedented decade of political resistance, with the escalation of the civil rights

movement, the anti-war movement, second wave feminism, and Black Power. These

events quickly dissolved the mood of consensus that pervaded the academic study of

politics in the 1950s, dramatically exposed behavioralism's lack of predictive power, and

validated the calls of thinkers such as Wolin and Arendt for a more participatory

appreciation of citizenship. While *Politics and Vision* suggests only that scientific

methods are unable to offer the imaginative insight of political theory, by the end of the

decade Wolin viewed the relationship between political theory and political science more

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[141] Seyla Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt* (Oxford, UK: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000.)

antagonistically. Influenced by Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962), he argues in his influential "Political Theory as a Vocation" (1969) that social science is not only unimaginative but also tends implicitly to validate the political status quo. Behavioralism, for example, had reinforced the liberal-pluralist paradigm, using the claim of value-neutrality to evade responsibility. In contrast, Wolin casts the political theorist as Kuhn's "extraordinary scientist," his "epic" task being to draw on experiential knowledge to offer a radically new paradigm "with its own cognitive and normative standards."[142]

This plea to recognize political theory as a distinct vocation appeared to be answered as three major journals were launched between 1968-1973 (*Polity* 1968, *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 1972, *Political Theory* 1973) and numerous others followed in subsequent decades. However, the revival was driven in part by theoretical developments elsewhere in the discipline. Indeed, Wolin would go on to chide much contemporary theory for failing to live up to his standards for the vocation.

After the 1960s Wolin becomes more critical of capitalism as a system of power and of the state power vis-à-vis democracy. Having turned to more radical critiques of capitalism and the state in the 1970s, Wolin is then increasingly critical of Arendt and the elitist elements of her view.[143] He also modifies his view of the role of political theory,

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[142] Sheldon S. Wolin "Political Theory as a Vocation," in *American Political Science Review* 63:4 (1969): pp.1062-1082.

[143] Compare "Hannah Arendt and the Ordinance of Time" with Sheldon Wolin, "Stopping to Think: Review of *The Life of the Mind* by Hannah Arendt" in *The New York Review of Books* (October 26, 1978); Sheldon Wolin, "Exchange on Hannah Arendt: Reply to Elizabeth Young-Bruehl" in *The New York Review of Books* (January 25, 1979); Sheldon Wolin, "Hannah Arendt: Democracy and the Political" in *Salmagundi* 61 (Spring-Summer 1983), pp. 3-19.

coming to understand the architectonic aspects of his "epic" conception from "Political Theory as a Vocation" as incompatible with his radical democratic perspective. Nevertheless, the general framework for critiquing modernity that Wolin forges in the postwar moment remains fundamental. From *Politics and Vision* through to his final texts, Wolin's work continually calls into question the supposed opposition between the void of modern liberalism on the one hand, and totalitarianism on the other. In taking this critical approach to modernity, Wolin is able to emphasize sinister aspects of the contemporary condition and requirements of democracy that other democratic theorists may not stress. However, to an event greater extent than other critics of modernity such as Arendt, he is prone to neglect modern achievements such as the establishment of fundamental rights and the institutions of representative democracy. The promise and risks of Wolin's approach can be illuminated further through a contrast with Claude Lefort, another theorist of democracy who analysis liberalism and totalitarianism from a less anti-modern perspective than Wolin or even Arendt.

Totalitarianism, Liberalism, and Modernity: A Comparison with Lefort

Although Wolin and Arendt focus on the modern decline of the political and the rise of modern power, they do not entirely deny the emergence of a democratic imaginary in modernity. As we have seen, Wolin's history of political thought in *Politics and Vision* at least recognizes that, with the questioning of transcendent sources of truth in early modernity, Machiavelli and others sought to develop an autonomous, secular theory of political power that allows for politics. He occasionally mentions the radically democratic

ideas that were made possible by this modern development, but which were quickly undermined by modern liberalism. Nevertheless, given his focus on the losses of modernity, he downplays the revolutionary inauguration of modern democracy and instead stresses an almost immediate decline of the political practices that might make equality a living reality. Focusing on liberalism, he gives short shrift to more political thinkers such as Rousseau. Arendt does more to argue for the importance of modern liberties, observing the tragedy of rightlessness and conceiving totalitarianism in part as a radical rejection of enlightenment values. However, like Wolin, she is less interested in rights abstractly conceived, and more interested in the worldly political attachments and conditions that secure an underlying "right to live in a framework where one is judged by one's actions and opinions" and thus safeguard specific rights.[144] In tracing how modern rootlessness erodes these conditions, Wolin and Arendt both emphasize continuities rather than only discontinuities between totalitarianism and modernity.

In contrast, Claude Lefort's analysis of totalitarianism primarily emphasizes its incongruity with a modern democratic imaginary. In "The Question of Democracy," (1983) Lefort echoes Wolin's early concerns about the decline of theory and declares his intention "to encourage and contribute to the revival of political philosophy and to reinterpret the political."[145] Like Wolin, Lefort insists that this task requires one to develop "a sensitivity to the historical" and to break with scientific points of view that cannot scrutinize fundamental characteristics of a society. However, he does not find that the political dimension of existence has been lost in modernity, but rather identifies a

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[144] Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism,* p. 296.

[145] Claude Lefort, *Democracy and Political Theory* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), p. 9.

democratic version of the political that has simply been underappreciated and that

must be brought to light in order to revive the discipline.

Lefort's findings regarding the fate of the political in modernity diverge from

Wolin's through a different conception of "the political." Wolin conceives "the political"

as entailing the practices through which commonality is expressed and power exercised.

If citizens in a "democratic" regime have fallen into liberal complacency then "the

political" has been lost, regardless of the underlying values of that society. While Lefort

also understands "the political" to be an expression of commonality or of the social

whole, he conceives it as the symbolic structure of power that characterizes a society and

arranges divisions within it. This structure gives society a form (mise-en-forme), gives

meaning to fundamental normative distinctions (mise-en-sens), and determines the way

in which society becomes visible to itself or is "staged" (mise-en-scène).[146] Certain

conditions, or actions on the part of citizens, may still be required to keep this regime

vital. However, for Lefort, the symbolic regime can be conceived independently of these

conditions. It is with this symbolic conception of the political that Lefort strives to

surpass scientific perspectives on politics and revive the ancient project of reflecting upon

different forms of society or politeia. This conception allows him, unlike Wolin, Arendt,

Strauss and others, to comprehend modern democracy as a bona fide political form.[147]

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[146] Lefort, *Democracy and Political Theory*, p. 11.

Lefort's use of the term "symbolic" has parallels in psychoanalysis but, as Warren Breckman explains, his use of this term pre-dates his engagement with Lacan: Warren Breckman, "Lefort and the Symbolic Dimension," in Martin Plot (ed.) *Claude Lefort: Thinker of the Political* (London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan: 2013), p. 180.

[147] Lefort distinguishes himself from Strauss, who does not recognize modern democracy as a political form. Lefort, *Democracy and Political Theory*, p. 2.

Lefort conceives modern democracy through a contrast with the Ancien

Regime, in which political power was rooted in a divine source of law and knowledge

and was embodied in the king. In modernity this theologico-political model breaks down,

as power is no longer legitimized by a divine source and there is a general "dissolution of

the markers of certainty" regarding the bases of law and knowledge.[148] Like Wolin,

Lefort identifies Machiavelli as a harbinger of this transformation. But while Machiavelli

accepts ineradicable conflict and identifies the people as the progressive element within a

divided society, his perspective is still "devoid of the image of a sovereign people."[149]

Democracy requires also that the principle of popular sovereignty and an attendant sense

of equality take hold, a revolution that, according to Lefort, was first keenly observed and

analyzed by Tocqueville.

In a modern democracy, the people are said to be sovereign but, since uncertainty

and social division are accepted, the identity and will of this people are always

indeterminate or "open to question."[150] Not only is there no divine source of power; there

is also no substantial bearer of this power akin to the body of a king. Real political power

moves from one holder to another, but no power holder fully embodies the people. It is in

this sense that Lefort describes the symbolic locus of power in a democracy as an "empty

place" and emphasizes the "gap" between any real manifestation of power and the

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[148] Lefort, *Democracy and Political Theory*, p. 19.

[149] Claude Lefort and Pierre Rosanvallon, "The Test of the Political: A Conversation with Claude Lefort" *Constellations* 19:1 (2012.)

[150] Claude Lefort, *The Political Forms of Modern Society* (Cambridge MA: The MIT Press, 1986), p. 304.

unrealizable power of the people, a "power of nobody."[151] Although modernity brings the loss of the old theologico-political model, this symbol of a sovereign people transcends the real and thus preserves a quasi-theological dimension of the social, albeit one that is not always adequately appreciated.[152]

Because the place of power in a democracy is empty, debate over the popular will is always legitimate and this, according to Lefort, implies the generation of rights and the institutionalization of conflict. Lefort rejects Marx's thoroughgoing critique of rights as bourgeois egoism, claiming instead that the idea of rights (not any positive set of rights), maintains space for conflict and is thus one of the "generative principles" of democracy: "Far from having the function of masking a dissolution of social bonds which makes everyone a monad, [rights] both testify to the existence of a new network of human relations and bring it into existence."[153] While rights do not guarantee substantive equality and may obscure oppression, "these formal freedoms made it possible to raise demands which succeeded in improving the human condition."[154] Moreover, although Lefort does not give specific institutional prescriptions, he insists that the contestability inherent in democracy means "the exercise of power is subject to periodical redistributions," that it "represents the outcome of a controlled contest with permanent

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[151] Lefort, *Democracy and Political Theory*, p. 17; Lefort and Rosanvallon "The Test of the Political."

[152] Lefort, "The Permanence of the Theologico-Political?" in *Democracy and Political Theory.*

[153] Lefort, *Democracy and Political Theory*, Ch.2; Lefort *The Political Forms of Modern Society*, Ch.7.

[154] Lefort, *Democracy and Political Theory*, p. 40.

rules," "the institutionalization of conflict."[155] Certainly, the indeterminacy of

democratic legitimacy implies an element of openness or dynamism, and Lefort even

suggests that it is *"the opposition and the demands of those who are excluded from the

benefits of democracy that constitute its most effective wellspring."* Nevertheless, his

conception of democracy is far from anarchic: he strongly defends institutions and even

the state.[156]

Lefort is eager to show how the symbolic regime of democracy – characterized by

an empty locus of power, rights, and the institutionalization of conflict – is effaced by the

French Revolutionary Terror, nationalism, and, most dramatically, totalitarianism.

Whereas Wolin's analysis of modernity tends to obscure both the salutary promise of

modern rights and the continual threat of nationalism in modernity, both are front and

center in Lefort's analysis. Lefort claims that, in an even more extreme fashion than

nationalism, totalitarian regimes attempt to close the gap between the symbolic and real

by realizing the power of the people conceived as a monolithic race or class. This

nullifies indeterminacy and the need for rights or internal conflict. With this "mutation"

of the political, power is again embodied without remainder in a mystical group or person

but, unlike the king in the Ancien Regime, its legitimacy is not anchored in a

transcendent source that lies beyond the social body.[157] Lefort aims this defense of

democracy and critique of its effacement at those on the French Left who do not

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[155] Ibid., p. 17.

[156] See also: Antoon Braekman "Neo-liberalism and the Symbolic Institution of Society: Pitting Foucault against Lefort on the State and the "Political," *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 4:9 (2015) pp. 945-962

[157] Lefort, *Democracy and Political Theory*, p. 13.

appreciate the importance of rights or "the damage to the social tissue that results from the denial of the principle of human rights in totalitarianism."[158] Indeed, having abandoned his youthful Trotskyist sympathies to become a staunch critic of Marx's legacy, the Soviet Union and its apologists, this critique of totalitarianism is central to Lefort's entire intellectual agenda.

This is a different angle from which to approach the totalitarian phenomenon than the angle assumed by Wolin or even by Arendt. In Wolin's intellectual context, the evils of the Soviet Union and the value of modern rights were not in question. There thus did not seem as pressing a need to clarify the symbolic form of modern democracy. While Arendt does more to acknowledge the importance of modern rights, she too is interested in foregrounding the dangers of modern power. Lefort's analysis is thus helpful in articulating this symbolic regime of democracy, which is assumed but left untheorized by Wolin and Arendt. He insists upon the intrinsic connection between democracy, rights and institutions of representative democracy, and clarifies how this democratic regime is effaced by totalitarianism and nationalism.

However, Lefort is less helpful in illuminating the central aspects of modernity that undermine democratic aspirations. For Wolin, the modern dissolution of markers of certainty and the emptying of the place of power carry the inherent risk that the modes of collectivity required for participatory practices will be eroded. Without such attachments, we descend into what Tocqueville experienced as an individualist "abyss" of meaninglessness. This risk is inherent to modern democratic regimes from the start. Wolin recognizes that the legitimization of conflict is necessary for a truly egalitarian

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[158] Lefort, *The Political Forms of Modern Society,* p. 259.

political life, and dismisses pre-modern conceptions of the political as inegalitarian

and thus "dangerous."[159] Nevertheless, he downplays this achievement of modernity,

occasionally acknowledging that rights and the institutions of representative democracy

are "important and precious" but more often expressing concern that idolization of them

will, "usurp the place of civic activity."[160] He is interested in how, in the absence of

concrete cultures and practices that substantiate democracy's symbol, totalitarianism may

emerge out of ostensibly democratic regime.

To be sure Lefort is, like Wolin, also concerned about the threat posed to

democracy by liberalism. Liberal thought as he understands it values rights and

institutionalized conflict but does not justify them through appeals to the symbol of

popular sovereignty. It dismisses any idea of the people as "pure illusion" and regards

"only individuals and coalitions of interests and opinions as real." "If we adopt this

view," Lefort alleges "we replace the fiction of unity-in-itself with that of diversity-in-

itself."[161] We thus disavow the political and undermine the egalitarian promise of

democracy. He even recognizes a potential causal connection between liberalism and

totalitarian or nationalistic assertions of the people-as-one. When politics has degenerated

to a mere competition between interests, he argues, "the reference to an empty place

gives way to the unbearable image of a real vacuum" and there begins a "quest for a

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[159] Sheldon S. Wolin, "Executive Liberation: Review of Harvey C. Mansfield Jr. *Taming the Prince," Studies in American Political Development* 6 (Spring, 1992), pp. 211-216.

[160] Sheldon S. Wolin, "The State of the Union," *The New York Review of Books* (May 18, 1978); Sheldon S. Wolin "What Revolutionary Action Means Today," *Dimensions of Radical Democracy: Pluralism, Citizenship, Community* Mouffe, Chantal ed. (Verso: London, 1992.)

[161] Lefort, *Democracy and Political Theory*, pp. 232, 25.

substantial identity."[162] Thus, while we must avoid nationalistic or totalitarian attempts to instantiate the people-as-one, political claims made in the name of the people are paradoxically essential to avoiding this outcome; they "have had the effect of preventing society from becoming petrified within its order, and have re-established the instituting dimension of right in the place of law."[163]

Nevertheless, Lefort does not conceive liberalism, or the perverse assertions of unity that may arise in reaction to it, as risks inherent to the modern developments he traces. Nor does he elaborate the concrete practices of popular mobilization, which, in making claims on behalf of the people, keep democracy vital. Indeed, he remains anxious that any positive articulation of the demos will close the gap between the symbolic and the real by attempting to realize the power of the people through a determinate principle or tradition rather than keep open the infinite contestability of the popular will. In Wolinian terms, he remains anxious that any vision of commonality will fail to allow for politics. Consequently, he struggles to differentiate clearly between the assertions of popular will that he concedes sustain a vital democracy and those that are totalitarian.

Similarly, Lefort is cognizant of the risks posed to democracy by forms of modern organizational power, which are utilized by both totalitarian regimes and institutionalized liberal democracies. He recognizes, for instance, an unresolved contradiction between bureaucratic regulation on the one hand and the dynamism and egalitarianism of democracy on the other.[164] However, for Lefort, neither liberalism nor these modern

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[162] Ibid., p. 233.

[163] Ibid., p. 232.

[164] Ibid., p. 27-8.

forms of power constitute the essence modernity. Rather, modernity is characterized primarily by the symbolic regime of democracy, a fragile achievement that must be defended against the political threat of totalitarianism. This is why, criticizing Arendt, he goes so far as to claim: "from a political point of view, the questioning of modernity means the questioning of democracy."[165]

In sum, Lefort's contrasting perspective on modernity generates different characterizations of both totalitarianism and democracy than those advanced by Wolin and Arendt. Associating the dynamism of modernity with democratic contestability, Lefort condemns the rigidity of totalitarian regimes and their regression to a pre-modern image of wholeness. Wolin and Arendt are more critical of the dynamism of modernity, associating it with the sweeping away of stable bases for democratic power. For Wolin, "unrelieved newness is the stuff of despotism."[166] Accordingly, Arendt stresses the "motion mania" of totalitarian regimes and the continuity of this phenomenon with some trends of modernity. Lefort explicitly rejects Arendt's characterization of totalitarianism's ceaseless movement, because he is invested in an affirmative image of modernity epitomized by democratic dynamism.[167] To some degree, this is a matter of emphasis, as the modern and anti-modern aspects of totalitarianism are both significant. However, this difference of perspective on modernity has important implications for how these thinkers conceive the demands of democracy and the potential for ostensibly democratic regimes to slide into despotism. I explore these differences in Chapter Three by comparing

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[165] Ibid., p. 55, emphasis in original.

[166] Sheldon S. Wolin, *The Presence of the Past* (Baltimore, MD: The John Hopkins University Press, 1989), p. 75.

[167] Lefort, *Democracy and Political Theory*, p. 55.

Wolin's emphasis on local cultures, memories and practices with Ernesto Laclau and

Chantal Mouffe's attempt to elaborate democratic will formation through Lefort's notion

of the "empty place." Lefort's anxiety that any attempt to assert a social whole will efface

democracy's "empty place" leads him later in his career to move further away from the

Left and closer to an embrace of liberal individualism. However, Laclau, Mouffe and

others take inspiration from his earlier theorization of the symbolic regime of democracy

while maintaining a stronger concern that its empty place will become a liberal void.

They thus go on to articulate political visions of the common quite different from Wolin's

"archaic" localism.

Politics and Vision Revisited, Totalitarianism Inverted

Whereas Wolin's early work traces parallels between modern totalitarian and non-

totalitarian societies, and warns that totalitarianism may arise out of a vacuum in

liberalism, his later work goes further and claims that the United States has actually

become an "inverted" totalitarian regime. After the 1960s, Wolin strengthens the

criticism of state bureaucracy that he develops in *Politics and Vision*, discarding his

tentative suggestion that we experience citizenship through the state and embracing a

more anti-statist view. He also comes more fully to recognize corporate capitalism as an

inegalitarian form of modern power. Although in *Politics and Vision* he critiques the

business corporation for its hierarchical structure, he offers no thoroughgoing critique of

capitalism there, and in fact suggests that we should rediscover the political by

distinguishing it from "the social," a move that prevents any radical confrontation with

economic power. Later he concludes that corporate capitalism is a system of power

"essentially impenetrable to, and unincorporable with, democracy."[168] Economic power

must hence be confronted, not evaded through a distinction between the political and

socio-economic that merely obscures this incompatibility. Accordingly, Wolin then

develops a localist, "archaic" conception of radical democracy that he intends to oppose

both corporate and state power. [See Chapter Three.]

At the same time that Wolin begins formulating this theory of radical democracy,

he starts to observe the emergence of new forms of power. The popular assumption that

liberalism and totalitarianism are diametrically opposed had long obscured the

undemocratic aspects of the American political system. However, by the 1980s Wolin

also discerns that, in the process of supposedly fighting totalitarianism through the Cold

War, America underwent further de-democratization. Despite Ronald Reagan's

dismantling of the welfare state and his ostensible commitment to decentralization, the

1980s saw the ongoing expansion of state power, notably in military and carceral forms.

At the same time, Reagan's politics were driven by an ideology of "political economy"

and a trend towards privatization.[169] This did not curtail state power but rather led to a

new entanglement of public and private power that Wolin at first calls "the megastate."[170]

The expanded edition of *Politics and Vision*, published in 2004, includes Wolin's

original text alongside seven new chapters that elaborate both his theory of radical

democracy and his diagnosis of the new forms of power that begin to emerge in the 1980s

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[168] Wolin, *Politics and Vision*, p. 518.

[169] Sheldon S. Wolin "The People's Two Bodies," *democracy* 1:1 (1981), pp. 9-24.

[170] Wolin, *The Presence of the Past*, Ch.10.

and crystallize at the turn of the twenty first century. Maintaining his opinion that past theories can help to sharpen our perspective on the present, Wolin assesses how well key nineteenth and twentieth century thinkers live up to his demands for democracy. Although neither Karl Marx nor John Dewey plays a major role in the original *Politics and Vision*, Wolin comes to appreciate them in the expanded edition for grasping certain aspects of democratic practice.

Marx is praised for his critique of capitalism as a system of power. Wolin even claims that in "ending the divide between the political and the social and the inequalities it promoted," Marx "restated the nature of the political in broadly democratic terms."[171] Alas, Marx also harbored anti-democratic tendencies, as his hope that proletarian revolution would create a classless society eschewed deliberation for unmediated unity and capitulated to centralized power. While Wolin considers Marx's notions of class and revolution to be untenable and potentially totalitarian, he insists that the critique of political economy must remain central to democratic thought. Wolin contends that, unlike Marx, Dewey did not offer a sufficiently radical critique of capitalism, ultimately "leaving economic questions unresolved."[172] Nevertheless, he appreciates Dewey for his understanding of democracy as a way of life that flourishes outside of major institutional channels, and for his attempt to maintain a notion of the public in era of liberal pluralism.[173] The readings of other thinkers in the expanded *Politics and Vision* are more critical, as Wolin condemns "postmodernism" (through Nietzsche) and more recent

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[171] Wolin, *Politics and Vision*, pp. 426, 411.

[172] Ibid., p. 517.

[173] Ibid., p. 512.

iterations of liberalism (Popper and Rawls) for failing to grasp the meaning of democracy or the powers that oppose it.

In addition to assessing these thinkers, the expanded edition of *Politics and Vision* also seeks to illuminate the new forms of American power that began to emerge under the guise of the Cold War. In the 1980s, Wolin describes these emergent forms of power as deepening modern trends towards increased centralization and capitalist domination. By the turn of the twenty first century, however, he claims that the fusion of the state with capital has yielded a new form of "postmodern power," qualitatively different from modern organizational power. This constitutes a "regime change," or fundamental break" from a flawed and hierarchical form of liberal democracy to a new and more ominous condition.[174] In this new condition, the centralized state has gained strength, but is also now fused with transnational corporate power that bursts through constitutional constraints. Whereas modern power relied primarily on bureaucratic organization, "postmodern power" also employs "lighter structures" – markets and other transnational bodies – which defy such boundaries. It is "simultaneously concentrated and disaggregated," yielding not just a megastate but also a "formless form."[175] While modern liberalism eroded "the political," the postmodern condition is entirely "post-political," since it dissolves even the bounded jurisdiction to which a political vision might hypothetically apply.

For Wolin, postmodern power is even more threatening to democracy than modern power. It subjects citizens to forces out of their control and comprehension,

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[174] Ibid., p. xviii.

[175] Ibid., pp. xvi, xvii.

further curtailing any limited opportunity to mount counter-forces. America's economic and military expansionism is fundamentally antagonistic to democratic power sharing. Meanwhile, the dramatic expansion of America's carceral state epitomizes an increasingly repressive domestic regime of punishment and control.[176] Wolin also identifies cultural shifts concurrent with these developments, as democratic values give way to values of economic efficiency, and a high-technology ethos that thrives on novelty erodes the historical memory that he considers essential to the revitalization of democracy.[177] He concludes the expanded edition of *Politics and Vision* by arguing that American postmodern power has become so antidemocratic and totalizing that we should seriously consider classifying it as a new kind of "totalitarianism."

Indeed, over the last decade of his career, and especially in his final book *Democracy Incorporated: Managed Democracy and the Specter of Inverted Totalitarianism* (2008), Wolin defends his characterization of twenty-first century American power as "totalitarian" and details its similarities and differences to classical totalitarian regimes. Despite the polemical and partisan aspects of the text, *Democracy Incorporated* is a crucial piece of Wolin's oeuvre, partly because it is his first and only attempt to discuss the nature of totalitarianism in detail instead of merely invoking it as a specter in order to criticize liberalism. Admitting that his formulation of inverted totalitarianism is "tentative, hypothetical," he identifies a central similarity between classical totalitarianism and contemporary American power in their shared aspirations to expand and globally dominate. The United States has succumbed to a "power imaginary,"

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[176] Ibid*.,* p. 577.

[177] Ibid*.,* p. 579.

according to which it "seeks constantly to expand present capabilities."[178] Wolin

returns to Hobbes as "the theorist par excellence of the power imaginary and a favorite

among neocons." Hobbes "had envisioned a dynamic rooted in human nature and driven

by a 'restless' quest for 'power after power' that ceaseth only in death."[179] However, by

the late twentieth and especially the postmodern twenty first century, power increasingly

overrides the boundaries of the state that Hobbes had envisioned. Wolin finds the origins

of American imperialism in the Cold War and the targeting of a transnational communist

enemy, neglecting its earlier origins. By the twenty first century, it is terrorism that

becomes the transnational threat fueling American expansionism. Wolin uses the term

"Superpower" to stand for America's particular brand of expansionism, a power that is

"indeterminate, impatient with restraints, and careless of boundaries," even "bent on

world domination."[180]

Wolin is adamant that an expansionist "power imaginary" not only exceeds but

also is fundamentally antithetical to a "constitutional imaginary." The latter is based

instead on the stability and limits of a state and on the ability of citizens to self-govern.

Thus, America's increasing imperial economic and military policy marks a paradigmatic

departure from its identification with both constitutionalism and democracy.[181] In this

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[178] Sheldon S. Wolin, *Democracy Incorporated: Managed Democracy and the Specter of Inverted Totalitarianism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), p. 19.

[179] Ibid.

[180] Wolin, *Democracy Incorporated*, p. xvii.

[181] This is more complicated since the US always had an imperial dimension. See., e.g. Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States* (New York, NY: Harper Perennial, 1980); Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1993), p. 5.

sense, Wolin implies, Hobbes' political theory contains a latent contradiction as it combines the restless quest for power with the limited imaginary of a modern state.

While Superpower refers to America's projection of power outward, Wolin also identifies domestic dynamics of "inverted totalitarianism" that project power inwards. Like classical totalitarian regimes, America has a weak legislative body, widespread government surveillance of citizens, a repressive legal system and militarized policing. Wolin claims that the dramatic increase in incarceration rates for black people in particular is driven less by "instinctive racism" and more by an effort to "neutralize" the most likely dissidents.[182] Moreover, the system is "abetted by a sycophantic and increasingly concentrated media" and the blurring of the line between fact and fiction in public discourse.[183] Academics have ceased to serve as effective critics of power, and a frenetic culture replicates the disorienting movement of totalitarian regimes.[184] Given all these similarities between contemporary America and classical totalitarianism it is no wonder that new readers are turning to Arendt's classic analysis of Nazism and Stalinism. Indeed, it is inexplicable that Wolin does not cite Arendt in *Democracy Incorporated* given the parallels between his text and her well-known account of totalitarianism.

However, "while the current system and its operatives share with Nazism the aspiration toward unlimited power and aggressive expansionism," Wolin observes, "their methods and actions seem upside down."[185] Given her death in the 1970s, Arendt cannot provide insight into these more recent developments in American power and how they

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[182] Wolin, *Democracy Incorporated,* p. 57, 58.

[183] Ibid., p. 260-5.

[184] Ibid., p. 267-9.

[185] Sheldon S. Wolin, "Inverted Totalitarianism," *The Nation* (May 19, 2003.)

diverge from classical totalitarianism. The primary difference, Wolin shows, is that whereas classical regimes harnessed state power to control the economy and expand militarily, inverted totalitarianism is "only in part a state-centered phenomenon." Its formless form emerges from a "symbiotic relationship," an unprecedented amalgamation, of state and corporate power. This is evident in, for instance, the dependence of political representatives on campaign contributions and lobbyists. Accordingly, even many of the features that inverted totalitarianism shares with classical totalitarianism now have a new twist. While media is deceptive, it is privately owned rather than state controlled. Academics are not overtly silenced but are rather self-pacified and "integrated into the corporate state" through precarious employment and dependence on funding sources.[186] According to Arendt's analysis of Germany, the bourgeoisie first destroyed the nation state through imperial expansion but was then "liquidated along with all other social classes" when the Nazi "mob" and their racialized ideology took over. In inverted totalitarianism, however, the economic elite remains in control and the expansionist ideology at work is not racial superiority but rather globalized neo-liberalism.

From this central difference Wolin others elaborates others. While the racist Nazi ideology mobilized the masses through a political vision and a sense of collective strength, Wolin claims that the ideology of neoliberalism is "post-political" and implicit. Instead of filling the empty place of democracy with an unmediated whole, inverted totalitarianism embraces the liberal void. Citizens feel weak, isolated and disengaged. Relatedly, inverted totalitarianism has emerged, unlike the classical totalitarian regimes,

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[186] Wolin, *Democracy Incorporated,* p. 166.

"in seeming unbroken continuity with the nation's political traditions."[187] It does not depend on the personal rule of a charismatic figure who boasts of breaking with the system, but is rather upheld by professional political operatives who steadily hollow out constitutional democracy from within.[188] Inverted totalitarianism:

"has no overt plan to suppress all opposition, impose ideological uniformity or racial purity, or seek the traditional form of empire. It allows free speech, venerates the Constitution, and operates within a two-party system that, theoretically, secures a role for an opposition party. Rather than revolting against an existing system, it claims to be defending it."[189]

Amidst the surreptitious erosion of America's constitutionally bounded form under inverted totalitarianism, Wolin turns at the end of his career again to recognize the value of the state. While constitutional democracy does not guarantee participation, and carries the threat of liberalism and bureaucratic ossification, he now seems to recognize that the law-bound sovereign jurisdiction it provides is at least more conducive to democracy than is boundless postmodern power. While he still claims that "democratic experience begins at the local level," and advocates democratic action that is "informal," improvised, and spontaneous," he also claims "the modern citizenry has needs which

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[187] Ibid., p. 45.

[188] Ibid*., p. 62.

[189] Ibid*., p. 56.

exceed local resources and can be addressed only by means of state power."[190]

Democracy has to "fight to recover lost ground, and "renew the meaning and substance

of "representative democracy" by affirming the primacy of congress, limiting executive

power, curtailing campaign finance, and nurturing a counterelite of democratic public

servants.[191] Wolin finds himself in a defensive position, asking "not what new powers we

can bring into the world, but what hard-won practices we can prevent from

disappearing."[192] In other words, he comes to appreciate the salutary aspects of modernity

only once he perceives they are being lost. [See Chapter Four.]

Totalitarianism and Nationalism in the Era of Trump

Wolin's ongoing tendency to diagnose the crises of liberalism through its

affinities with totalitarianism enables him to highlight disturbing contemporary

phenomena. Specifically, he highlights the erosion of local bases of democracy by

modern and postmodern power and the ongoing need for a democratic vision of the

political. Yet this diagnostic framework operates differently in his early and late works.

Whereas in *Politics and Vision* (1960) it enables him to illuminate the vacuum of modern

liberalism and the pervasiveness of modern power through the specter of classical

totalitarianism, his later work develops a conception of "inverted totalitarianism" to

describe America's own neoliberal expansionism. Although this latter diagnosis of

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[190] Ibid., p. 291.

[191] Ibid., p. 291.

[192] Ibid., p. 292.

inverted totalitarianism may rectify Wolin's earlier blind spot regarding the value of modern rights and institutions, his blind spot regarding the ongoing threat of nationalism remains consistent across his oeuvre.

In *Democracy Incorporated* Wolin neglects to analyze adequately the white and male supremacist nationalism that has persisted in the United States throughout the modern and postmodern developments that he traces and which even, arguably, contributed to them. Indeed, his early Hartzian reading of American political culture as primarily liberal, Wolin always struggles to address Right-Wing conservatism adequately. True to form, his claim that inverted totalitarianism is a "post-political" phenomenon that rests on an implicit, individualist ideology rather than an overt collectivist ideology downplays the contemporary power of culturally conservative and nationalistic strands of American politics. This is evident, for example, when he downplays the role of "instinctive racism" in his analysis of mass incarceration.[193] While Wolin does not ignore white and male supremacist nationalism entirely, he understands it as playing a supporting role within inverted totalitarianism: it bolsters the Republican Party's popular appeal but is not central to their capitalist-imperial agenda and in fact contradicts it. The central tendency of inverted totalitarianism is the rapid expansion of state, corporate and technological power, and "the most serious incursions into political and civil liberties come from elites."[194] This significantly underestimates the culturally conservative aspects of the American Right and their popular appeal.

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[193] Ibid.

[194] Ibid., p. 158.

This ongoing blind spot renders Wolin's work particularly perplexing in the context of a Donald Trump presidency. In one sense, the rise of Donald Trump and his actions thus far as president seem to vindicate Wolin's warnings about the emergence of a new totalitarianism. Trumpism certainly exacerbates many of the dynamics that Wolin claims our current situation shares with classical totalitarianism: a weak legislative body, widespread government surveillance of citizens, a repressive legal system, militarized policing, and aggressive overtures in foreign policy. This is why many citizens have rushed to read Arendt's *Origins* for illumination. Moreover, Trump is a member of the capitalist class and his conflicts of interest epitomize the merging of state and corporate power that Wolin claims characterizes the new expansionist ideology. However, instead of developing in seeming continuity with America's political system, Trumpism has mobilized citizens with an openly xenophobic, anti-system ideology promoted by a charismatic leader with no political experience and an open disdain for institutions and the rule of law. In these ways, it contradicts the other "inversions" that Wolin identifies in the new, neoliberal form of totalitarisnism.

Perhaps this means simply that the new totalitarianism is simply more classical, and less inverted, than Wolin suspected. However, this coming of age of American conservatism has also been explicitly nationalist rather than expansionist, promising a return to protectionism rather than global domination. Trump has used the standard playbook of right wing populism, promising to reverse America's economic and military globalism and secure the border. Whether this nationalistic agenda is authentic or merely a smokescreen for a transnational corporate agenda, it currently commands more attention than Wolin allows for in his diagnoses of liberalism and inverted totalitarianism.

3. The Center Cannot Hold: Memory, Identity, Coalition

"Radicals need to cultivate remembrance, for memory is a subversive weapon."

- Sheldon Wolin, "Why Democracy?"[195]

"All profound changes in consciousness, by their very nature, bring with them characteristic amnesias. Out of such oblivions, in specific historical circumstances, spring narratives. After experiencing the physiological and emotional changes produced by puberty, it is impossible to 'remember' the consciousness of childhood… Out of this estrangement comes a conception of personhood, *identity* (yes, you and that naked baby are identical) which, because it can not be 'remembered,' must be narrated. Against biology's demonstration that every single cell in a human body is replaced over seven years, the narratives of autobiography and biography flood print-capitalism's markets year by year."

- Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*[196]

"To act is to be committed, and to be committed is to be in danger. In this case, the danger, in the minds of most white Americans, is the loss of their identity."

- James Baldwin, *The Fire This Time*[197]

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[195] Sheldon S. Wolin, "Editorial: Why Democracy?" *democracy* 1:1 (1981), p. 3-5.

[196] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (New York, NY: Verso, 1983.)

[197] James Baldwin, "The Fire Next Time," in Toni Morrison (ed.), *James Baldwin: Collected Essays* (New York, NY: The Library of America, 1998.)

Introduction

Wolin is duly recognized for his powerful diagnoses of political crises, from his early critiques of liberalism, modern organizational power, and political theory's decline in the postwar period, to his theorization of "inverted totalitarianism" in postmodernity. Yet he claims that political theory not only has this critical aspect but also must offer "a glimpse of reality, of a better social order, of a more authentic life."[198] In *Politics and Vision* (1960) Wolin offers no positive vision for political life other than the suggestion that we embrace the "integrative experience" of "citizenship," a vague notion that is in tension with his critique of modern organizational power. From the 1960s on, however, he develops a vision of decentralized democracy that answers his critiques of both liberalism and organizational power more fully. He turns increasingly against the state and capitalism as a system of power and, by the 1980s, seeks to retrieve local practices of political participation that he associates with an "archaic" American tradition. The hope is that this tradition will counter liberal individualism with a vision of a common life, while also countering organizational power with an appreciation of local culture and historical memory. Although Wolin comes to question aspects of his archaic localism, it remains a distinctive and problematic aspect of his political thought. This chapter critically examines this vision and, in particular, how Wolin begins to confront its limitations by grappling with the place of identity in democratic politics and vis-à-vis historical memory. The following chapter will continue this interrogation of the

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[198] Sheldon S. Wolin, "Political Theory and Political Commentary" in *Political Theory and Political Education* ed. Melvin Richter (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980.)

prescriptive aspect of Wolin's work, exploring how his confrontation with the limits

of archaism generates a more complex view of democracy that he calls "polymorphous."

I first trace how Wolin arrives at his archaic vision, influenced by the student

movements of the 1960s and driven by his subsequent commitment to develop a coherent

democratic theory deeply critical of the state and capitalism. This intellectual history is

important, since the secondary literature has not yet shown how Wolin's first prescriptive

vision emerges, and how it fulfills or departs from his early calls for a renewed sense of

citizenship and his formative engagements with student activism. I then distill the key

features of archaic democracy. While it has no definite institutional form, it is

characterized by an emphasis on localism, deliberation, and the articulation of common

concerns. Wolin credits both Montesquieu and Alexis de Tocqueville with understanding

the importance of these local roots of power. However, rather than associating either

archaic democracy or these thinkers with the American founders, he ties them instead to a

contrapuntal tradition of colonial self-government and the anti-federalists who attempted

unsuccessfully to preserve it. Wolin thus centers archaic democratic practices on a

beleaguered American "identity," which, while supposedly distinct from identities

claimed by Reaganite conservatives, is rooted firmly in the past. He finds more promise

in the revival of this archaic tradition than in attempts by some political theorists in the

1970s and 80s to contest Hartzian readings of America's liberal political culture by

illuminating "republican" influences on the founders.

Wolin's archaic vision of democracy is valuable in underscoring the importance

of decentralized power, and of the local cultures, memories and practices that are put at

risk by rapid social changes and large-scale organization. These elements of democracy

are not well appreciated by many other "radical" democratic theorists, especially

those emerging from European intellectual discourses. To demonstrate this I put Wolin

into conversation with Laclau and Mouffe, whom he did not directly engage, but who

also sought in the 1980s to conceive a radically democratic politics. Instead of returning

to an archaic myth of democracy to combat liberalism and neoconservatism, Laclau and

Mouffe instead seek to show how various struggles often dubbed "identity politics" can

be held together with class politics in a cohesive, "hegemonic" Left. In doing so they

offer important insight into the formation of political coalitions. However, this

comparison shows that even thinkers associated with a "post-Marxist" moment, who

address a lack of viable understandings of collective power, do not necessarily share

Wolin's perspective of loss, his critical stance on modernity, or his appreciation of the

local roots of democracy.

Alas, while supposedly distinct from cultural conservatisms of the Right, even

Wolin's decentralized archaism carries the risk of parochialism. Wolin's blind spot

regarding the value of modern rights and institutions, and his consequent dismissal of the

state, will be further addressed in Chapter Four. In this chapter I focus on the symbolic

aspect of democracy, showing how Wolin's blind spot regarding nationalism allows him

at first to overlook the complicity of archaic traditions with the exclusion and domination

of women and minorities. This risk is especially acute given his association of American

democracy with a settled "identity", which he associates in particular with the white,

male anti-federalists.[199] Wolin comes to acknowledge this problem and, to avoid a

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[199] Wolin appeals to a democratic "identity" are most striking in Sheldon S Wolin, "The People's Two Bodies" *democracy* 1:1 (1981), pp. 9-24.

regressive nostalgia, recommends that we develop a more ambivalent view of America's democratic traditions by remembering the historical injustices that they have allowed. In doing so he suggests that we may "re-cognize" social hierarchies such as race so that they no longer have a hold on us. Although he continues to value historical memory and an archaic American tradition, he loosens his association of such tradition with a fixed "identity," using his notion of "fugitive democracy" instead to theorize the symbolic dimension of democracy as a "continual self-fashioning of the demos."[200] If only in its elasticity, this understanding of the demos is closer to those advanced by postmodern theorists such as Laclau and Mouffe, even as Wolin continues to prize local practices and memories in ways foreign to them.

Nevertheless, Wolin's attempts to grapple with the problematic relationship between memory and identity are inadequate. While he largely stops trying to recover a unified democratic "identity" from the past, he underestimates the ongoing anti-democratic effect of hierarchical differences such as race, and the durability of the identities that undergird them. As critical race theorists such as Kimberlé Crenshaw and Derrick Bell demonstrate, racism is a form of power that has had a decisive influence over the prospects for radical politics and which requires sustained opposition to combat.[201] Moreover, racism is rooted in white identities that cannot be so easily "re-cognized" or separated from the archaic traditions that Wolin continues to value. Wolin's

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[200] Sheldon S. Wolin, "On Rawls' Political Liberalism," *Political Theory* 24:1 (1996), pp. 97-142.

[201] Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Race, Reform, and Retrenchment: Transformation and Legitimation in Anti-discrimination Law" and Derrick A. Bell "Racial Realism" in Kimberlé Crenshaw, Neil Gotanda, Gary Peller, and Kendell Thomas (eds.), *Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings That Formed a Movement* (New York, NY: The New Press, 1995.)

demand that when "self-fashioning the demos" we "bracket" differences such as race

further suggests that *no* established identity belongs in democratic politics, including the

oppressed identities of minorities and women. This is driven by his anxiety that any

politics focused on differences such as race or gender will reinforce damaged identities,

bolster state power, and fracture solidarity on the Left. However, it risks sustaining white

supremacy in the guise of Left colorblindness, by not only denying the ongoing salience

of white racial identity but also depriving minorities and women the vocabularies and

oppositional traditions required for resistance.

In order to address the ongoing power of racial hierarchy, then, we must allow for

a race-conscious politics that tackles white supremacy head-on and persistently. This

means not only superficially denouncing archaic majoritarian identities, but also working

continually to recognize how they are bound up with dominant American traditions. It

also means allowing for a coalitional politics, which, instead of "bracketing" difference,

allows for identity claims by minorities and women. Laclau and Mouffe's work is more

helpful in developing an appreciation of how coalitions form on both the Right and the

Left. They conceptualize the "equivalences" that may be forged between different

struggles without erasing their specificity, and argue that such a politics may still allow

for the re-cognition and refashioning of identities over time. Yet, because they lack

Wolin's appreciation of historical continuity, they do not stress how the identities

involved in a coalitional politics are inevitably entangled in various traditions. If we take

from Wolin an emphasis on perceiving and respecting the presence of the past, a

coalitional politics of the Left would be one that values multiple traditions and takes on

the messy and irresolvable task of disentangling every tradition's promises from their

perils.

The Formulation of Archaic Democracy

Politics and Vision offers a powerful critique of the decline of "the political" under modern liberalism and the rise of modern power. However, at the end of the book Wolin's only suggestion for rediscovering political life is to embrace the "integrative experience" of citizenship through the "central referent of the state."[202] While this admittedly "highly tentative pointer" names a common experience of citizenship that might combat liberalism, it is vague and does not clearly respond to the problem of organizational power. Wolin's anxiety over the "sublimation" of political urges into various non-political organizations leads him to insist that the state should be the central vehicle through which citizenship is experienced. Yet this state-centric view of political participation sits uneasily with his claims in the same chapter that "constitutional theory is a variant of organizational theory" and that "organization and equality [are] antithetical ideas."[203]

In a series of articles in the 1960s, including the influential "Political Theory as a Vocation" (1969), Wolin develops an increasingly demanding view of the theoretical task as an imaginative re-envisioning the political at odds with the legitimizing tendencies of

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[202] Sheldon S. Wolin, *Politics and Vision* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), pp. 389, 372.

[203] Wolin, *Politics and Vision,* pp. 351, 338.

This is an argument along the lines of Michel's "iron law of oligarchy" in 1911: Robert Michels, *Political Parties: A Sociological Study of the Oligarchical Tendencies of Modern Democracy* (Eastford, CT: Martino Fine Books, 2016.)

science. At the same time, the events in the 1960s, and especially Wolin's first-hand experience of the Free Speech Movement at Berkeley, seemed to open space for such a re-envisioning. The university had become a microcosm of the modern bureaucratic, technological society: "The old idea of the university as a community of conversants has been pushed aside by the Baconian vision of knowledge as power."[204] In response to this alienating condition, student protestors engaged in decentralized, participatory practices that spoke to the problems of liberalism and organizational power, reversing modern tendencies towards powerlessness. In a series of articles co-authored with John Schaar for the *New York Review of Books*, Wolin examines the tactics of the Berkeley student movements in detail. Reflecting on the movements of the 1960s decades later, he concludes that they initiated an astonishing deauthorization of state institutions and left behind "the experience of democratic possibilities outside and often against the system."[205] They exposed the inadequacy of *Politics and Vision's* suggestion that we realize a richer form of citizenship through state institutions. In recognizing such a participatory culture thriving around him, Wolin departs from his earlier reading of American political culture as uniformly liberal and devoid of political vision, a reading inherited from his graduate school advisor Louis Hartz.

In "Political Theory as a Vocation" Wolin suggests that the theoretical task is creative, that it may bring something new into the world through epic "thought-deeds"

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[204] John Schaar and Sheldon S. Wolin, "Berkeley and the University Revolution," *The New York Review of Books* (February 9, 1967.)

[205] Sheldon S. Wolin, "A Look Back at the Ideas that Led to the Events," *The New York Times* (July 26, 1998)

that unite theoria and praxis.[206] Indeed, the 1960s activism that spurred his

imagination was unforeseen and seemed to break with old ideologies, representing

novelty rather than conservatism. In his detailed accounts of events at Berkeley he

emphasizes their spontaneity and unpredictability.[207] At the same time, however, he

understands these participatory practices as preserving the "civility, tradition, and care for

the common culture of the intellect" put at risk by modern organizational power. In this

sense, protestors were "striking against the fluid present rather than against the

burdensome past."[208] In other words, Wolin understanding of political revitalization at

this point combines an appreciation for novelty with an appreciation of conservation.

Despite the great promise of the activists of the 1960s, Wolin concludes at the end

of the decade that they failed in "the great intellectual task of the present"; that is, "the

task of rethinking every aspect of technological civilization."[209] The New Left did not

"create the new radical theory beyond both liberalism and socialism which the Port

Huron Statement had called for."[210] Ultimately, it offered only "episodic outbursts" and

"a mood, a feeling of rage and revulsion, which is increasingly impatient with theory, or

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[206] Sheldon S. Wolin, *Hobbes and the Epic Tradition of Political Theory* (Los Angeles, CA: William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, 1970.)

[207] Sheldon S. Wolin and John Schaar, "Berkeley: The Battle of People's Park" *The New York Review of Books* (June 19, 1969.)

[208] Sheldon S. Wolin and John Schaar, "Education and the Technological Society," *The New York Review of Books* (October 9, 1969.)

[209] Wolin and Schaar, "Education and the Technological Society"

A parallel critique is found in Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society*. Trans. John Wilkinson. (New York, NY: Knopf, 1964.)

[210] Sheldon S. Wolin and John Schaar, "Where We are Now," *The New York Review of Books* (May 7, 1970.)

even thought and argument."[211] Moreover, while other elements of the New Left and

Black Power movements certainly advanced critiques of capitalism, Wolin comes to

regard the student protestors on whom he focuses as inadequately critical of corporate

capitalism as a form of power central to modern technological civilization. Although

Students for a Democratic Society had roots in socialist politics, the unrest on campuses

ultimately proved to be "radical in its appetite for political action, but not in its

objectives." It was a "middle-class phenomenon," "which dares not go into the streets,

the factories, and (increasingly) the ghettos."[212]

Through the 1970s Wolin takes up this task of developing a more coherent vision

of democracy as the egalitarian sharing of power, a vision antagonistic to technology,

bureaucracy and the state, but also to capitalism as a system of power. He would later

describe his move away from the vague notion of "citizenship" offered in *Politics and*

Vision (1960) as a journey "from liberalism to democracy."[213] Through more articles in

the *New York Review of Books* he begins to theorize "a politics of smaller scales, of more

intensive care, of common concerns that are immediate to our daily lives."[214] His

emphasis on the past begins to overtake his appreciation of novelty, as he advocates, "a

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[211] Ibid.

[212] Wolin and Schaar, "Education and the Technological Society"; Sheldon S. Wolin, "The Destructive Sixties and Postmodern Conservatism" in Stephen Macedo (ed.), *Reassessing the Sixties: Debating the Political and Cultural Legacy* (New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 1997), pp. 129-156.

[213] Wolin, *Politics and Vision*, p. xv.

[214] Sheldon S. Wolin, "The Meaning of Vietnam," *The New York Review of Books* (June 12, 1975.)

Wolin frequently invokes the language of "care" to discuss democracy, but does not acknowledge its gendered connotations or cite parallels in feminist theory.

politics of reversal" and contests the meaning of conservatism.[215] He grows

increasingly critical of the US Constitution as a triumph of centralized power. The

increasing importance of capitalism to Wolin's understanding of modern power and

domination is evident in book reviews of Eric Hobsbawm and David McClellan's work

on Marx. By 1977 he asserts: "we must cease thinking about the "economy" as simply a

mechanism for producing goods, services, and employment" and understand it rather as

"a structure of power exercised over material things and human relationships."[216] While

he remains critical of Marx's untenable notions of class and revolution, critiques of

capitalism become central to his thought. In the interest of economic justice he disregards

distinctions he drew earlier between "the social" and "the political," and asserts his

increasing disagreements with Hannah Arendt on this score.[217] Throughout Wolin's later

work he understands corporate capitalism as a permanent threat to egalitarianism, a form

of power that is "essentially impenetrable to, and unincorporable with, democracy," and a

significant source of the overall alienation of modern technological societies.[218]

Wolin's archaic vision of democracy crystallizes in 1980 with the launch of his

short-lived interdisciplinary journal *democracy* (1981-83.) In contrast to American

liberalism, he identifies a contrapuntal American tradition of local self-governance,

originating in early modernity but in opposition to many of its tendencies, which allows

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[215] Wolin, "The Meaning of Vietnam"; Sheldon S. Wolin "The New Conservatives," *The New York Review of Books* (February 5, 1976).

[216] Sheldon S. Wolin "Looking for 'Reality: Review of *The Real America: A Surprising Examination of the State of the Union* by Ben J. Wattenberg," *The New York Review of Books* (February 6, 1975.)

[217] Sheldon S. Wolin "Hannah Arendt: Democracy and the Political" in *Salmagundi* 61 (Spring-Summer 1983), pp. 3-19.

[218] Wolin, *Politics and Vision*, 517.

citizens to share in power. It is critical, he argues, that the Left connect with this

tradition instead of leaving the past to neo-conservatives on the Right. We must "cultivate

remembrance, for memory is a subversive weapon."[219] Wolin continues to associate the

1960s with aspirations towards such radical democracy, suggesting that this decade saw

the fleeting resurgence of a beleaguered American heritage. Of course, in order to

associate 1960s movements with such a tradition, he must emphasize the elements of

them that seem to resist trends of modernity – the discovery of shared concerns, and

possibilities for decentralized action– over their novel and countercultural elements. In

this way he shapes a lost tradition of democratic practice in response to what he perceives

as America's contemporary democratic deficits. Since the participatory activity of the

1960s became more marginal in subsequent years, his analysis is doubly sorrowful.

Wolin's attempts to retrieve America's democratic tradition culminate in the 1989 essay

collection *The Presence of the Past: Essays on the State and the Constitution*, which he

describes as "concerned with a particular kind of loss, the loss of democratic values, the

constriction of democratic hopes, and the attenuation of the democratic element in

institutions not otherwise conspicuous in their commitment to democratic ends."[220]
It is here that he refers to radically democratic practices as "archaic," coming most fully

to realize the anti-modernist tendencies evident since his early work.[221]

Although Wolin's archaic vision of democracy is not systematic, we can draw on

his articles in *democracy* to state its key components more clearly than they have yet

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[219] Sheldon S. Wolin, "Editorial: Why Democracy?" *democracy* 1:1 (1981), p. 3-5.

[220] Sheldon S. Wolin, *The Presence of the Past* (Baltimore, MD: The John Hopkins University Press, 1989), p. 4.

[221] Ibid., Ch. 5.

been articulated in the secondary literature. First, democracy is "local," both in the sense that it develops on a small scale and in the sense that it thrives on customs specific to its location. "In the past," Wolin explains, "if democracy meant anything at all, it meant the copresence of human beings, the physical reality of people in *this* place and at *this* time."[222] Second, democracy involves "a process of deliberation among civic equals and [is] effected through cooperative action."[223] Wolin frequently returns to "deliberation" as the mode of action that accommodates both equality and diversity, though he does not have in mind the kind of rational discourse defended by other forms of deliberative democracy but rather a looser notion of face-to-face interaction that draws on local custom. More specifically, Wolin envisions a process of "arguing and deciding how to find the appropriate means to articulate their needs."[224] Through this process, a third feature of archaic democracy emerges: the articulation of "shared and common concerns."[225]

Wolin considers these three components of democratic practice essential for an egalitarian sharing of power, and claims they are put at risk not only by liberal individualism but also by large-scale forms of modern organization and corporate capitalism. Democratic power has "diverse origins" in "the family, school, church, [and] workplace," and depends upon the "experience, sensibility, wisdom, even melancholy distilled from the diverse relations and circles we move within." To prevent the disempowerment of ordinary citizens, we must be attuned to the potential loss of these

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[222] Sheldon S. Wolin, "Editorial" *democracy* 2:3 (1982), pp. 2-4.

[223] Sheldon S. Wolin, "The New Public Philosophy" *democracy* 1:4 (1981), pp. 23-36.

[224] Wolin, "Editorial" *democracy* 2:3.

[225] Wolin, "The New Public Philosophy."

textures of democracy. Indeed, "everything turns," Wolin claims "on an ability to establish practices whose form will not distort the manifold origins of power."[226] Yet modernity carries with it the inherent risk that local traditions, memories and cultures will be swept away as the generation of power is made into a sui generis act of will and we descend into an abyss of meaninglessness.

In conceiving a counter-modern kind of power, Wolin is drawn particularly to Montesquieu's appreciation of dispersed power and his emphasis on culture, which "counter the Bacon-Hobbes project of modeling society after the *logos* of science."[227] For Montesquieu, Wolin argues in *The Presence of the Past,* feudalism had a certain value as a "decentered political system in which power was dispersed among many centers and thereby limited by the natural rivalries among them."[228] Furthermore, Montesquieu appreciates that political principles must take root in a culture in order to thrive: "his ideal might be restated as power moderated by the complexities of political culture of, more briefly, acculturated power."[229] Wolin also finds increasing inspiration in Alexis de Tocqueville, who he reads as an anti-modern thinker who was deeply influenced by Montesquieu's understanding of power.[230] Finally, Wolin comes to appreciate John

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[226] Sheldon S. Wolin, "What Revolutionary Action Means Today" in *democracy* 2:4 (1982), pp. 17-28.

[227] Sheldon S. Wolin, *Tocqueville Between Two Worlds: The Making of a Political and Theoretical Life* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), p. 43.

[228] Wolin, *The Presence of the Past,* p. 74.

[229] Ibid., p. 107.

[230] Ibid., p. 71.

Dewey, who also critiques liberalism for confining democracy to major institutions and conceives of democracy as a way of life dependent on habit and custom.[231]

Insofar as Wolin's localist vision of archaic democracy does not prescribe an institutional model, it departs from the conception of epic, visionary theory developed in "Political Theory as a Vocation." Since Plato, architectonic theory has implied intellectual elitism. In addition, Wolin realizes through his examination of Thomas Hobbes in *Hobbes and the Epic Tradition of Political Theory* (1970), that modern architectonic theory is allied with the dangers of organizational power. Methodologically, he identifies his approach to democracy again with Tocqueville, who offers "a conception of theory that [is] epical in form but resigned to being antiarchitectonic in substance."[232] Tocqueville employs an "impressionistic" theoretical style that provides a broad perspective on social reality but is attentive to local custom and, crucially, focused on the imaginative recovery of the past. Wolin's abandonment of architectonic aspirations has led James Wiley and others to criticize him for failing to over a "viable alternative."[233]

While Wolin does not center his archaic vision of democracy on large-scale institutional forms, he does center it on settled practices and a common culture. Indeed, at times he goes further and identifies this tradition with "the demos," claiming not only that it allows for common concerns to be articulated but also that it bestows a collective

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[231] Wolin, *Politics and Vision*, Ch. 14.

[232] Wolin, *Tocqueville Between Two Worlds*, p. 181.

[233] James Wiley, "Sheldon Wolin on Theory and the Political" *Polity* 38:2 (2006), pp. 211-234; Ronald Beiner, "Democracy and Vision" *Bulletin of Science, Technology and Society* 24:1 (2004), pp. 60-62.

identity on the American people.[234] In "The People's Two Bodies" (1981), he claims

that the ways a society chooses to generate power shape its collective identity, and that

American political culture has been characterized by two competing tendencies, "with

each standing for a different conception of collective identity."[235] First, he identifies a

democratic tendency towards sharing decentralized power and a corresponding identity

that he calls "the body politic." This tendency has its origins in colonial self-government

and was upheld by the anti-federalists. "The antifederalists," Wolin claims in *The*

Presence of the Past, "can be described as leaning more against inequality and toward

citizen participation, strongly opposed to the enlargement of the powers of the new

central government, deeply concerned over the lack of a bill of rights in the original

constitution, and suspicious that the proposed system was a disguise for the introduction

of aristocratic government."[236] Since Montesquieu appreciates decentralized power,

"Anti-federalist critics of the proposed constitution were quick to invoke Montesquieu

and to charge that only despotism could rule the vast territory represented by

America."[237] Similarly, Tocqueville was not an uncritical admirer of the American

founders but actually "had a certain political kinship with the arch-enemies of T*he*

Federalist, the anti-federalists."[238] According to Wolin, the tendency of "the body politic"

was also encapsulated in the Declaration of Independence, the movement to abolish

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[234] Sheldon S Wolin, "The People's Two Bodies," *democracy* 1:1 (1981), pp. 9-24.

[235] Ibid.

[236] Wolin, *The Presence of the Past*, p. 88. See also: John Schaar, "Anti-federalists, Arise!" *The Nation* (January 22, 1983.)

[237] Wolin, *The Presence of the Past,* p. 112.

[238] Ibid*.,* p. 73.

slavery, Reconstruction, Populism, the struggle for autonomous trade unions, the

Civil Rights movement, and other popular movements.

Second, Wolin identifies an antidemocratic tendency towards centralization,

rationalization, and corporate capitalism, and a corresponding identity that he calls

"political economy."[239] This tendency is evident *The Federalist*, much of the Constitution,

the centralization resulting from the Civil War, the erosion of local cultures and historical

memory, and the displacement of ideals of popular sovereignty by ideals of pluralism.

Wolin considers Alexander Hamilton the worse offender amongst the American founders,

as he was dogged in seeking to establish "an intimate connection… among science,

reason, and power" in the pursuit of centralized power.[240] Madison, in contrast,

"displayed far less confidence in the ability of a new science to demonstrate that men can

safely exercise large and concentrated forms of power." "Indeed," Wolin claims,

"[Madison's] reservations are reminiscent of Montesquieu."[241] Nevertheless, Madison's

reservations about centralized power ultimately did not result in an embrace of local

democratic governance but rather reduced politics to liberalism, "to the self-interested

activities of economic interests, ideological sects, and demagogic politicians."[242] Alas,

claims Wolin, "the possibility of an American version of Montesquieu's

constitutionalism of diverse laws, "intermediary groups," and intricate accommodations

went unexplored."[243]

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[239] Wolin, "The People's Two Bodies."

[240] Wolin, *The Presence of the Past,* p. 113.

[241] Ibid*.,* p. 114.

[242] Ibid*.,* p. 117.

[243] Ibid.

Wolin claims that these two tendencies have co-existed, but that political economy "displayed greater vitality" and achieved its ultimate triumph in the presidency of Ronald Reagan. Thus, in the 1980s he diagnoses a "crisis in collective identity" as the fleeting hopes of participatory democracy fade.[244] The victories of "political economy" and the decline of "the body politic" have merely been disguised by the formal extension of democracy in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Despite the marginal status of the democratic tradition, Wolin claims that the world "owes a historic debt to America for the freedom that has enabled democracy to survive, even if mainly as an endangered species."[245] He positions himself in the 1980s as a kind of prophet calling the American people back to their best selves. The Biblical echoes in his texts of this period are at times explicit, as he refers to democratic identity as a "birthright" that must be defended and endorses the political value of such myths.[246] Wolin is aware that defending radical democracy though such jeremiads for a lost American tradition may seem peculiar given the cultural conservatism concurrently being championed by Ronald Reagan and his acolytes. Anticipating objections, he dismisses this ideology of the New Right as "pseudotraditionalism."[247] Moral and religious conservatism "furnish a substitute for politics, replete with solidarity, a sense of community, and a glow of moral superiority."[248] However, Reagan's supposed

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[244] Wolin, *The Presence of the Past*, p. 13.

[245] Sheldon S. Wolin, "On Nationalism," *The Nation* (July 15, 1991.)

[246] Wolin, *The Presence of the Past*, Ch. 8; Sheldon S. Wolin, "Postmodern Politics and the Absence of Myth," *Social Research* 52:2 (1985), pp. 217-239.

[247] Wolin, *The Presence of the Past*, p. 23.

[248] Wolin, "The New Public Philosophy."

commitment to decentralized power is a "hoax" masking his modernist embrace of

centralized power and rapid economic and technological change.[249] Thus his brand of

conservatism "leave[s] the entire structure of power, inequality, hopelessness, and

growing repression wholly untouched."[250] Contesting the Right's supposed monopoly on

narratives of loss and retrieval, Wolin's attempts through his democratic myth to reclaim

a more authentic, democratic conservatism.

The 1980s saw a broader anti-modern moment emerging among some Left

intellectuals in the United States, as evident in other contributions to the interdisciplinary

journal *democracy* and elsewhere.[251] Not wholly unconnected to this was the resurgence

of interest among some political theorists in the "republican" tradition and its historical

influence in the United States. J.G.A Pocock's *The Machiavellian Moment* (1975), for

example, contradicted Hartz in suggesting that the US founding was decisively shaped by

republican notions of virtue rather than by Lockean liberalism.[252] Alasdair MacIntyre's

After Virtue (1981) and Michael Sandel's *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* (1982)

further galvanized interest in virtue ethics as an alternative to liberalism, and one with

possible roots in American history.[253] In contrast to these thinkers, Wolin does not seek to

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[249] Sheldon S. Wolin "Editorial" *democracy* 1:4 (1981), 2-4.

[250] Wolin, "The New Public Philosophy."

[251] E.g. Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton, 1979); T.J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture 1880-1920* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1981.)

[252] J.G.A Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1975).

[253] Michael Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1982); Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981.)

dissociate the American founders from liberalism but rather to unearth a contrapuntal tradition that he associates with the antifederalists. In fact, he explicitly opposes "political theorists who interpret eighteenth-century American political ideas and institutions through the categories of "republicanism," such as "virtue, civic participation, and liberty."[254] He does so on the grounds that these "categories serve to obscure questions of power and authority and to sever political activity from specific localities." "The effect," he continues "is to soften the antidemocratic tendencies of the Constitution as well as the ideological thrust of *The Federalist*." Furthermore, "the use of the categories of republicanism and civic humanism also serves to obscure one of the most unique – and neglected – achievements of the Founders: they founded not only a constitution but the American version of the modern state."[255] These concerns are also evident in Wolin's growing disagreements with Arendt, for although she is more concerned with the local textures of democracy than are virtue ethicists, her political theory also advances elements of republican elitism and and naïvety about the state. While Wolin's Left archaism seeks to revive a more radically egalitarian American tradition, he would come to acknowledge that it too runs to risk of reinforcing inequalities.

The Promise of Archaic Democracy: A Comparison With Laclau and Mouffe

Wolin's tendency to view political phenomena through the prism of loss, and his resulting vision of archaic democracy, allow him to emphasize aspects of democracy

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[254] Wolin, *The Presence of the Past,* p. 5.

[255] Ibid.

neglected by other democratic theorists. Through his archaic vision he stresses historical continuity and the local memories, cultures and practices that constitute the "manifold origins of power" and thus cultivate genuine self-governance. While he illuminates these local textures of democracy through a narrative of American exceptionalism, arguably they are significant elements of democratic empowerment more generally. Yet many political theorists tend to neglect these elements of democracy.

To begin with, in the expanded edition *of Politics and Vision* (2004) Wolin shows that liberal theorists such as Karl Popper and John Rawls fail to appreciate the importance of either collective power or historical memory for democracy. While he rarely examines in detail the numerous contemporary thinkers who attempt to move beyond such liberal individualism and deepen our understanding of democracy, they too often fail to stress the importance of local cultures and traditions. We have seen how those who revive the "republican" tradition, for example, appeal to an abstract notion of virtue rather than a decentralized and egalitarian notion of power connected to specific localities. This localist, archaic element of democracy is also not well appreciated by deliberative democrats of a modern rationalist persuasion, such as Jürgen Habermas. Some other democratic theorists claim to be more "radical" than either republicans or Habermas, by maintaining a paradoxical perspective on liberal democracy and allowing for an emphasis on popular mobilization outside major institutional channels. However, these radical democrats also rarely emphasize archaic localism. Laclau and Mouffe, for example, stress the irresolvable tension between the logic of individual rights on the one hand and the

collective logic of popular sovereignty on the other.[256] Moreover, they elaborate the spontaneous popular mobilizations, not just institutionalized procedures, which are necessary to ward off liberalism. Nevertheless, Laclau and Mouffe are not attuned to the memories, local cultures, and practices that Wolin claims are part of the democratic experience, or the risks posed to them in modernity. They remain largely agnostic about the forms that democratic practice should take, focusing instead on the symbolic formation of democratic subjects. Their perspective provides a particularly illuminating counterpoint to Wolin's, since it competes as a contemporary "radical" democratic theory but emerged from a divergent, continental intellectual milieu.

Laclau and Mouffe's radical democratic theory also took shape in the 1980s, emerging out of European discourses that sought to reconceive the formation of collective subjects in the wake of Marxism's collapse and the rise of neoliberalism under Margaret Thatcher. In many ways, the fusion of neo-conservatism and neoliberalism under Thatcher in the United Kingdom ran parallel to developments in the United States under Reagan. When Thatcher famously asserted that "there is no such thing as society... there are individual men and women and there are families," she deftly connected neoliberal individualism with a conservative notion of traditional family.[257] Similarly, and even more striking, the 1980s in the US saw the alliance of rapidly expanding corporate power with social conservatives such as evangelical Christianity who sought to sustain heterosexist and white traditions. Whereas Wolin dismisses the conservatism of the New Right as phony, Laclau and Mouffe are interested in grappling with how such an

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[256] Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox* (London, UK: Verso, 2000), p. 3.

[257] "Margaret Thatcher: A Life in Quotes," *The Guardian* (April 8, 2013.)

unlikely coalition could have developed. Moreover, in response, they do not seek to revive a more authentic tradition of archaic democracy to compete with the New Right's allegedly phony conservatism, but rather to determine how the Left might build new, effective coalitions of its own. *In Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (1985) they identify this project as a response to a "crisis" in their own intellectual-political tradition of Marxism, conceding that the working class can no longer be considered the central political subject and that other political identifications must be incorporated into the Left's praxis if it is to remain vital.[258]

Although Laclau and Mouffe engage a "post-Marxist" moment, they do not consider the decline of Marxist understandings of class or revolution to be a loss in a negative sense, and do not attempt to retrieve them in the way that Wolin attempts to retrieve American democracy's archaic heritage. In place of a Marxist class-based analysis, they go on to develop a perspective that incorporates the numerous struggles that in the 1980s came to be referred to as "identity politics." Concerns about the potential of post-Marxist intellectuals to succumb to a "Left melancholy" thus miss the target with Laclau and Mouffe. Rather than bemoan the collapse of Marxism, they consider this an opportunity to develop a more thoroughly egalitarian politics.[259] Nor do they grieve the older losses, those inherent to modernity, which Wolin underscores.

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[258] Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (London, UK: Verso, 1985.)

[259] Wendy Brown, "Resisting Left Melancholy" *boundary 2* 26:3 (1999), pp. 19-27; Walter Benjamin, "Left-Wing Melancholy" in Anton Kaes, Martin Jay, and Edward Dimendberg (eds), *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994.)

In elaborating practices of popular sovereignty through which effective coalitions might form, Laclau and Mouffe draw on Claude Lefort's celebration of the symbolic regime of modern democracy, and its "empty place" of power. [See Chapter 2.] While in a modern democracy the people are said to be sovereign, Lefort claims that the acceptance of uncertainty and social division means that the identity and will of this people are always indeterminate. Real political power moves from one holder to another, but no power holder fully embodies the people. In this sense he describes the symbolic locus of power in a democracy as an "empty place" and emphasizes the "gap" between any real manifestation of power and the unrealizable power of the people.[260] While rights and institutions are necessary to maintain the indeterminacy of democracy, this openness and dynamism also means that democracy cannot be reduced to a particular institutional arrangement. Moreover, Lefort claims that assertions of the popular will are required to prevent bureaucratic petrification and a descent into liberal individualism.

Laclau and Mouffe take Lefort's conception of modern democracy as a point of departure, but seek to move it in a more radical direction. They diverge from him in identifying a stronger tension between the universalistic logic of individual rights and the principle of popular sovereignty. While they concur that rights are required for modern democracy, they stress that the union of rights with popular sovereignty is historically contingent. Rights were not present, for instance, in ancient versions of democracy, which Lefort does not examine.[261] Mouffe recuperates Carl Schmitt to argue,

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[260] Claude Lefort, *Democracy and Political Theory* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), p. 17; Claude Lefort and Pierre Rosanvallon, "The Test of the Political" *Constellations* 19:1 (2012), pp. 4-15.

[261] Mouffe, *Democratic Paradox*, pp. 3, 18.

furthermore, that regimes of individual rights contradict the collectivist logic of democracy and pose a constant risk of liberalism.[262] She accuses Rawls and Habermas of too quickly reconciling this tension rather than acknowledging it as an ineradicable paradox of modern democracy.[263] Although Lefort, like Schmitt, investigates the symbolic and quasi-theological character of popular sovereignty, he does not face up to the paradox between this symbolic regime and individual rights. Mouffe suggests that, as a result, he cannot grasp the nature of political antagonism and collective identity formation.

Accordingly, Laclau and Mouffe allege that Lefort fails to elaborate the concrete practices of popular mobilization, which, in making claims on behalf of the people, keep democracy vital. While Lefort recognizes the need for assertions of the popular will, he also worries that any such assertion will define the power of the people through a determinate principle or tradition, rather than keep open the infinite contestability of the popular will. Instead of facing up to this paradox of liberal democracy, Lefort shies away from elaborating collective action further. Consequently, he struggles to differentiate clearly between the assertions of popular will that sustain a vital democracy and those that are nationalistic or even totalitarian.[264]

Thus, Laclau and Mouffe adopt Lefort's emphasis on the indeterminacy and dynamism of democracy and its "empty place," but elaborate the formation of collective

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[262] Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*, p.3.

[263] Chantal Mouffe, *On the Political* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2005), pp. 9-11.

[264] Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London, UK: Verso, 2005), pp. 164-71. For related criticisms of Lefort, see: Glen Newey, "The Getaway Car," *The London Review of Books* 38 (January, 2016), pp. 39-42; Sofia Näsström "Democratic Representation Beyond Election," *Constellations* 22:1 (2015), pp. 1-12.

identities and the expressions of popular will that ward of liberalism. Given the indeterminacy of democracy, they do not identify "the people" with a particular tradition, and do not demand that popular movements revolve around a privileged axis such as class. Rather, such movements form as "chains of equivalence" among various struggles. Through this process "the identity of the forces in struggle is submitted to constant shifts and calls for an incessant process of redefinition."[265] To explain this process of redefinition, Laclau and Mouffe draw on poststructuralist theory and especially Jacques Derrida's notion of undecidabililty.[266] Certainly, in order for chains of equivalence to form and unite into "hegemonic articulations," decisions must be made and indeterminacy suspended. However, these decisions are not logically necessary but rather are always contingent on political efforts to develop through rhetoric and action "a logic" that connects different struggles. In more Wolinian terms, the power of the people may be articulated through many visions of commonality, but none is exhaustive, fully inclusive or final. In his later work on populism, Laclau emphasizes that these articulations claim to embody a unified popular will even though "the people" is ultimately an "empty signifier."[267]

This account of democratic will formation intends to show both how the New Right succeeded in connecting neoliberalism with neo-conservatism and how a coalitional Left might compete with this formation by incorporating social movements often critiqued as "identity politics." There is nothing necessary about the alliance of

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[265] Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, p. 151.

[266] Ibid., p. xi.

[267] Laclau, *On Populist Reason.*

corporate interests with conservative, Christian values, as we can see from the contrasting alliance of Christianity with Marxism in the context of South American liberation theology. However, Laclau and Mouffe's analysis suggests that Thatcher and Reagan's coalitions can also not simply be dismissed as phony. Rather, they are the outcome of active efforts to construct a logic equivalences between free market ideology and social conservatism. Thatcher, for example, succeeded in constructing an imaginary that consisted of " two poles: the 'people', which includes all those who defend the traditional values and freedom of enterprise; and their adversaries: the state and all the subversives (feminists, blacks, young people and 'permissives' of every type'."[268] The only path forward for the Left, Laclau and Mouffe claim, is "the construction of a different system of equivalents." While, "there are not, for example, necessary links between anti-sexism and anti-capitalism," the Left must construct a unity between the two through a "hegemonic articulation."[269] This understanding of political coalition is more sophisticated than Wolin's binary understanding of American political culture as characterized by the competing tendencies of "the body politic" and "political economy."

Although Laclau and Mouffe diverge from Lefort in stressing the paradox of liberal democracy and elaborating the positive articulation of collective identities, they share his primarily positive appraisal of modernity. They understand their project as "a deepening of the 'democratic revolution'" that Lefort identifies at the dawn of the modern era.[270] This project deepens democracy by showing how, despite its

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[268] Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy,* p. 176.

[269] Ibid., p. 178.

[270] Ibid*.,* p. xi.

indeterminacy, struggles for equality may be continually extended to "a wider range of social relations." Laclau and Mouffe do not mourn Marxism, claiming on the contrary that their project is "infinitely more ambitious than the classical Left."[271] Nor do they mourn the modern loss of local memories, cultures and practices that Wolin considers critical for democratic empowerment.

Indeed, while Laclau and Mouffe do more than Lefort to elaborate the formation of collective identities, they too offer a relatively thin, formalistic conception of the political that says little about what democratic practice involves other than that its content is indeterminate and that it makes claims on behalf of the people. Their reflections on the forms that democratic practice takes are limited to the observation that "the spaces constitutive of the different social relations may vary enormously, according to whether the relations involved are those of production if citizenship, of neighborhood, of couples, and so on."[272] "Forms of democracy," they continue, "should therefore also be plural, inasmuch as they have to be adapted to the social spaces in question – direct democracy cannot be the only organizational form, as it is only applicable to reduced social spaces." In other words, they focus on the symbolic articulation of collective subjects and remain largely agnostic about whether certain democratic practices are preferable to others.

Laclau concedes that, although "the demos" is subject to incessant redefinition, democratic practice always has some content and a history, "emptiness presupposes the concrete."[273] Yet his relentless attempts to articulate the formation of collective subjects

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[271] Ibid., p.152.

[272] Ibid., p. 185

[273] Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau, and Slavoj Žižek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality* (London, UK: Verso, 2000), p. 304.

in an empty place prevent him from critically examining the concrete and adjudicating whether some practices of articulating a chain of equivalence or a populist movement are more democratic than others. Although he refers to rhetorical devices such as "synecdoche" and "catachresis" through which an identity may be articulated, he is largely silent on the concrete practices of deliberation, decision-making and acting through which power is exercised and claims judged.[274]

It is not clear, for instance, if democratic movements must involve sustained deliberation amongst all citizens in order to produce an egalitarian sharing of power, or if they could just as well be momentary, or even vertically organized, so long as they express a common struggle. In fact, as Benjamin Arditi points out, Laclau at times pushes in the latter direction, relying on leadership in ways that may not be conducive to a genuinely radical politics.[275] Slavoj Zizek also casts doubt on whether the contemporary populism of Laclau and others offers a positive vision of democracy or is rather a superficial rejection of liberal individualism and consensus politics. He describes populism as "a negative phenomenon, a phenomenon grounded in a refusal, even an implicit admission of impotence."[276]

If Wolin directly engaged Laclau and Mouffe he would likely allege that they have only gone so far as to illuminate the expression of the symbol of democracy, rather than to elaborate adequately the forms of democratic practice through which power is

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[274] Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, p. 12.

[275] Benjamin Arditi, "Populism is Hegemony is Politics? On Ernesto Laclau's *On Populist Reason" Constellations* 17:3 (2010), pp. 488-497.

[276] Slavoj Žižek, "Against the Populist Temptation" *Critical Inquiry* 32:3 (2006), pp. 551-574.

exercised. Although Wolin at times refers to populism as "the culture of democracy," he states also that populist rhetoric is inadequate if it does not generate an egalitarian sharing of power amongst citizens.[277] As we have seen, he claims that this decentralized sharing of power depends on local memories, cultures, and practices rooted in a particular time and place. Laclau and Mouffe's account of democracy's empty place, and the hegemonic articulations that temporarily occupy it, lacks this Montesquieuean appreciation of the textures and roots of power that ward off despotism. Given their largely positive appraisal of modernity and attempts to overcome the limitations of the Marxist tradition, they do not clarify whether and in what ways democratic practice depends on local elements of historical continuity. Instead, they focus on how formally to conceive a dynamic coalitional politics in a multicultural era. Perhaps their theory has this emphasis on the symbolic dimension of democracy because it crystallized in European context in which the state was less ominous, infrastructure for popular mobilization was present, while the re-conceptualization of solidarity seemed urgently lacking. Nevertheless, their theories have less to say to communities struggling with a sense of loss and social dislocation, and can only abstractly promote hegemonic articulations on either the Left and or the Right. In contrast, Wolin in the 1980s gives democracy a concrete place – the American neighborhood – and grieves its decline.

For Wolin, the loss of a Marxist revolutionary tradition is not a major preoccupation because, while he draws on Marx for his critique of capitalism, this tradition did not play the historical role in America that it did elsewhere. Conversely,

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[277] Wolin, *The Presence of the Past*, pp. 140; Sheldon S. Wolin, "Carter and the New Constitution," *New York Review of Books* (June 1, 1978.)

most theorists working within continental intellectual traditions do not share Wolin's

focus on archaic visions of local democracy, or his attempts to retrieve what has been lost.

In a 1985 review of Irving Howe, Wolin celebrates America's native tradition of

democratic localism as the "true jewel in the crown of American 'exceptionalism,'"

contrasting it with European-inspired socialism.[278] He claims that such counter-modern

democratic traditions can, unlike the revolutionary Marxist tradition, continue to serve as

a radical alternative. Whereas the path of socialism has been to accommodate itself to a

reformist welfare statism, American radical democracy envisions the generation and

exercise of power in ways still fundamentally at odds with capitalism. This perspective

allows him unique insight into aspects of democratic practice but carries its own risks of

politically regressive melancholy.

Subverting History: Remembrance, Re-Cognition, Fugitive Democracy

The loss of local memories, cultures, and practices in modernity and

postmodernity affects all vulnerable communities. Consider, for instance, how rapid

economic shifts and geographic mobility trigger processes of gentrification that devastate

urban communities of color. However, in responding to these losses by identifying

democracy with a *specific* local tradition, Wolin is at greater risk than thinkers such as

Laclau and Mouffe of condoning parochialism. Although conservative American

traditions may counter anti-democratic forces of centralization, science, technology and

corporate capitalism, they also harbor other anti-democratic forces of male and white

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[278] Sheldon S. Wolin, "Socialism and America," *The Atlantic* (November, 1985), p. 138.

supremacist nationalism, what George Shulman calls the "the primal stain on localism."[279]

At times Wolin's attempts to recover an American heritage seem to depend on an amnesia regarding these anti-egalitarian aspects of America's dominant traditions, or on a blind faith that decentralized deliberation will fairly accommodate differences. Ever since his early Hartzian reading of American culture as uniformly liberal and individualistic, Wolin is generally slow to acknowledge fully that white and male supremacy have persisted as visions of common life and have been particularly pernicious at the local level. While he comes to divert from Hartz by recognizing in America a salutary tradition of local democracy in addition to liberalism, this myth seems to be sustained by an ongoing blind spot regarding the concomitant risk of nationalism. Certainly, in the early 1980s it is not yet clear to what extent Wolin can confront the historical vestiges of white and male supremacy, the loss of which ought to be borne, or even celebrated, rather than resisted or reversed. He is particularly ill equipped to confront these issues when he reifies past democratic practices into a unified "identity," defining the symbolic dimension of democracy through the "body" of the American demos. Such aggrieved narratives of lost national identity are undeniably reminiscent of reactionary discourses on the Right, even if Wolin dismisses Reagan's traditionalism as phony due to its embrace of centralized power and corporate capitalism.

In order to confront the risks of his archaism, then, Wolin must do more than cursorily reject archaisms of the Right and their inauthentic appeals to decentralism. Even a decentralized archaism must also develop a more complex, ambivalent relationship to

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[279] George Shulman, "The Pastoral Idyll of *democracy*" *democracy* 3:4 (1983), pp. 43-54.

the past. Wolin does in fact come to recognize the limitations of his counter-modern narrative of loss. Even while he defends archaic democracy in *The Presence of the Past*, he concedes, "Religious fundamentalism, 'moralism,' and racial, religious, and ethnic prejudices belong to the same historical culture as traditions of local self-government… and sentiments of egalitarianism."[280] Furthermore, he considers these aspects of tradition to be unacceptable, distinguishing radical democracy from nationalism by its insistence that "everyone is 'in.'"[281] Accordingly, he counsels remembrance of, and reflection on, the historical injustices that American democracy has allowed. In fact, he claims that his emphasis on historical memory renders him better equipped than liberal theorists in the social contract tradition to perceive historical injustice.[282]

Nevertheless, finding in America's local, "archaic" practices "the main, perhaps the only democratic counterthrust to statism," Wolin thinks we ought to recover their promise and take "pride in some of our history while accepting its dark chapters."[283] In order thus to confront the ambiguities of "our birthright," Wolin claims cryptically that "we need an interpretive mode of understanding that is able to reconnect past and present experience."[284] By recognizing the need for such an interpretive mode of understanding, Wolin could be understood to resist a crude melancholia for America's archaic traditions and develop a healthier, more ambivalent view of the past.

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[280] Wolin, *The Presence of the Past*, p. 79.

[281] Wolin, "On Nationalism."

[282] Wolin, *The Presence of the Past,* Ch. 2.

[283] Ibid., p. 81; Wolin, "On Nationalism."

[284] Sheldon S. Wolin, "Contract and Birthright," *Political Theory* 14:2 (1986) pp. 179-193.

In "Difference, Democracy and Re-Cognition" (1993), Wolin more directly tackles the problem of inherited hierarchies of race and gender and explains how he intends to distance his defense of archaism from its inegalitarian baggage. He acknowledges that, given the legacies of male and white supremacy, Americans are "born unequal and must learn equality." To learn equality they must do more than remember historical injustice; they must also free themselves of lingering prejudices. "For some, it will mean rejecting dependence and inferiority; for others, it will mean rejecting superiority."[285] If people belonging to dominant groups surrender their sense of "superiority" while the oppressed surrender their sense of "inferiority and dependence," hierarchical differences will not merely be recognized but rather will be fundamentally challenged or "re-cognized": "When the system of representations that guides recognition is upset, re-cognition is possible… a radical revision."[286]

In light of his admission that America's archaic traditions are problematic and his call for "re-cognition," Wolin loosens his association of such traditions with a settled and unified "identity." He now suggests that we must realize the symbolic aspect of democracy not through an identity rooted in the past, but rather by forming new articulations of "the demos." In other words, he severs the connection between the archaic forms of democracy and the symbolic aspect of democracy, associating the latter instead with radical novelty. This reconception of democratic subjectivities first becomes evident, I submit, in the powerful but enigmatic conception of "fugitive democracy" that he develops in the 1990s. At times Wolin's turn to fugitive democracy appears as a

[285] Sheldon S. Wolin "Democracy, Difference, and Re-Cognition" *Political Theory* 21:3 (1993), pp. 464-483.

[286] Ibid.

lament that local participatory culture is unsustainable, a sign of disillusionment.
However, this conception of fugitive democracy is so enigmatic because it is also an
attempt to come to terms with the parochialism of local tradition. It is because democracy
"condemns its own denial of equality and inclusion," that it is necessary to see beyond a
narrative of loss and embrace new articulations of the demos.[287]

With fugitive democracy, the demos is not associated with a traditional identity to
be retrieved, but is instead understood to emerge momentarily in an improvised and
spontaneous fashion, expressing a "common experience rather than in a common life."[288]
In this "continuing self-fashioning of the demos" the anti-democratic aspects of
traditional democratic identities have been re-cognized and thus overcome.[289] Instead of
locating a lost identity in the past, then, Wolin moves towards an understanding of the
people that incorporates the dynamism of Laclau and Mouffe's understanding of
democratic will formation, even as it lacks their appreciation of coalition. Despite
Wolin's turn to this more dynamic understanding of the demos, he maintains that
democracy must also preserve an important place for the local discursive traditions, and
he continues to grieve a specific "American" tradition or "birthright." Indeed, at times he
even regresses to bemoan America's lost identity, as when he claims that postmodern
Superpower is adversely "reconstituting the nation's identity."[290] However, he never

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[287] Sheldon S. Wolin, "Transgression, Equality, Voice" in Josiah Ober and Charles Hedrick (eds.), *Demokratia: A Conversation on Democracies Ancient and Modern* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), pp. 63-90.

[288] Wolin, "Democracy, Difference, and Re-Cognition."

[289] Wolin, "On Rawls' Political Liberalism."

[290] Sheldon S. Wolin, *Democracy Incorporated: Managed Democracy and the Specter of Inverted Totalitarianism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), p. 82.

matches the boldness of his conception of America's lost democratic identity in "The

People's Two Bodies."

Racial Domination, The Durability of Identity, and Identity Politics

While Wolin promotes remembrance, "re-cognition," and a more elastic

understanding of the demos, he cannot resolve the problematic relationship between

tradition and identity so easily. Social hierarchies and the identities that sustain them are

major, durable aspects of American politics that cannot summarily be divorced from the

traditions that Wolin continues to value. Here again Wolin reveals his general tendency to

downplay varieties of white and male supremacist nationalism. To begin with, in

understating the role of racism in American politics, he misunderstands the historical

developments that he finds most problematic. Yes, he comes to recognize racism both as

a cultural stain on the democratic tradition of "the body politic," and as forming a

"tactical alliance" with the opposing, antidemocratic tradition of "political economy."

However, he fails to understand racism as a central component of these American

traditions or as a driving force in political life. As we have seen, he claims that Reagan's

politics was essentially about "easing the path to the future" rather than "pointing the way

back to the past."[291] Allegedly, Reagan's "phony" social conservatism and racialized

rhetoric merely filled a psychic hole left by a spiritually bankrupt corporate agenda. But

white racial identity was instrumental to the political realignment that facilitated the rise

of Reagan and neoliberalism more generally, as many whites abandoned unions and the

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[291] Wolin, *The Presence of the Past,* p. 23.

Democratic Party after the 1960s.[292] Indeed, since W.E.B Du Bois' *Black*

Reconstruction (1935), many have argued that the failure of radically egalitarian politics

is partly attributable to the division of the working class by race, and the deep, albeit

contingent, ideological intersections of this division with America's myth of social

mobility and meritocracy.[293] Wolin does not engage with this literature.

Race has not only been a driving force in American political development; it is

also a form of power that persists in structural forms today. In addition to ongoing

income inequality along racial lines, low-income blacks possess considerably less wealth

than even low-income whites due in part to a long history of housing discrimination.[294]

Moreover, the militarization of policing and the four-fold growth of the US prison

population since 1980 have had a disproportionate and devastating effect on communities

of color. The percentage of prisoners of color has grown from 30% in 1970 to 70% today

and the overall incarceration rate for blacks is now six times higher than the rate for

whites.[295] Prison is a highly racialized space that then further reinforces white supremacy

and all of the socio-economic inequalities that make a person vulnerable to incarceration

in the first place.

To Wolin's credit, he focuses attention on the drastic expansion of prisons several

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[292] Paul Frymer, *Black and Blue: African Americans. The Labor Movement, and the Decline of the Democratic Party* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008.)

[293] W.E.B Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America 1860-1880* (New York, NY: The Free Press, 1935); David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: race and the Making of the American Working Class* (London, UK: Verso, 1991.)

[294] Melvyn Oliver and Thomas Shapiro, *Black Wealth/ White Wealth: A New Perspective on Racial Inequality* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2006.)

[295] James Kilgore, *Understanding Mass Incarceration* (New York, NY: The New Press, 2015), p. 12.

times during the 1980s, when not even the major civil rights organizations, let alone

many academic political theorists, were regularly doing so. In his final works he focuses

increasing attention on "the enslavement of African Americans and its continuing legacy

of racism, daily humiliation, and degradation."[296] He even claims that the mass

incarceration of black people is an attempt to "neutralize" the most politically astute

segment of the population, those most likely to rise up against American Superpower.[297]

Nevertheless, his reflections on historical remembrance suggest that the structural

injustices suffered by people of color as a result of white supremacy are primarily

confined to the past. Wolin always considers liberalism to be the chief threat to

democracy, and he does not explore in detail how for many citizens economic hardships

continue to intersect with racial and gendered oppressions.

Racial inequalities in the economy and in the criminal justice system are partly a

result of inherited disadvantage. But they are also the result of recent policies such as

sentencing guidelines, and extreme policing and prosecutorial practices, which have been

supported by both major parties and which have a clearly differential impact on racial

groups. Often support for such policies and practices cannot be straightforwardly traced

to blatant individual prejudices ripe for "re-cognition." Nevertheless, like the decline of

the labor movement, they can be understood to be both driven by, and to reinforce, an

underlying norm of white racial supremacy. Indeed, as Naomi Murakawa shows, a

narrow conception of racism as blatant individual prejudice not only obscures structural

inequalities in the criminal justice system but has also been complicit in deepening

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[296] Wolin, *Politics and Vision*, p. 591.

[297] Wolin, *Democracy Incorporated*, p. 58.

them.[298] This is why Kimberlé Crenshaw, Derrick Bell and other critical race theorists understand white racial identity as a deeply embedded form of power and privilege, which is central to America's dominant traditions, persists in a supposedly color-blind era, and cannot be fully addressed through anti-discrimination law. Bell argues that such racism is a permanent feature of American life, that full equality "is not a realistic goal," and that we should accept a permanently oppositional attitude of "racial realism."[299]

As William Connolly argues, identity is an indispensible psychic need, and every identity implies difference.[300] The reliance of many Americans on white racial identity is a complicated and deeply entrenched phenomenon. Significant efforts are required to chip away at it and to promote alternative modes of belonging and sources of power. Such whiteness cannot summarily be divorced from dominant American traditions, because, as Benedict Anderson, Paul Riceour and others argue, historical memory is intimately related to the formation of identity.[301] Even Wolin seems to acknowledge this when he claims that, although memory is a "subversive weapon," it is also "the guardian of difference."[302] However, he fails to grasp the implications of this insight, conceiving

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[298] Naomi Murakawa, *The First Civil Right: How Liberals Built Prison America* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2014.)

[299] Kimberlé Crenshaw, Neil Gotanda, Gary Peller, and Kendell Thomas (eds.), *Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings That Formed a Movement* (New York, NY: The New Press, 1995).

[300] William Connolly, *Identity/Difference: Democratic Negotiations of Political Paradox* (Minneapolis, MN: Minnesota Press, 1991), pp. 78, 158.

[301] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (New York, NY: Verso, 1983), p. 5; Paul Riceour, *Memory, History, Forgetting* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 84.

[302] Wolin, *The Presence of the Past,* p. 40.

"re-cognition" as a pre-political, psychological feat that "brackets" identity while leaving archaic traditions largely intact as sources of democratic promise. Whereas he is famously pessimistic about the possibilities for democracy more generally, he seems oddly sanguine about the ease with which racial distinctions may be "re-cognized": The self-fashioning the demos is "a moment when differences have been *bracketed* and their exploitive impulse suspended, when a commonality is forged."[303] One cannot so easily sever the symbolic dimension of "the demos" from the cultures and traditions of democracy in order to understand those traditions as benign. Instead, if we follow Wolin in prizing dominant archaic traditions, we must acknowledge a perpetual tension between the value of historical continuity on the one hand and the antidemocratic features of dominant traditions on the other. This calls for a politics that openly acknowledges the indispensability of identity, the ongoing salience of white identities, and their connection to archaic traditions, in order then to refashion the demos.

Wolin not only fails to acknowledge the centrality of whiteness to the American traditions on which he attempts to center democracy: he also prohibits minority identity claims and, by implication, the oppositional democratic traditions with which they are bound up. In "bracketing" identity, he disposes with the race-conscious vocabularies that minorities could employ to name either reality. Indeed, he bitterly disparages any politics that "flaunts fixed differences" or "tirelessly exposes past injustices so distant in time as to strain common understandings of justice, responsibility, and remedy."[304] This call to "bracket" oppressed identities is driven by a concern that any attempt to pursue the

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[303] Wolin, Democracy, Difference, and Re-Cognition, emphasis added.

[304] Ibid.

interests of marginalized groups will succumb to an elite interest-group politics that

is impotent to remedy structural injustices and may merely reinforce hierarchical forms of

identification. Ultimately, for Wolin, commonality is generated through the shared

"misery" created by economic and political forms of disempowerment. He is anxious to

forge such commonality because he believes that "the principle means by which those

who are less wealthy, less skillful, less experienced in ruling can redress their grievances

is by bracketing actual differences."[305] Its success depends on "how long differences can

remain bracketed" and this "depends on how skillfully the politics of similarities is

conducted." As he reiterates a few years later, "heterogeneity, diversity, and multiple

selves are no match for modern forms of power."[306] Other Leftists, especially white men,

shared such concerns about the misdirection of political energy into "identity politics" in

the early 1990s. Todd Gitlin, for instance, bemoans the Left's "disproportion of margins

to center" as an "American tragedy."[307]

      Unpacking Wolin's critique of identity politics a little further, we can distinguish

several interrelated elements. First, Wolin worries, that in seeking to advance the

particular interests of an exclusive group, identity politics "renders suspect the language

and possibilities of collectivity, common action, and shared purposes" that is needed in

order to generate democratic power. Second, he observes that such politics generally

proceed by entrusting group leaders to ask the state for protection and favors: they are

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[305] Ibid.

[306] Sheldon S. Wolin "Fugitive Democracy" in Seyla Benhabib (ed.) *Democracy and Difference: Contesting the Boundaries of the Political* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), pp. 31-45.

[307] Todd Gitlin, *Twilight of Common Dreams* (New York, NY: Henry Holt and Company, 1995), 82.

"compelled to appeal to a center of authority to mediate." This bolsters the power of

the state and capitulates to the logics of neoliberal capitalism, as it "maximizes the

opportunities for certain kinds of uncommon action that are elitist in spirit, hierarchical in

structure, bureaucratic in their modus operandi."[308] Finally, Wolin worries that such

politics reinforces the identities of those who seek recognition, cementing a "community

of grievance" as passive and victimized, and granting the dominant group continued

power as the "recognizer" who has slighted them. This politics of victimhood may fulfill

certain psychic functions. However, ironically, given his previous laments for a lost

"American identity," Wolin charges that it is a counterproductive displacement of

concerns about structural injustice. As he re-iterates later, when identity politics separates

people into villains and victims, it adopts a framework of "purity/innocence as a

prophylactic against the politics of mere power."[309]

Such concerns about identity politics carry through to Wolin's later works, such

as the expanded edition of *Politics and Vision* (2004). Related concerns also appear in the

works of some of Wolin's intellectual heirs. In *States of Injury* (1995), a book dedicated

to Wolin, Wendy Brown offers an influential critique of feminist identity politics that

shares key features with "Democracy, Difference and Re-Cognition." Though she focuses

primarily on gender, Brown is also concerned that any politics of identity bolster the

power of the state, fractures solidarity on the Left, and reinforces victimized identities.

She places particular emphasis on the latter concern, arguing that identity-based politics

thrive on ressentiment for past wounds. She suggests not "bracketing" identities such as

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[308] Wolin, "Democracy, Difference, and Re-Cognition."

[309] Wolin, "Fugitive Democracy"

gender and race, but engaging in a practice of Nietzschean forgetting whereby the "psychic residues of these histories" are purged in order to forge a new commonality. Rather than dispensing blame for an unlivable present," Brown suggests," we might "inhabit a necessarily agonistic theater of discursively forging an alternative future."[310] This, she suggests, may make room for a more radical alternatives to late modern formations of economic and political power. She questions the capacity of other recent theories of democracy to deliver such radical alternatives, pointing to the limitations of Laclau and Mouffe in particular. Given that Brown does not share in Wolin's attempt to revive an archaic democratic culture, she is perhaps less obliged to interrogate the aggrieved and resentful white, male identities bound up with America's dominant traditions. Nevertheless, her critique of identity politics, like Wolin's, does not thoroughly address the indispensability of identity in general and the durability of white and male identities in particular.

To be sure, Wolin's critique of identity politics is not baseless, and some of his claims are echoed by commentators concerned not only with Left politics in general but also with the potential of black politics in particular to address racial injustice. Crenshaw explains how the race conscious perspective that grew out of certain elements of the Black Power movement, a perspective that identified ongoing white domination and sought black self-governance, led to "debilitating contradictions within black political

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[310] Wendy Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), p. 76.

For a counterpoint: Susan Bickford, "Anti-anti Identity Politics" *Hypatia* 12:4 (1997), p. 111-131.

life."[311] Insofar as this mindset assumed a general uniformity of interests amongst blacks, it allowed for a nonparticipatory, elite-led, and masculinist electoral politics that was not always able to improve the lives of most black people. While the Black Power movement once offered radical critiques of American civilization, the form of politics that followed could be incorporated into a political system moving generally to the Right. This is illustrated by the fact that, although the number of African Americans holding public office rose from 300 to 7226 between 1964 and 1989, the life chances of the majority of black people did not markedly improve.[312] Indeed, taking the growth of the carceral state into account, conditions have by some measures worsened.

Cedric Johnson elaborates: "The evolution of Black Power as a form of ethnic politics limited the parameters of black public action to the formal political world… a conservative politics predicated on elite entreaty, racial self-help, and incremental social reforms."[313] Adolph Reed also lambasts the notion that a black leader could represent authentic black interests as "the greatest single intellectual impediment to the construction of a left-egalitarian black politics."[314] For such critics, as for Wolin, the struggles of poor and working class blacks, as well as the cultural and structural forms of racism that effect them disproportionately, can best be addressed through a more participatory style of politics that recognizes economic inequalities between *and* within

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[311] Kimberlé Crenshaw, Neil Gotanda, Gary Peller, and Kendell Thomas eds., *Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings That Formed a Movement,* p. xxxi.

[312] Adolph Reed, *Stirrings in the Jug: Black Politics in the Post-Segregation Era* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), p. xi.

[313] Cedric Johnson, *Revolutionaries to Race Leaders: Black Power and the Making of African American Politics* (Minneapolis: Minnesota Press, 2007), p. xxiii.

[314] Reed, *Stirrings in the Jug*, p. 4.

races. Indeed, criticizing liberal identity politics in general, Reed claims "this examination of black radicalism in the wake of its integration offers a microcosmic view of the plight of the left as a whole."[315]

Nevertheless, Wolin moves too quickly from this credible critique of a certain style of race-conscious politics to a position that suggests race-consciousness ought to be transcended altogether. In claiming that differences such as race should be entirely "bracketed" before fashioning the demos anew, Wolin implies that such politics should ultimately strive for colorblindness. This both assumes too quickly that traditional white/male-supremacist identities can be set aside, and prohibits all other identity-talk. As theorists such as Bell and Crenshaw explain, ongoing cultural and institutional forms of racial domination simply cannot be addressed without talking about and combating the lived differences that continue to be generated by racial categories. In reducing the task of anti-racism to pre-political "re-cognition," Wolin is unable to conceive such domination and the white identities underling it as posing an ongoing threat to democracy. At the same time, the "bracketing" of identity deprives the most vulnerable of necessary political tools. As bell hooks explains, "a totalizing critique of 'subjectivity, essence, identity' can seem very threatening to marginalized groups, for whom it has been an active gesture of political resistance to name one's identity as part of a struggle to challenge domination."[316] Similarly, but in the context of queer politics, Heather Love argues in *Feeling Backward* (2007) that, while "it may in fact seem shaming to hold onto an identity that cannot be uncoupled from violence, suffering, and loss," we must "insist

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[315] Reed, *Stirrings in the Jug*, p. 73.

[316] bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1994), p. 78.

on the importance of clinging to ruined identities and to histories of injury."[317]
Although some forms of identity politics may be divisive for the Left, a Left politics that
excludes raced and gendered discourse entirely is even more divisive as it ironically
drives queers, women and minorities (the vast majority of working people) to liberal
identity politics as the only race/gender-conscious political option.

Oppressed racial and gendered identities are also bound up with other traditions of
struggle – what Michel Foucault would call "subjugated knowledges" – which are
obscured by Wolin's admiration for a unified democratic tradition.[318] While he proudly
attempts to revive the subjugated knowledges of the white, male anti-federalists against
America's tendency towards centralization and corporate rule, he does not go so far as to
unearth histories of struggle led by women and minorities. But traditions such as the
black radical tradition, which formed in response to the social hierarchies that Wolin
attempts to "bracket," are important parts of America's democratic heritage. Whereas the
identities of minorities and women in such oppositional traditions are explicit in ways
that trouble Wolin, the whiteness and maleness of more dominant traditions are simply
implicit.

Thankfully, other intellectual heirs of Wolin pursue a more capacious project of
remembrance. Cornel West, for instance, celebrates not only primarily white episodes of
radical democracy such as populism and progressivism but also seeks to honor and revive
the "black prophetic tradition," particularly for its insights into how corporate capitalism

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[317] Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), p. 30.

[318] Michel Foucault, *Society Must be Defended* (London, UK: Penguin Books, 2003), p. 7.

and empire are sustained by white supremacy.[319] West shows how the "doings and

sufferings" of Black Americans are not only important to remember as forms of injustice,

but also "have something distinctive to say about what it means to be modern, American,

and human."[320] Thus, in *Prophesy Deliverance!* (1982), West brings the tradition of

Afro-American revolutionary Christianity into conversation with traditions of Marxism

and pragmatism in the hope of forging a radical politics. Similarly, Nikhil Singh argues in

Black is a Country: Race and the Unfinished Struggle for Democracy (2004,) "black

struggles for justice, dignity, and self-respect had always been about achieving a broader

transformation of the United States into an equitable society."[321] "The black intellectual

activists of this subaltern counterpublic," not only fought for the liberation of black

people, but also "left behind a rich legacy of radical visions for imagining coalitions and

thinking and feeling beyond the nation-state."[322]

     Thus, in order to develop a more ambivalent view of the past (what Wolin calls an

"interpretive mode of understanding") it is important not only to recognize the stains on

America's dominant traditions but also continually to complicate and expand our

understanding of tradition. As Hannah Arendt suggests, developing a more nuanced

approach to the past requires that we view it not as "one solid piece," but rather as a

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[319] Cornel West, *Prophesy Deliverance!: An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1981.)

See also: George Shulman, *American Prophecy: Race and Redemption in American Political Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), p. 17.

[320] Cornel West, *Prophesy Deliverance!*, p.5.

[321] Nikhil Singh, *Black is a Country: Race and the Unfinished Struggle for Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), p. 2.

[322] Ibid., p. 224.

source of manifold "thought fragments" that may be reinterpreted and put to work in fresh ways.[323] It is necessary, furthermore, to openly acknowledge the identities bound up with all such traditions or thought fragments drawn from the past. Unfortunately, Wolin never undertakes such a capacious project of remembrance, instead continuing to laud America's archaic past while attempting unsuccessfully to bracket all identities.

Coalitional Politics and The Renegotiation of Multiple Traditions

In the expanded edition of *Politics and Vision* (2004), Wolin observes that, "under the conditions of contemporary capitalist societies, there seemed to be no obvious vehicle of the political." Without a unified subject such as the proletariat, the political has an "absent carrier."[324] Through his vision of archaic democracy in the 1980s he attempts to rediscover such a vehicle in the shape of a lost American identity, retrieving not just archaic practices but also an archaic democratic subject. Recognizing the dangers of this formulation, however, he comes to concede: "a unified demos is no longer possible, or even desirable." Instead, he attempts to sever the symbolic dimension of democracy from archaic practices, conceiving it as a "continual self-fashioning of the demos." While this

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[323] Hannah Arendt, "Introduction" in Walter Benjamin *Illuminations* (New York, NY: Schocken Books, 1968), pp. 50-51; Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future* (New York, NY: Penguin, 1968), pp. 14, 93.

Reading Wolin, Jason Frank recommends a less unitary view of the past: "Not one constitution, but many. Not one single line of authoritative inheritance, but multiple and sometimes conflicting birthrights." However, he then contradicts this and joins Wolin in attempting to retrieve a unified radical democratic tradition. He briefly mentions, but does not examine, the parochialism of such a tradition. Jason Frank, "Is Radical Democracy a Tradition?," *Contemporary Political Theory* 16:1 (2017), pp. 76-82.

[324] Wolin, *Politics and Vision,* pp. 567-8.

formulation avoids some of the more egregious implications of his attempt to revive

a lost American identity, it fails adequately to confront ongoing forms of social hierarchy.

In suggesting that differences such as race be "bracketed" in order to forge a provisional

commonality, Wolin fails to appreciate the indispensability of identity in general, the

durability of white and male identities in particular, and their connection to the archaic

practices and cultures he values. At the same time, he dismisses race- and gender-

conscious politics that might address these issues and ignores the valuable oppositional

traditions with which they are bound up. Wolin's claim that identity ought to be separated

from tradition and set aside in democratic politics not only fails to dissolve hierarchical

racial divisions but risks reinforcing them in the amnesia of a Left colorblindness.

Radical democracy requires a more complex politics that allows racial distinctions

to be acknowledged in order to address injustice. Instead of "bracketing" identities and

prematurely subsuming all citizens under a new conception of the demos, we need a

coalitional understanding of the demos and an ambivalent appreciation of multiple

traditions. Certainly, some identities, such as whiteness, are marginalizing by their nature

insofar as they are tied inextricably to a dominant position in a dynamic of oppression.[325]

Thus, although identities of some sort are indispensible to human life and politics, this

does not imply a doctrine of radical pluralism according to which all identities, including

"whiteness," might get along.[326] Some such identities would eventually need to be

overcome if democracy is to be realized fully. Nevertheless, Wolin's impatience to re-

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[325] On this point, see: Joel Olson, *The Abolition of White Democracy* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), p. 66; Noel Ignatiev and John Garvey, *Race Traitor* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1996.)

[326] At times this appears to be the view of William Connolly in *Identity/Difference.*

cognize hierarchical identities such as race is naïve and counterproductive. While

not summarily "re-cognizing" difference, a coalitional politics among any groups who

have been politically disempowered might seek gradually to subvert hierarchical

distinctions and engage in the ongoing re-negotiation of multiple traditions. Wolin does

not consider the possibility of this more complex politics because the notion of coalition

remains foreign to him.

Furthermore, a race-conscious coalitional politics does not automatically imply

the pursuit of particular race-based political programs, such as reparations or racial

affirmative action programs.[327] The usefulness of such race-centric policies is a tactical

question and is doubted by many critical theorists of race. Angela Davis, for instance,

who draws on Du Bois to develop a race conscious notion of "abolition democracy,"

argues nevertheless that "progressive struggles… are doomed to fail if they do not also

attempt to develop a consciousness of the insidious promotion of capitalist

individualism."[328] She further argues that, when it comes to concrete political strategy,

"we have to really focus on the issues much more than we may have in the past [and]

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[327] Balfour and Olson simplify questions how racial domination ought to be resisted, suggesting that race-consciousness implies support for reparations. Laurie Balfour "Reparations After Identity Politics," *Political Theory* 33:6 (2005), pp. 786-811; Joel Olson, *The Abolition of White Democracy*.

Cedric Johnson disputes this. Similarly, Cornel West states that he favors "a class-based affirmative action in principle" but settled for race-based and gender-based affirmative action as "the best possible compromise and concession." Cedric Johnson "An Open Letter to Ta-Nehisi Coates and the Liberals Who Love Him," *Jacobin* (February 3, 2016); Cornel West, *Race Matters* (New York, NY: Vintage, 1993), p. 95.

[328] Angela Davis, *Freedom is a Constant Struggle* (Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books, Chicago, 2016), p. 1.

seek to create coalitional strategies that go beyond racial lines."[329] Building race-

conscious, yet cross-racial, coalitions to attack institutions such as prison, which

disproportionately impact black people but which impact others as well, may be as

effective as anything in chipping away at cultural and institutional layers of white

supremacy.[330] Such a race-conscious movement need not pursue any race-based policies

or exclude anyone, but it does require the voices of those most vulnerable to carceral

violence are prioritized.

       Laclau and Mouffe offer a coalitional politics, allowing for minority identity

claims to be articulated while various struggles find common ground through "chains of

equivalence." They further show how such coalitions can form provisional "hegemonic

articulations" of the demos, which do not jettison particular identities but rather meld

them together through a shared fate. Furthermore, they argue that such politics need not

fortify restrictive identities defined by their weakness and victimhood, but might engage

instead in its own re-fashionings. Laclau distinguishes his understanding of coalition

building and hegemony from "the construction of differential identities on the basis of

total closure to what is outside them." He agrees with Wolin that the latter "is not a viable

or progressive political alternative" but rather "a route to self-apartheid."[331] Instead,

identities can not only claim power but also shift and merge in the process of politics that

values both tradition and transgression. While some styles of intersectional politics may

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[329] Angela Davis, Interview with *Frontline* (Spring, 1997), available online at:
https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/race/interviews/davis.html

[330] 30% of incarcerated people in the US are white. Kilgore, *Understanding Mass Incarceration.*

[331] "Only a conservative identity, closed on itself, could experience hybridization as a loss." Ernesto Laclau, *Emancipations* (London, UK: Verso, 1996), p. 65.

enforce boundaries and engage in ideological purification, other styles of intersectional politics may, on the contrary, challenge boundaries and open new avenues for solidarity. Wolin is not attentive to these possibilities among movements such as Black Lives Matter and Occupy Wall Street because he fails to engage with youth movements again after the 1960s.

Nevertheless, as we have seen, Laclau and Mouffe do not particularly value historical continuity, or the local traditions and practices that Wolin helpfully emphasizes through his archaic vision. They focus on the symbolic dimension of democracy and remain largely agnostic about its forms. This de-emphasizing of tradition and local forms means also that they do not fully elaborate the difficulty of coalitional hegemonic politics. A coalitional politics that positively values historical continuity and cultural rootedness must recognize a perpetual tension between the democratic value of tradition and the limitations of traditional identities. This is perhaps most obvious in the case American traditions that are majority white and male. Here, narratives of loss must somehow be reframed to emphasize the loss of economic and social cultural stability rather than the loss of racial or gendered privilege. This requires that alternative modes of belonging and sources of power substitute for the defensive shoring up of white and male supremacist identities. Still, oppositional traditions may also, to a lesser extent, also harbor inegalitarian elements. Some black radical traditions have male supremacist aspects when, for instance, they are closely connected to patriarchal religions. Meanwhile, feminist traditions often have white supremacist aspects. Valuing these traditions and the local roots of power that they provide while also confronting their baggage is difficult and irresolvable work. It requires, in Fred Moten's words, a willingness to "live with and in

brokenness."[332] Although Wolin provides no shortcut for this task, his work brings its

difficulty into focus more sharply than theorists who are less explicitly invested in

historical memory and tradition, including those who allow for a coalitional politics, such

as Laclau and Mouffe.

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[332] Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, *Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (New York, NY: Minor Compositions, 2013), p. 50.

4. Towards a Polymorphous Democracy

"Democracy is unique in being related to all constitutions; it is not so much amorphous as polymorphous."

– Sheldon Wolin, 'Norm and Form: The Constitutionalizing of Democracy'[333]

"The old citizenship must be replaced by a fuller and wider notion of being whose politicalness will be expressed not in one or two modes of activity – voting or protesting – but in many."

– Sheldon Wolin, 'What Revolutionary Action Means Today'[334]

Introduction

In Chapter One of *Politics and Vision* (1960) Wolin claims that institutional forms, along with customary practices, constitute the "political nature" analyzed by political theorists. "The system of political institutions in a given society represents an arrangement of power and authority" that orders and defines "political space" and "political time."[335] Indeed, Wolin goes as far as to claim that human activity only

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[333] Sheldon S. Wolin "Norm and Form: The Constitutionalizing of Democracy" in Peter Euben et al. (eds.), *Athenian Political Thought and the Reconstruction of American Democracy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994), 29-58.

[334] Sheldon S. Wolin, "What Revolutionary Action Means Today" in Chantal Mouffe (ed.) *Dimensions of Radical Democracy: Pluralism, Citizenship, Community* (London, UK: Verso, 1992.)

[335] Sheldon S. Wolin, *Politics and Vision* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), p. 7-8.

becomes political if it is "directed towards political institutions": they serve an indispensible "relating function" between political aims and outcomes. Accordingly, Wolin goes on to critique early Protestantism for disconnecting an otherwise powerful notion of religious community from institutions and, in what is perhaps the most complimentary reading in the entire book, praises Calvin for reconnecting them.

Perplexingly, *Politics and Vision* goes on to condemn all large-scale institutions in a scathing and wide-ranging critique of modern organizational power. Moreover, the narrative of loss through which Wolin denounces modern liberalism generates a blind spot regarding the positive value of rights and of the often large-scale institutions of liberal democracy such as courts, elections, and representative bodies. Although Wolin's antipathy to centralization suggests that these institutions are especially problematic at the federal level, he fails to clarify on what scale the rule of law and political representation could be acceptable. Rather, he shares with some other thinkers of the 1960s a sweeping critique of "technological society" that often fails to distinguish between better or worse institutions or to differentiate between democratic and antidemocratic functions of the state.[336]

Given this critique, it is unclear at the close of the book which if any institutions are meant to play a role in Wolin's vision of the political. On the one hand, he claims that institutions comprise our political nature and even assumes that the state still ought to serve as "the central referent" for citizenship.[337] On the other hand, this is in tension with his sweeping critique of organizational power, his condemnation of liberalism, and his

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[336] E.g. Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society*. Trans. John Wilkinson. (New York, NY: Knopf, 1964.)

[337] Wolin, *Politics and Vision*, p. 385.

merging of the two in his association of constitutional theory with organizational theory. Whether he could consistently incorporate into his vision of the political a more complex, pragmatic approach to state and non-state institutions of various sizes remains undetermined.

As I have shown in Chapter Three, Wolin becomes more hostile towards the state after *Politics and Vision*. Inspired by grassroots activism of the 1960s, he becomes more consistent in categorically asserting that all major institutions in the contemporary United States are antidemocratic. Nevertheless, the archaic vision of democracy that he then advances in the 1980s is not amorphous. Rather, it rests on local customs and practices: settled forms of democracy and possibly, depending on how they are defined, smaller scale institutions. With this stress on local forms Wolin underscores elements of democracy often neglected by other contemporary democratic theorists. These elements are not stressed by Jürgen Habermas' institution-centric understanding of deliberative democracy, nor by radical democrats Laclau and Mouffe, who promote collective assertions of the popular will but remain agnostic regarding the forms that democratic action should take. Despite some commentators' suggestions otherwise, Wolin's localist vision also contrasts with Jacques Rancière's commitment to formless, anti-institutional politics. Debates in contemporary political theory about the forms of democracy tend to frame the issue in binary terms, juxtaposing Habermasian institutional politics and Rancièrian ruptural politics. Wolin's archaic vision has a different focus. While it aligns with Rancière in its antagonism with major institutions, it emphasizes cultures and practices that take root and endure over time, rather than moments of transgression or rupture.

We saw in Chapter Three that Wolin first confronts the limitations of his archaic vision when he acknowledges the parochial, exclusionary forms of identity bound up with American traditions. He subsequently attempts to detach his understanding of "the demos" (the symbolic aspect of democracy) from his appreciation of archaic practices, advocating a "continual self-fashioning of the demos" rather than a recovery of the American people.[338] Through a comparison with Laclau and Mouffe I argued that this move is unsuccessful, both because the symbolic aspect of democracy cannot be swiftly severed entirely from its forms, and because radical democratization actually depends building coalitions between established identities that are bound up with numerous traditions.

Nevertheless, as I argue in the current chapter, Wolin's attempt to appreciate a more transgressive element of politics yields a more nuanced conception of democracy as "polymorphous." When he theorizes "fugitive democracy," he comes not only to summarily reject archaic identities, but also to question whether settled practices of local deliberation could ever suffice to address various forms of inequality. In his essays of this period, he begins to focus on a more dynamic style of democratic politics that is antagonistic to all institutionalization, a politics that is *a*constitutional, transgressive, even anarchistic. In other words, he comes to appreciate a "formless form" of democracy closer to that theorized by Rancière.[339] However, Wolin continues to worry about the decentering tendencies of transgressive politics. Rather than fully embracing a one-dimensional Rancièrian perspective, Wolin advances what he calls a "polymorphous"

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[338] Sheldon S. Wolin, "On Rawls' Political Liberalism" *Political Theory* 24:1 (1996), pp. 97-142.

[339] Wolin, *Politics and Vision,* p. 558.

conception of democracy. This incorporates both localist and transgressive forms, even if he does not always acknowledge the tensions between them, and even as he unsuccessfully attempts to confine the symbolic aspect of democracy to the transgressive.

Wolin's polymorphous understanding of democracy incorporates not only local and transgressive forms, but also, ultimately, a qualified appreciation of major institutions. Despite his opposition to centralized power, Wolin at times criticizes the dismantling the welfare state in the 1980s and 90s, acknowledges the role of the federal government in addressing certain issues, and stresses the importance of large-scale institutions such as labor unions in centering the Left. Yet it is not until the rise of globalized neoliberalism at the turn of the century that he increasingly worries about the loss of basic institutions of constitutional democracy and urges us to shore them up in order to reign in the power of transnational capital. By this point Wolin's approach to state institutions is increasingly more nuanced than the approach of Rancière, who dismisses all such institutions as "the police."

Given Wolin's varied statements regarding institutions and the state, it is perhaps no wonder that critics such as Stephen Holmes dismiss his conception of "the political" as "a cacophony of irreconcilable values."[340] However, we might alternatively read his work not only as demonstrating the importance of local cultures and practices, but also as illuminating the unavoidable complexity of democracy and the ongoing tensions between the various forms and multiple registers that it must take in the twenty first century. Certainly, Wolin's work over sixty years is not always consistent and he does not fully elucidate the complexities that it ultimately contains. Nevertheless, he offers a more

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[340] Stephen Holmes, "Both Sides Now," *The New Republic* (March, 2002.)

multifaceted response to globalized neoliberalism than, for example, Hardt and Negri,

who also diagnose postmodern power but who respond to it by rejecting both localism

and the modern state in favor of a single, messianic hope in the emergence of a

transnational democratic subject. By acknowledging local, transgressive, and institutional

aspects of democracy, Wolin's work implicitly suggests that such contemporary theories

of democracy may be insightful but partial.

Local Democratic Forms and Contemporary Democratic Theory

As Wolin's critique of "the age of organization" intensifies after *Politics and*

Vision (1960), he becomes wary of the state as a vehicle for political action and

increasingly critical of the US political system in particular. In *democracy* and *The*

Presence of the Past, he condemns *The Federalist* and *The Constitution of the United*

States for initiating American tendencies towards centralization and corporate

capitalism.[341] He also criticizes the expansion and transformation of state functions in the

twentieth century, going as far as to claim, "The principal task of democratic theory in

America today is to establish a democratic critique of the welfare state."[342] He comes not

only to blame "liberalism" for the lack of democratic vitality in civil society, but also to

associate *any* politics focused on state institutions with "liberalism." This merging of his

critiques of liberalism and organizational power is evident in a scathing review of

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[341] Sheldon S. Wolin, "The People's Two Bodies" *democracy* 1:1 (1981), pp. 9-24.

[342] Sheldon S. Wolin, "Democracy and the Welfare State: The Political and Theoretical Connections between Staatsräson and Wohlfahrtsstaatsräson," *Political Theory* 15:4 (1987), p. 467-500.

Democratic Socialist Irving Howe. Here Wolin describes the welfare state as "the

cornerstone of contemporary liberalism" and claims that, in defending it, Howe "settle[s]

into a comfortable working relationship with neo-liberalism."[343] Indeed, in 1981, Wolin

denounces not only state power, but also all large institutions:

"Every one of the country's primary institutions – the business corporation, the

government bureaucracy, the trade union, the research and education industries, the mass

propaganda and entertainment media, and the health and welfare system – is

antidemocratic in spirit, design, and operation. Each is hierarchical in structure, authority

oriented, opposed in principle to equal participation, unaccountable to the citizenry, elitist

and managerial, and disposed to concentrate increasing in the hands of the few and to

reduce political life to administration."[344]

Reflecting on the previous two decades, Wolin concludes in 1983: "The biggest

lesson of all is that the revitalization of democracy must be undertaken primarily in

society rather than through state-oriented institutions."[345] Whereas "disillusioned radicals"

of the '60s had resigned themselves to "the long march through institutions," "today's

democrats must begin to disengage from the many forms of dependency that make them

accomplices in the legitimation of reactionary power."[346] The localist vision of

democracy that he then advances and calls "archaic," is focused primarily on cultures and

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[343] Sheldon S. Wolin, "Socialism and America," *The Atlantic*, November, 1985, 138.

[344] Sheldon S. Wolin, "Editorial: Why Democracy?" *democracy* 1:1 (1981), p. 3-5.

[345] Sheldon S. Wolin, "Editorial" *democracy* 3:1 (1983.)

[346] Sheldon S. Wolin "Editorial" *democracy* 1:3 (1981.)

practices, not major institutions. Like John Dewey's democratic theory, this vision

conceives democracy as way of life and stresses the cultivation of habits and customs

over any consideration of what Dewey calls governmental "machinery."[347] Wolin also

admires Tocqueville for first championing this approach to democracy, for "freeing the

discussion of democracy from the framework of constitutionalism" and instead

examining political culture.[348] Such an approach leads to a different understanding of the

citizen: "its model of action is not the administrator who "creates" an organization, but

the craftsperson who respects what he or she is working with – persons, relations, places,

and needs – and knows the story of where they have come from."[349] Wolin finds in this

conception of democracy and citizenship "a radical promise that holds out the hope of

undermining the authoritarianism implicit in the emerging technocratic order."[350] Given

that he comes to identify "liberalism" not only with individualism and an absence of

political vision but also with any state-centric politics, he describes his turn from state-

centric citizenship in *Politics and Vision* (1960) towards archaic localism as a "journey

from liberalism to democracy."[351]

Although Wolin's archaic vision is focused on culture and eschews major

institutions, it is not formless. Local cultures and traditions can be understood as forms:

they take root over time and have a stable character and shape. At no point during the

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[347] John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems* (Athens, OH: Swallow Press, 1954), p. 146.

[348] Sheldon S. Wolin, *Tocqueville Between Two Worlds: The Making of a Political and Theoretical Life* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), Ch.9.

[349] Sheldon S. Wolin, "Editorial" *democracy* 3:1 (1983).

[350] Sheldon S. Wolin, "Editorial" *democracy* 2:4 (1982).

[351] Wolin, *Politics and Vision*, p. xv.

1970s and 80s does Wolin deny the need for democratic forms. Instead, he insists that we need to rediscover and cultivate different forms; that is, "life forms for taking care of a part of the earth and of the beings who are there."[352] Depending on how we define "institutions," archaic localism might also be understood to operate through institutions of a smaller scale, such as small civil society organizations and town councils. Indeed, Wolin reminds us that, "An American is a citizen, not only of a nation, but of a neighborhood, locality, country, and state" and also insists, "these entities have *institutional roots* and participatory traditions older than the constitutions."[353]

Wolin's focus on "archaic," local forms illuminates aspects of democracy that are not foregrounded by other democratic critics of liberalism. Habermas, for example, centers his rationalist democratic theory on major institutions. Relying on a conception of rational discourse, he argues that by securing rights and institutionalizing communicative norms, citizens can deliberate rationally and share in power. "The demos" is here identified with the outcome of specific procedures: "Popular sovereignty is not embodied in a collective subject, or a body politic on the model of an assembly of all citizens," but in "'subjectless' forms of communication and discourse circulating through forums and legislative bodies."[354] Habermas hopes that this proceduralist view of legitimacy will elaborate democratic practice in a way that avoids "ethical overload" and preserves

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[352] Wolin, *The People's Two Bodies.*

[353] Wolin, *Politics and Vision*, p. 603, emphasis added.

[354] Jürgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms* (Cambridge, mA: The MIT Press, 1998), p. 136.

indeterminacy.[355] Because he eschews any more demanding or contextually specific

ethical content than a thin "constitutional patriotism," he claims, referencing Claude

Lefort, that "the symbolic location of discursively fluid sovereignty remains empty."[356] In

taking this modernist, institution-centric approach, however, Habermas de-emphasizes

the local elements of deliberation stressed by Wolin and thus risks misinterpreting

dynamics of popular resistance and participation. Despite Habermas' concession that the

formal political sphere ought to be porous to the informal, Wolin claims in a rare

reference to Habermas that he remains beholden to a modern scientific-technical

understanding of power that is anathema to democratic radicalism.[357]

As we saw in Chapter 3, Laclau and Mouffe also do not stress local forms of

democracy. They differ from Habermas in maintain a greater tension between individual

rights and popular sovereignty, and in stressing popular mobilization of "the demos"

beyond institutionalized procedures. Instead of identifying the demos with the outcomes

of such procedures, they identify it with whatever "hegemonic articulations" succeed in

claiming the "empty signifier" of "the people" by establishing "chains of equivalence"

between different struggles. They believe that in doing so they also preserve an the

element indeterminacy signaled by Lefort's conception of democracy's "empty place" of

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[355] Jürgen Habermas, "Three Normative Models of Democracy" in Seyla Benhabib (ed.), *Democracy and Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), pp. 21-30. But see also Accetti's claim that Habermas reintroduces a kind of political theology. Carlo Invernizzi Accetti "Can Democracy Emancipate Itself from Political Theology? Habermas and Lefort on the Permanence of the Theologico-Political," *Constellations* 17:2 (2010).

[356] Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms*, p. 443.

[357] Sheldon S. Wolin "What Time Is It?" *Theory & Event* 1:1 (1997.)

power, but move beyond him in further elaborating the formation of popular

subjects.[358] I argued that this approach is helpful in illuminating the symbolic dimension

of radical democracy; specifically, in demonstrating the need to form democratic subjects

from coalitional alliances of established identities. However, Laclau and Mouffe remain

largely agnostic about the forms that democratic action could take. Their work does not

associate identity with tradition, and does not clearly differentiate between relatively

momentary or superficial assertions of the popular will, populist movements that operate

through hierarchically organized institutions, or decentralized deliberative populism of

the kind advocated by Wolin.

Compared to both Habermas and Laclau and Mouffe, Wolin's expresses strong

and often undifferentiated opposition to all large-scale institutions and to centralized state

power, which he associates with the United States Constitution. Noting this, some

commentators claim that his view most closely resembles the anti-institutionalism of

Rancière. However, especially in its first, "archaic" iteration, Wolin's democratic theory

is quite different. Whereas Laclau and Mouffe understand the demos to be a "hegemonic"

articulation of popular power, Rancière understands the "demos" to refer only to the part

of the community who have "no qualifications" to participate.[359] "The demos" does not

denote all people but rather denotes "the part of those who has no part" or, alternatively,

"the poor."[360] It is defined through the "wrong" that has been committed against it.[361]

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[358] Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (London, UK: Verso, 1985), p. 151.

[359] Jacques Rancière, "Ten Theses on Politics" *Theory & Event* 5 (2001), p.6.

[360] Ibid, p. 6-7.

Meanwhile, Rancière defines "the police" as any and all "institutions, government,

and administration" and claims that these impose exclusionary "partitions of the sensible"

on lived experience. [362] He understands democracy to emerge from a "disagreement"

between the "demos" and the "'police" order whereby the demos dissents to the

particular "partition of the sensible" imposed upon reality by the police and demands to

be seen.[363] Thus, for Rancière, democracy is "a rupture;" it is "the wrench of equality

jammed into the gears of domination."[364] This ruptural, transgressive understanding of

democracy has also drawn the fascination of other contemporary democratic theorists.[365]

It contrasts with Wolin's emphasis on settled cultures and practices that are sustained

over time. While both Wolin and Rancière are hostile to centralized power and major

institutions, Wolin's archaic vision of democracy from the 1980s does not glorify rupture

or transgression but rather bemoans the loss of local cultures and practices and the

resulting rootlessness of modern and postmodern societies.

Some admiring readers of Rancière question this ruptural reading of his

democratic theory. Antonio Y. Vázquez-Arroyo, for instance, claims that Wolin and

Rancière both understand democracy as "a political *form* whose content is an unwavering

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[361] Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), Ch.2.

[362] Ibid, p. 249.

[363] Rancière, "Ten Theses," p.10

[364] Ibid, p. 4; Rancière *Disagreement,* p.79.

[365] E.g. Jean-Luc Nancy, "Finite and Infinite Democracy," in *Democracy in What State* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2011); Wendy Brown, "Nietzsche for Politics" in D. Schrift (ed.) *Why Nietzsche Still? Reflections on Drama, Culture and Politics* Alan (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001.)

commitment to shared power."[366] He claims that their respective criticisms of institutionalization merely intend to show that this form "cannot be housed in a (liberal-capitalist) constitutional arrangement." Similarly, Jason Frank argues that Rancière is attentive to, "the ongoing effort to create *forms* of the common." Indeed, Rancière claims such a project for himself when he declares:

"I am not a thinker of the event, of the upsurge, but rather of emancipation as something with its own tradition, with a history that isn't just made up of great striking deeds, but also of the ongoing effort to create *forms* of the common different from the ones on offer from the state, the democratic consensus, and so on."[367]

Despite such assertions by Rancière and his supporters, however, his theorizations of democracy almost always push in the opposite direction, revealing a deeper hostility towards form and a glorification of momentariness. At his most extreme, he states: "Democracy is irreducible to *either* a form of government *or* a mode of social life."[368] If democracy is neither a form of government nor a mode of social life, it is unclear what kind of ongoing democratic "forms of the common" we might create. For Wolin, as for Dewey and Tocqueville, democracy is certainly a mode of social life, even if it is not a comprehensive form of government. Even when Rancière acknowledges that democratic activism may have an organized structure, he asserts: "The question is not how long an

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[366] Antonio Y. Vázquez-Arroyo, "Four Maxims," *Theory & Event* 13 (2010.)

[367] Jacques Rancière, "Democracies Against Democracy," *Democracy in What State* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2011), emphasis added.

[368] Rancière, "Democracies Against Democracy."

organization lasts, but what it does with its time."[369] Here, he recognizes the

importance of form only to deny that building democratic power may depend upon

sustaining such forms over time. For Wolin, as for most political activists, the longevity

of an organization is an important question to consider, even if it does not always

outweigh other considerations.

Rancière's formless understanding of democracy is also evident in the strikingly

ahistorical quality of his thought. Although he identifies the origins of democracy in

ancient Greece, and undertakes archival research to unearth democratic moments in

history, he regards democracy as just that: a *moment* when the demos/poor demands to be

seen. Democracy can thus occur at any time in history, regardless of the underlying

distribution of power in a given society. Accordingly, Rancière uses the terms

"democracy," "politics" and "class struggle" interchangeably to refer to this moment.[370]

This makes it difficult to determine whether any extended period in history is more or

less democratic than another. While Vázquez-Arroyo and Frank hope to find in Rancière

a more nuanced democratic theory, his repeated reduction of democracy to protest, and

his dismissal of the democratic forms that might sustain power, have been critiqued by

several other readers.[371]

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[369] Rancière, *Disagreement,* p. 250.

[370] Rancière, "Ten Theses," p. 5.

[371] E.g. Ella Myers "Presupposing Equality: The Trouble with Rancière's Axiomatic
Approach" *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 42:1 (2016), pp. 45-69.

Miguel Abensour also embraces the anarchic aspect of democracy, but unlike Rancière
he states that democrats must engage with major institutions. While democracy has a
"savage essence" that "overflows and overtakes the state," there is still a limited place for
institutionalization. Miguel Abensour, *Democracy Against the State* (Cambridge, MA:
Polity, 2011), pp. 103, 106, 123.

In contemporary democratic theory, debates about democratic form are often framed in binary terms, juxtaposing a Habermasian focus on major institutions with a Rancièrean ruptural politics. Take, for example, the recent "Democratic turn" in Machiavelli scholarship, as surveyed by Boris Litvin. According to Litvin, some scholars take an "institutional" approach to Machiavelli, which seizes upon his account of the institutions through which the people can rule.[372] Other scholars take a "no-rule" approach, which finds in Machiavelli a conception of popular power as subverting all relations of rule. Given that debates about form and formlessness are often framed in these binary terms, it is no wonder that some readers struggle to situate Wolin's democratic theory in relation to contemporary alternatives. His archaic vision of democracy primarily stresses local forms of democracy, which contrast *both* with large-scale institutions and with moments of rupture. This is a perspective rooted in concern about the loss of stable cultures and practices amidst modern and postmodern power, and in an impulse to preserve. It is a perspective shared by Dewey and Tocqueville, and by postwar critics of modernity such as Hannah Arendt and Leo Strauss, but downplayed by most contemporary democratic theorists, from Habermas, to Laclau and Mouffe, to Rancière.

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[372] Boris Litvin, "Mapping Rule and Subversion: Perspective and the Democratic Turn in Machiavelli Scholarship," *European Journal of Political Theory,* First Published August 17, 2015.

Transgressive Democracy and its Limits

While Wolin never relinquishes his distinctive attachment to local cultures and practices, he grows in his later writings to appreciate both transgressive politics and, increasingly, large-scale institutions. In Chapter Three, we saw that he first confronts the limitations of his archaic vision when he recognizes the disturbing implicating of his call to revive an American democratic identity. In associating "the demos" with a specific tradition, rather than with, for instance, the outcome of discursive procedures or attempts to hegemonize an "empty signifier," he risks reinforcing the inegalitarian baggage of that tradition. He attempts to resolve this problem by continuing to value archaic American practices but severing the symbolic dimension of democracy from its archaic forms. Accordingly, he advocates a "continual self-fashioning of the demos" rather than the recovery of the American people. I argued that this response is inadequate, however, both because archaic forms of democracy cannot be entirely separated from problematic identities, and because some inequalities in power can only be addressed by reference to established identities. While Wolin never resolves these dilemmas regarding memory and identity, he does come to question his archaic vision further, doubting not only its conception of "the demos" but also whether localism could ever constitute a sufficient form for democracy. Whereas on the symbolic level he struggles to appreciate that established identities must both be acknowledged and transgressed, he is insightful in ultimately recognizing the importance of both archaic and transgressive forms.

Wolin's growing appreciation for transgressive politics is most evident in the pivotal essay "Norm and Form: The Constitutionalizing of Democracy" (1994), and

subsequent essays "Transgression, Equality, Voice" (1996) and "Fugitive Democracy" (1996). At times in "Norm and Form" he seems merely to reiterate his opposition to centralized state power and constitutionalism, claiming, as Vázquez-Arroyo puts it, that democracy "cannot be housed in a (liberal-capitalist) constitutional arrangement." Wolin writes: "'constitutional democracy' is not a seamless web of two complementary notions but an ideological construction designed not to realize democracy but to reconstitute it and, as a consequence, repress it."[373] Such a claim does not necessarily imply a ruptural Rancièrean notion of politics, since it is also compatible with an emphasis on smaller-scale, local forms of democracy. However, Wolin then goes further and critiques all institutionalization:

"Institutionalization brings not only settled practices regarding such matters as authority, jurisdiction, accountability, procedures, and processes but routinization, professionalization, and the loss of spontaneity and those improvisatory skills that Thucydides singles out as an Athenian trademark… It tends to produce internal hierarchies, to restrict experience, to associate political experience with institutional experience, and to inject an esoteric element into politics."[374]

Moreover, Wolin critiques not only all institutionalization but also the broader notion of "form" and Aristotle's dictum "that the practices of governance and politics

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[373] Sheldon S. Wolin "Norm and Form: The Constitutionalizing of Democracy" in Peter Euben et al. (eds.), *Athenian Political Thought and the Reconstruction of American Democracy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994), pp. 29-58.

[374] Ibid.

naturally grouped themselves into forms or constitutions." Disavowing even smaller-scale forms, he reduces the very concept of "form" to the concept of "organization," which he associates with the evils of modern power: "The modern variant [of the ancient vocabulary of "form"] is the concept of "organization" or its equivalents "bureaucracy," "administration," or "management." "The idea of organization," he continues, "is comparable to the idea of form in specifying a set of integrated conditions for the production of power."[375] As I will later elaborate, "Norm and Form" also points briefly towards a contrastingly nuanced and pragmatic approach to institutions that Wolin calls "democratic constitutionalism." Nevertheless, perhaps its most immediately striking statements are those that denounce institutions and forms outright.

"Norm and Form" thus marks Wolin's apparent turn towards a ruptural conception of democracy that is not focused on loss, a conception closer to Rancière. Here he not only embraces transgression on the symbolic level, advocating a "continual self-fashioning of the demos," but also understands democracy to be ruptural in its very (formless) form. Whereas decades earlier he chastised certain 1960s radicals for offering only "episodic outbursts," he now proposes: "accepting the familiar charges that democracy is inherently unstable, inclined toward anarchy, and identified with revolution and using these traits as the basis for a different, *a*constitutional conception of democracy."[376] This conception of democracy then reappears frequently in his thought. The essay "Fugitive Democracy," for example, describes democracy as momentary, as "a rebellious moment that may assume revolutionary, destructive proportions, or may

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[375] Ibid.

[376] John Schaar and Sheldon Wolin "Where We Are Now," *The New York Review of Books* (May 7, 1970), Wolin, "Norm and Form"

not."[377] The expanded edition of *Politics and Vision* (2004) refers to the "necessarily occasional character" of democracy.[378]

Confusingly, Wolin at times links this embrace of episodic politics with his realization that local deliberation simply cannot be sustained for long enough to produce an egalitarian sharing of power. Democracy is "*doomed* to succeed only temporarily" because, for most citizens, life's "main preoccupation – demanding of time and energy – is to scratch out a decent existence."[379] This lack of leisure time is, as Aristotle explains, a key reason why the poor tend not to rule. And, in a fast paced, unstable neoliberal economy, opportunities to participate are for many people all the fewer. From this perspective, Wolin's characterization of democracy as occasional, and "fugitive" seems to signal defeat and resignation. However, he also repeatedly states that democracy is momentary by its nature, implying that moments of transgression are not a mere consolation prize, but are in fact a pure manifestation of popular power. From this perspective, the turn to transgressive politics does not signal resignation regarding our inability to sustain local practices, but rather, on the contrary, a realization that his appeal to such practices missed something important about the nature of democracy.

In "Norm and Form" and elsewhere, Wolin fails to clarify how this newfound appreciation for transgression relates to the "archaic" localist view of democracy that he also, perplexingly, continues to value and mourn. Some readers take Wolin's shift in the

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[377] Sheldon Wolin, "Fugitive Democracy" in Seyla Benhabib (ed.), *Democracy and Difference: Contesting the Boundaries of the Political* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), pp. 31-45.

[378] Wolin, *Politics and Vision*, p. 602.

[379] Ibid, p. 603.

1990s to imply that he comes fully to embrace a ruptural politics. Nicholas Xenos,

for example, argues in 2001 that Wolin has decided in favor of transgressive politics,

placing it above his earlier emphasis on local deliberation.[380] Although elsewhere Xenos

recognizes Wolin's focus on the theme of loss, he again states in 2017: "a boundary-

defying democracy becomes the only opponent of a boundary-defying Superpower."[381]

From a more critical perspective, George Kateb chastises Wolin for privileging mere

protest over a genuinely democratic form of government.[382] However, as Jason Frank and

David McIvor argue, Wolin's focus on transgressive politics in his later work should be

read in the context of his broader oeuvre.[383] Wolin's enigmatic essays of the mid 1990s,

and his popular notion of "fugitive democracy," should not eclipse the mournful tone and

the focus on American history evident throughout much of his work.

In fact, despite his growing appreciation for transgressive politics, Wolin

regularly expresses anxiety that such politics will decenter democratic practice and fail to

sustain popular power. In dominant local traditions he had found a counterweight to key

antidemocratic forces of centralization and corporate capitalism. Such traditions centered

political practice in bounded, settled channels that could begin to sustain an alternative

power, even if they did not constitute a comprehensive political system. In contrast,

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[380] Nicholas Xenos, "Momentary Democracy" in Aryeh Botwinick and William Connolly (eds.), *Democracy and Vision: Sheldon Wolin and the Vicissitudes of the Political* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001).

[381] Nicholas Xenos, "Totalitarian Democracy Reditio," *Contemporary Political Theory* 16:1 (2017), 98-111.

[382] George Kateb, "Wolin as a Critic of Democracy" in *Democracy and Vision: Sheldon Wolin and the Vicissitudes of the Political*.

[383] Jason Frank, "Is Radical Democracy a Tradition?" *Contemporary Political Theory* 16:1 (2017), 76-82; David McIvor "The Conscience of a Fugitive: Sheldon Wolin and the Prospects for Radical Democracy," *New Political Science* 38:3 (2016), pp. 411-427.

transgressive politics do not necessarily center resistance on state and corporate

power as they also seek to overturn various social or cultural inequalities. Indeed, in their

impulse to destroy rather than preserve, transgressive eruptions may be especially well

suited to challenging the age-old hierarchical identities of race and gender that are deeply

woven into local traditions. In other words, they are better suited than either local

deliberation or institutionalized politics to promoting the radical re-fashionings of the

demos. However, as we have seen with Rancière, it is not clear how ruptural moments

sustain power over time. For this reason, they may not be so effective in challenging the

forms of state and corporate power that most concern Wolin. Thus we find him struggling

to make sense of the promise of transgressive politics while still honoring his earlier

conviction that "New forms must not only meet the test of encouraging human capacities

for shared activity but offer a reasonable prospect of revitalizing power."[384]

Wolin sometimes describes the limitations of transgressive politics in terms of

pace. He claims that local deliberation has a "leisurely pace" that allows problems to be

carefully discussed and power generated over time. In contrast to this ethic of care and

cultivation, transgressive politics actually replicate the disturbingly fast pace of late

capitalism. The temporalities of both the neoliberal economy and contemporary popular

culture "are dictated by innovation, change, and replacement through obsolescence."[385]

Similarly, promising democratic episodes are quickly forgotten in the chaos of continual

cultural change. Wolin also persists in his long-held hostility to science and technology,

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[384] Sheldon S. Wolin "The New Conservatives," *The New York Review of Books* (February 5, 1976.)

[385] Sheldon S. Wolin, "What Time Is It?" *Theory and Event* 1:1 (1997); Sheldon S. Wolin, *Democracy Incorporated: Managed Democracy and the Specter of Inverted Totalitarianism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), pp. 267-9.

associating it with centralized state power and ignoring the crucial role that camera

phones and social networking technologies have played in recent democratization efforts

in the US and elsewhere.[386]

Wolin's anxiety about the decentering tendencies of transgressive politics is

paralleled by his concern about the contemporary state of political theory and, in

particular, his vexed relationship with "postmodernism." In the expanded edition of

Politics and Vision (2004) he describes "postmodernism" critically as an intellectual

trend characterized by "antipathies towards essentialism, centered discourse,

foundationalism, and historical narrative."[387] Like practitioners of transgressive politics,

postmodern theorists allegedly identify power inequalities everywhere without centering

their analyses on the forms of power that pose the greatest threat or placing these

phenomena in historical context. Wolin thus asserts that postmodernism's "decentered"

notions of power and discourse have "served to disable its theorists from confronting the

basic characteristics of contemporary power-formations," particularly the state and

corporate capitalism.[388] Relatedly, he argues in "What Time is it?" (1997) that

"postmodern" theory, like transgressive politics, mirrors the fast pace of late capitalism.

It has "exchanged the tempos of deliberation and contemplation for the temporal rhythms

of contemporary culture and economy."[389] Wolin's objections to postmodernism are

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[386] E.g. He claims that "the computer" increases inequality and government and corporate control of culture in: Sheldon S. Wolin, "The Destructive Sixties and Postmodern Conservatism" in Macedo, Stephen (ed.) *Reassessing the Sixties: Debating the Political and Cultural Legacy* (New York, NY: W. W. Nortion & Company, 1997), pp. 129-156.

[387] Wolin, *Politics and Vision,* p. 567.

[388] Ibid.

[389] Wolin, "What Time Is It?"

sweeping and generally lack any sustained engagement with particular thinkers. One

exception is a critical and largely unpersuasive essay about Michel Foucault. Here Wolin

argues that Foucault's decentered understanding of power renders him unable to offer

plausible account of resistance. Instead, he offers only an "insurrectionary gesture."[390]

[See Chapter Five.]

       While Frank and McIvor acknowledge that essays such as "Norm and Form" and

"Fugitive Democracy" should be read in the context of Wolin's broader body of work,

they do not explain how these works confront the limitations of his earlier archaic view.

Nor do they cite the aforementioned passages in which Wolin continues to express deep

ambivalence about transgressive politics. McIvor observes that Wolin's politics involves

multiple "registers," claiming that we find in his work a notion of the "multiple civic self."

However, he does not fully grasp the discordant relationship between these registers or

how Wolin negotiates it over time.[391] I have suggested that Wolin's turn to transgressive

politics is in part a critical response to the limitations of his archaism. At the same time,

he remains suspicious of aspects of transgressive politics and unsure how to incorporate it

into his understanding of democracy. Wolin himself often fails to acknowledge the

tension between his multiple registers, appealing to archaic and transgressive aspects of

democracy simultaneously.[392] It is thus understandable that McIvor does something

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[390] Sheldon S. Wolin, "On the Theory and Practice of Power" in Jonathan Arac (ed.) *After Foucault: Humanistic Knowledge, Postmodern Challenges* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1988), pp. 179-201.

[391] McIvor draws on "Democracy Without the Citizen" in *The Presence of the Past,* where Wolin has not yet worked out the tensions between his different registers. McIvor, "The Conscience of a Fugitive."

[392] E.g. Sheldon S. Wolin, "Transgression, Equality, Voice" in Josiah Ober and Charles Hedrick (eds.), *Demokratia: A Conversation on Democracies Ancient and Modern*

similar when he refers to Wolin's "mournful awareness of democracy's fugitivity,"
blending the archaic and transgressive pieces of his politics as though they might co-exist
without friction.

Frank does more to acknowledge the tension between Wolin's multiple registers.
He first criticizes "some striking misinterpretations of [Wolin's] work as being too
preoccupied with the ruptural and transgressive quality of democracy," associating this
reading particularly with critics such as Kateb, although it is also found with admirers
such as Xenos.[393] According to Frank, Wolin's view of radical democracy instead
achieves a ''distinctive combination of the extraordinary with the ordinary, the
revolutionary and the quotidian.'' Noting the strongly conservative quality of many of
Wolin descriptions of democracy, he also identifies a "productive tension" between this
conservatism and his contrasting appreciation of the "insurgent event." While these
observations of a "tension" are important, we can deepen our understanding of Wolin's
theory by tracing how and when he turns to a more transgressive style of politics, and
noting that this shift presents dilemmas for him that he does not swiftly explain or
reconcile.

Wolin does most to clarify the discordant relationship between the archaic and
transgressive aspects of his politics, conceiving the tension between them as productive,
in a later essay, "Agitated Times" (2005). He argues here that, on the one hand,
democracy must preserve an important place for the local discursive traditions for which
he has long grieved. Through local deliberation decisions can be made and power

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(Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), pp. 63-90.

[393] Frank, "Is Radical Democracy a Tradition?"

generated slowly. Indeed, arguably, he remains primarily committed to this local

deliberative politics, stating, "Democracy's best hopes lie at the local level of state,

county, and municipality. In those locations the tempo of politics is slower, the

opportunities to stop and think more numerous, and the possibilities for meaningful

participation greater."[394] Elsewhere in his later works he advocates a politics that "affirms

the value of limits," describes democratic episodes as "restorative," and even returns to

bemoan the lack of a "cohesive public."[395] As we have seen in Chapter Three, Wolin

continues to view local tradition in a problematically monolithic way, and to assume that

it can be swiftly separated from problematic identities. Nevertheless, with this continued

emphasis on deeply rooted local cultures and practices Wolin makes a significant

contribution to contemporary theory. Even ostensibly like-minded thinkers such as

Rancière struggle to theorize these elements of democracy. On the other hand, in

"Agitated Times" Wolin also openly acknowledges, "Local democracy's communal

virtues are inseparable from the vices of parochialism." Because localism is "set in its

ways," it is "seriously in need of" a more eruptive politics that challenges its sedimented

hierarchies: "Enter agitation as mass protest, raucous demonstration, street theater with

jarring rhythms, cacophonies that contrast yet complement the slower tempos of

parochial politics." Such ruptural moments can, Wolin argues, "be a means of educating

particularism, energizing it to challenge the center." [396]

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[394] Sheldon S. Wolin, "Agitated Times," *Parallax* 1:4 (2005), pp. 2-11

[395] Wolin, *Politics and Vision*, p. 605; Wolin, "Fugitive Democracy"; Wolin, *Democracy Incorporated.*

[396] Wolin, "Agitated Times."

In this way, Wolin ultimately acknowledges and embraces the tension between archaic and transgressive forms of politics. Given the parochial tendencies of archaic politics, and the decentering tendencies transgressive politics, they can curb each other's excesses. Indeed, this more nuanced and multifaceted understanding of democracy is already nascent in "Norm and Form." While at times in this essay Wolin claims that democracy is "amorphous," he elsewhere states that it "is not so much amorphous as *polymorphous*."[397] Democracy operates through different styles of politics, including archaic local forms and transgressive "formless forms," all of which may be important for generating an egalitarian distribution of power. While democracy can be "housed" in these various forms, it cannot be reduced to a single, perennial form and it does not amount to a "complete political system." Similarly in the expanded edition of *Politics and Vision* (2004) Wolin states that democracy "embrac[es] a wide range of possible forms and mutations that are responsive to grievances."[398]

Major Institutions and Postmodern Power

For democratic theorists such as Habermas and Lefort, constitutions and large-scale institutions are essential to defending the indeterminacy of democracy – its "empty place" of power – and warding off totalitarianism. While Laclau and Mouffe do more to stress the paradoxical relationship between the concept of popular sovereignty and liberal constitutionalism, they ultimately also regard the institutions of constitutional democracy

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[397] Wolin, "Norm and Form."

[398] Wolin, *Politics and Vision*, p. 602.

as central to democracy in its modern form. Given that Wolin's formative concerns were about organizational power and the political vacuum generated by hegemonic liberalism in the United States, he always downplays both the importance of liberal institutions and the threat of nationalistic or right wing populist assertions of "the political." Moreover, his concern about the erosion of established cultures amidst modern power leads him to stress the revival of local traditions. Although he then diverges from his initial "archaic" vision of American democracy by embracing a "continual self-fashioning of the demos" and a Rancièrean notion of transgressive moments, he often still seems unappreciative of the state apparatus and of other large-scale institutions. As we have seen in "Norm and Form," he goes as far as to claim that the modern notion of constitutional democracy inherently "represses" democracy. Accordingly, in the essay "What Revolutionary Action Means Today" (1982, 1992), he praises "rejectionist" politics; that is, politics through which citizens withdraw from the state-corporate system and "direct their energies and civic commitments to finding new life forms." He elaborates:

"Towards these ends, our whole mode of thinking must be turned upside-down. Instead of imitating most other political theories and adopting the state as the primary structure and then adapting the activity of the citizen to the state, democratic thinking should renounce the state paradigm and, along with it, the liberal-legal corruption of the

citizen."[399]

However, while Wolin never joins Habermas and Lefort in describing the state or constitutionalism as essential to modern democracy, he does develop an appreciation of major institutional forms and constitutional guarantees as more contingent elements of a polymorphous democracy. Already in "What Revolutionary Action Means Today," he expresses some ambivalence about rejectionist and anti-institutional politics, describing them as "politically incomplete" and making the key concession that:

"There are major problems in our society that are general in nature and necessitate modes of vision and action that are comprehensive rather than parochial. And there are historical legacies of wrong and unfairness that will never be confronted and may even be exacerbated by exclusive concern with backyard politics."[400]

Wolin cites the anti-nuclear and anti-war movements and the defense of human rights as issues requiring a comprehensive politics that engages with institutions of liberal democracy such as courts and representative bodies (today, we would surely add climate change to this list.) However, he does not elaborate these issues.

Most striking is Wolin's failure here to mention racial justice movements, which have historically relied on the 14th amendment, federal legislation, and the centralized

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[399] Sheldon S. Wolin, "What Revolutionary Action Means Today" in Chantal Mouffe (ed.) *Dimensions of Radical Democracy: Pluralism, Citizenship, Community* (London, UK: Verso, 1992.)

[400] Wolin, "What Revolutionary Action Means Today"

power of the state to enforce civil rights against the protestations of southern states and localities. Certainly, decentralized power can also work on the side of racial justice, as has recently been demonstrated by the resistance of progressive "sanctuary cities" to draconian deportation policies. Juan Gonzalez explores how progressive cities such as New York City currently present the best hope for the Left. [401] However, cities are still large-scale governmental units that cannot be governed through rejectionist politics. Moreover, if policy victories such as comprehensive immigration reform were possible at the national level, this would surely be preferable to relying on the resistance of localities.

Because of the role that the centralized state has historically played in defending racial justice, George Shulman argues: "'Radical democrats' who demonize democratic sovereignty, a centralized or national state, and the party politics that mediates them, thus cede enormous power to the right, and secure the racial regime." Certainly, as Shulman explains, the divide between a progressive politics invested in state programs and a New Left politics focused on more horizontal participation exists in Black political thought as well, not only amongst white Leftists or in democratic theory. In the 1960s, actors such as Bayard Rustin favored engagement with the state while Malcolm X and Stokely Carmichael argued for the importance of localized citizen participation. Nevertheless, the issue of racial justice shows at the least that engagement with the state and other large-scale institutions must be considered as one effective strategy alongside or in productive tension with more "bottom-up" activism. [402]

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[401] Juan Gonzalez, *Reclaiming Gotham: Bill de Blasio and the Movement to End America's Tale of Two Cities* (New York, NY: The New Press, 2017.)

[402] George Shulman, "The Case of Bayard Rustin," by permission.

In addition to Wolin's scattered remarks about social movements that require a more "comprehensive" politics, he expresses some ambivalence about the welfare state in the 1980s and 90s. As we have seen, he both criticizes the expansion of state power in general in the twentieth century and specifically targets the state's welfare functions, going as far as to claim, "The principal task of democratic theory in America today is to establish a democratic critique of the welfare state."[403] He lambasts progressives such as Irving Howe for their investment in upholding the welfare state and seeks instead to revive a participatory vision of the common that he associates with the 1960s. However, he also expresses a contrasting concern that Ronald Reagan's mission to dismantle the welfare state will render ordinary citizens increasingly unable to achieve the level of material wellbeing required to engage in democratic participation. In 1981, shortly after Reagan's presidential victory, he states "The welfare functions of the state have made it of crucial importance to the lives of millions of citizens who would otherwise have no defenses against the vicissitudes of the economy." Thus, he continues, "Plainly to call for the dismantling of the state would be the height of cruelty as well as folly."[404] "Yet it is equally foolish," he clarifies, "to believe that the salvation of democracy lies in promoting a more efficient state or a stronger President." Here, Wolin's concerns about state power seem more focused on the expansion of the executive than on the state's welfare functions. He suggests that we should critique the welfare state only insofar as it creates forms of dependency and is relied upon to the exclusion of other forms

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[403] Wolin, "Democracy and the Welfare State"

[404] Sheldon S. Wolin, "Theme Note" *democracy* 1:2 (1981.)

democratic empowerment. Where the line is drawn between a necessary defense of the welfare state and excessive reliance on it remains unclear.

Wolin expresses related ambivalence about labor unions. Recall his claim, also in 1981, that, "Every one of the country's primary institutions – the business corporation, the government bureaucracy, *the trade union…* is antidemocratic in spirit, design, and operation." Despite this claim, he suggests the following year that organized labor should be at the "center" of democratic efforts. As he begins to question whether democracy can be symbolically centered on an archaic American identity, he suggests that it may be institutionally centered on labor:

"The immediate task is to generate power, and this requires participatory institutions. Many of these institutions exist, but they lack a vital center. There is only one group in the country capable of playing that role. Without labor taking the lead as a unifying force, not as a simple interest group, the redemocratization of America may become impossible. Which is why the democratization of the institutions of American labor must be the first rule of the new game."[405]

Although unions are often large-scale institutions, Wolin acknowledges that labor organizing is essential to achieving a more egalitarian distribution of power. While he would never abandon his faith in decentralized local participation, he suggests that unions should not be rejected but should rather be reformed to be more democratic. Indeed, if he

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[405] Sheldon S. Wolin, "Editorial" *democracy* 2:1 (1982.)

had explored this issue further he might have found that union locals often serve as schools of democratic experience.

These passages in Wolin's writings of the 1980s and 90s suggest and more nuanced attitude to major institutional forms, including the state-based institutions of liberal democracy, than his embrace of "rejectionism" might suggest. This is also a more nuanced attitude than that taken by some of Wolin's followers. Anne Norton, for instance, claims that the "only" threat to democracy that ought to concern us is liberalism, and that "the commitment to the Rule of Law is a commitment to mere proceduralism, and worse."[406] Jason Frank similarly sees in liberal constitutionalism only "regulatory mechanisms that work to delegitimize more radically egalitarian claims against established powers."[407] Wolin's tentative acknowledgement of "comprehensive" rights-based movements suggests instead a more paradoxical or ambivalent perspective on constitutional democracy, a perspective akin to that of Laclau and Mouffe.

Indeed, Wolin already gestures towards this more ambivalent perspective in "Norm and Form," when he contrasts constitutional democracy with "democratic constitutionalism." When democracy is *reduced* to the form of government "constitutional democracy" it is "repressed." However, he suggests, we might instead embrace "democratic constitutionalism." This is "a moment rather than a teleologically completed form," a moment through which institutions of a constitutional form of government is used pragmatically to serve the ends of democracy.[408]

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[406] Anne Norton, "Democracy and the Divine" *Theory & Event* 13 (2010.)

[407] Jason Frank, "Democratic Imagination on the Brink" *Polity* 47:4 (2015), pp. 566-575.

[408] Wolin, "Norm and Form."

At moments during the Reagan presidency Wolin appears to be learning the major lesson of Lawrence Goodwyn's study of nineteenth century populism, *The Populist Moment*: that a "movement culture" is insufficient to bring corporate power under democratic control and that it is necessary to capture large-scale institutions and the state apparatus.[409] Goodwyn finds, furthermore, that electoral politics is necessary to preserve local autonomy. While Wolin never quite reaches this conclusion, his conception of polymorphous democracy does seem to include not only local deliberative and transgressive elements, but also major institutional elements. He allows for this when he states in "What Revolutionary Action Means Today," "The old citizenship must be replaced by a fuller and wider notion of being whose politicalness will be expressed not in one or two modes of activity – voting or protesting – but in many."[410] Each mode of activity has it promise, and each has its risks. He thus avoids the crude opposition between democratic politics and state institutions that we find both in his own condemnation organizational power and in Rancière's notion of the "police."

Extrapolating from Wolin, we can better understand the promise of such a "polymorphous democracy" by looking at its implications for a particular contemporary movement, such as resistance to the massive expansion of the penal apparatus in the United States. The growth of the carceral state and militarized policing over the past several decades has had numerous de-democratizing effects on society, disproportionately impacting poor people and especially poor people of color. On the one hand, the earliest forms of resistance to these phenomena were local organizations that

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[409] Lawrence Goodwyn, *The Populist Moment* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1978.)

[410] Wolin, "What Revolutionary Action Means Today."

worked to expose the horrors of the penal system and advocate for incarcerated

people. While varying in their degree of institutionalization, these prison reform and

prison abolition movements were sustained over time. Moreover, such groups drew on

the organizing practices and rhetoric of past struggles, particularly histories of black

struggle. On the other hand, the sudden eruptions of popular protests to police brutality in

more recent years, particularly those emerging under the banner of "Black Lives Matter,"

have rapidly increased awareness and public outcry about the criminal justice system.

Technologies such as camera phones and social media, which did not play a role in older

styles of organizing, have been critical in these moments. Finally, critics of incarceration

cannot achieve their goals without engaging in the highly codified procedures of major

institutions and the state, since they must lobby for shifts in policy around sentencing

guidelines and police and prosecutorial conduct. Institutional change is needed in a

number of other areas too, from welfare to labor law to healthcare, in order to provide

alternatives to incarceration for those marginalized by structural racism and by a rapidly

shifting neoliberal economy. A polymorphous understanding of democracy would be able

to sustain the potential tensions between these modes of engagement without dismissing

any of them.

Although Wolin starts developing a more multidimensional politics in the 1990s

in essays such as "What Revolutionary Action Means Today" and "Norm and Form," it is

not until the 2000s that he fully embraces both constitutionalism and engagement with

large-scale state institutions as part of a polymorphous democracy. The Supreme Court's

intervention into the 2000 election and the subsequent erosion of civil liberties after 9/11

makes him for the first time seriously worry about the vitality of American

constitutionalism. At the same time, the fusion of US state power with transnational capital that began in the 1980s reaches its zenith, yielding a new "postmodern" form of power, a "formless form" that defies constitutional constraints.[411] Wolin considers this even more threatening to democracy than modern state-centric power. Similarly, Wendy Brown, not previously a champion of constitutional democracy, acknowledges that democracy loses "a necessary political form" under globalized neoliberalism:

"Democracy detached from a bounded sovereign jurisdiction (whether virtual or literal) is politically meaningless: for the people to rule themselves, there must be an identifiable collective entity within which their power sharing is organized and upon which it is exercised."[412]

Accordingly, in *Tocqueville Between Two Worlds* (2001) Wolin perceives the loss not only of the local cultures and practices that he has long grieved, but also the democratic aspects of modern constitutional democracy. In his final book *Democracy Incorporated* (2008) he goes further and claims that in the postmodern era the American political system has become a form of "inverted totalitarianism" that denies freedoms at home and projects itself as "Superpower" abroad. Here he continues to value local and transgressive forms of democratic action, those which are "informal," improvised, and spontaneous" or which "act from outside and against the system."[413] However, while

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[411] Wolin, *Politics and Vision,* p. 558.

[412] Wendy Brown, "We Are All Democrats Now…" *Theory & Event* 13 (2010.)

[413] Wolin, *Democracy Incorporated,* p. 254.

"democratic experience begins at the local level," he is now explicit in asserting, "the

modern citizenry has needs which exceed local resources and can be addressed only by

means of state power."[414] Democrats must "fight to recover lost ground," and "renew

meaning and substance of "representative democracy."[415] Even if the victory of Trump in

2016 indicates a nationalist backlash against globalized neoliberalism by voters, his

administration has only brought about an increase in corporate corruption and disrespect

for judicial independence. For these reasons a defense of basic institutions seems more

urgent than ever.

In Conclusion: A Contrast with Hardt and Negri

Wolin's polymorphous approach to democracy is, I submit, a more helpful and

realistic response to postmodern, globalized capitalism than many other approaches. For

example, in *Empire* (2000), Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri also claim that modern

sovereign power has given way to a kind of postmodern imperialism that is decentered

yet still hierarchical and oppressive. Their understanding of "Empire" places less weight

on United States and more on international organizations, but shares key features with

Wolin's diagnosis of Superpower. However, for Wolin, postmodern power further erodes

the local bases of democratic power that he has long defended, while also threatening

constitutional rights and the basic institutions of representative democracy. In contrast,

while Hardt and Negri consider Empire also to be cruel and inegalitarian, they claim that

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[414] Ibid, p. 291.

[415] Ibid, p. 291.

it is a necessary historical stage and is ripe for revolutionary transformation. In place

of Wolin's melancholic anti-modern sensibilities they advance a revised Marxist progress

narrative.[416] They claim that the modern idea of "the people" is a product of the now

defunct nation-state. Increased global communication and geographic mobility will allow

instead for the emergence of a new transnational, revolutionary subject: "the Multitude."

In *Multitude* (2004) and *Commonwealth* (2009) they attempt to elaborate how this subject

will banish sovereignty from politics while "inventing lasting democratic forms of social

organization."[417] This vision of "democracy" both celebrates the demise of the modern

state form and dismisses a return to localism as "false and damaging."[418]

    In rejecting both the state apparatus and settled local cultures in favor of

spontaneous popular mobilizations, Hardt and Negri seem to share some impulses with

Rancière. However, Rancière understands democracy as a moment of dissent that can

occur at any time in history, does not place a particular emphasis on global solidarity, and

does not advocate lasting, comprehensive forms of organization. In contrast, Hardt and

Negri embrace the current period of postmodern globalization in particular as the

precursor to genuine democracy, and they seek total transnational transformation. Their

materialist, progressive view of history is foreign to Rancière's timeless, ruptural

understanding of politics. As Andreas Kalyvas points out, Hardt and Negri do not

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[416] The mood of Hardt and Negri's work is not, as Elizabeth Anker primarily melancholic, but rather manic. Elizabeth Anker, "Left Melodrama" *Contemporary Political Theory* 11:2 (2012), pp. 130-152.

[417] Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2004); Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Commonwealth* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), p. viii.

[418] Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), p. 44.

concretely explain how the Multitude will seize power from Empire or found

egalitarian forms of organization.[419] Several other critics also accuse them of dismissing

strategic considerations, failing to address political conflict, and using the term

"democracy" spuriously.[420] Given Hardt and Negri's messianic, romantic perspective,

Laclau refers to their concept of the Multitude as "a purely fanciful construction."[421]

By incorporating a "formless form" of transgressive politics into his

polymorphous understanding of democracy, Wolin makes space for an appreciation of

global solidarities and mobilizations that are bound neither to nation states nor to local

cultures. However, Xenos goes too far in claiming that, for Wolin, "a boundary-defying

democracy becomes the only opponent of a boundary-defying Superpower."[422] He

remains wary about the loss of local cultures and practices and, increasingly, the loss of

the state form. For him, democracy in the late modern world cannot be reduced to a

comprehensive political system or a single style of politics: total transformation is not

possible. Instead, democratization must be pursued on numerous fronts, from the local to

the global. Wolin's melancholic approach can better make sense of the fact that in recent

years we have not seen the emergence of a global revolutionary subject but rather the

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[419] Andreas Kalyvas, "Feet of Clay? Reflections on Hardt and Negri's *Empire,*" *Constellations* 10:2 (2003), pp. 264-279.

[420] E.g. Terrell Carver "Less Than Full Marx…" *Political Theory* 34:3 (2006), pp. 351-356; Çiğdem Çıdam, "A Politics of Love? Antonio Negri on Revolution and Democracy" *Contemporary Political Theory* 12:1 (2013), pp. 26-45; Mary Hawkesworth, "The Gendered Ontology of *Multitude*" *Political Theory* 34:3 (2006), pp. 357-364; Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London, UK: Verso, 2005), p. 241; Slavoj Žižek, "Have Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri Rewritten the Communist Manifesto for the Twenty-First Century?" *Rethinking Marxism* 3:4 (2001.)

[421] Ernesto Laclau, *Emancipations* (London, UK: Verso, 1996), p. 44.

[422] Xenos, "Totalitarian Democracy Reditio."

resurgence of right wing populism, as nativist voters react against the losses of a postmodern world.

Wolin's polymorphous understanding of democracy leads critics such as Holmes to dismiss his political theory as a "cacophony of irreconcilable values." Certainly, Wolin was human, and thus prone to self-contradiction and growth. His scholarly writings span over sixty years and numerous points of ambivalence and inconsistency can be found within them. His long-held conviction that political theory should be radical in disclosing "warnings and possibilities" means that he sometimes stresses neglected aspects of democracy to the exclusion of those he takes for granted.[423] However, we can learn a valuable lesson from his various formulations of democracy and his attempts to address their respective limitations. Namely, Wolin's intellectual journey suggests that a single theoretical approach cannot capture the complexity of democracy in the twenty first century. As he started to appreciate more explicitly in "Agitated Times," democratization must be pursued on multiple registers – local, transgressive, institutional – and there are irresolvable tensions between them.

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[423] Wolin, *Politics and Vision,* p. 14.

5. On Political Education and Political Theory

"Education and democracy seem to complement each other so naturally that their union

appears predestined."

- Wolin, "Higher Education and the Politics of Knowledge"[424]

"Here lies the vocation of those who preserve our understanding of past theories, who

sharpen our sense of the subtle, complex interplay between political experience and

thought, and who preserve our memory of the agonizing efforts of intellect to restate the

possibilities and threats posed by political dilemmas of the past."

- Wolin, "Political Theory as a Vocation"[425]

Introduction

Many reviewers of Wolin's later works, including *Politics and Vision* (2004), and

Democracy Incorporated (2008), have observed that his outlook becomes increasingly

bleak.[426] Even relatively sympathetic readers such as Wendy Brown find "no solace in his

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[424] Sheldon S. Wolin "Higher Education and the Politics of Knowledge," *democracy* 1:2 (1981), 38-52.

[425] Sheldon S. Wolin, "Political Theory as a Vocation," *American Political Science Review* 63:4 (1969), 1062-1082.

[426] E.g. John Dunn, "The Dark Vision of a Small-Town US Democrat," *Times Higher Education Supplement* (February, 2005); Ronald Beiner "*Politics and Vision*: The Sequel" *European Journal of Political Theory* 5:4 (2006), pp. 483-493; Nadia Urbinati "Democracy Incorporated," *Political Science Quarterly* 125:1 (2010), pp. 171-174.

work," only "defeat" and "withdrawal."[427] Certainly, Wolin's diagnosis of inverted

totalitarianism identifies grave threats to democracy. However, there are still moments in

his later work when he identifies possibilities for change and when he remains convinced

of his 1981 claim that "despair is a luxury that democrats cannot afford."[428]

Surveying Wolin's works, the area in which he most often finds promise for

democratic revitalization is education. In the 1960s he co-authors a number of articles

with John Schaar for the *New York Review of Books* that examine the unrest at Berkeley

and defend the students' authentic understanding of education in contrast to the

administration's technocratic understanding. He then claims in 1981, "Education and

democracy seem to complement each other so naturally that their union appears

predestined."[429] Again in a 1987 interview with Bill Moyers, he dismisses revolution as a

viable option and states instead: "We've got to deal with where we are at this point, and

so consequently I guess I'm driven ultimately back to questions of education."[430]

At times, Wolin seems to have a broad and egalitarian understanding of political

education as an empowering practice through which anyone might become increasingly

aware of structures of power, enrich their lives with meaning, and discover greater

agency. In his analysis of the unrest at Berkeley, Wolin praises students' efforts to deeply

reflect on social values, shape their own educational experience, and challenge the

hierarchical structure of the university. Certainly, he seems to believe that a university

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[427] Wendy Brown, "Democracy and Bad Dreams," *Theory & Event* 10 (2007.)

[428] Sheldon S. Wolin "Editorial," *democracy* 1:3 (1981), pp. 2-6.

[429] Wolin, "Higher Education and the Politics of Knowledge."

[430] Sheldon S. Wolin, "Interview with Bill Moyers," *The World of Ideas* (PBS) June 14, 1989.

education in the liberal arts is potentially useful in cultivating the "tacit knowledge" that enables people to reflect on values in this way.[431] However, this broad understanding of political education is not faculty-centric and is not even necessarily limited to universities. Moreover, Wolin suggests that it was the students' direct experiences of political action, rather than their classes, that were in this case a vital source of their political education. Whether within or outside an organized educational setting, Wolin suggests that political education depends on an impulse to preserve tradition and specifically to safeguard "meditative culture" against the instrumentalized imperatives of economic and technological progress.[432] It depends, furthermore, on resisting the "microspecialization" of knowledge in order to foster holistic perspectives on society.[433]

Insofar as the academic discipline of political theory purports to be democratic, it ought to be in service of, or at least not in tension with, this broad and egalitarian notion of political education. However, as I explore in this final chapter, the relationship between political education and political theory in Wolin's work is often fraught. His critique of the political complacency of behavioral political science in "Political Theory has Vocation" (1969) quickly turns into an attempt to defend political theory as a subfield. Without much explanation, he ties his broad notion of "tacit knowledge" to two more specific terms: "epic theory" and the theoretical "vocation."[434] Epic theory involves not only reflecting on values and attempting to diagnose social ills holistically but also

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[431] Wolin, "Political Theory as a Vocation."

[432] Ibid.

[433] Sheldon Wolin and John Schaar, "Education and the Technological Society," *The New York Review of Books* (October 9, 1969.)

[434] Wolin, "Political Theory as a Vocation."

offering a radically different vision. The notion of epic is, furthermore, closely connected to the specific discursive tradition of Western political thought. Indeed, earlier in *Politics and Vision* (1960) Wolin blurs any distinction between the decline of this discourse and the decline of political experiences or ideas amongst citizens more generally, implying that the academic theorist has a crucial role to play in averting political catastrophe. Unsurprisingly, this defense of academic political theory has been popular amongst professional theorists, even amongst those who are unconvinced by Wolin's increasingly radical understanding of democracy.[435] However, in thus conflating the need for political education with a concern about the survival of a particular academic discipline, Wolin risks undervaluing the "tacit knowledge" of those who are not primarily engaged with this specific tradition and distancing political wisdom from experiential knowledge. Meanwhile, his claim that practitioners of such epic theory adopt this as their primary "vocation" further separates them from other citizens who do not or, owing to any number of inherited constraints, *cannot* make this choice.

As Wolin turns towards an increasingly radical democratic perspective through the 1970s and 80s, he questions some aspects of "epic" theory. Namely, he comes more definitively to regard the architectonic impulse found in canonical thinkers such as Plato and Hobbes as despotic. He also states during this period that political theory "is

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[435] E.g. Corey Robin, "Sheldon Wolin's the Reason I Began Drinking Coffee," *The Good Society* 24:2 (2015), pp. 164-173; William E. Connolly "Politics and Vision" in Aryeh Botwinick and William Connolly (eds.) *Democracy and Vision: Sheldon Wolin and the Vicissitudes of the Political* (Princeton, NY: Princeton University Press, 2001), pp. 3-20.

Readers who laud Wolin's early work but reject his later work include: Mark E. Warren, "*Politics and Vision* Expanded Edition" *Political Theory* 34:5 (2006), pp. 667-673; Ronald Beiner "*Politics and Vision*: The Sequel"; James Wiley, "Sheldon Wolin on Theory and the Political," *Polity* 38:2 (2006), pp. 211-234.

primarily a civic and secondarily an academic activity" and moves away from the

notion of "vocation."[436] Finally, he ventures beyond his subfield to found the

interdisciplinary journal *democracy* as well as continuing to write extensively for *The*

New York Review of Books. Nevertheless, Wolin remains committed to a form of

theorizing that can both holistically diagnose social ills and offer a coherent alternative

vision focused on a particular tradition. His solution is to unearth America's archaic

tradition of grassroots democracy as a central, albeit anti-architectonic, myth, which

draws on sources beyond the narrow reconstruction of the tradition found in *Politics and*

Vision. As we have seen in Chapter Three, this appeal to the archaic is still problematic in

that recuperates a monolithic tradition that obscures the co-existence of other traditions

and may be ill suited to addressing forms of power such as race and gender. Wolin's

concession in the 1990s that democracy is instead "polymorphous" and involves the

transgression of multiple forms of cultural power, would seem to discredit any theory of

democracy that offers a univocal alternative vision or is centered on a particular tradition.

If epic theory is thus entirely redundant, how might theorists at least contribute to

political education by offering fundamental reflection on values and holistic diagnoses of

social ills?

Wolin expresses growing anxiety about the role of theory in his reaction to

"postmodern" critiques of theoretical metanarratives. First, Wolin worries that Michel

Foucault's understanding of power relations as ubiquitous obscures the centrality of state

and corporate power. Moreover, Foucault's insistence that discourses of knowledge are

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[436] Sheldon Wolin, *The Presence of the Past* (Baltimore, MD: The John Hopkins University Press, 1989), p. 1.

bound up with power undermines any principle of legitimacy that might supply either a privileged standpoint for a holistic critique or an alternative vision. Wolin reacts to these threats by returning to a "classic" notion of epic theory, re-introducing the notion of "vocation," and insisting on a division between theory and practice.[437] Later, Wolin critiques intellectual descendants of Foucault, claiming again that postmodernists are unable to diagnose the central power structures of our time. Moreover, the antipathy of postmodern theorists to established intellectual traditions ironically encourages the proliferation of specialized and increasingly esoteric academic discourses. While this critique of the academic Left has some merit, Wolin does not initially respond to it by developing a holistic diagnosis of real-world problems that squarely faces the co-implication of discourses of knowledge with power. Rather, he again gestures towards the need to shore up canonical theory, insists on separating theory and practice, and even suggests that theorists no longer have any political role to play other than to grieve quietly.

In Wolin's final works and interviews, however, he suggests contrastingly that theorists may still have a political role to play. In fact, his last major work, *Democracy Incorporated* (2008), could be understood to enact this hope. Here Wolin offers a diagnosis of state and corporate power that does not heavily rely on the tradition of canonical theory and which is accordingly accessible. He also does not invoke a unified tradition of "archaic" democracy as an alternative vision, but rather heeds the notion that democratic resistance must be polymorphous. The ongoing blind spots of Wolin's

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[437] Sheldon S. Wolin, "On the Theory and Practice of Power" in Jonathan Arac (ed.) *After Foucault: Humanistic Knowledge, Postmodern Challenges* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1988), pp. 179-201.

analysis in *Democracy Incorporated* could be addressed, I argue, by drawing on a

wider array of intellectual traditions to shape a more comprehensive diagnosis. When

focus is thus taken off shoring up the narrow vocation of political theory against

postmodern threats, it can be placed on ensuring that political theory contributes to a

broad and egalitarian form of political education. This re-opens questions related to

pedagogy and the political economy of education, which Wolin originally raises in his

articles on Berkeley but does not fully explore. Such questions have only become more

urgent in recent years.

Tacit Knowledge, Epic Theory, and the Vocation

The student revolts at Berkeley in the 1960s compelled Wolin both to abandon his

early state-centric view of citizenship in favor of an appreciation of grassroots

participation and to reflect more about the role of education in a democratic politics. His

articles with Schaar in the *New York Review of Books* claim that the educational mission

of Berkeley had been corrupted as part of the general trend of modern technological

civilization towards instrumental rationality. Instead of "preparing [students] to serve as

the guardians of society's intellectual honesty and political health, arming them with the

vision by which society seeks its own better future" Berkeley had become "a mere

research factory and training institution."[438] Students consequently expressed "a sense of

not being valued members of a genuine intellectual and moral community." They rejected

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[438] Sheldon Wolin and John Schaar "Berkeley and the Fate of the Multiversity" *The New York Review of Books* (March 11, 1965.)

the institutions' efforts to train them as productive members of society and were

instead "passionately looking for authentic values to replace what they perceive as the

phony slogans and spiritual tawdriness of so much of the public rhetoric and action of

[their] time."[439] Both students and sympathetic faculty such as Wolin sought to recover

the capacity of formal education, especially in the liberal arts and social sciences, to spur

such fundamental reflection on values. However, it was primarily through the students'

activism itself that they experienced the stimulating, egalitarian education that was

lacking in the impersonal hierarchy of their structured curriculum.

In their reflections on the unrest at Berkeley, Wolin and Schaar take their students

seriously and credit them with "providing hope."[440] These articles certainly do not bestow

responsibility for upholding the educational mission of the university upon faculty as

authoritative bearers of academic tradition. Wolin respects both undergraduate and

graduate students' attempts to achieve greater participation in university governance and

supports efforts to "reintegrate faculty and students around smaller structures which are

allowed genuine powers of decision-making and broad opportunities for educational

experiments."[441] Moreover, the notion of political education that he develops here does

not seem necessarily to be confined to the university or even to formal educational

contexts. He recognizes that the Berkeley students represented a relatively narrow

demographic but suggests that their aspirations towards critical reflection and increased

political agency were more broadly characteristic of the period. As he reflects much later

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[439] Ibid.

[440] John Schaar and Sheldon S. Wolin, "Berkeley and the University Revolution," *The New York Review of Books* (February 9, 1967.)

[441] Ibid.

in *Democracy Incorporated* (2008), the sixties was "a decade of prolonged popular political education unique in recent American history."[442]

Although Wolin claims that "radical reforms" were necessary to realize the proper educational mission the university, he understands this is an act of restoration.[443] According to him, the student activists were attempting to preserve educational "tradition" against the modernizing, instrumentalizing impulses of technological society.[444] While he does not clearly specify what specific tradition(s) he or the students sought to preserve, he does stipulate that such traditions allow for holistic rather than highly specialized courses of study: "If something of the traditional idea of the university is to be salvaged, there must be a revitalization of a common culture and a lessening of the centrifugal tendencies of specialization."[445] Wolin recognizes that students also sought to initiate innovative forms of education but suggests, "A creative tension between tradition and innovation should be the guiding principle."[446] For example, the "experimental" courses initiated by students were valuable in that they recognized and attempted to break with "the passive character of the 'educational process.'" At the same time, Wolin alleges that such courses did not provide students with the "vocational

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[442] Sheldon Wolin, *Democracy Incorporated* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), p. 165

[443] Schaar and Wolin, "Berkeley and the University Revolution."

[444] Sheldon S. Wolin and John Schaar, "Education and the Technological Society," *The New York Review of Books* (October 9, 1969.)

[445] Schaar and Wolin, "Berkeley and the University Revolution."

[446] Ibid.

calling" that a traditional liberal arts education could provide and consequently tended to "exacerbate powerlessness."[447]

In Wolin's well-known essay "Political Theory as a Vocation," (1969) his understanding of the role of tradition in political education narrows and his association of such tradition with a "vocation" becomes more obviously problematic. At the same time that he was writing about the student revolts for the *New York Review of Books,* he also wrote a series of articles in academic journals and volumes that explore the particular discipline of political theory.[448] These explorations culminate in "Political Theory as a Vocation," which seems to connect or perhaps even to conflate political education and political theory. Whereas Wolin's articles on Berkeley condemn the university in general for conforming to the trends of technological society, his articles about theory offer a more specific critique of the rise of behavioralism in political science departments. He becomes increasingly hostile to empirical social scientists over the course of the 1960s, ultimately claiming that their "methodism" takes underlying political structures for granted and so disables critical reflection and reinforces the status quo.

At times, Wolin's critique of methodism in political science seems to be made in the interest of defending a broad notion of political education. He claims that the demands of methodism impoverish education by "threaten[ing] the meditative culture

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[447] Sheldon S. Wolin and John Schaar, "Is a New Politics Possible?" *The New York Review of Books* (September 3, 1970.)

[448] Sheldon S. Wolin, "Political Theory: Trends and Goals" in David L. Sills (ed.) *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* 12 (New York, NY: The Macmillan Company and Free Press, 1968); Sheldon S. Wolin, "Paradigms and Political Theories" in Preston King and B.C Parekh (eds.) *Politics and Experience: Essays Presented to Professor Michael Oakeshott on the Occasion of His Retirement* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1968); Wolin, "Political Theory as a Vocation."

that cultivates all creativity."[449] Similarly, "the triumph of methodism is a crisis in

political education" and "its main victim is the tacit political knowledge which is so

crucial to making judgments." The notions of "meditative culture" and the "tacit

knowledge" that it cultivates are not confined to a particular discipline or intellectual

tradition. Rather, tacit knowledge refers broadly to a "stock of ideas which an

intellectually curious and broadly educated person accumulates and which come to

govern his intuitions, feelings, and perceptions." This kind of knowledge, which Wolin

also calls "political wisdom" and "political vision," enables critical reflection on

fundamental values. Whereas political scientists seek "terse hypotheses" and

"parsimony," political life is contrastingly "elusive and hence meaningful statements

about it often have to be allusive and intimative." Tacit knowledge depends not on a

circumscribed method but on "an indwelling or rumination in which the mind draws on

the complex framework of sensibilities built up unpremeditatedly." It is largely rooted,

Wolin claims, in knowledge of the past. Because tacit knowledge "bear[s] a family

resemblance to 'bias,' it is dismissed by social scientists in their search for objectivity.

Moreover, these social scientists see no inherent value in the meditative cultures or stock

of ideas that have build up over time; indeed, they have an "anti-traditionalist bias."[450]

Wolin's critique of methodism in political science is not offered simply as one

example of the general erosion of political education in a technological society, but also

engages in a specific disciplinary turf war. Admittedly, Wolin claims that the tacit

political knowledge devalued by behaviouralists draws on the "diverse resources" of

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[449] Wolin, "Political Theory as a Vocation."

[450] Ibid.

meditative culture and "accrues over time and never by means of a specified program in which particular subjects are chosen in order to produce specific results."[451] However, he undermines the breadth of this characterization of tacit knowledge when he asserts that it is rooted not only "in the past" but also in a specific "tradition of theory." Without much explanation, Wolin slides quickly from discussing tacit knowledge in general to defending a particular conception of political theory as "epic" as well as the "vocation" of those who practice it. Despite the promisingly broad notion of political education at first defended in "Political Theory as a Vocation," the essay ultimately works to defend a particular form of theory as the antidote to methodism and as a legitimate part of the discipline of political science.

"Epic theory" is like other tacit knowledge in its capacity to take a holistic perspective on matters of public concern and thus diagnose a political culture as "systematically deranged."[452] However, when discussing epic theory, Wolin expresses this holism in more grandiose terms, claiming that the theorist is able to engage with the grand "magnitudes" of the social whole. Like anyone engaged in political education, the epic theorist can also question fundamental assumptions and imagine alternatives. However, again, Wolin frames this in more grandiose terms, stating that, in initiating "new cognitive and normative standards," the epic theorist resembles Thomas Kuhn's "extraordinary scientist." Finally, epic theorists offer coherent and structured visions that radically re-envision society: "by an act of thought, the theorist seeks to reassemble the whole political world." Theorists of times gone by "knew that the true drama of

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[451] Ibid.

[452] Ibid.

theorizing involved offering a theory which could not be accommodated within prevailing values and perceptions of the world." Wolin cites Plato as the first epic theorist and claims that Thomas Hobbes re-introduced epic theory into the modern period in a secularized, "scientific" form. Although Hobbes himself crafted an epic, he ushered in a period of disenchantment characterized by liberal individualism and scientific rationalism in which epic theory fell into decline.[453] Thus, whereas tacit knowledge was supposed to draw on the "diverse resources" of traditions and meditative cultures, epic theory appears to be tied to a specific tradition of Western political thought, the fate of which Wolin traces over time.

When earlier tracing this specific intellectual tradition in *Politics and Vision* (1960), Wolin similarly conflates it with political vision in general. He explicitly frames the book as a response to the apparent redundancy of the discipline of political theory in the 1950s:

"In many intellectual circles today there exists a marked hostility towards, and even contempt for, political philosophy in its traditional form. My hope is that this volume, if it does not give pause to those who are eager to jettison what remains of the tradition of political philosophy, may at least succeed in making clear what it is we shall have discarded."[454]

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[453] Sheldon S. Wolin, *Hobbes and Epic Tradition of Political Theory* (Los Angeles, CA: William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, 1970); Sheldon S. Wolin, "Postmodern Politics and the Absence of Myth," *Social Research* 52:2 (1985), pp. 217-239.

[454] Sheldon S. Wolin, *Politics and Vision* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), p. xxiii.

The narrative that he goes on to offer about the modern decline of "the political" does not clearly differentiate between the loss of the specific form of theorizing he would later call "epic" and the loss of political ideas or cultures in general. There seems to be an assumption that the failure of John Locke and others to offer a vision of the political was directly responsible for the supposed descent of American politics into liberalism. The flipside of placing this great responsibility on past theorists is the implication that contemporary theorists have a crucial role to play in political revitalization. Indeed, a skeptical reader might wonder if Wolin's selection of thinkers to constitute "the tradition," and consequently jaundiced view of modernity as devoid of political vision, is not motivated in part by a drive to validate contemporary theorists' occupational choices. At moments in the text he does refer to a broader understanding of political education, as when he claims that theory is "not so much an antiquarian venture as a *form of* political education."[455] He mentions political education again when he alleges, "Modern constitutional theory omits a theory of political education"[456] However, he does not identify other forms that political education might take beyond canonical political theory.

Politics and Vision itself fulfills only the diagnostic aspect of epic political theory. In the later chapters, Wolin attempts to grasp the magnitude of the social whole and diagnose the systematic derangement of modern liberalism and the "Age of Organization." However, unlike the epic theorist, he does not here offer a constructive political theory that "reassembles the whole political world." He only gestures towards a thin notion of 'citizenship.' Indeed, it is not yet clear how such an epic theory could satisfy Wolin's

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[455] Ibid., p. 26, emphasis added.

[456] Ibid., p. 349.

impulses towards an egalitarian democratic politics. None of the canonical epic

theorists were democrats, and already in *Politics and Vision* Wolin recognizes that the

architectonic theories of thinkers such as Plato and Hobbes are deeply "antipolitical" in

the sense that they are hostile to human disagreement. Still, if "Political Theory as a

Vocation" is any measure, Wolin still held in the 1960s that it might be possible to offer a

coherent and structured vision of democratic politics, in the architectonic style of Plato or

Hobbes.

While Wolin's diachronic approach to the history of ideas is compelling and

inspiring for professional theorists, it narrows his understanding of political education

and tacit knowledge to the study a limited range of canonical thinkers.[457] His narrative of

the modern decline of the "the political" in *Politics and Vision* may allow for a neat

diagnosis of mid-century technocratic liberalism. However, as we have seen in Chapter

Two, this diagnosis has significant blind spots regarding, for instance, white and male

supremacist nationalism. Wolin's conflation of political education with political theory

risks devaluing the tacit knowledge and meditative cultures of citizens who may not

primarily be engaged with this particular tradition but who may contribute to a less neat,

yet more comprehensive, diagnosis. In addition to being in this sense anti-egalitarian,

Wolin's understanding of epic theory as tied to the close reading of past texts also

distances political wisdom from the experiential knowledge that he earlier identifies as

crucial to the education of the Berkeley activists.

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[457] Robyn Marasco is right to wonder that maybe "the problem with epic theory was never its ambition or its audacity, but its narrowness." Robyn Marasco, "The Epic as Form," *Contemporary Political Theory* 16:1 (2017), pp. 65-76.

Wolin's relatively uncritical approach to the canon is evident in the silences

of his discussion of women's studies and black studies departments at Berkeley and other

universities in the 1960s. In "Is a New Politics Possible?" (1970), he addresses

controversies surrounding the establishment of black studies departments in particular.

While he does not take a clear stance in favor of or against the establishment of these

departments, he implies that black participation in already established departments would

be preferable. He writes, "It is also too early to determine whether blacks will insist on

segregating their programs and personnel, thereby consolidating independent enclaves

within the universities, or whether they will consent to one or another form of

integration."[458] Of course, if existing departments such as political science insist upon

narrow, canonical understanding of intellectual inquiry, "segregation" may be the only

outlet for other voices and values. Yet Wolin does not identify the perpetuation of a

narrow canon by himself and others as a potential barrier to integration.

In addition to advancing a canonical understanding of 'epic theory,' "Political

Theory as a Vocation" also claims that practitioners of such theory adopt a distinctive

'vocation':

"Here lies the vocation of those who preserve our understanding of past theories, who

sharpen our sense of the subtle, complex interplay between political experience and

thought, and who preserve our memory of the agonizing efforts of intellect to restate the

possibilities and threats posed by political dilemmas of the past."[459]

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[458] Wolin and Schaar, "Is a New Politics Possible?"

[459] Wolin, "Political Theory as a Vocation."

This notion of vocation, with roots in Puritan Christianity, denotes a chosen "calling" that gives meaning to a life. Invoking Max Weber, Wolin intends for this conception to contrast with the constrictive professional roles on offer in a disenchanted bureaucratic society and for which institutions like Berkeley were training their students. Unlike such jobs, a vocation is an existential commitment that a person can embrace wholeheartedly. Without one, Wolin claims, an individual is "powerless." However, most people need to make a living and, give the relatively few academic positions in political theory, cannot embrace political theory as their primary vocation. Moreover, the ability of an individual to choose such a vocation is shaped by any number of inherited factors such as economic status, family responsibilities, and health. In reducing political education to epic theory and then claiming that practitioners of such theory must embrace it as their primary vocation, Wolin introduces a firm divide between academic purveyors of political wisdom and other citizens. He thus inadvertently devalues the tacit knowledge of those whose lives revolve in large part around other experiences. In sum, despite its promisingly broad notion of tacit knowledge, "Political Theory as a Vocation" ultimately advances a contrastingly exclusive conception of political theory.

Archaic Democracy and the Fate of Epic Theory

In the 1980s, Wolin both reaffirms his broad and egalitarian notion of political education and revises his understanding of political theory to be more compatible with it. In the 1981 essay "Higher Education and the Politics of Knowledge" he updates his

general critique of university education. Since the 1960s the prioritization of technical knowledge over humanistic education has continued apace while there has also been a retrenchment of postwar efforts to expand access.[460] In addition, Wolin identifies both an emerging system of "meritocracy" based on standardized testing, and a reduction of tenured positions that will ensure "the university of the future will be essentially an administrative unit rather than a collegial body."[461] Overall he concludes that "higher education is being integrated into political economy" as a crucial part of Reagan's neoliberal agenda.

Again during the 1980s, Wolin periodically points to an expansive and experiential understanding of education and its empowering political purpose. In *The Presence of The Past* (1989) he bemoans the neglect of numerous "interpretive modes of inquiry," which cultivate thoughtfulness about the nature of power. When students are "deprived of this *range* of experience," he argues, they are rendered powerless.[462] He conveys a similarly broad perspective on education in his interview with Bill Moyers:

"The question of what it means to be empowered I think is at the heart of the whole issue of educational reform. But it's being faced only as a job issue, not as a question of what it means for students to be systematically deprived of the kind of knowledge, sensibility, understanding that can come from so-called soft subjects, subjects like literature or later on philosophy or history or some of the softer social sciences. Now, those kinds of

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[460] Wolin, "Higher Education and the Politics of Knowledge."

[461] Wolin, *The Presence of the Past,* p. 49**.**

[462] Ibid*.,* pp. 63-65, emphasis added.

subjects I think teach people not job skills, but they teach people how to interpret

their experience, how to interpret what's happening to them: What's the meaning of this?

What's the meaning of that? And what literature, history, philosophy, politics gives you

an understanding of are relationships of power in ways that aren't handled by more

scientific understandings, ways in which power relates to personal hopes, personal fears,

vulnerabilities and the rest of it. Now, those understandings I think, without them, I think

a person without them is really powerless."[463]

Wolin increasingly finds the architectonic aspect of epic theory to be

incompatible with this broad and egalitarian understanding of political education.

Through readings of Hobbes in particular, he identifies a "common thread of despotism"

in epic political theories from Plato to modern times.[464] Such theories aspire to achieve "a

great and memorable deed through the medium of thought" by re-imagining political life

in a coherent and structured vision. They grant the theorist a god-like status to bestow

knowledge while overcoming the vicissitudes of politics amongst ordinary people.[465]

Hobbes's epic took a new, scientific form, but it too was "a way of absolving men of

complicity and guilt for their common predicaments."[466] In contrast to "Political Theory

as a Vocation," then, Wolin no longer holds out hope for a more egalitarian architectonic

theory.

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[463] Wolin, "Interview with Bill Moyers."

[464] Sheldon S. Wolin, "Hobbes and the Culture of Despotism" in Mary Dietz (ed.) *Thomas Hobbes and Political Theory* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1990.)

[465] Wolin, *Hobbes and the Epic Tradition of Political Theory,* pp. 4, 32.

[466] Ibid, p. 49.

Wolin also attempts during this period to loosen his association of political theory with a circumscribed scholarly tradition and to narrow the gap between fellows of the theoretical vocation and other political commentators. In 1978 he states that theory ought to be "relentlessly and ruthlessly concrete" and praises Hannah Arendt for taking such an approach. [467] He then founds the interdisciplinary journal *democracy* (1980-1984), which offers commentary on contemporary events in relatively accessible styles. He also continues to reach for a broader audience by publishing political commentary in the *New York Review of Books*, *The New York Times*, and *The Nation*. Wolin largely abandons the notion of "the theoretical vocation" and, at the close of the decade, he goes as far as to claim that "political theory… is primarily a civic and secondarily an academic activity."[468] This move away from an architectonic version of epic and from the notion of vocation suggests a less grandiose (what Joan Tronto calls a "chastened") view of the role of the theorist.[469]

However, although Wolin comes to reject architectonic aspirations, he does not abandon his notion of epic theory entirely. Over and above the holistic diagnoses of social ills and fundamental reflection on values that he claims are characteristic of all tacit political knowledge, he also continues to aspire to offer a coherent alternative vision and to center his analysis on a specific tradition. His solution is to unearth an "archaic" tradition of American grassroots democracy. Like Alexis de Tocqueville's mode of

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[467] Sheldon S. Wolin, "Hannah Arendt and the Ordinance of Time," *Social Research* 44:1 (1977), pp. 91-105.

[468] Wolin, *The Presence of the Past,* p.1.

[469] Joan Tronto, "Political Theory: A Vocation for Democrats?" *Contemporary Political Theory* 16:1 (2017), pp. 82-89.

"political impressionism," this archaic theory is "epical in form but resigned to being antiarchitectonic in substance."[470] It attempts both to perceive the social whole and to question fundamental political assumptions, but through an imaginative re-envisioning of the past – a myth – rather than through architectonic constructions. Looking beyond the canon, Wolin also draws on a wider range sources that he claims inform this tradition, including political actors from the antifederalists to the 1960s. His participatory vision of democracy seems relatively compatible with his broad and egalitarian understanding of political education. Indeed, he claims, "their union appears predestined."[471] On this score he finds a further ally in John Dewey, who strongly links democracy with education, claiming that educational settings should allow for the cultivation of democratic skills rather than the reproduction of passive citizens.[472]

Nevertheless, as we have seen in Chapter Three, a theory of democracy based exclusively on an archaic American myth still sits uneasily with Wolin's own broad and egalitarian understanding of political education. This is because any attempt to elevate a single tradition of thought or practice tends to sideline other traditions, which may be better suited to addressing some kinds of power. While a local American tradition originating in the colonial period may effectively counter centralization and corporate capitalism, it may ignore or even perpetuate white and male supremacy. As we know, Wolin comes to acknowledge this, to qualify his emphasis on localism, and to concede

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[470] Sheldon S. Wolin, *Tocqueville Between Two Worlds: The Making of a Political and Theoretical Life* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), p. 181.

[471] Wolin, "Higher Education and the Politics of Knowledge."

[472] Wolin, *Politics and Vision,* pp. 504-508; John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York, NY: Simon & Brown, 2012), p. 5.

that democracy should be understood as "polymorphous."[473] This suggests that epic

theory has become entirely redundant, not only in its architectonic version but also in its

aspiration to offer a coherent alternative vision and its tendency to rely on one central

tradition. How then, might political theory continue to contribute to political education by

offering fundamental reflection on values and holistic diagnosis of social ills, without

recourse to a univocal vision or central tradition?

The Challenge of "Postmodernism" and the Temptation of Despair

Wolin expresses growing frustration regarding the capacity of theory to contribute

to political education when he engages with "postmodern" critiques of theoretical

metanarratives. In responding to the challenge posed by postmodernism, Wolin at times

grasps for the old comforts of a canon, seeks to re-impose a firm boundary between

theory and practice, and even counsels despair or resignation. He first conveys alarm in a

critical essay about Michel Foucault, "On the Theory and Practice of Power" (1988).

Wolin recognizes that Foucault's conception of power relations as pervading all areas of

social life "almost singlehandedly moved the discussion of that must elusive and illusive

concept from its modern or state-centered understanding to a postmodern or decentered

version."[474] However, he worries that this decentered, ubiquitous understanding of power

inhibits radical politics. It does so by rendering everything equally political and thus

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[473] Sheldon S. Wolin "Norm and Form: The Constitutionalizing of Democracy" in Peter
Euben et al. (eds.), *Athenian Political Thought and the Reconstruction of American
Democracy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994), pp. 29-58.

[474] Wolin, "On the Theory and Practice of Power"

thwarting attempts to identify the central power structures that pose the gravest threat to most people. Accordingly, Wolin claims, "[Foucault] was not directly concerned with great tyranny but with smaller ones," such as prisons and hegemonic sexualities.[475]

Moreover, Foucault's insistence that all discourses of knowledge perpetuate power relations means that his "postmodern" politics has no principle or myth of legitimacy, such as "popular sovereignty," that could provide a privileged standpoint for critique. In fact, Foucault considers the totalizing metanarratives of what Wolin calls "classic" political theory to be particularly authoritarian. Wolin worries that this means Foucault cannot even offer the kind of holistic diagnosis of social ills that is characteristics of political education, let alone an alternative vision. He alleges that, without either a focus on the most oppressive late-modern powers, or a privileged theoretical standpoint from which to articulate an emancipatory politics, "the best that [Foucault] could produce was an insurrectionary gesture."[476]

Wolin's concern that a decentered understanding of power relations may divert attention from major forms of state and corporate power is reasonable. If political education is meant to offer fundamental reflection on values and holistic diagnoses of social ills, it must somehow be able to prioritize and relate different threats. However, his essay on Foucault contains some highly misleading criticisms and reveals his reluctance to acknowledge fully the connection between knowledge and power or to accept its

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[475] Ibid.

[476] Ibid.

implications.[477] In a more sympathetic mood, Wolin might have recognized in Foucault's attempts to unearth the "subjugated knowledges" of non-experts something of his own attempt to unearth a grassroots tradition of democracy. Instead, he claims that these efforts to diversify scholarly perspectives only serve to obscure any clear justification for engaging in emancipatory politics. He alleges, "Foucault has come to a dead-end, the consequence of having accepted an unqualified Nietzschean conception of knowledge as generated by power drives that leaves no room for conceptions of theoretic vocation and civic commitment."[478] Here, the new threat of postmodernism has compelled Wolin to regress to the notion of "vocation."

Wolin goes on to recommend not only maintaining a focus on state and corporate power, but also reviving a "classic" form of theory in the mold of Plato or Hegel, which offers a univocal perspective on the political, even if that perspective ultimately "self-destructs."[479] Moreover, he insists that we recognize the "necessary tension between the objectives of theorizing and the tendencies of political action." In Foucault's claim that discourses of knowledge are always bound up with power, "the tensions between theory and practice have disappeared." Yet, Wolin claims, "Theory can only perform that critical function if it retains a separate identity" from practice. Given these attempts to revive an epic conception of theory and re-impose a division between the theoretical vocation and power politics, it is understandable that readers such as Lon Troyer

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[477] One of Wolin's misleading claims is that in Foucault the "emphasis is upon the repressive, dominating quality of power." On the contrary, Foucault stresses that power is productive. Wolin, "On the Theory and Practice of Power"

[478] Ibid.

[479] Ibid.

conclude, "Wolin's objections to Foucault's conception of power largely concern its implications for the theorist's vocation, not deficiencies in the conception itself."[480]

Wolin revisits and broadens his critique of postmodernism a decade later. Over the intervening years, theory ostensibly flourished in both the discipline of political science and in the liberal arts and social sciences more generally. However, he argues that much new theory is postmodern and thus politically impotent. Driven by an impulse to identify power relations everywhere, postmodern theorists develop abundant analyses of various permutations of power without offering a holistic diagnosis that underscores the state or corporate capitalism. In other words, Wolin finds that his worst fears have been realized regarding the potential of a Foucauldian conception of power to divert attention away from what really matters. In *Politics and Vision* (Expanded Edition, 2004), he asserts, "The vocabulary of postmodernism, with its antipathies towards essentialism, centered discourse, foundationalism, and historical narrative, has served to disable its theorists from confronting the basic characteristics of contemporary power-formations."[481] He similarly complains in "What Time is It?"(1997) that, whereas postmodern analysis of power "wants to be local and restricted," we ought to be most concerned with "structures of power--political, economic, and cultural— [that] are national and global." In "Political Theory: From Vocation to Invocation" (2000), he argues that postmodern theory has become "post-political" because, although it can identify numerous oppressions, it cannot identify common crises.

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[480] Lon Troyer, "Political Theory as a Provocation: An Ethos of Political Theory," in Jason Frank and John Tambornino (eds.) *Vocations of Political Theory* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), pp. 212-236.

[481] Wolin, *Politics and Vision,* p. 567.

Wolin argues, furthermore, that postmodern skepticism towards trusted intellectual traditions allows for the continual generation of new intellectual milieus, which are increasingly disconnected from real-world concerns and incomprehensible to most people. He associates the faddism of postmodern theory with the fast pace of late capitalism. Whereas political theory should have a "leisurely pace" rooted in tradition and deliberation, theorists these days succumb to "the temporalities of economy and popular culture," which "are dictated by innovation, change, and replacement through obsolescence."[482] Because postmodernism's fast pace and disregard for tradition allows for the rapid creation of new modes of analysis, Wolin associates it with what he calls "overtheorization" in academia. Although such overtheorization contrasts markedly with what Wolin calls the undertheorization of behaviouralism in the 1960s, he claims it is similarly unable to stand back and reflect on fundamental values.[483] This is because much new work is "theoretic theory": it responds primarily to problems in other texts rather than problems in the world and thrives on minute textual distinctions. Wolin claims that postmodern theorists are especially prone to theoretic theory because they are relieved of the obligation to offer a holistic diagnosis of social ills and focus rather on "smaller" threats. Ironically, given postmodernism's supposed skepticism towards expert knowledge, its tendency towards theoretic theory means that it becomes disconnected from concrete concerns and largely inaccessible to the uninitiated. Wolin thus blames postmodernism for the insularity of political theory and for the fact that the "brainy

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[482] Sheldon S. Wolin, "What Time Is It?" *Theory and Event* 1:1 (1997).

[483] Sheldon S. Wolin, "Political Theory: From Vocation to Invocation" in Jason Frank and John Tambornino (eds.) *Vocations of Political Theory* (Minneapolis, MI: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), p. 3-22.

classes [are] disconnected from the people."[484] He asserts that the fast pace of postmodern critique is the primary reason that theorists in general fail to respond either to major world events such as the collapse of the Eastern bloc or to "class divisions" within academia between tenured professors, adjuncts, and "union-busted teaching assistants."[485]

Wolin's damning account of "theoretic theory" and the political disengagement of the academic Left is compelling. Moreover, theoretical texts by or inspired by key "postmodernists" such as Ernesto Laclau, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, and Gilles Deleuze may be amongst the most specialized and least concrete. However, to blame only postmodernism for the proliferation of "theoretic theory" and the consequent insularity of academia is misleading. The widespread silence of tenured professors on world events and on the unionization of adjuncts and graduate students has not been confined to postmodernists. Plenty of "theoretic theory" has also emerged from followers of analytic theorists such as Rawls, a thinker whom Wolin accuses of ignoring operations of power altogether rather than identifying them everywhere. Moreover, John Gunnell and Jeffrey Isaac both suggest that Wolin's own early work inadvertently played a part in the subsequent insularity of theory, as its insistence on close readings of canonical texts and the notion of vocation "licensed" like-minded theorists to disengage from

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[484] Ibid.

[485] "How is it that subversion flourishes alongside class divisions within the academy – between "regular" appointees and "gypsies" or contract laborers, not to mention union-busted teaching assistants?"

Wolin, "Political Theory: From Vocation to Invocation"; Jeffrey Isaac, "The Strange Silence of Political Theory," *Political Theory* 23:4 (1995): pp. 636-652.

contemporary events.[486] Since Wolin remains fixated on postmodernism, he denies

Isaac's suggestion that the political disengagement of political theorists can be explained

by a general trend of professionalization and an overemphasis on canonical texts.

Due to Wolin's misguided tendency to blame the insularity of theory on fast-

paced postmodernists, he does not initially respond to these developments by striving for

a holistic and engaged form of theory that nevertheless faces up to the co-implication of

knowledge and power. Rather, he again reacts defensively, attempting to defend a purer

form of theory against the postmodern threat. In "What Time Is It?", the only example of

theory that he claims has an appropriately "leisurely pace" is the study of canonical

texts.[487] "Vocation to Invocation" acknowledges that politics is complex and involves

considerations of race, gender, but also claims, "Domination and its variants (oppression,

subjugation, rape, patriarchy, etc.)" have been overtheorized.[488] Although Wolin asserts

that he has abandoned his earlier notion of "vocation," he states that his newfound

posture of "invocation" is even more distant from action or practice.[489] In what does such

invocation consist? Although Wolin first draws on Theodor Adorno to suggest that

theorists ought to recover from history "the defeated, the indigestible, the unassimilated,

the 'cross-grained,'" he concludes that it "may be too late in the day" for "political theory

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[486] Isaac, "The Strange Silence of Political Theory"; John G. Gunnell "Dislocated Rhetoric: The Anomaly of Political Theory," *The Journal of Politics* 68:4 (2006), pp. 771-782.

[487] The most striking demonstration of Wolin's ongoing commitment to close readings of canonical thinkers is his 2001 publication of the lengthy *Tocqueville Between Two Worlds*.

[488] Wolin, "Political Theory: From Vocation to Invocation."

[489] Ibid.

to come to the aid of democracy."[490] All that is left for theorists to do is grieve for a

more holistic form of theory that was possible in the 1960s before the postmodern

discrediting of metanarratives. It is unclear how such a posture could helpfully respond to

world events or to class distinctions within the university.

Reconnecting Political Theory and Political Education

Contrastingly, in Wolin's final interviews, he suggests that those who conduct

theory properly still have a political role to play. In his 2014 interview with Chris Hedges

he states that the current political climate "calls for some kind of group, or class, you

could even call them, who would undertake the kind of continuous political work of

educating, criticizing, trying to bring pressure to bear, and working towards a revamping

of political institutions."[491] In his 2015 interview with me he again argues for the ongoing

importance of theorists in an age of extreme anti-intellectualism:

"We have deprived our politics of a really important resource: that is, the resource of

those who can make some contribution by the mere fact that they have tried to take on

politics from a, I don't want to say non-partisan, but from a point of view that tries to

look at the issues with the interests of the whole in mind."[492]

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[490] Ibid.

[491] Sheldon S. Wolin, "Can Capitalism and Democracy Coexist? Interview with Chris Hedges," *TheRealNews.com,* October 23, 2014,

[492] Wolin, *Interview with Lucy Cane* 3/25/2015.

Here he considers it possible that theory might maintain "a kind of dual personality," as both a form of "serious scholarly inquiry – trying to measure up to the rigorous standards of inquiry" and an "attempt to play some kind of relevant role in the contemporary political landscape."[493]

Developing such a holistic, engaged form of theory depends, I submit, not on mourning or re-asserting a division between theory and practice, but on accepting the co-implication of knowledge and power and recognizing that a reliance on one untainted intellectual tradition was never necessary to offer holistic diagnosis of social ills. Wolin attempts to develop such an analysis in his final major work, *Democracy Incorporated* (2008.) This book conceptualizes unprecedented postmodern formations of state and corporate power without relying excessively on canonical theory. Nor does it draw on a central "archaic tradition" for an alternative vision of democracy, but rather recognizes the polymorphous nature of democracy and the need for localism, momentary eruptions, and institutions. In this work, Wolin writes powerfully and accessibly about complex political realities in ways that break down the barriers between civic and academic discourse.[494] In this sense, although *Democracy Incorporated* advances a bleak diagnosis of contemporary politics, it could be considered hopeful in demonstrating the ongoing ability of political theorists to contribute to a broad and egalitarian political education.

That said, while Wolin does more in *Democracy Incorporated* than elsewhere to explore the culturally conservative rhetoric of the American right, I have argued in Chapter Two that his conception of totalitarianism as "inverted" continues his lifelong

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[493] Ibid.

[494] Joan Tronto also suggests that Wolin's work might lead us back to a broad notion of political education. Tronto, "Political Theory: A Vocation for Democrats?"

tendency to downplay white and male supremacist nationalism. Moreover, his

account of the emergence of postmodern imperialism neglects imperialist aspects of

American history. These continued blind spots are explained by the fact that Wolin never

really engages with critics of US imperialism or with theorists who explore the

intersections of racial and gendered power with state and corporate structures. Indeed,

although he expands his archive somewhat during the 1980s, the only theorists since

WWII that he engages with in a sustained way are Hannah Arendt, John Rawls, and

Foucault. He does not read or comment on the other contemporary democratic theorists

that I have examined in this dissertation, let alone critical race or feminist theorists. While

Foucault shows that no single intellectual tradition should be considered authoritative, a

diagnosis that is holistic rather than simplistic would draw on multiple intellectual

traditions or "meditative cultures" in order to reach broader conclusions. Just as Wolin

does not recognize the importance of preserving multiple local traditions of democracy

(Chapter Three), he tends to understate the value of bringing multiple intellectual

traditions into conversation.

Chandra Mohanty and Edward Said are helpful in further illuminating the value of

such intellectual exchange. For Mohanty, the task of "decolonize[ing] our disciplinary

and pedagogical practices" does not mean either rejecting dominant traditions altogether

or embracing a liberal multiculturalism that merely chooses representatives of minority

and feminist discourses to place uncritically alongside these dominant traditions.[495]

Rather, she argues, it means cultivating "cultures of dissent" that encourage skepticism

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[495] Chandra Mohanty,"On Race and Voice: Challenges for Liberal Education in the 1990s" *Cultural Critique* 14 (Winter 1989-1990), pp. 179-208; See also: Cornel West, "Minority Discourse," *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 1:1 (1987), pp. 193-201.

towards any intellectual pedigree and allow for critical engagements between
different traditions that yield multidimensional perspectives on power. Said makes a
complementary argument in "Professionals and Amateurs," offering "amateurism" as the
antidote to the political corrosive effects of intellectual specialization, expertise and
authority. The intellectual amateur is not confined to a particular tradition but rather is
characterized by "unquenchable interest in the larger picture, in making connections
across lines and barriers, in refusing to be tied down to a speciality, in caring for ideas
and values despite the restrictions of a profession."[496]

When the focus is no longer on shoring up of a particular ideal of theory against
postmodern threats, important questions regarding pedagogy and the political economy of
education can again come to the fore. Academics who pose as epic theorists or as
authoritative bearers of a circumscribed tradition tend to reinforce hierarchies between
faculty, students, and other citizens.[497] Wolin at times succumbs to this temptation, as
when he claims that theorists constitute an elite, "or class, you could even call them,"
who educate the masses about power. Conversely, in turning away from an epic
conception of theory in *Democracy Incorporated* he narrows the divide between the
knowledge of academic experts and the tacit, often experiential, knowledge of others.
Mohanty and Said's eclectic approach to the scholarly archive would further narrow this
divide. Such openness to intellectual sources is more congruent with Wolin's hope in the
1960s that faculty and students at Berkeley might work collaboratively. His more
egalitarian understanding of pedagogical relations could be enriched further by a deeper

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[496] Edward Said, "Professionals and Amateurs," *The Independent* (February 13, 2005.)

[497] Disgruntled former student Hal Sarf emphasizes Wolin's status as a "master
academic." Hal Sarf, *Masters and Disciples* (Berkeley, CA: Regent Press, 2002.)

engagement with scholars of critical pedagogy such as Paulo Friere, bell hooks, and

Henry Giroux.[498] Certainly, education may always involve a degree of authority, and to

deny this is naïve or deceptive.[499] Nevertheless, Giroux, for example, develops a notion

of "emancipatory authority," which insists on engagement with social movements and

responsiveness to the experiences of students.[500] A deeper critique of academic

hierarchies also cannot ignore the enormous differentials of power amongst teaching staff

that Wolin briefly points to in his statement regarding adjunct professors and teaching

assistants. Given that adjuncts have experiential knowledge of neoliberal precarity, and in

many cases live in poverty, they might reasonably be considered "organic intellectuals."

Finally, a fuller consideration of the prospects for political education in the United

States would critically assess the availability of empowering educational experiences

outside of four-year universities. This includes formal institutions such as community

colleges and schools, but also less conventional settings such as prisons and community-

based programs. Wolin's concern about standardized testing and the devaluing of

humanistic subjects, for example, is even more widely applicable to community colleges

and schools. While he never discusses primary and secondary schools, these are the

formal educational institutions that shape the lives of most Americans. Yet many schools

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[498] Paulo Friere, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York, NY: Bloomsbury, 2000); bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1994.)

[499] It is not necessary to go as far as Jacques Rancière, who suggests in his study of Joseph Jacotot that students can instruct themselves and teachers need not have knowledge in their subject matter. Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991.)

[500] Henry Giroux, *Schooling and the Struggle for Public Life* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2005.)

face severe problems of underfunding, ongoing segregation, and counterproductive standardized testing. For children in poverty, especially poor black youth, schools have also become sites of criminalization.[501]

Throughout his work, Wolin's efforts to defend the vocation of political theory tend to undermine his commitment to a broad and egalitarian notion of political education as the starting point for democratization. In his "archaic" period, and then more fully in *Democracy Incorporated*, he moves away from this epic conception of theory. He ceases bemoaning the loss of theoretical possibility and instead develops a holistic diagnosis of social ills that does not rely on a single authoritative tradition. Drawing also on Mohanty and Said, we might conclude that the appropriate response to "theoretic theory" in the academy is not to return to an older, purer notion of theory, but rather to cultivate an eclectic, open-minded ethos that brings numerous traditions into conversation in order to develop well-rounded diagnoses of contemporary politics. Doing theory in a democratic mode further implies both an actively critical stance towards the hierarchies of the university and attention to other educational contexts. While the university offers some people precious time to reflect and learn, it has deep structural problems and ought not to be viewed in isolation from the broader educational landscape. In *Undercommons*, Fred Moten develops the idea of "study" as opposed to "critique," in order to convey a permanently critical approach to education that neither seeks to restore an older ideal of

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[501] See, e.g., Dana Goldstein, *Teacher Wars: A History of America's Most Embattled Profession* (New York, NY: Anchor Books, 2014); Monique Morris, *Pushout: The Criminalization of Black Girls in Schools* (New York, NY: The New Press, 2015); Jay Gillen, *Educating for Insurgency: The Role of Young People in Schools of Poverty* (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2014.)

the university nor becomes complicit in its current wrongs. The critical educators and

learners of "the undercommons" are:

"wary of critique, weary of it, and at the same time dedicated to the collectivity of its

future, the collectivity that may come to be its future. The under- commons in some ways

tries to escape from critique and its degradation as university-consciousness and self-

consciousness about university-consciousness, retreating, as Adrian Piper says, into the

external world."[502]

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[502] Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, *Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (New York, NY: Minor Compositions, 2013), p. 38.

6. Conclusion

Wolin's self-professed tendency to focus on what has been lost yields important insights about democracy, especially democracy in the contemporary context of the United States. He not only echoes other contemporary democratic theorists in recognizing a dangerous political vacuum in liberalism but also mourns the loss of local cultures, traditions, and practices amidst modern and postmodern power. Although Wolin was not particularly attentive to the threat of white and male supremacist nationalism in the twenty-first century, his appreciation of the dangers of rootlessness and his emphasis on preserving culture become particularly pertinent in an era of neoliberal precarity. His work may even help to explain why many people feel alienated by the Democratic Party's narratives of progress and have chosen instead to side with a right wing narrative of loss, even against their own material interests.

However, Wolin's oeuvre also reveals his ongoing struggles to undo the blind spots of his single-minded focus on loss. His sweeping account of the loss of "the political" in modernity obscures modern nationalist visions of the political and downplays the importance of modern institutions and constitutional guarantees. His subsequent attempt to recover a lost tradition of American democracy similarly fails to appreciate how deeply such traditions are entwined with racial and gendered power. This archaic vision implicitly devalues struggles to transgress established cultural hierarchies and continues to neglect state-centric aspects of democracy. Finally, Wolin's tendency to bemoan the loss of political theory as a discipline leads him recurrently to defend an epic

notion of theory that conflicts with his own broader and more egalitarian understanding of political education.

Like most people, Wolin's best tendencies are closely connected to, or perhaps indistinguishable from, his worst. The shifts in his thinking over sixty years are driven by his attempts to confront the negative implications of his focus on loss while holding onto its distinctive insights. His willingness to interrogate and adapt his ideas in this way is admirable. Although Wolin never develops a sufficiently critical and multifaceted understanding of tradition, I have nevertheless argued that he moves towards a polymorphous understanding of democracy that combines traditional with transgressive and state-centric elements. Moreover, he ultimately moves away from mourning discredited notions of epic theory and instead offers in his final work a holistic and politically engaged analysis that does not elevate any tradition of thought as authoritative.

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Appendix: Conversation with Sheldon Wolin 3/25/2015

Lucy Cane: Firstly, I want to ask you to comment on questions of racial injustice. Do you think confronting racial injustices is part of the task of forging democratic commonality today? What might that look like, and how is remembrance part of that work?

Sheldon Wolin: Well I certainly think its fundamental to any kind of notion of democratic inclusion… [Inaudible]. The problems here in the United States are partly historical because there is a long tradition of oppression both in the form of slavery and of bad working conditions for people of lower classes. So that the problem for democratic theory dealing with this problem has been always present but not always fully recognized. Part of the problem I think has been the emphasis almost exclusively on gaining access to suffrage, the vote, and gaining access to general discussions in society, but not really making a kind of conscious effort to see where democracy falls short in terms of who is included in the democratic conversation. So that it has depended almost entirely on the ability of various groups not included to take matters into their own hands and to try to gain recognition and gain access to the kind of commonality of democracy. And that in a certain sense is not bad in the sense that it has caused groups that have been excluded to acquire of necessity a political consciousness that they might not otherwise have acquired, but rather might have remained more or less passive. So that's pretty much what I've been dealing with.

Cane: Thankyou, that's very helpful. Just as a follow up on that question of racial injustice: you appeal to the archaic in order to revitalize democracy. I'm wondering how you think an awareness of racial injustice should guide the way we look to the past for democratic inspiration, looking at archaic practices.

Wolin: You mean what the value of looking backwards is?

Cane: Right.

Wolin: Well I think it's a problem that has always historically afflicted almost every society. That is, the sort of tendency to remain within a certain worldview that they acquire by simple membership in a society or simply living there. So that the acquisition of political consciousness has never, in societies which have been more or less democratic, that require the acquisition of political consciousness, has never seemed to challenge because it seems obvious to most people that we're already a democracy and if people don't avail themselves of the possibility of democratic participation and starting democratic movements that's their problem and not the problem of society. So there's been almost a kind of laissez faire attitude towards democracy and towards getting citizen participation. So what has generally happened is that outside groups, which have been more or less outside whether for reasons of color or for reasons of class or some other basis of exclusion, it's been necessary for them to in effect make their own way into democracy and in so doing to I think contribute to a widening, usually, of democratic consciousness. Certainly the history of African Americans is one example, that I think the

impact of their fight for racial justice and for inclusion has generally sparked a wider

debate even than that, in that it has made democrats (small d) recognize that although you

have a democracy that doesn't mean that it necessarily functions inclusively or that it

deals fairly with problems of economic and social injustice. So that there has been a kind

of need for a continual sort of reawakening of democracy because it gets like almost any

system we're used to, we get accustomed to it and we tend to let our critical faculties

languish in effect, and a certain passivity creeps in. I think its most noticeable in the low

rates of actual democratic participation in elections – it's really quite low, we're rarely

getting over 50% of eligible voters, and it is that sort of complacency which has

contributed to the low voter turnout with the result that political parties tend to become

more or less autonomous in the sense that they see public opinion not as something to be

consulted or listened to but as something to be shaped, and that in a very real way tends

to be the definition of a large part of what political parties are up to. They see a kind of

passive consciousness which has to be reawakened at election time and then be allowed

to slumber in between election times, so that unless there is a viable lively local politics

that keeps political participation alive and meaningful, I think voters tend to lapse into

apathy because it doesn't seem important to them and they are quite preoccupied of

course with making a living in a complex economy that gets more complex as time goes

on.

Cane: Ok, that's really helpful, thanks. I'll move to my second question now on your

recent conceptions of democracy and especially "fugitive" democracy. So where do you

see hope for the emergence of a sustained democratic culture and, possibly, democratic

counter-institutions? Being able to answer this question seems to be an important

part of responding to the criticism that "fugitive democracy" is a merely ephemeral and

narrowly local phenomenon. If fugitive democracy is merely ephemeral or narrowly local,

it could be judged as practically speaking not much better than the insurrectionary

gestures that you associate with thinkers such as Michel Foucault.

Wolin: Yeah, there is certainly something to be said for that position and I think that the

challenge that it raises is a legitimate one that, in short, citizens do not avail themselves

of the opportunities that democracy potentially offers. I think we come back to a basic

fact that's existed for as long as democracy has been a factor in the world. And that is, as

I may have said before, you're trying to base a political system on those who have to

spend a large part of their waking hours working in order to survive and that those

conditions have been very onerous indeed and particularly in past centuries but even

today. People are, in effect, most people, find themselves too fatigued to worry about

democracy and find that when they get leisure time they have much better ways to spend

it so that democracy's battle, as I've tried to suggest, is uphill all the time given this

situation. Now one possible way of dealing with it is of course to fight for the reduction

of working hours and fight for the expansion of leisure time and those sort of goals it

seems to me are always present and have to be fought for because the powers of

corporate peoples are so great that if they aren't contested they will set the terms not only

for economic opportunity but also they will set the terms for political possibilities.

Cane: Great, can I ask you as a follow-up: how did you end up settling on the metaphor of "fugitive" democracy? Did you consider other terms or images for capturing the character of democratic politics today? How did you decide on "fugitive"?

Wolin: I decided on it for a number of reasons. One is I didn't want to appear arguing for something impossible: that is, where people live and breathe and eat democracy 24 hours a day. I think I was trying to come to terms with the economic situation of most people, where they have to work hard to sustain themselves and that the time available for political involvement is very little, and that the kind of tension between economic demands and political opportunities is really so profound in our society that the result has been a democracy that very often doesn't meet the challenges – whether it is the challenge of educational reform or the challenges of economic injustice – it doesn't meet those as frontally as it should because people are drained of most of their energy and they just want some leisure time to pursue things, their own interests, and let it go at that.

Cane: So you see your choice of the term "fugitive democracy" more as being realistic about the amount of time people have to spend on politics, than as the claim that democratic resistance can't be institutionalized or can't be sustained?

Wolin: Well, I think the two go together, as I've tried to suggest. The lack of involvement means that when people do get involved they find themselves facing a system which doesn't in actuality encourage them but they find themselves facing a formidable structure of corporate power and wealth and class differences that make it, as I say, a

formidable challenge to try to make some kind of political change in the world. So it requires a considerable amount of determination and a kind of lengthy record of injustice to spur people to take the kind of steps that can be taken democratically to remedy their own situation. You know, it's the dog chasing its tail again.

Cane: Okay, thankyou. So I've asked you two questions now and I have two more questions. Is it going okay, can I continue to my third question?

Wolin: Yup, sure, that's fine.

Cane: Okay great. So thirdly, I want to ask you about the future of political theory. You have suggested that it may be "too late in the day" for theory to come to the aid of democracy. Yet you also said in your recent interview with Chris Hedges that a problem with the Occupy Wall Street Movement was not, as most people thought, that it was insufficiently organized, but rather that it was insufficiently theorized. What did you mean by this? And what would it mean for theory to serve democracy today?

Wolin: Well, what I meant by it in the circumstance of the Wall Street thing was that because they were unable to really formulate (I don't want to use that word in a pretentious way), but unable to fashion a position that was more comprehensible than the simple facts of their own particular situation against which they were rebelling. That is, the quest for a more universal meaning to what they were doing, and hence helping to spread political conscious, was what I thought was lacking and as a result the Wall Street

event really became more of a spectacle than anything else. It should have become a

profound democratic experience, one which could have ramifications elsewhere in the

society because the conditions against which they were protesting were not unique to

New York City.

Cane: So do you think that there is a role for professional political theorists in

formulating the kind of general ideas that…

Wolin: Yes, sorry, I should have referred to that. Well, I think the challenges there, I'm

not so sure the response is adequate because of the kind of pressures that are playing

upon the universities these days that make it very difficult for political scientists and

political theorists to exert the kind of influence that they might if things were somewhat

different. I mean by that that in the present university you have today a fragmentation that

is so profound that the universities (many of them) have sort of lost any kind of coherent

notion of who they, what they should be doing, and what kind of generation they want to

encourage. I think that the plight of the universities is connected to the

professionalization of the disciplines within the university so that political science for

example is so much now geared towards playing some kind of role as auxiliary to public

opinion inquiries, to political party strategies, that it's kind of lost it seems to me its civic

orientation. Its basic orientation should not be advising the powers that be but trying to

encourage citizen response and citizen involvement. But the temptation is for political

theory and political science to become auxiliaries in the way that for example the field of

public opinion research has become an auxiliary to both business and government and not

really much of a critical instrument for looking at society on a more general and

detached and democratic point of view.

Cane: So, in the case of a movement like Occupy Wall Street that is lacking formulation

or theorization of its fundamental beliefs – do you see that role as falling to some activists

in the movement rather than political theorists trained in the canon of political theory?

Wolin: Yeah, well I guess I'm a little suspicious of the dichotomy. I think political

theorists who become so tradition-bound that they lose relevance with the contemporary

world are pursuing a conception of political theory that really belonged to the late 19th

Century and never disappeared – it was the notion that political theory should strive for a

form of objectivity modelled upon what the natural sciences had achieved. And that the

result was the failure to consider the possibility that political theory was unique, and that

it had a kind of dual personality both of being a serious scholarly inquiry – trying to

measure up to the rigorous standards of inquiry – but also by the nature of its inquiry it

should attempt to play some kind of relevant role in the contemporary political landscape

where partisanship tends to define what politics is and that its terribly difficult to find a

detached voice that can see the problems from a less prejudiced, less partisan point of

view.

Cane: Okay, great, my final question actually follows on from what we have already been

discussing in terms of educational institutions. So, I'll move onto that final question.

Education has always been a big part of your understanding of how to affect change. But

it seems that what is happening at universities and schools today is so bleak, and as you've been discussing just now, it's difficult for universities to articulate a coherent mission. Do you think that these institutions are hopelessly part of the structures of "inverted totalitarianism"? Where do you think real, democratic education can go today?

Wolin: Well, I don't think its hopelessly involved with the contemporary structures of power. I do think that even when it's conducted by someone with a conservative bent, say, it always has had a critical edge. I mean, you take thinkers like Burke, for example, they're not only espousing a conservative point of view, it's also a critical inquiry into what he regarded as problems of contemporary society following the French revolution. In other words, it was clued in to the contemporary world, not a detached ivory tower kind of pursuit. And I think the same is true today, where what makes the problem difficult is that we've come to establish a kind of politics, especially in the United States, that is so self-consciously shy about being dubbed theoretical or having a theoretical element or being intellectual that we have deprived our politics of a really important resource: that is, the resource of those who can make some contribution by the mere fact that they have tried to take on politics from a, I don't want to say non-partisan, but from a point of view that tries to look at the issues with the interests of the whole in mind. So that the divorce between the two has really been kind of tragic, and the result has been that we really rely on institutions like think tanks to supply the kind of intellectual drive that we think is necessary but which we do not want to see as too critical or too radical.

Cane: So, just to follow up on that… You consider contemporary universities not only as perhaps misguided in some of their goals but also as elitist institutions, institutions that are accessible to a much greater extent to the well off, and increasingly so. I wonder whether you see any important possibilities for education outside of the major institutions?

Wolin: Well, I think it's a very difficult problem that they face – the public institutions. I think it's difficult, of course to a large extent it's a practical problem: that is, the problem of financing government in an era when no politician wants to talk about taxes. It raises a genuine problem because it means that universities and colleges have to look to other resources, and that usually means [inaudible] corporations. So that the situation kind of plays upon itself. And it is going to be very difficult to rekindle the kind of idealism in which state governments regarded as one of their primary functions and mission to spread higher education to classes that had hitherto not had access to it. But I think that vision as gone, not only because states don't have much financial leeway to do it, but also because as I said I think we've lost confidence in the ability of educational institutions to effect a kind of change or effect a kind of improvement that would justify putting the kind of resources that are needed for that kind mission. So I think it's a kind of vicious circle – where one feeds upon the other. But at this point I think it's going to be a struggle for public institutions just to hold their own given the economic circumstances that society faces and the uncertainty of what future economic circumstances are going to be like. I think that's one of the most difficult questions of all. Because if public institutions are so dependent on states which tax private enterprise, and if private enterprise is not assuming

forms which are very resistant to being reached by the old fashioned taxation measures, I think that there is a real problem in the making. So, it's going to be hard. But you know, the history of education is really a history in which there have been repeated instances where there have been serious setbacks and there has been almost a need to start all over again because for one reason or another, either for reasons of economy or for reasons of widespread recognition that the old colleges and universities were simply based on an antiquated view of the world and of what the world needed. So I think it's always been a problem for educational institutions to constantly refine, rediscover their mission amidst a society that's constantly changing.

Cane: Ok well, that's really helpful. That's the end of my questions and I don't want to keep you on too long. But do you have any questions for me or anything else you'd like to add?

Wolin: Not particularly I think I've covered the kind of ground I could in terms of the context we're talking about. Now I certainly feel grateful for the opportunity and also the freedom to express my views at some length and I certainly want to thank you for it.

Cane: Well, I feel also grateful for the opportunity to write the dissertation and spend time with your texts. So it's really been a treat to also be able to ask you some of these things that I was wondering about.

Wolin: Thankyou very much.

Cane: Let me just ask you quickly if I may quote what you've said in our conversation or whether you'd prefer that I just take it as background?

Wolin: Oh I think I'll rely on your judgment. You do what you want with it. I certainly have sufficient confidence that you will do okay.

Cane: Alright, well thankyou very much again for speaking with me, it's been great to speak with you, and I hope you have a great day.

Wolin: Thankyou very much, I enjoyed it.