

CRITICAL POLITICAL THEORY AND RADICAL PRACTICE

THE POLITICAL
THOUGHT OF C.B.
MACPHERSON

Contemporary Applications

Frank Cunningham



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The Political Thought of C.B. Macpherson

Contemporary Applications

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PREFACE

The goal of all of C.B. Macpherson's writings was to put his sophisticated and unique political theory to the service of progressive political practice. 'The political scientist,' he writes in an early essay, 'will be a better scholar if he is a protagonist' (1942, 458).¹ This book is similarly motivated. In the chapters of Parts I and II, it explains Macpherson's essential views, which are appealed to in Part III for help in addressing a selection of challenging issues in the twenty-first century. While problematic dimensions of his theories will be noted, as will some of the few significant matters on which he changed his mind, I contend that his work constitutes a coherent whole that has well stood the test of time and can make original contributions in confronting current challenges. The book is not meant to be an exhaustive scholarly study, and secondary literature is only attended to when doing so helps to explicate, defend, and apply Macpherson's core theses.

This book has been rather a long time in the making. I first conceived of writing it shortly after the death of Macpherson (in 1987), whose work greatly influenced me and who counselled and supported me in my efforts in political theory at the University of Toronto. The more time that passed, the more relevant to current challenges to progressive politics his ideas became—even more 'contemporary' than when he first developed them in the 1960s and 1970s, that is, at a time when the welfare state led many to

¹C.B. Macpherson. 1942. The Position of Political Science. *Culture* 3: 452–459, 458. Re 'he': until the late 1970s Macpherson unfortunately employed gendered pronouns. This is discussed at the beginning of chapter nine.

question whether an attack on the capitalistic culture and politics of what Macpherson famously labelled ‘possessive individualism’ was needed. Then came the neoliberal politics and economics of the Reagan and Thatcher years, which continue today, even strongly enough to have survived their having ruined the world’s economies in the crash of 2008, and possessive individualism now stares one in the face at every turn.

Current resurgence of interest in Macpherson’s theories is a reaction to this situation. It reflects not just opposition to neoliberal values and practices but discontent with current alternatives: weak forms of social democracy and insufficient attention to economic-structural matters in mainstream liberal theory.

Though the chapters of this book may be read independently, the book is written as an integrated whole. In particular, the applications in Part III presuppose expositions and arguments presented in the first two parts of the book.

Thanks are due to those who helped me with one or more of the book’s chapters: Derek Allen, Edward Andrew, Ronald Beiner, Nicolas Blomley, John Calvert, Duncan Cameron, Marjorie Cohen, Harry Glasbeek, Alison Jaggar, Lynda Lange, Ian McKay, Charles Mills, Philip Resnick, Richard Sandbrook, Ingrid Stefanovic, Richard Stren, and Mel Watkins.

Thanks are due, too, for the patience of my wife, Maryka Omatsu, who appreciated the healthy scepticism of Brough Macpherson’s wife, Kay, about the power of theory alone.

Macpherson’s major writings have been reissued: *Democracy in Alberta* [DA] by the University of Toronto Press, 2013. By Oxford University Press: *The Real World of Democracy* [RWD] 1972 (also Anansi Press 1992); *Possessive Individualism* [PI] 2011; *Democratic Theory* [DT] 2012; *The Life and Times of Liberal Democracy* [L&T] 2012; *Burke* 2013; *The Rise and Fall of Economic Justice* [EJ] 2013. A nearly complete list of all Macpherson’s writings is in Ray, B.N. (1996) *C.B. Macpherson and Liberalism*. New Delhi: Kanishka Publishers.

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PART I

Macpherson's Project



CHAPTER 1

Overview of Macpherson's Works

Consumerism, commodification of nearly everything, unbounded acquisitiveness, fixation on private property—C.B. Macpherson saw all these things as distinctive features of life and work in the modern world. Contrary to those who think that they have their roots in human nature, Macpherson devoted his entire scholarly career to showing that they are products of a specific sort of society, namely, one dominated by a capitalist market, to which he proposed an alternative mode of life and work based on a form of robust democracy.

In the often appropriated term coined by him, Macpherson describes the world view he opposes as one of 'possessive individualism.' By the twentieth century this had become an explicit and dominant political orientation. It also implicitly informed the major political theorists in the early capitalism of the seventeenth century, especially Thomas Hobbes and John Locke. On this world view:

The human essence is freedom from any relations other than those a man enters with a view to his own interest. The individual's freedom is rightfully limited only by the requirements of others' freedom. The individual is proprietor of his own person, for which he owes nothing to society. He is free to alienate his capacity to labour, but not his whole person. Society is a series of relations between proprietors. Political society is a contractual device for the protection of proprietors and the orderly regulations of their relations. (PI, 269, and see *ibid.*, 3, 263–264)

Macpherson came to designate this perspective an ‘ontology.’ By this he means a conception of human nature presupposed, if not always explicitly expressed, by political theorists and in popular political cultures that carries with it judgments about what is morally desirable, or at least acceptable, and realistic. A possessive-individualist ontology is both engendered by and sustains a capitalist ‘market society’ where ‘exchange of commodities through the price-making mechanism of the market permeates the relations between individuals, for in this market all possessions, including men’s energies, are commodities.’ (*ibid.*, 55)

Publication in the early 1960s of his analyses of Hobbes, Locke, and others of their times in terms of this world view almost immediately established Macpherson’s reputation as an innovative scholar of political-theoretical history. His subsequent articulation of a rival ontology to possessive individualism (‘developmental democracy’) attracted an international following among left-wing theorists and a broader public through the 1980s, and, with the rise of neoliberalism, his theories are currently experiencing a revival.

Macpherson subjected an early version of neoliberalism to sustained critique (recounted in this book’s chapter six), in which, as in all his other writings, his stance was not as a detached scholar. Rather, he wished to contribute to efforts on the political left to combat conservative orientations. He pursues this task not by offering an answer to the ‘what is to be done’ question, that is, not by making detailed institutional recommendations or prescriptions about activist politics, but by interventions in political culture to articulate a progressive vision and to counter claims that such a vision flies in the face of human nature. After a biographical sketch, an overview of Macpherson’s works will be given. Then his stances on liberal democracy and on socialism will be reviewed, and in Part II of the book theoretical complexities of these stances will be examined. Part III will apply Macpherson’s theories to a selection of current challenging topics.

C.B. Macpherson

Crawford Brough Macpherson was born in Toronto in 1911 to a comfortable though not wealthy family. His father was a teacher of education, his mother of music. The family’s religion was Presbyterian, though Brough (as he was called) never exhibited any strong religious commitments. His secondary school education was at the prestigious University of Toronto Schools. He pursued his undergraduate

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work in the University of Toronto's Department of Political Economy and his graduate work at the London School of Economics (LSE) under Harold Laski. While at the LSE (from 1932 to 1935) he also interacted with R.H. Tawney and other scholars whose Fabian and other progressive views would have a lasting influence on him. He then returned to the University of Toronto, where, with the exception of some visiting positions, he taught in the Department of Political Economy from 1935 to his retirement in 1982.

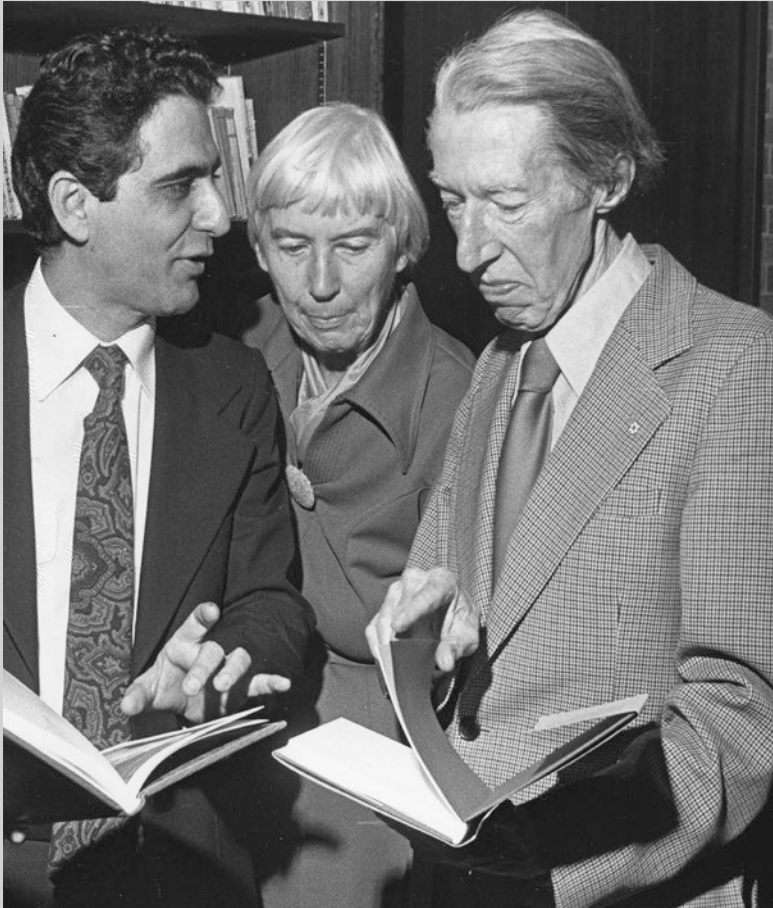
The Department of Political Economy (established in 1924) included the largest number and among the best known of political economists in Canada and perhaps in North America. The head of the department from 1937 to 1952 was Harold Innis, whose studies of the political and economic importance of the staples trades was a defining accomplishment of Canadian political economy and who was also a pioneer in communications studies. Other leading political-economic colleagues of Macpherson included E.J. Urwick, Vincent Baden, W.J. Easterbrook, Harry Easton, Abraham Rotstein, and Mel Watkins. Macpherson saw himself as in the tradition of political-economic theory dating from Adam Smith and including Karl Marx and J.S. Mill, all of whom 'thought of economic analysis as valuable for what it could contribute to the development of social and political principles' (EJ, 134). In the year Macpherson retired, his department was disbanded and replaced by the separate departments of Political Science and Economics.

Though Macpherson interacted with political activists, especially in his capacity as a founder of a Faculty Committee on Vietnam at the University of Toronto, which participated in demonstrations, lobbying campaigns, and an international teach-in against the war, his activities outside the study and the classroom were, with the exception of a stint as Secretary to the Canadian Civil Liberties Association, academically oriented: lead author of a report in 1968 resulting in dismantlement of an elitist division of students in the Faculty of Arts and Science in the University of Toronto and introduction of formal student input to the Faculty's governance and curricular decision making; a founding member of a faculty group in support of students in these matters (the Faculty Reform Caucus);

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head of the University's Faculty Association (an analogue of a faculty union); President of the Canadian Association of University Teachers; and President of the Canadian Political Science Association.



Brough Macpherson with Kay and Alkis Kontos, 1979. (Photo courtesy of University of Toronto Archives. Taken by David Lloyd.)

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These mainly university-centred activities contrast with the prodigious and influential grass-root endeavours of his wife, Kay. Originally from England, she met her husband early in his career when he was a guest lecturer at the University of New Brunswick. Their marriage issued in a son (who predeceased his mother, shortly after Brough's death in 1987) and two daughters. In addition to (unsuccessfully) running for Parliament for Canada's social-democratic, New Democratic Party and for a short-lived Feminist Party, Kay Macpherson was a founder and for periods of time president of an influential and still extant organization of women for peace, the Voice of Women, and of an equally influential organization campaigning for women's rights, the National Action Committee on the Status of Women, as well as several other ventures recounted in her autobiographical book *When in Doubt, Do Both* (1994). Kay died in Toronto in 1999. Her interests were not in political theory but in activism. Brough often expressed pride in his wife's political life, and his understanding of the importance of ground-level, participatory politics was largely gained in virtue of it.

Fuller descriptions of Macpherson's life and the early development of his thinking may be found in Townshend (2000, ch. 1), Ray (1996, ch. 2), Leiss (2009, ch. 2), and McKay (forthcoming).

SYNOPSIS OF MACPHERSON'S BOOKS

Macpherson's first book-length publication, *Democracy in Alberta: Social Credit and the Political Party System* (1953), sought to explain the dominant strength of a right-wing populist political party, Social Credit, which had formed the government of the Province of Alberta for 18 years before Macpherson published his book and was to continue in power for another 18 years. His explanation was by reference to that party's appeal to its large agricultural population. This class of *petit bourgeois*, independent entrepreneurs who, though champions of the private property system, were hostile to Eastern Canadian capitalism and receptive to Social Credit's attacks on it. (218–224) Although Macpherson did not pursue such Marxist-like class analysis in subsequent works, two themes in this early one (summarized in his chapter eight) were to be taken up in his last writings: the danger of a 'corporatist or plebiscitarian state' displacing democracy in

hard times (EJ, 16) and anti-democratic features of politics dominated political parties. (L&T, 64–69, 86–91)

In his 1962 *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke*, Macpherson saw in the capitalism gelling at the time of Thomas Hobbes and John Locke and eventually subsuming all aspects of society a growing acquiescence to market forces and a concomitant, possessive-individualist conception in popular culture of one's society and of one's self. He lamented the absence in twentieth-century Western societies of an equally persuasive alternative world view in keeping with non-capitalistic social, political, and technological potentials but still 'consistent with the maintenance of liberal institutions and values.' (PI, 276)

Macpherson challenges the conventional reading of Hobbes as deriving political norms from a supposed prehistoric human state, arguing instead that the society for which Hobbes was seeking legitimate state comportment was the nascent capitalist one contemporary to him: 'Natural man,' on Macpherson's interpretation of Hobbes, 'is civilized man with only the restraint of law removed' (PI, 29). His treatment of John Locke focuses on the latter's enthusiasm for property, conceived of as the right of owners to exclude others from the use of what they own, and of Locke's violation of his own, natural law-based injunction against unfettered acquisitiveness. Macpherson similarly exposes possessive-individualist suppositions in the theories of James Harrington (the seventeenth-century English essayist who defended a gentry-led republic) and even in the otherwise progressive Leveller movement of the 1640s, in both cases contrary to conventional understanding. Later he takes the same approach to the views of the prominent eighteenth-century Whig, Edmund Burke (1980).

In *Possessive Individualism*, Macpherson's own political-theoretical ideas were advanced in the course of interpreting the theories of Hobbes, Locke, and others. While he certainly believed that he had successfully exposed dominant dimensions of these thinkers' orientations, Macpherson's expositions are part of a project with contemporary political intent, and it is therefore misleading to classify him as primarily an historian of ideas. The nature of his efforts as an intellectual historian is addressed in an appendix to this chapter.

In *The Real World of Democracy*—a series of public lectures published in 1965 and receiving a very wide international readership—Macpherson contrasts the liberal-democratic 'first world,' the socialist 'second world,' and the developing or 'third world' countries with respect to their different, but he thought potentially complementary, values of, respectively, liberal rights, eco-

conomic equality, and communalism. Though he had not yet explicitly advanced a conception of developmental democracy, Macpherson is here proposing the combination of these three things as essential for full democracy, where liberal-democratic principles and institutions of the first world would be conjoined with socialist material equality and third-world community values.

The question of whether Macpherson's positive attitude towards existing socialism and his endorsement (albeit circumscribed) of vanguard leadership in some third-world national liberation struggles detract from his liberal-democratic credentials will be taken up in the next chapter. Here it is appropriate to identify the context within which he delivered the lectures. In 1965 there was pressure both in the leadership of the Soviet Union and in the West to relax the pressures of the Cold War, which had come dangerously close to becoming hot with the earlier Cuban Missile Crisis and which resulted a few years later in arms reduction pacts. Khrushchev had denounced Stalin at the 20th Congress of the Soviet Union, and the (short-lived) Kosygin economic reforms had begun there. African national liberation movements had formed and resulted in the gains associated with Kwame Nkrumah in Ghana in 1958 and Patrice Lumumba in the Congo in 1960. In this environment *The Real World of Democracy*, as Ian McKay puts it: 'was a plea for détente and the recognition of the dignity and complexity of decolonizing states' (2014, 317). Macpherson's description of his guiding question in these lectures is: 'Can we keep what is really valuable in our democracy while adjusting ourselves sufficiently to the new world to acknowledge their claims to co-exist with us?' (RWD, 3)

In his next major work, *Democratic Theory: Essays in Retrieval* (1973), Macpherson returns to the challenge he put to himself at the end of *Possessive Individualism* to identify an alternative to possessive individualism, and he proposes 'developmental democracy' as his candidate. On this conception a person is regarded 'as a doer, a creator, an enjoyer of his human attributes' (DT, 4), and a good society maximizes the development and exertion of these attributes equally by everyone. The attributes he has in mind include such things as 'the capacity for rational understanding, for moral judgment and action, for aesthetic creation or contemplation, for the emotional activities of friendship and love, and, sometimes, for religious experience.' (*ibid.*, expanded at DT, 53–54) Unlike in market-dominated societies that are focused on competition for profits or jobs, the development of what Macpherson calls a person's 'truly human potentials' is not achieved at the expense of others developing theirs, but on the contrary depends upon cooperation.

Macpherson sees possessive-individualist and developmental-democratic ontologies as uncomfortably coexisting in the history of liberal democracy. The first of these is at the centre of the political-scientific approaches of twentieth-century power-political, 'Pluralist' theorists, and it informs as well the radically pro-capitalist views of Milton Friedman and the softer, welfarist theories of such as John Rawls. Also in this book Macpherson distinguishes an approach to liberty consonant with developmental democracy from one in keeping with possessive individualism, and he contrasts two opposing conceptions of property: as entailing a right to exclude others from the use of one's possessions and as socially responsible trusteeship.

A major thrust of *Democratic Theory* is to argue that elements of the idea of developmental democracy have historical antecedents. A morality favouring the exercising of people's truly human potentials rather than seeking fame or wealth was well expressed by Aristotle, and its later incorporation in a democratic ideal advocating distribution of resources and opportunities for everyone equally to develop their potentials was to be found in varying degrees in the works of John Stuart Mill, John Dewey, and the English Idealist philosopher, T.H. Green. Macpherson's overarching aims were to show, on the one hand, that possessive-individualist values and attitudes are social-economic constructs not essential to human nature and, on the other hand, that a developmental-democratic alternative has cultural bases subject to 'retrieval' in the history of political thought.

The first demonstration is important for combating a fatalistic viewpoint that there is no alternative to accommodating politics and social/economic interactions generally to self-centred competition or to accepting the idea that everything is a marketable commodity. Retrieval refers to the exercise of drawing on elements of past traditions to explicate a developmental-democratic ontology. It may be seen as an effort at the level of political theory similar to left-wing projects to overcome an opposition between a politics that is realistic but not socially transformative (reform) and one that is transformative but not realistic (revolution). Macpherson's orientation regarding this matter is more like that of Gramsci than of Lenin in attempting to supersede a reform/revolution dichotomy. In Macpherson's case this means surveying liberal-democratic traditions to expose and reject components supportive of possessive individualism and to accentuate and build upon those conducive to developmental democracy.

This is not to say that Macpherson should be classified as a follower of Gramsci, to whom he devoted no attention in his works, but only that there are some broad similarities with Gramscism. There are also similarities between Macpherson's views and those of his contemporary Herbert Marcuse (with whom he developed a personal friendship), particularly in Macpherson's concerns about consumerist society and the self-images that support it. The prior radical thinking he explicitly employs most extensively is that of Marx. But, as will be urged in an appendix to chapter three, there is little to be gained by trying to classify Macpherson as a Marxist either, notwithstanding debates over whether or to what extent he was one.

Similarly, Macpherson is sometimes interpreted as a political philosopher, but while in *Democratic Theory* he made approving references to several philosophers there is no indication that Macpherson wished to place himself in any of the philosophical schools associated with them. His work remains instead within the domain of political theory where his principal efforts are to trace the origins of and implications for economic and political practices of alternative conceptions of, among other things, democracy, property, liberty, individualism, liberalism, rights, and justice, and to evaluate mainstream political theories according to how far they suppose or support either possessive-individualist or developmental-democratic thought and action. Macpherson's relation to philosophy is addressed in chapter four.

In *The Life and Times of Liberal Democracy* (1977) Macpherson describes four models of democracy, two of which—'protective' and 'equilibrium'—are informed by a possessive-individualist ontology. A third, 'developmental,' model is compatible with full democracy, but only if it is conjoined with rejection of an economy based on a capitalist market and includes an emphasis on the extensive citizen participation in governance endorsed in a fourth, 'participatory,' model. In this book it is clear that Macpherson saw possessive individualism and developmentalism as mutually exclusive alternatives, not world views and attendant politics that could complement one another or that could somehow be melded into a unified whole.

Macpherson's interest in participatory democracy is especially evident in this book. That interest dates at least from his graduate studies at the London School of Economics. Prominent in this milieu were proposals for guild socialism and other forms of what today democratic theorists call associational democracy, where collective decision making is devolved as much as possible to local-level associations. Macpherson's thesis for Harold Laski explored the specifics of the British trade union movement

viewed as a voluntary association constrained by the state to preserve existing (capitalist) industrial structures.

The version of participationism Macpherson advocates should not be confused with the anti-state stance associated with anarchism. He does not see states with representative governments being dismantled. Rather, he envisages transforming them insofar as they support market societies and are beholden to powerful economic interests. In this book he devotes attention to the role of political parties, which in a market society, he maintains, mainly function to allow for negotiation among dominant capitalist interests while foreclosing access to major decisions regarding the form and activities of governments for most people, thereby also encouraging political apathy. Still, in a world without major class divisions and with substantial bottom-up participation, Macpherson sees a need for political parties to 'allow issues to be effectively proposed and debated' such as 'the overall allocation of resources, environmental and urban planning, population and immigration policies, foreign policy, military policy,' and he speculates on how parties might function in this world. (L&T, 112–113)

Macpherson's last book, *The Rise and Fall of Economic Justice and Other Essays* (1984), comprises essays on a range of subjects, all of which relate in one way or another to his major polemic. He once again criticizes the possessive-individualist conception of property. Political theorists are sorted into eight categories depending on how their views are compatible with either possessive individualism or developmentalism. In an essay on the prospect for achieving industrial democracy, he concludes that developmental democracy largely depends upon working people 'changing their priorities from consumer satisfaction to work gratification' (EJ, 41). Several essays centrally include exhortations to Macpherson's fellow political theorists: to challenge the assumption that democracy must be traded off against economic efficiency; to retrieve a largely abandoned tradition to develop 'grand theories of the state' that relate it to 'essentially human purposes and capacities' (56); and to pursue visionary theories that look for conditions in which 'the demand for material satisfactions might give way increasingly to demand for a better quality of life and work.' (129)

In the lead essay of this book, Macpherson argues that demands for economic justice will likely diminish as first-world societies move towards one of two possible futures. One future is developmental-democratic transcendence of market capitalism where 'a concept of human fulfilment will surpass the concept of economic justice' (20); another is the triumph of