

Greening Sheldon Wolin: Limits and Vision, or Environmental Political Theory as a Vocation

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Abstract:

This paper stages an encounter between Sheldon Wolin's democratic political theory and theorizations of environmental politics or "green theory." Environmental issues do not figure prominently in Wolin's work, nor has Wolin been seriously taken up by environmental thinkers. There are, however, suggestive parallels between the two, as well as ways in which the theorizations of each could be enriched by the other. Wolin's recent revision of *Politics and Vision* concludes by emphasizing small scale community and "the value of limits" as democratic counterpoints to "Superpower" and "inverted totalitarianism," presenting highly suggestive resonances with earlier environmentalist critiques of industrial society. In the environmental field, considerable critical thought has been brought to bear on the concepts of limits and scale, which might be fruitfully brought into Wolin's democratic theory. On the other hand, the contemporary environmental movement often sees the solution to environmental problems in either technical (scientific or bureaucratic) changes, or in individual ethical or spiritual transformation. In this context, I argue that Wolin's earlier work on the social role of political theorizing bears revisiting, as environmental political theorists search for a role in a movement that continues to struggle with its relationship to both politics and theory.

“My hope is that in some measure the present work will encourage younger generations of political theorists to engage in the endless task of redefining the political and reinvigorating the politics of democracy”

- Sheldon Wolin, Preface to the Expanded Edition of *Politics and Vision*

“What seems to have been forgotten is that one reads past theories not because they are familiar and therefore confirmative, but because they are strange and provocative”

-Sheldon Wolin, “Political Theory as a Vocation”

I. Sheldon Wolin and Environmental Political Theory

This paper provides an opening to what I think is a promising encounter between the field of environmental political theory (EPT) on the one hand, and the work of Sheldon Wolin on the other. That this encounter has not yet taken place is somewhat surprising.

Environmental political theorists have turned their sights on both canonical or classical political theorists – from the Ancient Greeks to Marx and Nietzsche – and more contemporary ones – from Adorno to Zizek – mining a huge range of theorists, past and present, for insights into contemporary environmental problems. But to date (as far as I can find) there has been no attempt by environmental political theorists to examine the work of Sheldon Wolin, a figure who is, according to at least one observer, “perhaps the preeminent U.S. political theorist.”¹ At the same time, Wolin continues to be an active political theorist, most recently producing a greatly expanded version of his 1960 classic, *Politics and Vision*.² And yet, in spite of numerous claims to the effect that “the landscape of political theory has been transformed by the ecological challenge,”³ Wolin’s theorizations show little trace of having been so transformed. On the other side, few, if

¹ James Wiley, “Sheldon Wolin on Theory and the Political.” *Polity* 38, 2 (2006), p.212

² Sheldon S. Wolin, *Politics and Vision: Continuity and Innovation in Western Political Thought*, expanded ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004). Hereafter referred to as *PV*.

³ Andrew Dobson and Robyn Eckersley (eds.), *Political Theory and the Ecological Challenge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p.1. Many similar examples could be cited.

any, of Wolin's many commentators take up the issue of Wolin's relevance for environmental issues.⁴

The disjuncture is presented starkly here, although in some ways, Wolin and EPT are in some ways already quite close. Wolin is close to EPT in the sense that the conclusion to the new edition of *Politics and Vision*, with its emphasis on small scale community and "the value of limits" as democratic counterpoints to "Superpower" and "inverted totalitarianism," is highly resonant for environmentalists. At the same time, the value of small scale community and "limits" are highly contested within EPT. Indeed a great deal of EPT constitutes a forced engagement with accusations of "unreconstructed romanticism" or subscription to a "myth of primitivism" (a point that I can attest to having been on both the giving and receiving end of such accusations). As troubling as it may be to hear these accusations so often, I think the working through of these charges and our responses to them – whether we deny them or plead guilty – forces us to engage with difficult some of the political and philosophical dilemmas that lie at the heart of EPT, and perhaps even political theorizing more generally. The process is thus is not without merit, and so Wolin's work might equally be profitably interrogated on these grounds.

Wolin's theory lies close to EPT because of its normative emphasis on small-scale community and limits, but EPT is also close to Wolin in quite another sense. For Wolin is not only a political theorist in the same way that Plato or Hobbes was one, providing an

⁴ This point, which provided the inspiration for this paper, was made to me by Nick Xenos. Two partial exceptions are: J. Peter Euben, "The Polis, Globalization, and the Politics of Place," in Aryeh Botwinick and William E. Connolly (eds.), *Democracy and Vision: Sheldon Wolin and the vicissitudes of the political* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), which discusses not only the politics of place but also the issue of scale, though with only a few passing references to ecological issues *per se*; and Terence Ball, "Democracy" in Dobson & Eckersley, *op. cit.* Ball was a student of Wolin's, though this essay contains no specific reference to Wolin's work.

abstracted account of the working of the political realm. He is also a political theorist in the particular sense in which the term is used within the discipline of political science: a historian of political thought, providing an account of the role of political theory and the political theorist in the broader sense of the term. Political theorists in this sense are meta-theorists: they not only provide a theorization of politics, but also a theorization of theories of politics. In Wolin's meta-theory, political theory is (famously borrowing a term from Max Weber) a "vocation."⁵ So when, to return to the quotation from Dobson and Eckersley cited above, it is argued that ecological issues provide a transformative challenge to political theory as a field of inquiry, Wolin's notion of a vocation is at least implicitly at play. Put another way, the idea that integrating the challenges posed by environmental crisis is essential to the vocation of political theory in the contemporary era, lies at the heart of EPT as both an intellectual and political exercise. Re-examining Wolin's classic account of this understanding of political theory as simultaneously intellectual exercise and political gambit might help to elucidate the nature of environmental political theory as a vocation.

It should also be acknowledged that this exchange between Wolin and EPT is in some sense an intergenerational one, as the choice of epigraphs for this essay suggests. While Wolin's account of the vocation of political theory, as a meta-theoretical account, encompasses the entirety of the history of political theory (at least in the Western tradition), there is also a sense in which Wolin's intervention is one specifically directed to the political and academic context in which it was written.⁶ In what ways, if any, can the strategies that Wolin suggests for the political theorists of the late 1960s be taken up

⁵ Sheldon S. Wolin, "Political Theory as a Vocation." *American Political Science Review* 63, 4 (1969). Hereafter referred to as *PTV*

⁶ This is in no sense a contradiction: Wolin's meta-theory asserts that all theorizations of politics are interventions into the politics of the day.

by the environmental political theorists in the early 21st century? While answering this question directly is beyond the scope of this paper, I am here arguing that the question should be put high on the EPT agenda.

II. Preserving the political

Wolin's *Politics and Vision: Continuity and Innovation in Western Political Thought*, as the subtitle suggests, seeks to grapple with the dialectic of stability and change in the Western tradition of political philosophy from Plato into the twentieth century. On the one hand, political philosophy is a tradition – an “extended conversation” – stretching over many centuries, which casts a long shadow over the work of those who engage it. Making an intelligible intervention in this ongoing conversation requires acknowledging past speakers, and accepting many of the conversation's postulates, terms, and generic conventions. “Of all the restraints upon the political philosopher's freedom to speculate,” Wolin writes, “none has been so powerful as the tradition of political philosophy itself.”⁷ The terms, concepts, and insights of past thinkers – or what Wolin calls a “cultural legacy” – act as “conservatizing agencies within the theory of a particular philosopher.”⁸

On the other hand, however, the task of any particular political philosopher is to recast this cultural legacy to make it relevant for his or her contemporary concerns. Political philosophy is concerned not just with continuity but also with innovation. What is crucial here for Wolin is the political philosopher's vision, meaning not only the ability to objectively describe the political world, but also the use of the *imaginative* faculty. “The imaginative faculty has played a role in political philosophy similar to that

⁷ *PV*, p.21.

⁸ *PV*, pp.21-22

Coleridge assigned to imagination in poetry, an “esemplastic” power that “forms all into one graceful intelligent whole.”⁹ Imaginative vision is thus *integrative* (a key term, for reasons that we shall see momentarily), with its capacity to create an abstract, systematized understanding of the political realm. At the same time, imaginative vision is also fundamentally innovative: imagination “has been the medium for expressing the fundamental values of the theorist; it has been the means by which the political theorist has sought to transcend history.”¹⁰ One way to understand this “history” that is to be transcended is the particular political context in which the political philosopher lives (“An architectonic vision is one wherein the political imagination attempts to mould the totality of political phenomena to accord with some vision of the Good that lies outside the political order”¹¹). But, as is made clear just a couple of pages later (perhaps most strongly in the passage about restraints on the political philosopher, cited above), the dead hand of history that is to be shaken off may equally refer to the inherited traditions of political philosophy itself.

These dialectical interplays, between continuity and innovation, and between rootedness in contemporary political conditions and imaginative vision as an escape from history, form the intellectual core particularly of the first (1960) edition of Wolin’s text, and provide the metatheoretical grounding for some wonderfully insightful readings of canonical political theorists. As one review of the 2004 edition begins:

When it first appeared in 1960, *Politics and Vision* had an extraordinarily important impact on the development of political philosophy in the United States.... Time has been kind to what is now Part One of *Politics and Vision*. Many years after having cribbed liberally from it for my first

⁹ *PV*, p.18

¹⁰ *PV*, p. 19.

¹¹ *PV*, p.19.

lectures, I find it retains the freshness, subtlety, and extraordinary wisdom I found in a book then already twenty-five years old.¹²

The thematic focus, however, is rooted in what Wolin understands to be the main problem with the political conditions of his own day. The final chapter of the 1960 edition is titled “The Age of Organization and the Sublimation of Politics,” and in it Wolin most clearly expresses his own normative commitments (or “fundamental values”) and “architectonic vision.” The “Age of Organization” is a time which is fundamentally defined by the problem of the masses, as he asserts: “The concept of the masses haunts modern social and political theory.”¹³ The shift from Marxism to Leninism clarifies the political stakes here, as it signals a shift from seeing the bulk of humanity as the proletariat that is universal *subject*, to seeing the same people as the masses who are to be *objects* of manipulation by strategic-thinking elites. Wolin first describes Lenin as being among the first to grasp “the possibilities of organization as the action medium best suited to a mass age.” He then says that “the central point of Lenin’s argument” was a decisive break from Marx (and other nineteenth century views), in asserting the primacy of the political over the economic. But in a mass age, the political is crucially understood here to be “absorb[ed] into organization.”¹⁴ The organization is an action medium (we can recall here Wolin’s claim that the imagination is similarly a “medium” for expressing the normative commitments of the theorist), but its imperatives soon displace any autonomous political impulses that might have emerged from the masses, who are now conceived of as object rather than subject. The medium becomes the message.

¹² Mark Warren, review of *Politics and Vision* in *Political Theory* [issue?], p.667.

¹³ *PV*, p.377

¹⁴ *PV*, p.378

While Lenin is the among the first to grasp these insights, he is of course far from the last, as they are lessons absorbed by many others across the political spectrum concerned with the problem of the masses. The dominant political ideologies of the first half of the twentieth century - Leninism, organization theory, and fascism – have all sought (in different ways, to be sure) to solve the problem of the masses. “The measure of Lenin’s success is that his lessons have become the common property of the age; the irony is that his prescription for revolution has also been used to preserve giant capitalism.”¹⁵ For Wolin, one important consequence of this lies in its casting out of democratic impulses – across the board, rather than just in Leninist Russia:

Lenin’s emphasis on the “small, compact core” of professional revolutionaries as the vital cog of organization led him to the question of what kind of democracy, and how much, could be permitted. His answer established a framework of argument that was to be duplicated by later writers concerned with the same broad question. It was the procedure adopted by [Roberto] Michels in his famous study of the oligarchical and bureaucratic tendencies in professedly democratic parties; by Chester Barnard in his analysis of the contradiction between the requirements of administrative leadership and democratic practices; by students of organization concerned at the way mass society, with its penchant for “radical leveling,” “prevents the emergence of social leadership.” *What is important here is the way that the question is posed: how much democracy can organization endure? – never the reverse.*¹⁶

While this subordination of democratic principles to organizational imperatives is particular to the Age of Organization, it can also be traced to a broader trend in the evolution of political theory. The locus of political activity has gradually shifted from the body politic (or state) to the organization more generally, and this change carries with it important, if more difficult to see, consequences. While the emphasis on organization broadens the scope of the political in the sense that it allows us to see power operating in

¹⁵ *PV*, p.378

¹⁶ *PV*, p.381; emphasis added

a multitude of non-state institutions and networks (“governance without government” to use a more current formulation), this broadening simultaneously distracts us from the political understood as “what is general to a society,” or “the general responsibility for the welfare of the whole society.”¹⁷ Our tendential blindness to this, which Wolin terms “localism,” and identifies as rooted not only in the hegemony of the organizational imperative, but also in the scientization of the discipline of political science (its increasing reliance on objective, to the exclusion of imaginative, vision), provides a crucial point of reference for understanding Wolin’s architectonic vision, or how *Politics and Vision* can be seen as an attempt to “escape from history”:

The chopping-up of political man is but part of a broader process which has been at work in political and social theory. During the past two centuries the vision of political theory has been a disintegrating one, consistently working to destroy the idea that society ought properly to be considered as a whole and that its general life was best expressed through political forms. One result of this kind of theorizing has been to flatten the traditional *majestas* of the political order.¹⁸

Political concerns, properly understood, are therefore integrative (rather than disintegrative) ones, and ones that consider “society as a whole.” And the course of modernity has involved a detrimental downplaying of these sorts of concerns, in favour of the “localism” encouraged by the organizational imperative.

There are a cluster of resonances here for EPT. One is the concern to think holistically, rather than in terms of narrow sectoral interests: just as Wolin sees the political theoretical imagination as animated by an integrative (or “esemplastic”) cast of mind, environmentalism is similarly concerned with “thinking globally” and with making integrative connections even beyond the socio-political (human) world. Ecocentrism, for

¹⁷ *PV*, p.385

¹⁸ *PV*, p.386

example, is defined by Robyn Eckersley as “based on an ecologically informed philosophy of internal relatedness... [seeing] the world [as] as intrinsically dynamic, interconnected web of relations.”¹⁹ Similarly, Wolin’s normative emphasis on the concerns of citizenship (understood as a properly political form of identity) echoes Aldo Leopold’s highly influential notion of the land ethic (with human beings as “plain member and citizen of the land-community”²⁰).

A second common concern has to do with Wolin’s critique of the scientization of politics (in its subordination of democratic to organizational imperatives). Here too there are clear resonances with environmental debates stretching back at least to the 1970s, over whether authoritarian solutions are needed in order to solve pressing environmental problems, as well as more recent debates over whether or to what extent scientific expertise ought to guide environmental policy,²¹ and whether or in what sense democracy and environmentalism are ultimately compatible.²²

Finally, there is a concern about the political implications of the scientization of the *study* of politics. This is articulated more forcefully in his essay on “Political Theory as a Vocation” (published almost a decade after the first edition of *Politics and Vision*, and incorporating the insights of Thomas Kuhn’s *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, published in the intervening period²³). But even in the first edition of *Politics and Vision*, the political stakes in the project of making social (or political) science more “scientific”

¹⁹ Robyn Eckersley, *Environmentalism and Political Theory: Toward an Ecocentric Approach* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992), p.49.

²⁰ Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac* (Ballantine, 1966[1949]), p.240.

²¹ For example, in the debate leading up to the passage of Canada’s Species at Risk Act, over whether the designation of species covered by the act should be up to scientists or parliament. See also debates over scientific expertise vs traditional knowledge, esp. in Environmental Justice struggles.

²² [reference for this? John Barry?] See also Ben Minteer and Bob Pepperman Taylor (eds.), *Democracy and the Claims of Nature* ((Rowman & Littlefield, 2002).

²³ Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962)

are grasped, foreshadowing the development of science studies and the sociology of scientific knowledge, and later actor-network theory (ANT), which has important implications for EPT and environmental politics more generally.²⁴

III. Vision 2004: Postmodern Power, Superpower, Inverted Totalitarianism

By the time Wolin publishes his expanded edition of *Politics and Vision* in 2004, the political context has changed in important ways. In the preface to the new edition, Wolin notes that the original edition was published “midway between the Allies’ victory over one totalitarian regime and the collapse of another.”²⁵ Later, he observes that “the midpoint between the defeat of one totalitarianism and the disintegration of another was the high-water mark of American liberalism and the beginning of that ideology’s evolution from “social conscience liberalism” to “neo-liberalism.””²⁶ This changed political context, in which “The new liberalism remained state-centered, but its state was now imperial,” demanded a different response from the one formulated in 1960 – a different theorization of politics, a different architectonic vision – which Wolin characterizes on the first page of the new preface as the difference between “liberalism and democracy.”²⁷ Our discussion of Wolin’s understanding of the changed political context will be restricted here to a relatively brief explication of the constellation of three key terms that for Wolin characterize the contemporary political conjuncture: postmodern power, Superpower, and inverted totalitarianism.

²⁴ See, for example, Bruno Latour, *The Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).

²⁵ *PV*, p.xvi.

²⁶ *PV*, p.552.

²⁷ *PV*, p.xv. Wolin specifically refers to “the author’s... journey from liberalism to democracy” although it should be clear that the journey is impelled by the tides of history as much as Wolin’s independent thinking on the matter.

In his summary remarks in the preface, Wolin states: “In postmodern societies the coerciveness of power – its traditional threat of violence – is shadowed by abstract, non-physical power... includ[ing] the generation, control, collection, and storage of information and its virtually instantaneous transmission.”²⁸ Information has become vital to *producing* a political reality, rather than merely *encountering* it. Previous political theorists were concerned with making a distinction between how politics appeared and its underlying reality (Plato, Machiavelli, and Marx being three immediately obvious examples that are widely separated in time). “For theorists of a postmodern era, however, the contrast between appearance and reality no longer holds.”²⁹ While Foucault is not directly cited here (and in spite of Wolin’s dismissal of “cascades of “critical theory” and their postures of revolt” as little more than the valorization of novelty that essentially serves a legitimating function for postmodern capitalism³⁰), Foucault’s characterization of power – as essentially “productive” – seems clearly similar to what Wolin has in mind.³¹

As noted above, by 2004 American liberalism for Wolin has passed its “high-water mark” and the American state has become more frankly imperial. At the same time, because postmodern power is “simultaneously concentrated and disaggregated.” Power is concentrated in multinational corporations and international financial institutions, but at the same disaggregated in “the market” and consumer politics. For this reason, the American state in some ways appears quite flaccid. Unlike earlier empires, characterized as ““command regime[s]” of domination... Superpower is better understood as

²⁸ *PV*, p.xx.

²⁹ *PV*, p.395.

³⁰ *PV*, pp.566-67.

³¹ See, for example, Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1979), and Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1990).

predominance, as ascendancy, preponderance of power, terms that suggest... above all, an economy of power.”³²

This last phrase, of course, resonates with Wolin’s famous characterization of Machiavelli, as a theorist who sought “to create an economy of violence, a science of the controlled application of force.”³³ And indeed Wolin remarks in the book’s second half (i.e. the 2004 edition) that “a contemporary economy of powerful multinational corporations resembles nothing so much as the warring city-states of sixteenth-century Italy.”³⁴

One of the unique features of Superpower is the impact of the disaggregation and concentration of power characteristic of postmodernity on the state itself. Wolin’s use of the vaguer term “Superpower,” like Hardt and Negri’s “Empire,”³⁵ suggests the difficulty of locating a precise center of power, when the largest multinational corporations control economies that are the size of many nation-states, and when state autonomy is constrained by international financial institutions such as the World Bank and IMF. What other observers have called a “market fundamentalism” underlies Wolin’s observed shift from “social conscience liberalism” to “neo-liberalism” (or welfare state to Superpower³⁶). But this cannot be identical with (for example) “American imperialism,” because if the market is understood as fundamental, then political concerns are necessarily subordinated to economic doctrine. With the hegemony of neo-liberalism, “the economy” becomes not only political but the dominant “public philosophy,” it “sets

³² *PV*, p.xix. Wolin also emphasizes the extent to which the state’s monopoly on the legitimate use of violence is now challenged by “decentered terrorism.”

³³ *PV*, p.198.

³⁴ *PV*, p.564. The similarities between Wolin’s reading of Machiavelli and his understanding of his own political project are at times quite striking, and no doubt worthy of further comment. While a few others will be mentioned in passing below, a full treatment is beyond the scope of this essay.

³⁵ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2000).

³⁶ *PV*, pp.575-78.

the norm for all practices concerned with significant stakes of power, wealth, and status.” Indeed, Wolin goes on to muse darkly: “The twentieth century may have spawned some forms of totalitarianism without having exhausted the genus.”³⁷ But this new species of totalitarianism is “inverted.”

The normative criticism of the subordination of the political to the economic is a familiar refrain of the final chapter of the 1960 edition. And in this sense, the current moment is perhaps better cast as “hypermodern” rather than “postmodern.” While in the middle of the twentieth century the specter was of politics (and democracy) being crushed under the weight of organizational imperatives, by the early twenty-first century, the emphasis lies on the ways in which the global market (and capitalist economics as ideology) constitutes a form of power that is simultaneously concentrated and disaggregated – crushing, but in less immediately visible ways.

While it is never quite stated as such, there is a sense that with the latest species of totalitarianism, history is repeating itself, but for the second time as farce.³⁸ While Wolin is careful to note that it is “far from absurd,” nevertheless “Superpower, was inspired not by any ideology or theory but by a comic strip.”³⁹ If there is farce that is to be found here (as Marx well understood), it lies not in any pleasantly humorous consequences, but precisely in the absence of a sense of seriousness as the most dramatic of events unfold. And this appears to be just what Wolin apprehends: elections are now “lavish

³⁷ *PV*, p.564.

³⁸ This phrasing is of course taken from the opening passage of Marx’s essay “The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte.” It should be noted that in a preface to a (then) new edition that was being published in [1960s? – find reference], Herbert Marcuse observes that under fascism the reverse of Marx’s dictum is true: fascism first appears as farce, but ends as tragedy. Another argument that the contemporary moment represents history repeating itself as farce is made in Steven Hayward and Andrew Biro, “The Eighteenth Brumaire of Tony Soprano” in David Lavery (ed.), *This Thing of Ours: Investigating the Sopranos* (New York: Columbia UP, 2002).

³⁹ *PV*, p.553.

spectacles”; “The political actuality of Superpower Democracy is of a continuous managed plebiscite, controlled excitement for the plebes: their Circus Maximus, their political Superbowl.”⁴⁰ Thus at the same time that the economy is politicized in the important (Marxian) sense noted above, it is also depoliticized, as a supersized political spectacle substitutes for meaningful political debate over contending architectonic visions.

Contemporary totalitarianism represents an inversion because it combines a strong state – albeit one more inclined to use “soft” or postmodern forms of power – with an apparent flourishing of “liberal-democratic changes that appear to work against regimentation.”⁴¹ Just as postmodern theorizing (not to mention Rawlsian liberalism)⁴² appears to celebrate difference without interrogating underlying economic structures, anti-discriminatory (i.e. identity) politics “may also contribute to splintering and fragmenting opposition.”⁴³ The disaggregation of power provides the appearance of political pluralism and tolerance, while restricting the possibility of genuinely political debate – debate over the total constitution of society – over such organizational imperatives as continuous economic growth.

Wolin reminds us that totalitarianism (or more precisely its earlier variants) was not completely inoculated from politics. Drawing on recent historians’ descriptions of the Nazi regime, Wolin writes that:

totalitarianism is consistent with a measure of competitiveness, disorder, rival centers of power, and competing loyalties.... It is not so much a refusal of politics as a practice of politics without any consistent ideological justification.....

⁴⁰ *PV*, p.554.

⁴¹ *PV*, p.xvi

⁴² on postmodernism, see *PV*, pp. 566-67; on Rawls, see *PV*, pp. 530-36.

⁴³ *PV*, p.xvi.

If we substitute profit and exploitation for war and “dynamic” for “aggressive,” then the postmodern economy beings to appear as a variant of the totalitarian in which “free competition” masks the dominance of small groups in intense rivalry with each other, a rivalry that in its own way is as expansive and aggressive as any practiced by the Nazis and Fascists.⁴⁴

The inversion of what might be described as “classical” fascism, occurs as the state no longer rests on mass mobilization, but rather on mass demobilization. The perceived connection between fascism and democracy (both in the sense that fascist regimes appeared to enjoy quite broad popular support and in the sense that fascist regimes emerged out of mass democracies), meant that one of the “lessons” drawn by American social scientists from the experience of fascism was of the danger of “overpoliticizing civil society.”⁴⁵ The result was that post-war liberal political science emphasized (explicitly or implicitly) the desirability of mass depoliticization.

This trend in social scientific thinking in fact represents part of an ambitious (if “disaggregated”) reconstitution of citizenship in the latter half of the twentieth century. The “problem of the masses” is ultimately solved by their dispersal into individual consumers, or abstract categories that dominate polling but do not correlate with lived or communicative communities (i.e. “soccer moms”), or by the disaggregation of political power itself in the neo-liberal critique of “big government.”

A picture of the citizenry constructed by political and social scientists accomplished an astonishing inversion of the electoral “democracy” staged by the Nazis: not the enthusiastic masses endorsing the regime by a vote of 99 per cent but its parody, an

⁴⁴ *PV*, p.579

⁴⁵ *PV*, p.554. See for example Samuel Huntington’s notion of the perils of an “excess of democracy” in Michel Crozier, Samuel P. Huntington and Joji Watanuki. *The Crisis of Democracy (Trilateral Commission Task Force Report #8)* (New York: New York University Press, 1975).

apathetic mass half of which could barely bestir itself to vote at all.... The depoliticization of the citizenry, as rationalized in academic studies of voting behavior, implied that depoliticization was democratic because based on the tacit consent of citizens, of “the silent majority.” Thus unlike the dynamic polarity of elite and mass in Nazi propaganda, this was a peculiar combination that celebrated elite leadership and counted on mass passivity.⁴⁶

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the United States is the “sole remaining superpower” and capitalism is the political-economic system against which all others must be measured. In an ironic reversal of Marx, capitalism remains “uncollapsed.”⁴⁷ What keeps it aloft, in part, is simply the absence of a viable alternative. And as the title of the section “Faltering Vision” suggests, Wolin lays at least some of the blame at the feet of contemporary intellectuals who have rationalized the status quo rather than take up the vocation of political theory: “the disinclination of new millennial intellectuals to conceive of an alternative economic order that could support genuinely political forms of life represents either a failure of the theoretical imagination or the exhaustion of tradition – or both.”⁴⁸

IV. Fugitive Democracy

In *Politics and Vision*'s discussion of Machiavelli, the latter is described as a figure in which we find “a passionate commitment to the vocation of political theorist.” Indeed, it is striking that only a handful of the book's indexed citations for “political theory” are not connected to Machiavelli. And if, as noted above, the contemporary political moment is in important ways not dissimilar to the context in which Machiavelli

⁴⁶ *PV*, p.555

⁴⁷ *PV*, pp565-66. Adorno somewhat similarly opens *Negative Dialectics* with the observation that “Philosophy, which once seemed obsolete, lives on, because the moment to realize it has been missed.” Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 1973), p.3.

⁴⁸ *PV*, p.578.

found himself, we might say that *Politics and Vision* is in some sense Wolin's exhortation for liberation from the barbarians.

Wolin is of course more interested in rekindling a democratic impetus within society than in finding a prince who will reconstitute society from without. Postmodern societies, which provide an experience of perpetual change (technological and other), and which therefore tend to perpetuate expert and administrative rather than democratic rule, are "overwhelmingly, a revolution from above."⁴⁹ It is perhaps not for nothing that Wolin turns, in the book's final sentences, to Gramsci, who had sought to apply Machiavelli's insights to the mass age: "In the era of Fascism Gramsci had conceived the task to be one of arousing "the civic consciousness of the nation." In the era of Superpower the task is to nurture the civic conscience of society."⁵⁰

In a sense, the task that Wolin sets is more modest than Gramsci's. Rather than mobilizing a counter-hegemonic bloc that might successfully challenge the power of capital, Wolin is concerned with protecting and producing resistances to Superpower and contemporary inverted totalitarianism. Democracy, for Wolin, is a "fugitive" experience of politics, rather than a settled form of government.⁵¹ It is rendered scarce as a result of "the *inherently* anti-democratic structures and norms characteristic of the dominant institutions of so-called advanced societies, the contemporary corporation and the Superpower state."⁵² But it is by its nature fleeting.

⁴⁹ *PV*, p.605

⁵⁰ *PV*, p.606. The Gramsci quotation is from *The Prison Notebooks*. See also Antonio Gramsci, "The Modern Prince: Essays on the Science of Politics in the Modern Age" in Antonio Gramsci, *The Modern Prince and Other Writings*, trans. Louis Marks (New York: International Publishers, 1957).

⁵¹ *PV*, pp.601-06. See also Sheldon Wolin, "Fugitive Democracy" in *Democracy and Difference: Contesting the Boundaries of the Political*, ed. Seyla Benhabib (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

⁵² *PV*, p.604

What then allows democracy to flourish? Wolin's answer proves surprisingly resonant for ears tuned to environmentalist discourses, and can (with some risk of oversimplification, of course) be summed up in two words: "act local."

What the economic polity renders scarce for its citizens is the direct experience of politics itself and the responsibilities of power. And that is the "renewable resource" unique to the political ecology of localism: unlike the corporation and its accomplice, the postmodern state, localism can generate and continuously renew direct political experience.⁵³

Wolin does not romanticize the progressive content of local politics, acknowledging that "localism is typically the site of the "anti-modern centrifugals"... the Klan, militiamen and –women, neo-Nazis, Protestant fundamentalists, would-be censors of public and school libraries, champions of an "original Constitution.""⁵⁴ Rather it is the experience of political participation itself – which is most easily available at the local scale to the "ordinary citizens" with limited time for political engagement – that is valuable for rekindling the sense of citizenship and the possibility of collective action in the interest of society as a whole.

Of course, it is precisely the dominance of "anti-modern centrifugals" in local politics that disrupts the easy connection between local-scale politics and a "politics" that is necessarily concerned with societal rather than particular interests. And indeed, we can recall that it was "localism" had been identified in the first edition of *Politics and Vision* as a baleful feature of the Age of Organization: "Localism, in short, is the earmark not simply of those who are concerned to prescribe new forms of social and political organization, but equally of those who profess to be interested solely in explanation and description."⁵⁵ Thus while he doesn't explicitly put it this way, it seems plausible to

⁵³ *PV*, p.604

⁵⁴ *PV*, p.604

⁵⁵ *PV*, pp.385-6

describe Wolin's normative prescription in a familiarly two sided way: while access to the direct experience of politics compels us to "act local," resistance to the imperatives of the Age of Organization (and *a fortiori*, of postmodern Superpower) compels us to "think global." Before turning in the paper's final section to examine how these two might be connected, however, one other feature of Wolin's conclusion is worth noting.

In *Politics and Vision*'s final paragraph, just before citing Gramsci, Wolin argues that "a discordant democracy" is what needs to be nurtured – "discordant not in the flashy but empty ways of latter-day Nietzscheans but discordant because, in being rooted in the ordinary, it *affirms the value of limits*."⁵⁶ Superpower, on the other hand, constitutively presents itself as unlimited:

The *virtù* of that regime lies in its dynamic, its ceaseless reaching out. In its political economy form it is a furious drive for the innovations that promise greater rewards and expanded opportunities for exploitation. That drive is remarkable for its ability to keep extending the limits of the possible: the idea of limits becomes an incitement, new "challenges"⁵⁷

Thus Wolin ends his book with a remarkably (if not explicitly) ecological vision of what might provide a democratic counterpoint to postmodern Superpower: on the one hand, for Wolin (as for E.F. Schumacher and countless ecological thinkers who have followed him), small is beautiful: "small scale is the only scale commensurate with the kind and amount of power that democracy is capable of mobilizing."⁵⁸ On the other hand, because democracy is practiced by "ordinary citizens," lacking the leisure to engage in politics on a full-time basis, the modest scale of democratic political power is to be accepted as a virtue, and is furthermore consonant with a long tradition in American political life.

Wolin is again worth quoting at some length:

⁵⁶ *PV*, p.606; emphasis added

⁵⁷ *PV*, p.595

⁵⁸ *PV*, p.603

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, cultural institutions, property taxes) and in the ingenuity of ordinary people in inventing temporary forms to meet their needs. Multiplicity is anti-totality politics: small politics, small projects, small business, much improvisation, and hence anathema to centralization, whether of the centralized state or of the huge corporation. At the same time, multiplicity corresponds to the historic nature of American citizenship and its crucial implication: that citizenship in the emergent Superpower is not a part of democracy's multiplicity, much less its quintessential mode of civic existence.⁵⁹

We thus appear to have arrived, finally, at nothing so much as an unreconstructed romanticization of small-town life. It is almost surprising that the New England town hall and Jeffersonian agrarian democracy are not explicitly mentioned. But, as numerous commentators on similar visions have suggested, this may offer us little in the way of a programmatic vision for a society that has become increasingly urbanized and dependent on a global division of labour. And the embrace of “limits” – particularly understood as a political commitment rather than, say, an individual commitment to “voluntary simplicity” – similarly sits in some tension with a commitment to democratic freedoms.

As Fredric Jameson has observed:

It is important to identify this repressive dimension of the contemporary ecological ethic, about which it does not particularly matter whether it is voluntary and self-administered or not (or perhaps one should suggest that it is far worse if it *is* voluntary and self-administered), in order to grasp the kinship between a politics most of us feel to be positive and ideologically desirable and one we may feel rather differently about, namely contemporary authoritarianism.⁶⁰

V. Environmental Political Theory as a Vocation

⁵⁹ *PV*, p.603

⁶⁰ Fredric Jameson, *The Seeds of Time* (New York: Columbia UP), p.48

Wolin suggests that major (Wolin uses the term “epic”) political theorists are akin to the “extraordinary” scientists described by Thomas Kuhn, upsetting traditional ways of understanding the world through an innovative act of imaginative vision. But, he goes to suggest that political theorists are also unlike scientists in an important respect. Scientific revolutions tend to occur, according to Kuhn, with the persistent appearance of “anomalies” which cannot be explained by the dominant theory. Scientific revolutions involve envisioning a new systematized understanding of the world such that the facts now fit the (revolutionary) scientific theory. Political theories, on the other hand, involve the expression of “fundamental values” or “vision of the Good,”⁶¹ and thus political theorizing involves an insistence on making the facts fit the theory rather than the other way around: “The shaping experience [for the political theorist] has been the recurrently problematic state of the world, not the problematic state of theories about that world.”⁶²

This might provide a first line of defense against the accusation that Wolin is engaged in a romantic and ultimately untenable valorization of social forms and experiences being eclipsed by capitalist modernity. On this line of reasoning, to claim that Wolin’s account of engaged political life is anachronistic or no longer pragmatic, is to engage in the same kind of rationalization that smugly defends low political participation rates as a sign of satisfaction with the system. If capitalist modernity does not allow for the expression of our fundamental values, or for human beings to live the good life, then it is capitalist modernity, rather than our ideals and commitments, that ought to be jettisoned.

⁶¹ *PV*, p.19, and see above

⁶² *PTV*, p.1079

But the problem for Wolin seems to go deeper, if we inquire about the division of labour in a society whose politics are local, and resolutely so, grounded as they are in the notion of limits. Democracy for Wolin is all about enabling the political participation of those “ordinary citizens” for whom political engagement is not the primary focus of their daily lives. But then what exactly is the role of the political theorist in democratic politics? It is perhaps only by making democracy “fugitive” that a role for political theory can be retained.⁶³ And even if we accept that “epic theory” is to be rejected as “an elitist form of theory” – a position that James Wiley argues Wolin came around to⁶⁴ – why should this populist sense of democracy that the later Wolin valorizes, grounded in local politics, be immune to the charges of “localism” that so exercised the earlier Wolin?

The dilemma is a real one, and should probably be no less acutely felt by environmental political theorists who argue (rightly) that environmental issues are inherently political, and that appeals to a value-neutral science that might resolve problems in an objective manner are essentially ideological. The question is no less than: what is the normative basis for political theorizing?

Wiley suggests that Wolin had begun to reject epic theory as early as 1970 (in *Hobbes and the Epic Tradition of Political Theory*),⁶⁵ or in other words almost immediately after it was fully articulated in “Political Theory as a Vocation.” On the other hand, however, in the early 1980s, Wolin again appears to address precisely this dilemma of providing a value-laden orientation to theorizing politics, that cannot be dismissed as the rationalization of self-interest (whether individual or of some “sub-political” or “local” group). And he does so using the key term developed in the “Political

⁶³ A discussion of this dilemma in a different register is found in Fredric Jameson, “Politics of Utopia” *New Left Review* 25 (2005).

⁶⁴ James Wiley, “Sheldon Wolin on Theory and the Political.” *Polity* 38, 2 (2006), pp.221-4.

⁶⁵ Wiley, “Wolin,” p.221

Theory as a Vocation” essay. Wolin notes that Weber confronted a similar dilemma, and sought to “revitalize the concept of vocation and make it into a prophylactic that would prevent subjectivity from degenerating into subjectivism.”⁶⁶

The fundamental difference between great scientific innovators and great political theoretical innovators, as noted above, lies in the nature of the relationship between the facts that are encountered and their theorization. Political theory “refus[es] to yield to facts the role of arbiter.”⁶⁷ Unlike the natural scientist, the world that the political theorist encounters is composed “organizations [that] are uniquely the product of mind” and “impart regularity and predictability to the major realms of our existence.”⁶⁸ On the one hand this process of rationalization makes “epic theory” or the imagination and articulation of alternative political systems increasingly difficult. The world is “impervious to theory,” “For what could be more hopeful than to know that the political and social world is deliberately fashioned to produce regular and predictable behavior?” On the other hand, however, “The only trouble is that the world shows increasing signs of coming apart.”⁶⁹ If we can read the signs, or in other words with the proper vision, we can see that we have created not a rational world but rather have a world of (to cite the work of the Frankfurt School, who were also deeply influenced by Weber’s characterization of modernity) “rationalized irrationality.” So while “epic theory” is increasingly difficult, it is also increasingly urgent.

And indeed the logic of Wolin’s characterization of the contemporary moment suggests that this urgency has hardly abated. If our postmodern production of the political

⁶⁶ Sheldon Wolin, “Max Weber: Legitimation, Method, and the Politics of Theory,” *Political Theory* 9, 3 (1981), p.409

⁶⁷ PTV, p. 1081

⁶⁸ PTV, p.1081

⁶⁹ PTV, p.1081

world has finally collapsed the appearance/reality distinction – if everything is ultimately seen to be “socially constructed” – then perhaps the world has become even more “impervious to theory” in Wolin’s sense of theory as an imaginative vision of an alternative political order. Moreover, the signs of the world coming apart are also increasingly visible, not least with the by now too familiar litany of environmental crises – climate change, deforestation, massive species extinction, and so on.

Wolin’s rejection of epic theory came out of a growing sense that it was “an immodest attempt to emulate the heroism of political action in thought by creating powerful and memorable theories that would make their authors “immortal.””⁷⁰ This drive for immortality then can be seen as being of a piece with the ceaseless, totalizing drive for expansion that we find in Superpower. How then, to develop a political vision for an anti-totality politics?

I want to suggest, finally, that EPT offers a place to start reconstructing the vocation that Wolin outlines. It is a promising place to start because it defines simultaneously an object of study, a method of inquiry, and a political project.

By virtue of its object of study, or subject matter, EPT refers constantly to something that is external to the world of politics. The presence of “nature” works to short-circuit any totalizing claims about politics, either in the sense that the rationalized world has been realized (as environmental crises remind us of the persistence of systemic irrationalities), or in the sense that the political world is all-encompassing (the presence of nature reminding us that the world is not entirely the product of human mind or labour).

⁷⁰ Wiley, “Wolin,” p.221

At the same time, EPT's object of inquiry is not simply the natural world, but theorizations of it (not nature but rather "nature"⁷¹). The method of EPT, as a form of political theory, entails at the very least an engagement with, if not an exercise of, what Wolin defines as the imaginative vision of political theory. As Wolin notes in one of the epigraphs to this essay, the very process of engaging with the "strange" texts that develop a political vision in this sense, ought to provoke a political response.

This brings us finally to the notion of EPT as a political project. While it is certainly too much to argue that EPT constitutes a sort of intellectual vanguard for the environmental movement, it is nevertheless at least plausible that environmental political theorists (most if not all) share a broad commitment to environmental values (even if there is some disagreement about what exactly those values are, and how they might be realized). It is not too much to say, in other words, that environmental political theorists have a shared, or at least overlapping, vision.

What is more, this shared vision might allow us to begin to see our way past at least a couple of the dilemmas that Wolin's work presents us with, identified above. The first is Wolin's reconsideration of epic theorizing, and his claim that this constitutes a totalizing "drive for immortality." On the one hand this totalizing claim is hubristic, but on the other hand something like a totalizing vision is necessary to see beyond the constant flux of postmodern society (a section in *Politics and Vision* on postmodernism takes its epigraph from Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus*: "Keep moving, even in place, never stop moving."⁷²) The dialectical interplay between stability and change is a familiar one, and environmental commitments might serve as a reminder

⁷¹ See my *Denaturalizing Ecological Politics: Alienation from Nature from Rousseau to the Frankfurt School and Beyond* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005).

⁷² quoted in *PV*, p.566

that what is sought – in political theory as in environmental politics – is not immortality, but *sustainability*.

The second dilemma is between on the one hand Wolin's populist emphasis on the local as the site where politics, and hence democracy, is most likely to be found, and on the other hand the global vision that political theorizing seems to demand. The question here is how might these local democratic practices or moments be scaled up or translocalized, or how the ambit of a nurtured civic conscience might be expanded beyond the immediate experiences of local politics, to construct the sense of global solidarity that is required to deal justly with such challenges as climate change. The answer to this question is far from clear, although it does seem that the best – indeed, perhaps only – prospect of getting an answer lies through the path of political theorizing. Wolin's fundamental insight, which remains true even as ecological crises have accelerated over the past half-century, is that these problems are fundamentally of a political nature: concerning the whole of a society that is marked by all manner of inequalities. What is required to resolve ecological crises is not only better scientific understanding of where natural limits in fact lie, nor a cascade of individual ethical choices, but rather, primarily, the articulation and then realization of a compelling imaginative vision of a form of collective life that lies both outside, yet within the grasp, of the current historical moment.