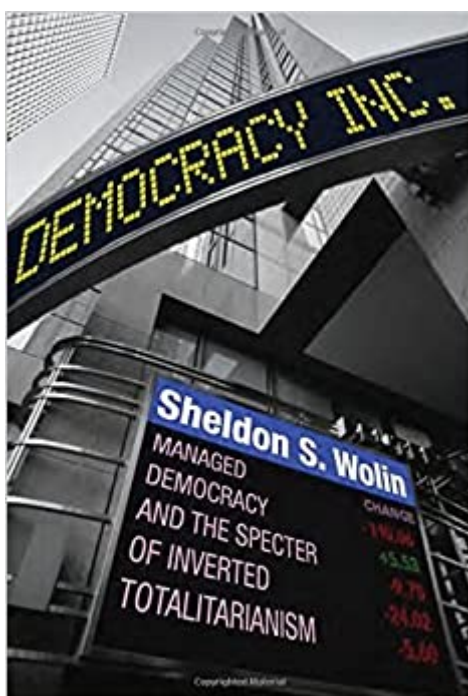


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# Democracy Incorporated: Managed Democracy And The Specter Of Inverted Totalitarianism



## Synopsis

Democracy is struggling in America--by now this statement is almost cliché. But what if the country is no longer a democracy at all? In *Democracy Incorporated*, Sheldon Wolin considers the unthinkable: has America unwittingly morphed into a new and strange kind of political hybrid, one where economic and state powers are conjoined and virtually unbridled? Can the nation check its descent into what the author terms "inverted totalitarianism"? Wolin portrays a country where citizens are politically uninterested and submissive--and where elites are eager to keep them that way. At best the nation has become a "managed democracy" where the public is shepherded, not sovereign. At worst it is a place where corporate power no longer answers to state controls. Wolin makes clear that today's America is in no way morally or politically comparable to totalitarian states like Nazi Germany, yet he warns that unchecked economic power risks verging on total power and has its own unnerving pathologies. Wolin examines the myths and mythmaking that justify today's politics, the quest for an ever-expanding economy, and the perverse attractions of an endless war on terror. He argues passionately that democracy's best hope lies in citizens themselves learning anew to exercise power at the local level. *Democracy Incorporated* is one of the most worrying diagnoses of America's political ills to emerge in decades. It is sure to be a lightning rod for political debate for years to come. In a new preface, Wolin describes how the Obama administration, despite promises of change, has left the underlying dynamics of managed democracy intact.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Winner of the 2008 Lannan Notable Book Award, Lannan Foundation "[A] comprehensive diagnosis of our failings as a democratic polity by one of our most seasoned and respected political philosophers. . . . Democracy Incorporated is a devastating critique of the contemporary government of the United States--including what has happened to it in recent years and what must be done if it is not to disappear into history along with its classic totalitarian predecessors."--Chalmers Johnson, Truthdig "[Democracy Incorporated provides] a rare, chilling analysis of intellectual critics of democracy. If democracy means more than occasional elections and protection of those rights that are compatible with economic and political elites' interests, Wolin's analysis of our democratic predicament is shocking, solid, and fundamentally correct."--C. P. Waligorski, Choice "Sheldon Wolin has produced an ambitious and broad-ranging book that examines the current state of democracy in America. . . . Wolin argues that the unquestioned faith in the virtues of free market capitalism has dramatically narrowed the range of policy options that are on the table when debate turns to resolving the US's ills. . . . [T]his is a trenchant and powerful volume."--Alex Waddan, International Affairs "Of the many books I've read or skimmed in the past seven years that attempted to get inside the social and political debacles of the present, none has had the chilling clarity and historical discernment of Sheldon S. Wolin's Democracy Incorporated. Building on his fifty years as a political theorist and proponent of radical democracy, Wolin here extends his concern with the extinguishing of the political and its replacement by fraudulent simulations of democratic process."--Jonathan Crary, Artforum "[W]e need to understand the deep roots of our present troubles ourselves and Wolin's book is an excellent beginning."--Toby Grace, Out in Jersey "Democracy Incorporated acts as an antidote to unconstrained corporate power and an elitist obsession and should be widely read by all those who cherish democracy and civil liberty."--Shih-Yu Chou, Political Studies Review "[Wolin] provides a rich narrative of the struggle of elites and the demos from ancient Greece through the writing of the U.S. Constitution and into the present, and the corporate-managed politics that has emerged will survive no matter which party holds Congress or the presidency."--Coleman Fannin, Journal of Church and State "Despite being written shortly before both the financial crisis and the Obama victory, the main lineaments of his analysis are still alarmingly cogent."--Tom Angier, Marx & Philosophy Review of Books "To find our way back to normalcy in a time of crisis and emergency we must ask ourselves, 'how did we get here?' Wolin's wisdom is a helpful guide for that journey."--Salon

"With his fundamental grasp of political theory and restless spirit to get at the essence of what threatens modern democracy, Wolin demonstrates that the threats to our democratic traditions and

institutions are not always from outside, but may come from within. It is a book that policymakers and scholars of contemporary society should read and reflect upon."--Rakesh Khurana, Harvard Business School, author of *From Higher Aims to Hired Hands*"As we've come to expect from Sheldon Wolin, a tightly argued and deeply revealing book about the dangers of unconstrained capitalism for our democracy."--Robert B. Reich, University of California, Berkeley"For half a century, Sheldon Wolin has been one of the most distinguished and influential political theorists in the United States and a perceptive observer of the American political scene. In his magisterial latest book, Wolin shows himself at the height of his powers as he presents a highly original, sober, and persuasive account of a number of tendencies in contemporary American society that constitute a significant danger for the future of constitutional democracy. If totalitarianism establishes itself in the United States, it will be in the 'inverted' form Wolin analyzes in this important book."--Raymond Geuss, University of Cambridge"Wolin's writing has a resonance that binds the canon of political philosophy to unfolding events and present circumstances. In *Democracy Incorporated*, he contends that the institutions and practices that Americans regarded as their defense against totalitarianism--and other forms of authoritarian domination--have failed them. There is nothing like this book. It is a major, potentially revolutionary contribution to political thought."--Anne Norton, author of *Leo Strauss and the Politics of American Empire*"Powerful and persuasive. *Democracy Incorporated* does exactly what great political theory should do: it provides a theoretical framework that allows the reader to see the political world anew. It left this reader with an almost nightmarish vision of American politics today, a nightmare all the more terrifying for being so compelling, so vivid, and so real."--Marc Stears, author of *Progressives, Pluralists, and the Problems of the State*

Sheldon S. Wolin, a renown professor of Political Science at both Princeton and Berkeley universities, a scholar who can count among his students, the renown public philosopher, Professor Cornel West, has, for most of his academic career, studied and written extensively and well about the philosophy and mechanisms of political systems, especially democracies and totalitarian forms of governments. Having tracked the anti-democratic tendencies that have been in the American political DNA since its inception, Wolin marks three fundamental inflection points that have led to a turn for the worse, and to the present crisis in our democracy: FDR's New Deal, the Cold War, and the attack that occurred on 9/11/01. As a result of these, the author concludes that the conditions have been set for U.S. democracy to quietly morph into a carefully managed top-down totalitarian state. He attributes this change to the informal coalescence of the shared interests of private centers of influence, centers whose tentacles have slowly and quietly increased their control over

the government through corporate power and money. This control, which amounts to a Conservative/Libertarian revolution, instead of making us freer, like a boa constrictor's grip, is now choking the life out of American democracy. Wolin's reading of history is deep and informative. He recalls the early discussions about how our democracy was to be structured. Those opting for a "true Athenian style democracy" were always in the minority. Most, including the architect of the US Constitution itself, James Madison, wanted only a limited role for "we the people." An unholy compromise was eventually struck resulting in a "Democratic Republic" instead. But every since that deal, the tensions between the ruling elite and "we the people" has remained undiminished, unstable and always threatening to again break out into open conflict. Wolin's views on how and why these changes have occurred, are of course not unique, or in any way a new set of observations. But his analysis is careful, detailed and important. In his farewell address in 1959, for instance, General Eisenhower gave us fair warning that such collusion was on the horizon, telling us to be vigilant and that it would be led by the (then newly emerging) military-industrial complex. Herbert Marcuse in his 1964 book "One-Dimensional Man," also warned that free elections were no panacea, alone they would not "change the master-slave relationship," and that "liberty [itself] can be made into a powerful instrument of domination." Thus, mistrust of handing power over to "we the people" has a long contested history, and has remained a source of angst for the "powers that be" in America throughout American history. Here, in what can only be called an academic tour de force, a grand critique worthy of the best intellectuals in the American academy, Professor Wolin tells us that the US has finally become a state that provides only the illusion of democracy; that we have become a nation ruled by greedy, selfish, even suicidal elites claiming to uphold democracy, when in fact they only give it lip service, as they assist in "hollowing it out" of all real substance, and no less than for their own private benefit. Arguably, what remains at the end of this "hollowing out process" is an empty shell of democracy, filled with Balkanized competing interests warring against each other over mostly non-substantive emotional table scraps, an anemic and compromised media, TV reality shows, and the graffiti from the pageantry of the four-year election cycle. Elections have become an empty "stand-in" for real democratic participation, and for what amounts to a corporate takeover of American politics: what Wolin describes as an unholy "merger between capitalism and democracy." He gives this "hollowing out" process a number of names: "corporate totalitarianism," "managed democracy," "democracy without citizens," "consumer-based sovereignty," but settles on "inverted totalitarianism." But, no matter which label he uses, at the end of the day, corporate and oligarchic interests, not only trump the interests of "we the people," but effectively replaces them as the nation's only sovereign. Wolin's "inverted totalitarianism" differs from

the more familiar forms of totalitarianism in that instead of encouraging activism and unanimity, as say Nazism, Fascism and Communism did, it encourages division and passivity. In effect, it takes the "political" out of American politics, depoliticizing the citizenry and replacing it with the trappings of a feeble, almost exhausted democracy. While it may appear that the activity in the American political arena is still full of vitality, anyone who takes a closer look, will readily see that this is a mirage, a parlor trick, an illusion brought about by "back-filling" the political stage with the "sound track," lights, and motion pictures of what "stands-in" as political activity. This empty pageantry of mirrors and flashing bulbs, is little more than political sleight of hand. The truth of the matter is that the drama of American politics has been reduced to a puppet show: Kabuki theater, in which the rich, and the corporations pull the strings, while our morally challenged politicians, like the ventriloquists they are, all sing kumbaya in unison and on cue with their corporate paymasters. In the mean time, "we the people" get the shaft, are left holding the bag with all our needs going completely unmet. Our inverted totalitarian system pays homage to the facade of electoral politics. That is, it acknowledges solemnly the Constitution, civil liberties, freedom of the press, the independence of the judiciary, and the iconography, traditions and language of American patriotism, but at the same time that it has effectively seized all of the mechanisms of power, it also renders the US citizen completely impotent. Effectively, America now has a "controlled politics" that tolerates only a minimum of dissent, encourages patriotic pageantry and celebrations, but is unresponsive to protests, dissent and proposals designed to address the real concerns of "we the people." The author marks FDR's New Deal as a turning point. However, I believe the October 1917 Revolution in Russia must also be considered an equally salient inflection point. As, from that point onwards, it is a fact that the elites across the Western world at least, were shaking in their boots, nervous enough to begin taking steps to ensure that another "proletarian revolution" would never occur in Europe or America. For two generations, Communism was the bugaboo of American politics. Second, he claims that the Cold War was used to reconsolidate the power of capital and to turn the tide against any thoughts of continuing FDR's welfare programs, including Social Security. What the ruling elite feared most about the New Deal was that it had established a new social contract between "we the people" and "our government" about what government's responsibilities to the people and the common good would be into the foreseeable future. As it turns out, Reagan's conservative counter-revolution intervened, and time was up: The foreseeable future had arrived much earlier than we expected -- four years before George Orwell's 1984 to be exact. Since then America's conservative forces have rallied, mustered a masterful full-court press and executed a perfect turn-around, enlisting to their ignominious anti-democratic causes, poor and working class whites,

religious evangelicals, the military, and all the corporations. And though it might be recalled that even the totalitarian regimes of Soviet Russia and Germany each instituted a strong network of social services; and at least nominally supported unions, "inverted totalitarianism" under Reagan sought to dismantle the welfare state altogether, and with it, all oppositional labor groups. The present diminished state of our democracy and the decline of unions is the best evidence that the Reagan forces were victorious in their revolution. In this regard, "inverted totalitarianism" has perfected the art of garnering the support of the grass roots conservative forces without allowing them the power to rule. Notably, poor and working-class whites whose best interests are almost always diametrically opposed to those of the corporate class, nevertheless invariably identify with them. Donald Trump's Tea Party, at least in part, appears to be a belated response to being both betrayed and ignored by the Republican establishment, which has always acted as the "water boy" for the corporate class. Yet, due to willful misreading of Republican ideology, working class whites still believe their interests are best served by continuing to support the Republican ideology. I would argue that racism against blacks has a lot to do with this, but this is not the place for that discussion. Integral to this process, has been Professor Wolin's third inflection point: U.S. arrival at the gates of Superpower-dom. At several points in the book the author suggests that the projection of vast power abroad is itself sufficient to undermine genuine democracy. Our status, as a global hegemon and the last standing superpower, has allowed the U.S. to continue extracting unconscionable sacrifices from "we the people," in exchange for the endless and often mindless pursuit of "progress," tax cuts for the wealthy, military service for the poor, and the fighting of pre-emptive wars of choice with no exits -- all as part of the Reagan/Bush counter-revolutionary mandate, or, as the Republican's version of their own "New Deal." Part and parcel to the many external threats conjured up by the pentagon, are the corresponding perceived internal threats, which wax and wane according to political and ideological dictates, often stretching constitutional interpretations to the breaking point in the process. Thus, as a result of a technologically sophisticated and unaccountable national security state apparatus, consisting of a string of 20 or more secret security and police agencies, all under the guise of better protecting the homeland, America, under the legislative abomination called the "Patriot Act," has become a much less free nation. And although the author stays clear of the JFK assassination, it must also be said, if only in passing, that in light of newly released information from US archives, it may soon be discovered that elements of the U.S. National Security State were actually implicated in his assassination. The reader may recall that JFK's continuation of FDR's New Deal social programs, his sympathies for the plight of blacks, and his forward-looking foreign policies (that the corporate class abhorred),

placed a clear bull's eye on his back. Thus, as the last standing superpower, the pursuit of empire has provided a whole parcel of rationalizations for engaging in all manner of international and domestic mischief -- from climate change denial and continued exploitation of fossil fuels, to engaging in preemptive wars of choice, torture, stand-off drone strikes, imprisoning the accused without due process, tightening the reins of internal security on all Americans -- and doing so under the dubious rubric of "American exceptionalism." These things have become an everyday reality in American political life. But more than this, the author concludes that corporate control over the economy dominates the political process in new more insidious ways -- downsizing, reorganization, sheltering corporate profits off shore, "casino capitalism" (resulting in economic crashes where no one is held accountable), union-busting, the high cost of college, closing down and moving factories overseas by the thousands, aggressive privatization of government functions, and obscene amounts of money being dumped into the political process -- have not only created a national economy thriving on debt and corruption, but also has produced a private economy built on fear and uncertainty. This means the average American worker can no longer plan on retiring; that the average family needs two or more jobs just to make ends meet; and that they can forget about sending their children to college, and worse, no time is left for working class Americans to properly raise a family, or engage in political activity. The result, Wolin writes, is that political discourse is trivialized, apathy and passivity sets in, and the public is "denied the use of state power." Taken together the new corporate run economy, leaves the public fragmented, and angry, but leaves corporate power and empire unchallenged and un-critiqued. The ruling cliques now operate on the assumption that they don't need the traditional notion of a public, or even a nation state as a home base, for that matter. For they now have the tools to manage their money and their corporation interests with a telephone and a computer. With data out on the cloud, they can literally call the shots at a stand-off distance, where thanks to Citizens United, they can also now enjoy all of the benefits of citizenship and personhood without incurring any of its liabilities. Enconced in their off-shore havens, they can evade taxes, outsource jobs to the lowest global bidders, hide profits in numbered bank accounts overseas, and still have lobbyists back in Washington ready to bribe and manipulate elected officials and write legislation to ensure that all their future actions are rendered legal, and that regulations and rules that might constrain their activities, are kept at a minimum. At the same time, they can also use their money just as the Koch brothers are doing: to foment dissension within the body politic by financing opposition think tanks, opposition political pacts, and conservative-based academic programs in colleges and universities. The upshot of these activities of course is not just to keep the adversary off balance, but also to institutionalize corporate friendly



structural reforms into the foreseeable future. This amounts to what Wolin calls a "corporate revolution" in politics, an unholy merger between capitalism and a much diminished and a very frightened democracy. What does a frightened democracy do? It looks for a strong man who seems to have all the answers, a tyrant, a despot, an incompetent demagogue like a Donald Trump. With the Bush doctrine introducing pre-emptive wars of choice, drone attacks, hysteria over terrorism, and the prospect of perpetual war against it, the public is kept in a state of fear, making the transition to a totalitarian state infinitely easier. Given that America is an emotionally and morally fragile nation, owing in large part to its racist nature, making a case for a surveillance state, with secret courts, torture and all the things we saw happening in Iraq, now seem not only tolerable, but the next logical step down the road to full-scale Fascism. Five Stars

I had not read anything by Sheldon Wolin prior to this book, and I picked it up because I was intrigued by what was apparently his own invented phraseology - "inverted totalitarianism." With these two words, Professor Wolin gave a name to something that those of us who pay close attention to global political and economic trends have glimpsed on many occasions but could never quite see in full. Indeed, this subject is so new and so little explored that it would be best to view Professor Wolin's book as our first landing point on an as-yet-unexplored continent. The continent is a dark place where shadowy plutocrats, corporate oligarchs and political prostitutes who aspire to admittance in the plutocracy conspire to keep the reins of power and control out of the hands of "the people" and in the hands of those who abuse that power and control for their own selfish ends. Wolin is careful, however, not to mis-cast "the people" in the role of entirely innocent victim. As Wolin understands and explains, each of us has a responsibility to be curious enough about our world to peer through the fog of propaganda in search of elusive truths, and to assault the walls of secrecy that insulate the powerful few from the powerless many. This book should be viewed as a call to arms, even though, in a very real sense, the war is already over and we, the people, have already lost. The war for transnational corporate hegemony has been marked here at home by the relentless dismantling of an already shaky scaffolding of American liberal democracy. Being constructed in its place is a virtually impenetrable authoritarian fortress protecting (and shielding from view) an unholy alliance among self-serving economic elites, self-appointed intellectual elites and self-promoting politicians who feign statesmanship while leaving bewildered rank and file Americans standing on the platform as the prosperity train pulls away from the station. The importance of this book, and this line of inquiry, cannot be over-stated. It is not an entirely easy read, but that is because it is so densely packed with vital information - it's like eating an incredibly

nutrient-rich energy bar for your brain. Pick it up and open your eyes to the real state of the world around you - if it doesn't cause you to jump into action, shame on you.

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