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Possessive Individualism at 50: Retrieving Macpherson's Lost Legacy

PETER LINDSAY

I went to the University of Toronto in the fall of 1983 to pursue a Master's Degree in what was then called Political Economy. I chose Toronto largely because C.B. Macpherson taught there. Or so I thought. In those pre-internet days, news traveled slowly, and while the brochure I had received in the mail clearly listed him as a member of the faculty, I discovered when I arrived that he had in fact retired.

As it happens, his physical absence hardly seemed to matter, as his ideas—along with those of Allan Bloom, who was also no longer there—permeated the air. It was easy to think about and find discussions of not just *Possessive Individualism*, but also of his many essays on democratic theory. When, after a four year absence in the mid-80s, I returned for doctoral work, I found no small amount of faculty support for a dissertation on Macpherson's democratic vision.

I mention this history because it is of a time that now seems quite remote. Good old-fashion Marxist inspired leftism has almost a quaint air about it, as the names of those whose works we debated endlessly—Miliband, Poulantzas, Althusser, Marcuse (a friend of Macpherson's), Fromm—now create more nostalgia than they do internecine graduate student fighting. So too does the name Macpherson, and, I would argue, we need, in marking the 50th anniversary of *Possessive Individualism*, to acknowledge that fact. The book is fifty years old, but it was really only alive for about half of that time. Part of the explanation for its decline is no doubt found in the critiques—by Dunn, Skinner and others—of Macpherson's interpretations

of Hobbes, Locke et al.¹ Of at least equal significance, however, are the forces that have undermined enthusiasm for much of the socialist left. Put simply: Macpherson was too forceful a critic of capitalism for his work to remain unscathed by that system's perceived triumph over communism.

Or so I shall argue. When I say "too forceful" I do not mean to imply that Macpherson's critique of capitalism was where he went wrong. Actually, I intend to make precisely the opposite point. To be more specific, my argument here is that while the central ethical commitment of the theory of possessive individualism was anti-capitalist in nature—and for that reason a difficult sell in today's political climate—a close inspection of the manner in which Macpherson employed that commitment reveals a critical perspective that renders his work every bit as vital now as it was thirty, forty or fifty years ago.²

I.

Macpherson explained in the opening pages of *Possessive Individualism* that the book's central concept is 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."³ This image was, Macpherson argued, brought to life in the writings of liberal thinkers who took their cues about the nature of individuals from the nascent capitalist relations around them.⁴ In imbuing their theories with this image, they managed, as have their successors—and in Macpherson's hands, there is no shortage of possessive individualists—to in turn justify those relations, for capitalism as an ideal made sense only as long as humans were conceived in the possessive individualist mode (which, as he later commented, was "a fairly realistic conclusion at the time"⁵).

The logic of these justifications made them unassailable to anyone unwilling to question the basic "postulates of human nature," as Macpherson was fond of calling them. And for those who did question them—J.S. Mill and T.H. Green through to twentieth century liberals such as A. D. Lindsay and Ernest Barker—the results were various forms of contradiction

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“involving the thinkers’ concealing from themselves the fundamental nature of the problem.”⁶ As the possessive individualism postulates could not be jettisoned “while market relations prevail,”⁷ critics of the possessive model simply tacked on to them an “egalitarian complement.”⁸ This “concept of man as at least potentially a doer, an exorter and developer and enjoyer of his human capacities”⁹ resulted in “an uneasy compromise between the two views of man’s essence, and, correspondingly, an unsure mixture of . . . two maximizing claims made for the liberal-democratic society.”¹⁰ Thus while the theory of possessive individualism was initially an attempt to bring to light the pervasiveness in liberal theory of market assumptions about humans, it became, as Macpherson continued in subsequent works to explore its normative implications,¹¹ an attempt to expose much broader and further reaching contradictions within what had become liberal-*democratic* theory. As he put it, “Because Western democratic theory contains these inconsistent postulates, its condition is internally precarious.”¹²

So far there is little to indicate why this theory might have come to be neglected in the last twenty years. Even if Macpherson’s critics were correct that early liberal thinkers were not drawing from nascent market relations in their postulates about human nature, none, to my knowledge, has suggested that these postulates are absent in their theories. (Rousseau, after all, had argued something very similar when he pointed out that all state of nature theorists, “speaking continually of need, avarice, oppression, desires, and pride, have transferred to the state of nature the ideas they acquired in society.”¹³) Nor has there been criticism of the claim that such postulates do indeed work to justify market relations (irrespective of whether that justification was the intention of any particular thinker). In fact, it is difficult to see how one could reject that claim. So what is the problem here? Why is the theory of possessive individualism not still in currency?

The answer, I think, has far less to do with Macpherson’s analysis of liberal-democratic theories than it does with the normative position that motivated it. He was, after all, targeting those theories not simply because he, like Rousseau, saw them as anthropologically or ontologically incorrect. Rather, he targeted them because of what they *did*, namely justify particular inequalities endemic to market relations.¹⁴ Hobbes, Locke, and others whose theories were imbued with possessive individualist assumptions did not interest him as subjects of intellectual history; they interested him for the part they played—wittingly or not—in the justification of unjust property relations. His general thinking was that

the maintenance [of any particular system of property] requires at least the acquiescence of the bulk of the people, and the positive support of any leading classes. Such support requires a belief that the institution serves some purpose or fills some need. That belief requires, in turn, that there be a theory which both explains and justifies the institution in terms of the purpose served or the need filled.¹⁵

This, then, was the role of possessive individualist theories.

So what unjust set of property relations—what institution—did possessive individualism explain and justify? In discussing possessive individualism's emphasis on humans as having unlimited desires, Macpherson followed a causal chain to the source of the problem:

. . . the acceptance, by the most active part of society, of the belief that unlimited desire is natural and rational *leads to* the establishment of the right of unlimited appropriation, which *leads to* the concentration of ownership of the material means of labour, which *leads to* the continual transfer of powers.¹⁶

The “possessive” in “possessive individualism” refers not to our relationship with commodities . . . but rather to our relationship with our own labor.

This continual transfer occurs because men, as “proprietors of their own person or capacities,” are able to “sell the use of their energy and skill on the market, in exchange for the product or the use of others’ energy and skill.”¹⁷ The source of the injustice was, then, the wage relationship, a relationship made possible by “the individual right to unlimited, or virtually unlimited, accumulations of property.”¹⁸ *Possessive Individualism* (the book) did not dwell long on these concrete conditions, as Macpherson's focus was on the possessive picture of humanity that emerges from Hobbes, et al. He did, however, in his discussion of Hobbes, outline the features of “possessive market society,” emphasizing that “if a single criterion of [this] society is wanted it is that man's labour is a commodity.”¹⁹ Indeed, this criterion makes this possessive “model of society” the only one (of three he described) that “meet(s) Hobbes's requirements:”

Only in a society in which each man's capacity to labour is his own property, is alienable, and is a market commodity, could all individuals be in this continual competitive power relationship.²⁰

To sum up: the “possessive” in “possessive individualism” refers not to our relationship with commodities (as is commonly supposed),²¹ but rather to our relationship with our own labor. Specifically, it refers to the fact that we *can have* a relationship with it; that it is thought of not as “us” but rather as “ours.” (Try having a relationship with your leg.) This self-image—the product of possessive individualist theories—in turn allows us to accept the sale of labor to others, and it is this actual, concrete economic fact (the existence of the wage relationship) that lies at the core of Macpherson’s critical analysis. It is also what makes that analysis problematic in the era that accepts the market in an increasingly uncritical fashion, for in attacking the commodification of labor, the theory of possessive individualism attacks the market at *its* core.

II.

In most of Macpherson’s analysis of possessive individualism, Marx is not mentioned. In fact Marx’s name only appears on two pages of *Possessive Individualism*. Yet, as he makes clear on one of those two pages, his debt is substantial:

The conception of possessive market society is neither a novel nor an arbitrary construction. It is clearly similar to the concepts of bourgeois or capitalist society used by Marx, Weber, Sombart, and others, who have made the existence of a market in labour a criterion of capitalism.²²

Indeed, while Macpherson did in subsequent writings say a bit more about the concrete economic relations he viewed as unjust, he never actually refined or added to Marx’s analysis; he simply appropriated it as his own.²³ Whatever debt he owed “Weber, Sombart, and others” was never again mentioned. Marx, however, remained a steady, if often unmentioned, voice in his later writings. Irrespective of whether he himself was at some level a Marxist—an issue I have always found uninteresting, if not silly²⁴—he clearly felt, as he once quipped, that “the utility of Marxism as a means of understanding the world is increasing over time.”²⁵

I highlight Macpherson’s embracing of Marx’s social analysis in order to identify a crucial difference between the two. If Macpherson’s social analysis was the same as Marx’s, the conceptual framework in which it was delivered was emphatically not, and, as I shall suggest, it is precisely this

perspectival difference that explains why the utility of Marxism as a means of understanding the world has *not* increased over time, and why the utility of possessive individualism need not follow the same path. To see this point, we need to contrast the language each thinker used in discussing what, precisely, was the problem raised by the wage relationship. We turn first to Marx.

Marx's first sustained analysis of the wage relationship is found in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, where he describes the problem of that relationship as one of "alienation." In the essay "Estranged Labor," he identifies four particular types of alienation: from the laboring process, from the object of labor, from our "Species Being" and from each other. The first thing to note in this account is how at least half of it rests on some fairly ambiguous conceptual arguments. Whether we are alienated from our Species Being will, of course, depend on what that is; an issue that can hardly be resolved in the absence of some deep ontological claim. As far as being alienated from our fellow human beings, it is difficult to see how social separation—though regrettable morally—could, despite its effects on the individual, be constituted as a wrong in some political sense: if it is "wrong," it is so only in a broad sense that would be difficult to defend uncontroversially ("life shouldn't be like that"). At a minimum it seems unlikely that we can point, say, to any right (to fraternity?) being violated.

What, however, of alienation from the laboring process and the product of our labor? How is the essence of the problem described there? On the laboring process, Marx's language is particularly striking (and should draw comparisons to Macpherson's):

... labor is external to the worker, i.e., it does not belong to his essential being; that in his work, therefore, he does not affirm himself but denies himself, does not develop freely his physical and mental energy but mortifies his body and ruins his mind. He is at home when he is not working, and when he is working he is not at home. His labor is therefore not voluntary, but coerced; it is forced labor. It is therefore not the satisfaction of a need; it is merely a means to satisfy needs external to it . . . Lastly, the external character of labor for the worker appears in the fact that it is not his own, but someone else's, that it does not belong to him, that in it he belongs, not to himself, but to another . . .²⁶

In attacking the commodification of labor, the theory of possessive individualism attacks the market at its core.

Here alienation results in a condition of, as Wood has put it, “a person who experiences life as empty, meaningless and absurd, or who fails to sustain a sense of self-worth.”²⁷ Troublesome as well is what the laborer creates:

The worker puts his life into the object; but now his life no longer belongs to him but to the object. Hence, the greater this activity, the greater is the worker’s lack of objects. Whatever the product of his labor is, he is not. Therefore the greater this product, the less is he himself. The alienation of the worker in his product means . . . that the life which he has conferred on the object confronts him as something hostile and alien.²⁸

Again, the condition seems problematic, although it is difficult to know how to characterize what is problematic about it. Is it that we fail to remain attached to our deeper, ontological self? And what is that? With respect to the products the laborer produces, how precisely is he harmed in not being able to see himself in them?

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I am not suggesting that there exist no wrongs here, only that one’s capacity to conceptualize them as Marx did seems contingent upon acceptance of certain antecedent ontological claims.²⁹ In some sense, this difficulty gets us to the heart of Marx’s project. To translate the problem with wage labor into one of injustice, where rights of the laborer are

violated, is to miss Marx’s larger message that talk of justice and rights is hopelessly parochial, bound as it is to the very relations of production we wish to call into question.³⁰ Indeed, given that our conceptual understanding of justice and rights is, in his mind, the product of those relations, Marx might have questioned even our ability to *perceive* the wage relation as an injustice or a violation of rights.

At first glance, this claim seems similar to Macpherson’s argument about the obscuring effects of possessive individualism. The difference, however, is that Macpherson’s claims about liberal theory were divorced from a larger theory of history. He was largely agnostic on the issue of how deeply tied justificatory theory was to its material foundations. “I do not enter into the general question of the primacy of ideas or material conditions,”³¹ he pronounced. Yes, Hobbes and Locke could be explained by the milieu in which they wrote, but so too could Mill and Green. If the formers’ theories were

merely “ideological reflexes and echoes of this life-process,”³² the latter’s were proof that liberalism was not merely another moment in capitalist’s epiphenomenal orbit. Marx spilled much ink—and more bile—decrying Mill’s “shallow syncretism;”³³ Macpherson, on the other hand, extolled his ability to break free from the narrow confines of possessive thinking.

The difference, then, is that Macpherson decoupled liberalism from the relations of production to which he so objected. His project was one of “retrieval,” as he put it, not dismissal, a point he makes clear in the opening pages of *Possessive Individualism*. If we are blinded by some liberalisms, others might restore our sight. Whether he was “right” in some absolute sense—whether we can indeed see and critique the relations of production from some independent standpoint—is beside the point. What matters only is that Macpherson’s critique is one that still has force in an era reluctant to look beyond the realities of liberal individualism. Requiring no controversial ontological claims, Macpherson asks only that we view relations of production from individualistic ideals spawned in their lifetime. More pointedly, he asks whether those relations might actively subvert the very ideals used to justify them.

In *Possessive Individualism*, Macpherson’s principal critique of the market was that by the twentieth century it had destroyed both the equality and cohesion of interests that were the sine quo nons of political obligation.³⁴ The problem was that “liberal theory must continue to use the assumptions of possessive individualism because they are factually accurate for our possessive market societies.”³⁵ Moreover, the market posed no inherent contradiction to the assumptions; indeed it vindicated the only sort of freedom of which possessive individuals were capable. Liberals such as Mill who rejected possessive assumptions as “morally offensive”³⁶ were thereby doomed to toil in unreality.

As Macpherson continued to work on problems in liberal-democratic theory over the next twenty-five years, he expanded his understanding of its internal contradictions beyond the issue of obligation. The problem remained liberal-democratic theory’s “attempt to carry into the period of mature capitalist society a combination of market postulates and egalitarian humanist principles which were not strictly tenable together even when first compounded a century or more ago.”³⁷ Yet what made the combination untenable was not simply that obligation was precluded, but that one set of postulates (the possessive individualist ones) worked to justify an economic system that contradicted the other (the egalitarian humanist principles). The market simply cannot generate a society of “doers

and creators.” Hence, the inclusion of the latter postulates had rendered liberal-democratic theory *self*-contradictory.

We see, then, that while Marx’s claim is that the capitalist market contradicts larger concerns about a higher nature of humanity and human relations, Macpherson saw no need to abandon the basic liberal-democratic ideals that were “introduced into predemocratic liberal theory in the nineteenth century to make it liberal-democratic.”³⁸ To Marx’s claim that the system would collapse under the weight of its internal *structural* contradictions—falling rates of profit, proletarianization, concentration of capital—Macpherson argued that the contradiction was between a *functioning* market system and the ideals of human life understood *on its own terms*. Put simply: Marx rose above liberalism, Macpherson stayed within it.

III.

Let me be clear about why this last distinction matters. I am making no claims here about the ontological adequacy of either Marxism or liberalism. In truth, I have always been drawn to the implications of Marx’s analysis of alienation—to the very ideas that I earlier suggested were ambiguous and reliant on controversial ontological claims.³⁹ What I have always found appealing about Macpherson, however, was his determination to *liberalize* those claims. As a first rate historian of political thought, Macpherson taught his readers that there was within the liberal tradition a rich vision of human life, one that held much of the appeal of Marx’s⁴⁰ (and that was in fact “fundamentally the same as the Marxian concept”⁴¹), but one that also avoided the political ramifications that came with Marx’s corresponding theory of history. In short, Macpherson’s critique of the wage relationship demonstrated that “revisionism” need not accept the baggage with which Marx had laden it. Seen through a wide enough historical lens, one that looked beyond its possessive moments, liberalism could offer a vision expansive enough to challenge the wage relationship, and it could do so using the market’s *own* analytic framework.

The advantage of Macpherson’s perspective is plain: to engage in debate over the wage relationship without recourse to justice or a concern for rights is to argue at cross paths with one’s antagonists, all the more so in the past twenty years. Even if Marx is correct that, “liberty as a right of man is not based on the association of man with man but rather on the separation of man from man,”⁴² it would still be important to question whether

the capitalist market is really the most effective means to protect *its own* conception of rights and to realize *its own* understanding of justice. Thus, to ground a critique of property rights in the claim that “the rights of any man which are morally justifiable . . . are only those which allow all others to have equal effective rights”⁴³ is to point out that property rights must at a minimum be justifiable on basic *liberal* principles. Macpherson’s demonstration that rights derived from possessive postulates could not rise even to this challenge allowed him to arrive at a position both radical *and* liberal. Rather than overcoming liberalism, Macpherson contested its meaning:

A liberal position need not be taken to depend forever on an acceptance of capitalist assumptions, although historically it has been so taken. The fact that liberal values grew up in capitalist market societies is not in itself a reason why the central ethical principle of liberalism—the freedom of the individual to realize his or her human capacities—need always be confined to such societies.⁴⁴

In Macpherson’s hands, then, the transcendence of capitalism could occur on liberal terms; terms that emphasized the importance of both civil liberties⁴⁵ and human rights. As long as liberalism was viewed from the proper historical perspective—as “an assertion of the right to all to full human development”⁴⁶—it alone could reveal the inadequacies of the market system.

Marx rose
above liberalism,
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IV.

So how, then, does the wage relation pose contradictions for liberalism? In what way is a “fully human life” subverted by a productive process in which laborers play no part in deciding what is produced, when it is produced, how it is produced or why it is produced? The salient moral issue is not the *distribution* of the means of production, as it is, for instance, in the analytic critiques of Roemer⁴⁷ and Arneson.⁴⁸ The issue, rather, is with respect to the *effect* that distribution has on the participants in the productive process. Macpherson was particularly concerned about the effects on two institutions crucial to the liberal ideal: those of democracy and those of property. I shall close by examining how the wage relation undermines each one.

First democracy. We can begin with democracy in its most generic sense, something akin to Dewey's claim that it "consists in having a responsible share according to capacity in forming and directing the activities of the groups to which one belongs and in participating according to need in the values which the groups sustain."⁴⁹ While this understanding of democracy highlights the potential conflict between the wage relationship and democratic principles, it also points to a number of ways in which the two might have little or no bearing on one another. Suggesting conflict is the idea that the laborer, insofar as he or she belongs to the productive process, should have a responsible share in forming and directing the activities of that process. The same words also point to reasons for being wary of seeing conflict, however, for skeptics could ask: In what sense does the laborer "belong" to the productive process? Moreover, there is the issue of whether a "responsible" share is necessarily inconsistent with an unequal one.

Both issues point to the fact that the applicability of democratic principles rests on how we might adjudicate prior questions about the nature of the productive process, for the imposition of the democratic lens has normative force only if we accept the prior claim that the productive process *should be* democratic. (The claim, for example, that family relations do not meet with democratic standards is more of an observation than a normative critique.) In short, we need first to determine the extent to which the productive process is similar to or different from the society that Dewey, among others, had in mind.

In Macpherson's hands such concerns are quickly brushed aside, for boundaries between democratic and non-democratic realms are blurred, if not torn asunder. In an essay written twenty years before *Possessive Individualism*, Macpherson argued that,

If we think of democracy as not merely a set of institutions . . . but as a set of purposes or ends to which these institutions are but means, it is surely legitimate to hold that any other institutions, including economic ones, which can be shown to be also essential means to the democratic ends are equally entitled to the shelter and support of the word *democracy*.⁵⁰

The idea that democracy was not merely a political concept but a broader social one (a "normatively structured way of life" as John Keane described it⁵¹), remained at the heart of Macpherson's thought until his death. So too did the claim that democracy was not just about "having a responsible share accord-

ing to capacity in forming and directing the activities of the groups to which one belongs” but also that it involved “moving towards a firmly-held goal of an equal society in which everybody can be fully human,”⁵² or, as he later formulated it, in which there was an “equal opportunity to use and develop and enjoy whatever capacities each person has.”⁵³ Indeed, it is this broader conception of democracy’s meaning that explains Macpherson’s insistence on looking beyond political institutions.⁵⁴ If the goal is to be fully human, then (assuming democratic control as seen as an integral aspect of that goal), the activities over which one needs control would necessarily encompass the whole of one’s life.

To go even further, the activities of particular importance will be those that get to the heart of “doing” and “creating;” namely those surrounding our productive, laboring lives. In discussing movements for the democratic participation in decision making in the workplace, Macpherson captured what was at stake:

Those involved in workers’ control are participating *as producers*, not as consumers or appropriators. They are in it not to get a higher wage or a greater share of the product, but to make their productive work more meaningful to them. If workers’ control were merely another move in the scramble for more pay to take home . . . it would do nothing . . . to move men away from their image of themselves as consumers and appropriators. But workers’ control is not primarily about distribution of income: it is about the conditions of production . . .⁵⁵

Whether empirically true or not, the statement speaks to Macpherson’s (and Marx’s) central claim that how we produce is of vital importance to the way in which we conceive of ourselves, (and, ultimately, *who we are*). Far from being a controversial ontological claim, the insight here relies only on the observation that labor is, in fact, a part of us (and that it is only in light of an historical turn in seventeenth century liberal thought that we have come to think otherwise). From that perspective it is the *wage relationship* that reflects and embodies an ontological mistake (or at a minimum, an extremely controversial claim), one whose correction requires a democratic ideal that, in calling for a fully human existence, insists upon the return of what the capitalist market structure has taken:

Now there can be no doubt that democratic control is incompatible with the corporate freedoms that are needed for maximum capital accumulation. Capital has every reason, for the sake of its own liberties,

to resist democratic control. An unlimited property right cannot co-exist with democracy.⁵⁶

In subjecting the wage relation to a democratic litmus test, Macpherson saw as the task not to overthrow the market, but only to rein in its anti-democratic effects. What mattered was the degree to which, to alter Dewey slightly, “the laborer has a responsible share according to capacity in forming and directing the activities of the *productive* groups to which he belongs.” Whether that share is received will depend not on the existence (or lack thereof) of the wage relation, but on its terms. Moreover, any advances toward the democratic ideal would themselves depend upon a democratic process, one that hinged as much on advances in public perception as it did on any underlying structural change. As Macpherson put it: “the possibil-

ity of a genuinely participatory democracy emerging in Western liberal-democratic states varies inversely with their electorates’ acceptance . . . of the possessive individualist model of man.”⁵⁷

The wage relationship was not simply a democratic problem, for the inequality of access to the means of labor that it entailed “also contradict[ed] one of the basic justifications of the . . . institution of individual property, namely, that human needs cannot be met without that institution.”⁵⁸ In his writings on property, Macpherson began with the concept in its broadest sense, one that abstracted away from any particular mode of production. At this level, property is, in Tawney’s words, “a moral right, and

not merely a legal right, because it insures that the producer will not be deprived by violence of the result of his efforts.”⁵⁹ What market society had done, via the wage relation, was to sever this all-important link between labor and its fruits. As such, its very rationale (which was, as Green put it, “that everyone should be secured by society in the power of getting and keeping the means of realizing a will”⁶⁰) had been undermined.

In response, Macpherson worked to reconnect readers to conceptions of property that the market and its justifying theories had occluded.⁶¹

The validity of the case for property as a necessary human right depends . . . on whether we take property in the modern narrow sense, or in the more extended and more natural sense of an individual right

Critics of the market, if we are to hear them at all, must demonstrate that market property rights will not get us where we want to go . . . as liberals.

both to some exclusive property and to some non-exclusive right of access to the remaining natural resources and the accumulated capital of a given society. If we continue to take it in the modern narrow sense, the property right contradicts democratic human rights. If we take it in the broader sense, it does not contradict a democratic concept of human rights: indeed it may bring us back to something like the old concept of individual property in one's life, liberty, and capacities.⁶²

Elsewhere, he was more specific:

As soon as a property in things is derived from an exclusive right which is at the same time an alienable right, i.e., the right to or property in one's labour, the damage is done: property as a right needed by all to enable them to express their human essence is denied to many.⁶³

In short, certain forms of property are consistent with the ideal of the institution itself and certain forms are not. In adopting the latter forms, market societies not only lose sight of property's fundamental meaning, they also abandon the very principles upon which they were built.

V.

Again, I have no wish to promote Macpherson at the expense of Marx. As I have suggested, most of these arguments are wholly consistent with Marx's thinking. Like Macpherson, Marx sought to salvage property, not to destroy it ("that there can be no production and hence no society where some form of property does not exist is a tautology"⁶⁴), he did so by taking aim at its most recent form ("the distinguishing feature of Communism is not the abolition of property generally, but the abolition of bourgeois property"⁶⁵), and he did so on exactly the same grounds as Macpherson ("[c]ommunism deprives no man of the power to appropriate the products of society; all that it does is to deprive him of the power to subjugate the labour of others by means of such appropriation"⁶⁶).

The problem of Marx has less to do with the substance of his message than it does with its ability to be heard. And yet, critiques of the market are as vital now as they were in 1962, or, for that matter, 1862. Perhaps more so. Environmental degradation, growing income inequality, high rates of unemployment and, for those who do have jobs, a steady erosion of labor

rights all provide adequate evidence, for those who care to listen, that the market's "triumph" is a hollow one. The question is who will care to listen. Or, more to the point: *to whom* will they listen?

Critics of the market, if we are to hear them at all, must demonstrate that market property rights will not get us where we want to go . . . *as liberals*. They must demonstrate why that is, and then they must demonstrate why an alternative set of property rights is to be preferred. But most importantly, they must, after defending such a set of rights, be able to close the argument as follows:

Would a liberal-democratic theory which embodied the new concept of property still be in any significant sense a liberal theory? That depends, of course, on what you put into liberalism. If you insist that it must mean all the market freedoms . . . then clearly a political theory built around the new concept of property could not be called liberal. But if you take liberalism to be essentially an assertion of the right to all to full human development . . . then a political theory built around the new conception of property is eminently qualified as liberal theory . . . [A] new, less historically inhibited, paradigm of property would not destroy but would liberate the essential liberal-democratic theory.⁶⁷

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NOTES

1. Frank Cunningham discusses these critiques in his introduction to C. B. Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

2. As Macpherson revised the theory of possessive individualism in all of his subsequent works, I will draw heavily on those works as well, notwithstanding their relative youth.

3. Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism*, 3. Cf., "Market Concepts in Political Theory," in C. B. Macpherson, *Democratic Theory: Essays in Retrieval* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), 192; "The Deceptive Task of Political Theory," in *Ibid.*, 199; "Revolution and Ideology," in *Ibid.*, 158; and C. B. Macpherson, *Property, Mainstream and Critical Positions* (Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 1978), 203–5.

Macpherson also discussed possessive individualism under the rubric of “protective” democratic theory in Macpherson, *The Life and Times of Liberal Democracy*, ch. 2. I give a more detailed version of this explanation in Peter Lindsay, *Creative Individualism: the Democratic Vision of C.B. Macpherson* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 68–74.

4. In his treatment of Burke's political thought, Macpherson provided capitalism with the following temporal bearings: “The property law and the political institutions needed for full capitalist development were well in place when they were confirmed by the Whig Revolution in 1689.” Macpherson, *Burke* 1st ed. Past Masters Series (New York: Hill and Wang, 1980), 63.

5. C. B. Macpherson, *The Real World of Democracy: The Massey Lectures 1965* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1966), 54.

6. “The Deceptive Task of Political Theory,” in Macpherson, *Democratic Theory*, 201.

7. Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism*, 4. Cf. “Democratic Theory: Ontology and Technology,” in Macpherson, *Democratic Theory*, 32–33.

8. “Democratic Theory: Ontology and Technology,” in *ibid.*, 31.

9. “Problems of a Non-market Theory of Democracy,” in *ibid.*, 51.

10. “The Maximization of Democracy,” in *ibid.*, 5.

11. As he wryly remarked in the Preface to his final collection of essays, “the critic who remarked that I never write about anything except possessive individualism will here find no need to retract.” Macpherson, *The Rise and Fall of Economic Justice, and Other Papers* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).

12. “Democratic Theory: Ontology and Technology,” in Macpherson, *Democratic Theory*, 35.

13. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, “Discourse on the Origins of Inequality,” in *Basic Political Writings*, edited by Donald A. Cress (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1987), 38.

14. To be sure, his rejection of those inequalities was motivated by postulates he viewed as correct, but in the debate over how to view human nature Macpherson merely asserted the correctness of one side; the debate itself only laid the groundwork for the political arguments that were important to him.

15. “A Political Theory of Property,” in Macpherson, *Democratic Theory*, 121.

16. “The Maximization of Democracy,” in *ibid.*, 18 (emphasis in original). Cf. “Democratic Theory: Ontology and Technology,” in *ibid.*, 32–33.

17. “The Maximization of Democracy,” in *ibid.*, 11. Cf. “Deceptive Task of Political Theory,” in *ibid.*, 199, and in particular Macpherson, *Property, Mainstream and Critical Positions* (Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 1978), 199–200.

18. “The Maximization of Democracy,” in Macpherson, *Democratic Theory*, 17.

19. Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism*, 48.

20. *Ibid.*, 59.

21. That element did play a role, however: “In choosing to make the essence of man the striving for possessions, we make it impossible for many men to be fully human. By defining man as an infinite appropriator we make it impossible for many men to qualify as men.” Macpherson, *The Real World of Democracy*, 55.

22. Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism*, 48.

23. For examples, see “Problems of a Non-market Theory of Democracy,” in Macpherson, *Democratic Theory*, 43–44. “Do We Need a Theory of the State?” in Macpherson, *The Rise and Fall of Economic Justice, and Other Papers*, 62–68.

24. For those who disagree, see Victor Svacek, “The Elusive Marxism of C. B. Macpherson,” *Canadian Journal of Political Science/Revue Canadienne de Science Politique* 9:3 (1976): 395–422; and C. B. Macpherson, “Humanist Democracy and Elusive Marxism A Response to Minogue and Svacek,” *Canadian Journal of Political Science/Revue Canadienne de Science Politique* 9:3 (1976): 423–30. Whether any thinker is a Marxist or a liberal, or whether the two are compatible or incompatible are questions without much political significance. (Imagine how the Eleventh Thesis on Feuerbach would read had Marx also mentioned philosophers who interpret *interpretations* of the world.)

25. “Post-Liberal-Democracy?” in Macpherson, *Democratic Theory*, 184.

26. Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* (New York: International Publishers, 1964), 110–11. “The German Ideology” contains similar descriptions Karl Marx, *Selected Writings* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994), 151.

27. Allen W. Wood, *Karl Marx The Arguments of the Philosophers* (London; Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), 8.

28. Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, 108.

29. Even Marx abandoned such controversial claims in his later years, preferring detailed analysis of the extraction of surplus labor in *Capital, Volume 1*. Unfortunately the shift does not help matters from a contemporary perspective, for as this analysis rested on the labor theory of value—a theory that has been rejected since Alfred Marshall—its stock has been low not just for the past twenty years, but for the past one hundred and twenty.

30. There is considerable debate on the issue of whether Marx found the wage relation, and capitalism more generally, just or not. For good overviews, see Steven Lukes, *Marxism and Morality* (Oxford; New York: Clarendon Press; Oxford University Press, 1985) ch. 4; Norman Geras, “The Controversy about Marx and Justice,” *New Left Review* 150 (1985): 47–85; and William Kymlicka, *Contemporary Political Philosophy* (USA: Oxford University Press, 1991), 176–95. Lukes refers to this ambiguity as the “paradox of Marxism.”

31. “The Maximization of Democracy,” in Macpherson, *Democratic Theory*, 18.

32. “The German Ideology,” in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 2nd ed. (W. W. Norton & Company, 1978), 154.

33. Karl Marx, *Capital: Volume 1: A Critique of Political Economy* (Penguin Classics, 1992), 98.

34. Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism*, 272–73, 275.

35. *Ibid.*, 275.

36. *Ibid.*

37. “Revisionist Liberalism,” in Macpherson, *Democratic Theory*, 77.

38. “Problems of a Non-market Theory of Democracy,” in *ibid.*, 51.

39. In fact I have argued in the past that Marx’s focus on actual social relations is in many ways preferable to Macpherson’s focus on *theories* of social relations. See Peter Lindsay, “The ‘Disembodied Self’ in Political Theory: The Communitarians, Macpherson and Marx,” *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 28:2 (March 2002): 191–211.

40. Macpherson makes an explicit attempt to demonstrate the compatibility of the Marxist and the liberal political ideas “Do We Need a Theory of the State?” in Macpherson, *The Rise and Fall of Economic Justice, and Other Papers*, 64.

41. “Democratic Theory: Ontology and Technology,” in Macpherson, *Democratic Theory*, 37.

42. "On the Jewish Question," in Marx, *Selected Writings*, 16.
43. "Problems of a Non-Market Theory of Democracy," in Macpherson, *Democratic Theory*, 55.
44. C.B. Macpherson, *The Life and Times of Liberal Democracy* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 2.
45. "Liberalism as Trade-offs," in Macpherson, *The Rise and Fall of Economic Justice, and Other Papers*, 53.
46. Macpherson, *Property, Mainstream and Critical Positions*, 207.
47. John E. Roemer, "New Directions in the Marxian Theory of Exploitation and Class," *Politics & Society* 11:3 (1982): 253–87.
48. Richard J. Arneson, "What's Wrong with Exploitation?" *Ethics* 91:2 (January 1, 1981): 202–27.
49. John Dewey, *The Public & Its Problems*, 1st ed. (Swallow Press, 1954), 147.
50. Macpherson, "The Meaning of Economic Democracy," *University of Toronto Quarterly* 11 (1942): 403–4.
51. John Keane, "Stretching the Limits of the Democratic Imagination" in *Democracy and Possessive Individualism: The Intellectual Legacy of C. B. Macpherson* by Joseph H. Carens (State University of New York Press, 1993), 114.
52. Macpherson, *The Real World of Democracy*, 33. Cf. "The Prospects of Economic and Industrial Democracy," in Macpherson, *The Rise and Fall of Economic Justice, and Other Papers*, 35.
53. "Human Rights are Property Rights," in *ibid.*, 79.
54. It also explains his unfortunate insistence that politically undemocratic systems can be considered democratic "so long as [they] remain true to [their] purpose." Macpherson, *The Real World of Democracy*, 22. Cf. "Market Concepts in Political Theory" in Macpherson, *Democratic Theory*, 190. I examine this tension within his work in Lindsay, *Creative Individualism*, 89–93.
55. Macpherson, *The Life and Times of Liberal Democracy*, 103–45, 111. Cf. Marx: "An enforced increase of wages . . . would . . . be nothing but better payment for the slave, and would not win either for the worker or for labor their human status and dignity." Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, 117–88.
56. "Liberalism as Trade-offs," in Macpherson, *The Rise and Fall of Economic Justice, and Other Papers*, 52.
57. "Pluralism, Individualism, and Participation," in *ibid.*, 100.
58. "Human Rights as Property Rights," in *ibid.*, 79.
59. R. H. Tawney, *The Acquisitive Society* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Howe, 1920), 55. On this point, even Bastiat, Marx's favorite whipping boy, was in seeming agreement: "By property I understand the right that the worker has to the value that he has created by his labor . . . The true title to property is the labor that produces it." Frederic Bastiat, *Selected Essays on Political Economy* (Irvington-on-Hudson: The Foundation for Economic Education, 1995), 98. (Of course, elsewhere he equivocated in ways consistent with his market allegiance: "Property is the right to enjoy for oneself the fruits of one's own efforts or to surrender them to another only on the condition of equivalent efforts in return." Frederic Bastiat, *Economic Harmonies* (Irvington-on-Hudson: The Foundation for Economic Education, 1996), 220, emphasis added.
60. Thomas Hill Green, *Lectures on the Principles of Political Obligation and Other Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986): 170.

61. “[W]e have been misled by accepting an unnecessarily narrow concept of property, a concept within which it is impossible to resolve the difficulties of any liberal theory.” Macpherson, *Property, Mainstream and Critical Positions*, 201.

62. “Human Rights as Property Rights,” in Macpherson, *The Rise and Fall of Economic Justice, and Other Papers*, 79–80.

63. Macpherson, *Property, Mainstream and Critical Positions*, 205.

64. “Grundrisse,” in Marx and Engels, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 226.

65. *The Communist Manifesto*, in Marx, *Selected Writings*, 170.

66. *Ibid.*, 172.

67. Macpherson, *Property, Mainstream and Critical Positions*, 207.