

1 Introduction

Why Macpherson?

In the years since C. B. Macpherson's death, the world has witnessed a shift in politics seemingly unprecedented by historical standards. Exemplifying this shift, the Soviet Union has metamorphosed from what Macpherson referred to as the "communist variant of democracy" into a group of nations espousing political economic doctrines that, in many cases, would make Adam Smith proud. To say that Macpherson foresaw these events would be far from the truth. In the moral battle between the communist and the liberal-capitalist visions of democracy, Macpherson predicted dire consequences for the latter if it failed to purge itself of its capitalist component.¹ While correct in stating that "the relative power and influence of different nations and sections of the world is going to have to depend on the degree to which their economic and political systems satisfy the desires of all their people," Macpherson thought that the moral advantage ultimately came to rest on the side of those societies which eventually came to repudiate their own doctrines.²

By itself, Macpherson's inability to see how events would play themselves out might not qualify him for the historical scrap heap. After all, in this lack of prescience, he was clearly not alone. Rather, the temptation to brush him aside as an irrelevant or at least a dated political theorist comes with the realization that his ill-fated predictions were rooted in an ideological aversion to the market itself. The fact is, Macpherson spent the better part of his academic career warning his readers that the market, especially of the capitalist variety, was the major roadblock to a democratic society. Were he alive today, it is doubtful that he would be less wary of the market than he was when the "communist variant" of democracy was around to offer an ideological alternative. If any messages seem destined for the historical scrap heap in this market-smitten world, this one would surely be among them. It seems, therefore, that the first question

to be answered in an examination of his work is, Why Macpherson? Why is his work of great enough importance to warrant its review?

The short answer to these questions is that while liberal democracy³ may have triumphed over communism, it has yet to triumph over its own shortcomings. Until it does, the voices of its critics will remain one of its more valuable assets. A more detailed answer starts by examining the nature of the liberal-democratic victory. What should be remembered here is that liberal democracy has fared well in its competition with nonliberal variants, not necessarily because it presented a superior moral vision, or was more consistent in its internal logic, but rather because nonliberal democracies preferred to trade their own visions—however strong or weak—for the material comfort of the market.⁴ If Macpherson is to be condemned for his errors in prediction, blame for those errors should be placed on the fact that he overestimated technology's ability to supply the abundance which, he hoped, would render obsolete all need for the market. Nonliberal democracies never achieved the productive levels of the West, and while this may not have been so bad in itself, it was the kiss of death for societies whose people had acquired the needs that Western—rather than their own—economies had generated. In a world of scarcity, both relative and absolute, nonliberal democrats will turn to the market well before liberal democrats will give it up, especially when the vision for which they are to give it up is being abandoned by its most ardent champions.

What is important to see is that a liberal-democratic victory which owes much to its market allegiance ultimately does little to diminish the moral force of any competing visions. To be sure, the victory highlights the need on the part of nonliberal democrats to solve problems of absolute scarcity.⁵ Yet liberal democracy's market allegiance has provided it with a victory that is more Pyrrhic than real; for in winning the battle of productivity, it has lost sight of the human values for which productivity is but the most basic of requirements. It is for this reason that Macpherson's vision is still very much alive. As more and more people accept their lot as consumers ("possessive individualists"), the notion that there exists a more fulfilling life, a life beyond mere consumption, becomes all the more vital. Macpherson never doubted that for a society which put a high premium on productivity (i.e., as an end in itself rather than as a means to human happiness and fulfillment), the market was the appropriate method of social control. But if there were a unifying strand to his social vision, it was that *there is more to life than that which could be satisfied by*

material abundance alone. In a sense, his is a theory *precisely* for a world swept up in market exuberance.

Of course, the perils of consumerism reach far beyond a distorted sense of what is of value in life. At risk also is the natural environment from which our abundance is extracted. Rapid growth in food production, industrial production, and resource consumption, all "rational" from a capitalist market perspective,⁶ all place human life of *any* sort in a predicament of colossal magnitude. While Macpherson has frequently been associated with a reckless advocacy of higher and higher standards of living through technological advance, the centerpiece of his views on scarcity was not that supply was inadequate, but rather that demand had to be curtailed. His target for criticism was a market system which promoted material acquisition as a virtue, and thus his primary emphasis was on finding the limits to desire, not the technological means to satisfying it. If we as a race are to survive, surely we will need the aid of a theory which questions our allegiance to self-destructive modes of existence.

The relevance of Macpherson's vision does not end with a critique of market materialism. For him, the more important fact about liberal democracy was that the spoils of its productivity were—and continue to be—unevenly shared. Indeed, the primary emphasis of his message had less to do with how humans relate to nature than it did with how they relate to each other. Here Macpherson argued that the (capitalist) market's ability to generate abundance would necessarily bring with it the subordination of one class of people to another. The net result, as he saw it, was not a freedom from scarcity, but rather a freedom from scarcity *for some*. In the wake of the market's resurging popularity, such a weakness is too easily overlooked, or worse, ignored. An analysis such as Macpherson's thus serves, at the very least, to preserve a sense of perspective about the nature of freedom in a liberal-democratic society.

Finally, we should note one other problem with which liberal democracy must continue to cope, one which is not strictly market related. I am referring here to political participation.⁷ That a problem exists in this area can be seen by the increasing levels of voter apathy in many liberal democracies. More and more citizens grow ever more disenchanted with governments that are perceived to be increasingly out of touch with the popular will. If there is a sentiment lurking behind this disenchantment, it is that there must be more to democracy than simply the shuffling of pandering politicians in and out of office every few years.

Such a sentiment comes at a time when the expectations for democracy are particularly high worldwide. Indeed, meaningful political participation may well be the key to resolving such problems as racism, sexism, pollution, resource depletion, poverty, and civil rights generally. Improving the quality of democracy can and should be considered as a sort of "meta-issue" upon which the fate of all other issues rests.

Here Macpherson is of importance. In his seminal interpretations of Hobbes and Locke, he observed that ultimately only one major condition separated the former's Leviathan from the latter's republic: a self-perpetuating sovereign. The point is a powerful one: despotism need not be limited to entrenched forms of government. In "democracies," leaders may come and go, but this fact is not proof that any substantive popular demands are being heeded, or that a complete loss of franchise does not lurk but one short step away. Awareness of this fact led Macpherson to insist that true democracy was more than simply a method of choosing and authorizing governments. This insight and the alternative democratic vision that arose from it comprise a powerful critique of the present "equilibrium"⁸ model of democracy. In working to build a society which satisfies rather than stifles popular needs and demands, such a critique offers an invaluable tool.

We see, then, that Macpherson's democratic vision is still of value in that it provides a critical standard against which the shortcomings of the triumphant liberal-democratic doctrine can be measured. As more and more countries succumb to the appeal of the market, leaving fewer and fewer to offer any alternative way of doing things (politically, socially, and economically), the usefulness of such a standard should not be underestimated. Macpherson is, in a sense, our democratic conscience, prodding us to stay ever mindful of all that must be done to attain and preserve democratic ideals. That he was conscious of this role is evident in the opening words of *The Real World of Democracy*:

The question I want to raise is whether we are likely to lose our unique system by our own doing, or on what terms can we keep it? It is no use digging our heels in unless we can be sure we are on solid ground. How much is the ground of democracy shifting? How far, if at all, must we change, and in what directions, if our system is to continue to serve the purposes we want it to serve and is to continue to embody the values of freedom and individuality that we have always meant it to embody?"

Clearly these questions are as relevant now as they were when they were posed some thirty years ago. So too, I would argue, are the answers Macpherson provides.

Purpose and Outline

It is to this relevance that the following chapters are addressed. I would argue that our ability to appreciate Macpherson is hampered by the fact that he never produced a systematic and comprehensive political vision. Writing mostly short, critical essays, he never explained how all of the individual components fit together in a cohesive whole, and how that whole is to be interpreted in light of problems presented by worlds both academic and real. In this sense his work is incomplete.

The central claim of this book is that a cohesive and comprehensive positive vision does exist and that that vision provides a useful critical standard in today's world. What follows is what, in my estimation, this vision looks like. I offer, then, a defense of Macpherson, or, to be more precise, a defense of the *spirit* which his work conveyed, or perhaps of the logic of his argument. The distinction is an important one, for in my estimation there are many points at which Macpherson himself compromised that spirit and that logic. Hence, I do not intend to defend all of the positions that he took. In some places I have simply ignored aspects which strike me as either extraneous or counterproductive to his overall vision. My claim here is that that vision does not depend on these positions for its overall force, and that it may, without loss, dispense with them altogether. In most of these cases the difficulties have been taken up—and taken up well—by one or more of his many critics, and I have little interest in repeating their arguments.¹⁰ In other places my strategy is quite the opposite. Certain tensions and difficulties in his work demand resolution if the coherence of the whole is to be preserved. Here I may see problems where Macpherson would not and thus offer resolutions he could not. In all cases my presumption is that the resolutions offered strengthen his vision *without* altering its essential message.

In concentrating on Macpherson's positive vision, I have intentionally set aside the work for which he is perhaps best known; namely his interpretations of liberal theory from Hobbes on. His thesis that this tradition was imbued with certain market assumptions revolutionized the contemporary perspective, and, in the process, sent many a scholar back to re-examine the historical record.

Indeed, much has been written since the publication of *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism* which purports to show that Macpherson's argument was at best overdrawn and at worst wrong.¹¹ I ignore this rather large debate simply because, in my mind, it has little immediate bearing on his positive vision. This is to say that the strength of that vision in no way depends upon the merit of his interpretations. I trust that any objections to this claim will be met in the following chapters.

The book is organized as follows. The task of chapters 2 and 3 is the overall reconstruction of Macpherson's vision. As he himself never undertook such a project, the picture that will emerge is not simply one drawn together from various places within the corpus of his work. Rather, I offer a vision which in many instances is more inferred from the logic of this corpus than it is extracted from actual arguments. This method is most apparent in chapter 2, where Macpherson's conception of 'human nature' is reconstructed. The argument here is that the essence of humanity lies in creative, purposive activity, and that while this is transhistorically true, the concrete circumstances of that creativity are very much a product of cultural context. This conclusion leads us to see Macpherson's creative individual as far from the atomistic self often portrayed by his critics.

Chapter 3 places the creative individual in society. Here I examine the connection between those individuals and the social structure that Macpherson deemed most appropriate for them. Of course, an examination of Macpherson's positive social theory would be incomplete without some discussion of "possessive individualism." The chapter therefore concludes with an attempt to place this critical concept within the framework of his overarching social perspective.

Chapter 4 focuses on the theory as a whole. I begin by examining whether his vision is, as Macpherson would put it, "entitled to the shelter and support of the word *democracy*."¹² This discussion raises certain issues which allow us to situate his work in the context of current democratic *and* liberal debates. The central issue here is whether the tension between the essentialist nature of Macpherson's foundation and the participatory democratic prescriptions he offers is somehow resolvable. I argue that it is, as long as the underlying presumptions of participatory democracy are held in the proper perspective.

Finally, chapter 5 is an attempt to go beyond Macpherson, to fulfill his hope that "as political theorists we may widen and deepen

the sort of analysis [he had] sketched."¹³ Here I offer a glimpse of the sorts of actual, concrete socioeconomic conditions that would meet the normative demands of his vision. While the intent is to go beyond him, the tool used is the conceptual apparatus of property, an apparatus which he did much to champion. My argument is that Macpherson's strong aversion to market activity of any sort is unwarranted by the logic of his own theory. I conclude that a society that is equitable in the Macphersonian sense is one which could in fact incorporate a regulated form of market activity.

In the end, we are left with a synthesis. Macpherson rejected the market, and I, in the name of his vision, have retrieved it. However, it should be clear that the market I have retrieved has been altered substantially by the force of Macpherson's rejection. What should also be clear is that my retrieval would not have come without Macpherson's insistence that the market was, first and foremost, a *democratic* concern. We offer correctives only because he has pressed us to look at an aspect of our lives that modern democratic theory has increasingly ignored. In a certain sense, then, we will never really go beyond Macpherson. At best, we will only carry on his legacy.

Notes

1. "What I am suggesting is that in the world from now on, power and influence will depend on moral advantage. And I am suggesting that we in the West will decline in power unless we can discard our possessive market morality" (*The Real World of Democracy* [Toronto: Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 1965], 66).

2. *Ibid.*, 65.

3. Liberal democracy is here used in the sense in which Macpherson usually spoke of it: a democratic political system with a capitalist market economy. Macpherson's use of the word *liberal* is at times confusing. He mostly uses it in this narrow sense that came with the growth of capitalism (this is always true when it is used as an adjective modifying democracy), yet he is always wary of allowing 'liberal' to be exclusively associated with the capitalist market. Cf. *Property: Mainstream and Critical Positions* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1978), 207.

4. One could argue that liberalism's emphasis on the importance of critical reason, civil liberties, responsible government, and the supreme value of the individual all played at least as important a role in its victory as did the allure of material abundance. While it is no doubt true that liberal-

ism's embracing of these ideals had much to do with its victory, it is less evident that such ideals are unique to the liberal-democratic vision. In fact, in countries like the U.S.S.R., such ideals were well on their way to being introduced when the system buckled under the increasing weight of economic despair. Only at *this* point did that system cease to be nonliberal.

5. It should be noted that the inequality of liberal democracy is as big an obstacle on the road to plenty as any productive inefficiencies might be. This sad fact is presently being discovered by many in the former Soviet bloc.

6. At least all *can* be rational. For a good discussion of the market rationality of environmentally damaging practices see Meadows, Meadows, and Randers, *Beyond the Limits* (Post Mills: Chelsea Green Publishing, 1992), ch. 6.

7. Macpherson might argue that the issue of political participation is, in fact, market related: "The market is too jealous a mistress to allow much direct political participation by many people" ("The False Roots of Western Democracy," in Dallmayr, ed., *From Contract to Community* [New York and Basil: Marcel Dekker, 1978], 22. Later he continues, "When one brings into the account the tendency of the [market democratic] system to produce and reproduce voter apathy, especially among the relatively deprived, one is tempted to describe the system as positively antidemocratic, all the more so if one retains any vestiges of the . . . idea of democracy as encouraging the qualitative development of the citizenry" (26). While I accept Macpherson's point, I shall wait until a later chapter to develop the market/participation link.

8. See *The Life and Times of Liberal Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), ch. 4.

9. Pg. 3.

10. I will point to these critiques throughout the book.

11. For a good overview of this Macpherson literature, see James Tully, "The Possessive Individualist Thesis: A Reconsideration in the Light of Recent Scholarship," in *Democracy and Possessive Individualism: The Intellectual Legacy of C. B. Macpherson* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 19–44.

12. "The Meaning of Economic Democracy," in *The University of Toronto Quarterly* 11 (1942): 404. Italics in original.

13. "Democratic Theory: Ontology and Technology," in *Democratic Theory: Essays in Retrieval* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 38.