

Chris Hedges & Sheldon Wolin: Can Capitalism and Democracy Coexist?

Source: [TheRealNews](#)

CHRIS HEDGES, PULITZER PRIZE-WINNING JOURNALIST: Hi. I'm Chris Hedges. And we are here in Salem, Oregon, interviewing Dr. Sheldon Wolin, who taught politics for many years at Berkeley and, later, Princeton. He is the author of several seminal works on political philosophy, including *Politics and Vision* and *Democracy Inc.* And we are going to be asking him today about the state of American democracy, political participation, and what he calls inverted totalitarianism.

So let's begin with this concept of inverted totalitarianism, which has antecedents. And in your great work *Politics and Vision*, you reach back all the way to the Greeks, up through the present age, to talk about the evolution of political philosophy. What do you mean by it?

SHELDON WOLIN, PROF. POLITICS EMERITUS, PRINCETON: Well, I mean by it that in the inverted idea, it's the idea that democracy has been, in effect, turned upside down. It's supposed to be a government by the people and for the people and all the rest of the sort of rhetoric we're used to, but it's become now so patently an organized form of government dominated by groups which are only vaguely, if at all, responsible or even responsive to popular needs and popular demands. But at the same time, it retains a kind of pattern of democracy, because we still have elections, they're still relatively free in any conventional sense. We have a relatively free media. But what's missing from it is a kind of crucial continuous opposition which has a coherent position, and is not just saying, no, no, no but has got an alternative,

and above all has got an ongoing critique of what's wrong and what needs to be remedied.

HEDGES: You juxtapose inverted totalitarianism to classical totalitarianism—fascism, communism—and you say that there are very kind of distinct differences between these two types of totalitarianism. What are those differences?

WOLIN: Well, certainly one is the—in classic totalitarianism the fundamental principle is the leadership principle and the notion that the masses exist not as citizenry but as a means of support which can be rallied and mustered almost at will by the dominant powers. That's the classical one. And the contemporary one is one in which the rule by the people is enshrined as a sort of popular message about what we are, but which in fact is not really true to the facts of political life in this day and age.

HEDGES: Well, you talk about how in classical totalitarian regimes, politics trumps economics, but in inverted totalitarianism it's the reverse.

WOLIN: That's right. Yeah. In classic totalitarianism, thinking here now about the Nazis and the fascists, and also even about the communists, the economy is viewed as a tool which the powers that be manipulate and utilize in accordance with what they conceive to be the political requirements of ruling. And they will take whatever steps are needed in the economy in order to ensure the long-run sustainability of the political order. In other words, the sort of arrows of political power flow from top to bottom.

Now, in inverted totalitarianism, the imagery is that of a populace which is enshrined as the leadership group but which in fact doesn't rule, but which is turned upside down in the sense that the people are enshrined at the top but don't rule. And minority rule is usually treated as something to be abhorred but is in fact what we have.

And it's the problem has to do, I think, with the historical relationship between political orders and economic orders. And democracy, I think, from the beginning never quite managed to make the kind of case for an economic order that would sustain and help to develop democracy rather than being a kind of constant threat to the egalitarianism and popular rule that democracy stands for.

HEDGES: In your book *Politics and Vision*, you quote figures like Max Weber who talk about capitalism as in fact being a destructive force to democracy.

WOLIN: Well, I think Weber's critique of capitalism is even broader. I think he views it as quintessentially destructive not only of democracy, but also, of course, of the sort of feudal aristocratic system which had preceded it. Capitalism is destructive because it has to eliminate the kind of custom /'mɔ:reɪz/, political values, even institutions that present any kind of credible threat to the autonomy of the economy. And it's that—that's where the battle lies. Capitalism wants an autonomous economy. They want a political order subservient to the needs of the economy. And their notion of an economy, while it's broadly based in the sense of a capitalism in which there can be relatively free entrance and property is relatively widely dispersed it's also a capitalism which, in the last analysis, is [as] elitist as any aristocratic system ever was.

HEDGES: You talk in the book about about how it was essentially the engine of the Cold War, juxtaposing a supposedly socialist Soviet Union, although like many writers, including Chomsky, I think you would argue that Leninism was not a socialist movement. Adam Ulam talks about it as a counterrevolution, Chomsky as a right-wing deviation. But nevertheless, that juxtaposition of the Cold War essentially freed corporate capitalism in the name of the struggle against communism to deform American democracy.

And also I just want to make it clear that you are very aware, especially in *Politics and Vision*, of the hesitancy on the part of our founding fathers to actually permit direct democracy. So we're not in this moment idealizing the system that was put in place. But maybe you could talk a little bit about that.

WOLIN: Well, I think that's true. I think the system that was consciously and deliberately constructed by the founders who framed the Constitution—that democracy was the enemy. And that was rooted in historical realities. Many of the colonial governments had a very strong popular element that became increasingly prominent as the colonies moved towards rebellion. And rebellion meant not only resisting British rule, but also involved the growth of popular institutions and their hegemony in the colonies, as well as in the nation as a whole, so that the original impulses to the Constitution came in large measure from this democratizing movement. But the framers of the Constitution understood very well that this would mean—would at least—would jeopardize the ruling groups that they thought were absolutely necessary to any kind of a civilized order. And by “ruling groups”, they meant not only those who were better educated, but those who were propertied, because they regarded property as a sign of talent and of ability, so that it wasn't just wealth as such, but rather a constellation of virtues as well as wealth that entitled capitalists to rule. And they felt that this was in the best interests of the country.

And you must remember at this time that the people, so-called, were not well-educated and in many ways were feeling their way towards defining their own role in the political system. And above all, they were preoccupied, as people always have been, with making a living, with surviving. And those were difficult times, as most times are, so that politics for them could only be an occasional activity, and so that there would always be an uneasy relationship between a democracy that was often

quiescent and a form of rule which was constantly trying to reduce, as far as possible, Democratic influence in order to permit those who were qualified to govern the country in the best interests of the country.

HEDGES: And, of course, when we talk about property, we must include slaveholders.

WOLIN: Indeed. Indeed. Although, of course, there was, in the beginning, a tension between the northern colonies and the southern colonies.

HEDGES: This fear of direct democracy is kind of epitomized by Thomas Paine,—

WOLIN: Yeah. Yeah.

HEDGES: —who was very useful in fomenting revolutionary consciousness, but essentially turned into a pariah once the Revolution was over and the native aristocracy sought to limit the power of participatory democracy.

WOLIN: Yeah, I think that's true. I think it's too bad Paine didn't have at his disposal Lenin's phrase "permanent revolution", because I think that's what he felt, not in the sense of violence, violence, violence, but in the sense of a kind of conscious participatory element that was very strong, that would have to be continuous, and that it couldn't just be episodic, so that there was always a tension between what he thought to be democratic vitality and the sort of ordered, structured, election-related, term-related kind of political system that the framers had in mind.

HEDGES: So let's look at the Cold War, because in *Politics and Vision*, as in *Democracy Inc.*, you talk about the framing of what Dwight Macdonald will call the psychosis of permanent war, this constant battle against communism, as giving capital the tools by which they could destroy those democratic institutions, traditions, and values that were in place. How

did that happen? What was the process?

WOLIN: Well, I think it happened because of the way that the Cold War was framed. That is, it was framed as not only a war between communism and capitalism, but also a war of which the subtext was that communism was, after all, an ideology that favored ordinary people. Now, it got perverted, there's no question about that, by Lenin and by Stalin and into something very, very different.

But in the Cold War, I think what was lost in the struggle was the ability to see that there was some kind of justification and historical reality for the appearance of communism, that it wasn't just a freak and it wasn't just a kind of mindless dictatorship, but that the plight of ordinary people under the forms of economic organization that had become prominent, the plight of the common people had become desperate. There was no Social Security. There were no wage guarantees. There was no union organization.

HEDGES: So it's just like today.

WOLIN: Yeah. They were powerless. And the ruling groups, the capitalist groups, were very conscious of what they had and what was needed to keep it going. And that's why figures like Alexander Hamilton are so important, because they understood this, they understood it from the beginning, that what capitalism required in the way not only of so-called free enterprise—but remember, Hamilton believed very, very strongly in the kind of camaraderie between capitalism and strong central government, that strong central government was not the enemy of capitalism, but rather its tool, and that what had to be constantly kind of revitalized was that kind of relationship, because it was always being threatened by populist democracy, which wanted to break that link and cause government to be returned to some kind of responsive relationship to the people.

HEDGES: And the Cold War. So the Cold War arises. And this becomes the kind of moment by which capital, and especially corporate capital, can dismantle the New Deal and free itself from any kind of regulation and constraint to deform and destroy American democracy. Can you talk about that process, what happened during that period?

WOLIN: Well, I think the first thing to be said about it is the success with which the governing groups manage to create a Cold War that was really so total in its spread that it was hard to mount a critical opposition or to take a more detached view of our relationship to the Soviet Union and just what kind of problem it created. And it also had the effect, of course, of skewing the way we looked at domestic discontents, domestic inequalities, and so on, because it was always easy to tar them with the brush of communism, so that the communism was just more than a regime. It was also a kind of total depiction of what was the threat to—and complete opposite to our own form of society, our old form of economy and government.

HEDGES: And in *Politics and Vision*, you talk about because of that ideological clash, therefore any restriction of capitalism which was defined in opposition to communism as a kind of democratic good, if you want to use that word, was lifted in the name of the battle against communism, that it became capitalism that was juxtaposed to communism rather than democracy, and therefore this empowered capital, in a very pernicious way, to dismantle democratic institutions in the name of the war on communism.

WOLIN: Oh, I think there's no question about that, the notion that you first had to, so to speak, unleash the great potential capitalism had for improving everybody's economical lot and the kind of constraints that had been developed not only by the New Deal, but by progressive movements throughout the 19th century and early 20th century in the United States, where it had been increasingly understood that while American

economic institutions were a good thing, so to speak, and needed to be nurtured and developed, they also posed a threat. They posed a threat because they tended to result in concentrations of power, concentrations of economic power that quickly translated themselves into political influence because of the inevitably porous nature of democratic representation and elections and rule, so that the difficulty's been there for a long time, been recognized for a long time, but we go through these periods of sleepwalking where we have to relearn lessons that have been known almost since the birth of the republic, or at least since the birth of Jeffersonian democracy, that capitalism has its virtues, but it has to be carefully, carefully watched, observed, and often controlled.

HEDGES: Thank you. Please join us for part two later on with our interview with Professor Sheldon Wolin.