Was C.B. Macpherson a Crypto Philosopher?

FRANK CUNNINGHAM *University of Toronto and Simon Fraser University*

Phillip Hansen's book, *Reconsidering C.B. Macpherson: From Possessive Individualism to Democratic Theory and Beyond* (2015) arrives when revival of the thought of one of Canada's most original and influential political theorists is to be welcomed. Macpherson's critiques of market-dominated society and culture are even more apt in an era of free trade and neo-liberalism than in his own times. More than a summary of Macpherson's views, Hansen's book offers an original reading of him as a philosopher. This review raises questions about the accuracy and usefulness of such a reading.

In *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism* (1962) Macpherson surveyed the political theories of Hobbes, Locke, and others and found humans portrayed as acquisitive and exclusive owners of property, including of their own abilities, which may be bought and sold in an economic market. This image grew out of the capitalism nascent in seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in England and also served to sustain capitalism at the level of political theory and popular culture. It provided normative bases for liberalism and liberal democracy: equality in the market and individual freedom in self-ownership. By the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, growing understanding of the anti-egalitarian and freedom-inhibiting features of a market society, combined with expansion of the franchise such that social cohesion could be democratically secured, began to tax belief in the indispensability and legitimacy of possessive-individualist morality.

When this book was published in 1962 Macpherson did not see an alternative to possessive-individualist norms in popular political culture consistent with liberal democracy and capable of gaining wide-spread acceptance. By the publication of *Democratic Theory* (1973) Macpherson had re-examined the history of relevant theories and found in it an alternative concept of the human essence and of a good society where everyone

Urban Studies Program Simon Fraser University 515 W. Hastings St, Unit 2100 Vancouver, B.C. V6B 5K3, email: frankcunningham55@gmail.com

Canadian Journal of Political Science / Revue canadienne de science politique
49:3 (September / septembre 2016) 559–566 doi:10.1017/S0008423916000664
© 2016 Canadian Political Science Association (l'Association canadienne de science politique) and/et la Société québécoise de science politique

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0008423916000664 Published online by Cambridge University Press

enjoys the resources and opportunities to develop their "truly human potentials" and where these potentials are such that their development by some is not unavoidably at the expense of others but thrives on co-operation. Democracy in this conception is a social vision, "developmental democracy," where everybody equally has the resources and opportunities to develop their human potentials to the fullest.

Macpherson saw this viewpoint, now called an "ontology" by him, as pre-existing liberal democracy, most strikingly in Aristotle and continuing to the present and exhibited in the thought of Marx, J.S. Mill, John Dewey and T.H. Green. The principles of a developmental-democratic viewpoint were, Macpherson insisted, clearly morally superior to those of possessive individualism. He also thought that they were capable of general incorporation in liberal-democratic theory and practice. Given technological and economic advances, social policy in accord with the principles is now realistic.

All of Macpherson's subsequent work was devoted to elaborating these ontologies, strengthening articulation of the developmental one and seeking conditions conducive to its popular embrace. Thus, he identified possessive-individualist assumptions in theorists beyond those treated in the earlier book (Burke, Schumpeter, Dahl, Friedman, Rawls and others); defended developmental-friendly conceptions of liberty and property against the possessive conceptions; described alternative models of democracy to defend one that integrated developmentalism with participatory democracy; and applied his pivotal distinction to concepts of human rights, needs, power and the state. Phillip Hansen would not disagree with something like this description of Macpherson's project, but he thinks that it is insufficient unless it is shown how the project is philosophically founded.

The central claim of Hansen's book is that Macpherson should be regarded as a philosopher, in particular a critical theorist in the Frankfurt School of Max Horkheimer, Herbert Marcuse, Théodor Adorno and Jürgen Habermas. This claim has the virtue, if it is one, of audacity. Neither in his published writings nor in his extensive private notes did Macpherson make more than slight reference to some of these theorists, and when he did it was not to their philosophical theories but to such as Habermas' views on state legitimacy and Marcuse's on consumerism. Not addressed are Habermas' theory of human interests or communicative action or Marcuse's deployment of Hegelian dialectics. Such absences are to be expected for Hansen, since he holds that Macpherson "suppressed" his philosophical views: "There is in Macpherson's work what I would call *a suppressed philosophical dimension*: a more or less systematic, if only implicit, meta-conceptual basic and framework for his specific conceptual universe" (2015: 8).

In its starkest version Hansen's view is that though writing for an Anglo readership, Macpherson "was really a critical theorist" whose

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0008423916000664 Published online by Cambridge University Press

approach "may have been Anglo-analytic but his substance was, so to speak, Continental" (13). In form this interpretation is like that of some of Macpherson's conservative critics that while he presented himself as a liberal democrat he was really a Marxist. Or it is a sort of reversal of Leo Strauss's quest to identify stances on specific political issues behind putatively timeless philosophy, though in Macpherson's case abstract philosophy is found in the specific and contextualized political-theoretical analyses that ostensibly concerned him.

Hansen does not seem think that Macpherson deliberately disguised consciously adhered to critical-theoretical tenets but that, for example, regarding his view about the forced extraction of working people's powers, he "did not fully recognize or conceptualize what he was really after" (97). A less contentious way of making the point would have been simply to argue that Macpherson's theory would have been better had he integrated and enhanced it with ideas of critical theory. Alternatively, Hansen might have argued that Macpherson can be read *as if* he were a Frankfurt philosopher, rather than attributing hidden or unconscious motives to him, and perhaps in allowing that Macpherson would not likely have recognized himself in Hansen's account (303), this weaker interpretation is what he has in mind. However, I find neither interpretation convincing, and the project as a whole, insofar as it detracts from Macpherson's political-theoretical and political strengths, misguided.

Macpherson believes that possessive-individualist values exist in tension with alternative developmental-democratic ones, and he looks to the former being replaced by the latter. Attempted replacement does not fly in the face of human nature, since this, Macpherson maintained, is not fixed. Because the economic and technological conditions that support possessive individualism are also not eternal, optimism about growing embrace of developmental values is justified. Hansen avers that here "the issue of Macpherson's suppressed philosophical dimension emerges" (119) and that what "he was really doing" was advancing a philosophical theory about how human conceptions of themselves can and do change which is 'most fully at home' … with Hegel's 'objective spirit,' or Wittgenstein's 'form of life,' as well as the work of Horkheimer, for whom the content of ideas 'is not eternal' (121).

I do not see the usefulness of this interpretation of what Macpherson was "really doing" from the point of view of the political aims of his work. He wished to explicate what he took as the two major, competing concepts of humanity in the history of liberal democracy, each with its own morality, in order to identify conditions where the developmental one could displace possessive individualism. Either these broad concepts are to be found in the authors he studies and in popular consciousness or not. Either there are or are not prospects for changes in political culture from one conception to the other. Either he has or has not identified

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0008423916000664 Published online by Cambridge University Press

conditions conducive to such changes. Attempting to show that if the changes in question can or do take place this is due to something about the structure of human consciousness or the like that only an appropriate philosophical theory can expose does not advance Macpherson's political agenda.

Space does not permit addressing the many other places in the book where suppressed philosophy is supposed to be at work. In every treatment one can see how, *were* Macpherson a philosopher, he might have engaged in speculation about philosophical bases for his political analyses. Though it might be mentioned that had he sought philosophical foundations, Macpherson would more likely turn to the philosophers he does often cite, such as Marx, Aristotle or Dewey, than to Horkheimer or Adorno, to whom he makes no references. For example, when he insists that for a full life one's capacities "must be under one's own conscious control," he refers not to Kant, who made the principle of autonomy the cornerstone of his ethical theory and in whose linage the Frankfurt philosophers are located, but to Aristotle (1973: 56), and he only cites Aristotle with respect to the content of the principle without invoking his metaphysical theories.

For someone who demands philosophical founding to make a political theory acceptable, Macpherson's abstinence is a deficiency. But it is not clear how this would also make the historical and cultural analyses, hypotheses, advice to political scientists, classification of forms of democracy, and so on, deficient on their own terms. Moreover, much of the book, and I think its best, if densely packed, parts do not, except in superficial ways, invoke the suppression thesis. Chapter 3 is a full and interesting treatment of Marxism, which, though introduced by describing it as "a self-reflexive, hermeneutic engagement" (127), does not return in any substantive way to this theme. Nor do the discussions of democracy in the next two chapters require reading Macpherson as a Frankfurt philosopher, despite assertions that Macpherson's views on democracy somehow flow from his "immanent critique of possessive individualism" (for example, 189, 238). Hansen's strong claim toward the end of these chapters that Macpherson's approach to democracy and views of the Frankfurt School "entail each other" (259) is not elaborated on.

As to why it is desirable to uncover philosophical dimensions in the thought of political theorists, two reasons are given: this gives their theories "richness and meaning" (269), and by "disengaging" a political theory from a philosophical body of thought, otherwise unnoticed aspects of the theory are exposed (306, n. 9). I suppose that for some a theory must be philosophically understood to be rich and meaningful. Though trained as a philosopher, I find Macpherson's theories both rich and meaningful, indeed, exciting and refreshing for breaking logjams in progressive political thought and action, in part exactly because they are close to the political

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0008423916000664 Published online by Cambridge University Press

ground. Perception of richness and meaning is a subjective matter. As to the second putative advantage, Macpherson himself noted aspects of his theories unrecognized by him when first advanced, and post-Macpherson scholarship has found gaps and new applications. Reading Macpherson from a philosophical point of view might help somebody to identify these things, but such a reading is not necessary for this purpose, unless the gaps and possible applications are intrinsic to the thought of Macpherson *as* a philosopher, but whether he was one is what is now in question.

In many places Hansen argues not that Macpherson's conclusions are philosophical but that they require philosophical support, as in the example about value transformations. This yields a third ground for maintaining he should be viewed philosophically, though it is in tension with Hansen's remark that Macpherson's suppressed philosophical dimensions are not the same as "missing" dimensions (273). A case that Macpherson requires philosophical support is made by Alkis Kontos, to whom Hansen approvingly refers (109) and who may well have persuaded his senior colleague to employ the term "ontology." This is in an exchange where Kontos agrees with Macpherson's criticism of making a basic distinction between needs and wants (1977a). Kontos sorts wants into those consonant with Macpherson's preferred developmental ontology and the possessive ones he urges be rejected and adds that "from a strictly philosophical point of view" this requires "independent grounds for the validation of ontological postulates" (1979: 32).

Macpherson agrees with rejection of a basic distinction between wants and needs, but retaining use of the term "need" because it is familiar to English-speaking liberal democrats, he distinguishes between needs that are "imposed by relations of production which require domination" ("false needs") and needs that "could be met by a rational, non-class-dominated, organization of production… given present available technology." These are "true needs" compatible with developmentalism (1979: 48–9). In the response, Macpherson does not address Kontos' point that favouring "true needs" requires philosophical justification. Two questions, applicable to this and any other claim that Macpherson's theories require philosophical defence, are pertinent: Would Macpherson have welcomed such defence? Does he need it for his purposes?

Macpherson remarks, almost as an aside, that for a model of democracy to be "workable" it must be in accord with how people actually think, and it "must contain, explicitly or implicitly, an ethically justificatory theory" (1977b: 6). Note that his point is not that the developmental model is ethically *justified*, but that liberal democrats must claim ethical justification for whatever model they endorse, which includes two models—"protective" and "equilibrium" —that Macpherson emphatically rejects. Still, were a proven philosophical theory in support of the "developmental" and "participatory" models he favoured produced, he would surely

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0008423916000664 Published online by Cambridge University Press

welcome it. But militating against justificatory ethics for Macpherson is the one ethical-philosophical view he expresses (in keeping with a contemporary strain in Anglo ethical theory) that "the truth or falsity of [a core norm of possessive individualism] is not in question" since "it is an ontological postulate, and as such, a value postulate" (1973: 37). The postulate may nonetheless be discarded because its rejection is "logically possible as well as now technically possible" (37–38), that is, not because it is out of keeping with proven ethical theory.

Macpherson's discussion of false consciousness illustrates how he approaches philosophically loaded topics without relying on philosophical theory. His orientation to political culture is pragmatic: articulate goals, identify impediments to reaching them, and look for ways to overcome the impediments. Some impediments to developmental democracy are "external" to people's values: inadequate resources to pursue full lives, confinement of work to wage labour, oppressive class relations. "Internal" impediments affect people's values such that they "hug their chains" and become willing "slaves of their own possessions." Macpherson does not hold out hope for directly attacking internal impediments and certainly not by winning people to a liberatory philosophical world view. Instead, he argues that the staying power of possessive-individualist values importantly depends upon whether a society is experiencing political, economic and environmental crises. In these circumstances "a partial breakthrough of consciousness is not out of the question." Political theorists can bolster this process through "rational analysis of the external impediments" (1973: 76), by which Macpherson clearly does not mean rationalistic or other philosophical analysis but highlighting the deficiencies of market society and describing a realistic alternative.

There are disadvantages to reading Macpherson philosophically. First, by sticking to factually based political theory, his views have a better chance of making actual political impact than if someone must buy into a philosophical theory to appreciate his contribution. Moreover, there is the question of what kind of philosopher Macpherson is supposed to be. Robert Meynell argues that Macpherson was a Hegelian (2011: part 2). Hansen thinks that this case is overstated (307, n.11), but he does not specify which of Hegel's views do and do not inform Macpherson. Because there are significant differences among the Frankfurt philosophers and between them and Hegel, this is required show what kind of philosophy informs Macpherson. Similarly, Hansen links Macpherson with Wittgenstein, Gadamer, Marx and Mill (9), as well as with Hegel and the critical theorists, but there are also important differences among these philosophers. Surely readers cannot be expected to sift through these philosophies as a precondition for understanding and making use of Macpherson's theories.

Second, philosophical commitment can prompt dubious readings of a theory to fit the philosophy. One example is Hansen's view, often repeated

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0008423916000664 Published online by Cambridge University Press

in the book, that interpreting Macpherson from the standpoint of "interpretive structuralism" involves recognition of an "immanent critique" of possessive individualism that is supposed to show that the seeds of a developmental-democratic ontology are already present in it as tensions in possessive individualism between alternative understandings of freedom (286). It requires a strained reading of *Possessive Individualism* to sustain this interpretation. There Macpherson portrays possessive-individualist values and conceptions of the human essence not as dialectically contradictory concepts that "point beyond themselves" (15), but as parts of a coherent and pernicious world view for which Macpherson was then seeking but had not yet identified an alternative.

A third disadvantage is that one invites the charges Marx and Engels levelled against the "young Hegelian" philosophers of obfuscation and the submersion of concrete political and economic analysis in abstract concepts, where "a philosophical *phrase* about a real question is the real question itself" (1964: 101). A related danger is that a philosophical reading of Macpherson bifurcates him into the political theorist whom Isaiah Berlin called "one of the very few rational and lucid and altogether admirable writers" (1971), and a putatively substantive philosopher, assessable only through philosophical language, which is very seldom as lucid as that of Macpherson's writings.

I conclude by calling attention to a virtue of Hansen's book. In several places he notes similarities between Macpherson and the Frankfurt philosophers, and many of the places where he alleges fully shared philosophical theory can be interpreted more modestly as indications of affinities. This is true, also, of other theorists, such as Martha Nussbaum and Armartya Sen in their capacity-building version of egalitarianism or, in extra-philosophical circles, current critiques of consumerism and environmentally inspired advocacy of lifestyles not dependent on indefinite accumulation. These and other examples show that Macpherson was not alone or outdated in his pursuits.

References

Berlin, Isaiah. 1971. Letter to Macpherson, May 25. University of Toronto Archives, Box 013, 05.

Hansen, Phillip. 2015. *Reconsidering C.B. Macpherson: From Possessive Individualism to Democratic Theory and Beyond*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Kontos, Alkis. 1979. "Through a Glass Darkly." *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory* 3:1, 25–45.

Macpherson, C.B. 1962. *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Reissued with an introduction by Frank Cunningham. Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2011.

Macpherson, C.B. 1973. *Democratic Theory: Essays in Retrieval*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Reissued with an introduction by Frank Cunningham. Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2012.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0008423916000664 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Macpherson, C.B. 1977a. "Needs and Wants: an Ontological or Historical Problem? In *Human Needs and Politics*, ed. Ross Fitzgerald. Oxford: Pergamon Press.

Macpherson, C.B. 1977b. *The Life and Times of Liberal Democracy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Reissued with an introduction by Frank Cunningham. Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2012.

Macpherson, C.B. 1979. "Second and Third Thoughts on Needs and Wants." *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory* 3:1, 46–49.

Marx, Karl and Frederick Engels. 1964 (1845–46). *The German Ideology*. New York: Progress Publishers.

Meynell, Robert. 2011. *Canadian Idealism and the Philosophy of Freedom: C.B. Macpherson, George Grant, and Charles Taylor*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0008423916000664 Published online by Cambridge University Press