

THE RETREAT TO POSTMODERN POLITICS

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INTRODUCTION

SINCE THE APPEARANCE of his landmark work of political philosophy, *Politics and Vision*, in 1960, Sheldon Wolin has been a major influence in turning the study of politics from its abstract ethical orientation towards social theory. The main presupposition of social theory is that the possibility for what Wolin terms “participatory democracy” is immanent in the totality of economic, political and social relations. Inspired largely by his example, but also appalled by the slow erosion of democratic institutions in the United States and around the world, a considerable fraction of succeeding generations within political science has adopted the stance of social theory rather than remaining within the orbit of conventional political philosophy concerned with the old questions: what are the first principles of politics? How can politics be autonomous from economic and social influences? How do political philosophers free themselves from the pernicious influences of Machievelli and Rousseau, let alone Hegel and Marx, all of whom insisted that politics was integral to class power?

The turn that began with *Politics and Vision* signifies that for American political theory class, inequality, power and the role and obligations of the capitalist state have been thrust from the shadows to center stage. So it was with anticipation that the expanded edition of his classic text appeared in 2004, especially because in the more than forty years since the first edition Wolin is arguably the leading left-liberal political philosopher in the United States. While he has lost none of his capacity for brilliant, often scorching commentary on a tepid liberalism which dominates today’s intellectual landscape, Wolin’s conclusion confirms not only the end of the liberal phase of political philosophy, but the crisis in social theory that seems unable to rise above the despair that marked most of the history of the Frankfurt School. Indeed, in this new edition, it is glaringly apparent that Critical Theory has influenced Wolin, including the resignation to the prevailing set-up that marked its late development.

Like Benjamin Barber, Marshall Berman, Amy Guttmann, Mark Warren and many others, Wolin’s project is to determine the prospects for, and conditions of, democratic renewal in the wake of what he perceives as a

near-complete corporate capitalist takeover of the modern state. In the light of this project, in the present essay I will try to assess what he has and has not achieved and what remains to be theorized in order to realise the project. My chief conclusion is that, despite a sincere and often trenchant analysis of the current state of affairs, Wolin's retreat to modest, episodic (he calls it "fugitive") democracy is a symptom of the isolation of many left liberal intellectuals from actual oppositional movements, and their refusal to take seriously a sophisticated Marxist analysis; his misreading of Marx and contemporary Marxism prevents Wolin from taking the point of view of the totality and produces only a fragmented vision which he calls postmodern. In the conclusion, I outline a different direction for social and political theory if the project of radical democracy is to be realized.

THE DECLINE OF LIBERAL DEMOCRACY

Ours is a time when a relatively honest election almost anywhere in the world is greeted by many as a triumph of democratic citizenship because wide participation in the act of voting has become the virtual definition of citizenship and of democracy. A citizen confers consent on the prevailing system of political rule, choosing among contenders for power who, nevertheless are pledged to reproduce the liberal state. To be sure this is a definition as old as the origins of liberal democratic governance in 17th century England. One may question the efficacy of a major entailment of liberal democracy, namely, the representativeness of the government in a society rent by class and other particular interests, or whether elections are rigged, either by law or by blatant theft of one kind or another. But in this reactionary era we are admonished to accept the idea that the farthest horizon of democracy consists in legal protections for individual and collective political expression, short of insurrection; a justice system that guarantees individual civil and criminal rights before the law; and representative government in which citizens confer consent on the prevailing system of political and economic power through the transparent exercise of the franchise, and are free to choose among competing parties who offer platforms that promise to rule in a lawful way corresponding to accepted practice. This view is hegemonic in all liberal democracies, whether ruled by conservatives, the authoritarian right or labor and socialist parties. In the American system private property shields its owner(s) from being required to share decision-making with workers or non-governmental citizens, and only collective bargaining agreements insure a degree of worker voice in decisions affecting a limited range of enterprise activities, many aspects of economic

life are not democratic, but, in general, correspond to the most authoritarian practices of anti-democracy. Recall Andre Gorz's characterization of the industrial workplace as a "prison factory".

In the sphere of state functions Sheldon Wolin's pithy comment says it all: "The citizen is shrunk to the voter: periodically courted, warned and confused but otherwise kept at a distance from actual decision-making and allowed to emerge only ephemerally in a cameo appearance according to a script composed by the opinion-takers/makers" (565). Wolin attributes this reconstitution of the "civic culture" to the emergence of capitalist subsumption of all aspects of society, including its political institutions, in a fundamentally anti-democratic regime of domination. Echoing Critical Theory's concept of the "totally administered society"—uniformly derided by pluralists and much of the Left-- in this new form of repressive totalization, Wolin notes:

The unity of theory and practice is ironically realized in the optical illusion of all utopias: in uncollapsed and totalizing capitalism no one seems able to see 'beyond'. Consequently the notion of alternative appears irrational (566). (1)

Certainly, even from the perspective of representative process, some countries are more democratic than others. Israel and Germany have systems that permit the smaller parties representation in parliament if they meet a threshold of votes. To assure that the winner has received a majority of the votes France, in which representatives are elected by district, in cases of pluralities mandates a runoff, of the top two candidates a week after the general election. Contrary to the popular myth that the United States is marked by political pluralism, its "winner take all" system and the absence of a runoff provision in the federal and state electoral processes in most instances effectively thwarts the emergence of third parties, but also signifies that, in a sharply divided electorate, and one in which half the voting population does not cast ballots, a large majority may be disenfranchised. Thus, in the recent past the victorious presidential candidates were elected by about 30% of eligible voters.

An electoral majority or plurality itself, no matter how narrow the margin, and no matter what proportion of the electorate has chosen or has been coerced not to participate, is taken as a mandate for the implementation of a series of policies which may or may not be popular. Witness the 2000 and 2004 Bush victories. All the dominant party needs is a sliver of legislative members of the putative "opposition" party to go along in order to

implement its program. Thus, for example, polling data show a majority of voters opposed or were skeptical of the justice of the Bush administration's huge permanent tax cuts for the rich, and have serious reservations about privatizing social security. Despite this, the administration arrived with only a small congressional majority, and believes it has a mandate to move forward on these and other proposals to implement reverse redistributive justice.

In the alternative, democracy has been defined as the participation of the "people" in decision-making. In the context of the nation-state, the citizenry intervenes on a continuous basis in the decisions affecting their everyday lives as well as the life of the community, whether the national or a local jurisdiction. This concept, often termed "radical" democracy has been variously identified with the "cooperative commonwealth" the old Anglo-Saxon term for socialism—a self-managed society of producers of social as well as economic goods, in which the "state" either disappears or is relegated to administrative, i.e. coordinating functions, but in any case does not impose its will from above. This bottom up regime does not necessarily mark the "end" of politics, but it sharply restricts the sovereignty of bureaucratic, centralized institutions. Representatives are chosen by popular assemblies of workers, members of the armed forces, and community residents and merchants. These assemblies may elect delegates to make decisions subject to the popular will. Radical democracy confirms the right to recall representatives at any time. In Wolin's conception the state, but perhaps only the local state, becomes a site for popular decision-making and politics consists in genuine debate and discussion about what constitutes the community interest. Sadly, in the wake of the collapse of the "official" institutions of popular sovereignty—the workers' councils—these conversations have all but vanished in contemporary political discourse, largely due to the virtual disappearance of radical and revolutionary movements, let alone "socialist" societies where the abridgement of these principles often spurred oppositional movements from the left. Of course, where popular decision-making is on the political agenda, even if not essentially operative—in Brazil and Argentina, for instance—the public conversation revolves precisely around these questions. More of this later in the present essay.

Despite the sound and fury surrounding the 2000 and 2004 U.S. national and state elections, the differences among contestants, in the United States, and in many countries of Europe has narrowed so much that some observers argue that national electoral politics is little more than the granting of collective consent to the prevailing neo-liberal consensus. And in the United States we have been in a state of near-total military mobilization for

sixty years of putative peace a policy which crosses partisan political lines. Neither major political party stands for isolationism. Certainly not even the Democrats challenge the main drift of foreign policy. Election opponents differ only on matters of strategy and tactics of how to secure global U.S. economic and political hegemony, no longer on principle. And it is not exclusively a question of whether the major parties agree that the prevailing system of capitalist power is off the political table. In the U.S., the bi-partisanship that has dominated executive and legislative decision since the Spanish American War has withstood the rancor of sporadic partisan debate generated by the emergence of anti-war movements that reflect the views of a substantial portion of the population. In one of the rare instances of public airing of the question of whether to go to war--the Congressional debate over the 1991 Gulf War--many in the opposition argued that the decision was hasty and should be delayed or referred to United Nations jurisdiction, not that the war itself was unjustified. In the American discourse about war, liberals and moderates sometimes differ from the War party over tactics. But the 2003 rush to the Iraq War saw the Democrats divided with its eventual presidential candidate, John Kerry, voting for the war resolution. And during the presidential campaign Kerry was consistent in his refusal to oppose the war, even when it became clear that, like Vietnam, there was little to no chance of a clearcut military victory, let alone winning the peace.

During the 2004 presidential election, at least at the level of political programs the two parties were not far apart. Kerry accused the Bush administration of bungling the Iraq War and promised to pursue its resolution more intelligently and with increased military force. Despite his often blistering criticisms of his opponent on particulars such as sending too few soldiers to protect the swift military victory over the Iraqi government forces, Kerry never once questioned the war itself. The Democrat took the stance of the bi-partisan post-World War Two U.S. foreign policy, which was committed to multilateralism, in which the Western alliance, either through the U.N. or NATO, was designated as the proper vehicles for conducting wars against rogue regimes and other threats to international stability. Only in areas where the Great Powers maintained their sphere of influence as determined by the Big Three at Potsdam and Yalta and in previous agreements, were they permitted to take unilateral military action. Indeed Harry S. Truman received U.N. sanction for intervening in the Korean conflict, but Dwight Eisenhower sent troops into Central America without a multilateral cover since, before the Cuban revolution, he knew that neither the Soviet Union nor Western European powers would actively contest the right of the U.S.

to promote its interests in the region. Similarly, when the Soviet military crushed the Hungarian Revolution in 1956 and sent tanks into Prague in spring 1968 to suppress reform, neither Eisenhower nor Johnson's administration lodged more than formal protests.

Since the end of World War Two there has also been bi-partisan agreement that the state of permanent war requires sacrifices of public goods. Moreover, since the 1970s the Democrats have acknowledged that the privatization of public goods may, under some conditions, be desirable, although they have been hesitant to support plans to privatize the national pension program, Social Security. Thus, consistent with the failed plan advanced by the Clinton administration to provide universal health care through the private sector, Democratic presidential candidate John Kerry agreed with the Republican, George W. Bush, that a government-financed and administered universal health care system was out of the question. The challenger offered instead a complex and largely undecipherable scheme that left the system, including prescription drugs, in the hands of private corporations and suggested government subsidies to bring the uninsured into the privatized system. Similarly, on the question of trade policy which, since the passage of NAFTA in 1993, has elicited considerable opposition from, among other sources, the unions, Kerry stood firmly for free trade, a cardinal plank of neo-liberalism and promised only to revisit the issue, but only for minor tinkering after the election.

Moreover, the experiences of the 2000 and 2004 U.S. presidential elections remind us that even in a liberal democracy, at the commanding heights of political power no less than at the local level, the parties in power steal votes, "persuade" members of the state and federal courts to thwart legitimate procedural challenges to elections and, through a network of local officials committed to victory at any price: broken machines, intimidation, bogus challenges, and planned understaffing of voting sites, to rob opposition constituencies--largely black and working class voters--of their ballots. For example, there is reason to believe that the Bush reelection victory, which depended crucially on the Ohio results, was purchased by the widespread use of these tactics by county Republican election officials and sanctioned by the Republican Election commissioner, who was George Bush's campaign chairman for the state.

For more than three decades the public has been treated to a veritable avalanche of scandals involving high elected officials who have taken bribes, and used their offices to benefit cronies, campaign funders and lovers; a president's administration used drug money to finance illegal counterinsurgency

activities in Nicaragua but it would surprise few if other presidents were involved in similar shenanigans; and in 2004 both candidates were able to circumvent badly crafted campaign finance restrictions, exempting them from public accountability. At the federal level regulatory agencies such as the Securities and Exchange, Environmental Protection, Food and Drug, and Federal Communications commissions have been so compromised by congressional underfunding which, in the administrations of both parties corresponds to the administration's complicity with major corporation lobbies who often write the regulatory codes, agencies' indifference to corporate flaunting of regulations, that the laws they are constituted to enforce are often inoperative, a sign of both parties' complicity with lobbies representing major corporations (who, ironically write the regulatory codes) and the agencies' indifference to corporate flaunting of these regulations. Bi-partisanship was illustrated by the Clinton administration's "voluntary" program of corporate regulation and the use of a market exchange to allow companies to avoid compliance with environmental rules. Moreover Clinton's budget chronically underfunded inspection and other regulatory personnel. While the United States example is perhaps most flagrant, these practices are widespread in Eastern Europe and Latin America and some nations of Western Europe. That the opposition Democrats in both presidential elections bowed to the will of the courts and to the realities of local political power indicates that democracy, even in its representative guise, is at best episodic in the current conjuncture or, as Sheldon Wolin has argued "fugitive":

Above all, it should be recognized that in the contemporary world democracy is not hegemonic but beleaguered and permanently in opposition to structures it cannot command. Majority rule, democracy's power principle, is fictitious. Majorities are artifacts manufactured by money, organization, and the media. (*Politics and Vision*, 601)

For these reasons he concludes:

Small scale is the only scale commensurate with the kind and amount of power that democracy is capable of mobilizing, given the political limitations imposed by prevailing modes of economic organization. The power of a democratic politics lies in the multiplicity of modest sites dispersed among local governments and institutions under local control (schools, community health services, police and fire protection, recreation). Multiplicity is an anti-totality politics."(603)

So ends the expanded edition of Wolin's widely known and much praised magnum opus *Politics and Vision*, first published in 1960 and reissued with five new chapters in 2004.

In the original chapters, which are unaltered for this edition, Wolin treats his readers to a breathtaking survey and commentary on the history of political theory that revolves around a dominant theme: is the hope of political philosophy since Plato to create an autonomous politics possible? Machiavelli who broke from medieval political philosophies which were based on ecclesiastical dogma, was the first modern political thinker insofar as he helped establish politics as "an independent area" of inquiry and rigorously excluded religion and other non-pragmatic issues while focusing almost exclusively on the problems of power. According to Wolin, he "offered a new science of statecraft" based on the then revolutionary idea that the Prince's sovereignty depended, crucially, on the consent of the "people" and could no longer rely on heredity or the absolute sovereignty of the medieval prince to exercise rule.

Leading philosophers of the pre-revolutionary period in France (such as Montesquieu and Rousseau) but also the political economists, (notably the Scot Adam Smith and the English Thomas Malthus), argued that the economy and, by extension, nature as the ground of production and reproduction of physical life, occupied pride of place in society. As Wolin showed in the earlier writing, even 17th century proponents of natural right such as Locke and of the priority of the political order as the genuine site of the general interest (as opposed to the particular interests of economically-dominated civil society) were fatally drawn to the idea that the self—the basis of political life—is fundamentally conditioned by its social surroundings in which private property plays a pivotal role, and by the natural conditions that form the basis of productive activity. In turn, informed by private property the social was infused with private interests that complicated the task of constituting a unified, sovereign state, and forming a polity that could reach consensus concerning their common problems was fated to be frustrated.

The concept of the autonomy of politics from social and economic relations was severely challenged in the 18th century, even as the bourgeoisie, to facilitate its dominance in the production sphere and civil society (which had been reduced to market relations), demanded control over the state form as a necessary complement to its economic and social hegemony. Wolin terms the rise of economic and social thought "anti-political" in the sense that statecraft as much as popular participation in state decision-making was

theoretically as well as descriptively undervalued. Needless to say, the anti-political tendencies within liberalism itself prepared the ground for what became known as the “managerial revolution” associated with the 20th century, and forcefully argued, in different ways, by Thorstein Veblen, A.A. Berle and most popularly the erstwhile American marxist, James Burnham whose book *The Managerial Revolution* became a best seller in the immediate years before World War Two.

Written at the end of the 1950s in the midst of the Cold War and when confident declarations of unparalleled prosperity, even as theorists of the American celebration such as Robert Dahl proclaimed the pluralism of U.S. power, and the increasing concentration of corporate wealth dominated the media and other sources of public information, *Politics and Vision's* explication of an “Age of Organization” thesis strongly resembles Daniel Bell’s contemporaneous contention that we had arrived, at least in the West, at the “end of ideology.” (2) Bell tends to approve, if not entirely celebrate this development. In contrast Wolin insists that, by its focus on class and other sectoral interests and categorizations, social science had neglected the “general” dimension of society, the need for integration of disparate groups, which remains the function of politics and cannot be replaced by administration. Wolin deplors the elevation of the large corporation to the level of a quasi- state and the consequent elevation of the business executive to the status of “statesman”. In sum, in 1960 Wolin retained his critical ethical stance against the anti-politics of bureaucratic and corporate domination of society, but offered neither prescription nor theoretical discourse that pointed to new agents capable of restoring to the polity its central place in decision-making. In the absence of any but ethical alternatives, the earlier essay trails off.

The essential contention of the long, concluding chapter of the earlier edition was that politics had been eclipsed by the “Age of Organization”. In concert with Max Weber’s theory of rationalization, Wolin argues that modern societies were dominated by technical rationality. Decision-making had conclusively passed from political elites and property owners--and certainly the demos--to managers and experts who exercised bureaucratic control of the functions of the economy and well as government, whether in “American capitalism, British Socialism or Soviet Communism”. Thus, the emancipatory doctrines of liberalism and marxism had been fatefully displaced by the requirements of large scale organizations for efficient and “neutral” management. Conditioned by the balance of nuclear terror between the world’s two superpowers, all but excluded wars that were not

officially sanctioned by them as “local”. This is surely a judgement that could not withstand the Cuban revolution and the subsequent Cuba Missile Crisis of 1961, in which the Soviet Union apparently attempted to establish a military and economic beachhead in the Western hemisphere, a perception fueled by the spread of insurgencies throughout Latin America that were inspired by the survival of the revolution; the global implications of the Vietnam war, and the concomitant spread of Communism in Southeast Asia; and the intensification of turmoil in the Middle East.

Nor, one might add, were Wolin and his colleague John Schaar--- then professors at the University of California-- unaffected by the 1964 student Free Speech Movement at Berkeley, which challenged the corporate university with democratic demands, especially the right of students to engage in national politics on campus. In fact, Wolin collaborated with Seymour Martin Lipset, in an edited collection of commentary on the movement and its demands and, with Schaar, wrote a fairly sympathetic assessment of the movement which contrasted with Lipset and other professors’ generally hostile comments.(3) As Wolin moved to Princeton in the early 1970s, his political ideas became much more radical. At the end of the decade he founded, and edited a short-lived journal *Democracy* that was, de facto, a dialogue between marxists and radical democrats. Wolin’s seminar at Princeton mirrored his belief that Western marxism, associated chiefly with the Frankfurt School, might offer some clues to the resolution of the crises of liberalism and of orthodox marxism, of which he was acutely aware.

In the new chapters added for the 2004 edition Wolin frontally addresses, some theorists and philosophers who have captured the attention of considerable fractions of the intelligentsia during the past forty five years: Marx, Nietzsche, “rationalists” such as John Dewey and Karl Popper, and the leading liberal philosopher, John Rawls. Wolin argues effectively that the “new” Nietzsche celebrated by a legion of philosophers and literary critics beginning with Bataille in the 1930s and concluding—if not irrevocably-- with Derrida and Deleuze, is misdirected because it ignores Nietzsche’s elitist, anti-popular, anti-political “and therefore anti-democratic” and authoritarian side. In fact, notwithstanding outbursts of right-wing populism, which are deployed opportunistically in electoral campaigns, Wolin seems to argue that we are living in a Nietzschean World.

Of course, this aspect would not give Martin Heidegger pause. His celebration of Nietzsche’s anti-democratic railings was fully consistent with his own denigration of the everyday and of the concerns of ordinary people,

especially their penchant for solidarity with friends and family, but also on the basis of their common interests in society. Wolin argues that it is this side of Nietzsche, rather than his often trenchant arguments against “laws” of history, and other scientific dogmas that are characteristic of his writings. Against those 20th century French philosophers who attempt to rescue Nietzsche from the charge of being pre-fascist and anti-semitic, Wolin aggressively demonstrates with a kind of overkill of quotations from a broad range of his writings that the traditional characterization is right, if incomplete, because it ignores Nietzsche’s importance as a political thinker.

For Wolin Nietzsche’s main concern as with other political philosophers is with power. As with all of the critiques Wolin proceeds from the question of how is democracy possible and finds Nietzsche an impediment rather than an ally to this project. His argument suggests that the protagonists of the Nietzsche revival are either naïve or complacent regarding the fate of the Enlightenment in the 20th century. Wasn’t the 20th century a time when the Enlightenment project was brutally deformed, not only by the rise of fascism and the degeneration of communism into a bureaucratic nightmare? As Horkheimer and Adorno argued, it was challenged from within its own precepts: the possibility that society could be organized rationally and particularly according to scientific precepts. (4)

The will to scientificity—which Nietzsche identified with the will to power—has given rise, at all levels of social organization, to the rule of managers and other experts with its concomitant usurpation and denigration of the sovereignty of the ordinary citizen. Indeed, Wolin critically invokes Karl Popper’s identification of the “open society” with the rationality of science. (5) Recall that in view of the impossibility of devising a method to affirm the truth of any scientific proposition, Popper sought to evaluate the claims of science by the criteria of falsifiability. Any scientific proposition not subject to repeatable experiment would be adjudged poetry or worse. (6) But, as Wolin correctly notes, to organize society on these principles would require that only qualified experts would be entitled to access to rule. Of course, the educational system would bear heavy responsibility for training such people but, parallel to Walter Lippmann’s famous argument in *Public Opinion* (1921) the role of the polis in the management of society is confined to the ritual of approving or disapproving the performance of professionals trained in rational methods of governance. Wolin justly derides this phantasm as impractical and, contrary to Popper’s prattle about the “open” society, ultimately undemocratic. Despite its claim Popper’s discourse is a version of the rationality that

informs the ideology of the modern capitalist state, no model of participatory democracy.

The second effort to bring rationality to political affairs while retaining a small-town version of participatory democracy finds Wolin far less critical. While remaining skeptical of John Dewey's attempt to offer a prescriptive participatory model based on face to face interaction among equals because it remains ensconced in conditions of rural and small town life whose time, in industrialized urban society is all but past, Wolin's own views are closely parallel. (7) In view of his recognition that the conditions of contemporary economic, political and social life have so reduced citizenship on the large scale Wolin holds out hope that democracy has a chance to flourish at the grass roots level in such issues as education, health, the environment and the like. His own embrace, albeit somewhat despairing, of a postmodern democratic politics retains a strong affinity to the underlying assumptions that inform the social psychology of Dewey and his colleague, George Herbert Mead. We know the world and ourselves in the process of face to face interaction with "significant others". The social process of abstraction signified by the dominance of the mass media and other large-scale state and economic institutions such as the corporation are, for Wolin, barriers to genuine communication and therefore undermine real democratic decision-making.

Wolin reserves his most biting criticism for John Rawls's doctrine of redistributive justice not only because he was the most influential theorist of the post-World War Two generation of political philosophers, but because his work remains almost identical with modern post-utilitarian liberalism. Liberalism, in Wolin's lights fails because it leaves the socio-economic system in tact and offers only palliatives to redress the blatant inequalities of capitalist economic relations. And, as Wolin points out, Rawls' *Theory of Justice* (1971) is careful to renounce any effort to address these relations. Insofar as Rawls stays within the confines of the current political and economic arrangements, his proposals for redistributive justice must ultimately fail because, by accepting the status quo institutions they would reproduce the inequality (and other injustices) they intend to mend:

Rawls' liberalism accepts democracy as a formal principle of 'free and equal citizens'. The revealing passage is where he explicitly condemns the 'civil humanism'—a code word for expressing participatory democracy—and sides with the more elitist classical republicanism. Civic humanism/participatory democracy is

denounced as a comprehensive doctrine that 'man is a social, even a political animal, whose essential nature is most fully achieved in a democratic society in which there is widespread participation in political life'. Participation, Rawls remarks disparagingly, is trumped not merely as a right but as a 'privileged locus of the good life'. (549)

Wolin has arrived at the position of radical democracy by means of a comprehensive critique of the limits of political philosophy, including its liberal variant, which retains a too narrow vision of society. This leaves him with two alternatives: a radical democratic marxism, whose critique of capitalism, he readily acknowledges, is unmatched by any other paradigm; and what Wolin terms "postmodern democracy" which incorporates large chunks of the contemporary marxist critique of late globalized capitalism but ultimately rejects both its designation of the proletariat as capitalism's gravedigger and Marx's conviction that it must be transformed root and branch.

That Wolin addresses Marx in a fairly wide compass indicates his political and theoretical evolution since the early 1960s. It is a courageous intellectual act, considering the careful avoidance by even the most liberal and social democratic of his peers to avoid taking this step. Wolin combs the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, *Capital*, the historical and political writings to discover whether, despite the general discredit to which Marx and marxism have been subjected, especially since the collapse of the Soviet Union, there is anything left to salvage. Wolin's reading of Marx is filtered through the lens of political philosophy, especially the problem of power. In this project he traces Marx's early and later perspectives on the prospects for democracy and for revolutionary transformation of society. While accurately showing that, in general, Marx favored proletarian engagement in the institutions of liberal democracy (indeed, Marx argued that the struggle for suffrage was the "last" great working class struggle under capitalism) but argued that in a system of class exploitation, these institutions were unable to secure social freedom, let alone justice for its subjects. Contrary to the liberal expectation that elections are the proper forum for settling major political issues or the more sophisticated contention that civil society is the space for the resolution of social differences and conflict through debate and dialogue—Habermas's public sphere. Habermas himself argued in his great early work *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962) the institutions of "civil society" generated by the bourgeois revolutions of the 18th and 19th centuries are

reduced to the marketplace, thereby inhibiting the emergence of a public sphere in which rational discourse might clarify and solve social issues. As Hegel showed commodities and commodity-exchange become the substance of civil society where buyers and sellers are perennially antagonistic to each other. (8)

In the cauldron of the capitalist market the proletariat, whose only saleable commodity is its labor power, is the class in “radical chains...in but not of society”. Marx argued that the proletariat was a revolutionary class out of necessity, not moral suasion. Uniquely situated as the fundamental source of capital accumulation, the labor process, but under conditions of ruthless exploitation, Marx “designates” the proletariat as the agent of historical change that, through its struggle over basic needs which capital in its relentless pursuit of profit cannot permanently satisfy, develops a vision of the new society. Under these circumstances in and through revolutionary action, which always evolves from unmet demands for elementary needs, the working class may realize the potential for human freedom inherent, but betrayed, by capital’s relentless pursuit of its own interests after it calls society as a whole to defend freedom. (9)

At the same time capital’s great achievement was to abolish the institutions of past feudal societies which fettered the forward march of history, particularly a system of land tenure that, relatively speaking, protected, intergenerationally, the peasants’ right to remain on the land. The betrayal, manifested infamously in the enclosures of the commons, consisted chiefly in capital’s refusal to make good on its declaration of universal human freedom. While it often was obliged to concede political liberty and the right of the people to confer formal consent on the political forms of its rule, it was unable and unwilling to extend democracy to the sphere of social production, nor did it concede voting rights for the propertyless and for women without a fierce and prolonged struggle. The divine right of property is the absolute limit of capital’s commitment to democracy.

Wolin detects a contradiction in Marx’s naming of the proletariat as the historical agent capable of liberating humanity from the thrall of capitalist social relations. On the one hand, Marx shows that capital reduces the worker spiritually and physically to a cog in the machine of commodity production. One of the crucial features of the past that capital all but destroys is the power of the craftsperson over the labor process. As we know, by the turn of the 20th century the last vestiges of workers’ control, rooted in the skills inherited from a much earlier time, were coopted and appropriated by

systems of rationalized production such as Taylorism and Fordism. Even the ostensible legatees of the artisanal mode of production, such as toolmakers, carpenters and tailors are no longer the masters of production. All but a few skilled workers repair or maintain the machinery or the commodity and become subject themselves to the capitalist division of labor. Equally significant, as Marx shows in the last chapter of *The Grundrisse*, that with the application of science to the labor process, the machine and other technologies have become largely “self-activating”, a concept whose prescience is richly verified by the mid-20th century when automation and computerization gradually dominated the processes of industrial production. Now the worker has definitively become the object rather than the subject of the production process. At the turn of the 21st century nearly all sectors of industrial production, distribution, communications and state and corporate administration have become subject to the vicissitudes of cybernetic technologies in which the entire labor force follows the rules intrinsic to the digitalization of all economic activity; the computer—the characteristic machine of late capitalist production and reproduction— invades, with force, into our social and psychic lives as well. Production occurs without the direct intervention of the worker who, as Marx remarks, has been relegated to a “bystander”, pushing buttons, watching and reporting on gauges, and reporting breakdowns or irregularities to mechanics and managers.

Capital is a “social relation”, meaning that its hidden character is that it owes its existence to the appropriation of the labor time of both intellectual and manual labor. A condition of its expansion is the subsumption of labor under its rule. Yet, on the other hand, despite computerization—numerical controls atop lathes and other standard machines, automatic feedback mechanisms, and robots—living labor, in its various forms, remains crucial to the production process insofar as, despite the relative marginalization of its direct role in production by technology, retains its regulative function. The motive power of the machine is supplied by labor; machines only partly produce other machines; the intellectual and manual labor of design, tool and mold-making are the absolute condition of mass production. Almost universally ignored by political philosophers who have detected the end of the working class intellectual labor, and the labor involved in operating automated equipment, transporting commodities from the shop to the truck or train and bringing the product to warehouses or markets remains vital to realizing and transforming capital from its material form to its money-form. In *Capital Volume III* Marx argues that the relentless reduction of the part played by direct labor in the production of the commodity in the intensive regime constitutes a crisis since labor time

remains the basis of value. The value of the commodity is constantly cheapened by incredible labor productivity, the so-called “multiple powers of labor”. This puts enormous pressure on profits, which, after all are derived from surplus labor. But if surplus labor for each unit of production is reduced to nearly the vanishing point in industries such as chemicals and oil refining, monopoly and oligopoly can mitigate the crisis by price-inflation in certain products and, most importantly, by further intensifying the technological fix, but only for a time. Under conditions of competition between highly centralized capital (in the industry Hewlett Packard, Compaq, IBM and other PC makers, for example) after the initial stage of expansion based on high prices—which partially cover the costs of research and development—prices tend to fall precipitously, and mergers and acquisitions ensue because the smaller and weaker corporations—even many technical pioneers—cannot withstand the price wars and can no longer raise capital. At the end of the process, only few firms are left standing, but capital still scrambles to get rid of inventory. After all, no matter how relentless the cost-cutting practices of technological innovation, in the end the product must be exchanged for money. Hence, for example, the realization crisis that afflicted computer makers from 1998 to 2004.

After suffering what its apologists termed a crisis of productivity during the 1960s—a symptom of the vigor of workers’ resistance to the logic of capital—the last three decades of the 20th century were marked by a systematic and largely successful effort, promulgated by new global institutions such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, and national states under the hegemony of Western capital, to drive the working classes of the advanced capitalist societies into submission. This class war is still underway but it must be admitted that, through globalization and decentralization of production, reductions of the social wage and, most importantly, the weakening of workers movements, capital achieved most of its objectives. The strike wave that ignited during the last two years of the 1960s may have subsided in the West, but, in the face of brutal suppression both by client governments of the United States and by former Communist regimes it has been taken up by the newly industrialized workers in the developing world.

Since Wolin is, in the main, unconcerned to explore the question of capitalism as a system of social relations or the real processes by which capital is produced, its fundamental unit being the commodity and the inherent relations that are reified in its material forms, his focus on politics and power leads to a bleak conclusion about the uses to which Marx’s analysis of capitalist social

relations might provide for democratic social transformation. That new social forces that arise as a consequence of the complex changes in the modes of material and ideological production largely elude his analysis. So apart from the influence of the Critical Theory's powerful analysis of the cultural and political contradictions of late capitalism--which are rehearsed in the last chapter of the book--Wolin remains impressed chiefly by the failures of what may be termed the "real socialism" of the Eastern bloc and China. That is, if it can be shown that, overcome by the powers of technology and capitalist organization, the working class is no longer capable of confronting a much stronger adversary, the whole project of a self-managed socialism and its "midwife" the social revolution, is rendered obsolete.

Against his own intentions, Wolin arrives at the postmodern turn. While rhetorically endorsing the dialectical concept of the totality, Wolin concedes that fundamental social transformation is now off the table because socialism—which promised to transform the social world root and branch--has failed. Concomitantly he is pessimistic about the chances of achieving democracy beyond the local level. Democratic struggle must, he admits, confine itself to reinforcing "fugitive" democracy, which is necessarily episodic and limited in scope. However accurate is this evaluation of the current state of affairs, its consequences are dire for the fate of theory and practice. The piercing metaphor of "fugitive democracy" suggests that it has become outlaw, but also marginal in advanced capitalist societies. While immanent in the concept of fugitive is a piercing critique of the claims of liberal and authoritarian states alike to have achieved some kind of "end" of history, it is bereft not only of hope, but never rises to the concrete because it fails to identify countervailing tendencies, especially outside the United States which, after all, is not the center of the world.

Wolin is not alone in his stripped down version of democracy and social justice. Others like Benjamin Barber, Michael Walzer and, indeed, a veritable legion of former marxist intellectuals such as Chantal Mouffe, Ernesto Laclau and, although retaining his radical edge, Sigmund Bauman who have taken the postmodern turn: they have abjured "grand narratives" (anti-totality), and utopian visions and have abandoned the search for a new or significantly altered paradigm of social transformation. Although most call themselves "radical" democrats, they advocate the "realistic" politics of what Cornel West and Roberto Unger have settled for: pragmatic tinkering with the institutions of liberal democracy. In this sense Habermas is right to argue that modernity remains an unfinished project if, in most cases, it has led left intellectuals back to liberalism—albeit not without critique.

THE CRISIS OF THE LABOR MOVEMENT

In concert with traditional political philosophy some liberals, as well as an important strain of modern philosophers whose farthest horizon has been the possibility of an autonomous political sphere, are experiencing tremendous anxiety in the wake of overwhelming evidence that the economic and social spheres are, both theoretically and practically, structures of dominance in the configuration of political life. More precisely the autonomy of the nation-state—especially its coordinating role of the economy, and its ability to unify and mobilize the underlying population around its program—has been called into question by the re-emergence of large corporations, especially those that are transnational, as key political actors after their relative recession in the era of state regulation which abruptly came to a close in the 1970s. Capital's concomitant abrogation of the informal social contract between Capital and Labor in the most advanced industrial societies which, to a large degree, was facilitated by the post-war agreements designating the dollar as the stable international currency has produced a slow but steady slide in real wages mitigated only by the proliferation of part-time, contingent and temporary employment of women and youth, the combination of which has precariously maintained the household wage, even as social wages have plummeted.

With the decline of the European and United States labor movements and the consequent deterioration of the remnants of civil society and the public sphere, the capitalist state is undergoing a fairly prolonged period of transition. Contrary to some recent arguments, the nation-state has not disappeared; instead its core functions have shifted from the legitimating institutions such as those of social welfare to, on the one hand, providing the monetary and fiscal conditions for the internal, but spurious expansion of (fictitious) capital, among whose elements is a reverse redistributive program, and on the other to supplying a vastly expanded regime of coercion, that is, the growth of the police powers of government at home and abroad directed against the insurgencies that object to the growing phenomenon of an authoritarian form of democracy. In this form the procedural institutions of liberal, representative government are preserved but, owing to vast centralization of capital and of economic and political power, the substance of participation is equivalent to conferring consent.

This shift does not mean that all aspects of the social wage are subject to repeal; but in the United States it does suggest the transfer of a considerable quantity of public goods to private hands. The law remains powerful, but

now the taxing powers of government are a mechanism for the transfer of wealth from the working class to large corporations and the wealthy individuals. Lacking a concerted counterattack by workers and other sections of the relatively powerless class inevitably this reverse transfer payment will result in the decline—both absolutely and relatively—in the share of national budgets devoted to the social wage. If these trends have been displayed more haltingly in Europe, it is due, not to some vague concept of “political culture” but to the specific resistance of the labor movement and its allies. For example, when the rightist governments of France and Italy proposed pension and health care reductions, sometimes in the form of cutting employees in the public sector, they were met with labor-led mass demonstrations and strikes and were forced to scale back or withdraw their plans. However, recent proposals to reinstitute the forty hour work week from the prevailing thirty five hours in Germany and France have not provoked the same level of working class opposition because many have been convinced that you can no longer reduce hours in a single country or a small group of European nations as long as the United States and the developing world, especially China, are still mired in overworking and underpaying the workers.

In the United States and most countries of Western Europe democracy is reduced to a voting ritual in proportion to the decline of civil society and the public sphere. In the United States during the first half of the 20th century, the chief sites of the democratic sphere were the local unions of the insurgent industrial working class, and the neighborhoods they inhabited. Even as the top layers of the labor movement became more centralized and bureaucratic in the 1940s and 1950s, and the largest multi-worksites local unions in the big cities were really “little” national unions in their practices and ideology, there were thousands of single worksite local unions whose democratic practices exhibited in a high level of membership participation both on the shop floor—where wildcat strikes were not uncommon—and in the administration of union committees. And there were many other sites of working class conviviality that remained: the bar, social clubs closely linked to industrial labor; ethnic societies; and, yes, ladies auxiliaries of local unions and nationality-based institutions such as the Polish National Home and Ukrainian and Russian mutual aid societies. The rank and file tended to show up at membership meetings where, at least in many instances, they spoke without fear and intimidation. In the Auto, Steel, Electrical and Rubber Workers unions to win election to local union office was often a sign that the candidate had gained the confidence of the most militant and vocal section of the rank and file. And when their choices

turned out to be corrupt or otherwise failed to serve members' needs and interests, the membership did not hesitate to throw the rascals out of office.

By the early 1950s a combination of laws and contract concessions eroded shop-floor militancy that protect and extend formal and informal worker-imposed restrictions on management's power to speedup the assembly-line and otherwise unilaterally set production standards, and limited the right of the unions to bargain over changes in the way the company does business. Unions began to sign long term contracts that, among other shackles, limited the use of the strike weapon to the expiration of the contract or, in the best scenarios, permitted strikes during the life of the contract only for a limited group of issues. Many unions watered down their rank and file steward systems by making stewards full-time and enlarging their jurisdiction, which effectively reduced the number of activists and gave shop floor leaders a vested interest in holding union office (hardly anybody voluntary returns from full-time union office to the line). These changes provoked a rash of wildcat as well as official strikes in the last half of the 1950s and, in the current of opposition and insurgency of the 1960s, led to the mass organization of public employees, a veritable revolt among black auto and steel workers against racist union policies, and a brief rebellion among young workers, members of the armed forces in Vietnam and at home and witnessed the birth of a new feminist movement whose breadth has still to be adequately chronicled. But these insurgencies were short lived. Their agents were either drummed out of the shops, settled for less than they once were prepared to accept, or won union office only to find that the forces of conformity were stronger than those of innovation and dissent.

When the black freedom movement and locally-based community organizations turned their attention in the 1960s to what they perceived to be vast corruption and discrimination in municipal services, they found few trade union allies except among a handful of long-time left unions such as the Longshore, Electrical and some of the newly formed state and municipal unions that had large black, female and Latino memberships. By this time labor was already split on the Vietnam War, to a lesser extent on the Democratic Party, and on the so-called "social" issues raised by feminists, blacks, and gays. By the 1970s many production sector unions were fighting the spectre of deindustrialization and, after Reagan's presidential victory, were caught in the vortex of contract concessions amid membership losses. In sum, in these environments labor fulfilled C. Wright Mills's judgment that unions had become a "dependent variable" in the political economy. In some fundamental ways, in the past quarter century, except for

national elections and some local contests, labor's voice is muted as unions have withdrawn from civil society and especially the public sphere. In turn, labor's *cause*, which still has a mountain of unfinished business, has lost considerable public support since the farm workers organizing campaigns of the 1970s, the fights of low waged hospital workers, and the battles for public employees unionism electrified the labor movement and middle classes.

CRITIQUE OF POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

Political philosophy is, with the exceptions noted above, a normative science. Since Plato its prevailing project is to ask whether the realities of politics and of the state—the Is—reach the standard of the Ought. The tradition of political philosophy arising from *The Republic* seeks a prescription that links the current state of affairs to the Good. The Good is the self-evident set of values derived from natural law or from *a priori* religious precepts. In either case the first principles of the political order are fixed, prior to any possible consensus arrived at by argument or by convention. The main question for those who follow the precepts of natural law are what are the elements of the Good and how do we arrange our political relationships so as to correspond to virtue which, in political philosophy, is often taken as a synonym for the Good.

Of course modern political theorists confronted with the growing distance between the concentration and centralization of capital—oligarchic control over large sections of the global economy and the consequent disappearance of the era of the small and medium sized producers—and a political system that is prone to take direction from these corporations, have lowered their expectations. At the same time, since there is no political theory of the global metastate(s), contemporary political philosophers cling to the nation-state as the only possible context for politics. Thus communitarians, no less than the liberals they criticize, write as if global capitalism and its discontents are part of a distant universe. Alisdair McIntyre—another erstwhile marxist of the hegelian variety--Charles Taylor and Michael Sandel remain locked in arguments derived from Kant, the empiricists and their latter day acolytes: what is the moral life and how can the self achieve it? (10) But even they, like Rawls—whose theory of redistributive justice Sandel has sharply criticized--are obliged to acknowledge the power of the question of justice, even economic justice, in the constitution of politics.

It may be argued that almost alone among 20th century political philosophers, Leo Strauss and his followers and the last before the last among practitioners of the profession, to proclaim the Good and the search for its contents as the sole task of political philosophy. As I shall argue at the end of this essay, the very last is the great Marxist utopian Ernst Bloch whose defense of natural law is perhaps the best argument for freedom in our time. Strauss and Bloch go back to the early Greeks, but draw radically different conclusions. Bloch wants to show that the impulse to freedom is relatively autonomous from historical determinations. But Strauss seeks to reclaim the ancients for a very contemporary project of political reaction; his real object is to erase history except the history of ideas, especially those about morality. While acknowledging the social nature of humans, Strauss denies the historicity of ethics and politics; his definition of historicity is that everything, including philosophical concepts, inevitably passes away. Of course, he is confusing historicity with historicism, for Strauss "historicity" preeminently stands for marxism. In a revealing passage Strauss imputes to marxism the view that a thinker's class origin determines or at least strongly influences [her/his] ideas:

According to a view which today is rather common and may be described as marxist or crypto-marxist, the classics preferred the rule of the urban patriciate because they themselves belonged to the urban patriciate or were hangers-on of the urban patriciate. We need not take issue with the contention that, in studying political doctrine, we must consider the bias, and even the class bias of its originator. It suffices to demand that the class to which the thinker belongs be correctly identified. In the common view the fact is overlooked that there is a class interest of the philosophers qua philosophers, and this oversight is ultimately due to the denial of the possibility of philosophy...the selfish or class interest of the philosophers consists in being left alone, in being allowed to live the life of the blessed on earth by devoting themselves to the most important subjects. (11)

Presumably, by this little joke, Strauss means to reveal marxism's vulgarity and the absurdity of any attempt to link class origins or class interest to philosophical ideas. Moreover, the "common people" had little sympathy for philosophy until the 19th century "due to a complete change in the meaning of philosophy" that is, when the concept of natural right is replaced by utilitarian, Constitutional and other deontologized conceptions of justice. Since, according to Strauss, all true philosophy concerns ontology, until Heidegger, ideas about nature as the ground of all aspects of

human existence, disappear. And it was Heidegger who went back to the Greeks to re-discover the “first principles”.

Strauss claims that humans have lost or forgotten the true meaning of political philosophy: the quest for “first things” the principles or things that are “imperishable”—not subject to the vicissitudes of history. One must avoid seeking virtue in conventional meanings, that is, in conceptions that derive solely from “ancestral” authority or from divine revelation. For in these instances political philosophy, which presupposes that we do not yet possess the knowledge of these principles, becomes unnecessary. Instead genuine political philosophy, as opposed to political theory and especially political science, seeks its object neither in convention nor in divine law but in “nature”, the term Strauss employs to designate the “eternal”. But since Nature is hidden it must be discovered. The discovery does not nullify the ancestral or customary, but “uproots” it from its position of first principle. But “By uprooting the authority of the ancestral philosophy recognizes that Nature is *the* authority” (*Natural Right and History* p.92) In turn this move nullifies the distinction between reason and authority. And this is the fundamental distinction between “classical” and “modern” natural right. Following Plato—the founder of classical political philosophy for whom man was essentially a political and social animal--the straussian task is to discover the forms of the specifically political without regard to the socio-historical conditions under which they exist. At the same time, in concert with only Rousseau among modern philosophers, he locates the origin of virtue in the ancient Athenian and Roman cities.

Rousseau, whose famous proclamation of Natural Law in the first chapter of *The Social Contract* “Man is born free”, which implies a state of “nature” prior to “his” entrance into the social world where “everywhere he is in chains” (12) advocated a return to “nature” while in civil society, invoking a kind of democracy which entails economic and social equality and “conscience”—derived from instinct and sentiment--as twin paths to freedom. (13)

Yet Rousseau was ambivalent about the Enlightenment, viewing science with considerable skepticism (see the *Discourse on the Sciences and Arts*), and believed that civil society was, in the last instance, “closed and a site of inequality rather than providing a basis for its remedy”. At the conclusion of the *Discourse On the Origin of Inequality*, Rousseau acknowledges the huge distance between the natural state of freedom and the social reality of inequality, where the strongest and more talented inevitably have more rights than others, where the distinctions between the leaders and the led in

civil society leads to political despotism. Hence natural right with its exaltation of the state of nature and of the heavenly city as its social repository become utopian declarations of hope rather than a practical way to freedom.

If Rousseau may be claimed by social science as one of its modern founders, he was also the last of the great bourgeois political philosophers, last because, while he proclaims nature as a the foundation for social critique, he no longer finds the origins of inequality in natural distinctions among people, but attributes them to social arrangements. Under the influence of Rousseau and Hegel, the doctrines of natural right and natural law suffer partial eclipse in the 19th century, as ethics itself submits to the criterion of human ends as its basis and becomes deontologized. In this respect historical materialism occupies a somewhat ambiguous place. Conditioned by the level of development of human knowledge of nature and embodied in science and technology, Marx notes that, alone among members of the animal world, humans create the object first in the imagination and then create its material form. Ends are conditioned by means but are in essence prior as well. It is important to assert that Marx was no social determinist: from *The German Ideology* to *Capital* he never tired of reminding us that the physical organization of man is the first premise of social production and therefore human history. Among the components of this physical organization is the brain capable of imagining new objects and new relations before they can assume material form. In turn this physical organization is conditioned by the natural environments into which communities are thrust. As Alfred Schmidt, Herbert Marcuse, James O'Connor, Joel Kovel and John Bellamy Foster among others have pointed out, the dialectic of labor is, in the first instance, the relation between humans and "nature" both that which is prior to their existence and the built environments inherited by succeeding generations. That balance with nature—its ecology—is vital for reproduction of the species these writers declare are already integrated by Marx into his critique of capitalist social relations. Marx's ecology consists precisely in his discovery that the imperative of labor, with its organic origins and consequences, is inherent in fundamental proposition that humans are part of natural history.

In this regard Ernst Bloch's spectacular effort to restore the concept of natural law and natural right to marxism proceeds from the premise that human history is itself conditioned by human striving for freedom, an "ideal" (his term) that cannot be realized under all social conditions but which appears within every mode of production. Bloch's great insight is that there is a limit to historicity in the dialectic between the transhistorical and the historical.

Bloch argues from philosophical evidence that, for example, Epicurus and the stoics already contains this striving in the Epicurian “law of pleasure” that stands outside of institutions of the status quo. “Of course”, Bloch adds, “that the desires and life of the slaves could also be taken into consideration when securing such guarantees (against mutual injury and harm) is not even a possibility in a society of slave owners with its Epicurian garden for the elite. The Epicurian right to pleasure needed calloused hands to sustain it...”(14) Thus Bloch retains the fundamental assertion of historical materialism of the primacy of the dialectic of labor: “nature is the mother” of humans, but social relations configure these relations. In this discourse history is the constraint to the natural law of the ineluctable striving by subordinate classes to human dignity, but not the determination of the law itself. The great Spartacus revolt in Ancient Rome, the 18th century slave revolt in Haiti, and in the early 19th century slave uprising in the American South may have been somewhat mythologized by historians and social theorists, but they are only a few of many “premature” challenges to the prevailing order by chattel slaves whose powerlessness was presupposed by masters and their acolytes. Similarly, the 1381 “Wat Tyler” peasant rebellion in England prefigured the uprisings of the English workers four centuries later—those of the luddites and the ranters-- just as the appearance of the German and French working classes within the democratic revolutions led by the bourgeoisie in 1848 took place when capitalism had not yet reached its maturity in these countries. Unexpectedly, the signs of proletarian autonomy were not to be even partially realized for a quarter century. Eric Hobsbawm and George Rude have documented the activity of the “crowd” in the French Revolution, and in the Italian countryside. These so-called “primitive rebels” defied expectations of their betters and while rulers labeled them “dangerous criminals” according to Hobsbawm “bandits” were really agents of rebellion. And how do we account for the recent factory occupations in Argentina where, refusing to accept the decision of the employers to abandon the plants, workers have opened them and adopted a regime of self-managed cooperatives. Don’t they know that the working class is only a potentiality, and no longer corresponds to the conditions of the globalized world?

Wolin’s trajectory tracks a path from the political morality characteristic of political philosophy before Rousseau to a recognition of the historicity of any possible ethical basis for politics. When the political philosopher discovers what Rousseau, Smith, Hegel and Marx argue, that all modern (and postmodern) politics are class politics and about power and hegemony, that the state and its institutions are irrevocably linked to economic and social

relations, the retreat to the postmodern constitutes, like all politics of despair, a profound, if unintentional, conservative ideological shift. This shift occurs because of the surrendering of a concrete vision of a new series of social arrangements and of political agents to address the transformations needed to realize them. Or to be more exact, the postmodern political philosopher's vision of radical democracy remains hollow because it no longer provides a ground for hope, but merely restates a sophisticated version of pragmatic rationality. Needless to say, despite many "fugitive" actions by apparently defeated workers there is much ground for pessimism, for precisely the reasons given in *Politics and Vision*: the traditional left opposition has been largely defeated as have been the so-called "new" social movements, many of whom have devolved into "non-governmental organizations"(NGOs) and have become mouthpieces for liberal democratic regimes in the developing as well as the advanced capitalist worlds.

But the judgment that this is no time for world- historical theorizations or for a vigorous dialogue about alternatives to traditional formulae and expectations demonstrates the impoverishment of both analysis and an entailment of an anti-utopianism which, in the last instance, is a de facto acknowledgement of the permanence of the current setup. Lacking not only a concrete conception of possible futures, but a sober assessment of incipient social forces, the political philosopher becomes overwhelmed by the forces of domination and can only urge us to be content to narrow our compass and our vision. Perhaps, as with Sartre and Marcuse to revive the only chance of reversal of these ruminations will come when rebellion is reignited.

TOWARDS A NEW THEORY OF POLITICAL AGENCY

I face a conundrum. On the one hand, I don't have the luxury of ending this essay on a note of defeat since I have argued that the dialectics of defeat, enunciated with great eloquence by Critical Theory during and after World War Two and repeated with numbing regularity by its legatees, no longer suffices, if it ever did. More to the point, this attitude reflects the growing isolation of intellectuals from movements of the global opposition. It may be argued that in the dim twilight of really existing socialism and the bankruptcy of the social-democracies of Western Europe and their proto-equivalents in the North America, Critical Theory had nowhere else to turn. In the wake of the abandonment of the concrete utopia by the putative forces of opposition for most of the last half of the 20th century, to keep

alive critical analysis of the givens of the social world was--and remains--an important program. At the same time, I reject the cockeyed optimism of much of the Left which, on the whole, is bereft of even a fraction of the acuity of Wolin's analysis of the main features of advanced capitalism's betrayal of what, following the felicitous phrase enunciated first in SDS's manifesto The Port Huron Statement, he calls "participatory democracy"—a concept that is still foreign to much of the Left—and that certainly offers little more than the same formulae that failed in the past century. In this sense I follow Bloch in accepting the obligation of declaring and, even more, specifying reason for hope, without engaging in the phantasm of empty revolutionary rhetoric. The question is: is the postmodern turn away from totality—the possibility of the emergence of a new subjectivity that can “grasp” the sprawling object and constitute itself as a new subject/object of freedom—as ineluctable as it is ubiquitous?

Introduced in his “Note on the Dialectic” (the new preface to *Reason and Revolution: Hegel and the Rise of Social Theory*) Marcuse's concept of the Great Refusal was an acknowledgement that the conditions of possibility for this eventuality resided only in the excluded masses: the working poor of the advanced industrial societies and of the colonial and post-colonial world. Written in 1960, just after the victorious Cuban revolution against the ghastly Batista dictatorship, Marcuse invokes the power of negativity as “hope against hope” against the increasingly narrow horizons wrought by the smooth repressive desublimation of technologically-suffused late capitalism. Four years later in *One Dimensional Man*, he declared that only from those entirely excluded from the blandishments of consumer society could Critical Theory derive solace. In any case the possibility of agency within the scope of late capitalism itself was strictly proscribed by the universalization of technological rationality.

Published just a year before the most politically significant anti-war demonstration in two generations, Marcuse's monumental dialectic of defeat, *One Dimensional Man*, had a curious effect: it inspired precisely the proponents of participatory democracy, the young opposition that emerged out of the civil rights movement, out of the boredom of the smooth repression of suburban life, out of the profound discontent students experienced with the prospect they could take their places as loyal supplicants of the bureaucracies of late capitalism and especially the war machine. And, virtually obliterated from contemporary history were the movements of working class struggles against the capitalist production

machine—in France, Italy and in the United States. Marcuse’s vivid description of their condition had the opposite effect intended by its author: together with C. Wright Mill’s powerful indictment of the ruling circles in *The Power Elite*, and Paul Goodman’s searing indictment of the educational system in *Growing Up Absurd*, *One Dimensional Man* was among the most influential political texts for the New Left.

The failure of Critical Theory to acknowledge the fundamental significance of feminism, ecology and black freedom as expressions of oppositional, even a new class politics reflected both the isolation of left intellectuals from new social movements and the limits of the negative dialectic. Elsewhere I have argued that holding to the criterion that no social movement has world-historical significance unless it represents the “determinate negation” of the prevailing social order is too high a standard (15). Moreover, in its enslavement to the past, it cannot grasp the new when it does not dismiss it entirely. What was new in the late 1960s influenced some elements of the camp of Critical Theory. But many remained true to the masters: for example, Paul Piccone, editor of the influential journal *Telos*, dubbed the New Left and the social movements of which it was a part, examples of “artificial negativity”; Russell Jacoby wrote an interesting study of *The Last Intellectuals* which, while containing a grain of truth that academia had absorbed much of the revolt against late capitalism, ignored the emergent intellectuals of the new social movements. But Andre Gorz, Tony Negri, Mario Tronti insisted that intellectuals who would theorize world history keep their ears and noses to the ground. Toward the end of his life Marcuse came to recognize the irony of Critical Theory’s failure to embrace feminism, black freedom and the episodic, but powerful workers’ revolts on the shop floor. But Marcuse’s shift away from the politics of despair had little influence on his “children” who began to shift to the center in the 1980s.

I would argue that these judgments were symptoms of the parochialism of late Critical Theory, which, although disdaining the postmodern retreat, failed to integrate a global perspective into its analysis. For the preponderance of Critical Theorists only Western Europe and North America were worthy of concern. And then only white males were capable of entering history. Although this attitude was somewhat engendered by a healthy rejection of the third worldism of much of the 1970s Left for which no displacement of subjectivity was too extreme to embrace, it also produced considerable intellectual blindness. What many could not see was the profound implications of the emerging global vision of the ecology, feminist

and labor movements for the creation of a new opposition to transnational capitalism. The Seattle demonstrations of December 1999, the subsequent mass demonstrations at Quebec, Genoa and Spain against the key institutions of global capital, and the development of the World Social Forum, whose location in Brazil's Porto Alegre was symbolic of a global shift, as both an attempt to create a new civil society and as a post-911 continuation of the protests, present new possibilities, the ignorance of which leave social and political theory stranded in the past.

Even as Europe drifts rightward and the United States has an entrenched far-right regime in power, what are we to make of the dramatic Latin American shifts from a morass of military dictatorships that prevailed until the 1980s to today's center-left governments? Note well, most of these are by no means radical: indeed Chavez's Venezuela is far from a democratic regime. Yet the factory occupations in Argentina and the government's rejection of IMF and World Bank austerity plans, the Workers Party government in Brazil and anti-authoritarian developments in Chile and Equator are signs, however inclusive of major change in the region. To these we might add the possibility of the center-left PRD victory in the upcoming Mexican presidential elections.

While it would be foolish to neglect the still powerful influence of neo-liberalism over these parties and governments, it would also be a mistake to dismiss the new context for social struggles. Already forces to the left of these parties have sharply criticized them for their accommodation to global finance capital and, in Venezuela, pro-Chavez workers have demanded the right to vote for their trade union leaders. While the electoral center-left promises more equality, its base insists on more democracy as well. Compare the world's response to the resurgence of U.S. militarism to any similar development in the 20th century. In the eyes of much of the world, including perhaps half the American people, the Bush administration stands condemned of gross violations of human rights, and its legitimacy has been widely questioned.

And, despite the right-wing victory in the United States, under the radar screen is the largest burst of activism in thirty-five years. Anti-war and anti-sweatshop movements, fierce discussions in black circles about the future of a people whose gains are being wiped away in slow, but steady measures, a new student activism, and even the outpouring of hundreds of thousands of anti-Bush liberals and leftists to aid John Kerry's failed campaign despite

his center-right platform, indicate the existence of a popular opposition, however fragmented and visionless it might remain. The task of social and political theory is plain: to make sense of these developments, and to address those already in motion to propose an alternative. We might speculate that the disparity between activism and theory is a symptom of new circumstances, the dimensions of which we are only dimly aware because theory lags behind events.

What has become clear, however, is that the old forces of the opposition—the parties of the labor, communism and social-democratic left—have exhausted their capacity for struggle, except for the occasional demonstration to stall the shredding of the welfare state. In some instances they are the embodiments of what Sartre termed the “practice-inert” a play on Marx’s famous remark in the *18th Brumaire* that “the traditions of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living”. In consequence, despite the revolution of 1989, and the subsequent rapid collapse of really existing socialism, many still cling to the past but, more to the point, insist that it should rule the present and the future. Enscorced in tradition, the Left seems unable to assume the position of the opposition. One explanation for their relatively tepid response to the anti-social right offensive is that the working class composition of the parties is thinning as almost all of them have become parties of government and, more to the point, the traditional western industrial working class retreats, however slowly, into history. Moreover, without a sharply altered conception of what it might be, socialism has become a statement of moral hope, mostly bereft of content and certainly not on anyone’s political agenda.

What is emerging as an urgent, but also radical departure from the old formulae is an ecological perspective rooted in the implausibility of continuation of the three hundred year legacy of carboniferous capitalism, and of one of its primary presuppositions, economic growth on the basis of urban and suburban sprawl, dirty energy and the consequent automobile culture. Radicals need to reject the penchant of social and political theory to leave questions of our ecological relations to the scientists and engineers or to the “Greens”. They must become involved in the politics of land use, water and energy if any alternatives to the current set up are at all possible. Social theory must address questions of our relation to the ecological context which conditions the character of social relations and be able to examine the effects of exploitative social relations on the environment and then to consider alternatives, many of which have been worked out but languish for lack of

strategic theorizing. “Global warming” or, to be more precise, structural climate instability and shift, may be the catalyst for the invention of new economic, social and cultural arrangements or at least the development of a program of regional, democratic delinking of communities from the global system. This would entail programs of import substitution, new modes of cooperative ownership of enterprises, limits to the market as regulator of economic activity and the forging of a new international labor movement, the seeds of which were born in Seattle in 1999. Note the contradictory character of these proposals: delinking seems to contradict global solidarity. This may be true, but if current trends continue, the main strategy for maintaining historical living standards in the West will be to raise the wages and living conditions of workers in developing countries while, at the same time, conceiving new modes of life that reduce or otherwise undermine capitalist interdependence.

For example, *“The Take”* the film documentary depicting the attempts by a network of Argentine Workers to reopen abandoned industrial plants on a cooperative basis might be considered an exemplary instance of initiative from below and could have broad application in the so-called advanced capitalist societies, especially the United States where millions of relatively well-paid jobs were lost in the last thirty years without opposition or alternative initiatives taken by workers, their unions and their communities. The Argentines did not emulate so-called worker-controlled industries, which preserved the top-down managerial style of the Fordist system, but tried to effect a broad democratic management in which workers participated and ownership did not revert to the former owners. Of course, within a market system, these efforts met with only mixed results; some attempts failed to get off the ground. The question for us is how to comprehend such a development? Again, what to make of the landless movement in Brazil which is driving the Lula government crazy as it demands agrarian reform? (Note: 2500 troops were deployed in February 2005 to break up a peaceful demonstration for land redistribution. Eight hundred demonstrators were arrested and several were killed.) The questions here are whether democracy from below is possible, and under what circumstances? How can workers take the initiative to defend their own living standards without resorting to protectionism, concessionary bargaining and other forms of collaboration with capital?

I invoke these examples to suggest that beyond hand-wringing and surrender to liberal institutions, beyond pure defense of the gains of the past, lies considerable uncharted territory. Our task is to draw the maps.

NOTES

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- 13 See J.J. Rousseau. "Origins of Inequality" in Kress ed. *Ibid*; Strauss op cit, 256.
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