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# Politics Beyond the Personal: Reading Wolin In the Age of Trump

Christopher Jackson

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POLITICS BEYOND THE PERSONAL: READING WOLIN IN THE AGE OF TRUMP

by

Christopher Jackson

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for graduation with Honors in the Political Science

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John S. Nelson  
Thesis Mentor

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All requirements for graduation with Honors in the  
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Rene Rocha  
Political Science Honors Advisor

Christopher Jackson

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# **Politics Beyond the Personal: Reading Wolin In the Age of Trump**

## **Abstract**

*This thesis argues that the root cause of both climate change and the decline of democracy in the West is neoliberalism's pervasive marginalization of faith in public action. It responds to the election of Donald Trump by critically analyzing how noted democratic theorist Sheldon Wolin interpreted the election of Ronald Reagan and the lessons to be learned from it. It argues that Wolin is right to ascribe great importance to historical memory in democratic citizenship, but wrong to highlight localism as the primary venue for contestation, especially in the context of global climate change. The antidote to these problems, then, is to reinvigorate people's faith in public planning by forcefully reasserting the role of the state in areas where the interests of capital are most clearly incompatible with the general welfare. It proposes nationalizing the fossil fuel industry as an example of a policy that would fulfill these needs.*

**Keywords:** *political theory, climate change, transitional justice, localism, participatory democracy, state planning, neoliberalism, non-ideal theory, Sheldon Wolin, Donald Trump, nationalization*

## **I. Introduction**

...the most significant political fact about contemporary American life: the steady transformation of America into an antidemocratic society. — Sheldon

Wolin

There is a light and it never goes out. — The Smiths

The contemporary climate situation is grim. The Paris Agreement's target of limiting the rise in global temperatures to 2 degrees Celsius is now out of reach due to the U.S's insufficiently stringent policies to minimize carbon emissions.<sup>1</sup>

At the same time, there seems to have been a decline in the role of democracy in the West. In part, the rise of Donald Trump was due to the massive epistemic failure of the professional class to see his victory as his possibility. This has a disturbing parallel in climate change's unique agony in its tendency to play into people's worst psychological blind spots regarding time discounting and processing future impacts.<sup>2</sup> One of the implication with that while climate change is an issue that requires paying close attention to the news, it can at times feel like standing in between the iron of a train track and seeing the first railcar come slowly but surely towards you and being paralyzed. The slow drip of bad news continually takes new and increasingly disturbing forms. The most recent iteration of this process has been the reports regarding the distressing loss of Arctic sea ice.<sup>3</sup>

The core position being argued for is that the marginalization of democratic elements in the West has been in parallel with the increasing difficulties climate change has posed for governing structures. In particular, both of these are, at their core, symptoms of the capitalist system. By capitalism I refer to:

an indirect system of governance based on a complex and continually evolving political bargain in which private actors are empowered by a political authority to own and control the use of property for private gain subject to a set of laws and regulations.<sup>4</sup>

This definition is useful in several ways. Firstly, it highlights the necessity for other institutions to prop up market structures. Markets are not “natural” as is often alleged, but instead evolve and are insured by non-market institutions. Second, that it captures the centrality of political institutions in maintaining capitalism as a functioning economic order and that it isolates the private (meaning without consideration for public needs) nature of actions undertaken within it. It is the last part of this formulation that is crucial to my arguments regarding the relationship between capitalism and climate change: the drive for private accumulation puts the desire for constant expansion into necessary conflict with ecological limits. This is why my argument is that the proper remedy for this fundamental disconnect is strong state intervention.

It is also useful, especially as it relates to solutions to climate change, to reference neoliberalism. This term has been maligned as of late for being hopelessly vague and functioning as a sort of catch-all for criticisms of

modernity.<sup>5</sup> The discussion of the impact of carbon markets will show that neoliberalism is a useful descriptive term to describe the frame of policy consideration. It refers, by my reading, to *an unrelenting faith in markets*. But my understanding of neoliberalism is notably similar to Wendy Brown's, who emphasizes the way that governing processes influence social formation:

...neoliberalism carries a social analysis that, when deployed as a form of governmentality, reaches from the soul of the citizen-subject to education policy to practices of empire. Neoliberal rationality, while foregrounding the market, is not only or even primarily focused on the economy; it involves extending and disseminating market values to all institutions and social action, even as the market itself remains a distinctive player.<sup>6</sup>

Note that whereas some definitions of neoliberalism emphasize its economic policies (free trade, labor market deregulation), the distinction between it and prior forms of liberalism come from the usage of the state to promote market-driven ends. The traditional liberal division between public and private spheres is upended as no space for non-economic evaluation is allowed. My understanding of democracy here is in line with the standard reading for theorists in Sheldon Wolin's sphere of influence: popular rule.<sup>7</sup>

The Marxist argument for capitalism as the source of climate change is relevant here. Climate change comes first and foremost as an impact of the need for capital's uninterrupted expansion. Even if the basis for capitalism in the West has shifted (towards an unequal service-sector economy driven by financialization), it is only sustainable by shifting production towards the

periphery. Even if manufacturing has declined as a share of the economy in the West (here meaning the highly developed countries of Europe and North America), production still occurs, and often in areas with much weaker environmental regulations.

I am inclined toward believing in the value of democracy<sup>8</sup> as a governing system. I believe that rule by the people is not only the most ethical political arrangement but also tends to produce the best outcomes, especially in relations to environmental matters. This is because democracy is the only system that is able to build the durable consensus necessary to get individuals on board with sacrificing material prosperity for the larger good. This is especially true on environmental issues. “Only a democratic system can sensitively attend to the conflicts within and among nations and communities, decide between different policies, and generally advance the aspirations of different segments of the population.”<sup>9</sup> Popular democracy legitimizes state actions by helping people find their voices and feel that their voices are heard by government. Citizen deliberation and debate over public issues is essential to an effective polity.<sup>10</sup>

As an outgrowth of capitalism, neoliberalism is responsible for the decline of democracy in the United States and impending ecological disaster. Global neoliberal capitalism generates climate change, resource depletion, biodiversity loss, and a whole host of other ecological troubles.<sup>11</sup> At the same time, it damages our ability to speak democratically to each other by eroding the conduits of democratic life, elevating the grammar of cost-benefit analysis

over public good and literally language itself.<sup>12</sup> No practical solution to climate change fails to take capitalism as the root cause of the problem, and the same is coming to hold for democracy. It is capitalism or us. The irony is that although criticisms of capitalism are frequently tarred as utopian or unrealistic, allowing a system that has put human civilization on a collision course with the environment to continue is hopelessly impractical.

Opposition to continuing domination of our lives by capitalism has become a position linked to the political Left. Due to the ecological problems cited previously, the next few years will be critical to determining the course of the next century. This is why thinking hard about how to translate principles into policies is essential. To such needed discussions, this essay contributes an analysis of Sheldon Wolin's important call to defend democracy. I focus on the opening notes from his journal *democracy* to discuss how badly maligned the public sphere has become. I criticize Wolin's faith in localism as unresponsive to climate change. Then I defend the state as needed to stop humanity's catastrophic course by nationalizing the fossil fuel industry. This is because I aim to provide a useful document from the perspective of both activists and academics, which in turn requires an actionable proposal attached to theorizing.

## **II. A Note on Non-Ideal Theory**

Each paper is itself attempting to model what a theory or argument should look like. This model includes: what facts can be assumed, what the

endpoint of the analysis is, and what ought to be considered a persuasive argument.

One question that should be a preliminary component of any discussion in political theory is what relationship a proposal or analysis has to ideal theory. I am persuaded that the best way to characterize the divide between ideal and non-ideal theory from Colin Farrelly as ultimately amounting to the degree of *fact sensitivity* a theory must take on.<sup>13</sup> At one extreme would be one who believes that a vision of justice is and ought to be separate of non-ideal facts. The New Jerusalem, in other words, would need no concern for what the world as it is looks like, or what barrier that exist to its implementation.

There is value to both ideal and non-ideal theory. It is a necessary prerequisite to think about what we want as our endpoint before how to get there. I am much more skeptical about taking any strong level of certainty that we have successfully established what is wrong in society the way many more critically-oriented philosopher are. The wide divide across the West (and the world more broadly) should lead us to the conclusion that no major consensus exists on what constitutes good or bad behavior, whether for individuals or governments. Doubtlessly this is to some degree from bad faith (this seems most apparent in the case of global inequality as Westerners will never consent to giving up their substantially higher standards of living) and ideological conditioning that allow people to ignore very marked problems, but it also points to some unanswered fundamental questions. The most obvious example being our relationship to the state: many liberals call for big government but

are skeptical about emphasizing border protection to deal with illegal immigration as conservatives remain both patriotic and raise no major objection to global capitalism and its weakening of borders. The point here is that we still require more thinking.

While this is a paper connected to questions of the state and politics more broadly, its more fundamental interest is not prescribing the ideal government form or how society should demarcate power. The relatively more valuable practice may normally be ideal theory, but the intimately political nature of climate change requires theorists to devote their attention uniquely to how to craft political solutions to the problem. It is true that the major impacts to global governance will not arrive for a long time, but priority should not be based on how long it will be until they arrive. Rather, the concern is how much time we have until we can no longer address the problem successfully. This makes the issue of warming distinct from other existential threats such as nuclear war or disease. They each are outside of our ability to control risk in a much more fundamental way than climate change.

The nature of the threat as a primarily political one alongside the enormous impacts it can have should alone be enough to draw the attention of political theorists to our ability to speak democratically to each other. An ideal theory would be more in line with political philosophy as understood in the philosophy discipline, and non-ideal theory with political theory. This isn't a description of how it operates right now. Rather it evokes what the ideal society would look like and how to remedy the vast problems in our world.

### **III. Wolin**

Why focus on Wolin? Why not one of the mainstream liberals of the times? Why not one of the conservatives later in ascendance? And if a Leftist, why not a trendier Marxian, Foucauldian, or Derridean? Wolin's insightful work explores links between popular politics and participatory democracy.

Sheldon Wolin was a guiding light of political theory in the second half of the twentieth century. From John Rawls to Wendy Brown, Wolin joined the ranks of people who have raised the profile of political theory in the media and kept the field from failing into obscurity as had been predicted for recent decades.<sup>14</sup> From the 1960s onward, Wolin's public profile has been high, and his contributions to the field through writings and students have been clearly visible.

A mid-life high point was the journal *democracy*, founded in 1981. It lasted only until 1983, but its roster of excellent writers, its influence in policy circles, and its fusion of theory and practice deserve our attention even today.

A further reason to focus on Wolin, and especially his journal for a more practical political theory, is that 1981-1983 were the first years of the Ronald Reagan presidency. Their perspectives invite comparison to the views available to us in the immediate aftermath of the 2016 election that leads into the first years of the Donald Trump presidency.

Many things can be said about the 2016 election. One is that Trump voters revolted against elites. A candidate won with no experience in government and challenged the elite cosmopolitan orthodoxy on key issues

(immigration, trade, environment, intelligence, manners, etc.) and won in both substantive and symbolic ways. From globalization to global warming, elite consensus has been rejected by a large swath of the American population, and rejected with extremely crude gestures. Can the election of a billionaire signal “the twilight of the elites?”<sup>15</sup> Trump presented his candidacy as a repudiation of American elites, and structured his candidacy to be an object on which his supports could project their own desires. An image of tough talk, grit, tenacity and sharp elbows, allowed his supports to embrace him in exactly those terms. His campaign speeches centered opposition to free trade and critiques of deindustrialization alongside calls to build a massive border wall, positioning him squarely as an economic nationalist. His public pride in receiving the votes of the least-educated voters, seen by many on the left as a sign of his brazenness in insulting the intelligence of his supporters, was better read as publically signaling that he didn’t think that intelligence was the only thing that mattered in order to participate in public life. This disconnect between how Trump was read by media elites and his actual supports was effectively summed up by billionaire Peter Thiel in that the media took his candidacy and words literally, but not seriously. Voters, on the other hand, took his words seriously but not literally.<sup>16</sup>

To see how to respond to the election of an alarmingly right-wing president, we do well to heed a theorist concerned with participation in public life and a broadened public sphere. Wolin addressed how we Americans ought to orient ourselves towards a right-wing state and raised a few very key

question on what counter-movements might do to maximize their effectiveness and what conditions enable democracy to grow.

Many are treating the election of Donald Trump ahistorically, as a unique break in history, an Event.<sup>17</sup> Looking to Wolin's response to the election of Reagan can counter that mistake, reminding us to learn what we can from what has come before. It is likely to temper some of the Left's worries about trump and exacerbate others. But especially it can suggest practical responses.

Beyond historical parallels as provocative facts or guides to action, there are emotional reasons for communing with people facing past troubles, different, better eras, if only because the polity seemed to have survived them. Part of the enjoyment from reading a journal from 1981 is the feeling that things weren't as bad, that modernity had not steamrolled traditional cultures or neoliberalism had not fully entangled the west in its spell, or that the real had not been fully consumed. Political hope, or hope to be political, was not yet a bad joke. Raiding the archives is a useful way of undermining one of the key tenants of the system as it currently constitutes itself-: that there is no practical alternative, because there is no viable grammar of public life. Wolin provided such an alternative:

An historical and theoretical understanding has, we believe, not only intellectual merits but **real political implications**. At this moment in the historical development of a capitalist civilization in America-including under "civilization" not only the economy, but politics, state organization, technology, and organized or "big science" – the crucial challenge to

radical democracy is to **be as zealous in preventing things of great value to democracy from passing into oblivion as in bringing into the world new political forms of action**, participation, and being together in the world. **Radicals need to cultivate a remembrance of things past** for in the capitalist civilization, which Schumpeter saw as based upon the principle of “creative destruction,” **memory is a subversive weapon**. The ideology of progress fostered by science and **capitalism depends upon the steady elimination of historical consciousness and of the customs, sensibilities, and textures of everyday life nourished by that consciousness**; just as it depends upon the emasculation of the critical function of theory. What is at stake simultaneously is the past and the future. **Radicals cannot leave the past to the conservatives**; they need to remind themselves that they, too, have a past rich with democratic experience and wisdom, and that the arts of conservation have as much to do with learning how to live. With the past as with learning how to live within nature and with other human beings. The subtitle of democracy states our highest aim: renewal and radical change.<sup>18</sup> (Bold added)

There are two distinct, though interconnected, arguments in this passage that are worth being attentive to. The first is that, to Wolin, the past is littered with moments, memories, symbols, and movements that are of vital importance to the success of radical democracy. The reason for this, and the second argument being flagged, is that memory is a subversive tool because the axis of

elements hostile to popular democracy (capital and technocratic science) rely on the erasure of our historical memories. Recall that this emphasis on the role of subject creation was noted by Wendy Brown's formulation of neoliberalism. We rely on the past to evaluate the present and be reminded that nothing is inevitable. The hopelessness many feel in the present is all the more destabilizing in the absence of historical memory.

Let's be clear-this came out in 1981. The conservative tendencies apparent in the Trump era have been around since at least the 1960's and the Goldwater campaign. The quality of American democracy has only gotten worse since then. One measurement of this could be voter turnout in midterm elections, which have seen decreasing numbers relative to the 1960s.<sup>19</sup> Lest there be any thought that such a claim lacks any empirical validity, upcoming research makes essentially the same point: the warning lights are flashing red as democracy declines across the globe.<sup>20</sup>

There is a valid criticism that claiming that capitalism is stable or lacks internal contradiction is disempowering and saps people of the motivation to challenge the system.<sup>21</sup> There are of course many forms of instability that run through the system-but any honest assessment of the state of global politics will admit that there appears no base able to take power across national capitals, much less make the sorts of transnational linkages that the state will have to engage in to respond effectively to the international nature of contemporary capital. The weakness of European social democracy is widely recognized,<sup>22</sup> and no expressly anti-capitalist left alternative is in a position of

strength to propose a different system. Even in Greece, where voters elected and re-elected an expressly leftist government after experiencing the horrors of austerity in the neoliberal era, the government ultimately capitulated to capital with so little fight that Slavoj Žižek compared to the Theater of the Absurd.<sup>23</sup>

All this is to say that, when surveying the terrain of international politics, the present seems to be a very grim place indeed, with the state either drastically weakened in its capacity to confront international capital (whether that takes the form of fossil fuel or financial firms) or directly controlled by it. This is a pressing problem, and it demands we raid the archive of democratic theory to see where to turn. Considering that the interests of capital are in the exact opposite direction of ours, and the power of the state is out of our grasp, we need to raid the archive of democratic theory to see where instead our moments of contestation should arise.

Here I glean Wolin's arguments from the 1981 *democracy* articles written expressly by Wolin. These include his editorials at the front of each issue, his notes on each theme, and his stand-alone essays. I also include the second edition of Wolin's classic *Politics and Vision*, with special attention to the last chapter on postmodern democracy. It features his most succinct alternative to the hegemony of neoliberal power. Wolin provided a practical, democratic strategy of participatory resistance that we do well to pursue as a response to the time of Trump.

As Wolin himself argued, historical remembrance has power. Rummaging through the archives of the earlier fights for justice from the postwar era can

help inform our responses. The first issue of *democracy* had an especially apt theme: “Crisis.” America’s lurch to the right took the form of a hard-right actor who railed against environmentalism, social liberalism, and American weakness abroad.

This tension in the current moment’s historical positioning has been especially noted this year. One historian of the conservative movement, Rick Perlstein, found himself deluded with “wave after wave of tweets, Facebook mentions, and appreciative emails thanking [him] for helping them see how this presidential election is ‘just like’ 1968. Or 1972. Or 1964. Or 1976. (Though it can’t be “just like” all of them, can it?)”<sup>24</sup>

Judge for yourself how close Wolin’s description of 1981 fits 2016: “Elections, supposedly the grand expression of the will of the people, are becoming more like rituals of despair in which the voters heap their scorn and embarrassment upon the national institutions of Congress and the presidency.”<sup>25</sup> Thus, the early 1980s seems more directly applicable to the time of Trump, for a variety of reasons argued previously. Worries about American weakness abroad, economic insecurity, the election of a candidate on the right against a technocratic Democrat. The question becomes, then, what to do about the situation going forward.

It is interesting that Wolin begins his framing of the concept of crisis by criticizing the overuse of the term. He blames both media (television especially) and government officials for the term being attached to any societal concern and ultimately leading to the trivialization of serious issues. He argues that the

packaged nature of reporting on crisis inverts the traditional understanding<sup>26</sup> of crisis as a symptom of a broader disorder of the body towards comprehending it as a discrete illness, something to be understood in the language of those affected and the experts whose remedies will inevitably be called on to fix it. This managerialism is alleged to have constricted the realm of subjects which citizenship, rather than specialized knowledge, was a minimum criteria and helped to contribute to the marginalization of the public sphere.

As is always the case, things are a little bit more complicated now. TV's power has diminished as people rely increasingly on the Internet for news,<sup>27</sup> This change in viewing habits led to the explosion of professional fact-checkers and longer-form policy-centric sites like Vox,<sup>28</sup> suggest that the drive for experts to cut through the noise of political discourse has not diminished. Who could resist expertly-curated publications that put out content like "How America became a superpower, explained in 8 minutes?"<sup>29</sup> The rhetoric of the newly-invigorated class of professional consensus-creators who supposedly research questions of recent public controversy and come up with the unvarnished truth is usually in the form of short, declarative sentences that suggest definitive conclusions, like the one given above. They are the product of a technocratic society which would prefer to leave debate over truth to professionals rather than making them issues of public deliberation. They are the result of outsourcing our community concerns.

Moreover, it appears that the internet has incentivized many to share their opinions, whether through BuzzFeed community articles, individual Tumblr accounts, The Odyssey Online, Puckermob, Medium, or any of the whole host of websites that have minimal requirements for being a published writer. Such minimal costs of entry have led to the proliferation of forums for ordinary individuals to make their voices heard. The content might be terrible, the reach might be small, but these new media put in doubt Wolin's consistent assertion that the media functioned as one of many fundamentally antidemocratic institutions. The key distinction between traditional forms of media and social media is the level of interactivity they allow. This is why a substantial amount of research concludes that social media improves the functioning of democracy by allowing for new channels of dialogue to develop between citizens. New forms of media have been extremely useful as a tool for activists to mobilize and get their message out, especially in less democratic societies.<sup>30</sup> It is also why the world's authoritarian governments are so desperate to decrease access to it.<sup>31</sup>

This becomes a problem for Wolin's articulation of the nature of crisis insofar as it indicts the way we react to a crisis. Whereas he suggests that the packaged presentation of news events lends itself to disconnecting specific problems from their roots in broader societal issues, we see just the opposite phenomena as *everything* is tied back to society. For instance, the summer of 2016 saw debates on whether the mobile videogame Pokémon GO would lead to instances of racism against minorities due to broader social inequalities.<sup>32</sup> It

is quite hard to find cultural phenomenon or political issues these days that do NOT get tied to some social illness. The feminist mantra of “the personal is political” was picked up by the tastemakers in elite institutions, and they bring such a mindset into their work. Just as we see mass depoliticization at the macro-level, we see hyperpoliticization at the micro. This has favored tactics such as call-out culture and ideologies centered on identity which have less emphasis on finding commonality with disparate peoples. This is one way that Wolin’s work are limited in their applicability to today, as now, more than ever, people have the tools to make their voices heard. Whereas Wolin was concerned with the depoliticizing effect that relying on experts would have, and specifically that it would lead to apathy stemming from the belief that societal problems are too complex for individual citizens to weigh in on, the situation is now that people are choosing to make their voices heard.

Still, this is not an unconditionally good thing. Online political culture is filled with trash, with memes as warrants and hurt feelings trumping falsifiable data. But no matter my problems with the content of the discussions, they are happening, and are increasingly accessible to people previously voiceless. The explosion of commentary from all fronts in the wake of the 2016 election also empirically denies the claim that this could lead to voices being drowned out. Experts got such a rude awakening on November 8<sup>th</sup> that many took them to task, justifiably or not, for their confidence in predicting the election.<sup>33</sup> Confidence in elites is now the lowest it has been in decades.<sup>34</sup> Wolin is simply not correct in the current context.

However, Wolin's understanding of crisis is strikingly applicable to today. He defines the difference between a true crisis and "pseudo-crisis" as an event that:

concerns the basic presuppositions that determine who is to take decisions in the name of the society; how they come to have that authority; what standards of common well-being are to be binding on authorities; and what kind of people and society are supposed to be nurtured over the long pull. A genuine crisis appears when the presuppositions on which the society has based its existence and worked out its history for a fairly long time become incompatible, even contradictory. But these presuppositions were not themselves the work of yesterday or the discovery of the most recent issue of *Business Week*. A true crisis extends to the deep structure of historical existence. A crisis is not something that is but a condition that becomes. It is a gathering of the past and the present crystallized into opposing forces and ideas.<sup>35</sup>

That Donald Trump represents a repudiation of the very nature of status-quo politics is widely acknowledged. The number of news stories framing his election as a triumph over the establishment, whether in the form of the Republican hierarchy, news media, social elites, or otherwise is overwhelming. His pledge immediately after the election to "drain the swamp" in Washington D.C. was an explicit claim that he meant to upend contemporary norms of doing politics, starting with who was in office. His aesthetic and discourse played precisely into the questioning of elites

(ironically) aligned perfectly with what a large part of the country felt. The conclusion must be that such a feeling had been present for a long time, was felt with increasingly intensity and culminated in the ultimate middle-finger: the election of a candidate with the least experience in government in modern memory. It was an undercurrent that has existed for some time, not something that was manufactured or only recently erupted. The major political forces of the Left, to the extent that they still exist, have widely endorsed a technocratic, expert-driven agenda. The most potent example of how this has negatively affected the working class and contributed to the rise of Trump is free trade, an especially salient issue for him to capitalize on. This was further incentivized by the shift in the Democratic Party towards trying to capture white-collar professional voters, who backed free trade and globalization more generally.<sup>36</sup> The problem is that a theory of democratic life is an essential prerequisite to those same policy fixes insofar as they are only possible by an active citizenry who feel they can actually engage in public life. Wolin's concluding paragraph on the nature of crisis is strikingly prescient for the current moment: "the question is posed of why we, as a society, have thought so little and so badly about how a democratic people can get itself (or selves) together and act in democratic ways."<sup>37</sup> In order to take back the public sphere, we must engage in just such a conversation.

Why is the focus on democracy so important? Wolin argued in the opening pages that the fundamental fact in American political life is the increasingly undemocratic nature of our institutions.<sup>38</sup> Strengthened by

hierarchical organizational structures that are entirely unaccountable to outsiders, these institutions marginalize politics to managerialism and concentrate powers in those able to access the institutions. He links these processes to the decline of the effectiveness of political parties and their ability to effectively mobilize voters towards a common agenda. The catastrophic status of the Democratic Party and its failure to mobilize the white working class or at least offer convincing reasons to not vote for a conservative outsider is plausibly due to just this process.<sup>39</sup> What Wolin identifies as the process of marginalization is even more convincing in 2016 than in 1981. It can only have gotten worse as expectations of politics dwindled. It was precisely the otherworldliness of Bernie Sander's message of economic justice, with its transparently reformist agenda that was perceived as radical that showed how generally minimal is expected of politics these days. This is the same point made by Slavoj Žižek when he quips that the success of disaster movies proves that it is easier for most people to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism.

Wolin argued that the focus on economic and technological progress distracted from the regressive trends in society, and that this has led to us "evolving from a more to a less democratic polity and from a less to a more authoritarian society. These tendencies define the meaning of the present as the moment in our national history when democracy is forced into opposition."<sup>40</sup> The Trump phenomenon seems like just the sort of thing that signals a shift towards a more authoritarian society. His actions in office have

been roundly and persuasively interpreted as broadly authoritarian,<sup>41</sup> but social science research indicates that his voters are not.<sup>42</sup>

However, I do not think that the election of Donald Trump represents a turn away from democracy. Quite the contrary, insofar as it represented a rejection of faraway elites and their cultural preferences, it implies just the opposite—that people are so fed up with the status quo’s perceived rules of operation that they are willing to go to extreme lengths to make their unhappiness known. His election has forced a great deal of reflection as to what went wrong, why people are so unhappy, and what to do about it.

Wolin was responding to a historical moment that he took to spotlight the powerlessness of America. At the time this was in the form of the Iran hostage crisis, dependence on foreign oil, the decline of American global hegemony, the weakness of President Carter’s response to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. For Wolin these contributed to an American crisis in our identity as a polity and as a people. Those same questions are being raised now. The Presidency of Donald Trump questions who Americans are and what they value. Are we racist, sexist, and xenophobic?

No, not overall. While there are racist elements in American society, the borderline universal revilement of explicitly racist public statement suggests that Americans are at least unwilling to back such positions. That our schools revere the Civil Rights movement, teach history as an ever-expanding march towards progress and equality, also reflects societal values that, however imperfect, prioritize legal equity. There is, moreover, a tradition within (yet

critical of) American life running from the early Quakers through the radical abolitionists and the Populists and Prairie radicals that refused the exclusionary practices of the dominant political forces and elites towards racial minorities and indigenous people. Major segments of the American population opposed imperialism, racial discrimination, the expansion of neoliberalism, and each attempt at expansion of elite control. To me this means that oppression is not inherently American, or Western, or liberal. It must always be stressed that virtually all instances of objectionable policies have been opposed by at least some portion of America.

So when we speak about the legacies of slavery, we must keep in mind the John Browns who objected relentlessly. Iowa, for instance, had the highest percentage of its male population serve in the armed forces of any state during the Civil War. The point is that white people are not ontologically antagonistic and that there has always been a contingency of American society that has objected at every step of the genocidal process of colonization, racialization, and political exclusion. To think otherwise is to accept the capitalist notion that politics is useless and concede that violent racial relations are inevitable.

This has some significance when it comes to how we do politics from now on. I do not think that the election of Donald Trump shows any great darkness in the American character. Many Trump voters preferred him for outrageous statements not because of their (sometime racist) content but because of their politically incorrect form. They did not agree with his specifics but appreciated him in general for “going there.” Most people didn’t approve of his attacks on

the background of a federal judge, nor his ill-considered representations of immigrants, but his excess was seen as subverting contemporary political norms rather than disqualifying. If the Left thinks anything else, it is left with two bad paths. Either America is irreversibly racist, at the core of its being, so that politics are worthless and we might as well give, or Trump voters cannot be persuaded and must be pitted against a combination of sympathetic whites and minority groups. Neither approach offers a successful future, and would contribute to the further breakdown of the political process. It is a dead end. This balkanization will fail because, as Wolin wrote in his seminal 1994 essay on fugitive democracy, “homogeneity was not then and need not now be equated with dreary uniformity, any more than equality need be mere levelling. What it does require is understanding what is truly at stake politically: Heterogeneity, diversity, multiple selves are no match for modern forms of power.”<sup>43</sup> Bottom line, we cannot give up on democracy.

#### **IV. The Luxury of Localism and the State of Climate Change**

Beyond vague references to a return to democracy and a focus on crafting political identities, Wolin doesn't discuss strategy in practical terms. But he does focus on the centralization of power from the Articles of Confederation into the 1950s. He saw the new social movements of the 1960s as an effort to forward a more inclusive view of citizenship through emphasizing the more democratic elements of the American Revolution. Yet he argued that their political weakness was exposed and repudiated by the re-

election of Richard Nixon in 1972, over the clearest signifier of the new politics, George McGovern.

Wolin's most clearly articulated strategy comes in the concluding chapter of his magnum opus, *Politics and Vision*. He claims that the remnants of democratic life can only be found in the currently operating centrifugal forces "away from inclusive commonality...an accompanying emphasis on difference."<sup>44</sup> The current iteration of this would likely be groups such as Black Lives Matter and other identity politics groups. They have had remarkable staying power in crafting political identities outside of commonly shared notions of citizenship. But as he wrote back in 1994, they are no match for current forms of state power. A group defining itself by its distinction (or characteristics that render it distinct) from the broader polity will find it very hard to convince people without similar affiliations to care about their needs. Moreover, the form of diversity-based identity politics is easily assimilated into broader economic structures because demands couched in such terms are easily to implement without changing the underlying structure of exclusion. This cultural cooption of identity is most clearly apparent in the recent choice by Pepsi to focus their most recent ad campaign on images of protesters sharing a can of soda with police, all while holding up generic protest signs. While the campaign came under enormous criticism for precisely this monetizing of protest, it should come as no surprise that ad agencies have concluded that evoking social change is a winning strategy to capture consumer dollars.<sup>45</sup> Another instance of this is the rise of corporate feminism.

For example, the female C.E.O. of Yahoo who banned working from home and refused to expand opportunities for childcare built a nursery next to her office.<sup>46</sup>

Instead, Wolin proposed that we turn towards the local to learn again to do democratic politics. We should engage local political life through school boards, city councils, and the like because “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.”<sup>47</sup> Modest sites under local control can, according to Wolin, become schools of democracy. They can enable us to relearn how to deliberate, and generate alternative arrangements of social life. Wolin suggested that they will also eliminate the tendency toward professionalization of interests in representative democracy.<sup>48</sup>

Wolin’s work is strongest in explaining needs and describing processes for practical alternatives to the status quo, but he does provide an eloquent summation of a method for reinvigorating democratic politics. But my aim argument is that Wolin’s prescription is strikingly wrong, and must be rejected. Localism is for us an unacceptable strategy for democracy. To say why is to provide a positive defense of the national state, democratizing it as best as we can.

As a preliminary point, the emphasis on local spaces of deliberation does not fully eliminate the sorts of hierarchical politics that many proponents wish

to avoid. The sorts of institutions that Wolin cites as nurseries for democratic politics, such as school boards, maintain hierarchies.

The first major objection is that, contrary to Wolin's claim that the more intimate setting will act as a bulwark against the power of capital, it is actually a much worse beachhead. It should come as no surprise that the risk of regulatory capture increases as the size of the institution decreases, especially on environmental issues.<sup>49</sup> Localities do not have the resources or institutional power to challenge neoliberalism either regionally, nationally, or globally. Local governments don't have the economic resources or scale to match that of capital. Radicals will be outgunned on the ground and swatted down by state and federal pre-emption. And there is no articulation of how movements centered on localities will link up to sympathizers elsewhere. Politics that attach an especially strong weight to cultivating ties centered on locality would necessarily have a harder time establishing connections beyond where their interests lie. If the primary source of our political and social allegiance is local, there is a tradeoff with other allegiances. This is what led to the centralization of power primarily defining the transition from the *Articles of Confederation* to our modern Constitution.

Localities are especially weak at protecting the rights of minority groups, as evidenced by the long reign of yellow-dog Democrats in the south and their suffocating of citizenship for those who did not look or act like them. The petty little feuds of the county seat bosses is much harder to counteract without federal intervention. It might be nice to envision town-hall style democracy

from sea to shining sea, but that is at best a long-term goal, not an effective response to the status quo. Revolutionaries cannot wish away existing power structures or policy dilemmas, they must craft alternatives that at minimum use power as they find it towards other ends. And they must make a justification for whether the extra time necessary to have their vision of society implemented and effective is justified in light of pressing ecological concerns.

Wolin, like other advocates for localism, has no strategy for scaling local institutions or experiences up to the national and international levels. This should leave us skeptical of their ability to solve pressing problems. Some of the more contemporary examples of localized politics (BLM, Occupy, the academic left in the universities) show that only movements which use the language of the national state and operate through its accountable political channels have even a prayer of actualizing their demands. None have been able to effectively change policy or scale up what policies they called for. They have been effective in the culture wars, most notably relating to same-sex marriage, but it was ultimately instituted legally by judicial fiat, not legislative acts. Cultural coercion will be required to get more regressive regions on board. All this points to the fact that the one significant victory the cultural left has had in recent years came about through the legal system and that it short-circuited the sorts of national deliberation and debate necessary to get disparate people onboard. Nonetheless, it is also true that corporations much prefer dealing with smaller localities because of the mismatch of power and resources.

Especially we lack time to engage in localist experiments in a world where top climate scientists show that we need drastic emissions cut in the next few years to stave off the two-degree rise in emissions that will trigger catastrophic feedback loops.<sup>50</sup>

So, to summarize, we do not have the time, localities are a uniquely bad site to fight, and there is an unacceptable risk of the exclusion of minorities.

We must instead be trying to take back the state. The fundamental claim of this essay is that no matter the validity of localism otherwise, Wolin and other localists are wrong specifically when confronting the threat of radical change in climate. We need the state, organized beyond the local level, to effectively coordinate our actions and cultivate our technical abilities to address climate change. This is to say that while democracy is a good thing and is probably the system of governance most amenable the long-term consensus-building necessary to address climate change,<sup>51</sup> the state is a necessity. If (temporarily) accepting an unjust social order is necessary to stave off planetary catastrophe, so be it. To re-appropriate a rather disgusting right-wing slogan, there is no alternative.

There are several defenses of the state. It can be remarkable force for positive social change.<sup>52</sup> It is also the singular major institution left that has even a chance of matching the clout of capital because although the relative power of national governments to regulate industry has declined, the fundamental coercive power remains. Governments can (and have) coordinate policies to limit multinational corporation's ability to circumvent regulations.

Now is not the time for anti-statist rhetoric. The nature of climate change requires that the vast power of Leviathan to command and coordinate human activity be repurposed towards ecologically sustainable ends. The opposition many on the left harbor towards the state is hideously flawed. Although the threat of movement cooption is a real one,<sup>53</sup> the simple fact is that there is no other institution with the capacity to address systemic problems like climate change. In light of what little time remains to confront environmental problems with a modicum of faith in our ability to succeed, we should privilege political tactics that will most likely allow us to take back state power.

And even if there was a non-state entity that could act, it likely wouldn't have the democratic component that makes the government more responsive to the public. Individuals often become overwhelmed by news of climate change and a pessimism that is politically fatal sets in. The antidote to the poison of pessimism is hope in popular sovereignty. Too often we forget that by law we could elect a Congress full of Ralph Nader's if we wanted. Make the bastards either reject popular democracy or implement the laws necessary to ward off climate change.

Yet is not necessary to prove that the state is a good thing in order to justify state action to deal with climate change. The alternative is market-driven reforms. The most obvious example is cap-and-trade. Although it is a government-run program, it quite literally commodifies carbon and uses capitalistic mechanisms to address what is at its root a problem of capitalism. Chasing our own tail, anyone?

Neoliberalism is the governing ideology of public policy. It should come as no surprise then that the policies crafted to respond to climate change have tended to make the assumption of markets as a good thing and proceeded from there.<sup>54</sup>

It should be said that there are a number of good things about such a policy. Assuming accurate oversight of industry emissions and a cap influenced by the best of climate science, it assures that emissions will not rise above a dangerous level. But it also promotes an exceptionally pernicious form of climate colonialism whereby governments allow businesses to create “offsets,” or provable decreases in a firm’s emissions. These offsets can be used to decrease the number of emissions permits needed.

Although that may sound like a good thing, it tends to overwhelmingly occur due to corporate-funded deforestation of the global South, cutting old-growth forests and planting new trees, which can be used as offsets. This displaces indigenous and poor people as the West finds new and creative ways to hurt the people least responsible and most affected by our own mess. This helps reinforce existing inequalities and unequal power relations.<sup>55</sup>

The choice, then, is between state-centric solutions or those of the market. We should listen to our enemies on this point—they have been making sure they can influence national government policy as much as possible. Industry takes the power of the state to regulate very seriously.

Last, huge, high-profile moves by the government can help reignite people’s imaginations and help them realize that public action is possible.

From Star Trek to the originally enthusiastic response to Roosevelt's N.R.A., there is precedent for the public responding to mass mobilization of society towards a common goal. Only broad state policies can remind people what sort of power they share.

## **V. Points of Contestation**

If our goal is to reignite the public's faith in democracy, we need to think big. At the same time, the urgent need for action on climate change (and the fact that it allows us to highlight one of the most damaging outgrowths of capitalism) requires us to use the state. In this section I will discuss some possible policies meant to mitigate carbon emissions. It will focus on a proposal left out of most debates-nationalization.

If we rule out cap-and-trade, we are left with essentially two options. The first is a tax on carbon emissions. As suspicious as we should be about a policy publically supported by Exxon-Mobil, it has won accolades in all corners, from a roster of neoliberal economists to Naomi Klein. It can be designed to be strongly redistributive (through rebates to households made worse off by increased costs), a net-plus for the economy (via a tax swap with the corporate income tax), or used to fund green technology. It can sound like a win-win proposition.

Yet there are several reasons why carbon taxes should not be our priority. For one thing, it is exceedingly hard to nail the true "cost" of something like biodiversity loss and the destabilization of the climate. It is likely that we will shoot too low. Speaking the language of taxes and costs is all

too easily weaponized by the Right. It also can't guarantee that emissions will be sent sufficiently downward in time, because there is no statutory cap on emissions. It simply is too risky an option.

Market-based solutions focus on incentivizing good behavior through effective carbon pricing, and command-and-control policies. Command-and-control involves direct regulation of private industrial activity through governmental fiat. Generally speaking, such policies can be divided into *performance* and *technological* mandates.<sup>56</sup> In the context of climate change, a technology mandate would require that companies adopt specific processes, such as carbon-capture storage. In contrast, performance mandates would merely call for industrial processes to stop short of a specified amount of emissions. It does not call for any one technology to get the job done. Performance standards can be imagined as applying the cap portion of cap-and-trade to various activities that contribute to climate change, such as manufacturing processes, natural resource extraction, electricity generation, etc.

The primary benefit of command-and-control policies is their effectiveness, especially in a situation where the risks of not effectively addressing a problem are high. If something absolutely must get done in a short period of time, or when the uncertainty of the severity of an event is high, policies that don't pussyfoot around are to be preferred. In light of the numerous scenarios for extinction that climate change might lead us to, it does

not seem like a stretch to say we should assign the highest priority to mitigation policies with the highest likelihood of being effective.

How would command-and-control look in practice? Just to look at cars, we already have fuel efficiency standards, CAFÉ standards, and safety mandates. Many portions of the Clean Air Act have provisions that function like a technology standard by requiring that utilities adopt better practices to minimize air quality concerns. Nonetheless, if mandating performance or technology requirements is to have anything close to the economy-wide effect of a carbon tax in terms of reducing emissions, it would require an enormous bureaucracy to coordinate with industry and effectively monitor polluters. The sheer size of the intervention into the private sector would be unmatched in the history of peacetime America. It would rival the Roosevelt administrations A.A.A. and N.R.A. programs in intrusiveness. It would also take time to record the status-quo emissions, determine what amount of CO<sub>2</sub>-equivalent is acceptable, and then roll out either the technology necessary to get us there or allow the private sector to come up with its own solutions.

Beyond simple economic cost concerns, command-and-control standards that rely on using technology to curb emissions will likely run into difficulty getting emulated internationally. The rollout poses high costs to businesses, causing industries in poorer countries to balk all the more. Performance standards are more appealing because they incentivize the development of more technology, promising cheaper compliance for companies. Still, the issues

above make command-and-control policies in general unfit to be the rallying cry of the climate justice movement.

Another non-market response to climate change has received scant attention in the capitalist United States: nationalizing the fossil fuel industry. In political science, most studies ask questions such as why countries nationalize domestic oil industries and what political effect they have nationally or internationally. Many Marxist journals discuss relationships between energy and capital. But on this topic, I could only find one piece of disciplinary political science in the last two years, and it appeared in an online opinion website.<sup>57</sup>

Although nationalization of fossil fuel companies has been discussed since the mid-to-late 2000s, when gas prices were high and it seemed apparent that the oil industry was bilking the American people, it seems especially appropriate for dealing with climate change. There are a number of reasons why a government takeover would be a good idea.

First, as climate activist Bill McKibben argues persuasively, the math on climate change keeps worse. As he wrote in September:

...last year, when the world's leaders met in Paris, they set a new number: Every effort, they said, would be made to keep the global temperature rise to less than 1.5 degrees. And to have even a 50–50 chance of meeting that goal, we can only release about 353 gigatons more CO<sub>2</sub>. So let's do the math again: 942 > 353. A lot greater. To have just a break-even chance of meeting that 1.5

degree goal we solemnly set in Paris, we'll need to close all of the coal mines and some of the oil and gas fields we're currently operating long before they're exhausted.<sup>58</sup>

His conclusion is that we must have a managed decline of the coal, oil, and natural gas industries. Absent government intervention, the planned exploration and drilling projects that the industry has laid out will be cataclysmic for the planet.

If there is anything that a reader must take away from this discussion, it is that the world has no chance of stopping global warming if we don't stop future exploration. In McKibben's words:

In the United States alone, the existing mines and oil wells and gas fields contain 86 billion tons of carbon emissions—enough to take us 25 percent of the way to a 1.5 degree rise in global temperature. But if the U.S. energy industry gets its way and develops all the oil wells and fracking sites that are currently planned, that would add another 51 billion tons in carbon emissions. And if we let that happen, America would single-handedly blow almost 40 percent of the world's carbon budget.<sup>59</sup>

The best proof of the idea that zero-percent probabilities can exist is the notion that the fossil fuel industry will never, ever, commit suicide. It is a metaphysical impossibility. The CEO of Shell will not disassemble their own company. Only through immediate seizure of the industry by the federal government and implementing strict anti-extraction policies will we be able to

wind down the extractive industries in time. Stopping future projects is an essential prerequisite to having even a prayer of dealing with climate change.

Second, the industry is already dying. Independent oil companies are going bankrupt at an incredible rate, divestment pressures are rising, and the amount of risk these companies are exposed to is extremely high. We have also probably hit peak oil.<sup>60</sup> If the likelihood of bankruptcies in the coming decades is high, the effects of nationalization on the economy would pale in comparison to the effects on financial markets. In the 2016 Forbes Top 500, oil and gas companies take the third, fourth, fifth, sixth, tenth, sixteenth, and twentieth spots. Fossil fuels are crucial both as a fuel and as a commodity. It powers a great deal of our world, but our world will not survive if the oil industry as we know it continues.

What then for the communities who rely on nonrenewable industries for their continued existence? It isn't hard to argue that keeping a few West Virginia towns around isn't worth cooking the planet, but these are real people who can't just be thrown aside in a mad dash to stave off warming. That would replicate the logic of disposability and sacrificial zones that are so dehumanizing. But if Ahmed is correct and those industries are already terminally in decline, public management of threatened industries is the only way to protect local communities. A cascade of bankruptcies will already increase public costs through more stress on the social safety net, but this can be avoided if the workers are classified as public employees. There is some precedence for this. When the French government chose to wind down their

domestic coal industry, they provided a greater degree of protection for affected communities through decent early retirement packages and shifting workers into other state industries so as to avoid job losses. From 1946 until the last mine was closed in 2004, the number of job losses was zero.<sup>61</sup>

It is precisely this last part that is key because any policy aimed at dealing with climate change will be demonized by the right as an economy-killing government intervention that will devastate working class people. Nationalization seems to hit the sweet spot-it targets an already at-risk industry, is the only way to protect those who will be affected by closures, and shows the state can plan effectively for a green future. This is why Bruce Lesnick argues that such a policy is uniquely key for galvanizing the climate justice movement and avoiding the media narrative surrounding prior anti-neoliberal movements like Occupy, namely that they lacked concrete demands. By focusing the movement on a policy that can actually be implemented by the state and that highlights the absurdity of allowing the market system to continue, the movement can bring to the attention of the American public the need for collective action in the context of climate change and have a chance of creating the sort of multilevel, ideally transnational linkages that are crucial to effective policy influence. The success of Bernie Sanders in 2016 suggests that there really is a yearning for a left-populist alternative.

Does this mean that we need to challenge liberal democracy? I don't think so. The drive towards sustainability is fully compatible with liberal democracy insofar as we note a distinction between individual rights to self-

expression and property rights. I for one am ambivalent on the significance of private property to the functioning of a liberal democratic order.

So far as some room for personal property is allowed, and the citizenry feels included in the decision to appropriate property for the community (and trust that the process was fair and for just reasons), the dystopian nightmare states of the past can be ignored both as rhetorical tools against the Left and as ongoing criticisms. Most Americans probably do have an unusually explicit attachment to property rights, but they have been willing to sacrifice them for the broader body politic when the stakes are sufficiently high enough.

## **VII. Conclusion**

There is much to be worried about in the world that we find ourselves in. War, poverty, ecological destruction, and unequal societal relations are problems that we continue to face despite modernity having an almost unchallenged global reach.

Although left movements have been stymied in Europe and North American, there is a growing rejection of elites across national capitals. The conclusion we should draw from this is that centrist elitism cannot defeat right-wing populism, not that democracy is flawed.

As capitalism represents a threat to both our physical and communal well-being, it must be broken as soon as possible. Generating innovative strategies of resistance alongside targeted actionable policies will help to hasten its demise by demonstrating that capitalism is not inevitable. By challenging capitalism at its weakest, most unpopular points (such as the oil

industry) we can simultaneously demonstrate that public life is worthwhile, the state can be effective, and collective action can merit our attention. How to rebuild the organizational capacity of the left is an open question, but for now, our demands must be as radical as necessary and as practical as possible.

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## Notes

- 1 Lavelle.
- 2 Johnson and Levin.
- 3 Shankman.
- 4 Scott.
- 5 Venugopal.
- 6 Brown pg 39.
- 7 Dallmayr.
- 8 I take democracy to mean the sorts of popular politics practiced by Thomas Paine and Jaques Ranciere, a non-hierarchical attitude towards how politics should be done. The Leveler (and Digger) traditions would be exemplary.
- 9 Stehr.
- 10 Gutmann and Thompson.
- 11 Qualley.
- 12 Amano.
- 13 Farrelly.
- 14 Berlin.
- 15 Hayes.
- 16 Parenti.
- 17 Altman.
- 18 Wolin 1981 "Why Democracy?"
- 19 Alter.
- 20 Taub.
- 21 Gibson.

22 Berman.

23 Zizek.

24 Perlstein.

25 Wolin 1981 "Why Democracy?"

26 Derived from Wolin's historical reading of the Greek word *krisis*.

27 Mitchell.

28 Graves.

29 See Vox, How America Became a Superpower, Explained in 8 Minutes.

30 Eltantawy and Wiest.

31 Shirky.

32 Akill.

33 Dion.

34 Rosenheck.

35 Wolin 1981 "Why Democracy?"

36 Chow.

37 Wolin 1981 "Crisis."

38 Ibid.

39 Yglesias.

40 Wolin 1981 "Why Democracy?"

41 Heer.

42 Oliver and Rahn.

43 Wolin 1994-"Fugitive Democracy."

44 Wolin 2004 pg 587.

45 Ranger.

46 Lange.

47 Wolin 2004 pg 604.

48 Ibid pg 602.

49 Thompson and Arroyo

50 Eshelman

51 Stehr.

52 Pavel.

53 L'insurrection Qui Vient.

54 Parr.

55 Bachram.

56 Rachlinski.

57 Lesnic.

58 McKibben.

59 Ibid.

60 Ahmed.

61 Cohen.