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C.B. MACPHERSON
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C.B. Macpherson was a political theorist who was known internationally as one of the twentieth-century's foremost socialist critics of liberalism: a thinker who undertook a genealogy of the contradictions of liberal-democracy at the level of property and the state; and who, moreover, developed the fundamental concept of "possessive individualism" into a more general political theory: of the failing liberal personality (*The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism*); of the crisis of "democratic" capitalism (*The Real World of Democracy*); of the interpellation of law and ideology in the welfare state (*Property*); of the ethical bankruptcy of the liberal account of contractual justice (*Economic Justice*); of the class-ridden character of authoritarian populism (*Democracy in Alberta*); of the irreconcilability of property and democracy (*Democratic Theory: Essays in Retrieval*); and, finally, of liberalism and conservatism as reverse mirror-images under the same ideological sign (*Burke* and *The Life and Times of Liberal Democracy*). Better than anyone else of his generation, Macpherson developed a critical, comprehensive and persuasive account of the limits and possibilities of liberalism as the dominant ideological formation of advanced capitalist societies.

Macpherson's theoretical account of the fate of liberal democracy was based principally on his pivotal study *Democracy in Alberta*, a work which forced him to deepen and extend his analysis of democracy and the party system in a mature capitalist economy. Specifically Canadian in its setting (the emergence of authoritarian populism in response to the crisis-prone character of the Canadian state in the 1930s), and yet global in its political implications, *Democracy in Alberta* was the key stepping-stone between Macpherson's Canadian origins and his later path-breaking studies of the origins and development of liberalism — whether as a theory of the state

(an unlikely fusion of economic liberalism and political egalitarianism), an ideological proclamation concerning the absolute sovereignty of private property rights, a psychology ("possessive individualism"), a discursive understanding of the market-place as a key model of social and political theory ("accumulative" and "maximizing" behaviours), or as a market-steered theory of law.

In *Democracy in Alberta* — a work which was originally published in 1953 at the height of the Cold War — Macpherson undertook a Marxist analysis of the party system. The stunning victories of the Social Credit movement in Alberta of the 1930s became the laboratory *par excellence* for developing and testing his theory of liberal democracy and the role played by the party system in simultaneously advancing and suppressing class interests. In this crucial text, Macpherson translated a specific, local and regional analysis of the democratic party system into a classic account of the contradictions of the petit-bourgeoisie in liberal societies. As a new and persistent species of democratic government, Social Credit raised the most fundamental questions about the character of democratic governments under conditions of sharp class divisions and almost panic-like economic crisis. What seized Macpherson's attention was the dual role played by the party system in democratic theory in articulating, yet containing, divergent class claims on the body politic. For Macpherson, the political contradictions of Social Credit populism in Alberta were ultimately the key ideological contradictions of the *system* of Western liberal democracy writ small. Indeed, it might be said that *Democracy in Alberta* presented Macpherson with a political and theoretical problem — the failure of experiments in radical democracy and the turn to authoritarian populism at a decisive moment in the crisis of capitalist society — which took him the rest of his life to begin to solve.

It was not coincidental that the rise to power of the Social Credit movement in Western Canada in the thirties should have forced Macpherson not only to explore problems confronting liberal democracy but, more particularly, to reflect on the relation of the party system to certain particularities of Canadian society where only the powerful have political influence. In a country where the claims of individualism were traditionally weak and the reality of class glaringly strong, the Canadian party system became the logical institution for revolutionizing the study of Canadian political economy.

Under Innis and Creighton, Canadian political economy was cast in a narrow mould of geographic determinism where environmentalism was the bedrock of Canadian social science. Macpherson changed this with his formative study of Canada as an integral part of the advanced capitalist world. As a necessary corrective to Innis, Macpherson's critical exploration of the significance of the Social Credit movement in Alberta confirmed

that democracy came as an ideological "top dressing" to market society — even in Canada, a society marginal to Western political development. Whether in new or old societies marked by the ascendency of liberal ideology, individualism would be betrayed by the older problem of class. Moreover, the Canadian situation underlined another reality that would loom large in Macpherson's later work; namely, the importance of the market mechanism as the central structure of liberal democratic society. Democratic institutions had to accomodate themselves to the operation of a competitive, individualist market society which did not erase class lines and was not expected to. In fact, Canada could be thought of as a 'pure' model where pluralistic theory and the class concept of democracy co-habited in rather unstable and unpredictable ways. On one hand, the Social Credit experience led Macpherson to invent a new category to describe a political structure such as a political party which is a really a non-party: political governments chosen for "efficiency in administration of policies on which there is no deep and lasting division among the electorate."[1] On the other hand, he rejected any suggestion that non-party systems should be confused with a one-party system. At a deeper level, the distinct category of a quasi-party system was needed as a middle way between an alternate-party system — non-existent in the case of Alberta — and a one-party 'socialist' state for which there is no requisite working class basis.

In looking at different dimensions, old and new, of democratic theory in Alberta, the role of the party system *tout court* could not be reduced (as orthodox political scientists wished) to neutralize politics to ". . . a sort of market which measures and equates political supply and demand."[2] For Macpherson, pluralist political theory, under the pretext of being a value-free discipline, took the critical and humanistic content out of political economy. The real issue — and what pluralism ignored — was that the party system had a primary task; namely, to diffuse and contain class opposition. His study of the independent commodity producers of Alberta led to the conclusion that moderating class conflict is not only the *raison d'être* of the party system but, in advanced capitalist countries under pressure to moderate their economic structure, will likely become *more* strategically important than its ability to perform brokerage functions between competing interest groups. The unfolding of Canadian political history in the 1980s has witnessed the fundamental accuracy of Macpherson's analysis. Macpherson's theoretical lucidity also led him to speculate that the future of Canadian federalism also lay precisely in this direction. Social Credit was an early warning system of coming transformations in the Canadian party system.

Although a classic in Canadian political economy, *Democracy in Alberta*

remains a curiously unfinished exploration of liberal democracy, pluralism and market society — the very themes that were to dominate Macpherson's interest for the next quarter-century. For Macpherson, *Democracy in Alberta* demonstrated simultaneously the full historical limits of orthodox class analysis as well the incipient contradictions of democracy and property. It brought him to the realization that what was required was a theory of the market economy which demonstrated the full tensions between democracy and the acquisitive impulses of maximizing market behaviours. Macpherson's project became then that of understanding liberal democracy as a *historical phenomenon*: this entailed a *political* analysis of the economic logic underlying liberal market societies; and an *economic* diagnosis of the contradictions of liberalism and democracy. Ultimately, Macpherson adopted a genealogical strategy: one which explored the origins of liberal democracy, property and the evolution of the market in the formation of Western capitalist culture.

Revisiting classical democratic theory in the Western tradition — at first, from Hobbes, Locke, Mill to the Levellers and later from Max Weber to Karl Polanyi — Macpherson focussed, almost exclusively, on the historical development of the market as a gigantic mechanism of social order and social dislocation. Why? More than is customary in orthodox political economy and with the eloquence of unerring intellectual precision, Macpherson insisted that *only* the market was capable of transforming the most fundamental of economic arrangements as well as the whole of civil society. Nothing would be excluded. Everything would be subjected to this vast, speeded-up and fully extended universalization of the commodity-form. Religion, subjectivity, marriage, the ideological concept of "careers," democratic theory: all would be interpellated by the transformative idea of individual market freedom and the freedom of market choice.

In industrialized countries from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century, this creative tension between democracy (as a *political* theory of egalitarianism) and liberalism (as utilitarian *economic* ideology) had revolutionized society. The justificatory assumption was simply that the market would maximize the utilities of the whole society, although this might necessarily involve inequalities in freedom of choice. Contrary to the traditional claims of democratic theory, the deeper reality of market society was maximum accumulation for the few and maximum dependency for the many. For Macpherson, this fundamental inequality in the "transfers of power" at the centre of liberal society was the key problematic for liberal democratic theory: the requirement "to reconcile the claims of the free market with the claims of the whole mass of individuals for some kind of equality."[3] Unlike most Marxist scholarship which is reductionist on the question of the relationship of democratic politics to the commodity-form, Macpherson's theorisation of this relationship was both nuanced and original. He explored, in exhaustive detail, how democratic ideology was

simultaneously functional and dysfunctional for the smooth operation of capitalist market societies. Long before Claus Offe's theoretical analysis of the state in administered capitalism, Macpherson insisted that market economies come to rely on and yet simultaneously refuse the legitimating logic of democratic ideologies. The 'market right' requires democratic ideology both to sweep aside the detritus of feudalism and to install the historical class compromise necessary for its very operation. Equally however, the market must work to suppress the revolutionary possibilities inherent in liberalism before the unfolding logic of democracy threatens the sovereignty of private property. Macpherson's brilliant decoding of the ambivalent politics represented by the very term 'liberal democracy' stands at the apex of his thought.

As a twentieth century theorist fully sensitive to the transformation of capitalism from its competitive to its regulatory phase, and as one who was equally alert to the dangers of totalitarian liberalism, Macpherson developed a new theory of political economy: one which would recuperate the best possibilities of democratic theory into a critical politics of individualism; and which would function simultaneously to expose the lie in liberal democratic society — its 'suffocation' of developmental democracy by market-maximizing forces. Macpherson's thought, then, was a remarkable synthesis: a political economist, not only of historical capitalism, but also of the newest phase of regulatory capitalism. And all this with the consciousness of a classical democrat.

Because Macpherson was a working democrat, his thought confronted with telling honesty actual historical transformations in the nature of the working class. Refusing the theoretical abstraction of the 'automatic' proletariat, he brought to bear a powerful and rich optic on the effects of science and technology on labour. Theorizing that the welfare state would ultimately produce " . . . a less oppressed and more educated and versatile working class,"[4] Macpherson confronted directly key orthodoxies in Marxian labour theories. His aim was to revitalize Marxist labour theory by the method of high realism; that is, addressing critically the dramatically new political and economic circumstances confronting the post-industrial working class.

Too much a socialist on the question of the class bias of Western political democracy ever to be content with "neutralist political theory," Macpherson's thought could never be reconciled with the 'pluralistic' and epistemologically neutered claims of liberal ideology. And, too much a liberal on the issue of recuperating the dynamic tension between individual freedom and state-sponsored theories of democracy — whether of the left or the right — Macpherson could never accept the subordination of democratic individualism to theorisations privileging the ideology of the commodity-form. His thought occupied a critical middleground between

reductionist socialism and opaque liberalism and, more than is customary in critical political theory, worked at the very edge of ambiguity, heterodoxy, and realism. While orthodox socialism might privilege class, there was never anything 'elusive' about 'C.B.'s' Marxism. The politics of *transformation* was at the forefront of all of his theoretical analysis. Indeed, in the last decade of his life — principally in *Economic Justice* and *Democratic Theory* — Macpherson focused squarely on the dilemmas of democratic individualism in the contemporary welfare state. Resituating the issue of the class-specificity of the welfare state in the broader framework of a fully relational theory of power, Macpherson's analysis gave a high-profile to the politics of empowerment and individual rights: the developmental capacities of the free individual working within, but against, the constraints of late capitalist society. Consequently, Macpherson's political legacy was to restore to socialism a humanistic vision of democracy and to liberalism an austere analysis of class-mediated societies. His theoretical analysis of the dilemmas of the welfare state ran parallel to political diagnoses of major social movements in advanced industrial societies: the Greens, socialist feminism, anti-war movements and liberation theology. This was, once again, critical political theory in the service of a transformative vision of society.

Perhaps, though, C.B. Macpherson might best be remembered, and honoured, by stating simply that his emblematic concept — *possessive individualism* — represents, at once, his finest political contribution to understanding the structure of contemporary capitalist domination and his unfinished theoretical legacy. In the concept of possessive individualism, Macpherson captured the full sweep of his times: the schizoid quality of the petit-bourgeoisie (whose politics always short-circuit their economic interests); the reduction of the self to property in capitalist society; the abolition of democratic use-value by the universalizing commodity-form; the recapitulation of the competitive market-place into the logic of regulatory capitalism; and, finally, the suppression of the self-developmental capacities of democratic individualism at the behest of the acquisitive impulses of the market-place. As a sweeping summational concept, possessive individualism designates, in one stroke, the *politics* (liberal-democratic), the dominant *psychological* principle (the "acquisitive individual"), the *economics* ("maximizing"), the *technological* laws of operation (market-steered), the key *cultural* mode (the aestheticization of power), and the prevalent *labour* theory (the technification of labour under conditions of industrial, and later service, economies) of the whole of advanced capitalist societies existing in the shadow of the Year 2000.

Macpherson's political analysis ultimately did not take full advantage of the theoretical complexity of the concept of possessive individualism. This indicates that an integral part of Macpherson's unfinished legacy is to provide the key to a new and decisive link between the approach of political

economy which he so favoured and other theoretical strategies — semiotics, cultural studies, and psychoanalysis — which, as a thinker deeply marked by the Canadian realities of class, property and the market, he found so intellectually alien. For better or for worse, 'possessive individualism' directly centres today on issues concerning the ideological production of subjectivity in capitalist discourse. That Macpherson's interpretation of political economy opens up important political questions which, however, cannot be solved within the limits of his thought, does him no dishonour. Like other critical thinkers before him, from Marx and Weber to Adorno and Polanyi, Macpherson has revisited on our behalf the Medusa of history; and has come away, once again, only with more unanswered — and perhaps unanswerable — questions.

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Notes

1. C.B. Macpherson, *Democracy in Alberta: Social Credit and the Party System* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962), p. 238.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 240.
3. C.B. Macpherson, *Democratic Theory: Essays in Retrieval* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 173.
4. *Socialist Studies/Études Socialistes: A Canadian Annual*, No. 1 (1983): 8.