Critical Dialogue

Oligarchy. By Jeffrey A. Winters. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011. 344p. $95.00 cloth, $29.99 paper.
doi:10.1017/S1537592711004294

— John P. McCormick, *University of Chicago*

In democracies, the rich protect their freedom with wealth, and the people protect theirs with laws. This notion, associated with Demosthenes in classical Athens, and revived by Leonardo Bruni in republican Florence, imputes a roughly fair equilibrium to popular government: Private wealth and public institutions, so the truism goes, combine in democracies to ensure that both wealthy and common citizens live with fewer arbitrary restrictions on their behavior than in any other kind of regime.

In his ambitious, provocative, and illuminating book *Oligarchy,* Jeffrey Winters demonstrates why the first component of this adage is universally valid and grossly underestimated. More than he lets on, however, Winters also raises grave doubts over the full extent and genuine substance of the liberty promised average citizens by the adage's second part. Not only do super wealthy "oligarchs" enjoy economic freedom within democracies, but their cooperation, according to the author, is also the sine qua non of such regimes: Democracies are neither established nor sustained without explicit or implicit guarantees on the security of massive wealth concentrations among a minuscule number of individuals. The ubiquity and inflexibility of this fact necessarily means that the very wealthiest members of society materially circumscribe—whether through deprivation of the commonweal or the exploitation of vulnerable individuals—the freedom practiced by ordinary citizens in even the most widely participatory and formally egalitarian regimes, at all times and in all places.

Winters distinguishes the social actors he deems oligarchs from the more familiar and more conceptually diffuse categories of "elites" and "the rich" so as to better classify socioeconomic and political regimes, and explain their interactions and transformations throughout history. Elites, who hold formal positions of authority in social and political organizations (pp. 30–31, 275), and the "mass affluent," who possess far greater material resources than the vast majority of any given population (p. 213), do not enjoy free rein to determine a particular community's political fate as do oligarchs—who, Winters insists, form a nearly ineradicable part of all political regimes that are not naked autocracies. Unlike elites and the merely rich, oligarchs (an even smaller percentage of the approximately wealthiest 1% of every society) have proven largely impervious to reformist or redistributive campaigns by their much more numerous social subordinates. Extreme wealth, the author enlightens us, differs qualitatively from both mere wealth and formal political power; it bestows an exponentially greater ability on those who possess it to keep it. Moreover, the various "wealth defense" strategies devised by oligarchs to protect their economic privilege from one another and from those beneath them in socioeconomic hierarchies decisively influence political regime formation throughout time.

Winters ingeniously reconfigures traditional regime typologies according to the different ways that oligarchs defend their massive economic holdings; depending on the challenges they face, in some regimes oligarchs rule directly in order to secure and maximize their material interests; in others they do not have to. (In strict autocracies that do not permit "extreme stratification of wealth" [p. 284], such as ancient Mediterranean tyrannies and twentieth-century communist dictatorships, oligarchs do not exist at all [p. 277].) Regimes in which the richest few gain and protect their property through individually exercised physical violence are called by Winters warring oligarchies (e.g., ancient chiefdoms and medieval baronies); those in which oligarchs partially disarm so as to govern collectively (Mafia commissions, ancient senatorial republics, and certain late-medieval, commercial city-states) he calls ruling oligarchies.

Sultanistic oligarchies emerge, Winters argues, when one overweening oligarch steps forward to check yet simultaneously protect other oligarchs (as in Imperial Rome, Marcos's Philippines, and Suharto's Indonesia). In civil oligarchies (the United States and Singapore, for instance), oligarchs rule hardly at all; administrative states, the rule of law, and property rights successfully defend wealth on their behalf. However "tamed" such oligarchs may be in regimes where they do not directly, or at least do not formally, "rule" (pp. 36–37, 256), Winters demonstrates decisively that they do not rest idly in the tranquil comfort of political inactivity. In civil oligarchies like the United States, the guaranteed security of their property does not prevent oligarchs from gaming the political process to protect sources of wealth, such as income, that are for the

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592711004294 Published online by Cambridge University Press

most part superfluous to their already nearly unassailable, titanic economic advantages.

As the author concedes, these findings are "troubling" for anyone, himself included, concerned with political freedom and socioeconomic equality in contemporary democracies (p. 284). Recast in the language of normative democratic theory today (for instance, Philip Pettit's "republican" conception of contemporary democracy), Winters's evidence suggests that the wealthiest members of even relatively egalitarian and fairly participatory societies "dominate" less economically privileged citizens: They retain the inherent *ability* to intervene in the workings of public institutions with the aim of imposing economic burdens and responsibilities onto the poor, the middle class, and especially, Winters argues, the merely rich, whether or not the oligarchs actively do so at any particular moment. Under such conditions, most citizens of democracies throughout the world enjoy fundamental dimensions of their freedom merely at the pleasure of oligarchs. This fact would be less disconcerting if, as their apologists often suggest, oligarchs offset the astronomical discretionary advantages they enjoy by contributing substantially to the economic welfare of the less well-off through productive investment, and so on. However, the author demonstrates definitively that this is not the case: When confronted with societal demands from below for assistance in the provision of public goods, oligarchs consistently offload their obligations onto the "mass affluent" and onto others beneath them in the socioeconomic hierarchy for fulfillment.

Winters attempts to comfort readers, and perhaps himself, by indicating powerful circumstantial factors that supposedly prevent oligarchs from disproportionately and self-servingly influencing other aspects of public policy, that is, legislation governing issues besides the protection of their massive wealth holdings. The oligarchs, after all, do not necessarily agree about any policy goals except those that maintain and enhance their economic advantages: "[T]heir influence in these realms is either small or mutually canceling" (p. 211). Winters assures us—not without palpable ambivalence (e.g., p. 249)—that democratic majorities still decide a wide range of social issues through the relatively transparent and popularly responsive channels of electoral politics. Yet even if we bracket the arguably excessive influence exerted over the democratic process by other powerful minorities, especially the mass affluent and the political elites that he leaves behind (p. 213), his analysis still prompts serious concern.

Recent trends in the United States and Europe leave one to wonder whether oligarchic cohesion on, for instance, cultural, racial and religious issues disproportionately influences policy debates and outcomes, as it did, for that matter, in the pernicious historical examples of Jim Crow America and interwar Germany's Weimar Republic. In such cases, oligarchs may collectively pursue extraplutocratic antidemocratic agendas either sincerely, because they genuinely believe in the merits of such issues, or more instrumentally, because they cynically believe that such issues can be enlisted into broader programs of wealth defense. Put simply, whether or not oligarchs have historically agreed (or always will agree) exclusively on wealth preservation and not, say, on various forms of status that accompany it is an empirical question that the author leaves unaddressed.

Indeed, Winters's general use of historical cases will doubtlessly provoke skeptical reactions from scholarly experts in disparate fields. One might challenge, for instance, his classification of democratic Athens and republican Rome as "ruling" as opposed to "civil" oligarchies. Winters gives admirable due to the genuine power exercised by the demos in the former regime, but he does not pause at sufficient length to consider whether democratic politics kept Athenian oligarchs from maximizing their economic advantages as much as they would have liked. If this is so, then Athenian oligarchs did not really "rule" as extensively as he suggests. Moreover, he professes to take full account of revisionist scholarship on the Roman republic that demonstrates how much more substantively democratic it was than traditional scholars, such as Ronald Syme, had argued (pp. 72–73). Nevertheless, Winters then proceeds to cast republican Rome quite narrowly as a political as well as an economic oligarchy (drawing extensively on the work of Douglass North—Syme's heir in these matters). For instance, the tribunes of the plebeians functioned, for Winters, largely as a tool of competing oligarchs within Rome's senatorial class (pp. 102–3, 109 n. 55); and he focuses solely on popular assemblies in Rome where voting was weighed toward the wealthy (p. 104), neglecting important assemblies where voting was conducted along more majoritarian lines. Still, one cannot dispute his ultimate conclusion that the collapse of the Roman republic derived from a full-scale rearming of the republic's oligarchs—even if he attributes this result to a breakdown of oligarchic cohesion rather than, as notable scholars such as Andrew Lintott and Fergus Millar would, to a corruption of the republic's previously vibrant, popular, civic–military institutions (p. 111).

Along similar lines, Winters struggles throughout the book to conceptualize mass challenges to oligarchic wealth. For instance, he primarily attributes the revival of agrarian reforms in Rome to efforts by the Brothers Gracchus to settle political scores with other oligarchs in the senatorial class (pp. 106–11); and he eschews any serious discussion of contentiously democratic guild politics within Italian commercial city-states, focusing instead on cases, like Venice and Siena, where oligarchs successfully forestalled progressive advances by middle and lower guildsmen (pp. 121–33, esp. 123). Most problematic for his analysis is the undertheorized role that economic "crisis" plays in his explanation of the occasional victories won by common citizens against the super wealthy in civil oligarchies like the United States.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592711004294 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Winters neglects to explain why and, more importantly, how "well organized popular forces" (p. 232) managed to exploit the economic crises of 1893, 1913, and the Great Depression to successfully tax, in some cases at increasingly progressive rates, American oligarchs. Economic panics, depressions, and world wars seem to function for Winters as exogenous shocks to the otherwise machine-like oligarchic system. As a result, his account begs at least two pressing questions: Did oligarchic misbehavior and deleterious influence on public policy cause or contribute to such crises? And, moreover, what grassroots strategies resulted in the "highly effective but short-lived episode[s] of mobilizational power" (p. 227) that emerged from these crises? Indicative of this difficulty, at a later juncture the author remarks that "the highly public battle over extending the Bush-era tax cuts late in 2010 undercut the ability of oligarchs to get their preferred result" (p. 253). Most readers would be very curious indeed to hear much more about the possibilities for popular containment of oligarchic wealth maximization that this intriguing aside implies.

Not surprisingly, Winters is much better at demonstrating the mechanisms through which oligarchs erode progressive policies during normal times by capturing "the politics of the ordinary" that prevails between moments of economic crisis (p. 245). To be sure, Winters's account of "the gnawing political influence" (p. 245) exerted over contemporary tax policy by American oligarchs and their clients in the "Income Defense Industry" is fairly chilling (pp. 213–24, 272–73). Yet, for all his efforts to distinguish his novel oligarchic theory from traditional elite theory, his story of oligarchic encroachment sounds very much like narratives of inevitable elite ascendance associated with older "iron law" theories of elite recirculation: For both theories, during moments of crisis or scandal, average members of political or socioeconomic organizations (governments, parties, associations, unions, corporations, etc.) successfully, if not always fully, disperse the power of elites or the wealth of oligarchs, who then gradually gain back their privileges and advantages during ordinary times.

What are the practical implications of Winter's grand theory of oligarchic wealth defense? Certainly, he is correct to assert that the relatively "tamed" super-wealthy of civil oligarchies pose fewer and less intensely hostile threats to average people than do the wildly marauding armed and semiarmed barons, chiefs, and senators of warring and ruling oligarchies (pp. 284–85). Yet the book betrays a disheartening fatalism concerning the possibility of containing, let alone reducing, oligarchic economic cum political power within civil oligarchies like the United States and Singapore (pp. 220–72). After all, if Winters is correct that the top 1/100th of the top 1% of wealthy individuals have managed to avoid *any* significant subsidizing of public goods in *every* nonautocratic regime, from feudal Europe to post–World War II Scandinavia (pp. 277–80), what hope is there?

If *Oligarchy* provides any resources for strategies of popular mobilization aimed at reducing socioeconomic inequality, and by extension political inequality, within contemporary democracies, these may emerge from Winters's novel and intriguing distinction between the super-wealthy and the merely rich, and the intense political conflict that he suggests has ensued between them in the civil oligarchies of America and Europe for the past generation. Newly mobilizing egalitarian forces might consider which of the following agendas is more immediately feasible and ultimately efficacious: forging an alliance between the oligarchs and the working, middle, and poorer classes to "soak" the mass affluent in ways that benefit not only the oligarchs but the general public as well; or, conversely, deciding whether democratic forces ought to provide serious economic concessions to the merely rich in a long- and not merely short-term effort to beat back the political influence of their common adversary, the super-wealthy.

Criticisms and skeptical queries notwithstanding, Winters must be congratulated for offering a major contribution to two invaluable, recent waves of scholarship: one that takes a broad historical approach to the study of the relationship between economic and political power in political regimes, especially democracies, and another that puts economic stratification back on the agenda for the study of contemporary American politics. Like fellow comparativists Stathis Kalyvas, Carles Boix, Robert Bates, and others, Winters mines the historical record of political regimes, especially cases predating the seventeenth century, for evidence concerning the constraints and possibilities posed to civic life by concentrated economic power. Furthermore, like such notable scholars of American politics as Larry Bartels, Martin Gilens, and Jacob Hacker, Winters reminds us that liberty and equality will remain mere slogans in even the most "advanced" democracies if the political influence of extremely concentrated wealth is not better understood and, indeed, is not challenged with greater acuity and vigor in the immediate future.

Response to John McCormick's review of *Oligargy*

doi:10.1017/S1537592711005263

— Jeffrey A. Winters

I am very grateful to John McCormick for his excellent review of *Oligarchy.* It is careful and thoughtful, and I especially appreciate the important criticisms he raises. On Rome, I fully concur that the scholarship in the "democratic school" raises important interpretative challenges. But I must confess to being more persuaded by the compelling work of Karl-Joachim Hölkeskamp, Kurt Raaflaub, Robert Morstein-Marx, and especially Henrik Mouritsen than the admittedly influential authors McCormick cites. Fergus Millar and others have been criticized for their

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592711004294 Published online by Cambridge University Press