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CRITICAL NOTICE

C. B. Macpherson: Philosopher or Radical Educator?

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ABSTRACT

Phillip Hansen's *Reconsidering C. B. Macpherson: From Possessive Individualism to Democratic Theory and Beyond* has many virtues, principal among them the fact that it casts Macpherson's thought in what to many will be the unfamiliar light of Continental critical theory. Doing so could broaden Macpherson's audience to include those working within this tradition. What is less clear is whether casting Macpherson's thought in this light will yield any new insights into his historical interpretations or his democratic theory. I argue that there may be reasons to doubt that it will.

C. B. Macpherson was known as much for the style of his work as he was for its substance. He wrote with a crispness and lucidity that put even the most complex ideas within his readers' grasp. It was this aspect of Macpherson that drew me to his work as a graduate student at the University of Toronto in the 1980s and 1990s. There was something pedagogically enticing about his prose; he had a way of making readers feel as if they should have seen the world as he did all along – it was just that simple. Indeed, it is easy to think of Macpherson in terms similar to those he used to describe Hobbes: '[He] is…formidable not because he is difficult to understand but because his doctrine is at once so clear, so sweeping, and so disliked.' (1964, 9) Macpherson escaped the dislike heaped on Hobbes in large part because the mirror he put to our faces was more agreeable than the one Hobbes offered.[1] That said, the clear and sweeping nature of his words made him every bit as formidable, albeit on a much smaller scale.

Consider his wonderfully trenchant essay, 'Democratic Theory: Ontology and Technology.' (1973, 24–38) Macpherson begins the essay by arguing that 'the ontological assumptions of our Western democratic theory have been, for something like a hundred years, internally inconsistent, comprising as they do two concepts of the human essence which are in the circumstances incompatible.' (24) The problem is that one assumption – that we are 'a consumer of utilities, an infinite desirer and infinite appropriator' – is so completely compatible with western market societies as to make it seem not just empirically true, but

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ontologically or universally so. This reification gets at the heart of possessive individualism: we see our labor as belonging to us – as *a possession* – because in market society that is what it has become. The assumption is empirically accurate. In fact 'the market system. . .requires that men act as maximizers of their utilities,' (27) and that fact effectively renders the other ontological assumption – 'man as an enjoyer and exerter of his uniquely human attributes or capacities' (24) – unrecognizable.

Now, there is an explicitly Marxist element to this analysis. The material relations of production spawn a self-conception that fosters and perpetuates its imperatives. The specific historical claim – that 'the market system can permit no other criterion of a man's worth than what the market will give him' (29) – is rooted in Macpherson's expressly Marxist theory of history, in which 'man changes his nature by changing his relation to other men and the material environment.' (34) Moreover, Macpherson's way out was not merely a plea to embrace the more appealing assumption of humans as enjoyers and exerts of their capacities. Rather, the realization of that self-conception requires, like all self-conceptions, a reinforcing set of material conditions. Here Macpherson may have been overly sanguine about technology's ability to release us from scarcity, thereby making the 'logically possible' rejection of market assumptions 'technically possible.' (38) In this respect he was, however, no different from many on the left.

Or at least *almost* no different. Macpherson's liberalism had a way of popping up in the midst of his most thorough going Marxist analysis. Even in market society, the notion of humans as enjoyers and exerters was still somehow the 'morally preferable concept.' (37) Hobbes may have gotten it right as an empirical matter – as Macpherson put it in another essay, 'We do well to be afraid of Hobbes; he knows too much about us.' (1973, 239) – but underlying all of Macpherson's work were judgments that abstracted away from the productive relations that gave truth to Hobbes' picture. In his liberal moments, Macpherson offered hope. (Hobbes, in contrast, had no time for hope – hope, or at least naivety, cost Charles I his head.)

My focus here on just one essay of Macpherson's oeuvre is not intended to demonstrate that he effectively said the same thing over and over again (although there is that[2]). It is, rather, to point out that his message was not difficult to distill into relatively few words. 'Ontology and Technology' is all of fourteen pages, and yet it captures the main points of Macpherson's argument with remarkable clarity and breadth.

And this matters. Again, think of Hobbes. It was not just the substance of the picture he painted that we do well to be afraid of; it was also its clarity. Hobbes threatens because we cannot possible misunderstand him, a fact that made him, above all else, deeply, deeply persuasive. If theories of possessive individualism merely reflected market truths, their effect would be reinforcing perhaps, but hardly the stuff to be afraid of. Thinkers like

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Hobbes (and *especially* Hobbes) played a central role in the development of market relations for their capacities, in combination with actual material forces of production, to *teach* us who we are, or at least who, for the sake of those forces, we must become. To the skeptics – those for whom his vision 'may seem strange' (1985, 186) – Hobbes came prepared with pedagogically astute responses. Anyone who doubted the horrors of the state of nature, for example, would need 'consider with himselfe, when taking a journey, he armes himselfe, and seeks to go well accompanied; when going to sleep, he locks his dores; when even in his house he locks his chests; and this when he knows there bee Lawes, and publike Officers, armed, to revenge all injuries shall bee done him; what opinion he has of his fellow subjects, when he rides armed; of his fellow Citizens, when he locks his dores; and of his children, and servants, when he lockes his chests. Does he not there as much accuse mankind by his actions, as I do by my words?' (1985, 186–87) The state of nature shocks its readers not because of the picture it paints. It shocks because that picture is so entirely believable. It shocks, in other words, because Hobbes did not *present* it so much as he did *teach* it.

It is this capacity to teach and, in so doing to persuade, that Hobbes and Macpherson share. Indeed, *Democratic Theory: Essays in Retrieval* might have been better subtitled *Essays in Persuasion*, for like Keynes (who *did* give that title to a collection of essays), Macpherson wrote (to quote Keynes) 'in a spirit of persuasion.' (Keynes 1971, xvii) Macpherson's success as a political theorist lay not just in his insightful analysis, but in his ability to convey that analysis to a liberal audience. Much ink was spilled in the 1970s and 1980s trying to determine the extent to which he was a Marxist (although spilled may be the wrong word – wasted, really), but what is beyond question is that he put whatever Marxist elements there were to his thought within the grasp of liberals steeped in Hobbes, Locke, Mill and others – precisely those held in its sway. Macpherson was, above all else, a radical educator for the social democratic left. If there is a reason to still read him, it is surely this.

This rather long reflection on Macpherson's pedagogical capacities is a distillation of thoughts that came to me as I read Phillip Hansen's *Reconsidering C. B. Macpherson: From Possessive Individualism to Democratic Theory and Beyond*. Let me say at the outset of my remarks about the book that it has many virtues, principal among them the fact that it casts Macpherson's thought in what to many will be the unfamiliar light of Continental critical theory – the thought of Adorno, Horkheimer and Marcuse, among others. There are at least two potential benefits of such an exercise. First, it could broaden Macpherson's audience to include those working within the critical theory tradition. More importantly, it may yield previously unconsidered insights into his thought. As it is too early to judge whether the book has succeeded in the first regard, I will put the matter aside, except to say

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that he has certainly made as compelling a case as possible for Macpherson being of Frankfurt as well as Toronto. I hope others see it this way.

It is, then, to the second potential benefit that I direct my remarks. As my introductory comments might suggest, here I have concerns, concerns that stem in large part from the central focus of Hansen's book. In the Introduction, he states the following:

> I argue that there is in Macpherson's work what I would call *a suppressed philosophical dimension*: a more or less systematic, if only implicit, meta-conceptual basis of and framework for his specific conceptual universe that gives his ideas richness and meaning. (8)

'Interrogat[ing] a body of thought in this fashion' consists, Hansen suggests (in the words of Erica Sherover-Marcuse), 'of making explicit what in the texts is only implicit.' (8) So far so good. In fact, it sounds strikingly like the approach Macpherson took with Hobbes et al., and in that regard the strategy seems particularly fitting. We must ask, though, What *is* this suppressed philosophical element, and what, to get back to the matter of benefits (and to my concerns), do we learn about Macpherson along the way?

To begin with the first question: after reading the book, I confess I am still not entirely sure what Hansen means by the suppressed philosophical element. In fact, I am not even sure what he means by the term philosophical.[3] My best guess is that when he writes (in speaking about Macpherson's contrast between ethical and descriptive powers) that Macpherson 'did not focus systematically or self-consciously on the meta-methodological or meta-theoretical issues involved,' (78) he is suggesting that such a focus is the stuff of philosophy. If so, his additional remark, 'nor was he inclined to do so' is surely correct. I'm not sure he was inclined to meta-anything. That said, I think Macpherson *would* have been comfortable describing his work in another philosophical sense that Hansen mentions, namely with the idea of formulating 'logically connected propositions derived from and consonant with the facts of the situation being empirically investigated and theoretically comprehended.' (78) I can't be sure about this, as I'm not entirely sure just what Hansen means here, but it does sound like precisely what Macpherson was engaged in in his study of human powers. And to this observation we might add that he offered theories based on fundamental claims about human existence, and that he did so in a manner that critically interrogated often unspecified assumptions lurking beneath the surface of liberal theories. Moreover, his democratic theory – as I argued in my own book on him (1996) – laid out a coherent normative vision. So I do not think philosophy is missing, at least on a sufficiently capacious understanding of what philosophy is.

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To be fair, Hansen is probably not saying that Macpherson was unphilosophical *per se*; he seems to simply be directing our attention to one suppressed philosophical element to his work. Assuming this is the case, then the best candidate for that element is the aforementioned Frankfurt school critical theory. Here again, though, it is not easy to see just what aspect of critical theory Hansen has in mind or how unsuppressing this suppressed element gives us a better sense of Macpherson's thought.

As an example, consider the case of Horkheimer. After a lengthy excursion into his thought, Hansen concludes that Horkheimer 'describes the overall social context in terms that strikingly recall Macpherson's account of possessive individualism.' (83) Here is part of the description to which he's referring:

> The social whole lives through unleashing the possessive instincts of all individuals. The whole is maintained insofar as individuals concern themselves with profit and with the conservation and multiplication of their own property. Each is left to care for himself as best as he can. But because each individual must produce things that others need in the process, the needs of the community as a whole end up being addressed through activities that are apparently independent of one another and seem only to serve the individual's own welfare. The circumstances that the production and maintenance in this order coincide with the subjects' striving after possessions is a fact that has left its impression upon the psychic apparatus of its members…In this era, economic advantage is the natural law under which individual life proceeds. (83-84)

Now, I'm happy to take Hansen's word for it that Horkheimer is here describing processes that resemble those Macpherson described. What I'm less happy to accept is that these terms 'strikingly recall' Macpherson's. I see Marx here, and as both Horkheimer and Macpherson drew heavily on him, that similarity is not too surprising. None of this passage recalls Macpherson to me, however, and I have trouble seeing how it illuminates Macpherson's thought in any way. Moreover, if the substance of the two is in fact so similar, what are we gaining from seeing it put differently? Hansen never adequately makes this case, and thus even if we view Macpherson's project as one that (unwittingly perhaps) translated Horkheimer from Germanic critical thinking into Anglo-Canadian liberalism, the question I would ask is, Why translate him back? Hansen's conclusion that 'Horkheimer…offers an important complement to Macpherson's analysis of human nature' (90) will surely be of historical interest to some, and I don't want to diminish that interest, but it is simply unclear that we learn about either Macpherson or the concepts that concerned the two of them from the contrast. It is not enough to point out that one theorist sounds like another (or in this case that two sometimes Marxists sound like Marx). Something more needs to be said before that fact can help us.

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The same issue comes up earlier in the book, where Hansen draws parallels between Macpherson and Marx himself. Shortly after describing Macpherson's account of how Hobbes had a possessive market society as the model for his political theory, Hansen remarks that such an approach is 'once again reminiscent of that of Marx.' (29) Fine, but does that fact add to our understanding of either Macpherson or Marx (or, for that matter, of Hobbes)? In this particular instance the comparison is odd, as Macpherson's model was (as Hansen acknowledges) 'not intended to be taken as a literal picture of any society that exists or is known to have existed,' while Marx's discussion of the stages of economic development was meant quite explicitly to capture actual social phenomena. Even, as in Volume 1 of *Capital*, where the discussion abstracts away from empirical relations and focuses on commodity production, Marx is certainly not concerned to capture models that existed in thinkers such as Hobbes, Locke or Harrrington. Moreover, if in the end Hansen has demonstrated that Macpherson and Marx have similar diagnoses of market society's ills, we must again remember that Macpherson was deeply influenced by Marx – so the similarities are not exactly a coincidence.

I should note that later in the book Hansen devotes a chapter to Macpherson's relationship to Marx, and here his analysis yields some real insights. After a wonderfully insightful discussion of Macpherson's most neglected work, *Democracy in Alberta* (pronouncing it to be 'the work most explicitly indebted to Marx' (185)), Hansen observes that while Macpherson's analysis of possessive individualism followed his theoretical development of the concept, it is in this first work of his that we see the analysis that led to the theory. This claim – that Macpherson's principal contribution to political theory stemmed not from his reading of the liberal canon, but from his analysis of Albertan social relations – puts Macpherson in a wholly unfamiliar, and, to my mind at least, fascinating light. That his development may have been the precise reverse of Marx's (whose empirical analysis came well after his theoretical contributions), adds an interesting twist to the long discussion of Macpherson's Marxist roots.

Unfortunately, such insights are not immediately apparent with respect to the many other contrasts that Hansen discusses. In fact, in some cases Hansen's desire to show similarities with critical theorists comes with no explanatory comment at all. To offer one example: after commenting on Macpherson's desire to 'move democratic theory beyond both possessive individualism and general will communalism' Hansen points out that here 'Macpherson shares common ground with the later efforts of Jurgen Habermas to develop a theory of radical democracy that transcends both liberal and republican models.' (60) I hope this fact is of interest to students of Habermas. What it does not seem to be, at least not to me, is helpful in recasting Macpherson's ideas. I can say the same about Hansen's claim that

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Frankfurt theorists like Honneth and Hatmann follow Macpherson's path when they 'write of the contemporary power of neoliberal values as simultaneously resting upon and reinforcing what they call "a normatively charged economization of social contexts."' (17) Well, maybe, but I'm not sure Macpherson would recognize this path as one he was blazing. Again I wondered, what is gained by putting Macpherson's ideas in a continental language?

Safer contrasts come in the first of two chapters on democratic theory. Here Hansen focuses on the analysis that Macpherson himself offered of John Chapman, John Rawls, Isaiah Berlin and Milton Friedman, and he provides readers with a good sense of how Macpherson's thinking on liberal democracy grew out his critiques of these contemporaries. Unfortunately, in the second of the two chapters Hansen returns to contrasts Macpherson himself could not have made – in this case with theorists such as Seyla Benhabib, Maria Saffron and Nadia Urbinati. Again, the result is historically interesting perhaps, but as with earlier chapters, it is difficult to see the payoff of such positioning. More troublingly, there is a clear downside, as the discussion obscures rather than clarifies Hansen's larger and potentially more interesting points about how Macpherson's democratic theory might inform contemporary debates on the topic.

In other places, the discussion obscures Macpherson himself. Take the concept of possessive individualism. Macpherson's explained it as a form of individualism arising in the seventeenth-century in which the individual is 'seen as essentially the proprietor of his own person or capacities, owing nothing to society for them.' (1964, 3) The concept may be open to objections, but it is hardly open to misinterpretation. I worry that the same cannot be said of Hansen's treatment of it. I doubt, for instance, that it is really best thought of as 'a critical reading of a certain normatively charged, historically developing social form of life,' (40) or as 'an internally contradictory articulation that always and already points beyond itself as a normatively charged core of the self-understanding of individual agents embedded in a specific historical form of social life.' (274)

I could ask similar questions of other Frankfurt translations of Macpherson's central concepts. On Hansen's account, Macpherson's human powers are 'modalities of experience that involve possibilities for individual development,' (70) and the payoff of seeing them in this light is that we can grasp his overall position as existing on two bases: 'a "productivist" or labour model of human fulfillment, and a subject-object conception of human agency.' (75) Developmental and extractive power are 'simultaneously quantitative and qualitative – they possess …normative properties [that] are not isolable qualities restricted to the concepts taken singly. Rather, they inhere in and significantly define the connection between the notions; they manifest their interactive mutual determination.

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And this in turn tells us something about the social nature of individual power and capacities.' (93–94) What *is* that something? That 'Macpherson's position can fruitfully be read from the standpoint of intersubjective communicative relations not reducible to a subject-object productivist model'? (96) If that's really the payoff, then I'll confess to wanting more. I may have learned something about critical theory in reading Hansen's analysis, but my view of Macpherson is pretty much the same, and it is not of someone who 'assumed a productivist and subjectivist model of social action in terms of which the overcoming of class domination would allow for the development of society as a collective macro-subject able to rationally organize and direct the process of social reproduction.' (90) Putting in this way may capture an assumption Macpherson indeed makes, but it certainly is not to capture it in a language he – or his readers – would recognize.

On more than one occasion as I read I thought back to Mill's famous comment that he 'found by actual experience of Hegel that conversancy with him tends to deprave one's intellect.' (Mill 1963, vol. XVI, p. 1324) Might Macpherson have had a similar reaction to Hansen's translation of his theories into the language of critical theory? Would *he* have understood that an '"existential judgment" [was] central to [his] political thought'? (82) Would *he* have seen that 'in his treatments of populist movements in *Democracy in Alberta*, [he] provided something like a non-metaphysical account of objective spirit'? (293) Would *he* have seen his main contribution as 'a self-reflexive, hermeneutic engagement with the meanings and purposes intertwined with our historically and dynamically developed social practices with a view to clarifying the situations of social agents experiencing the contradictions [he] identified with the presence in liberal democratic societies of the twin competing ontological commitments of consumerism and self-development'? (127) I have my doubts. After all, even the word 'ontology', which he used quite a bit, was one he never wore with great comfort – he certainly never seemed to mean much by it beyond 'essence' or 'condition.'[4]

I should pause here and say that it could be me. While I have read and taught critical theory at various points in my career, I would never claim it as my métier. To repeat what I said above, I fully expect those more at home in this tradition to find Hansen's discussion of great interest. The problem is that Hansen promises more: 'the language of the Continental philosophy with which Macpherson was not fully comfortable…nevertheless helps capture what he was trying to do.' (32) This promise is not, to my mind, one that he keeps. Nor is it one that he *could* keep, for the simple reason that Macpherson *himself* was so good at 'capturing what he was trying to do.' More troubling, however, is that there is a cost involved with Hansen's translation of Macpherson. Rather than adding something to what he said, the Frankfurt Macpherson runs the risk of negating much of

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what allowed the Toronto version to excite a generation of liberal thinkers, and what – to get to the point of writing a book on him – might allow another one to do the same.

Early in the book, Hansen writes that 'for Macpherson, the point of political theory…is to capture and address the dynamism of a particular social order and present the reader with dilemmas, predicaments, challenges, and opportunities. Its task is…to provide encounters with the demands of social life and their impact on individual life situations – to open up possibilities of self-clarification.' (23) This statement expresses Macpherson's project quite well; he did seek to 'capture and address the dynamism of a particular social order,' and Hansen hopes Macpherson's suppressed philosophy can reinvigorate that aspect of his work. For me, though, Macpherson's continuing important lies with the other part of the statement – with the presenting of dilemmas and the opening of possibilities. It lies, in other words, with the radical educator, not the philosopher.

Notes

1. There was, however, no shortage of criticism for his interpretation of Hobbes, Locke, et al. For an excellent overview of that criticism, see Frank Cunningham's Introduction to the 2011 edition of *Possessive Individualism* (Macpherson 2011).
2. Having read all of his written works as a graduate student, I recall being amazed at how frequently he employed the same language to say the same thing. The objects of his analysis changed – he went on from Hobbes, Locke, the Levelers and Harrington to apply his framework to Burke, Bentham, Berlin and Rawls, to name just a few. Yet the message was always same: so-and-so's thought is imbued with possessive individualist assumptions which render them overly narrow. He famously admitted to the repeated nature of his work in the Preface to his last collected essays (1985).
3. After finishing the book, I was somewhat relieved to see that I was not alone in this confusion. Hansen and Frank Cunningham, in a critical review and response, spend much of their back and forth seeking to clarify the issue. (Cunningham 2016b) (Hansen 2016) (Cunningham 2016a).
4. Cunningham suspects that Macpherson's colleague Alkis Kontos may have persuaded him to use the term. (2016b) He is not alone in that suspicion. It was, in the halls of Toronto's political science department, the common explanation for why he appropriated such an uncharacteristically philosophical term.

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