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Democracy Incorporated: Managed Democracy And The Specter Of Inverted Totalitarianism



Synopsis

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

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Customer Reviews

At the end of a long, distinguished career as one of America's foremost political philosophers, Sheldon Wolin takes a hard look at the current political system in America and arrives at the profoundly uncomfortable conclusion that America has become a "managed democracy," where the will of the American people is effectively removed from political, social and economic decision-making. He sees the country firmly set on its way toward becoming a system of "inverted totalitarianism" where democratic institutions are only empty shells and "democracy" has become a myth which in practice is completely controlled by transnational corporate elites and their willing executioners. You think it can't happen here? According to Wolin, it already happened, if you carefully define what "it" is. The term "Inverted Totalitarianism" addresses the obvious rejoinder many people might make: Isn't America still a democracy? Where was the *Machtergreifung*--the coup or takeover of power? Wolin asserts that it does not require brown shirts marching in the streets for a totalitarian takeover to take place. In Inverted Totalitarianism, the Fuehrer is the product of the system (George W. Bush), not the architect; it does not celebrate the state but uses an informal network of corporate and political power. Inverted Totalitarianism does not mobilize its populations (the way communism and the Nazis mobilized theirs) with endless parades and speeches, but it keeps them quiet with Reality TV and consumer culture; it does not require unanimity among the people, but fosters a splintering of public opinion, etc. Still, the end result is a de-fanged democracy, laying prostrate before a mighty corporate elite in love with its own power.

- yet what's new? When has Democracy in America not been managed? From robber baron "Lords of Creation" mouthing "the public be damned," to political bosses admonishing their machine electorate to vote early and often, irresponsible private elites and their bought "public servants" have always formed an entrenched nexus of privilege. Wolin is aware of these precedents, and alludes to them; but like Progressives of a century ago, he appeals to some lost Grecian golden age from which we've somehow allowed ourselves to fall. There was never such an era. What you see is what there always was. The exceptions have been just that. Nor has modern media really altered this trajectory. The "soft totalitarianism" produced by 9/11 was no different from the managed hysteria over Pearl Harbor, nor Hearst's profit-driven newspaper crusade to remember the Maine, nor Lincoln's manipulation of Ft. Sumter. Perhaps the root problem is the very concept of American democracy as "consensus," so that we all "meet in the middle." But what if that consensus allows for white supremacy, Protestant ascendancy, or other inherently undemocratic cultural heritage? This dichotomy has been part of the American experience since the first colonies were founded as private proprietaries. "American values" then seem but a political grafting onto a granted social

order where everyone "knows" his/her place and expectations. Again, I don't dispute the author's "timely message for our age." It's just that an ancient fart like me knows this age differs from others only in style, not substance. As George Bernard Shaw wrote in "Major Barbara": "The government of your country! I am the government of your country: I and Lazarus."

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