

Review of Cory Chambers's McNair thesis "Citizens United v Federal Commission, Inverted Totalitarianism and Contemporary Literature"

In her thesis, Cory Chambers argues that the Citizens United decision granting personhood to corporations undermines American democracy and threatens America with totalitarianism. If democracy means, as she writes quoting Peter Murphy, that everyone has a share in government with no group or class dominating, then how can we say democracy exists when corporations now have an outsized financial influence on elections? She draws on political theorist Sheldon Wolin to show that this creates a situation of "inverted totalitarianism," whereby corporations indirectly but palpably control the state. Cory further draws on thinker Hannah Arendt to help her articulate the existential implications for the individual in this kind of failed democracy – individuals are "simultaneously exposed and in complete loneliness." Finally, her thesis brings these analytical points together through a close reading of Gary Shteyngart's novel *Super sad true love story*.

Cory has chosen texts that work well together and that illustrate the points she wants to make. *Super sad true love story* depicts a dystopian near-future in which corporations bring America to collapse and then take it over. The complex and sophisticated political analysis she undertakes with regard to the Koch Brothers' war on regulation is brought to life by a novel that shows how much corporations can gain when the state devolves into anarchy – most obviously, they can capitalize on defense and security contracts. When the public falls apart, the new opportunities for private companies are boundless—as happens in the novel.

Cory shows how the novel's world—a consumption-oriented world not so different from our own, perhaps just more simultaneously sophisticated and crude than ours—prepares the citizenry for their loss of freedom. As Cory writes, "Shteyngart's early focus on credit and the financialization of the citizen sets the stage for the great gulf between those with all the money and those with none." A cowed population is less likely to assert its rights or to even protest when due process and other aspects of law are discarded in favor of secret police and private hired hands. Cory does a particularly good job threading the connections of our contemporary situation, as explained by Jane Mayer in *Dark Money*, through the plot and details of the novel.

Cory finishes by exploring the role of technology in inverted totalitarianism, a role Shteyngart emphasizes in his novel in where all aspects of people's lives are hooked up to, and exposed by, their devices. Privacy as we know it no longer exists. "The more freedoms we give up as citizens," Cory writes, "the more reliant upon technology we are, then the more isolated we become, leaving us in a disempowered state."

The thesis is well-organized and clear. Difficult points are made simple and evidence is used effectively. This is an extremely timely, politically sophisticated, and poignant work that requires no revisions.