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## Critical Exchange

# Sheldon Wolin's theoretical practice

Robyn Marasco<sup>a,\*</sup>, Jason Frank<sup>b</sup>, Joan Tronto<sup>c</sup>,  
Antonio Y. Vázquez-Arroyo<sup>d</sup> and Nicholas Xenos<sup>e</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Hunter College, CUNY, New York, NY 10065, USA.

E-mail: rmarasco@hunter.cuny.edu

<sup>b</sup>Cornell University, Ithaca, NY 14853, USA.

E-mail: jf273@cornell.edu

<sup>c</sup>University of Minnesota-Twin Cities, Minneapolis, MN 55455, USA.

E-mail: jctronto@umn.edu

<sup>d</sup>Rutgers University-Newark, Newark, NJ 07102, USA.

E-mail: a.vazquez@rutgers.edu

<sup>e</sup>University of Massachusetts-Amherst, Amherst, MA 01003, USA.

E-mail: xenos@polsci.umass.edu

\*Corresponding author.

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## The Epic as Form

### Robyn Marasco

As a starting-point it is necessary to reject the classical and modern conception that ascribes to democracy 'a' proper or settled form. – Sheldon Wolin (2004, p. 601).

Sheldon Wolin died on 21 October 2015, at his home in northwest Oregon. He was 93 years old, survived by his two daughters and two grandchildren. I did not know Professor Wolin personally. I met him only once. It was a brief introduction while waiting for the elevator in Barrows Hall on the campus of the University of California, Berkeley. This was several decades after the historic battles he waged there in the 1960s. But even at that time, Berkeley was a special place to study political theory and the East Bay an ideal place for a general political education. We all knew that to be part of Wolin's tremendous legacy. He is survived by generations of scholars, scattered across the academy and beyond, whose thinking and writing is directed to the basic questions of democracy.



Wolin was the teacher of my teacher. I learned from both of them what critique looks like that is unafraid of its own conclusions, to borrow a phrase from Marx's letter to Arnold Ruge. Political theory is not an exercise in edification, nor does it participate in a mandatory optimism. And speaking of Marx, I was instructed to always keep him close at hand and to keep capitalist power squarely in view, without being blinded by orthodoxy or blindsided by history. Politics cannot be reduced to economics or administration, which is why a meaningful equality requires a demos that can think and act.

Above all else, I was schooled in a distinctive way of assembling a historical canon around a contemporary political problem. I understood this scholarly practice to represent a coherent alternative to the available "methods" in political theory, developed in the two Cambridges and Chicago, those inspired by Rawls or Skinner or Strauss. Political theory, for Wolin, was neither the investigation into perennial problems lifted out of history, nor the antiquarian pursuit of political ideas. Theory meant mining the history of political thought for a clearer picture of our present. It meant that the history of ideas would change as political conditions and circumstances changed. It meant mapping traditions – "multiple and sometimes conflicting birthrights," as Jason Frank puts it in his contribution below – so that we might better account for our own habits and conventions. The idea of a "tradition" was important to Wolin, as it was for Strauss, but it was not a venerated object, nor was it passed between the lines of great books.<sup>1</sup> Wolin was committed to doing justice to the historical shape of political traditions, much like Skinner, but he rejected any contextualism that tacitly depoliticized thinking and diminished the role of political practice in the formation of political ideas. Like Rawls, he recovered and reworked the utopian promise in political theory, but this would entail what he famously described as the "journey from liberalism to democracy" (Wolin, 2004, p. xv). Unlike all of them, Wolin amplified a voice of radical protest in political theory and encouraged a theoretical practice attuned to the future and fate of the demos. For myself, I don't hesitate to call this anti-method by the name, Berkeley.<sup>2</sup>

*Politics and Vision* remains my surest companion through the history of Western political thought. *Tocqueville Between Two Worlds* is the standard by which I measure the monograph study of a single thinker. Antonio Vázquez-Arroyo rightly describes them as two masterpieces, and it is worth pausing on how substantially different these two great works are. *Politics and Vision* is the establishment of a Western tradition of political theory; *Tocqueville Between Two Worlds* is the portrait of a political education and its theoretical practice. Both are books for endless re-reading. His short-lived journal, *democracy*, offers a treasure of contents and an alternative model for the academic periodical. I turn to Wolin for so many things – to see how realism and utopia might be cut from the same cloth, for guidance on how to engage Machiavelli politically and rhetorically, in pursuit of the parodic element in Montesquieu's *Persian Letters*, to discern the fascist tendencies in contemporary power (though I am not sure he would have used the



f-word as readily as I do). His extraordinary body of work is an invitation into an adventure, where the history of political theory presents itself as possible itineraries into the present. His texts are not only our companions and guides to specific thinkers and histories, but they are also dispatches from *his* excursions. Wolin invites us to treat democracy as practice worthy of our theoretical considerations and theory as practice worthy of our democratic commitments.

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My title is in reference to what Wolin termed “epic theory” in the celebrated essay from 1969, “Political Theory as a Vocation” (Wolin, 1969). He had also developed the idea of epic theory in an early lecture on Hobbes (Wolin, 1970). Epic theory, for Wolin, is theory of a certain explanatory power, theory driven by real concerns and problems, and theory that aims to grasp the political whole. My title also alludes to Adorno, to the author of “The Essay as Form” (one of Adorno’s most important statements on political thinking and writing) and the co-author of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (where Adorno mostly repudiates the epic as a proto-bourgeois form). Bringing Wolin and Adorno together is obvious and difficult, at once. Obvious, for these thinkers were rough contemporaries, broadly trained in a European philosophical, scientific and literary tradition, secular Jews, and men of an antiorthodox Left. Both saw liberalism as a feeble response to the sudden threat of fascism and the creeping effects of late capitalism. Both perceived totalitarian powers in places we had not known to look for them. Still, Adorno was more deeply suspicious of the demos and political appeals to them. His attitudes toward democracy were more reserved and less clearly developed, though he has moments of real democratic clarity and commitment (Adorno, 1998; Mariotti, 2016). One was a German and the other an American.

And even that gets complicated – and points to a basic disagreement between them. Wolin criticized what he saw as an anti-political impulse in Adorno’s work, a permanent inner exile that persisted even beyond his return to Frankfurt. “Exile is the worst of fates for a theorist,” says Wolin, “because it decontextualizes theoretical activity, freeing it of political ties and referents” (Wolin, 1993, p. 185). Wolin’s inspiration on this front was none other than Socrates, for whom death was preferable to exile and philosophy was ineluctably bound to the polis. Others, notably Edward Said, would draw very different conclusions about Adorno’s philosophy in exile and its political implications (Said, 2002). Without proposing to settle a question at the heart of the *Crito*, I would say that the *location* of political theory – within the polity and its particular problems– is a constant theme in Wolin. What he says of Tocqueville might also be said about Wolin himself: “The metaphor of location was also a means of posing or arranging the self while he repositioned his theory” (Wolin, 2001, p. 374). Wolin resisted any movement away from the polity, even as he encouraged self-distancing from within it. He saw in



Adorno a decisive turn away from the polity, a move that was itself located in a particular time and place, but which the philosopher in permanent exile never really permitted himself to avow as his own.<sup>3</sup>

On the other hand, Wolin's theory of fugitive democracy is infused with an Adornian notion of remembrance. And his investments in the local shape of fugitivity might be seen, not only as a reiteration of the importance of location for even the most protean of forces, but also as an extension of Adorno's commitment to that which "fell by the wayside...cross-grained, opaque, unassimilated material, which as such admittedly has from the start an anachronistic quality, but is not wholly obsolete since it has outwitted the historical dynamic" (Adorno, 1978, p. 151). Wolin cites this aphorism from *Minima Moralia* at length when accounting for his idea of political theory as invocation (Wolin, 2000, p. 4). Wolin's eventual name for this "historical dynamic" was Superpower. The theory of fugitive democracy was his pursuit of its unassimilated material.

Though central to his early account of the vocation, "epic theory" largely vanished from Wolin's later terminology. In the Vocation essay, epic theory stood opposed to traditional theory, methodism, and positivist political science. Epic theory was a kind of *critical theory* – and not just in the sense that epic theory allowed itself to be motivated, to stake out a position and a perspective, and to commit itself politically (Fraser, 1989). Epic theory was a kind of critical theory in the very old-fashioned sense: it aimed to bring a *totality* into view. Wolin's term was "magnitude." And here is how he put it: "By an act of thought, the theorist seeks to reassemble *the whole political world*. He aims to grasp present structures and interrelationships, and to re-present them in a new way" (Wolin, 1969, p. 1078). Political theory is the representation of a complex totality in its many parts. But totality is not a category belonging to abstract thought. For Wolin, as for Lukács and Adorno, the concept of totality is called forth by the objective order of things. Epic theory postulates – and here are Wolin's words – "the possibility that the factual world is the outcome of a *systematically disordered whole*" (Wolin, 1969, p. 1080, italics mine). Or, Adorno: *Das Ganze ist das Unwahre* (Adorno, 1978). The whole is the false. It was entirely appropriate that Wolin name this enterprise – theory that aims to grasp a systematically disordered whole – epic theory. It was 1969, after all. The stakes were very high and the platform was appropriately ambitious.

But Wolin mostly drops the term, notwithstanding the occasional reference to the epic in later work, for example, in connection with Marx's valorization of the working class. One explanation is suggested in Joan Tronto's contribution below, though, admittedly, this is not the focus of her argument. Tronto speaks of a shift in Wolin's work from a view of political theory as vocation to a "chastened" view of political theory as invocation. And it might be that the disappearance of the epic reflects this humbled reinterpretation of theoretical work. It might also be that the turn away from epic theory was the preparation for a more substantial turn toward the demos, that the journey from liberalism to democracy was also a journey from



theory to practice, from political education to political experience, from magnitude to localism, and from totality to fugitivity.

But what if the problem with epic theory was never its ambition or its audacity, but its narrowness? What if epic theory turned out to be a form unsuited to the times or unable to grasp the constellation of political forces? What if the difficulty with epic theory was not its hubris but its tendency – already present in Hobbes, the original epic theorist – to take flight from the political world and its challenges? What if epic theory unwittingly participates in the displacement of politics? I believe Wolin’s definition of theory was consistent across his work: *repicturization*, a term he uses in the Tocqueville book, but which might have appeared in any of his major works (Wolin, 2001, p. 38). Seeing the whole differently. Re-assembling the factual world and re-presenting it anew. Seeing the factual world as a systematically disordered whole. Could it be that epic theory turned out to be more blinding than visionary in these efforts?

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Many of his readers have remarked on Wolin’s exceptional literary education and sensibility (Vázquez-Arroyo, 2015). In the Western literary tradition, the epic pivots on the lonely figure at its center: the hero. In his early lecture on Hobbes, Wolin shows how epic theory places the “theorist-creator” in that role. And a significant part of this early interpretation of Hobbes turns on the relationship between the literary and the scientific techniques found in the *Leviathan*. Vázquez-Arroyo’s contribution to this Critical Exchange offers a careful consideration of Wolin’s early portrait of Hobbes. What Vázquez-Arroyo so expertly shows is how the epic theorist becomes, by Wolin’s conclusion to that early lecture, an antihero. He is quite right that this insight “could easily be the point of departure to a whole different interpretation of Hobbes,” but I would add that it might also be the point of departure for a whole new understanding of epic theory and its relationship to politics.

Of the literary figure of the epic hero, I am reminded of Lukács’s insistence that the epic journey is never really about *him*:

The epic hero is, strictly speaking, never an individual. It is traditionally thought that one of the essential characteristics of the epic is the fact that its theme is not a personal destiny but the destiny of a community (Lukács, 1971, p. 66).

Lukács is underscoring the feature of epic poetry that makes it seem very different from modern narrative forms, the latter taking subjectivity as a principle theme. From a Lukácsian perspective, it could be said that epic theory was *always* a theory of the demos, always a meditation on collective fate and purpose, and always the work of the collective. (Some classicists take a literal tack on the argument, seeing “Homer” as only the proper name for an oral tradition and shared authorship.) *The Theory of the Novel* pits the epic against a culture of possessive individualism, but this text was



composed between 1914 and 1916, before Lukács became a Marxist. At this point, he is interested in how epic narrative stirs a different set of passions – passions that point the human being outside of himself, to a world of others and objects. The epic hero knows no loneliness because the epic journey is never his alone. *The Theory of the Novel* is a mourning poem for this vanishing affective horizon.

“The novel is the epic of an age in which the extensive totality of life is no longer directly given,” he says, “in which the immanence of meaning in life has become a problem, yet which still thinks in terms of totality” (Lukács, 1971, p. 66). I quote from Lukács here to emphasize that the relationship between the epic and the novel, for him, is not one of simple opposition.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, the point is that the elemental ingredients of epic – totality, community, history, fate – also make up the novel. The historical form has changed, because historical conditions have changed. The novel is the epic of a disenchanting age. It is the interiorization of epic heroism “when the distinctions between men have made an unbridgeable chasm...when the world of deeds separates itself from men.” In just a few years, with the publication of *History and Class Consciousness*, he would trade a Weberian idea of disenchantment and what he later dismissed a “romantic anticapitalism” for a Marxist concept of reification. His conversion to historical materialism would yield a very different presentation of the European literary tradition in *The Historical Novel*, written twenty years later. Franco Moretti has remarked that “*Theory of the Novel* belongs to the small circle of masterpieces – Baudelaire’s *tableaux*, Flaubert’s novels, Manet’s paintings, Ibsen’s plays, or, indeed, Weber’s last lectures – where the rules of bourgeois existence are at once ineluctable and bankrupt. It sounds, often, like the work of an *exile*” (Moretti, 2014, p. 39). Moretti remarks especially on its stylistic ambitions and how Lukács’s sociology of literature gets elaborated as a highly stylized experiment in theoretical form.

Adorno sees epic differently, not as the union of personal and collective fate, but as the mythic origins of a rationality of domination. Epic is the poetic expression of a nascent positivism, already audible in Homer. This is the argument developed in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, where Odysseus prefigures the bourgeois man of reason and where bourgeois reason finds its true origins in a mythic fear of nature (Horkheimer and Adorno, 2002). *The Odyssey* is the early portrait of a rationality that sets out to subdue nature by mastering and overcoming it. Homeric poetry is the archaic image of ourselves, the premonition of a society held under a spell, and the formal anticipation of a *systematically disordered whole*.

But that is only half of Adorno’s argument about epic. The other half has to do with how “a critique of bourgeois reason dwells within epic naïveté” (Adorno, 1991a, p. 26). Adorno also sees epic narrative, with its focus on small details, its investment in singularity, even “the narrator’s stupidity and blindness – [and] it is not accident that tradition has it that Homer was blind” – as a poetic revolt against an administered totality (p. 27). Epic naïveté stands between myth and reason,



between the “eternally invariant” and the ordering of experience by the rule of rationality, but it also stands apart from both. Epic opposes myth in that “it wants to report on something worth reporting on, something that is not the same as everything else, not exchangeable” (p. 24). But it is also here that epic opposes bourgeois rationality, for the latter wants to subsume epic singularity under the abstract universality of thought. Epic is fidelity to “what occurred once and only once” – and in so limiting itself, the epic transcends the limits of abstract thought (p. 25). Epic preserves a single experience that refuses assimilation to a bad reality. But it also harbors a dreamwish for “something real” that breaks with the logic of social domination, even if that something real happened *just once*.

I think this epic dreamwish, which Adorno glossed as its naiveté, is a good way to understand Wolin’s later pursuit of archaisms and marginalia and fugitive experience for the renewal of radical democracy. That is to say, Wolin’s pursuit is precisely *not* an episode in mythic rage, “which borders on the nihilistic, the merely destructive, with either no content or only a pretext for content,” as George Kateb alleges (Kateb, 2001, p. 45). It is fidelity to the surprising and sometimes unlikely forms in which democratic contents make their everyday appearance.

From a different direction, Bertolt Brecht posited that “epic theater” could awaken the critical capacities of the spectator, by revealing the constructed nature of reality and refusing to offer a cathartic consolation for injustice (Brecht, 1964). For its “alienation effect” (*Verfremdungseffekt*) and the reflexive distance it establishes between the spectator and spectacle, Brecht saw epic theater as a political and revolutionary aesthetic. Epic theater aimed at representation of totality, but a deliberately contrived and artificial totality. Brecht anticipated that such a theatrical encounter with artifice would awaken a sense of agency in the audience. Epic theater meant empowerment and an alertness to injustice. I have no indication that Wolin had Brecht in mind in his elaborations on epic theory, but both invoke the epic on behalf of a certain type of political education. In her brilliant and challenging contribution to this Critical Exchange, Joan Tronto wonders about the fate of theory “in a time when neither politics nor education are given much intrinsic value.” “What are we saying, even as radical democrats,” she asks, “if we say epic theory is *passé*?” Are we saying that we’ve abandoned the project of building and defending the kinds of political, social, and cultural institutions that make democratic education possible?

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With these reflections on form, it may be that I have done exactly what Wolin cautions against: I have mistaken a “problem-in-a-theory” for a “problem-in-the-world.” But I think Adorno is right that experiments in form are also ways of approaching problems in the world (Adorno, 1991b). And I think Wolin believed this, too. Consider what he says about Montesquieu in the early pages of the Tocqueville book:



Virtually all of Montesquieu's contemporaries as well as later commentators have agreed that the complex, unrationalized qualities he ascribed to political formations were reflected in the shapelessness of his theory. The latter was as sprawling, ill-digested, and even on occasion inchoate as the former....It was made for a politics of indirection and obliqueness... Montesquieu's theory offered few formulas for political action and many for inaction...the whole temper of his political theory ran counter to the modern culture of power we have been tracing (Wolin, p. 43).

I believe Montesquieu is important to Wolin for a whole bunch of reasons: because he perceived the fundamental link between individualism and despotism, because he appreciated that politics is a learned practice and a socio-historical achievement, not a natural necessity. In this passage, Wolin is talking about Montesquieu's *practice of theory*, not only a practice apart from epic theory but also squarely opposed to the "modern project of theory as pragmatics." This theoretical practice – shapeless, sprawling, ill-digested, inchoate – is built for inaction. Montesquieu offers few formulas and no program. The forces he saw in the political world got reflected in his own theory. Montesquieu's theoretical practice is at once a reflection of its times and an exercise in untimeliness.

Montesquieu's experiments with form violate the unwritten rules of an exchange society. Wolin calls it an exercise in "studied impracticality" and describes Montesquieu's theoretical practice as "the most complex effort in the history of Western theory to sabotage the accumulation of power and to make its exercise so exhausting as to leave it severely hobbled." Montesquieu himself described *Persian Letters* as "a kind of novel," but what's remarkable about Wolin's interpretation is that the entire theoretical practice is cast in these terms. All the theoretical detours amount to "novelistic" exercises in the interruption of power. Here Wolin is opening up a whole new way of approaching Montesquieu's political thought, just as Vázquez-Arroyo shows he could offer several different Hobbes even in a single essay and Frank explains how Wolin sidesteps entirely the debates that dominate early American historiography to open up an alternate democratic tradition. What Wolin identifies in Montesquieu's theoretical practice is not a science of human society or a system of political classification, but an anti-systematic subversion of rapidly diversifying and consolidating forces. "He encouraged metaphors of a social topography full of so many creases, turns, obstacles, and entrenched bastions as to bewilder power and leave it unable to impose any architectonic vision," Wolin says of the politics of Montesquieu's theoretical form (p. 44). Montesquieu's theory takes indirect aim at power through the arts of fatigue and confusion. It also offers an alternate politics of individualism, grounded in a "conception of the individual as a vectorial point where different norms converged tugged so that the individual – diversified but not atomized – could never be the wholly reliable instrument of rulers or dominant





groups” (p. 44). But no less than Hobbesian science, it is a theoretical practice of repicturization.

Tocqueville is different because he perceived the fundamental link between “theory as pragmatics” and a democratic culture in America, which is to say he perceived the tension between epic theory and a democratic theoretical tradition, between “a nondemocratic form of theory that could constitute the facts differently” and a pragmatic form that restricts itself to the facts as they are given (p. 359). *Democracy in America* – at least, its second part, after Tocqueville had “discovered the Cartesian mind in America” and could “discriminate among various types of theory” – is a meditation on the fate of theory in a democracy and the fate of democracy under the distinctive theoretical culture it nurtures (p. 357). Tocqueville’s aristocratic gaze, for Wolin, is less about his elitism than his efforts to preserve a theoretical practice that would not be completely engulfed by democratic norms. An aristocratic conception of theory offered the distance necessary to maintain a critical perspective on democracy. Wolin cites a clarifying remark from Tocqueville to his English translator: “I have written in a country and for a country where the cause of equality has now triumphed, leaving no possible return to aristocracy. In this state of affairs, I have felt duty-bound to give special emphasis to the bad tendencies which equality can nourish and thereby seek to prevent my contemporaries from surrendering to them” (p. 359). This writing, too, often sounds like the work of an exile.

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The contributions collected in this Critical Exchange offer testimony to Sheldon Wolin’s extraordinary theoretical practice. Each takes his work chiefly as an occasion to speak to central questions in our politics: What are the resources for the renewal of radical democracy? What are the tasks of political theory in a democracy? What is the meaning of the past for our present and in charting futures? What is the relationship between democracy and totalitarianism? They are interventions in the embattled field of political inquiry and democratic knowledge and, in this way, participate in a tradition that Wolin inherited and bequeathed to us.

In his contribution to this Critical Exchange Jason Frank reconstructs a “highly distinctive view of radical democracy as a tradition” out of Wolin’s essays of the 1980s, the essays published in *democracy* and those anthologized in *The Presence of the Past*. “In his writings on American politics in the age of Reagan, and in his simultaneous engagement with early American political thought,” Frank writes, “Wolin came to view radical democracy (as opposed to democratic theory) as a distinctive kind of tradition, one that distinguished it in content from the reigning ideological paradigms of liberalism and civic republicanism, but that also, and this has to be emphasized, lead to a different understanding of what constitutes a tradition in the first place” – that is to say, democracy is distinctive in content *and* form. Frank elaborates that this is an understanding of political tradition as



“formative experience and popular practice rather than theoretical articulation or ideological expression,” which can result in some surprising affirmations and affinities. Frank discusses the “odd feudalism” that Wolin found in early American political thought, showing how it provided a certain resource for the renewal of a radical democratic tradition. Frank also offers an essential retort to a misreading of Wolin that alleges he indulged a dangerous preoccupation with transgressive and ruptural demotic movements, or what George Kateb criticized as the “Sorelian coloration” in Wolin’s concept of democracy.<sup>5</sup> Frank shows instead that Wolin’s tradition of radical democracy joins “the extraordinary with the ordinary, the revolutionary and the quotidian,” and finds inspiration in local democratic organizing for better schools or safe drinking water as much as mass social movements.

Joan Tronto’s essay revisits Wolin’s portrait of the epic theorist in “Political Theory as a Vocation” in light of his “later and much chastened description of his own role as a theorist” to ask: what need does democracy have for the epic theorist, “or perhaps, for any theorist at all?” Tronto presses this question beyond Plato and the prophets of the Old Testament, for she is not only concerned with whether the people are “listening” to the theorists, but also with the fundamental task of political theory in a democracy. “Let us ask,” says Tronto, “other than political education, what could be the task of political theory?” She contrasts this precept in the early Wolin that political theory is the pursuit of a form of political education, with the Cambridge School on the one hand and Wolin’s later reticence about the powers of theory on the other. “It is not that Skinner objected to political education,” Tronto notes, but he did “seem to object to the idea that *political theory* was a way to a broader political education.” Skinner balked at the magnitude of epic theory, defending instead intellectual constraint and the limits imposed by context. “This was not a political education from student rebellions, it was not a political education for the dispossessed,” but an argument for moderating and scaling back our ambitions. Indeed, it was the transformation of political knowledge into careerism. “Part of the continuing excitement of the Cambridge School is that it won for political theory a room of its own in the great hall of political science too” – at the expense of the possibility that a real political literacy requires more than a few “little chambers” within a professional academic discipline. In his own way, though, Wolin also retreated from the demands of building political literacy, especially to the extent that he believed theory itself was complicit in the consolidation of modern power. Yet, “Wolin still wanted theory to offer us a kind of political education” and this would mean attending to “the ways in which theory is also tempted by, and implicated in, service to power.” Tronto presses against the “despairing” voice in Wolin that abandons the idea of political theory as political education. And she amplifies a voice, which resounds throughout his work, which speaks of our responsibility to and for our democracy. Tronto concludes with a clarion call for the renewal of epic theory: “The task for political theorists who still consider themselves democrats is not to find some hidden gem in the history of political



thought to polish, nor to shed light on some small pockets of life that appear democratic, nor to flee from the trappings of power, as if this were possible. It is instead, to take on the rather epic task of trying to create a form of political education in a time when neither politics nor education are given much intrinsic value.”

Antonio A. Vázquez-Arroyo considers Wolin’s writings on Hobbes as opportunity to clarify the politics of interpretation and define an interpretative practice that treats political theory “first as a civic activity and, only secondarily, as an academic endeavor.” Vázquez-Arroyo sees “continuity and innovation” as the guiding principles of this interpretive practice: continuity, the term that captures the “conviction that the study of political theory constituted a crucial component in the political education of citizens” and innovation, the term that announces the need for an interpretive practice responsive to changes in the political world. The history of political thought was not a singular tradition, despite occasional remarks otherwise in *Politics and Vision*. As Vázquez-Arroyo sees it, Wolin “increasingly zoned in on the challenges in the meaning and nature of ‘theory’ and how there are genres of political theorizing beyond ‘philosophy’ and ‘theory’ as classically understood, as well as different conceptions of history, thus fully acknowledging the theoretical complexity of historical inquiry, its multiple, often contested, meanings and forms.” Put differently, Wolin’s attunement to the historicity of theory, in the diversity of its forms, reflected a *political* engagement with the history of political thought. What is so important about Hobbes, says Vázquez-Arroyo, is that Wolin, in the span of thirty years, “crafted three major interpretations of this thinker that are striking dissimilar,” and, therefore, point to the politics of interpretation. The dissimilarities betray a certain continuity in Wolin’s political thought concerning the historicity of political concepts and the role of theory in “tending the political literacy of citizens.” But the innovations in these three different interpretations of Hobbes’s political thought – as the new science, as epic theory, as the culture of despotism – also confirm the richness of Wolin’s perspectival approach the historicity of political thinking. Two things are especially noteworthy about Vázquez-Arroyo’s intervention here. First, he invokes T.S. Eliot in order to assert the “dialectical” character of Wolin’s perspectivalism: “the presence of a past always mediated but never determining the present; and a present that would mediate any prefiguration of the future and a figure of the future that could only have a fighting chance if the present is addressed.” Second, Vázquez-Arroyo clarifies the *politics* of interpreting Hobbes politically, which is to say that the qualities of “sensitiveness, erudition, sense of fact and sense of history, and generalizing power” are not, *pace* Eliot, “put at the service of cultural hierarchy and elitism,” but developed in pursuit of a vanishing democratic present. Political theory, for Wolin and Vázquez-Arroyo, “is not prompted because something is wrong with theories about politics, but because something is fundamentally wrong with the political world.”



In his contribution Nicholas Xenos returns to the idea of totalitarian democracy, put forth by Jacob Talmon in his influential book published in 1952, *The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy*, in order to clarify some of the distinctive features of Wolin's political thought. Xenos notes that Wolin cites Talmon favorably in the first edition of *Politics and Vision* through to the expanded second edition, but that his journey from liberalism to democracy also meant a substantial reorientation to the idea of totalitarian democracy. In the expanded second edition, Wolin criticizes Talmon for the invention of "a new and ominous regime-form, 'totalitarian democracy,'" which he reads in terms of "a deep suspicion of collective action." What Talmon offered up in defense against this menacing form of totalitarian democracy was, says Wolin, "an attenuated democracy dissociated from political action and instead identified with protecting individual rights and promoting economic growth." Xenos provides an indispensable genealogy of the concept of totalitarian democracy, from Talmon to George H. Sabine and E.H. Carr, even to Friedrich A. Hayek and Benjamin Constant. He also shows the importance of a particular understanding of Rousseau and the Jacobins to the development of this concept. Xenos also considers the work of Guido De Ruggiero, who draws from Tocqueville for a concept of "democratic despotism" and endorses a liberal vision to "neutralize the venom" of democracy, and the work of his Spanish contemporary, José Ortega y Gasset, as further variations on the theme of totalitarian democracy. Xenos reminds us that Wolin's touchstones for the development of a radical democratic tradition are "Thomas Paine, William Godwin, and Karl Marx, not Rousseau" and that even the vision of constituent power in Wolin looks more like Spinoza's "conatus" than Rousseau's "general will." Still, and in a powerful conclusion, Xenos shows how Wolin "arrives at a curious symbiosis of his own" in the theories of fugitive democracy and inverted totalitarianism. "A boundary-defying democracy becomes the only opponent of a boundary defying Superpower" – that is to say, an alternate image of totalitarian democracy.

## Is radical democracy a tradition?

**Jason Frank**

"The idea of democracy," Sheldon Wolin once wrote, "comes to us...primarily through hostile interpreters. The politics of the demos has not been lost to memory but is preserved, though half-buried, in the political theories of democracy's critics" (Wolin, 1994a, p. 55). Taking this claim seriously means that reconstructing a tradition of theoretical reflection on democracy – a tradition of democratic theory – requires a distinctive form of interpretive work able lay bare or excavate what lay "half-buried" in the writing of democracy's theoretically articulate critics.



The difficulty of this hermeneutic enterprise is complicated by the problem of theoretical form, by the fact that, according to Wolin, what we have come to expect of political theory exists in a deep tension with democratic practice. A democratic theorist worthy of the name cannot proclaim epistemic authority and presume to make a one-time “gift to the demos,” as Wolin put it in his review of Rawls’ *Political Liberalism*, neglecting the central democratic importance of the formative collective struggle to achieve equal rights by the people themselves (Wolin, 1996b, p. 98).

For Wolin, political theory’s focus on rules and norms, procedures and principles, organization and institutional form, exists in sustained tension with democracy’s egalitarian protest against the reduction of politics to rule, its transgressive opposition to norms and forms, and to the institutionalization and routinization of political action. Political theory’s typical tendency toward abstraction is itself at odds with the historically embedded and power-sensitive conception of democracy Wolin emphasized. Political theory “typically advances by generalizations. We classify and categorize, we simplify and we quantify...we regularize phenomenon so that we can subsume them under general statements or hypothesis. In the very form of our theory we duplicate the modern administrative outlook which seeks to fit individual cases under general rules and abhors exceptions as a scientist does anomalies” (Wolin, 1989, p. 136).

Democracy always bears the mark of its diverse and localized origins and struggles, so the problem of identifying a unitary tradition of theoretical reflection on democracy is not only a problem of content but also of theoretical form. What form could a democratic theory – a radical democratic theory – possibly take? Wolin exposed the political content of seemingly neutral theoretical forms, revealing their quiet implications in modern forms of state and corporate power – what he would eventually come to call Superpower – inimical to democracy. In doing so, Wolin challenged not only self-congratulatory understandings of democracy, but also self-congratulatory expectations of the tasks and goals of political theory. A radical democratic theory would be a form of theoretical inquiry attendant to the transgressive, radically egalitarian, historically situated, and power laden dimensions of democracy itself. It could not remain democratic if it was premised on an attempt to transcend those defining conditions. Wolin’s sustained engagement with Tocqueville, and beyond him Montesquieu, allowed him to explore these ideas in most detail. For example, the issue “central in Tocqueville’s formulation of his ideas,” Wolin wrote in *Between Two Worlds*, was “whether theorists would assume the task of normalizing the appearance and presence of [modernity’s] huge powers, preserving their impressive and triumphal character while rendering them familiar and, above all, demonstrating their manageability, or whether the powers would be revealed to have certain unsettling and unnatural qualities that portended a continuous discontinuity in the human condition” (Wolin, 2001, p. 133).



Wolin's "journey from liberalism to democracy" occurred during his period of political activism in the 1960s, but it was in his remarkable writing during the 1980s – for the journal *democracy*, which he edited, and on early American political thought, anthologized in *The Presence of the Past* – where he began to more fully develop these themes (Wolin, 2004, p. xv). There are notable continuities across Wolin's work, for example, his critique of pluralism and interest group politics and his larger thematic of the disappearance of the political (although he eventually came to see the political as so closely related to the idea of democracy as to be "almost synonymous") (Wolin, 1994a, p. 290). In his writing on American politics in the age of Reagan, and in his simultaneous engagement with early American political thought, Wolin came to view radical democracy (as opposed to democratic theory) as a distinctive kind of tradition, one that distinguished it in content from the reigning ideological paradigms of liberalism and civic republicanism, but that also, and this has to be emphasized, led to very different understanding of what constitutes a political tradition in the first place. This is an aspect of Wolin's work that has yet to be fully recognized and developed. It was a view of political tradition that contrasted sharply with the reigning scholarly paradigms of post-linguistic turn historiography associated with the Cambridge School and that was focused on formative experience and popular practice rather than theoretical articulation or ideological expression (in this, Wolin might have been quietly drawing from Arendt's *On Revolution*). As far as I know, Wolin left no clear methodological statement on these questions – perhaps unsurprising, considering his dismal view of "method" – but a highly distinctive view of radical democracy as a tradition can nonetheless be pieced together from his key writings from the period.

In the first essay he wrote for *democracy* – entitled "The People's Two Bodies" – Wolin offered an early indication of what this refigured sense of democratic tradition might mean, at least in the United States. In America, Wolin argued, the people have always had two bodies. One of these imagined forms emerged from the politically active collectivity envisioned by the Revolution, a collective being who would "not just participate in politics, but would join in actually creating a new political identity, to 'institute,' 'alter,' or 'abolish' government, to lay a 'foundation' and to organize power" (Wolin, 1980, p. 15). Wolin called this the body politic. The other dominant collective imaginary, which Wolin dubbed the political economy, was enshrined in the US Constitution and defined by a passive form of sovereign legitimation of the state, the depoliticizing disaggregation of the collective agent into individual consumers, and the conversion of the collective deliberation over matters of common concern into sublimated regulations of an impersonal market. Long before contemporary political theorists became preoccupied with neoliberalism's dissolution of the demos, Wolin had indicated the democratic costs of imagining and institutionalizing political subjectivity along economic lines (Brown, 2015).



Wolin's increasingly trenchant critique of liberalism, already forcefully articulated in the *New York Review of Books* essays he co-authored with John Schaar in the 1960s, takes on a new force in these writings emphasizing liberalism's myriad forms of depoliticization and of the imaginary and institutional disaggregation of the collectivity, the demos, that it entails (Wolin and Schaar, 1970). Wolin's understanding of democracy assumed a more definite outline in opposition to liberalism over the course of these writings. One of the most striking aspects of this developing understanding of democracy was Wolin's focus on the collective actor as both agent and object of action. This oddly self-referential dynamic of demotic agency and power is already there in "The People's Two Bodies" and remains constant across these writings and beyond to the radical democratic works of the 1990s focused on ancient Greece – "Norm and Form: The Constitutionalizing of Democracy," "Fugitive Democracy," and "Transgression, Equality, Voice" (Wolin, 1994a; 1996a, 1996c).

There are discontinuities in Wolin's turn to the Greek material, as he came to take a more radical "fugitive" view of democratic action, but the focus on the collective actor working on and enabling its own emergence and the creation of demotic power remains constant across these later works. "The continual self-fashioning of the demos," he writes, is self-referential "because it aims to transform the political system in order to enable itself to emerge, to make possible a new actor, collective in nature" (Wolin, 1996c, p. 64). Even as late as *Democracy Inc.* Wolin would write that "the survival and flourishing of democracy in the first instance depends upon the people's changing themselves, sloughing off their political passivity and acquiring the lost characteristics of the demos... To become democratic – to embrace political freedom under threat on so many sides in the modern world – is to change one's self, to learn how to act collectively, as a demos" (Wolin, 2008, p. 289). These are provocative formulations, figuring the demos as both actor and acted upon, agent and object. It is also notable that in these descriptions of demotic emergence, Wolin does not engage with the theoretical language of representational claims, performativity, and dynamics of popular identification. Wolin did not envision democratic enactment through the framework of agonistic claims of popular authorization (Frank, 2010).

Wolin's arguments about demotic power taking its own emergence as its political goal has also led to some striking misinterpretations of his work as being too preoccupied with the ruptural and transgressive quality of democracy, even dangerously aestheticizing action in the celebration of the revolutionary emergence of demotic power. "There are no limits," as George Kateb writes along these lines, "to Wolin's praise of limitlessness" (Kateb, 2001, p. 55). Reading Wolin's work from the 1980s and 1990s alongside other radical democratic theory from the period – whether the agonistic populism of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, the deep pluralism of William Connolly, or resurgent theories of popular constituent power, like Antonio Negri's – what is most striking is not the neo-Schmittian



themes of existential antagonism, on the one hand, or the extraordinary or revolutionary enactments of constituent against constituted power, on the other, so much as Wolin's distinctive combination of the extraordinary and the ordinary, the revolutionary and the quotidian. In these writings, democracy's antagonism to the "state," "unum," "Superpower," can sometimes appear in the form of insurgent praxis and sometimes as organizing for better schools and safe drinking water. Democracy, Wolin writes, "lives in the ebb-and-flow of everyday activities, responsibilities, and relationships" (Wolin, 2004, p. 604).

Nowhere is this productive tension between the insurgent event and quotidian practice more clearly elaborated than in another famous essay from *democracy*, appropriately titled "What Revolutionary Action Means Today" (Wolin, 1982). In this essay, Wolin called for a renewed and radicalized conception of citizenship, "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" (Wolin, 1982, p. 27). Wolin argued this fuller practice of citizenship was revolutionary in the context of consolidating Superpower, and that its radicalism was defined, in part, by its inhibition of the seemingly limitless powers of technological, economic, and scientific progress: the "new Trinitarianism" of capital, state bureaucracy, and science (Wolin, 1983). In contrast to other prominent theorists of radical democracy, Wolin's key words were deeply conservative: "inheritance," "birth-right," "tending," "remembrance," and "renewal." Wolin occasionally had positive things to say about Thomas Paine, but I think he hated the famously Promethean dictum of *Common Sense* – "We have it in our power to begin the world over again" – as much as Ronald Reagan loved it. Wolin clearly saw how the American embrace of futurity and radical independence helped construct the founding myth of the New World as nature's nation, "fresh land seemingly without limits or boundaries and innocent of past inequities" (Wolin, 1989, p. 75). Wolin feared the despotism of constant innovation more than he did the despotism of tradition.

Wolin's revolutionary citizens did not treat tradition, inheritance, and birthright as so many heteronomic fetters to overcome, as a "nightmare which weighs upon the brain of the living," but as crucial sources of democratic power and renewal. "The role of the citizenry was to tend and defend the values and practices of a democratic civic life" (Wolin, 2004, p. 598), he writes in one typical formulation. "Democratic power depends on an historical accumulation of dispositions." Wolin argued that democrats had to disentrail themselves of their dangerous fantasies of sovereign autonomy. "Transgressive, changeable, and forgetful man is heteronomous man," Wolin wrote, "the subject of a variety of laws. He is by nature not the malleable object of a single and sovereign lawmaker. Instead, he is the object of multiple claims and the subject of multiple constitutions" (Wolin, 1989, p. 105). Wolin not only urged readers to think democracy beyond the state, but also beyond the conceptual traps of their commitment to popular sovereignty. Radical





democracy is a tradition for Wolin, but it is one that contrasts with, rather than springs from, modern theories of popular sovereignty (here, too, the parallels with Arendt's *On Revolution* are suggestive).

Not one constitution, but many. Not one single line of authoritative inheritance, but multiple and sometimes conflicting birthrights. Wolin's essays on early American political thought from the 1980s are remarkable, in part, for the prominent scholarly preoccupations they do not engage. Wolin is not primarily focused on traditions of political discourse, or with tracing the continuities and discontinuities of different theoretical paradigms or ideologies. He has very little to say about the historiographical debates between defenders of liberal consensus or the republican revival, and what he does say is mostly critical. Of the new civic republicans Wolin insightfully argues: "their categories serve to obscure questions of power and authority and to sever political activity from specific localities, thereby producing the abstract category participation" (Wolin, 1989, p. 5). The republican revivalists' focus on a tradition of political thought abstracted from social conflicts and power struggles "has the effect of muting the tensions between republicanism, with its strong historical attractions to elitism, and democracy, with its irreducibly populist strain" (Wolin, 1989, p. 5). Wolin presciently anticipated criticisms of the republican revival in political theory that would come to dominate critical discussions two decades later (McCormick, 2011).

Wolin sought democratic resources in America – sources of renewal – that were not reducible to an isolated tradition of political thought, discourse, or ideology, but rather drew from practical repertoires of political action and association. In this, as in so much else, he followed Tocqueville. Wolin did not seek to recover radical democracy as another tradition of political discourse alongside liberalism and republicanism, but to reveal it as a tradition of a different kind. Wolin had been a student of Louis Hartz, and one of Wolin's most provocative engagements with the debates between liberals and civic republicans was a distinctive and revealing criticism of the Hartz thesis. Wolin's objection to the liberal consensus paradigm was not primarily that it neglected alternative political discourses that thrived beyond the parameters of Lockean liberalism. His criticism was more fundamental: that there had been "feudalism" in America. Rather than construing feudalism as part of the old regime the American revolutionaries fought against, Wolin figured it as the local and decentralized political culture that they fought to preserve. For Wolin, feudalism had a very different meaning in the colonial American context. He describes it as the "system in which inheritance, with its implicit historicity, is the master notion" (Wolin, 1989, p. 74). Feudalism "serves as a metaphor for historicized politics," "a politics that over time inevitably produces inherited privileges and unequal powers. The result is a social space crowded with prior claims to unequal ownership and status and the transformation of a manifold of injustices (unlawful conquests and forcible seizures) from the dim past into vested rights of the present" (Wolin, 1989, p. 75). Drawing on the work of Tocqueville and Montesquieu, Wolin figures feudalism as the



archaic resource of renewal for a political culture that is democratic, participatory, localist and, overall, more egalitarian than elitist in ideology (although one could certainly argue with this latter claim).

Wolin's attempt to locate radical democratic resources of renewal in this archaic remnant was also an attempt to give "feudalism" a theoretical articulation it never had. "It did not gel into a coherent theory," Wolin writes, primarily because there was no available theoretical language to give adequate expression to a distinctive blend of ideas that seemed at once progressive and at the same time regressive in the sense of emphasizing values of place and locality" (Wolin, 1989, p. 132). Wolin acknowledged that these living archaisms have not always been radically egalitarian, emancipatory, or inclusive; they have not always been political movements of the left. "Religious fundamentalism, 'moralism,' and racial, religious, and ethnic prejudices," he writes, "belong to the same historical culture as traditions of local self-government, decentralized politics, participatory democracy" (Wolin, 1989, p. 79). Any attempt to assess Wolin's legacy for radical democratic theorizing – and for conceptualizing a distinctive radical democratic tradition – must confront these arguments directly.

This American archaism and odd feudalism was one of Wolin's sources of democratic renewal, but it was not the only one. He would also turn to the pamphlets of the English Civil War, the Old Oligarch's Constitution of the Athenians, the surprising and fugitive appearances of democracy in the margins of the traditions of Western political theory. Nicholas Xenos is right to say that Wolin attempted to articulate for us in theory what was essential to the "experience of democracy" (Xenos, 2001, p. 36). The incredible body of work Wolin left behind will be a continued source of provocation and inspiration for democratic theorists and democratic actors. Wolin argued that "democracy has never produced its own word-smiths" (Wolin, 1996c, p. 84). This is an exaggeration, but it is an exaggeration that reveals an important truth; it is what Adorno once called a true exaggeration. Wolin's work powerfully demonstrates the truth of that exaggeration while also being its most eloquent refutation.

## **Political theory: a vocation for democrats?**

### **Joan Tronto**

This contribution revisits Wolin's arguments in "Political Theory as a Vocation" (1969) (hereafter, PTV) in light of his late work as a theorist of contemporary democracy. On some level, these works seem in conflict with one another: "Political Theory as a Vocation" introduces us to the character Wolin called "the epic theorist." But what need would democratic citizens have for an epic theorist, or perhaps, for any theorist at all?



Wolin somewhat anticipated this question. He addressed it in the preface to the expanded edition of *Politics and Vision* (Wolin, 2004) (hereafter, PV2). There he wrote that his own views and commitments as a theorist had changed:

This, then, is not a revision but an envisioning of strikingly different forms of politics and theorizing from those discussed in the original. It is also, however, an attempt to bring to bear upon contemporary politics what I have learned from studying and teaching about the history of political theory. Far from being a handicap, a familiarity with the varied forms that, historically, political theory has taken may aid in the recognition of radically different recent and contemporary conceptions of the political and politics when they emerge (PV2, p. xv).

The tone of this passage is almost apologetic and certainly conditional. What, if anything, can we learn about democracy by putting the epic theorist of the “Vocation” essay in tension with Wolin’s later and much chastened description of his own role as a theorist, and what can that mean for the rest of us in pursuing the vocation of political theory?

Wolin’s main point in PTV was to suggest that the fascination with “method” had led to a “crisis in political education,” a closing off of political studies from a richer starting point of a “cultivated mind” that therefore resulted in “a world impervious to theory” (p. 1081). If anything, the concern about the absence of cultivated minds has become more serious than it was fifty years ago, as universities have divested themselves of their responsibility to be preservers and conveyors of culture, deciding instead to become part of a neoliberal regime of corporate governance. Students might now even object to having to follow a “method,” since it so constrains them from the rest of their too-busy lives. But let us instead focus only on what Wolin actually wrote about the passing away of a world that had not been “impervious to theory.” The crisis is one of the political education. What can that mean?

The theorists’ lament, that despite their sage ideas that they will not to be heard, is an old one. We encounter it in the opening lines of *Republic* where his interlocutors ask Socrates “suppose we won’t listen?” and in the prophets of the Old Testament, who observe how far the people have fallen from their righteous ways. But Wolin was not only lamenting the fact that the people are not listening to the theorists, as much as that is true. The problem anticipated in PTV is more serious, and becomes clear if we put the question a different way. Let us ask, other than political education, what could be the task of political theory?

Put this way, I want to suggest, several aspects of Wolin’s ideas become more clear to us. His disputes with other theorists make more sense, his never-ending hostility to political science becomes more legible. PTV was not without its critics at the time; Wolin’s own students Larry Spence and John Gunnell took aim at the text, albeit for different reasons. And the first party of what we’ve come to call the



“Cambridge School” was about to appear: Quentin Skinner’s “Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas” appeared in the same year as PTV. For Skinner and his followers, the de-historicized study of political ideas simply provided those who believed in any particular “ideas” a way to toot their own horns, make their own political arguments, and to do it under cover of being intelligent and learned. That is, it could confer a false authority to some bad ideas. It was (to use a favorite term of Wolin’s) an exercise in debunking the pretensions of more ambitious political theorists, Straussians, Marxists, and participant–observers of political life such as Wolin, alike.

It is not that Skinner objected to political education, he did, however, seem to object to the idea that political theory was a way to a broader political education. The only thing one could learn from studying the history of ideas was more modest: the goal was to recognize that even great political theorists and would-be political actors faced constraints shaped by the political language available to them. As a type of political education, such an approach presumed first, better to study history that to do it. But, if one wanted to do it, then certain presumptions were already in place: that one was able to act, i.e., agency, and that constraints were as important as boldness. This was not a political education from the student rebellions, it was not a political education for the dispossessed. It had more modest goals, to allow those who already knew something about the world to manage their goals better.

Part of the continuing excitement of the Cambridge School is that it won for political theory a room of its own in the great hall of political science. Political theory, too, could have a method. It could, in fact, have several little chambers. Another could go to the “Harvard School” of realist political theory, for example, who learned to avoid all forms of system (Sabl, 2011), except, of course, the systematic thought that a room of one’s own in a contemporary academic discipline is somehow enough.

Wolin’s concerns were different. It is important to go back to and look at the precise kind of dismissal that has occurred to political theory. It has to do not with method’s failure, but its success. A world subject to Baconian “knowledge is power” has become a world of remarkably greater power than could previously be imagined. Here is a passage from 1969, a year now considered to some to be among one of the more chaotic periods in recent American history:

In a fundamental sense, our world has become as perhaps no previous world has, the product of design, the product of theories about human structures deliberately created rather than historically articulated. But in another sense, the embodiment of theory in the world has resulted in a world impervious to theory. (PTV, p. 1083)

Now the question I raised before becomes more complex: what happens when the purpose of political theory is but a kind of political knowledge, and when the goal



of knowledge is to produce power? How and what kind of political education is then possible?

Wolin returned to this theme of theory as power, of knowledge as power, over and over again. It had appeared in the initial work on Hobbes in the first edition of *Politics and Vision* (1960, pp. 248–249) (hereafter, PV1) and in PTV. Not only had method made the world impervious to theory, but it has also “rendered epic theory superfluous,” as “leaders of the behavioral revolution claim, the irrelevance of epic theory” (PTV, p. 1081). Yet Wolin resisted this claim, and argued that “the world shows increasing signs of coming apart,” and yet it did not. Why not?

Wolin returned to this question in his book *Tocqueville Between Two Worlds* (Wolin, 2001). There, he carefully traced a “paradox of power,” where, though Tocqueville thought that “the most striking characteristic of the times is the powerlessness of both men and governments to direct the course of political and social changes,” (p. 13) Wolin observed that “the exercise of power was no longer associated with ruling.” (p. 14) Instead, Wolin writes, “By then the preoccupation of theorists had shifted from the acquisition of power to its production.” Creating power, and too much power (e.g., when Marx and Engels describe the collapsing bourgeois system in the *Communist Manifesto* as “too much civilization, too many goods, too much industry, too much commerce” (Carver, 1996, p. 6) required that the “modern project was not to renounce the commitment to increasing power but to find a saving formula whereby it could be rendered ever more predictable, ever more obedient” (p. 18). Wolin continued, “Theory is, uniquely, modernity’s way of constituting power, conversely, modern power has, uniquely, a theoretical constitution” (p. 20). The incapacity to see that theory has narrowed its focus to being a part of the developing system of power is what caused it to go awry. Surveying Bacon, Descartes, and Hobbes as the founders of this new theoretical regime, Wolin averred “A theory that could not be translated into practical works was adjudged incoherent according to modernity’s new standard for mental activity” (p. 24).

(There is, of course, another story of this kind of overarching power of humans that comes from a method: the commonality of language that preceded the building of the Tower of Babel. Wolin’s insistence of the role of science and a commitment to progress as a part of the story of productive power owes something, perhaps, to this earlier version of the story.)

Superpower, which appears in Wolin’s writings in the new millennium, in *Democracy Inc.* (Wolin, 2008) and in PV2, allows us to add another gloss to this theme. What is peculiar about Superpower is that it has now amassed so much power that it need no longer worry about its limits. It is all encompassing, and in part, is able to keep going forward because it is not a kind of flexible power. Wolin wrote



The political economy embodies a widespread consensus of an ironical sort.... The demos has been hammered into resignation, into fearful acceptance of the economy as the basic reality of its existence so huge, so sensitive, so ramifying its consequences that no group, party or political actors dare alter its fundamental structure (PV2, p. 578).

This despairing moment in Wolin's writing informed much of his writing in the 2000s. He described the chastened theorist's best way to understand his role in his 1999 essay as, "Political Theory: From Vocation to Invocation" (Wolin, 2000). Nevertheless, while it is possible to dwell upon the sad state of democracy, if we return to the question of political education, another possibility presents itself.

While most people turn to the language of neoliberal economics to describe this switch, Wolin does not. He surely understands that this is what has happened; he notes that as early as the eighteenth century, the goal was to "fashion the demos to fit economy rather than citizenship" (PV2, p. 405). We might read this as stubbornness on his part to hold on to a political vocabulary. But something else is going on, to repeat the framing of this contribution. Wolin still wanted theory to offer us a kind of political education. To do so, we have to know the ways in which theory is also tempted by, and implicated in, service to power. What would theory, in the service of Superpower, look like? I think this is the way to understand Wolin's critique of postmodernism in PV2.

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 whose precise characteristics are to be: centralized yet quick to react, essentially economic, founded on corporate capital, global, and best understood in developments over time. The cascades of "critical theory" and their postures of revolt, and the appetite for theoretical novelty, function as support rather than opposition.... (PV2, p. 567).

The danger is that all of the new and creative forms of political theorizing that have arisen in recent years are no guarantee against this hegemonic form of theory as power.

Wolin introduces two new categories in his 2000s books: Superpower and terrorism, Inverted Totalitarianism and fugitive democracy. At first these categories seem inapt, they seem to follow a framing of international v. national levels of analysis. They are political, not economic, categories. Indeed, though Wolin never made the point precisely this way, terrorism as the resistance to superpower seems to operate analogously to fugitive democracy's "escape" from inverted totalitarianism. It seems ironic that the hope of "power to the people" became instead, another part of a new blob, here, not the social, but lip service paid to democracy.



In PV2, Wolin made the case for fugitive democracy, among other ways, by declaring that the demos would not want to rule. (“The true question is not whether democracy can govern in the traditional sense, but why it would want to. Governing means manning and accommodating to bureaucratized institutions that, ipso facto, are hierarchical in structure and elitist, permanent rather than fugitive – in short, anti-democratic” (p. 602).)

Political theory’s great hope, democracy, has become pusillanimous, its conceptual frame a kind of theoretical sour grapes. Wolin ended the book noting that “change is the essence of post modern societies, yet decisions about the forms of change have been pre-empted by governmental, corporate, and (to a lesser extent) academic elites” (p. 605). And so he called for, “not... reconciliation” but “dissonance, not about democracy’s supplying legitimacy to totality but about nurturing a discordant democracy...discordant because, in being rooted in the ordinary, it affirms the value of limits” (pp. 605–606).

Is “discord” the only form that contemporary political education allows? If we read Wolin as despairing, then I think we read him as having surrendered the commitment to political education too quickly. The right question to ask requires us to go back and ask: what might political education look like in an age of Superpower?

Wolin did not use the term “epic theory” in PV1 or PV2. This bold (too bold?) claim of 1969 specified two aspects of such epic theory. “The first feature shared by epic theorists has to do with magnitudes. By an act of thought, the theorist seeks to reassemble the whole political world” (PTV, p. 1078). “The second aspect of epic theory can be brought out if we look upon theory not only as a structure of formal features, but also as a structure of intentions.” For Wolin, the most important of these “controlling purposes” were to focus on the common purpose of people, and to recognize crisis as a systematic derangement.

Perhaps epic theory no longer appealed to Wolin because the association of theory with a kind of power poisoned the notion of an “epic theorist” for him. But in closing, let me suggest an alternative way to read PV2, one that can be powerful and nonetheless resist the gravitational pull of Superpower/inverted totalitarianism. To make the point, I return to a passage from John Dewey that Wolin described as a “properly respectful epigraph” for Dewey’s thought:

...the democratic road is the hard one to take. It is the road which places the greatest burden of responsibility upon the greatest number of human beings (p. 519).

It is worth noting that the word “responsibility” enters English around the same time that Wolin described the shift from power as something to acquire to power as something to produce, in the mid-seventeenth century. There can be no responsibility without power. While power is being produced, it is also producing, as Dewey grasps and yet misunderstands, greater responsibilities. That these



responsibilities are overwhelming if we take them seriously is surely one of the lessons of the second half of the twentieth century. What would it mean, though, for democracy not to flee and become fugitive, but to take up the yoke, this “burden of responsibility,” genuinely, that is, for democratic citizens to care about all others as well as themselves?

Political theory’s power can no longer come from its simple rehearsal, expecting either that “the truth will set you free” or that reading Plato automatically translates into knowing how to live a good life. It can no longer come from its oppositional place, because it is difficult, Wolin advised, to know whether one is in a genuine place of opposition or another endlessly contestable “critical” node. As with the ancient prophets, perhaps our task as theorists is not to find the new, but to begin a process of calling back to more foundational democratic processes in which, from the ground up, we try to rethink the nature of responsibilities for ourselves, our past, our future, and the world in which we live.

Even when democracy’s best moments are thus “fugitive,” this is no justification for political theory to become fugitive as well. The task for political theorists who still consider themselves democrats is not to find some more gems hidden in the history of political thought to polish, nor to shed light on some small pockets of political life that appear democratic, nor to flee the trappings of power, as if this were possible. It is, instead, to take on the rather epic task of trying to create a form of political education in a time when neither politics nor education are given much intrinsic value. In an age in which corporatized colleges and universities extol a type of “civic engagement” (e.g., McCartney *et al*, 2013), we see another example of what Wolin deemed Superpower’s “flexibility” as the very idea of political education is rendered innocuous.

McIvor (2016), after his careful reading of Wolin’s work, suggests a useful place to begin a re-working of contemporary political education is with the concept of citizenship, developing what Wolin called the “multiple civic self.” But how can we do so, when we are living in a time that is deeply antagonistic to all forms of ambiguity, to complex as opposed to simplistic solutions, to any form of thought that has no financial payoff? It is here that I want to return to the promise of epic theory from someone who appreciated what such learning could bring. As Wolin wrote, methodism (and we might add here, even theoretical methodism) “threatens the meditative culture which nourishes all creativity. That culture is the source of the qualities crucial to theorizing: Playfulness, concern, the juxtaposition of contraries, and astonishment at the variety and subtle interconnection of things” (PTV, p. 1073). We might well ask, what kind of political, social, economic, and cultural institutions are needed to make such a meditative culture (to invoke Audre Lorde) “not a luxury” (Lorde 1984)? What are we saying, even as radical democrats, if we say that epic theory is passé? That the task ahead is made well-





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nigh impossible by the culture in which we now live is no excuse not to try to remain committed to this difficult form of political education.

## On interpreting Hobbes politically

**Antonio Y. Vázquez-Arroyo**

Political Theory doesn't have "implications" for politics; rather politics has implications for theory. ...political theorizing is not prompted because something is wrong with theories about politics, but because something is fundamentally wrong with the political world. Sheldon S. Wolin, "History and Method" (Wolin, 1986, p. 50).

One of Sheldon S. Wolin's best-known precepts is his understanding of political theory first as a civic activity and, only secondarily, as an academic endeavor; an ordering of priorities that placed him at odds with the increasing professionalization of the political theory subfield during the last thirty years.<sup>6</sup> Wolin steadfastly asserted this priority even in his most intellectually demanding work, *Tocqueville Between Two Worlds* (2001), in which theoretical and intellectual contexts are carefully delineated, construed, and thus carefully adduced, as part of a supremely political interpretation of Tocqueville's political theory, his genres of reflection, his predicaments of power and ours. And as this second masterpiece makes obvious to anyone who carefully reads it, this order of priorities never led Wolin to tendentious, let alone arbitrary, interpretations. Rather, it became part of his sui generis approach to the interpretation of the history of political theory, a perspectival approach defined by a bi-directionality that focused on both the sources nourishing theoretical formulation in a given situation and their aftermaths (see Vázquez-Arroyo, 2015, pp. 146–163).

*Politics and Vision* articulates Wolin's perspectival approach not only in the recurrence of the term throughout the book but also in its form. Not a comprehensive history of political thought, the book tacitly severs theory from the altogether looser category of thought, and focuses on the former by offering a "historical perspective;" a "historical approach" concerned with the nature of theory and the political by zoning in on particular thinkers, seismic historical moments and political changes, in order to reflect on the meaning of these two terms (Wolin, 2004, p. xxiii). Thus, what has struck some readers as the odd architecture of the volume responded to this impulse: separate chapters on Luther and Calvin and Liberalism; Church fathers occupying more space than Aquinas; and Durkheim and Saint Simon analytically dislodging Marx, Tocqueville, and Rousseau. Retrospectively, Wolin characterized *Politics and Vision* as simultaneously enacting and defending "a historical approach to the practice of political theory" (Wolin, 1986, p. 50).



But to speak of Wolin's approach in the singular already obfuscates more than it enlightens. Despite the obvious continuities in his formulation of political theory and its vocation, there are discernable and very significant shifts in his approach to the history of political theory over a career that spanned six decades. If in *Politics and Vision* Wolin on occasion speaks of the history of political theory in the singular, subsequent reflections led him to entertain the possibility of "a political and theoretical history of political theory," which ultimately amounted to "histories of theories" (Wolin, 1994c, p. 19). From the seventies on, he increasingly zoned in on the changes in the meaning and nature of "theory" and how there are genres of political theorizing beyond "philosophy" and "theory" as classically understood, as well as different conceptions of history, thus fully acknowledging the theoretical complexity of historical inquiry, its multiple, often contested, meanings and forms (Wolin, 1986, p. 64).

Yet if there is one continuous theme it is found in terms already announced in the subtitle of *Politics and Vision*, "continuity and innovation." Without undue simplification, one can suggest that the continuity resides in the aforementioned order of priorities and the conviction that the study of political theory constituted a crucial component in the political education of citizens. Innovations emerge as a corollary of these two core tenets. Stated differently, as the political situations to which Wolin was responding continued to evolve, so did the ways in which he would approach the history of political theory, and the different intellectual currents within this received tradition.

Reflecting theoretically and politically about the present, accordingly, always assumes a historical perspective. The centrality of this is conveyed in several verses of T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*, which are partly quoted in *Politics and Vision* and characterized as bearing "the moral" of Wolin's conception of political theory as a tradition of discourse:

Time present and time past  
Are both perhaps present in time future  
And time future contained in time past.  
...  
Neither from nor towards; at the still point, there the dance is,  
But neither arrest nor movement. And do not call it fixity,  
Where past and future are gathered. Neither movement from nor  
towards,  
Neither ascent nor decline (Eliot, 2004, pp. 171, 173).

Neither ascent, nor decline; instead, reflection out of a received tradition, a moment of thinking that is conceived as an interval of stillness, of reflection. Like Eliot's dance, it is an act of imagination that gathers the past as historicity and prefigures a future mediated by the present in order to reflect about a present situation and its historically constituted predicaments, a situation suggesting that something is



fundamentally wrong with the political world, with *what is*, its orderings and imperatives. But it is the dialectical bi-directionality figured in Eliot's poem that ultimately captures the gist of it all: the presence of a past always mediating but never determining the present; and a present that would mediate any prefiguration of the future and a figure of the future that could only have a fighting chance if the present is recovered and redressed.

The importance of historical perspectivism thus resides in its role in the political education of present-day citizens and would-be political actors. It roughly consists of three dimensions: first, that of familiarizing oneself with a vocabulary deployed with critical and intellectual rigor in the past in order to better make sense of one's own political present, not in order to find solutions to present-day problems, but to rather apprehending it more adequately and critically; second, familiarity of this relatively stable vocabulary and the ways in which prior thinkers have transformed, sometimes even transmogrified, its meaning for political and intellectual reasons, is a condition of possibility for political literacy – namely, for a more rigorous and realist apprehension and conceptualization, grasping and assessment, of the stakes involved in contemporary controversies, and how these controversies may be related to the fundamental or systematic nature of the questions and problems these reflect upon or symptomatize; third, as an illustration of how to think about politics and political life in a theoretically demanding way.

The latter is of fundamental importance for Wolin, as political phenomena have become increasingly decentered and dispersed – Wolin's foremost example in *Politics and Vision* was “the corporation” and its conscription and sublimation of the language of participation and responsibility – but so has the theoretical vocation, at least from the onset of Reaganism on (Wolin, 2004, pp. 338–339). *Politics and Vision* thus constitutes the first formulation of Wolin's arresting critique of both theories and movements that neglect political phenomena as a distinctive set of problems and thus considers these as either epiphenomenal or as occasional subject matter in the ever-expanding world of Theory; a world in which Theory has immediate implications for politics rather than politics, qua an external historical reality, interrogating theory.

Recently, Corey Robin has drawn attention to how Wolin interpretations of figures in the history of political thought exhibit a unique combination of contextualism and close reading (Robin, 2015, p. 166).<sup>7</sup> The historicism involved in providing political, theoretical, and intellectual contexts is frequently found in the deep scene-setting found in Wolin's finest essays, where intellectual and theoretical contexts frequently take precedence against the background of an acute historical sense of the epoch the theorist in question was located. The close readings, in contrast, are particularly memorable in their adeptness at poring over the meaning of silences in a text, often found at the level of the sentence and its cadences, and the rhetorical devices a particular thinker deploys to think



theoretically about her political present, and to draw, even lure, his audience into her thought-world and the political practices and principles it upholds.

Yet these are two approaches, each demanding its own skillset, that many interpreters have perforce kept them apart: whereas close readers of texts often neglect any deep scene-setting in their interpretations, or simply lack the necessary historical sense, historians of political thought mostly serve as technicians of political thought that diligently reconstruct contexts but seldom dwell on the rhetorical layers and literary cadences of a formulation and its place in a broader diachronic tradition of political discourse. Part of Wolin's originality as an interpreter was his inimitable ability to bring the two into a single field of vision.

Wolin's perspectival approach to the history of political theory and its historicity is most clearly seen in his several engagements with Thomas Hobbes's political thought. Over a span of thirty years, he crafted three major interpretations of this thinker that are strikingly dissimilar. But the unlikeness of these engagements betrays a moment of continuity in what are otherwise strikingly different interpretations, a continuity of approach to the historicity of political thought, and the vocation of political theory and its role in tending the political literacy of citizens. This continuity is intimately related to the multivalent contexts in Wolin's practice, once hermeneutically understood. Each engagement with Hobbes was situated in a particular context – Wolin's, his intellectual preoccupations, and the increasing desire to reflect on the despairing political situation of the United States – that led to a productive engagement with Hobbes, his thought forms and literary cadences, in relation to different theoretical, intellectual, and political contexts.

In *Politics and Vision*, for instance, Hobbes is contextualized in relationship to the tradition of discourse the book presents, especially as he continues a long motif within that tradition: the need to respond to crises. Alongside Machiavelli, Wolin argues, Hobbes stands at the center of a “revival of political creativity” in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (Wolin, 2004, p. 216ff.). And like Machiavelli, Hobbes postulated an autonomization of political phenomena. Even so, Hobbes's defense of the autonomy of political phenomena is more radical than the Florentine's in at least one respect. It dirempts political thought from the intractability of history and culture by way of his deployment of a new science whose de-historicized abstractions constitute the basis upon which Hobbes's passion for order is expressed. A severance of political thought from the thickness of past traditions, its resources and encumbrances, which sets Hobbes apart from not only Machiavelli, but also from radical innovators like Calvin and Luther: “Where Machiavelli's thought had contained only some striking anticipations of the coming modes of scientific thought and could therefore combine modernity with a cult of antiquity, and while Luther and Calvin might skirt the Middle Ages to recapture the wisdom of Augustine and the simplicity of Apostolic teachings, Hobbes wrote from the midst of a scientific revolution that seemed to snap the continuity between the present and the past, exposing the wisdom of the ancients as



convenient targets for sarcasm” (Wolin, 2004, p. 217). Hobbes is thus contextualized in terms of the tradition of discourse that is political theory and his innovation is brought to relief by way of a contrast with other radical innovators who nevertheless retain sediments of the past in ways that Hobbes’s autonomization of political thought from history and tradition did not.

It is along these lines that Hobbes is presented as the figure inaugurating the social contract tradition, which Wolin characterized as “a creative act of political imagination,” a process of creative destruction akin to Francis Bacon dictum: “On waxen tablets you cannot write anything new until you rub out the old. With the mind it is not so; there you cannot rub out the old till you have written in the new” (Wolin, 2001, p. 32). And the new would be written in the language of science, although a language not entirely exfoliated of rhetoric and metaphor. The linguistic order conjured up by this “sardonic moralist,” therefore, constitutes a radical attempt to anchor authority by way of a conception of the state of nature as a permanent possibility allegorizing the ever-present threat of anarchy and the breakdown of public authority (Wolin, 2004, p. 235ff.).

Although Wolin registered the momentous changes that Hobbes introduced to the tradition of political theory, the chapter of *Politics and Vision* hardly dwells on its power effects, nor did he dwell on the role of rhetoric and metaphor in the construction of Hobbes imposing but ultimately very fragile construction. Indeed, even when he grasped the ways in which Hobbes dislodged any ideas of an “engaged citizen,” Wolin understates the sources of power in Hobbes’s conceptualization of political life (Wolin, 2004, p. 246). Indeed, in open contrast to his last sustained engagement with Hobbes, the essay “Hobbes and the Culture of Despotism,” where the abstractions and ruses of devices like a state of nature are sharply criticized, in *Politics and Vision* the actual content of the scientific revolution, its exact contours and the forms of power it relied on or aimed at producing, remain unspecified. The emphasis is rather placed on how Hobbes creatively built upon these intellectual developments to fundamentally transform the nature of political theorizing. But amidst the radical transformations Hobbes’s political theory emblemized, there remain some recurrent themes, such as the link between chaos and creativity, and the drive to restore meaning in a time of crises, which still situated him in the tradition of western political thought.

Roughly a decade later, Wolin returned to Hobbes in a different political and intellectual context. If *Politics and Vision* was conceived and written during the Eisenhower era, a time in which political theory was considered defunct or simply history of ideas, “Hobbes and the Epic Tradition of Political Theory” was crafted at the tail end of the sixties and in the context of Behaviorist ascendance. In these new contexts, the idea of “crisis” is reemphasized, as is the literary and rhetorical quality of political theory, but with the goal of recapturing “what tends to get lost in the age of analysis: the human excitement which moves the theorist” (Wolin, 1970, p. 4). At the very out of “Hobbes and the Epic Tradition of Political Theory”



Wolin establishes the relevant context for his inquiry, as well as its form. Not only he aimed at “the informing intention which governed Hobbes’s political thought,” but unlike recent commentators – and he lists Strauss, Oakeshott, Polin, and Macpherson – Wolin focused on intentionality had a different critical edge: “the way in which intention affects style and substance” (Wolin, 1970, p. 4). The upshot: the most literary of all of Wolin’s interpretations, one adept at the formal qualities of Hobbes’s political thought, his style, even the cadences of his sentences, and how all of it bear upon the content of his political thought. In this essay, the scene-setting is mostly intellectual and literary, with particular focus on the epic as a literary form.

Hobbes is then cast in terms of “an epic tradition in political,” which Wolin systematically unveils in the essay. Indeed, after announcing his intention, Wolin devotes the next nine pages of his essay to laying out the broad contours of this current within western political thought. Unlike heroic poetry, Wolin writes, which celebrates the hero whose deeds it recounts, the hero of the epic tradition of political theory is the theorist. Rather than a self-effacing figure, the theorist draws attention to himself, “the theorist-creator” (Wolin, 1970, pp. 19, 29).

After establishing this intellectual context from an eminent literary perspective, Wolin proceeds to make his case by carefully bringing together the several instances in Hobbes’s writings in which he expresses his ambitions and stakes out his claim of originality. As Hobbes’s metaphors clearly suggest, Wolin argues, Hobbes had monotheistic ambitions, which account for *Leviathan’s* “fullness of scope and boldness of execution” (Wolin, 1970, p. 23). He thus wrote the epic work of political theory, if there ever was one, while “combining the pictorial vividness of the epic with the relentless precision of logic” (Wolin, 1970, p. 24). Of course, the combination of these two motifs was not always stable and Wolin goes on to suggest that once read immanently the literary architecture of the book mostly had the upper hand. Here’s Wolin’s wonderful formulation:

*Leviathan* itself is a metaphor, while the argument supporting it is but an extended metaphor, a superb and sustained display of imagination and fancy and not always restrained by “judgment.” Recall the vivid imagery of the state of nature; or the extravagant discussion of the human passions; or the translation of the state into the language of mechanism; or the fanciful act whereby men covenant themselves into society; or the mock-heroic assault on the Kingdom of Fairies. No further comment is needed except that Hobbes had been more honest in his *Autobiography*, where he had written that his life had been spent serving peace and “her companions, the Muses” (Wolin, 1970, p. 38–39).

Wolin’s interpretation establishes the connections between the rhetorical structure of the work and the claims of Hobbes’s *Autobiography*, and adduces these to support his interpretation of the actual content of Hobbes’s political theory to great



effect. One of its unexpected results is the emphasis placed not on the architectonics of sovereignty, but on how in *Leviathan* Hobbes aimed at nothing less than “transforming the political culture of his society” (Wolin, 1970, p. 49).

Yet Wolin does not stop there. Rather, this interpretation of *Leviathan* leads him to return to his earlier question of the theorist as hero. But this time he reads Hobbes’s heroic deeds against the background of his own role in the defining political episode of Hobbes’s lifetime: the English Civil War. With a touch of causticity, Wolin quickly reminds the reader of Hobbes’s less than heroic actions during the civil war and its immediate aftermath. And in a move that strikes the reader as tangential to what precedes it, Wolin unexpectedly suggests that Hobbes’s prudential actions actually complement the epic drive of his theory. The conclusion at once clinches Wolin’s interpretation and also opens up a whole new problematic that could easily be the point of departure to a whole different interpretation of Hobbes. Wolin’s concluding paragraph is memorable:

The society of *Leviathan* is the antihero’s utopia: a society of formal equality, where all subjects have been humbled and made dependent upon the sovereign for the security of their lives, goods, rights, and status. It is a utopia for those who wish to be rid of the anxieties produced by political instability so that they may concentrate upon “industry” and “culture of the earth” and all of the other goods of “commodious living,” which “natural philosophy” and mathematics make possible. The political epic of the antihero proves, in the end, to be an attempted epitaph to politics, another denial of the ancient hope of a public setting where men may act nobly in the furtherance of the common good, another way of absolving men of complicity and guilt for their common predicaments (Wolin, 1970, p. 50).

It is precisely the question of political culture and how it relates to the absolution of complicity and responsibility for common predicaments that Wolin took up in 1988, twenty years after his unveiling of an epic Hobbes. But “Hobbes and the Culture of Despotism” does more than picking up and expanding upon these times. In this essay, Wolin contextualizes Hobbes in terms of the relationship between knowledge and power, the forms of elitism a particular configuration of this relationship sanctions in the context of “a high-tech society,” and the principles in which such rule is legitimized. And along these lines, Wolin explores the ways in which technocratic rule is increasingly exercised and normalized in the name of science and expertise.

This set of concerns is framed in relationship to Karl Popper’s famous polemic against Plato in *The Open Society and its Enemies*. Wolin, however, turns the tables on Popper and while showing the tendentious nature of Popper’s diatribe he also reveals something else: by placing the debate against the background of the emergence and dominance of the so-called “Technological Society” in advanced



capitalist social forms, Wolin shows how “rule-by-knowledge” is a Popperian conceit that is even more despotic than Plato’s figuration of the Philosopher King. It amounts to a novel form of the “tyranny of reason” whose antidemocratic implications resulted not from the obvious elitism involved; rather, these “owe more to certain political views embedded in conceptions of technical knowledge than to a consciously elitist conception of politics” (Wolin, 1990, p. 12). Wolin offers the following formulation:

What goes unnoticed is the peculiarity of the assumption that “principles of knowledge” should “rule,” that the nature of the one is fitted to the nature of the other, that truth and power have not only complementary structures but mimetic ones, that there is a power-structure to truth and a truth-structure to power. The sense in which elitism is a “necessary” feature of advanced societies may have less to do with a theory of politics than with an imperative whose political character is no longer recognized. The imperative is to organize political power in order to best exploit the structural character of truth while concealing from exploiters and especially the exploited the political elements that have helped to constitute the understanding of truth and shaped its structure (Wolin, 1990, pp. 12–13).

For Wolin, this politics of knowledge, and the *mentalité* it fosters, can already be seen at work in the Enlightenment, especially in the writings of the D’Alambert, Turgot, and, later on, Condorcet, with afterlives in Comte and the shadow his positivism cast upon the twentieth century. This is what Wolin calls the “culture of despotism; i.e., a social mentality and practice that enable power to operate unhindered” (Wolin, 1990, p. 17).

Bacon and Hobbes deeply influenced the emergence of this mentality, especially Hobbes in whose political theory, Wolin argues, several of the strands associated with this culture first found systematic expression; indeed, Hobbes is presented as “the first modern in whom a despotic mentality was at work” (Wolin, 1990, p. 19). By thus setting the scene, Wolin proceeds to offer his most critical interpretation of Hobbes, an interpretation in which some of the questions previously posed in a less critical light emerged in sharper relief, say, his conception of a rationalized political culture, the abstract depersonalization of ruling, and the upending of any participatory understanding of political rule.

But while breaking new ground in this essay, this new Hobbes is not entirely severed from some of Wolin’s earliest concerns. Think, for instance, of the organizational drive at work in the theoretical architecture of *Leviathan* and how for Wolin it correlates and fosters the forms of depoliticization and expert-rule. It is apropos of this concern that perhaps the most remarkable insight of Wolin’s interpretation of the despotic impulse emerges: the ways in which the culture of despotism manages the feat of operating unhindered. Organization as a term does not appear in *Leviathan*, Wolin argues, because Hobbes couched his arguments for





a “political society as a social scientific construction by transforming older political language,” thus the radical transformation his proposed order entailed could be rhetorically presented as less so (Wolin, 1990, p. 23).

This interpretation of Hobbes’s despotic drive, however, is hardly just an exercise of unveiling and denouncing a hidden motif in the history of political thought. By interpreting Hobbes along these lines, he sheds light on the structure of Hobbes’s political theory and originally recasts one of its basic assumptions: equality, something that has led some interpreters to suggest that Hobbes was some sort of proto-democrat. Against any vindication of the egalitarian moment of Hobbes’s political thought, Wolin shows “equality is the consequence of a methodological need rather than a normative claim” (Wolin, 1990, p. 32). For there is a “refractory” quality between the Hobbesian construction of sovereignty and the “abstract subject of a despotic theory,” and the “natural equality which allows for the covenant that makes society possible also makes absolutism necessary” (Wolin, 1990, pp. 31, 33). Equality is a theoretical necessity whose positing cannot be sliced and diced from the inner coherence of *Leviathan’s* overarching argument.

At a time when the end of the cold war was in sight, and along with it the triumph of capitalist modernity, Wolin’s concern with “the culture of despotism” first articulated by Hobbes was as prescient as it was unwelcomed. It decentered despotism, severed it from fantasies about totalitarian despots, and drew attention to strictures of power and the cultural patterns sustaining them.

One Hobbes, one interpreter, yet three markedly different interpretations: what accounts for such variation? In light of Wolin’s perspectival approach to the historicity of political thought, Wolin’s three very different interpretations correspond to three different perspectives whose common denominator is the task of interpreting Hobbes politically. In doing so, Wolin’s interpretations embody a unique combination of the attributes T.S. Eliot associated with criticism at its best: “sensitiveness, erudition, sense of fact and sense of history, and generalizing power” (Eliot, 1975, p. 57). Wolin’s interpretations of Hobbes exhibit all of these qualities but, unlike Eliot and his idealized critic, these are not put at the service of cultural hierarchy and elitism. In these essays, contextualization thus emerges as a corollary of interpretation, as an eminently political and theoretical decision that Wolin pondered in terms of the intellectual, historical, and political contexts of both text and interpreter. Yet a process of contextualization bound to be perspectival, as in *Politics and Vision*, the book that inaugurated, clearly staged and demonstrated this approach. Each essay opens up a new perspective, a new vista on Hobbes from the perspective of Wolin’s own theoretical and political concerns, which, in turn, were a response to his political situation.

In “Tradition and Individual Talent,” Eliot writes about how to be capable of the “great labor” required to “obtain” the tradition, the poet needs “a historical sense” that “involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence;” furthermore, “he is not likely to know what is to be done unless he lives



in what is not merely the present, but the present moment of the past, unless he is conscious, not of what is dead, but of what is already living” (Eliot, 1975, pp. 38, 44). Wolin’s critical inheritance of political theory, qua tradition of discourse, combines these qualities, including the hard labor required to genuinely inherit it, an acute sense of the present, and of the presence of the past, but these are placed at the service of recovering the present. The task of the political theorists is that of “retrieving a receding democratic present,” while critically mapping the forms of power and collective mentalities depleting it (Wolin, 2001, p. 9).

## **Totalitarian Democracy Reditio**

**Nicholas Xenos**

It is easy to say that we fight against the totalitarian idea; it is less easy to admit that to fight against it successfully means running grave risks of becoming like our enemy. Harold J. Laski, *Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time* (1943, p. 179)

In the original, 1960 edition of *Politics and Vision*, Sheldon S. Wolin referred approvingly on two occasions to Jacob Talmon’s once influential study, *The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy*. Written in the immediate post-World War Two period and published in 1952, Talmon explained in his Introduction that his book was “an attempt to show that concurrently with the liberal type of democracy there emerged from the same premises in the eighteenth century a trend towards what we propose to call the totalitarian type of democracy .... The tension between [these two currents] has constituted an important chapter in modern history, and has now become the most vital issue of our time” (Talmon, 1970, p. 1). Wolin himself struggled to distinguish between what he termed liberalism and “radical democracy,” and his first reference to Talmon was on this distinction (Wolin, 2004, p. 263 and n. 9, p. 657). However, in the expanded second edition of his book, which marks, in Wolin’s words, his “journey from liberalism to democracy,” the only reference to Talmon is pejorative, claiming that Talmon “proceeded to invent a new and ominous regime-form, ‘totalitarian democracy,’ and endowed it with a genealogy stretching back to Rousseau’s ‘general will’ and the French revolutionary Terror.” Wolin further pointed out the paradox that while democracy and totalitarianism had been taken to be opposites during the war, in its aftermath “totalitarianism was now being depicted as a version of democracy.” He concludes that, “Totalitarian democracy, then, was a critical construction, reflective of a deep suspicion of collective action. It justified the idea of an attenuated democracy dissociated from political action and identified instead with protecting individual rights and promoting economic growth” (Wolin, 2004, p. 521 and note 129,



p. 722). And in the preface to the expanded edition of *Politics and Vision*, Wolin deploys the term “inverted totalitarianism” to describe what he sees as the antidemocratic spawn of liberalism wedded to the modern state.

In this contribution, I will recount Talmon’s notion of totalitarian democracy and briefly describe several accounts preceding his of the relationship between a particular understanding of democracy and its threat to liberty. I will then contrast Wolin’s interpretation of democracy and totalitarianism to these in order to highlight certain features of his political theory. Further, I will ask how Wolin’s notion of “fugitive democracy” corresponds to the form of power represented in the “regime form” of inverted totalitarianism.

Along with Talmon, Wolin cites an essay by George H. Sabine in reference to the distinction between liberalism and radical democracy. Sabine, in turn following the lead of E.H. Carr, traces two trajectories of what he calls democratic theory. One is associated with the Puritan Revolution, finds its philosopher in John Locke, and emphasizes the freedom of minorities, principally religious minorities in the form of Protestant churches. The other is associated with the French Revolution, follows the political theory of Rousseau, which predates it, and places the equality of citizens at its center. Sabine thus attributes the familiar distinction between liberty and equality to two relatively distinct traditions of democratic thought. The apparent tension between these had often been noted, especially after Tocqueville, and so, “in the accusations of its enemies, both conservative and radical, the democratic argument seemed to be caught in a dilemma: the more liberty the less equality, and the more equality the less liberty. Its more liberal friends, like John Stuart Mill, were more than half afraid that the accusation was true” (Sabine, 1952, p. 452). But Sabine shows that the evolution of democratic government in the nineteenth century combined both traditions, with the British introducing an egalitarian expansion of the suffrage while the French took measures to protect freedom of association. His larger intention is to demonstrate that democracy consists in a practice aiming at an institutional structure that recognizes both the individuality and equality of citizens and the groups and associations beneath the level of the state with which citizens willingly identify. Sabine’s political purpose was to draw attention to informal inequalities among and between groups that results in “what is in effect second-class citizenship” for individuals of variously defined minorities of race or religion (Sabine, 1952, p. 473).

In the course of his argument, Sabine makes several observations of particular relevance here. He notes that in Rousseau’s schema, the individual’s “personal will, when properly understood, is identical with the General Will of the society, this Will is identical with morality, is infallibly right, and quite exhausts the citizen’s will when he has contributed to forming a consensus of the group. If he imagines his interest to be otherwise, he is mistaken, and if he is coerced, he is ‘forced to be free’” (Sabine, 1952, p. 464). And for Rousseau, all private interests



are a threat to the public interest by virtue of simply being private. Sabine concludes that “Rousseau’s version of democracy, therefore, is not in any fundamental sense incompatible with absolute government, provided absolutism can claim to speak for ‘the people’” (Sabine, 1952, p. 464). While Sabine notes that others have pointed out this compatibility, it was unanticipated by Rousseau, though logically consistent with his vision of individuality. “The absolutely sovereign and omniscient state,” Sabine observes, “is the logical correlate of a society which consists of atomic individuals” (Sabine, 1952, p. 467). And in such a context, devoid of all other forms of social distinction, Sabine finds it unsurprising that property assumed the crucial role it did in defining property rights in nineteenth-century France, thus justifying the Marxist criticism of bourgeois democracy as plutocracy. “The individualist radicalism of the Revolution,” he writes,

gave place to the class radicalism of the nineteenth century and the present. What the two types of radicalism had in common was a form of individualism that flattened down individuality into mere likeness of kind, in the one case of man in the abstract or citizenship, in the other of membership in a social class... The identification of society with mass, and of democracy with the action of individuals in the mass, is not a theoretical error only but a well-authenticated part of the mechanics of dictatorship. That it spells the death of political democracy is not a matter of speculation (Sabine, 1952, p. 467).

As proof, Sabine offers the recent history of Germany, where the National Socialists destroyed independent labor unions and the history of single-party states in general.

In a footnote, Sabine mentions that the suggestion of E.H. Carr’s, which had inspired his own reflections, has been developed by Talmon in a book published after the completion of his essay (Sabine, 1952, p. 451). *The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy* was originally intended as the first part of a trilogy. The second volume, published in 1960 and entitled *Political Messianism: The Romantic Phase*, takes up Talmon’s narrative where the first book leaves off. *Origins* traces its theme in French thought from the mid-eighteenth century through the Babouvist conspiracy of 1796. *Political Messianism* carries the story forward from Saint Simon to incorporate the 1848 revolutions in Western Europe, though it seems the original intent was to extend the story through the events of the Paris Commune, after which “the heirs of the Jacobin tradition abandoned violence and began to compete for power by legal means. They entered parliaments and governments and were incorporated by degrees into the line of the democracies. The Revolutionary spirit now spread eastwards until it found its natural home in Russia, where it received a new intensity from the resentment created by generations of oppression and the pre-disposition of the Slavs to Messianism” (Talmon, 1970, pp. 252–253). The unwritten third volume would thus have been devoted to democratic totalitarianism in Eastern Europe.



Several things are clear from this plan and its main themes. Unlike Sabine, Talmon is clearly involved in a regressive enterprise, working backward from the Russian Revolution and taking a form of so-called totalitarianism as both the starting point and the outcome of his investigation. Second is the intertwining of the concepts of democracy, totalitarianism, messianism, and revolution. Third is the claim that what had been one strand of western political thought and action had become separated out and was now in external opposition, represented by the Soviet Bloc, to a triumphant strain devoid of its dangers and errors.

Talmon has little to say about the liberal form of democracy he champions. It is “empirical” and limited in its scope, whereas the totalitarian form “may be called political Messianism in the sense that it postulates a preordained, harmonious and perfect scheme of things, to which men are irresistibly driven, and at which they are bound to arrive. It recognizes ultimately only one plane of existence, the political” (Talmon, 1970, p. 2). On the liberal side stand Benjamin Constant, Mme. de Staël, John Stuart Mill, Lord Acton, and Reinhold Niebuhr; on the other, Rousseau, Robespierre, Babeuf, Hegel, and Marx. The shadows of Tocqueville and Burke are cast throughout. But Talmon finds a common root to the two kinds of democracy in the concept of liberty, rather than in a Tocquevillian opposition (also shared by Acton and Niebuhr and others) between liberty and equality. The difference lies in the approach to liberty, with the liberal trend finding it “in spontaneity and the absence of coercion,” while “the other believes it to be realized only in the pursuit and attainment of an absolute collective purpose” (Talmon, 1970, p. 2). It is the absolute quality of the latter that causes Talmon to characterize it as Messianic. Talmon’s Burkean side is manifested in his claim that in the second half of the eighteenth century an epochal change occurred. “Men were gripped,” he writes, “by the idea that the conditions, a product of faith, time and custom, in which they and their forefathers had been living, were unnatural and had all to be replaced by deliberately planned uniform patterns, which would be natural and rational” (Talmon, 1970, p. 4). Talmon’s combination of a laissez-faire notion of spontaneity with a Tory admiration of time, custom, and faith indicates a hybrid conception of liberalism defined more by what it is not than by a coherently positive doctrine.

Talmon makes a further distinction, between Right and Left totalitarianisms, totalitarian democracy being representative of the latter. Left totalitarianism, despite its culmination in a collective purpose, begins with the individual and with reason, Talmon claims, while that of the Right takes groups, “historic, racial and organic entities,” as its material. The result is that totalitarianism of the Right does not generate the “universal creeds” that are a signature element of the Left. Instead, totalitarianism of the Right aims at stirring the individual toward “what is nowadays called a wholly satisfying experience in a collective élan, quickened by mass emotion and the impact of impressive exploits; in brief, the myth.” Further, while totalitarian democracy rests on “the essential goodness and perfectibility of human nature[, t]he Right declares man to be weak and corrupt.” Consequently, the



Right views coercion as a permanent and continuous instrument of social control, while for the Left, “force is used only in order to quicken the pace of man’s progress to perfection and social harmony. It is thus legitimate to use the term democracy in reference to totalitarianism of the Left. The term could not be applied to totalitarianism of the Right” (Talmon, 1970, p. 4).

Wolin’s description of the trajectory of Talmon’s narrative, quoted above, is accurate. The key constituents are Rousseau and the Jacobins. Talmon’s entire conceptual edifice rests on the centrality of Rousseau’s notions of the general will and popular sovereignty. Talmon implicitly takes Rousseau to be the theoretician of democracy and explicitly as the progenitor of totalitarian democracy. The problem is Rousseau’s formulation of the general will. “Rousseau’s synthesis” of the general will with popular sovereignty, he claims,

is in itself the formulation of the paradox of freedom in totalitarian democracy in terms which reveal the dilemma in the most striking form, namely, in those of will. There is such a thing as an objective general will, whether willed or not willed by anybody. To become a reality it must be willed by the people. If the people does not will it, it must be made to will it, for the general will is latent in the people’s will (Talmon, 1970, p. 43).

The postulates of unanimity and unity underlay Rousseau’s formulation. The general will can only be the unified, single will of the collective. Talmon sees in this a precursor of the notion of the homogeneous nation. But what troubles him more, it seems, is the notion of an active, participatory citizenry Rousseau deemed necessary to the genuine expression of the general will. Talmon’s critique of Rousseau on this point hinges on the Genevan’s adoration of antiquity and on his living in “the pre-democratic age.” Rousseau, he says,

was unaware that total and highly emotional absorption in the collective political endeavour is calculated to kill all privacy, that the excitement of the assembled crowd may exercise a most tyrannical pressure, and that the extension of the scope of politics to all spheres of human interest and endeavour, without leaving any room for the process of casual and empirical activity, was the shortest way to totalitarianism. Liberty is safer in countries where politics are not considered all important and where there are numerous levels of non-political private and collective activity, although not so much direct popular democracy, than in countries where politics take everything in their stride, and the people sit in permanent assembly (Talmon, 1970, p. 47).

However, it is not clear in Talmon’s exposition whether he takes the last proposition seriously. He immediately notes that in reality the appearance of the people assembled to decide is simply an appearance. “The truth,” he writes, “really is that, although all seem to be engaged in shaping the national will, and are doing it with a sense of elation and fulfillment, they are in fact accepting and endorsing



something which is presented to them as a sole truth, while believing that it is their free choice.... The collective sense of elation is subject to emotional weariness. It soon gives way to apathetic and mechanical behaviour” (Talmon, 1970, p. 47. See also Talmon, 1970, p. 207). And thus the general will comes to be represented by an elite, Jacobin or Bolsheviks, that enforces it against a population that has not yet come to recognize it. There ensues an educational dictatorship.

The final element of Talmon’s conceptualization is the extension of the egalitarian impulse within democracy beyond the political sphere, a transformation that occurred during the French Revolution. Talmon treats the idea of a “purely formal political democracy, without social leveling,” as a later development unknown to the eighteenth century, which was under the influence of an antique model of democracy (Talmon, 1970, p. 63). Hence the importance in Talmon’s narrative of Babeuf, who serves as a bridge between Rousseau and Marx.

Talmon’s account of totalitarian democracy is a long variation on a single note. His singular contribution was to coin the term. As we saw in Sabine’s comments, and as will be made clearer below, the possible linkage between democracy and dictatorship had been made by others in various formulations. And the deploying of the newly minted concept of totalitarian in conjunction with democracy was not really new, having been articulated some years before by Friedrich A. Hayek in his assessment of the consequences of democracies undertaking social planning.

The bases for the theoretical distinction between liberalism and democracy can be attributed to Benjamin Constant, as can the critique of Rousseau’s concept of the general will. In his 1819 speech to the Athénée Royal in Paris, “The Liberty of the Ancients Compared with that of the Moderns,” Constant famously argued that the idea of freedom that structured and animated the republics of antiquity was fundamentally different from the modern notion of liberty and that, therefore, representative rather than participatory political institutions were the best and appropriate forms for modern states. The popular sovereignty of the ancients, he said, went hand-in-hand with the total subjection of the individual to the collectivity: “Thus among the ancients the individual, almost always sovereign in public affairs, was a slave in all his private relations” (Constant, 1988, p. 311). By contrast, “Among the moderns... the individual, independent in his private life, is, even in the freest of states, sovereign only in appearance. His sovereignty is restricted and almost always suspended. If, at fixed and rare intervals, in which he is again surrounded by precautions and obstacles, he exercises this sovereignty, it is always only to renounce it” (Constant, 1988, p. 312). Individual liberty is thus placed in opposition to political liberty and Constant argues for the superiority of the former, with the latter merely as its guarantee (Constant, 1988, p. 323). Political liberty does not provide the pleasure for the modern individual, lost in the multitude, which it did for the ancient, who truly shared in the administration of his



polity (Constant, 1988, p. 316). Instead, that pleasure is provided by commerce and the exercise of personal independence.

The critique of Rousseau follows from this, since Rousseau, “by transposing into our modern age an extent of social power, of collective sovereignty, which belonged to other centuries, this sublime genius, animated by the purest love of liberty, has nevertheless furnished deadly pretexts for more than one kind of tyranny” (Constant, 1988, p. 318). In his earlier *Principles of Politics* (1815), Constant descried Rousseau’s notions of the absolute alienation of the individual’s rights and of unlimited and indivisible sovereignty. “When sovereignty is unlimited, there is no means of sheltering individuals from governments,” Constant argued. “It is in vain that you pretend to submit governments to the general will. It is always they who dictate the content of this will, and all your precautions become illusory” (Constant, 1988, p. 179).

Constant’s critique of Rousseau and advocacy of a liberalism based on a withdrawal of direct political action has reverberated through the subsequent centuries. In Italy, in 1925, three years after the Fascist March on Rome, Guido De Ruggiero looked to the origins of what he, following Tocqueville, called democratic despotism. But De Ruggiero echoed Constant in seeing the roots of this despotism in Rousseau’s infallible general will, the notion of popular sovereignty, and the influence of Greek and Roman models on the eighteenth century. And like Talmon after him, De Ruggiero also counted communism among the outcomes of this democratic, as opposed to liberal, tradition (De Ruggiero, 1959, pp. 61–64). But while Talmon saw a triumph of the liberal form of democracy in the west, his predecessor hoped for a fusion of the liberal and the democratic in order to offset the worst effects of the latter. “Since the advent of democracy is inevitable, and has indeed already taken place, we must neutralize its venom by means of all the antidotes which liberty can afford,” he argued.

Yet no task can be harder than that which democracy at once necessitates and impedes. It destroys all the barriers which ought to restrain it, and paralyses the individual energies which ought to resist it. In this state of things the school of liberty is a hard school, while despotism is rich in attractions, offering itself as the cure of all evils, the safeguard of rights, the champion of the oppressed, and the source of order. Nations sink into slumber amid the prosperity which it brings in its train; when they awake, they recognize their wretchedness. Freedom, on the contrary, comes into being for the most part amid storms, is established painfully amid civil discords, and yields its benefits only when it has grown old (De Ruggiero, 1959, p. 190).

The Tocquevillian antidote to this democratic despotism is systematic opposition in the form of struggles for freedoms of opinion, education, association, and religion. And thus De Ruggiero endorses a liberal democracy to neutralize the venom. If





power is singular at its source, in popular sovereignty, it must be “divided in its application” (De Ruggiero, 1959, p. 65). In liberal democracy,

the adjective Liberal has the force of a qualification, and serves to emphasize the demand for specification and differentiation which makes itself felt within the oppressive and deadening uniformity of democratic society. The partisans of this tendency are aiming at a democracy of free men: at instilling a sense of autonomy into the masses, fostering a spirit of spontaneous association and cooperation to break up their shapeless bulk, and at paving the way for the self-government of the State by means of varied and independent forms of particular and local self-government (De Ruggiero, 1959, p. 379).

In retrospect, one can see that De Ruggiero’s liberal program was thoroughly trumped by Fascist corporatism.

Insofar as De Ruggiero’s analysis relies upon Tocqueville, and therefore upon what we may call the culture of democracy, it bears similarity to his Spanish contemporary who was also fearful of the mass politics of the day, but there are important differences, as well. In 1930, José Ortega y Gasset warned of the effects of what he called “hyperdemocracy” upon contemporary Europe. He used the term to distinguish this form of democracy from “the old democracy,” which “was tempered by a generous dose of liberalism and of enthusiasm for law.” Hyperdemocracy, by contrast, is manifested by the fact that “the mass acts directly, outside the law, imposing its aspirations and its desires by means of material pressure. It is a false interpretation of the new situation to say that the mass has grown tired of politics and handed over the exercise of it to specialized persons. Quite the contrary. That was what happened previously; that was democracy” (Ortega y Gasset, 1993, p. 17). More clearly than De Ruggiero, Ortega thus looks to a cultural underpinning to the political transformations of the day. He is emphatic on the point that political activities are the most visible product of “more intimate, more impalpable” facts (Ortega y Gasset, 1993, p. 67). But whereas Tocqueville and De Ruggiero emphasize the threat posed by the relationship between the democratic masses and the state, which results in the danger of the tyranny of the majority, among others, it is the active mass that worries Ortega. In his view, the mass man has emerged in Europe out of the successes of modernity, the consequence of rapid population growth in the nineteenth century resulting from advances in industry, science, and technology. The mass man enjoys the fruits of these advances without having attained a sense of their cultural underpinnings. He experiences an unprecedented life of potentiality and power and the absence of necessary limits. This produces a self-confidence in one’s own opinions. The result is a new political form: “Under the species of Syndicalism and Fascism there appears for the first time in Europe a type of man who does not want to give reasons or to be right, but simply shows himself resolved to impose his opinions. This is the



new thing: the right not to be reasonable, the ‘reason of unreason’” (Ortega y Gasset, 1993, p. 73). Accepting no authority outside itself, the mass turns to “direct action.” This turn to violence as a first option, as a principal means of expression, emerges as “the norm which proposes the annulment of all norms, which suppresses all intermediate process between our purpose and its execution. It is the Magna Charta of barbarism” (Ortega y Gasset, 1993, p. 75).

Ortega’s alternative is again liberal democracy, which “carries to the extreme the determination to have consideration for one’s neighbor and is the prototype of ‘indirect action.’” Liberalism, in Ortega’s rendering, is “anti-natural” insofar as it represents a decision to concede rights to a minority, to share existence not only with an enemy, but also with an enemy that, as a minority, is weak. But his hopes for its survival are dim. “The mass... does not wish to share life with those who are not of it. It has a deadly hatred of all that is not itself” (Ortega y Gasset, 1993, pp. 76–77).

In a bibliographic note, Talmon cites Carl Schmitt’s books on Hobbes and on dictatorship as sources for the totalitarian Right’s notion of human nature, and comments that “Schmitt was the main theoretician of the National Socialist philosophy of law” (Talmon, 1970, p. 263). But Schmitt’s own distinctions between liberalism and democracy closely parallel Talmon’s, albeit moving in the opposite direction, so to speak. In the 1920s, Schmitt saw something of what De Ruggiero and Ortega saw, but his sentiments put him in the camp of Ortega’s nemeses, the men of direct action.

In *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*, originally published in 1923, and in his preface to the second edition of 1926, Schmitt analyzes the current state of parliamentary liberalism and mass democracy. Observing that democracy was originally construed in opposition to monarchy, the decline of the latter meant that “democracy itself lost its substantive precision” and became identified with a variety of political movements. “At first, democracy appeared in an entirely obvious alliance, even identity, with liberalism and freedom. In social democracy it joined with socialism. The success of Napoleon III and the results of Swiss referenda demonstrate that it could actually be conservative and reactionary, just as Proudhon prophesied,” Schmitt noted. “If all political tendencies could make use of democracy, then this proved that it had no political content and was only an organizational form; and if one regarded it from the perspective of some political program that one hoped to achieve with the help of democracy, then one had to ask oneself what value democracy itself had merely as a form” (Schmitt, 1985, p. 24). The structure of this form, according to Schmitt, is given in a series of identities, beginning with the notion, common to both Rousseau and Locke, that the will of the minority is identical to the will of the majority. Thus, the citizen “never really gives his consent to a specific content but rather in abstracto to the result that evolves out of the general will, and he votes only so that the votes out of which one can know the general will can be calculated” (Schmitt, 1985, p. 26). Schmitt then



repeats the by now common observation that the Jacobin rule of a minority in the name of the general will is entirely consistent with this formal structure. Other identities in the democratic series include those between governors and governed, sovereign and subject, the people and their representatives, and so on. But democracy can never realize an actual identity between these respective terms, and that means that the formation of the single, unified will is the internal problem of democracy. A certain limit is reached at the point where democratic form might result in the auto-destruction of democracy. Then, a decision may be reached to create “a dictatorship that suspends democracy in the name of a true democracy that is still to be created. Theoretically, this does not destroy democracy, but it is important to pay attention to it because it shows that dictatorship is not antithetical to democracy” (Schmitt, 1985, p. 28). Schmitt then contrasts this conceptualization of democracy with the principles of parliamentarism which center on the notion of a harmony or balance that results from the exchange of opinions. In addition, the liberal notion of a division of powers contradicts the foundations of democracy in identity.

Schmitt is clearest on these distinctions in his 1926 preface, which perhaps also reflects the degeneration of the Weimar political context. Here Schmitt, anticipating, but not necessarily sharing, Ortega’s lament, suggests that, “perhaps the age of discussion is coming to an end after all” (Schmitt, 1985, p. 1). It is ending because modern mass democracy depends upon interests rather than arguments and so public discourse is inauthentic. Propaganda replaces “genuine” discussion (Schmitt, 1985, p. 6). And here Schmitt repeats his claim that democracy requires identity, in this case formulated as homogeneity. “Every actual democracy,” he writes, “rests on the principle that not only are equals equal but unequals will not be treated equally. Democracy requires, therefore, first homogeneity and second – if the need arises – elimination or eradication of heterogeneity” (Schmitt, 1985, p. 9). Schmitt adduces the examples of Australia’s selective immigration policy and the Turkish expulsion of Greek residents. But whatever the concrete example, Schmitt’s point is that democracy rests on some substantive notion of equality and therefore entails the exclusion of those who do not meet that substantive criterion. While Sabine would later point to those with second-class citizenship as a contradiction for democracy, Schmitt sees the governing of heterogeneous populations of noncitizens by democracies as logically consistent. The notion of universal equality without a substantive foundation is not a democratic, but rather a liberal idea (Schmitt, 1985, pp. 10–11, 13).

The confusion of liberal and democratic ideas is contained within Rousseau’s *Social Contract*, Schmitt argues. The liberal element rests with the notion of a free contract, the democratic with the concept of the general will, which recognizes that “a true state... only exists where the people are so homogeneous that there is essential unanimity.” Whatever divides people must be suppressed. A contract, by contrast, makes sense only in a context of “differences and oppositions” (Schmitt,



1985, pp. 13–14). With the emergence of mass democracy, the element of will overcomes the possibility of discussion based on differences. Again noting that dictatorship, while antiliberal, is not necessarily antidemocratic, Schmitt points to both Bolshevism and Fascism as examples of movements that attempt to create homogeneity. And Schmitt concludes his discussion of the conflict between liberalism and democracy in terms that Ortega would later abhor: “Compared to a democracy that is direct, not only in the technical sense but also in a vital sense, parliament appears an artificial machinery, produced by liberal reasoning, while dictatorial and Caesaristic methods not only can produce the acclamation of the people but can also be a direct expression of democratic substance and power” (Schmitt, 1985, pp. 16–17).

Talmon refers to the Jacobin plan for direct democracy across a range of institutions and actions, only partly realized in the 1793 Constitution, as a “democratic perfectionism”: “This democratic perfectionism was in fact inverted totalitarianism. It was the result not of a sincere wish to give every shade of opinion a chance to assert itself, but the outcome of an expectation that the fruit of democratic sovereignty stretched to its limit would be a single will. It was based on a fanatical belief that there could be no more than one legitimate popular will. The other wills stood condemned a priori as partial, selfish and illegitimate” (Talmon, 1970, p. 104).

There is no indication that Sheldon Wolin is aware that Talmon used the phrase “inverted totalitarianism” to describe the Jacobin model. Wolin writes that he coined the phrase in order to describe a post-war constellation of tendencies toward the centralization of governmental power, on the one hand, and a series of liberal-democratic measures that both empower various groups and effectively fragment their potential collective opposition to that centralizing power at the same time. Wolin suggests that this constellation has its recent origins in the Cold War, the struggle against totalitarianism having in some way effected a “regime change” among the victors. Wolin calls this new regime “Superpower” (Wolin, 2004, p. xvi). Thus, the instrumentalities of inverted totalitarianism have led to Superpower. Both concepts are meant to operate as Weberian ideal types in order to highlight tendencies rather than to describe completed or fully realized phenomena and are therefore somewhat tentative, but Wolin clearly believes that they serve to reveal actual changes in the political character of the United States, in particular.

Wolin shares with Talmon the notion that inverted totalitarianism has something to do with democracy, but the similarity does not extend very far. The democratic element in Wolin’s conceptualization resides in the legitimating function democracy provides for Superpower. Only the state can provide that legitimacy and it is needed in order to effect the “symbiosis of non-political de facto powers with the de jure political authority that forms Superpower” (Wolin, 2004, p. xvii). That symbiosis accounts, in part, for the dynamic of centralization and disaggregation of power that characterizes Superpower. While this seems to represent a perversion of



democracy rather than its perfection, we will see that there are ways in which democracy paves the way for the emergence of Superpower.

A few characteristics of Wolin's treatment of themes that emerged in the preceding discussion of earlier theorists are clearly discernable. In both the original and the expanded editions of *Politics and Vision*, and indeed throughout his writings, Wolin does not conceptualize democracy in terms of a general will. Rousseau, in particular, plays a very minor role in Wolin's work as compared with other figures in the so-called canon of western political theory. In *Politics and Vision*, he is treated in relation to theories of community that have a depoliticizing effect and which are therefore, in Wolin's context, extensions, or consequences of the essentially liberal substitution of the social for the political (Wolin, 2004, pp. 330–336). Although Wolin locates the tradition of radical democracy in reference to the French Revolution in the first edition of *Politics and Vision*, the figures he identifies with this tradition are Thomas Paine, William Godwin, and Karl Marx, not Rousseau.

In an essay in which Wolin attempts to develop an appropriate conception for capturing the process by which a collective actor is formed, focusing principally on the ancient demos, he references Rousseau's concept of the general will as signifying the first time that collective action assumed a central role in political theory. But Wolin rejects Rousseau's formulation of the problem, noting that, "Rousseau could not conceive of a self-fashioning people so he invents, literally, a *deus ex machina*, a Great Legislator who is to transform human nature by giving it a collective cast and then prescribe the framework of beliefs and practice that ensures the proper operation of the *volonté général*. Except for rare elections, the idea of a democratic practice, of how ordinary people might actually cultivate political skills, remained undeveloped by Rousseau" (Wolin, 1996c, p. 73). Instead of Rousseau, Wolin then turns to Hobbes' description of the bourgeois individual as a model and to Spinoza for the concepts of the multitude and *conatus* from which to construct an alternative formulation. This formulation rests on the notion that the demos as collective actor forms out of resistance to an external force and constitutes its identity through striving to remain in existence. That striving, in Spinoza's account that is taken up by Wolin, is not the product of a general will (Xenos, 2001, p. 31).

A related difference between Wolin and the earlier theorists is that his concern is not with the danger of mass political action but rather with the consequences of political apathy. Benjamin Constant's defense of the individualist retreat from the political sphere stands as representative of the liberal trajectory for Wolin (2004, p. 252). In this sense, the differences between the analyses of Constant and Tocqueville are centrally important to understanding Wolin's interpretation of these issues. Wolin's understanding of inverted totalitarianism owes a great deal to his interpretation of Tocqueville's concept of democratic despotism:



Whether the society was depoliticized (post-political) or merely apolitical, in either condition it was complementary to the centralizing tendencies of state power. Thus if state and civil society become smoothly continuous, if manners, moeurs, and beliefs shape social relationships and attitudes so as to discourage active political involvement by the citizenry while simultaneously encouraging state power, then the matrix exists for a new form of despotism. Despotism would change its physiognomy and cease to be an alien power violently superimposed on a stunned and resentful society. It becomes, instead, institutionalized, grounded in a congenial – because depoliticized – culture and camouflaged by modernity. It is a “democratic” despotism whose theoretical possibility was signaled by Tocqueville’s silent elimination of “the New England factor.” Without its participatory elements, other elements of democracy’s culture can be reassembled – the nonresistant ones, as it were – to become supports for political democracy’s opposite (Wolin, 2001, p. 345).

This summary captures Wolin’s sense that certain aspects of democracy can contribute to its evisceration, a notion that is contained in his description of Superpower’s ability to simultaneously empower, fragment, and depoliticize potentially oppositional groups. And this line of argument in Wolin’s work extends his critique of liberalism’s substitution of the social for the political. It was in this vein that Wolin concluded the first edition of *Politics and Vision* with a call to transcend what he called nonpolitical groups and to address areas of common concern. The concept of the political only has meaning in relation to what is common, what transcends but does not obliterate heterogeneity. Here Wolin recognized that the appeal to a revival of the political in this sense “seems an invitation to totalitarianism.” And he observed that, “There can be no denying that totalitarian systems have re-asserted the political with a vengeance,” destroying the autonomy of groups and using propaganda and plebiscites to organize and mobilize support and an identification with the state. Nevertheless, the risk needed to be taken to overcome the “groupism” and apathy of western liberal democracies and to restore to citizenship the one thing specific to it; namely, “an integrative experience which brings together the multiple role-activities of the contemporary person and demands that the separate roles be surveyed from a more general point of view” (Wolin, 2004, p. 389).

In a different, but perhaps not contradictory way, Wolin’s later writings often display a Tocquevillian moment in their emphasis upon participation and local activism as the antidote to apathy and toward the retrieval of the political. These are what he calls the archaic, democratic moments that cultivate multiplicity in the face of the centralizing aspects of Superpower (Wolin, 2004, pp. 603–604). The political now becomes identified with the democratic and the democratic with a multiplicity of forms. In developing the line of thought deriving from his analysis of the demos



as collective actor, Wolin coins the term “fugitive democracy” to describe the protean character of democracy. As opposed to those who reduce democratic theory and practice to a rationalist project aiming at realizing happiness in the here and now, the stock in trade of the antidemocratic liberals, Wolin sees democracy as historically constituted in moments of an “evanescent homogeneity” experienced against a backdrop of heterogeneity. As such, it is fugitive and transgressive, unable to institutionalize itself, a form of “rational disorganization” (Wolin, 1996a, p. 34).

“Rational disorganization” might as well describe Superpower or inverted totalitarianism. And this brings me to a tentative conclusion. The totalitarian threat is not, as some of the earlier writers experienced it, and as Wolin himself suggested at an earlier stage, an extreme centralization combined with mass mobilization. Against this threat, one could perhaps hope for a fusion of liberalism and democracy as Sabine or De Ruggiero suggested. It is instead a product of the very successes of liberalism, an inverted mirror of the totalitarianisms of the first half of the twentieth century. In this context, the only mode of appearance of democracy, and the only mode it should aspire to, is fugitive, transitory. This means that democracy and Superpower are both protean in character. Thus, Wolin arrives at a curious symbiosis of his own. Democracy is transgressive, while Superpower is “an expansive system of power that accepts no limits other than those it chooses to impose on itself” (Wolin, 2004, p. xvi). A boundary-defying democracy becomes the only opponent of a boundary-defying Superpower.

## Notes

- 1 Wolin’s review of Hans-Georg Gadamer’s *Philosophical Apprentices* captures this point about “tradition” beautifully, even if Strauss only makes a minor appearance in the review. On pre- and postwar German university life and the “tightly enclosed world” that Gadamer describes, Wolin concludes:

Irresistibly the metaphor of a circle suggests itself, not only because of the famous paradox of the hermeneutical circle (what is to be understood must already be known), but also because of the oppressiveness inherent in any enclosure. Mr. Gadamer’s chronicle shows great teachers creating small, seemingly autistic coteries and exclusive loyalties: Heidegger’s followers were contemptuous of Husserlites, admiration for Reinhardt meant skepticism toward Werner Jaeger. “We live in traditions,” Mr. Gadamer asserts, and yet even the vaunted dialogue with the past appears so narrowly conceived as to be merely self-justifying (Wolin, 1985).

Wolin goes on to describe an intellectual practice that has virtually nothing substantial to say in response to the political and ethical questions of its time. He challenges an idea of tradition that altogether excludes debates about science and “its broadly political bearing,” an idea of tradition more philological than political, an idea of tradition set in opposition to modernity as such. And he opposes a philosophical practice bent on the cultivation of exclusive coteries more than the pursuit of critical wisdom. Wolin makes explicit the reason Strauss was never to return to the German



- university (though Gadamer “could not bring himself to state the reason”): Strauss was a Jew. Nonetheless, Strauss’s concept of tradition was also Germanic.
- 2 Though it does strike me that one very good reason to avoid proper names (and the “methods” that follow from proper names) would be to reject “the systematic thought that a room of one’s own in contemporary academic discipline is somehow enough” (to borrow a bit of perfection from Joan Tronto’s contribution here).
  - 3 I have argued elsewhere for a spontaneous receptivity to everyday experience in Adorno’s work, vital to political thinking and in his case occasioned by exile (Marasco, 2015). I see this spontaneous receptivity to everyday experience repeated in Fanon’s work, as well, which I would also describe as critical theory in exile. Fanon’s radicalization in Algeria, his alliance with a people with whom he did not share a local language or tradition but an everyday life of violence and a felt need for freedom, is the refutation of a certain Socratic conceit in Wolin.
  - 4 Mikhail Bakhtin’s 1941 essay “Epic and Novel” does tend to pit the epic against the novel, arguing that the former is static and self-referential and the latter is porous and citational (Bakhtin, 1981). The epic closes on a homogeneous totality, while the novel opens to heteroglossia. But returning to Wolin’s project, he was never terribly interested in heterogeneous forces as such, but as the condition for the “evanescent homogeneity” that he called democracy. (Nicholas Xenos nicely distills this element of fugitive democracy in his contribution here.) Democracy, for Wolin, is a fleeting experience of unity in deep diversity, an occasion of shared power that reconstitutes the demos from below. “Heretogeneity, diversity, multiple selves,” says Wolin, “are no match for modern forms of power,” and, it turns out, no real basis for radical democracy (Wolin, 1993, p. 24). But democracy is also essentially formless. Or, more accurately, democratic forms and forms of democratic life are not given in advance.
  - 5 I am a shade too close to Sorel, perhaps, but it seems to me Kateb is wrong on another count. He sees Wolin’s mature theory of democracy in terms of a move toward myth, a Sorelian myth of the demos, fueled by passion (“a focused rage”) (Kateb, 2001, p. 45). I see the development of Wolin’s political thought, by contrast, as a decisive move *away* from myth, away from epic. I have considered this move in connection with theoretical practice, but I think it also applies to Wolin’s approach to democratic politics. I think this is not, *pace* Kateb, because “the death of the student movement of the 1960s [had] sharpened his despair lastingly,” but because democracy is precisely *not* where heroes are born but where ordinary people experiment in sharing power (Kateb, 2001, p. 40).
  - 6 This order of priorities, as Nicholas Xenos has noted, is also explicitly formulated in his 1998 essay, “Political Theory: From Vocation to Invocation,” when Wolin lists his formative experiences – the Great Depression, WWII, the sixties – in political not academic terms. Xenos writes, “This list of experiences is telling. It does not include any of the presumed mile markers of his academic life. There is no mention of Oberlin or Harvard or Oxford. Berkeley figures not as the professorial position he occupied when *Politics and Vision* (1960) made him famous among political scientists but as the unstated battleground in which he emerged as “an activist” a few years later and before his vocation essay threw down the gauntlet in a different disciplinary battleground” (Xenos, 2015, p. 180).
  - 7 Corey Robin’s depiction of Wolin as a reader of texts is compelling and accurately conveys the literary sensibility that is one of the signatures of Wolin’s interpretations. Yet, without further unpacking, the characterization of Wolin as reading “like a New Critic” needs qualification. For New Criticism, *pace* René Wellek, overwhelmingly consisted of a rather formalist approach to literary criticism that treated texts as reified wholes, as objects in themselves. Although New Critics contended that literary works included reality within, paradoxically, interpretation of such works remained insulated from their historical and political contexts. Literature, especially poetry, is treated as a sort of palliative for the alienation from earthly existence. Furthermore, out of the many figures associated with New Criticism, it is not I. F. Richards, but Kenneth Burke and T. S. Eliot who resonate in Wolin’s practice of reading. Yet Burke, whose reading of the rhetorical dimension of





Machiavelli he cites, was mostly marginal to New Criticism; Eliot's influence is more substantial. Even so, in contrast to Wolin's interpretations, Eliot's criticism had a rather cavalier attitude toward the content of the literary works he examined, and the actual thinking figured in it, and doggedly focused on language and feeling, imagery and experience. And even if the work was contextualized in relation to a shared culture and a tradition, Eliot has little to say about the actual content of that which is shared. Needless to say, despite the resonances between Wolin and Eliot, none of the latter's conceits are found in Wolin's interpretative practice, which has a decidedly earthly (*irdisch*) texture.

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