Chapter 1
Possessive Individualism and Democratic Theory: Macpherson's Legacy

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The fox knows many tricks, the hedgehog only one. One good one.
—Archilochus

By his own account, C. B. Macpherson was more a hedgehog than a fox. In the preface to his last book, Macpherson observed wryly, "Although the papers range widely in subject matter, the critic who remarked that I never write about anything except possessive individualism will here find no need to retract."[1] Macpherson used the concept of possessive individualism as a lens through which to view critically the familiar concepts and categories of liberal political theory: human nature, rationality, power, freedom, justice, equality, democracy, state, property, participation, pluralism, and human rights. Still, it is an overstatement to say that Macpherson wrote only of possessive individualism—unless one includes in that concept its opposite, the "creative

I wish to thank Jennifer Nedelsky, Ed Andrew, Frank Cunningham, and Alkis Kontos for comments on a previous draft of this essay. The epigram by Archilochus is from a fragment that appears in *Greek Lyrics*, 2d ed., trans. Richard Lattimore (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), 17. Isaiah Berlin's famous essay on Tolstoy (*The Hedgehog and the Fox* [London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1953]) has so shaped contemporary perceptions of the contrast between the hedgehog and the fox that it is easy to overlook the fact that Archilochus himself was celebrating the hedgehog.

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and cooperative individualism"[2] that can only be achieved in a genuinely democratic society. Macpherson's positive goal was to retrieve a richer, deeper understanding of democracy from the distortions and limitations imposed on it by possessive individualism, both in theory and in practice. Thus, possessive individualism and democracy constitute the two poles of Macpherson's intellectual project: the critical and the constructive.

AN OVERVIEW OF MACPHERSON'S ACCOUNT OF POSSESSIVE INDIVIDUALISM

The centrality of individualism to liberalism had not gone unremarked prior to Macpherson's work. His distinctive contribution was to explore how a certain conception of property ownership had shaped liberal thinking about individualism. Beginning with Hobbes, Macpherson argued, one finds a tradition of political theory in which ownership is constitutive of individuality, freedom, and equality.[3] To be an individual is to be an owner—in the first instance, an owner of one's own person and capacities, but also of what one acquires through the use of one's capacities. To be free is to be an owner. Freedom is defined in terms of independence from others, and one is independent only when one has the right to use one's property, including one's abilities, as one chooses. Even equality is linked to ownership, because being an owner of one's own person and capacities is a status that every individual can enjoy equally.

In the political theory of possessive individualism society is presumed to consist of relations among independent owners, and the primary task of government is to protect owners against illegitimate incursions upon their property and to maintain conditions of orderly exchange. The notion of ownership here draws upon an understanding of property as private and exclusive, entailing the right of owners to exclude others and to use or dispose of their property as they choose.[4] This version of individualism is ultimately justified on the grounds that it is congruent with human nature, for human beings are portrayed as bundles of appetites that are, in principle, unlimited and not subject to rational scrutiny. A social world organized around individuals as owners will, it is said, maximize the satisfaction of such desires.

The concern for democracy comes late in this tradition—only in the nineteenth century—and it is grafted onto these possessive roots.

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Democracy is conceptualized merely as a means of choosing one's governors, and this is justified as an extension of the principle that individual owners should be free to make choices about how best to pursue their individual interests, assuming that the basic system of property ownership is not itself in question.[5]

This is, in brief, the conception of human nature and society that Macpherson called "possessive individualism." He argued that it had shaped liberal political theory from Hobbes to the present, despite changes in language and doctrine, and that it remained dominant in the late twentieth century despite the emergence of an alternative version of liberal individualism that he traced primarily to J. S. Mill.

According to Macpherson, possessive individualism is fundamentally flawed for two reasons. First, it generates an impoverished view of life, making acquisition and consumption central and obscuring deeper human purposes and capacities. Wordsworth's famous complaint—"Getting and spending we lay waste our powers"—nicely captures one dimension of Macpherson's objection to possessive individualism. The possessive view of life distorts the democratic ideal, which Macpherson described as a commitment to "provide the conditions for the full and free development of the essential human capacities of all the members of the society."[6] According to Macpherson, possessive individualism reduces this lofty goal to the maximization of utilities.

Second, possessive individualism holds out a false promise. Most people cannot really enjoy even the impoverished individuality, freedom, and equality that possessive individualism ostensibly offers to all, because a system based on private property and so-called free exchange inevitably generates a concentration of ownership of all the means of production except labor. Most people are compelled to sell their labor to gain access to the means of life. They are free and equal individuals in name only. In reality, they are subordinate to the owners of capital, who are able to use the power that ownership brings to control those without capital and to extract benefits from them. The original meaning of democracy, Macpherson argued, was rule on behalf of the common people or the formerly oppressed. The possessive individualist version of democracy denies and conceals the oppression and class domination inherent in a society based upon private—and unequal—property. It ignores the obstacles to effective popular political participation that such a society creates.

Despite these flaws, possessive individualism is not a mistake, at least not in any simple sense. Macpherson argued that possessive individual-

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ism held sway in political theory precisely because it grew out of and reflected (as well as concealed) the realities of liberal society. Human beings are not, by nature, possessive individuals, but this is the sort of human being that capitalism requires and, to a large extent, produces.

Of the many provocative and important features of this account of possessive individualism, let me highlight three that figure prominently in the essays in this volume: the unity of the liberal tradition, the relation of the economic and the political, and the place of difference in the democratic ideal. I will not defend Macpherson, but merely explicate and clarify his views on these topics so that the issues at stake in this volume may be seen in clearer focus.

First, there is the question of the unity of the liberal tradition. Viewed through the lens of possessive individualism, the differences between liberal theorists seem less important than their similarities. For example, Macpherson treated talk of natural right and natural law among liberals as a facade for an underlying utilitarian structure of thought. His reading made Locke much closer to Hobbes than most previous interpreters had thought, and Bentham closer to both. In his words, "Bentham built on Hobbes."[7] All this is highly controversial. In the eyes of many critics, Macpherson's reading of liberal theorists neglected important differences of social circumstance, political purpose, and intellectual context.

Macpherson's unifying reconstruction of the liberal tradition rests, in my view, upon three methodological presuppositions, only the first of which he identified as such. At the beginning of *Possessive Individualism,* Macpherson argued that the possessive individualist conceptions of human nature and society that liberal theorists share often operate as background assumptions in the theories themselves, with different elements being more explicit in some authors than in others.[8] These assumptions help to account for contradictions and gaps in an author's argument, in the sense that they reveal how an author could have failed to notice the contradictions or gaps. Macpherson used this approach to account for various puzzles about the authors whom he discusses in *Possessive Individualism,* such as Locke's having two conflicting pictures of the state of nature.[9]

He employed the same approach in later works. For example, according to Macpherson, Bentham put forward a concept of utility that was formally open to any sort of satisfaction but unduly emphasized material satisfactions to the point of insisting that only satisfactions that could be measured by money really counted. Bentham was committed

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to the egalitarian principle that everyone should count for one and no one for more than one, but he accepted, and even defended, social and economic inequalities that he himself had shown to be incompatible with that principle. Bentham moved without any plausible justification from general claims about the importance of security to an absolute defense of existing property rights.[10] All these unexplained and logically indefensible moves in Bentham's arguments could only be accounted for, Macpherson argued, by the hypothesis that Bentham's thought had been shaped by possessive individualist assumptions of which he was not himself fully aware.

In addition to this claim about the importance of shared background assumptions in the interpretation of a tradition of political theory, Macpherson's case for the unity of the liberal tradition rested upon two other methodological premises that he himself did not treat as explicitly as the preceding. First, Macpherson assumed that there is a logic to social developments that can be captured and revealed in political theory. What made Hobbes a great theorist was his capacity to identify the underlying logic of capitalist society at a time when it was just beginning to unfold. Macpherson did not claim that there had been no significant changes in society since the seventeenth century. On the contrary, he described Harrington as "a more realistic analyst" of the seventeenth century than Hobbes.[11] Harrington's theory was also informed by possessive assumptions, but he did not pursue their implications as relentlessly as Hobbes. As a result, Harrington was able to be more faithful to the complexity of the society in which he lived, a society which was not yet fully bourgeois. But Hobbes explored the logic of liberalism more fully. He abstracted more from the surface realities of his own time and penetrated more deeply to the underlying reality of what was implicit and what was to come. This underlying logic is what ties the liberal tradition together and gives Hobbes an enduring relevance today.

Second, what matters most in understanding a political theory is not the intention of the author, but rather how a theory actually supports or challenges prevailing (or emerging) social relations and social institutions. Two examples illustrate this approach. In one of his last essays, Macpherson suggested that Hobbes's theory objectively supported the emerging capitalist order by providing an understanding of human nature and society that made bourgeois social relations appear legitimate, even though Hobbes himself was quite hostile to the capitalists of his day and was not writing with the aim of supporting

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them.[12] The other example is the Levellers who, prior to Macpherson, had generally been regarded as radical democrats. Macpherson argued that the Levellers made individual freedom central to their political thought and property central to their conception of individual freedom. They failed to see the limiting implications of these conceptions, and, as a result, they "paved the way, unwittingly, for Locke and the Whig tradition."[13] In both these cases—and many others—Macpherson derived the unity of the liberal tradition not from the intentions of the authors or the understandings of their contemporaries, but from what he took to be the underlying implications of their views.

I turn now to the question of the relation between the economic and the political. Macpherson's account of possessive individualism offered, above all, a critique of class domination, private property, and economic inequality. He emphasized the similarities between economic and political power, and the dependence of the latter upon the former. Did he unduly subordinate the political to the economic, neglecting the distinctiveness of political institutions and political life?

Macpherson's own answer to this question could be inferred from his discussion of two sets of predecessors: developmental idealists such as T. H. Green, Barker, and MacIver, and empirical realists such as Schumpeter, Dahl, and Verba. The former put forward an understanding of human nature that emphasized human self-realization through conscious and creative activity rather than acquisition and consumption. They saw democratic political participation through shared deliberation about the common good as an essential element in this conscious and creative activity, and one that all citizens could enjoy. Macpherson embraced these ideals but argued that the developmental idealists had neglected or been naïve about the way in which the economic organization of society would either block or make possible the realization of these ideals. "The theorists of the first half of the twentieth century increasingly lost sight of class and exploitation. They generally wrote as if democracy itself, at least a democracy that embraced the regulatory and welfare state, could do most of what could be done, and most of what needed to be done, to bring a good society."[14] He offered a related objection to that branch of developmental idealism that emphasized "the multiplicity and moral value of group life."[15] Macpherson did not repudiate this sort of pluralism in principle, but argued that the focus on the diversity of group life had concealed and left in the shadows the more fundamental problem of class.

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By neglecting the distance between their vision of the good society and the way liberal democratic institutions actually and inevitably worked in a capitalist society, the developmental idealists made themselves vulnerable to the charge that they were unrealistic. But those who made this charge, the empirical realists, suffered from their own lack of realism.[16] On the one hand, they were more accurate than the idealists in describing much of the political behavior in liberal democracies. They presented a picture of democracy as a system of elites competing for the votes of an ill-informed and uninvolved citizenry, and of pluralism as groups pursuing their own narrow interests rather than the public good. But they did not ask *why* individuals and groups behaved in such narrowly self-interested ways, thus suggesting that this was simply the inevitable outcome of human nature rather than the product of capitalist organization and culture. Similarly, they emphasized the differences between economic and political power while neglecting the more important similarities of purpose and effect. The empirical realists had nothing to say about how economic and political power cohere as extractive power to the advantage of one class over another. Thus, their emphasis on the difference between the economic and the political served to legitimate the system even while they were acknowledging some aspects of its elitism and nonresponsiveness. In sum, for Macpherson, the failures of both the developmental idealists and the empirical realists showed the dangers of trying to discuss the political in abstraction from the economic, or indeed of accepting such a distinction at face value.

Finally, there is the issue of how human differences fit into a democratic ideal. In one famous section of *Democratic Theory,* Macpherson asserted that his theory of democracy assumed "the nonopposition of essentially human capacities," that is, that in a truly democratic society each member of society would be able to develop his or her capacities without preventing others from developing theirs.[17] At one point he described this as an "assumption of potential substantial harmony."[18] Macpherson himself characterized this assumption as "staggering" at first sight, but argued that it was a necessary postulate of any "fully democratic theory."[19]

As I see it, Macpherson was not talking here about the possibilities of abundance or about the absence of all conflicts, but rather about the necessary presupposition of any claim that it is possible to have a society that is not based on domination and subordination. If one

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rejects this assumption and asserts instead that the fundamental goods of some groups and individuals will conflict with those of others even in the best society we can hope to achieve, then one must accept the claim—not unknown in the history of political thought—that happiness for some inevitably depends upon the misery of others.

AN OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK

In exploring the implications of Macpherson's intellectual project for political theory today, the essays in this book take up the three topics I have just discussed, as well as several closely related ones. All of the essays address Macpherson's problems, concerns, and arguments, although some of them focus exclusively on responding to Macpherson while others use him more as a point of departure. Some of the authors are more sympathetic to Macpherson than are others, but none is uncritical. Above all, they pay tribute to Macpherson by taking his ideas seriously even as they try to challenge or transcend them.

James Tully focuses on Macpherson's account of early modern British political thought. He celebrates the importance of Macpherson's possessive individualism thesis while providing a magisterial survey of recent scholarship that calls that thesis into question. According to Tully, this new scholarship shows that the writers of the early modern period were concerned with the problems of creating, maintaining, and justifying a stable political order rather than with the problems of an emerging capitalism. The scholarship identifies at least three distinct—and somewhat conflicting—lines of thought in responding to these problems of political order.

First, there is the juristic tradition. This tradition did indeed make considerable use of a concept of self-ownership, but it was a juridical and moral concept rather than an economic one. It emphasized self-preservation rather than acquisition, and it derived from Grotius rather than Hobbes. Second, there was the seventeenth-century literature on questions of political economy. It adopted a mercantilist rather than a market perspective, presupposing that economic affairs should be organized and regulated to preserve and strengthen the state. This literature treated the individual as a "repository of productive capacities" to be used by and for the state through the manipulation of rewards and punishments. This is a concept of the individual quite different from both the juristic and the Macphersonian possessive concepts. The

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third discursive tradition to which Tully points is civic humanism or republicanism, which can be traced from the Italian Renaissance to the late eighteenth century. This tradition made property central, but tied it to an ideal of citizenship and civic virtue. It was this republican tradition, not the juristic one, that eventually reflected upon and legitimated market capitalism. However, it did this in the eighteenth century (not the seventeenth), and through discussions of "commercial society" (a more complex phenomenon than "market society") it produced deep criticisms as well as defenses of this new form of society.

On the whole, Tully concludes, the scholarship about these three discursive traditions shows that Macpherson's analysis fails to take adequate account of the intellectual and social context of early modern thought and of the diversity among the writers of this period. Nevertheless, Tully says, Macpherson's work still stands as a model of original and provocative questioning of the history of political thought.

Like Tully, Louise Marcil-Lacoste focuses on Macpherson's work on the seventeenth century, but she limits her concern to Macpherson's discussion of Hobbes and she is far more sanguine than Tully about the enduring validity of Macpherson's work. Indeed, Marcil-Lacoste basically accepts Macpherson's analysis and seeks to extend it by doing for equality what Macpherson has done for liberty. Just as Macpherson has shown how the Hobbesian understanding of individual freedom was informed and distorted by unarticulated possessive assumptions that shaped the liberal tradition and continue to constrain our thinking about freedom today, so Marcil-Lacoste argues that the concept of equality in Hobbes is shaped by negative possessive assumptions that drastically limit its capacity to serve as a positive social value and that inform discussions of equality down to the present day. She shows how Hobbes's treatment of the passions, of felicity, and of obligation all presuppose inequality and yet provide the context for his discussion of natural equality. Thus, in Hobbes, equality can only be understood negatively, as a form of egoism. Equality is indissolubly linked to inequality. By exposing these negative presuppositions, Marcil-Lacoste hopes to retrieve a richer, more positive understanding of equality from the constraints imposed by Hobbes's seventeenth-century conceptual prison.

The conventional view of Bentham portrays him as the author of an abstract, atomistic, and narrowly rationalistic version of utilitarianism. It is a position that fits well with Macpherson's suggestion that he represents the logical final development of the political theory of

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possessive individualism that Hobbes had introduced. Nancy Rosenblum presents another Bentham, one who paved the way for romanticism and who was more expressive and sensitive than most critics since J. S. Mill have thought him to be. She ties her critique of Macpherson's view of Bentham to larger debates about individualism and holism and about the relation between ontology and politics.

According to Rosenblum, Macpherson (and other holists) are mistaken in describing Bentham's individualism as abstract, atomistic, and narrowly rationalistic. Bentham's own sensibility, she argues, was shaped more by horror of pain than calculation of gain. Far from seeing the individual as independent of society, Bentham emphasized the importance of socialization and social connections in human life. For that reason, he made securing expectations a central theme of his work. Furthermore, Bentham's individualism did not inevitably entail a commitment to capitalism. That is the mistake of supposing that ontology determines politics. Bentham's primary political purpose was not, in fact, to offer an apology for capitalism but to expose the ways in which those with more power inflict pain on those with less and to offer proposals to reduce this oppression. When he defended private property, he did so in the name of securing expectations against an abstract, absolute, and unrealizable egalitarianism whose pursuit would cause great suffering.

John Keane's essay provides a bridge between the previous three essays, which start from Macpherson's reading of the past, and the subsequent ones, which take up Macpherson's view of the democratic present and future. He begins with a defense of Macpherson's method of interpretation, which he sees as a "deliberately selective" retrieval of those aspects of the liberal and democratic tradition that are most relevant to the task of democratizing the present. Keane thus poses a challenge to the critiques of Tully and Rosenblum, and provides a somewhat different account of Macpherson's method from my own.

The rest of Keane's essay in turn celebrates and criticizes Macpherson's vision of democracy, introducing a number of themes that are pursued by other authors. Keane endorses Macpherson's claims that democracy should be more than the selection of political elites and that capitalist property rights are incompatible with the democratic goal of equal human fulfillment. He argues, however, that Macpherson's democratic ideal rests on problematic assumptions about the objectivity of truth and goodness, and especially about the desirability of a democratic society as a vehicle for human self-realization. According to Keane, these

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assumptions are incompatible with ethical pluralism and stand in tension with democratic procedures. Like Tully, Keane argues that Macpherson's reading of the liberal tradition neglects that tradition's concern for limiting the power of the state and reconciling the freedom of individuals and groups within civil society with the requirements of political order, a concern that Keane says contemporary democrats ought to share. Like Rosenblum, Keane links Macpherson to the expressivist tradition with its assumption of collective harmony and criticizes him for neglecting issues of institutionalization, such as the question of what place market exchanges and conflict-resolving mechanisms might have in a postliberal democratic society. Finally, Keane claims that Macpherson's vision is informed by an unwarranted optimism about technological progress and mastery of nature as a solution to the problems of scarcity and environmental degradation. Keane says that Macpherson fails to appreciate the ways in which democracy is threatened by these problems, and yet offers the best way of dealing with them.

While Keane emphasizes the importance of differences in democracy, Virginia Held asks us to pay attention to one particular form of difference—gender—and to consider how Macpherson's work, especially his treatment of freedom, looks in the light of contemporary feminist insights and concerns. In contrast to Keane, she endorses the emphasis that Macpherson placed on substantive rather than procedural democracy and shares his optimism about the compatibility of human developmental powers. She also agrees with his claim that freedom requires access to the means of life and labor. But she argues that Macpherson's critique of liberal freedom does not go far enough in seeing what is needed for women to develop their full human capacities.

From a feminist perspective, the internal obstacles to self-development go much deeper than Macpherson acknowledges. As an example, Held points to the way women in our society are taught to feel an incapacitating shame, a form of oppression neither captured by Macpherson's categories nor cured by the changes he proposes. False images and distorted feelings are forms of disempowerment that women suffer *as women,* not just as members of a noncapitalist class. The gendered division of labor within the household—psychic as well as physical—places unequal and unfair demands on women. In all these ways, Held draws attention to the way in which feminism has challenged conventional distinctions between public and private, making relevant to political theory matters that have been treated as issues of personal psychology. Furthermore, Macpherson's conception of human

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development remains deeply individualistic, even if it is not narrowly possessive. Feminists emphasize relations among human beings, especially relations of trust, care, and shared enjoyment. Feminist theory treats as central the question of how social institutions and cultural practices foster (or discourage) such relations, thus challenging a conception of the person and public life that isolates such concerns as "private."

Jane Mansbridge draws our attention primarily not to what Macpherson said, but to what he did not say and to what this silence obscures. In this, she adopts a form of critique that Macpherson himself used against the developmental liberals. She applauds Macpherson's effort to broaden the meaning of democracy and to bring to light the tension between democratic ideals and the patterns of domination produced by capitalism, but like Keane she argues that Macpherson neglected crucial political concerns that would endure even in a more egalitarian society and that we must somehow address today. First, she says, Macpherson writes only about coercive power as a form of domination in the context of relations among unequals. But coercive—indeed, extractive—power may be necessary even in an egalitarian society. Democratic theory must address questions about the legitimacy and limits of such power. We cannot assume that power among equals would be unnecessary or, if necessary, unproblematic. Second, she argues that Macpherson's emphasis on social relations rather than political ones led him to say little about how political participation would contribute to human development, as opposed to his frequent discussion of the importance of access to the means of production. Finally, she suggests that Macpherson has little to contribute to our understanding of the problem of deliberation in a democracy, attributing his neglect of this issue to his assumption of the harmony of human interests in a fully democratic society.

Chantal Mouffe shares Mansbridge's view that the political is distinctive and important, but she approaches the political in a very different way. She begins by endorsing Macpherson's basic project, which she sees as an attempt to develop "the radical potential of the liberal-democratic ideal," but then criticizes Macpherson by contrasting his position with that of Norberto Bobbio, another liberal-democratic socialist. Bobbio, she says, is more committed both to liberal-democratic institutions and to pluralism than Macpherson, and both of these liberal commitments are ones that contemporary radical democrats should share.

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The importance of liberalism for democracy is revealed, Mouffe argues, by Carl Schmitt, who sees the two as antagonistic. Schmitt argues that democracy requires homogeneity among citizens, and that this democratic homogeneity conflicts with the liberal ideal of the moral equality of all human beings and with the pluralism that flows from that ideal. According to Schmitt, the rationalism, universalism, and individualism of liberalism are incompatible with the political. For Schmitt, Mouffe says, the political is "concerned with the relations of friend and enemy. It deals with the creation of a 'we' opposed to a 'them'. Its subject matter is conflict and antagonism and these indicate precisely the limits of rational consensus." Mouffe argues that we should learn from Schmitt's analysis of the political even while rejecting his denial of pluralism and his attempt to separate liberalism and democracy. Contemporary theories like those of Rawls and Habermas do entail a rationalist denial of the political. We must recognize, instead, that liberty and equality are not universal truths but the values of a particular kind of regime: liberal democracy. We must also recognize that these values are in tension with each other, that their meanings are contested, and that widespread acceptance of particular interpretations of their meanings can be established only temporarily and only through struggle. Political philosophers like Macpherson contribute to the struggle to establish a radical interpretation of liberal democracy.

William Connolly pursues the issues of harmony, conflict, and difference in the context of his own quest for a radical interpretation of democracy. Connolly starts by reviewing the four models of democracy discussed by Macpherson in *The Life and Times of Liberal Democracy,* paying particular attention to his critique of class inequality as an obstacle to the democratic ideal of the equal development of human capacities. Connolly agrees that the reduction of inequality is an essential prerequisite for democratic practice, although he argues that the degree of equalization needed for effective democratic citizenship can be achieved through progressive taxation and an emphasis on inclusive, rather than exclusive, modes of consumption.

Connolly's main challenge to Macpherson focuses on Macpherson's ideal of human development. Connolly is concerned that this ideal entails the assumption that there is a true identity to the self that can be realized once the right institutional framework is established. This is an assumption that, Connolly says, fits with the normalizing tendency of modern societies to treat particular socially constructed identities as

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natural standards and to insinuate these standards into the psyches of all members of society. By contrast, Connolly cherishes the potential which democracy offers for calling identities into question. Like Mouffe–and perhaps even more than she–Connolly places conflict and contestation at the center of his democratic ideal. "Because democracy contains the possibility of heightening the experience of contingency, it is through democratic engagement that the care for difference can be cultivated and embodied in the agonism of politics."

Care for difference is only one pole of Connolly's democratic project. At the other pole lies the characteristic democratic concern with consent as the basis for legitimate collective action. Connolly worries that some forms of democratic theory "lend too much legitimacy to the drives to unity and consensus." Thus, he treats the presence of consensus as a sign of probable closures and concealments in need of politicization. However, he does not want to legitimate any form of nonconsensual politics, and so he regards the absence of consensus as a reason for democratic criticism. This is the "ambiguity of politics" that is crucial to democratic practice. And despite his worries about the suppression of difference, Connolly wants to preserve a constructive, not merely critical, form of democracy–namely, the possibility of using democratic means to organize collective action for general goals.

If Connolly offers a deconstructionist critique of some aspects of Macpherson's thought, Ernesto Laclau reads others as a form of proto-deconstructionism. Drawing in particular on *The Real World of Democracy,* Laclau argues that Macpherson made the theory of democracy radically contextual by revealing the contingent character of the links between liberalism and democracy, and by showing that there were other ways, both traditional and modern, of conceiving democracy besides those dominant in liberal discourse.

Laclau seeks to extend that radical contextualization. He argues that, in the modern world, at the very time that democracy is gaining universal acceptance as a criterion of political legitimacy, the meaning of *democracy* has become more and more indeterminate. There are many ways of conceiving of the oppressed masses in the modern world. Both Shiite fundamentalism and various forms of European totalitarianism present themselves as democratic discourses in this sense. Indeed, there is "a plurality of underdogs" whose struggles may conflict with, as well as complement, one another. If one tries to avoid this indeterminacy in the meaning of democracy by defining it narrowly as control of the representatives by those whom they represent, the same problem simply

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reemerges in another form, because the representatives play a crucial role in constructing the interests, the will, and even the identity of the represented. Thus, the universal acceptance of democracy means that democratic terms such as *liberty* and *equality* have become empty signifiers. What counts as democratic, who is included or excluded by that definition, how freedom and equality are interpreted—in short, the meaning of democracy itself—must always be constructed in a particular context. It follows that this construction can and will be contested.

Several of the authors in this work stress the importance of considering the institutionalization of democratic ideals and— especially in light of recent developments in Eastern Europe—of rethinking Macpherson's critique of markets. This is precisely what Mihailo Marković undertakes in his essay. (Marković's own role in some of the developments in Serbia led me to consider whether it was appropriate to keep his article in this volume. I discuss this issue in a note immediately preceding Marković's article.) Marković begins by drawing attention to the ongoing relevance of Macpherson's critique to the political economy of contemporary liberal democratic societies. His major focus, however, is on Eastern European socialism. Marković argues that the attempt to transform private property into truly social property has failed, both in highly centralized, Soviet-style planning systems (in which the state—or more precisely, the bureaucratized Party elite—became the effective owner of most property) and in Yugoslavia (where decentralization left no one with the responsibilities of ownership). In both, the result was waste and corruption. However, Marković argues that privatization of property is no solution for these economies for two reasons. First, private property brings its own characteristic problems and abuses. Second, there is so much social property in these economies that privatization is not a feasible option. Instead, the solution lies in a new form of social property in which the responsibilities of ownership are assigned to democratic representatives, market prices are used to allocate property among alternative uses, and laws regulating property protect against abuse and usurpation.

After briefly reviewing recent political developments in Eastern Europe, Marković explores some possible models of democracy for socialist societies. The best model of democracy would not only reject one-party rule but would challenge party rule itself as inadequately democratic even when it is the outcome of freely contested elections in a multiparty system. What is needed is a deeper form of self-government in which citizens have more effective control over their elected

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representatives, and in which the scope of democratic control is extended to the economy through a participatory system of self-management that would move from workers' councils at the local level to a branch of the legislature responsible for economic management.

Given the emphasis that several authors in this volume have placed upon historical context and the contestability of concepts, William Leiss's essay provides an appropriately challenging conclusion, since it calls into question Macpherson's basic problematic (and that of most of the other authors) from what might be called a radical neo-Hegelian ecological perspective. Leiss argues that Macpherson understood his own work from the perspective of philosophical history. He saw the epoch in which he lived as determined, above all, by the conflict between capitalism and socialism. He also saw his political theory as a contribution to the progressive resolution of that struggle. Macpherson was right about his epoch, Leiss says, but that age is now at an end. The three types of democracy that Macpherson identified—Western liberal, socialist, and national liberation—have all been exhausted as creative political forces, and their ideals have been unmasked as illusions. A historical compromise between capitalism and socialism has been achieved. While concrete struggles for democracy and justice are still necessary, no new political forms will emerge from those struggles. Indeed, we can now see that what the protagonists of this dying epoch shared was more fundamental than what divided them. Capitalists and socialists alike were committed to the pursuit of technological mastery over nature. The global environmental crises generated by this pursuit will define the new epoch that is now emerging, and will set the agenda for the next stage of human development—that is, "to find adequate political forms to yield an appropriate representation of the relation between humanity and nature."

CONCLUSION

One way to characterize all of C. B. Macpherson's writings is to say that he embraced the highest aspirations of the liberal-democratic tradition, while insisting that the tradition had failed deeply to meet those aspirations, that it could not do so on its own terms, and that it could not even provide the intellectual resources to think adequately about those aspirations and how they might be realized. Macpherson pursued an intellectual inquiry that he thought required both a deep continuity with

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the liberal-democratic tradition and a radical departure from it. His quest was to advance our thinking about the highest goals of liberal democracy and about ways of bringing those goals closer to fruition. That quest is his legacy to us.

The authors of this volume take up that legacy. In one way or another, they all pursue the same quest, and they all build on Macpherson even when they challenge him and depart from his ideas to emphasize the importance of new critical perspectives. This enterprise is rendered all the more urgent by the collapse of state socialism. Now, more than ever, what is needed is critical reflection about Western liberalism and democracy by those who are committed, as Macpherson was, to retrieving the best of the tradition and to developing its unrealized possibilities. The essays in this volume contribute to that project.

NOTES

1. C. B. Macpherson, *The Rise and Fall of Economic Justice and Other Papers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), hereafter cited as *RFEJ.*

2. The phrase is taken from a review of Macpherson's *Democratic Theory* by Alasdair MacIntyre in the *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 6, no. 2 (June 1976): 177-81 at 178. Macpherson himself endorsed the term as a description of his project on p. 198 of the same issue.

3. The summary of possessive individualism in the next few paragraphs is taken in particular from C. B. Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962), 3, hereafter cited as *PI,* and from C. B. Macpherson, *Democratic Theory: Essays in Retrieval* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), 192-94 and 199, hereafter cited as *DT.*

4. Macpherson contrasted this private and exclusive property with traditional views emphasizing the constraints of justice and social duty upon the use of property and concepts of common property with rights of access for all. See especially *DI,* 120-40.

5. For the view of democracy summarized in this and the following paragraph, see *DI*; C. B. Macpherson, *The Real World of Democracy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966), hereafter cited as *RWD;* and C. B. Macpherson, *The Life and Times of Liberal Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), hereafter cited as *LTLD.*

6. *RWD,* 37.

7. *PI,* 3. See also p. 270.

8. Ibid., 4-8.

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9. Ibid., 238-47.
10. *LTLD,* 27-33.
11. *PI,* 193.
12. *RFEJ,* 136.
13. *PI,* 158. Ironically, Macpherson himself has been criticized on grounds quite similar to those on which he based his criticism of the Levellers. In an essay entitled "Human Rights as Property Rights," Macpherson suggested that human rights claims be put forward as claims about property rights in order to enable the immense prestige of property to work for them rather than against them (*RFEJ,* 84). However, Jennifer Nedelsky has argued that this strategy (which Macpherson is not alone in endorsing) ignores the limits implicit in the conception of property as it has evolved in Anglo-American culture. It overestimates the capacity of reformers to make the concept of property serve egalitarian ends despite its long historical association with inequality. It also underestimates the power of the concept of property to limit and distort egalitarian reforms that attempt to employ it. See Jennifer Nedelsky, *Private Property and the Limits of American Constitutionalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).
14. *LTLD,* 70.
15. *DT,* 201.
16. For Macpherson's discussion of the empirical realists, see especially *LTLD,* 77-92, and *DT,* 77-80.
17. *DT,* 54-55.
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid.

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