

**C. B. Macpherson**

*The Life and Times of Liberal Democracy.*

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This very practical new edition of a short book on nineteenth- and twentieth-century liberalism might be taken as evidence of the enduring legacy of the iconic twentieth-century Canadian political economist C. B. Macpherson. But the reader might just as well be forgiven for feeling that its appearance is a rather clear example of that most subtle form of iconoclasm: damning with faint praise. There is nothing in this edition of Macpherson, that is, that is loathsome, ignoble, offensive, or thoughtless. But the absence of negative qualities alone would not make an iconic figure, merely a competent one.

On the back cover we hear from K. R. Minogue that “Like the celebrated hedgehog of Archilochus, Professor C. B. Macpherson knows one big thing.” According to the classic Aristotelian definition, the political thinker is the kind of thinker most obliged to speak on the universal level, at the level of the *polis*, about that which contains all other social formations within itself. Surely, in this massively cosmopolitan and complex time, knowing ‘one big thing’ is no longer a measure of relevance, let alone greatness. Can ‘one big thing’ – which can easily be interpreted to imply ‘only one thing’ – really speak to the scale of concerns that *includes all other social formations*? On the front cover, we see William Mathie acknowledging that the book (and presumably its author) is “provocative and skillful”. Is it enough for a thinker concerned with the truth – surely the concomitant of speaking of concerns purporting to be *universal* – to be ‘provocative and skillful’? Is the charge of sophistry far behind?

Criticisms of Macpherson have been voiced from both left and right. From the left, Ellen Meiksins Wood accused Macpherson of being a ‘liberal in socialist clothing,’ of undercutting and diluting socialist radicalism with liberal ambiguity (Ellen Meiksins Wood, “C. B. Macpherson: Liberalism, and the Task of Socialist Political Theory”, *Socialist Register*, 1978). Per contra, from somewhere near the centre, Jim Tully argued in 1993 that Macpherson’s work is hobbled by its attachment to a ‘socialism versus liberalism’ debate which appears to have lost its relevance after 1989 (*An Approach to Political Philosophy*, Cambridge University Press 1993). Macpherson, then, is either too liberal or too socialist – or alternatively, according to criticisms from further to the right, too much of both (see David Miller, “The Macpherson Version”, *Political Studies* 30.1 [1982], 120–7).

It is not hard to see the grounds for the centrist or liberal critique of Macpherson – that he was a ‘rigid socialist’. *The Life and Times of Liberal Democracy* seems ‘rigid’ in its insistence that the emergence of liberal democracy in the nineteenth century represented a great step backward, not forward, in the modern quest for democratic equality: “The earlier conception of democracy... had rejected class division... Liberal democracy, on the other hand, accepted class division, and built on it” (23–4). Macpherson seems to have made quite clear that the formal, legal equality of the contemporary liberal democratic consensus, the roots of which he traces to

the early nineteenth century, was not adequate to the vision of a ‘classless’ or ‘one-class’ participatory democratic society.

Macpherson’s criticism of the hard-boiled utilitarian liberalism of Bentham and James Mill, which he calls ‘Model 1’, is clear enough. Model 1 accepts and entrenches Hobbesian or Lockean assumptions about human nature Macpherson had identified earlier in his career under the label of ‘possessive individualism’. People, says Model 1, are inherently individualists, seeking to maximize their own pleasure and minimize their pain. Individualism is not an historically specific outlook – according to Model 1, it is the only meaningful measure of *any* human experience.

Bentham and Mill, unlike some earlier democratic thinkers, accepted that the threat of starvation was the only incentive for the majority of humanity to work. And so the ‘egalitarian’ nature of their premises of justice – which indeed undermine all traditional patterns of hierarchy not conforming to a market of individuals – is rather cut across by the empirical fact and necessity of continuing economic and political inequality. Hence, we have Mill’s subtle yet necessary ‘seesaw’ between advocacy of liberation of individuals from traditional strictures, and advocacy of a government elected by limited franchise to serve the interests of property:

... the discordance between his two sets of principles, the one requiring universal franchise, the other permitting enormous exclusions, is kept ‘not very visible’ by his recommending a limited franchise only hypothetically ... The seesaw in the article *Government* is completed by Mill’s assurance to his readers, at the very end of the article, that no danger was to be anticipated from any enfranchisement of the lower class because the great majority of that class would always be guided by the middle class ... the democratic franchise would not only protect the citizens, but would even improve the performance of the rich of governors. It is scarcely the spirit of equality (41–2)

Macpherson finds in Model 1 “no enthusiasm for democracy, no idea that it could be a morally transformative force; it is nothing but a logical requirement for the governance of inherently self-interested conflicting individuals” (43).

The next subject of *Life and Times*, which Macpherson calls ‘Model 2’, can be summarized briefly as consisting of John Stuart Mill’s attempt to reform his father’s utilitarianism (‘2A’) followed by a range of similarly-minded idealist-reformers including Barker, Dewey, and Hobhouse (‘2B’). Macpherson’s ‘rigid socialism’ seems no less in evidence here. For while Macpherson admits to sharing in the ideals the younger Mill articulated – primarily that the individual truly desires to be a self-developing being, learning and growing through work, and not merely a consumer of pleasures and avoider of pains – he also argues trenchantly that Mill and his successors failed to realize those ideals. Reform liberalism, though it harbours a morally auspicious concern for the development of the whole individual as opposed to the accumulating agent, suffers from its idealism: “Indeed one can see a cumulative decline in realism from Model 1 through Models 2A and 2B” (48). Macpherson identifies the weaknesses in J. S. Mill’s liberalism specifically in economic terms: “he saw the *existing* class inequality, and saw that it was incompatible with developmental democracy, but thought it accidental and remediable” (49).

What Mill failed to see in Macpherson's view was that the capitalist market relation enhances or replaces any original inequitable distribution, in that it gives to capital part of the value added by current labour, thus steadily increasing the mass of capital. Had Mill seen this, he could not have judged the capitalist principle consistent with his equitable principle (55–6).

Macpherson's account concludes with his prognosis for the present and future of liberal democracy, which he identifies as conforming generally and globally (in 1977, he means 'apart from the communist countries') to what he calls 'Model 3', or the 'Equilibrium' model of democracy. The instruments of reform imagined in Model 2 (limited state intervention, the formation of co-operatives and workers' unions to promote the development of individuals) have not delivered the equality of human beings as workers and developers of their capacities. Model 3, on the contrary, is "a reversion to and elaboration of Model 1" (77), for which democracy "is simply a market mechanism: the voters are consumers" (79). Via bureaucracy and the immense armatures of the electoral party system, the political 'participation' and 'self-development' of the vast majority of people is limited to voting in mass elections. The pluralist 'individualism' of Model 1 continues to operate alongside an increasing elitism. Oligarchy, rather than democracy, is its operative tendency:

The Model 3 political market is far from fully competitive. For it is, to use an economist's term, oligopolistic. That is, there are only a few sellers, a few suppliers of political goods, in other words only a few political parties... Where there are so few sellers, they need not and do not respond to the buyers' demands as they must do in a fully competitive system... (89)

Indeed, the question *Life and Times* implicitly raises about Model 3 is whether or how the prevailing liberalism can really be called democratic at all. Macpherson's root insistence is that democracy, to live up to the ideals it has represented, must be realized in the *forms of participation in economic activity* and not a mere formalism in and of capital markets. And this in turn makes it seem rather clear that Macpherson's 'Model 4', which would supersede the oligarchy of Model 3, would need to be really 'socialist' at least in the sense that it must look toward the means of production and their use in work as what is censored from the idea-markets of mass-electoral liberalism.

With all this in mind, one might ask what might have brought Ellen Wood to criticize Macpherson for complicity with liberalism. Wood's criticism implicitly offers the reply: while Macpherson did criticize J. S. Mill and his progeny for their unrealistic volunteerism, he in many crucial ways also maintained their unrealized ideals. He insisted that "Model 2 is worth considerable attention... to re-moralize democracy under the banner of participatory democracy" (48). Wood raises the question of whether the difference between Macpherson and other liberals may not be as clear as his ideals of 'participatory democracy' might lead one to believe. Frank Cunningham's new introduction to the text, notably, goes to some length not only to distance Macpherson's 'pyramidal council' proposal from the Soviet model, but also to show its harmony with the Presidential and parliamentary versions of the 'developmental model'.

Was reassuring developmental liberalism actually the limit of Macpherson's view? Was he satisfied in his lifetime with the polyglot 'developmental' initiatives of Trudeau's model of Canadian parliamentary democracy? Surely if Macpherson had been happy with our merely adding some meritocratic or developmental (or, in the language of Tony Blair's New Labour, 'aspirational') policies to the existing division of labour, 'Model 4' would be unnecessary and 'Model 2' would have been quite sufficient. But then, given Macpherson's own competent enough critique of Model 2 as lacking in realism, would not the substance of Macpherson's argument suffer a rather embarrassing logical problem? Would it not indeed disappear, not unlike that God who 'disappears in a puff of logic' in Douglas Adams's *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*? It seems that Macpherson, grounded in the 'realities' of actual liberalism, must have intended to argue in *Life and Times of Liberal Democracy* that Model 4 would indeed have to be substantially different from Model 2, would no longer be 'liberal democracy' but something new, whether it be called 'socialism' or 'participatory democracy'. But, saved in this way from Wood's label of 'duplicitious liberal', is he not most likely only to be criticized again for straying to the opposite extreme, that 'same old rigid socialism'?

It seems that Macpherson's demise as a figure of significant influence can be traced to being 'stuck in the middle' of conflicting interpretations. For liberals and conservatives, he is a utopian twentieth-century socialist whose ideas may be dangerous to liberalism and the right order of things. For the socialists, he is a muddle-minded liberal compromiser, slinking away from the real fight. Perhaps we might simply imagine Macpherson himself, witnessing this new, very practical and 'typically Canadian' edition of *Life and Times of Liberal Democracy*, pausing to consider the irony of the waning importance of the possessive-individualism thesis in a world finally and once again delivered over to mega-corporatized possessive 'individualism', then finally laughing ruefully and reminding us of something from Hobbes: "For in a way beset with those that contend on one side for too great Liberty, and on the other side for too much Authority, 'tis hard to passe between the points of both unwounded." (*Leviathan*, ed. C. B. Macpherson, Penguin Books 1985, 75)

**Colin J. Campbell**  
York University