

Inverted Totalitarianism: A Preface

by Sheldon S. Wolin

“Certain tendencies in our society point in a direction away from self-government, the rule of law, egalitarianism, and thoughtful public discussion, and toward what I have called ‘managed democracy.’”

As a preliminary I want to emphasize certain aspects of the approach taken in this volume in order to avoid possible misunderstandings.

Although the concept of totalitarianism is central to what follows, my thesis is not that the current American political system is an inspired replica of Nazi Germany’s or George W. Bush of Hitler. References to Hitler’s Germany are introduced to remind the reader of the benchmarks in a system of power that was invasive abroad, justified preemptive war as a matter of official doctrine, and repressed all opposition at home—a system that was cruel and racist in principle and practice, deeply ideological, and openly bent on world domination. Those benchmarks are introduced to illuminate tendencies in our own system of power that are opposed to the fundamental principles of constitutional democracy. Those tendencies are, I believe, “totalizing” in the sense that they are obsessed with control, expansion, superiority, and supremacy.

The regimes of Mussolini and Stalin demonstrate that it is possible for totalitarianism to assume different forms. Italian fascism, for example, did not officially adopt anti-Semitism until late in the regime’s history and even then primarily in response to pressure from Germany. Stalin introduced some “progressive” policies: promoting mass literacy and health care; encouraging women to undertake professional and technical careers; and (for a brief spell) promoting minority cultures. The point is not that these “accomplishments” compensate for crimes whose horrors have yet to be fully comprehended. Rather, totalitarianism is capable of local variations; plausibly, far from

being exhausted by its twentieth-century versions, would-be totalitarians now have available technologies of control, intimidation, and mass manipulation far surpassing those of that earlier time.

The Nazi and Fascist regimes were powered by revolutionary movements whose aim was not only to capture, reconstitute, and monopolize state power but also to gain control over the economy. By controlling the state and the economy, the revolutionaries gained the leverage necessary to reconstruct, then mobilize society. In contrast, inverted totalitarianism is only in part a state-centered phenomenon. Primarily it represents the political coming of age of corporate power and the political demobilization of the citizenry.

Unlike the classic forms of totalitarianism, which openly boasted of their intentions to force their societies into a preconceived totality, inverted totalitarianism is not expressly conceptualized as an ideology or objectified in public policy. Typically it is furthered by power-holders and citizens who often seem unaware of the deeper consequences of their actions or inactions. There is a certain heedlessness, an inability to take seriously the extent to which a pattern of consequences may take shape without having been preconceived.

The fundamental reason for this deep-seated carelessness is related to the well-known American zest for change and, equally remarkable, the good fortune of Americans in having at their disposal a vast continent rich in natural resources, inviting exploitation. Although it is a cliché that the history of American society has been one of unceasing change, the consequences of today's increased tempos are less obvious. Change works to displace existing beliefs, practices, and expectations. Although societies throughout history have experienced change, it is only over the

past four centuries that promoting innovation became a major focus of public policy. Today, thanks to the highly organized pursuit of technological innovation and the culture it encourages, change is more rapid, more encompassing, more welcomed than ever before

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—which means that institutions, values, and expectations share with technology a limited shelf life. We are experiencing the triumph of contemporaneity and of its accomplice, forgetting, or collective amnesia. Stated somewhat differently, in early modern times change displaced traditions; today change succeeds change.

The effect of unending change is to undercut consolidation. Consider, for example, that more than a century after the Civil War the consequences of slavery still linger; that close to a century after women won the vote, their equality remains contested; or that after nearly two centuries during which public schools became a reality, education is now



being increasingly privatized. In order to gain a handle on the problem of change, we might recall that among political and intellectual circles, beginning in the last half of the seventeenth century and especially during the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, there was a growing conviction that, for the first time in recorded history, it was possible for human beings to

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deliberately shape their future. Thanks to advances in science and invention it was possible to conceive change as “progress,” an advancement benefiting all members of society. Progress stood for change that was constructive; that would bring something new into the world and to the advantage of all. The champions of progress believed that while change might result in the disappearance or destruction of established beliefs, customs, and interests, the vast majority of these deserved to go because they mostly



served the Few while keeping the Many in ignorance, poverty, and sickness.

An important element in this early modern conception of progress was that change was crucially a matter for political determination by those who could be held accountable for their decisions. That understanding of change was pretty much overwhelmed by the emergence of concentrations of economic power that took place during the latter half of the nineteenth century. Change became a private enterprise inseparable from exploitation and opportunism, thereby constituting a major, if not the major, element in the dynamic of capitalism. Opportunism involved an unceasing search for what might be exploitable, and soon that meant virtually anything, from religion, to politics, to human well-being. Very little, if anything, was taboo as, before long, change became the object of premeditated strategies for maximizing profits.

It is often noted that today change is more rapid, more encompassing than ever before. I shall suggest that American democracy has never been truly consolidated. Some of its key elements remain unrealized or vulnerable; others have been exploited for antidemocratic ends. Political institutions have typically been described as the means by which a society tries to order change. The assumption was that political institutions would themselves remain stable, as exemplified in the ideal of a constitution as a relatively unchanging structure for defining the uses and limits of public power and the accountability of officeholders.

Today, however, some of the political changes are revolutionary; others are counterrevolutionary. Some chart new directions for the nation and introduce new techniques for extending American power, both internally (surveillance of citizens) and externally (seven hundred military bases abroad), beyond any point even imag-

ined by previous administrations. Other changes are counterrevolutionary in the sense of reversing social policies originally aimed at improving the lot of the middle and poorer classes.

How to persuade the reader that the actual direction of contemporary politics is toward a political system the very opposite of what the political leadership, the mass media, and think tank oracles claim that it is, the world's foremost exemplar of democracy? Although critics may dismiss this volume as fantasy, there are grounds for believing that the broad citizenry is becoming increasingly uneasy about "the direction the nation is heading," about the role of big money in politics, the credibility of the popular news media, and the reliability of voting returns. The midterm elections of 2006 indicated clearly that much of the nation was demanding a quick resolution to a misguided war. Increasingly one hears ordinary citizens complaining that they "no longer recognize their country," that preemptive war, widespread use of torture, domestic spying, endless reports of corruption in high places, corporate as well as governmental, mean that something is deeply wrong in the nation's politics.

In the chapters that follow I shall try to develop a focus for understanding the changes taking place and their direction. But first—assuming that we have had, if not a fully realized democracy, at least an impressive number of its manifestations, and assuming further that some fundamental changes are occurring, we might raise the broad question: what causes a democracy to change into some non- or antidemocratic system, and what kind of system is democracy likely to change into?

For centuries, political writers claimed that if—or rather when—a full-fledged democracy was overturned, it would be succeeded by a tyranny. The argument was that democracy,

because of the great freedom it allowed, was inherently prone to disorder and likely to cause the propertied classes to support a dictator or tyrant, someone who could impose order, ruthlessly if necessary. But—and this is the issue addressed by our inquiry—what if in its popular culture a democracy were prone to license ("anything goes") yet in its politics were to be-

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come fearful, ready to give the benefit of the doubt to leaders who, while promising to "root out terrorists," insist that endeavor is a "war" with no end in sight? Might democracy then tend to become submissive, privatized rather than unruly, and would that alter the power relationships between citizens and their political deciders?

A word about terminology. *Superpower* stands for the projection of power outwards. It is indeterminate, impatient with restraints, and careless of boundaries as it strives to develop the capability of imposing its will at a time and place of its own choosing. It represents the antithesis of constitutional power. Inverted totalitarianism projects power inwards. It is not derivative from classic totalitarianism of the types represented by Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy, or Stalinist Russia. Those regimes were powered by revolutionary movements whose aim was to capture, reconstitute, and monopolize the power of the state. The state was conceived as the main center of power, providing the leverage necessary for the mobilization and reconstruction of society. Churches, universities, business organizations, news and opinion media, and cultural institutions were



taken over by the government or neutralized or suppressed.

Inverted totalitarianism, in contrast, while exploiting the authority and resources of the state, gains its dynamic by combining with other forms of power, such as evangelical religions, and most notably by encouraging a symbiotic relationship between traditional government and the system of “private” governance represented by the modern business corporation. The result is not a system of codetermination by equal partners who retain their distinctive identities but rather a system that represents the political coming-of-age of corporate power.

When capitalism was first represented in an intellectual construct, primarily in the latter half of the eighteenth century, it was hailed as the perfection of decentralized power, a system that, unlike an absolute monarchy, no single person or governmental agency could or should attempt to direct. It was pictured as a system, but of decentralized powers working best when left alone (*laissez-faire*, *laissez passer*) so that “the market” operated freely. The market furnished the structure by which spontaneous

economic activities would be coordinated, exchange values set, and demand and supply adjusted. It operated, as Adam Smith famously wrote, by an unseen hand that connected participants and directed their endeavors toward the common benefit of all, even though the actors were motivated primarily by their own selfish ends.

One of Smith’s fundamental contentions was that while individuals were capable of making rational decisions on a small scale, no one possessed the powers required for rationally comprehending a whole society and directing its activities. A century later, however, the whole scale of economic enterprise was revolutionized by the emergence and rapid rise of the business corporation. An economy where power was dispersed among countless actors, and where markets supposedly were dominated by no one, rapidly gave way to forms of concentrated power—trusts, monopolies, holding companies, and cartels—able to set (or strongly influence) prices, wages, supplies of materials, and entry into the market itself. Adam Smith was now joined to Charles Darwin, the free market to the survival of the fittest. The emergence of the corporation marked the presence of private power on a scale and in numbers hitherto unknown, the concentration of private power unconnected to a citizen body.

Despite the power of corporations over political processes and the economy, a determined political and economic opposition arose demanding curbs on corporate power and influence. Big Business, it was argued, demanded Big Government. It was assumed, but often forgotten, that unless Big Government, or even small government, possessed some measure of disinterestedness, the result might be the worst of both worlds, corporate power and government both fashioned from the same cloth of self-interest. However, Populists and Progressives of

the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as well as trade unionists and small farmers, went a step further to argue that a democratic government should be both disinterested and “interested.” It should serve both the common good and the interests of ordinary people whose main source of power was their numbers. They argued, perhaps naively, that in a democracy

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the people were sovereign and government was, by definition, on their side. The sovereign people were fully entitled to use governmental power and resources to redress the inequalities created by the economy of capitalism.

That conviction supported and was solidified by the New Deal. A wide range of regulatory agencies was created, the Social Security program and a minimum wage law were established, unions were legitimated along with the rights to bargain collectively, and various attempts were made to reduce mass unemployment by means of government programs for public works and conservation. With the outbreak of World War II, the New Deal was superseded by the forced mobilization and governmental control of the entire economy and the conscription of much of the adult male population. For all practical purposes the war marked the end of the first large-scale effort at establishing the tentative beginnings of social democracy in this country, a union of social programs benefiting the Many combined with a vigorous electoral democracy and lively politicking by individuals and organizations representative of the politically powerless.

At the same time that the war halted the momentum of political and social democracy, it enlarged the scale of an increasingly open cohabitation between the corporation and the state. That partnership became ever closer during the era of the Cold War (1947-1993). Corporate economic power became the basis of power on which the state relied, as its own ambitions, like those of giant corporations, became more expansive, more global, and, at intervals, more bellicose. Together the state and corporation became the main sponsors and coordinators of the powers represented by science and technology. The result is an unprecedented combination of powers distinguished by their totalizing tendencies, powers that not only challenge established boundaries—political, moral, intellectual, and economic—but whose very nature it is to challenge those boundaries continually, even to challenge the limits of the earth itself. Those powers are also the means of inventing and disseminating a culture that taught consumers to welcome change and private pleasures while accepting political passivity. A major consequence is the construction of a new “collective identity,” imperial rather than republican (in the eighteenth-



century sense), less democratic. That new identity involves questions of who we are as a people, what we stand for as well as what we are willing to stand, the extent to which we are committed to becoming involved in common affairs, and what democratic principles justify expending the energies and wealth of our citizens and asking some of them to kill and sacrifice their lives while the destiny of their country is fast slipping from popular control.

I want to emphasize that I view my main construction, “inverted totalitarianism,” as tentative, hypothetical, although I am convinced that certain tendencies in our society point in a direction away from self-government, the rule of law, egalitarianism, and thoughtful public discussion, and toward what I have called

“managed democracy,” the smiley face of inverted totalitarianism.

For the moment “Superpower” is in retreat and “inverted totalitarianism” exists as a set of strong tendencies rather than as a fully realized actuality. The direction of these tendencies urges that we ask ourselves—and only democracy justifies using we—what inverted totalitarianism exacts from democracy and whether we want to exchange our birthrights for its mess of pottage.

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