



Oligarchy

Jeffrey A. Winters

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For centuries, oligarchs were viewed as empowered by wealth, an idea muddled by elite theory early in the twentieth century. The common thread for oligarchs across history is that wealth defines them, empowers them, and inherently exposes them to threats. The existential motive of all oligarchs is wealth defense. How they respond varies with the threats they confront, including how directly involved they are in supplying the coercion underlying all property claims, and whether they act separately or collectively. These variations yield four types of oligarchy: warring, ruling, sultanistic, and civil. Oligarchy is not displaced by democracy but rather is fused with it. Moreover, the rule of law problem in many societies is a matter of taming oligarchs. Cases studied in this book include the United States, ancient Athens and Rome, Indonesia, the Philippines, Singapore, medieval Venice and Siena, mafia commissions in the United States and Italy, feuding Appalachian families, and early chiefs cum oligarchs dating from 2300 BCE.

Oligarchy Details

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Gde Dwitya says

Winters' Oligarchy is a book elaborating a theory of how extremely concentrated wealth at the hand of powerful minority induces extreme political inequality. By doing so, he clarifies the oligarchy theory that has been muddled by the elite theory. He claims that not all powerful minorities are oligarchic in nature. Only those that are materially endowed as their source of power can be called oligarchs and their politics of wealth defense is what oligarchy is all about. The definition of oligarchs is constant across time but the oligarchy is varied. Winters also provides typology of oligarchy in his book: Warring, Ruling, Civil, and Sultanistic. An important theoretical proposition of Winters' book is that taming oligarchy has little to do with democratization. Both are two different enterprises: democracy is about dispersal of political power while oligarchy is about concentration of material power. In fact, democracy only poses potential threat to oligarchy if the majority of the masses are set to commit radical material redistribution. Following Aristotle, Winters mentions the fusion of oligarchy and democracy in which "the wealthy few is not overly oppressive and the many poor will not threaten the rich" as a solution to a stable polity. This means that it does not need to be a radical redistribution in the future, and there is no need to have a radical historical project to cease oligarchy altogether. What it needs is only taming oligarchy. It is important and interesting since it is quite a departure from a Marxist ideal of classless society which implies a radical redistribution of material wealth and reclaiming factors of production from the capitalist few. Implications of Winters' book to praxis which is a departure from Marxist ideal is also coincided with its more Weberian nature of theorizing the locus of power in society. This book is Weberian in nature and yet at the same time is also fully materialist.

mharipin says

buku ini saya baca secara diskriminatif. hanya baca serius bab 1 (elaborasi teoretis) dan bab tentang 'oligarki sultanistik' (Indonesia dan Filipina), sedangkan bab yang lain dibaca cepat. sejak bagian teori, banyak isu yang patut dipermasalahkan. kenapa Winters mengambil 'putaran' ke 'teori oligarki' ketika dirinya menilai Marxist tidak memadai, padahal saya pikir neo-Marxist memiliki banyak persinggungan dengan apa yang 'dipikirkan' Winters. saya pernah menulis critical review buku ini. tapi filenya di kantor, mungkin nanti saya paste saja

Joel Robbins says

Not finished but there seems to be a lot of redundancy so far.

Rick Claypool says

Winters' analysis of the phenomena of oligarchy -- the stratum of the super wealthy who exist at the very top of the wealth scale and aim to keep it that way -- is insightful and compelling. If you are frustrated when you

hear about the likes of Sheldon Adelson or Charles and David Koch pouring millions of dollars into distorting U.S. elections, this book provides a keen insight into why, as a class, oligarchs do it, and is rich with historical and global examples of how oligarchs achieve what they want, which is primarily just one thing: to fend off perceived threats to their own wealth and income.

Atif Taj says

The author discusses four types of oligarchy: warring, ruling, sultanistic, civil. One thing that struck was oligarch will serve their own purpose regardless of what just society requires. The premium example is the income inequality during Roman Empire that is comparable to present times and in order to achieve the maximum wealth and income, violence is the key ingredient.

Clif says

Yes, it's a tired phrase that you can't tell a book by its cover, but this work is a perfect example. Look at the plain dark brown cover with nothing but the title and the author's name on it. A typical textbook would look exciting by comparison. It's likely this book IS used as a textbook, yet inside lurks eye-opening information on that teeny tiny percentage of the population that has tremendous wealth and wants above all to protect it. How do they do it?

It's always been the case the the many are dominated by the few, but this book is not about the elite. The elite may be defined by education or political connection, celebrity or outstanding achievement in many areas. This book is concerned only with those who command vast material resources (wealth), who may or may not be involved directly in politics or any other area. Jeffrey Winters examines how this tiny fraction of the top 1% by wealth manages not only to keep it but to protect the income that goes with it.

So what you say? Of course the rich want to keep what they have.

But wait, how do they do it? Thus begins a wonderful story reaching back to ancient Greece and Rome. Winters has come up with a theory that covers the field of wealth protection.

Oligarchs (the supremely wealthy) can fight each other with hired armies as with ancient warlords or the Mafia. In this case the oligarch himself is armed and ready to fight if need be. This can be relatively stable but what if one warlord manages to gain supremacy?

In that case, it can become a "sultanistic" arrangement whereby one supremely powerful oligarch overawes all the rest but through his immense power can maintain order, giving and withdrawing favors to keep the second rank in line - thus protecting their wealth and allowing them to disarm. What follows is a detailed account of 20th century Indonesia, where General Suharto accomplished this very thing. But after decades of stability, it fell apart because of his one weakness. What was that? You gotta read the book!

Another stable system can be many unarmed oligarchs with a system of laws to protect their assets. Look to Rome where the contesting oligarchs as senators often were military leaders as well. Did you know there were strict rules prohibiting soldiers from appearing in uniform in the district of Rome? It was to keep someone from marching on Rome and taking supreme power. But it finally happened and Winters relates all

kinds of wonderful details on how it did, including the murder of Caesar. Is this beginning to sound interesting?

What about the type of government? Does democracy tame oligarchs? We know it doesn't! It's a major assertion of Winters that oligarchy can live quite happily with any system that maintains order and does not deprive them of their wealth or their income.

Without a "sultan" or direct force between equals to maintain wealth, there must be a strong legal system, but not necessarily one that protects individual freedoms, only one that protects property. The example is Singapore, where the reader learns of Lee Kwan Yew, a remarkable man who would tolerate no corruption by oligarchs and had a government agency dedicated to going after them without prejudice if they tried to pull any funny business. It worked marvelously, but forget about freedom of speech and don't get caught spitting on the sidewalk! The beauty of the strong legal system is that oligarchs need not be armed or have hired thugs for protection. It's a good life for the multi-billionaires under the law, but now a completely different kind of army for hire is needed: the tens-of-thousands-strong army of wealth-protection paper-pushers.

This is a group of ordinary people, moderately wealthy at best, whose jobs are dedicated to figuring out how the ultra-wealthy can keep their income away from Uncle Sam. This army reduces the effective tax on the uber-rich to the same level as the average working person, or even to no tax being paid at all. The catch is - you have to have so many millions to spare to hire this army, that it isn't affordable for any but the richest of the richest. Thus is the tax burden passed down to the merely rich and even so far down as you and me. You'll get a nice history of our income tax to show how this came about.

Confused? Don't be. It's this simple. Suppose you make so much each year that you can hire the wealth protection army for 1% of your income. In return for that, they reduce your income tax to a few percent of your income or even nothing at all. So you have lost 1% of your income to the army you hired, and, say, 2% more in actual tax that the army couldn't finesse, instead of the 35% someone in the top tax bracket would pay without the services of the army. That means you have effectively lost 3% of your income. Someone who makes \$25,000 a year will pay three times that percentage or more! This makes income tax regressive - the more you make, the less you pay as a percentage.

Have I convinced you that this book is anything but dull reading? There's so much to learn for all of us in this slim text that is a delightful blend of history, current affairs and economics.

Thank you for an education, Mr. Winters!

Bookshark says

I'm not sure his distinction between those who have enough wealth to engage in wealth defense and those who do not stands up. There are plenty of people who he does not seem to be counting as oligarchs who hire financial professionals to ensure they pay the minimum amount of taxes possible. The difference between the 5%ers with their stock brokers and accountants and the ultra-rich .1% with their high-powered teams of tax evasion experts seems to be one of degree, not the qualitative difference he seems to believe it is. Some quantitative line between the merely rich and the oligarchs is probably still necessary.

His argument that oligarchy and democracy are compatible seems to only be true for certain narrow

conceptions of democracy (liberal, Schumpeterian, etc).

His distinction between tamed and untamed oligarchies is rather unclear.

However, this is an important topic, and this is one of the few texts that attempts to theorize oligarchy as a distinct phenomena. I also appreciated that his theory was linked to case studies, a move not often seen in theoretically inclined texts. Overall, a good read.

JJ says

Despite all the confusion, oligarchy is – and oligarchs are – extremely important for understanding politics, whether ancient or contemporary, poor or advanced-industrial. The main problem is that the concept has defied clear definition. The solution lies in defining oligarchs and oligarchy in a manner that is precise, consistent, and yet still provides an analytical framework that is broad enough to be theoretically meaningful across a range of cases. “Rule by the few” simply will not do.

Winters provides a prudent analysis and reasonable theory on oligarchy and oligarchs in general. Using historical and present case studies such as the Mafia, Ancient Athens, Rome, Medieval Europe, Indonesia, Philippines, United States, and Singapore to name a few. The case studies are the foundations for each of the four types of oligarchies as described by Winters throughout the book: Warring, Ruling, Sultanistic, and Civil. Winters describes how oligarchs are actors who command and control massive concentrations of material resources that can be deployed to defend or enhance their personal wealth and exclusive social position. The resources must be available to be used for personal interests even if they are personally owned. His definition of oligarchs integrates into his definition of oligarchy which refers to the politics of wealth defense by materially endowed actors. Wealth defense of oligarchs has two components: property defense (securing basic claims to wealth and property) and income defense (keeping as much of the flow of income and profits from one’s wealth as possible under conditions of secure property rights). He also clarifies the confusion not just on the oligarchy concept but the elite theory as well, the two are surprisingly different. Winters provides a clear definition of the oligarchy subject which is a great framework to build on by future scholars engaging in the topic.

However, I gave the book a 3 due to my disagreement with both the author and Aristotle in that oligarchy and democracy could be durably fused (compatible) as long as the many poor did not threaten the few rich through representative institutions, and the few rich did not concentrate wealth to the point that the many poor became politically explosive. There were no examples or case studies presented by the author or the philosopher to prove whether that statement is right or not. I do have my own opinions of the incompatibility of the two using the United States as an alone example but my opinions are irrelevant to the review of this work. I also thought his references became a bit excessive. Referencing is scholarly but a 11-an-half page bibliography was a bit much for a 285 page read. Overall I did enjoy the theories, concepts, and case studies presented in this work. I recommend this book to anyone interested in the study of political philosophy.

Nils says

A very clarifying book about what distinguishes oligarchs from other sorts of elites — in a nutshell: concentrated efforts to protect their wealth. Which then follows with a carefully delineated typology of

different sorts of oligarchies, based how much their authority structures are institutionalized versus personalistic, and how much the oligarchs rely on personal militias. The only curiosity in the book is that despite going through many examples of different sorts of oligarchies, from medieval city-states to the United States to SE Asian dictators to African warlords to mafia commissions, it largely avoids discussing what many take to be the paradigmatic contemporary case of oligarchs, namely Russia during the 1990s.

Thomas says

That copy of *Capital in the 21st Century* you were planning to read? That semi-massive tome collecting dust on your table? You're looking at it right now with that guilty glint.

Well bin it or burn it. This is the book you need to read and blab about to everyone around you. This is the single most important book on politics, history, capitalism, and social relations that you'll have ever read. The theory isn't perfect, nor was it meant to be. He doesn't flesh out some of his historical examples when compared with others. He should have spent more time examining the case of Singapore and Civic Oligarchy at the end of it.

Minor quips, because the theory he lays out is revolutionary, and especially because it can form a cornerstone of future critical analysis.

UChicagoLaw says

"Jeffrey Winters' *Oligarchy* is by a Northwestern University political scientist who specializes in Southeast Asia. Ranging from Indonesia to Ancient Rome to the contemporary United States, he explores the politics of the defense of wealth across time and space." - Tom Ginsburg

Maru Kun says

Very interesting review of this book here: [How the oligarchy wins: lessons from ancient Greece](#)

Jonathan says

A very dense (and occasionally dry) but interesting book that seeks to conceptualize and categorize "oligarchy." He divides oligarchy into four types--warring, sultanistic, and civil--and provides examples of each. With regard to civil oligarchies, he stresses the point that oligarchy and democracy are not mutually exclusive--they only become so when democratic participation "challenges material stratification specifically." This point is useful when conceptualizing oligarchy as something that transcends the formal system of government, but it relies on a very thin conception of democracy (free and fair elections, multiple parties, etc.).

Winters explores the tools oligarchs use to protect income/wealth and how political leaders or systems attempt to tame them, but the discussion leaves out the important question of how oligarchs achieve their great wealth in the first place.

I would have also liked to see an expanded treatment of the resurgence of oligarchs in post-Soviet Russia (or other Eastern European countries) and the coexistence of oligarchy and social democracy in Western Europe. He only briefly addresses these in his conclusion, but they are interesting cases that really get to the heart of the power dimension of oligarchy.

All in all, though, I found this a valuable synthesis of history and theory and worth the time spent reading it.

3.7 stars

Brian Peterson says

Insightful

Gave me a new perspective on ancient and modern history. Changed how I view and understand the Roman Republic and Empire, and the modern history of the US income tax law. Keeps a clear focus on the topic of oligarchic theory and its fundamental points, along with the insights gained with such an analysis.

Todd says

A very taught presentation of a basic sociology theory. According to Winters oligarchy is not just rule by the few, but rule by those who have material power, usually in the form of great wealth. The book details out all of the criteria for being an oligarch and then gives a bunch of historical cases that are divided into different types: warring, ruling, sultanistic, and civil oligarchies. Winters contends that the U.S. is a civil oligarch where politics is controlled by the wealthy who pay for an entire industry that is dedicated to income defense. The introductory theory chapter is particularly well-done.
