

ABSTRACTIONS AND POLITICAL THEORY

Kenneth R. Minogue

C.B. Macpherson, *The Life and Times of Liberal Democracy*, Oxford University Press, 1977, pp. 120.

The Life and Times of Liberal Democracy is Professor Macpherson's best book since *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism*. The eccentricity of its title covers a short, lucid and sometimes persuasive account of his main tenets about democracy. These tenets have placed Macpherson in a central position in contemporary political theory. The centrality depends less on the fact that Macpherson has persuaded a great number of people than on his singleminded exploration of a theory of democracy which touches on many important issues and provides a strikingly bold outline with which to deal.

The attractively firm structure of the book rests upon Macpherson's two favourite ways of grasping the world: firstly, his use of "models" consisting of a few propositions and some assumptions detectable behind them; and secondly, the framing of these "models" in terms of modern British political thought. In the *Life and Times*, we are invited to consider four ideas about democracy as it has been discussed since the late eighteenth century to the present day. Bentham and James Mill appear as the founders of liberal democracy since they advocated a democratic franchise within an existing liberal constitution. The "model" of democracy they produced was based upon the familiar assumptions Macpherson attributes to capitalism, namely, that each human being is a competitive maximiser of his own desires, and that these desires are potentially infinite. The desire is for power, particularly over others; therefore men must be protected against each other by the laws that governments enforce. However, the government will itself become a wolf to man unless it, too, is circumscribed and dismissable. Thus democracy in Model 1 appears as a way of protecting men against oppression not only by each other, but also by the very governments they have set up for this purpose.

As any experienced reader of Professor Macpherson knows, democracy is not to be taken merely as a constitutional doctrine about legitimacy. He believes that democracy can be (p. 43) a "morally transformative force". It is this particular junction between the moral and the political which accounts for the

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attractiveness of Macpherson's argument. As he says of John Stuart Mill's view of man, which he takes as the second of his democratic models:

Man is a being capable of developing his powers or capacities. The human essence is to exert and develop them. Man is essentially not a consumer and appropriator (as he was in Model 1) but an exorter and developer and enjoyer of his capacities. The good society is one which permits and encourages everyone to act as exorter, developer, and enjoyer of the exertion and development, of his or her own capacities. So Mill's model of the desirable society was very different from the model of society to which Model 1 of democracy was fitted. (p. 48)

Mill appears as a Macphersonite hero by virtue of his concern with moral development, but he fails to be a true egalitarian democrat because he has absorbed too many of the assumptions of market society. Nevertheless, his heritage led on to later versions of Model 2 (known as Model 2 B) which were dominated by a "neo-idealist pluralism". (p. 70) The general defect common to all versions of the second model is that it fails to understand the consequences of class division resulting from the capitalist market.

Macpherson's third model embraces modern behavioural political science which realistically understands democracy as a competition between competing elites all seeking to influence the government.¹ There is here no question of democracy as a moral idea, nor does the model incorporate any propositions about the desirability of citizens energetically exercising their political rights. On the contrary one of the common theses of this model is that democracy could not possibly work if every citizen wanted to have his say on every question. This belief has sometimes been elaborated as the paradoxical theory that "apathy" is a necessary condition of democracy. Macpherson takes this as a moral Achilles heel of Model 3, and it is the point to which he directs his analytical probes.

The fourth model is, if judged critically in terms of its elaboration and coherence, the least satisfactory since it largely consists of a gleam in the eye of Macpherson himself and of a variety of critics of modern civilisation over the last decade. Its essence is participation, and it draws together the desirabilities of the previous three models into a conception — dream, or vision, might be better terms — of a society in which the populace, while continuing to enjoy the liberties of the present Western world, also participates directly and enthusiastically in discussing the decisions which determine their lives. How this

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would work is admittedly difficult to foresee. Macpherson sketches out a pyramidal system of representation which he thinks would at least facilitate participation more effectively than the present competition of parties. There are glances at worker-participation in Yugoslavia, and there is a firm insistence that Model 4 will be a relatively egalitarian world without capitalists. What we are dealing with, then, is a water colour sketch of social democracy as it might be were it released from the common charge made against it by Marxists, namely that it is merely a device for propping up capitalism.

Macpherson's *Life and Times* is, then, a complex argument. Part of it deals with the intellectual history of the idea of democracy since Bentham and James Mill. Part of it is an academic exercise in political theory, probing the logical relations among assumptions about man and society. And part of it is simply an argument for socialism, replete with all the current symbols and references, such as viewing modern Western life in terms of loaded generalisations such as "consumerism", and wistful salutes to Allende's Chile and the "Prague Spring". There is a great deal one might say about each of these almost inseparable elements, but perhaps the shortest way into the heart of the matter is to consider the relation between Macpherson's vocabulary of abstractions on the one hand, and the realities of modern life on the other.

In discussing Model 3, Macpherson criticises political scientists for borrowing from economists the idea of "consumer sovereignty". "For", he writes, "in the mid-twentieth century, when it still did not seem too naive to talk about consumers' sovereignty in the economic market, it was easy to see a parallel in the political market: the political consumers were sovereign because they had a choice between the purveyors of packages of political goods." Now one might think, in reflecting upon this passage, that the borrowing had been in the reverse direction. The term "sovereignty" is a political word which had been taken over by economists, somewhat pretentiously, to describe an important fact of the economies they studied. That fact is that, by contrast with the situation of a soldier in an army, or the citizen of a communist state subject to rationing, the citizen of a capitalist economy may determine whether he will buy a lettuce or a cabbage, this or that brand of beer (or perhaps a home-brewing kit) or indeed, whether he will not simply save most of his money. What is produced, and the price at which it is produced, depends fundamentally upon that fact. Now Macpherson, like Galbraith, does not believe this account corresponds with the facts. More than that, his use of the word "naive" suggests not merely that he thinks it an error, but an error that could only be entertained by a particularly simple sort of person. Just why Macpherson is so confident that it is an error is not at all clear, apart from one or two glancing references to oligopoly. Others who take this view are greatly given to emphasising advertising, which no doubt influences some aspects of

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what people buy; but it is not an argument that can be carried too far without tumbling into the opinion that the mass of mankind, consistently and day by day, are a set of gullible fools incapable of making a judgement for themselves. No cynic goes quite that far. In any case, the confident view that the consumer these days is but putty in the hands of vast corporations who mould his mind and ravage his purse is plausibly contested by a great number of economists.² They may be wrong, but they cannot be summarily dismissed as "naive". Each reader should perhaps ask himself whether he feels weak and helpless in the disposal of his own money before the psychic pressures of business.

The comparison between a product being marketed and a political party "in the market" (as we say) for the votes of the electorate was thus not merely an obvious borrowing from economics, but also a retrieval of what was originally political. The retrieval was no doubt facilitated by the kind of confusion about democracy introduced into political theory by Rousseau. Sovereignty in Hobbes is the final power of decision in a State. That the Sovereign was defined as a "representative" did not satisfy the many critics of Hobbes who thought that the element of absolutism he described in government was much too close to the kind of despotic rule they all feared. The common eighteenth century solution to this problem is to talk of the Sovereignty of the people, a high-sounding but largely nonsensical expression, of great use to demagogues. The realist political scientists criticised by Macpherson were using and criticising this set of *political* (as much as economic) ideas, and interpreting them in a way that covered some, though obviously not all, of the realities of a modern democracy. "The pluralism of Model 2," Macpherson tell us, taking the economic metaphor more seriously than the longstanding political argument behind it, "... treats citizens as simply political consumers, and political society as simply a market-like relation between them and the suppliers of political commodities." (p. 80)³

The reason why Model 3 leaves out the ethical component is, of course, that Robert Dahl and the other exponents of pluralist realism were self-conscious political scientists. For the most part, they wanted nothing to do with such a thing as an "ethical component". They were in a different line of business. The problem here is not merely that Macpherson does not recognise this as a different line of business; he does not quite understand what kind of business it is. In saying that this brand of modern political science "treats citizens as simply political consumers" he is mistaking the function of abstraction in science. He ignores the fact that it is the business of scientists to deal with manageable abstractions; and therefore he chides them with (what is actually his own mistake) confusing abstraction with reality. Dahl and the rest are no less capable than Macpherson of understanding that each of these political consumers is *also* an exalter and developer of his human essence, loving parent,

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immortal soul or whatever else. Macpherson, like Marx, sometimes writes as if he thinks that because economists, for their own very special purposes, construe human beings under some circumstances, as "factors of production", they are by that very manner of speaking dehumanising them.

It seems to me that at the root of what is unsatisfactory about Macpherson's theory of democracy lies a mistake about the place of abstractions in a scientific and philosophical argument, and what I have said so far is designed to bring into focus the weight he places upon two abstractions that feature prominently in *The Life and Times*.

The first of these is the idea of "consumerism", which has as harsh and negative a ring in Macpherson's work as the idea of production correspondingly has a positive ring in the work of Marx. The capitalist view of the world is "based on the assumption that man is an infinite consumer, that his overriding motivation is to maximise the flow of satisfactions, or utilities, to himself from society, and that a national society is simply a collection of such individuals." (p. 43) The idea of consumption in socialist thought has two important senses that resonate through Macpherson's writing. The first, which was worked out with great gusto by Georges Sorel,⁴ is of greedy passivity contrasted with the productiveness and creativity of workers. The second has much more diffuse origins and is a picture (rather than a theory) of modern men frenetically seeking to buy a great variety of worthless things in imitation of and in competition with each other. People who engage in this activity are understandably thought to be leading dreadful lives of frustration and emptiness. Hence consumerism is a pointless passion for possessions, or (as Macpherson puts it) preferring "affluence to community". (p. 91)

Now there need be no doubt that modern men often spend their money on paltry plastic gewgaws; and that quadraphonic sound is often used to amplify the wailings of punk rock; and that electric drills or expensive cameras often lie unused after the first image-boosted enthusiasm of purchase has waned. These phenomena, however, are the inevitable consequences of allowing people the freedom to do what they like with their own money. Freedom is the ability to make mistakes. To discover one's propensity for this kind of folly is part of the moral education of modern man; and the other side of this coin is the enormous capacity for developing their human powers which very large numbers of our contemporaries do in fact actively enjoy, as a result of technological abundance. They certainly show very little sign of wanting to give it up. It is possible to regard this from a highly moral and spiritual point of view and deplore the amount of empty dissatisfaction in modern life, but if one seriously wishes to explore this aspect of modern life, one will find that it is the poets and philosophers rather than the political theorists who have the most to say about it. They can do so because they are not in thrall to so thin an abstraction as the idea of consumerism.

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Macpherson further places great emphasis upon the idea of man as an "infinite consumer". He finds this assumption clearly presented in Bentham, for whom each want satisfied is just the beginning of another want. (p. 28) The great source for this opinion was Hobbes, and it was elaborately discussed by Macpherson in *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism*. The same view of man can be found, of course, in Machiavelli,⁵ and in many others. In spite of its ubiquity, it is, as Macpherson presents it, a distinctly odd view. Even in the capitalist market society of the present, most people do not in fact go on "consuming" infinitely. Most have a bit less than they think they need, but seem to behave as if they had taken *Candide* to heart. They cultivate their gardens. It may well be doubted, then, that this proposition, in the various forms in which it may be found in the history of political thought, is actually meant as a description of what people are in fact like.

If not a description, what can this proposition be? It is, I think, a constitutive proposition of the activity of politics. It points to the fact that people do in fact want things, that they often want them so much that they will behave criminally or unjustly in order to get them, and that there is no natural limit at which a constitution maker can be sure that this often competitive pressure on the social order will cease. The proposition means, in fact, that there is no *natural* limit to human desiring, and that whoever constructs a constitution must take this fact into account.⁶ It does *not* mean that every human being is thought to be continuously rapacious and demanding in his everyday behaviour. Like the similar proposition which is prominent in Machiavelli, that all men are knaves, it is to be interpreted as saying that unbridled desire (or knavishness) is likely to crop up at unpredictable moments, and that no constitution should assume its absence. It is indeed curious, as David Hume remarked, "that a maxim should be true in *politics* which is false in *fact*."⁷ That, however, is no reason for taking it as being "true in *fact*" when a great deal of experience runs to the contrary.

To analyse to any extent the place of the idea of "consumerism" in Macpherson's argument is, then, to be brought up against the fact that the "models" he uses are not only static and unhistorical, but that they rest in certain places upon misinterpreting operative assumptions as if they were descriptions. Bentham was peculiarly someone of powerful practical bent, whose interest was in what one may safely assume rather than in the complexities of what is actually true. Indeed, in the discussions of Model 1 we find Macpherson noting Bentham's awareness of this very point. In advancing an egalitarian argument based on the theory of diminishing returns, Bentham puts aside the point that individuals vary greatly in their sensibility, for without setting such complexities aside, "it will be impossible to announce any general proposition."⁸ The point to be decided, then, is whether Bentham (and also

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his contemporaries, for he is taken as a typical figure) actually thought of human beings as the kind of greedy and insatiable consumers that they are when transposed into the Macphersonite model.

The answer is undoubtedly that this is not a complete account of how nineteenth century Englishmen thought of human nature. The mistake Macpherson makes is the same as that of Marx in *The Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*:

Society, says Adam Smith, is a *commercial society*. Each of its members is a *merchant*.

It is seen that political economy *defines* the *estranged* form of social intercourse as the *essential* and *original* form corresponding to man's nature.⁹

However, to describe the commercial, or the social, or the religious, or any other aspect of human activities, is not at all the same thing as to say that human nature is nothing else but the aspect which has been isolated. This caution is all the more relevant when we are dealing with the operative assumptions of some human activity.

The whole idea of man as a "consumer", thus employed, falls into incoherence; it is a parody of the realities of modern life. Similar considerations apply if we consider another of the abstractions prominent in Macpherson's argument, namely, the idea of apathy.

It may be noted as an irony in the history of ethics that *aparthia* was the great object of Stoic striving, the condition of passionless understanding of the world allows our reason full sway, and which protects us from the disappointment and griefs of involvement or participation. Apathy, as a modern word however, pejoratively suggests a dull, flabby condition of unfeeling, a deplorable lifelessness and lack of enthusiasm. We would be unwise, however, to take this rather medical image too seriously. Anyone who has had any connection with universities will immediately recognise the term "apathy" as a rhetorical device by which student politicians in search of an audience castigate those who have better things to do with their time than go to political meetings.

The Macphersonite use of the idea of apathy is to suggest that each citizen ought to participate in all the political processes that might affect him. It is at once a concealed moral argument, and an echo of the classical belief that to participate in politics is the fullest expression of one's human character. In Macpherson's view, something is wrong if this does not happen, and the faults he proceeds to diagnose are the frustrations of a competitive society and the

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remoteness of the political system. This argument is reinforced by emphasising that apathy, or abstinence from politics, is greater among the lower classes than in the rest of the community. The difficulty of the argument is that lack of interest in politics is an effect for which there are a great number of different causes. It may well be the case that some people feel frustrated and alienated and therefore take no interest in politics. It is certainly the case that a great number of people are bored by politics, particularly the ordinary business of organising things, and much prefer to spend their time in other ways. A university is, in many ways, the very model of a participatory community as it has been envisaged by reformers in recent decades. It is full of committees on which people may have their say, but except for exciting conflicts, or some particularly close and intimate issue, university politics generate interest only for the few who like committees and have a taste for the work. To call everyone else "apathetic" is nothing more than a dogmatic moral argument which insists that everyone must do the same as everyone else. Hence when Macpherson writes, as a condition of arriving at his Model 4, that people must have "thrown off their political apathy" (p. 111) the very notion of apathy as a weakness to be transcended is a piece of moral dogmatism.

These remarks on Macpherson's vocabulary are designed to loosen the tight structure of his thought; and while *The Life and Times of Liberal Democracy* is an admirably clear statement of his political theory, the tightness of the intellectual structure prevents the opening up of any new ground. He has at various points some useful remarks on the extent to which, in politics, it is the politicians and the parties who determine not so much the answers, as the very questions themselves. The same point, ironically, applies to his own thought. He himself chooses the questions, and he chooses to discuss them in a close and opaque vocabulary of abstractions which cannot bear too much the light of criticism. His work illustrates the point that it is always a great tactical advantage in political theory to choose as one's battleground some single concept on which all the rest hinges. Rawls has done this with justice, Berlin with freedom, and Macpherson with democracy. None of these ideas can be elaborated without soon running into the major ideas which constitute the abstract structure of political understanding, but in each case the theorist has a home base within which he can always move with confidence and security. Macpherson's natural base is the idea of socialism, but he has chosen to transpose virtually the entire content of the idea of socialism, into an extended idea of democracy. This means that he has also taken on board all the ambiguities which have always weakened socialism as an ideal, and we may conclude by considering how these relate to Macpherson's work.

Socialism is both a political project and a moral aspiration. As a political project, it seeks to replace the existing state with a society which, being largely

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homogeneous in terms of the way men live, will be without the conflicts and divisions which currently necessitate strong government, police, prisons and all the nastier side of life. The moral aspiration is toward a greater sense of brotherhood and community, a life in which men help and cooperate with one another. One of the problems of this combination is where to start. The new society will not work unless men behave differently from the way they do now. Without new men, in other words, no new society. Socialists are usually tempted to believe that a society gets the men it deserves; and hence the first priority must be to overthrow the state, if necessary by revolution, in order to allow the new man to emerge. This priority has already been tried in a large number of countries in the world, and it has invariably issued in vicious and petty-minded despotisms. For the most part, Macpherson recognises this, and consequently he looks to spontaneous changes within existing society, while his own theory is designed to give a push to the advancement of the cause. He also has moods of tough-minded realism in which he dismisses the idea of goodwill or spontaneous attraction as a motor of socialism. He tends to believe — as for example when he explains the supposed market assumptions Mill makes in terms of the fact that Mill is living in a market society — that men think largely in terms of the social life they live.

Therefore, he is caught in a classic reforming fork, of the kind William Godwin was aware of in the late eighteenth century. There can be no change in society without better education (thought Godwin), but there can be no change in education without a change in society.¹⁰ Such is the box in which those who are simultaneously social *dirigistes* and at the same time determinists (however inconsistently) must always find themselves; and it is this box which would seem to account for the weakness of the Macphersonite account of Model 4. It is a collection of thoughts, hopes and suggestions rather than a model having the same relation to political reality as could plausibly be found in the earlier liberal writing discussed.

Perhaps we may push the weakness of the Macphersonite socialist position one stage further. Socialism in this form is not the sort of moral movement which demands that its adherents should live better lives right now; rather, it demands that the power of the state shall be seized so that we may impose better lives upon ourselves. For although socialists believe strongly in a kind of moral improvement, they also believe that men are morally the victims of their circumstances; and therefore the muscular vitality of such a spiritual movement as Christianity, in its early days, which insisted on abstinence and asceticism here and now, is neither necessary nor possible. The socialist belief is that men *are* good, and all they need is a decent society to allow them to be what they fundamentally are as human beings. There is no need for moral effort, no endogenous evil; all that is needed for a happier world is the exercise of state power.

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Given a change in the system, men will become "developers and exerters of their human capacities". The word "human" has a lot of sentimental work to do in Macpherson's thought; but when it comes to how we actually live, words are not enough, and it is difficult to believe that the moral problems of human life will yield to political, or politically induced, changes.

Political Science
London School of Economics
and Political Science.

Notes

1. Joseph Schumpeter in *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* is cited on p. 78 as the father of this view which was elaborated in such more recent works as Bernard R. Berelson, Paul F. Lazarsfeld and William N. McPhee, *Voting*, Chicago: 1954; Robert A. Dahl, *A Preface to Democratic Theory*, Chicago: 1956; Dahl, *Who Governs?*, New Haven: 1961; Dahl, *Modern Political Analysis*, Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: 1963; Gabriel A. Almond and Sidney Verba, *The Civic Culture*, Princeton: 1963. James Burnham in *The Machiavellians*, London: 1943 traces realism of a similar kind back to Machiavelli.
2. See for example Milton Friedman, *From Galbraith to Economic Freedom*, Institute of Economic Affairs, Occasional Papers, 49, London: 1977.
3. One might note in passing Macpherson's penchant for terms like "political goods" and "political commodities". These might be highly abstract metaphors, but they tend to suggest that political questions are about the distribution of actual benefits. This is certainly what they would be in a planned economy (which is hardly an economy at all, in the ordinary sense of the word) but it is not what they usually are in current politics. Canadians deciding on the future of the federation, or on linguistic policy, or Britons deciding whether to go metric, are not deciding on the allocation of "goods" or "commodities" in any obvious sense.
4. See *Reflections sur la Violence*, Paris: 1912.
5. Thus we learn in *Discourses* I, 5, that "men do not believe themselves sure of what they already possess except by acquiring still more ...".
6. In a great deal of socialist thought the concept of need functions as a natural limit to man's desiring. If men could be taught to limit their desires in terms of their needs, many conflicts in the political life would disappear.
7. "Of the Independence of Parliaments" in *Essays: Moral, Political and Literary*, London: 1903.
8. *Life and Times* p. 29. citing *Principles of the Civil Code*, Part 1, Ch. 6.
9. Comments on James Mill, in *Collected Works*, London: 1975, Vol. 3. p. 216.
10. Macpherson would no doubt have agreed with Godwin that "The only method according to which social improvement can be carried on, with sufficient prospect of an auspicious event, is, when the improvement of our institution advances in a just proposition to the illumination of human understanding." *Everything Concerning Political Justice*, IV 2.