informed by the possibilities associated with this ongoing debate will be challenged by Gerson and Wehner’s analysis.

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Sheldon Wolin has been a leading political theorist since the 1960 publication of Politics and Vision, in which he explored the influence of imagination on ideals and institutions. Along the way he has engaged figures usually confined to theology, including Augustine and Luther, but only recently has he captured the attention of theologians. For example, in The State of the University, Stanley Hauerwas enlisted Wolin for his analysis of the conflation of liberal theory and democratic practice and the assumption that the primary political “we” for Christians is the “civic nation” rather than the church. Whether or not they agree with Hauerwas, scholars unconvinced by the descriptions of American democracy offered by Jeffrey Stout and others will find Democracy Incorporated helpful for envisioning a radical democracy in which Christians can participate without setting aside their claims about the world.

In the final chapter of the 2004 expanded edition of Politics and Vision, Wolin outlined the rise of a new political form: inverted totalitarianism, the dominance of not only state-centered political power but also corporate-centered economic power. Democracy Incorporated is the exposition of this argument. Wolin is careful to distinguish the United States from the regimes of Hitler, Mussolini, and Stalin, under which life was harsh and absorbed by ideology. For Americans, however, the abundance of choices makes life seem tolerable, even entertaining. In contrast to classical totalitarianism, “inverted totalitarianism has emerged imperceptibly, unpremeditatedly, and in seeming unbroken continuity with the nation’s political traditions” (p. 46). Here economics is not subordinate to politics; rather, “economics dominates politics—and with that domination come different forms of ruthlessness,” such as when the government withholds appropriated funds or waives economic and environmental regulations, thereby abdicating its responsibility under the guise of privatization (p. 58).
Indeed, the danger of inverted totalitarianism is that it is not immediately apparent in public discourse or policy but subtly infiltrates them via technology and with the help of both political elites and a submissive citizenry. In a “managed democracy” that fosters the illusion of participation by reducing politics to voting, the rapid pace of social change and a single, ongoing election cycle in which all views are partisan (and a product of “spin”) prevent substantive discussion and consolidation of ideas. Meanwhile a divided “electorate”—a poor substitute for engaged demos—is preoccupied with peripheral, often irresolvable issues, preventing populist action and increasing the influence of lobbyists for corporations such as Wal-Mart, “the perfect economic complement to Superpower” (p. 139).

Superpower is Wolin’s term for the military-industrial complex and its attempt to reconstitute the nation’s identity. An empire does not require direct rule; it portrays its interests as confrontations between good and evil (or “freedom” and “terror”) in order to justify its behaviors abroad and expenditures at home. The more resources that are devoted to “a permanent global war,” the more likely that citizens will voluntarily surrender their rights and democracy will perish. And what of academics, scientists, and other intellectuals? They have been marginalized by the elite or “seamlessly integrated into the system” through “self-pacifying” offers of government contracts and corporate funds (p. 68). Although Wolin’s grasp of religion is limited, his discussion of the role of archaism in this process is of interest.

Some readers will dismiss Wolin as another leftist critic of neoconservatism—he focuses too much on the Bush administration—but in doing so they will miss his deeper message. He provides a rich narrative of the struggle of elites and the demos from ancient Greece through the writing of the U.S. Constitution and into the present, and the corporate-managed politics that has emerged will survive no matter which party holds Congress or the presidency. Wolin leaves open the question of whether the American system is reformable, and he fails to perceive several problems inherent in progressivism. Still, he rightly argues that democracy must be understood separately from the modern “megastate” and, further, that its survival (or reemergence) depends on the people recognizing their own passivity and resolving to pursue the common good at the local level.

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