

**The Real World of Democracy? C.B. Macpherson's Critique of the Cold War
Reification of 'Liberal Democracy,' 1965**

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“There is a good deal of muddle about democracy,” declared a man with a soft and slightly drawling voice on 22 January 1965. So began a six-part lecture series on the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation delivered by a soft-spoken scholar named Crawford Brough Macpherson (1911-1987), a world-renowned political scientist.¹ That such a “muddle” existed was, of course, hardly self-evident to the many Cold Warriors for whom “liberal democracy” – often rendered “liberal-democracy” by Macpherson – was that coherent set of moral principles and practices distinguishing *our* freedom from *their* totalitarianism. By de-reifying and historicizing liberal democracy, relativizing it both spatially and temporally, Macpherson’s lectures and short book sought to destabilize Cold War polarities. Coming in the 1960s amid the worldwide turmoil of decolonization and the global stand-off between capitalism and communism, this was a noteworthy experiment in “iconoclasm,” in the estimation of world historian Geoffrey Barraclough.² The iconoclast in question came from a leading elite university not renowned as a centre of radicalism and a distinguished leader in Canadian academic affairs.³ The lecture series bore the name of Vincent Massey, a revered Canadian Governor General, and was delivered on the state-owned broadcasting service.

Macpherson was born into a middle-class Presbyterian family and spent the greater part of his life in Toronto. After a stellar undergraduate career at the University of Toronto, he studied at the London School of Economics under such left intellectuals as Harold Laski (his supervisor) and R.H. Tawney (who was more of an inspiration to him). He returned to the University of Toronto (U of T) in 1935 and joined its Department of Political Economy, where he spent most of his academic career from 1935 to 1982. *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke* (1962) was the book that won him an international reputation that endures to this day: some commentators regarded as original and insightful and others as eccentric and inappropriately abstract. It was widely regarded as a Marxist text, insofar as it emphasized the powerful influence on Hobbes and Locke of an orientation to an emerging capitalist market.

Possessive Individualism inaugurated a phrase still in common currency, and it undoubtedly constituted a high point in Macpherson’s career – it is the one book of his that the world outside Canada is apt to remember. Yet it many respects it can be viewed as having inaugurated a much more general “Moment of Macpherson,” extending roughly from 1962 to 1973 – one that encompassed

¹ The lectures were broadcast from 22 January to 26 February and rebroadcast from 10 March to 14 April. They were also picked up by National Public Radio in the United States. Five of them may be (and should be) listened to on-line: see <https://www.cbc.ca/radio/ideas/the-1964-cbc-massey-lectures-the-real-world-of-democracy-1.2946802>. By and large the printed version – C.B. Macpherson, *The Real World of Democracy* (Toronto: Anansi, 2006) [hereafter RWD] aligns with the oral, with the exception of Chapter Three on democracy’s “underdeveloped variant.”

² Geoffrey Barraclough, “Canadian Iconoclasm,” *New Statesman*, 25 March 1965.

³ Macpherson was head of the Canadian Political Science Association, a leader of the Canadian Association of University Teachers, and was soon to be entrusted with the overhaul of the undergraduate curriculum in the faculty of arts and science at the University of Toronto, by general accord the country’s most prestigious university.

not just his famous volume, but a slew of articles and book reviews and a controversial report in 1967 to U of T recommending the overhaul of its arts and science curriculum. In these years the scholar was in his heyday. *Democratic Theory: Essays in Retrieval* (1973) was arguably as formidable as its more famous predecessor and laid out his case in a more systematically theorized form.⁴ He had (and has) many critics and even enemies. None has ever accused him of sloth.

Why the enemies? Because, in a context in which “liberal democracies” were the revered antitheses to the “totalitarian tyrannies” of the socialist bloc and Third World, Macpherson argued that this revered reified dichotomy was simplistic. He thought that the liberal values he cherished – the human rights for which he fought in the 1940s and 1950s, a peaceful world order, the rule of law, ordered civility, almost all the classical liberties – were put at risk by the capitalist social relations pervasive since the seventeenth century. Liberals needed to retrieve democracy, the rule of the many, not the few, from capitalism. But – could one really be an anti-capitalist liberal? And, further, could this mission of retrieval really be accomplished by means of selective but extensive borrowings from a Marxist tradition conventionally construed as the liberals’ arch-enemy? At what point did such borrowings constitute a betrayal of liberalism itself? Often accused of elusiveness and stealth, Macpherson himself thought he was being quite candid:

What I have been trying to do all along (and am still trying to do)...is work out a revision of liberal-democratic theory, a revision which clearly owes a good deal to Marx, in the hope of making that theory more democratic while rescuing that valuable part of the liberal tradition which is submerged when liberalism is identified with capitalist market relations.⁵

His critics thought otherwise. Because his immanent critique focused most intently on his own liberal tradition, liberals in particular never accepted the plausibility or the probity of their compatriot’s life work.⁶

By common consent among the best Macpherson scholars, the “Marxist or Liberal?” debate on these questions reached its best-before date, if indeed it had one, sometime in the 1970s.⁷ Yet for the scholar interested in the history

⁴ A partial list of milestones from the ‘Moment of Macpherson’ should include the many essays from the 1960s, many of which, plus five original ones, can be found in *Democratic Theory: Essays in Retrieval*, which is now generally accessible in a new edition introduced by Frank Cunningham: *Democratic Theory: Essays in Retrieval* (Don Mills: Oxford University Press, Wynford Edition, 2012) [hereafter *DT*]. For other milestones in addition to *Real World*, see C.B. Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962) [hereafter *PI*]; Presidential Advisory Committee on Undergraduate Instruction, *Undergraduate Instruction in Arts and Science in the Faculty of Arts and Science, University of Toronto* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1967).

⁵ C.B. Macpherson, “Humanist Democracy and Elusive Marxism,” *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 9, 3 (1976), 423.

⁶ All of his major titles are now back in print, many of them in new Oxford University Press “Wynford Editions” edited by Frank Cunningham. The one major exception is *The Real World of Democracy*, available from the House of Anansi.

⁷ As Peter Lindsay puts it: “I personally see little point in such exercises. This type of categorization would seem to lend itself to reductionist error more than it would to genuine thought.” Peter Lindsay, *Creative Individualism: The Democratic Vision of C.B. Macpherson* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 42n78. For a judicious assessment, see

of political science in the 1960s and 1970s, the polemics themselves are still interesting, in part because they suggest how slippery the term “Marxist” had become, especially as a term of liberal reproach. It never comfortably fit Macpherson and, so far as I can see, he never applied it to himself. Questioning liberalism’s reified status as ‘that which must not be questioned’ seemed to provoke almost automatic charges of Marxist authoritarianism – and since Macpherson was unabashedly making use of some Marxist concepts, one can understand why such a reaction seemed plausible.

What did it mean to be a liberal democrat critical of capitalism in the Cold War and the radicalizing 1960s? As a man who “spoke the liberal language, albeit with a heavy Marxist inflection, and took liberalism seriously enough to embrace some of its core values,” one who built his argument “on a close reading, particularly of Hobbes and Locke,”⁸ Macpherson appealed to those impatient with both liberal and Marxist doctrinaires and anxious to rethink what democracy might mean and how it might still be defended.

The Real World of Democracy merits close attention as a significant element in the ‘Moment of Macpherson.’ It offers us a good example of the promise and peril of that mid-century moment. Only 67 pages long in its first edition, the pamphlet-length text, likely hurriedly written in the closing months of 1964, hardly has the scholarly heft of *Possessive Individualism* or *Democratic Theory*. *Real World* offers contemporary critics of Macpherson as an irretrievably dated figure from another time low-hanging fruit. As philosopher Frank Cunningham noted in 1993, rather than the future imagined in the book – in which liberal democracies, the communist bloc, and the Third World would all converge in a more harmonious order that had wisely learned to move beyond capitalism -- we find one in which

possessive individualism, inequality, and a market economy not only remain dominant features of the capitalist world, but it, and not socialist equality has provided the model for peoples of both second and third world countries, who, given an opportunity, have voted against socialism and for an extreme version of market capitalism.⁹

And Cunningham was writing before the full consolidation of a neoliberal world order,¹⁰ Granting all these limitations, *Real World* offers an unrivalled glimpse into a formidably intelligent and critical western liberal trying to re-situate himself and his tradition historically and spatially – within a *longue durée* extending from the sixteenth century to the present and within a world characterized by ideologies and political formations operating both within and far beyond national borders.

It was comprised of six chapters, each of them based on a CBC lecture summarizing a complex theme in less than 20 pages. The first lecture laid out

Frank Cunningham, *The Political Thought of C.B. Macpherson: Contemporary Applications* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 52-54.

⁸ Jules Townshend, *C.B. Macpherson and the Problems of Liberal Democracy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), 2.

⁹ Frank Cunningham, *The Real World of Democracy Revisited, and Other Essays on Democracy and Socialism* (Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1994), 3.

¹⁰ For more present-day reflections, see my “Challenging the common sense of neoliberalism: Gramsci, Macpherson, and the next left,” in Leo Panitch and Greg Albo, eds., *Socialist Register* 2018 (London: Merlin, 2017), 275-297.

many of Macpherson's core definitions and claims, all of which went to historicize and de-reify liberal democracy and undermine its claims to (temporal and spatial) universality. Liberalism and democracy were, conceptually and historically, distinct from each other. For Macpherson, liberalism could be defined as the politics of choice. It was something much more than a limited political tradition; it meant that "both the society as a whole and the system of government were organized on a principle of freedom of choice." It meant individuals were free to choose their religion, their pattern of life, their marriage partners, their occupations; indeed, they were free to make the best arrangements, the best bargain they could, in everything that affected their lives. In an ideal liberal order, people offered their services, their products, their savings, or their labour, on the market and got the market price for them, which was itself determined by all their independent decisions. And "with the income they got they made more choices – how much to spend, how much to save, what to spend on, and what to invest in." Instead of a society based "on custom, on status, and on an authoritarian allocation of work and rewards," one found "a society based on individual mobility, on contract, and on impersonal market allocation of work and rewards in response to individual choices." People once accustomed to lives conditioned by their position in "ranks or orders or communities" now found themselves living, "with delight or with fear," in a society that required them to "think of themselves as individuals free to choose."

Even governments themselves, treated as suppliers of "certain political goods, were "put in a sort of market situation." They furnished not just the general political good of law and order but also the specific political goods "demanded by those who had the upper hand in running that particular kind of society." The "job" of the competitive party system was "to uphold the competitive market society, by keeping the government responsive to the shifting majority interests of those who were running the market society." Market criteria spread far beyond the economy in a society governed by "the politics of choice," in which "everything is up for choice, or may be up for choice at any time – everything, that is to say, except the liberal society and the democratic franchise themselves. The ideal of liberal-democracy is consumers' sovereignty – we buy what we want with our votes."¹¹

Democracy, on the other hand – and here Macpherson was thinking of its meaning in such authors as Aristotle, an abiding influence on him -- meant "rule by the people" or "government in accordance with the will of the bulk of the people," "a system of government... in which the majority actually controls the rulers,...those who make and enforce political decisions." The "majority must be able to say what they want and make it stick." It entailed, more generally, "rule by the common people, the plebeians...the sway of the lowest and largest class...government by and for the common people, by and for the hitherto oppressed classes." In other words, the "original notion of democracy" was "rule by and for the poor and oppressed" or "rule by and for the poor."¹²

Thus, on his reading, 'liberal democracy' was a term that concealed an underlying tension between two divergent and potentially conflicting political and social trajectories. Contrary to much Cold War opinion, there might be

¹¹ *RWD*, 8, 9, 9-10, 11, 12-13, 48.

¹² *RWD*, 2, 26, 7-8, 68.

“nothing democratic” about a liberal society, especially one divided between the rich and the poor. Driven by imperatives that were both political and economic, initially hostile liberals accepted only some elements of democracy “on competitive liberal grounds.” Over time democracy became, not a threat to the liberal state, but rather “a fulfillment” of it; not a term for a disparaged plebeian tradition but one designating the entire order’s highest principles. In its narrow sense, “a system of government... in which the majority actually controls the rulers,... those who make and enforce political decisions,” democracy had at least been partially achieved. “We in the West,” he proclaimed, “have built up a system which we value very highly. It combines a large measure of individual liberty with a fair approximation to majority rule. None of the other systems have managed it, and we don’t intend to be talked out of our achievement no matter how necessary a policy of co-existence with the other systems may be.” Yet, much as one valued the achievements of “the West” that “We” inhabited – and this book is densely populated with such “We’s” – such freedoms had not fundamentally altered the market society. Democracy was applied, “as a top dressing,” to soil “already prepared by the operation of the competitive, individualist market society.”¹³ Topdressing – sand or prepared soil mix applied to a lawn – can be used to smooth its surface and help avoid desiccation; over the years, multiple applications may gradually modify the profile of the soil.¹⁴

Somewhat satisfied in the west, egalitarian democratic demands had returned in a radical way by the mid-twentieth century, this time on a world scale. Macpherson argued that twentieth-century liberals in the West could no longer claim to be democracy’s sole guardians. There were now the “somewhat different non-liberal systems of most of the underdeveloped countries of Asia and Africa.” All of these non-western models had “historical claim to the title democracy,” because they echoed the original ideal, i.e., “rule by or in the interests of the hitherto oppressed class.” They all justified themselves with reference to “the classic notion of democracy as an equal human society.”¹⁵

The second lecture explored the claim of Communist states to the term. Macpherson wanted to historicize the Communist bloc by relating its experience of dictatorship with those of such revolutions as the English in the seventeenth and the French in the eighteenth centuries. In all such epochal moments for liberalism, a minority believed it needed to take command.

And so it had been in Russia in 1917. Lenin inherited the insights of Marx, who had made the ancient concept of democracy “more precise” by “relating it to the historical development of systems of production, and particularly of the capitalist system of production.” On Macpherson’s very conventional interpretation,¹⁶ Lenin had conceptualized the vanguard party as a means of modernizing “a nation mainly of backward peasants,” which necessitated,

¹³ *RWD*, 11, 14, 4, 16.

¹⁴ As a non-landscaper, I rely here on the expert advice of “The Lawn Institute,” <https://www.thelawninstitute.org/pages/education/lawn-maintenance/topdressing/>

¹⁵ *RWD*, 17, 48.

¹⁶ For a much more satisfying contemporary analysis of Lenin’s thought about the party and its purpose, see Lars Lih, *Lenin Rediscovered: What Is to Be Done? in Context* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2006). Macpherson was merely reproducing what Lih calls the “textbook Lenin” of mainstream scholarship on the Russian Revolution.

among other things, an economic strategy prioritizing “capital equipment” over “the production of things for people to eat and use.” It was a problem “we in the West” could not recall ever confronting, Macpherson argued. Yet, insofar as Communists were genuinely trying to move “towards a firmly held goal of an equal society in which everybody can be fully human,” they were simply using the word in its “original and normal sense.” In fact, vanguard parties might also be construed as democratic in a narrower sense as well, if there was full intra-party democracy, membership was open, and they did not demand abnormal levels of commitment.¹⁷ Macpherson was really only summarizing much conventional scholarship on the Soviet Communism, epitomized by historian E.H. Carr, and more recently extended by such Alfred G. Meyer, Herbert Marcuse, and Adam B. Ulam, all of whom Macpherson had earlier assessed, in some cases closely anticipating *Real World's* discussion.¹⁸ In no case did his reviews offer an approval of dictatorships.

Macpherson thought that vanguardism, perhaps a tragic necessity in some situations, such as the revolutions in England, France and Russia, nonetheless constituted “an exceedingly dangerous path,” one providing “no guarantee that such a vanguard would “in fact use their power for the ends for which it was supposed to be used.” A vanguard state “may be a government *for* the people but it is not government *by* the people, or even by the choice of the people,” he remarked. As for the potentially democratic one-party states, Macpherson noted that none had yet appeared on earth.¹⁹ Taken out of context, his attempt at a reconnaissance of the ideological *assumptions* defended by Soviet-style regimes could be and were mistaken as a defence of those regimes.

Almost as controversial was Macpherson’s third and rather under-researched chapter, which dwelt upon democracy in the “newly independent underdeveloped countries” or “the third world, as it is sometimes called.” Here was a “new world, “neither communist nor capitalist.” Macpherson drew a picture of countries in which there was generally little in the way of “internal class divisions of an exploitive kind.” This made it very difficult for Communists to make headway, for “communist doctrine and communist movements” could flourish only “where there is something for them to take hold of.” In such settings of “relative classlessness,” one party-states in the Third World could register a claim to be democratic insofar as the parties, unlike those in Communist states, did often entail grassroots control, open membership, and realistic expectations of members.²⁰

If the first three lectures set out models of democracy that corresponded to widely-debated questions of the 1960s, the next two, focused specifically on

¹⁷ *RWD*, 21-22, 24, 28, 47, 21 25.

¹⁸ C.B. Macpherson, Reviews of Alfred G. Meyer, *Leninism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1957), 129-30; Adam B. Ulam, *The Unfinished Revolution: An Essay on the Sources of Influence of Marxism and Communism* (New York: Random House, 1960), in *Political Science Quarterly* September 1962, 451-3; and Herbert Marcuse, *Soviet Marxism: A Critical Analysis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958), in *Political Science Quarterly* 74 (March 1959), 152-3. In his review of Marcuse, he was struck by his finding that the Communists confronted “a historical dynamic’ by which the theory, ‘once incorporated into the foundational institutions and objectives of the new society... surpasses the intentions of the leadership’: to this dynamic ‘the leadership itself is subjected—no matter how autonomous and totalitarian it may be,’” a foreshadowing of *Real World* six years later.

¹⁹ *RWD*, 28, 26, 32.

²⁰ *RWD*, 33, 47, 15, 45, 15, 49, 47.

the ills of liberal democracy as a “system of power,” explored more recondite territory, specifically Macpherson’s idea of the “transfer of powers” and the “myth of maximization.” Both discussions recapitulated themes developed earlier in *Possessive Individualism*, but at least in the first case introduced new elements.

Macpherson argued that a “curiously limited” vision of “human excellence” – or more strongly, “a travesty of the human condition” – had been built into market society and hence into liberal democracies, which took every expenditure of human energy to be painful, no one worked except in expectation of material reward, and assumed that one should prefer to obtain satisfactions with the least expenditure of effort. This “hollow vision” of humanity influenced liberal democracy as a whole, which was, “like any other state,” “a system of power.”²¹ Government – enjoying a monopoly on “the power to compel by physical force or constraint” and entailing the power of governors “to compel the governed” – obviously meant such a system in the narrow sense, but, Macpherson insisted, it should also be seen as a force working “to maintain a set of relations between individuals and groups within the society which are power relations.” Macpherson conceded that when a person sold “the use of that strength to another at its market price,” there was “no net transfer of his powers to another. He is selling something he owns for what it is worth: he gets no less than he gives.” Without “free access” to the “means of labour,” a person’s powers were diminished, and with no access, that person “ceases to live.” The liberal democratic state was both the government in a narrow sense, i.e. a necessary institution whose legitimacy rested on “the governed having some effective control over the governors by way of choice of governors” and an institution with a much broader mandate, vested with “the job” of maintaining the relations whereby some people’s powers was transferred to others. Such injurious power relations had been obscured by capitalism’s enormous productivity. It was now possible to imagine a modern productive society that did not require “the transfer of powers from non-owners” – Macpherson in 1973 would call this the owners’ “extractive power”²² – and indeed, such societies were not only possible but had already emerged in the socialist bloc.²³

The transfer of powers thesis was developed briefly in *Possessive Individualism*, but *Real World* was the first time it received such a detailed exposition. Drawing on Hobbes as much as Marx,²⁴ *Real World* clarified what

²¹ *RWD*, 56.

²² *DT*, 42.

²³ *RWD*, 61, 62, 62-3, 63, 64, 57 64.

²⁴ Leo Panitch writes that the theory was “*entirely* founded on the theory of surplus value, only extended to point out that, in addition to the material value transferred by the labourer to the capitalist in the process of production in the form of value over and above that of what it takes to reproduce the wage of the exchange contract in material terms, there is an additional loss to the labourer.” Leo Panitch, “Liberal Democracy and Socialist Democracy: The Antinomies of C.B. Macpherson,” *Socialist Register*, Vol. 18 (1981), 147 (emphasis added). Victor Svacek, “The Elusive Marxism of C.B. Macpherson,” *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 9, 3 (September 1976), 405, calls this Macpherson’s “terminological codpiece.” The Hobbesian genealogy seems clearer to me: see Macpherson, *Possessive Individualism*, 56; Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, edited and introduced by C.B. Macpherson (London: Penguin, 1985), Book I, Chapter 11, 160-8; Phillip Hansen, *Reconsidering C.B. Macpherson: From Possessive Individualism to Democratic Theory and Beyond* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015), 70.

²⁴ Macpherson, *Possessive Individualism*, 56.

was inherently undemocratic about capitalism as Macpherson understood it. Under capitalism, one's powers were not only diminished by lack of access to the means of life, but by virtue of the fact that one was no longer exercising powers for one's own purposes. Powers must be exercised in order fully to exist, and "in this exercise manifest something of the essential character of what it means to be a free and rational being."²⁵ It was obvious that "the natural development of the capitalist market" had distanced the real world of democracy from the theory's hypothesized "perfect competition." When such competition was removed, "the firms go on maximizing their profits, but this no longer maximizes social utility." The notion that the market maximized utilities or satisfactions was a myth, Macpherson argued, first because it was difficult to think of a standard system of measurement that would empirically sustain the claim; and second, because the market could not "reward people in proportion to the energy and skill they expend," because "it had to reward ownership as well. It has to look after the transfer of powers..."²⁶ In his conclusion, Macpherson, citing Keynes, foresaw a time when the "accumulation of wealth" would no longer be of "high social importance." Then "we" might aspire to retrieve "the democratic values of equal freedom and equal access to a rational purposive life."²⁷

The puzzle prompted by the reception of *Real World* is two-fold. First, it is odd that it did not arouse a storm of public controversy as a radio lecture, given what we think we know about Cold War Canada. (If the radio lectures prompted calls for Macpherson to be hounded Red on the Radio, I have not, to my surprise, found them.) Second, it is equally odd that it *did* rouse such an anti-communist storm among critics over the ten years following its publication in Canada and Britain.

We have already hinted at one reason why the lectures were received so placidly: given their unremittingly academic tone, intricate arguments, and arcane references, they probably caused many listeners to zone out.²⁸ The last two lectures, oriented to the "transfer of powers," emphasized a concept Macpherson himself noted had stumped many of his critics.²⁹ And the mythical maximization of utilities was an implausibly abstract topic for a radio talk clocking in at 29 minutes and 36 seconds.³⁰

A second, more contentious explanation for the apathetic response to his lectures was that many liberals in his CBC audience might not have heard much with which they strenuously disagreed. They were written in late 1964, a scant two years after the Cuban Missile Crisis, widely seen as an ominous sign that the world was on the brink of destruction. Placed in its 1964/5 context, *Real World* makes much more sense than it does as a supposed treatise on democracy in the abstract. From mid-1963 to the end of 1964, Macpherson was a director of the Canadian Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CCND) and

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²⁶ *RWD*, 69, 72, 73, 76, 78.

²⁷ *RWD*, 90, 94, 95, 94-5.

²⁸ Minogue, not exactly an impartial critic, did memorably capture this stylistic quality of Macpherson: "The problems of the argument might well diminish if Macpherson were to equip the tortuous defiles of his argument with a few examples to supply foot and handhold." Minogue, "Humanist Democracy," 382.

²⁹ Macpherson, "Humanist Democracy and Elusive Marxism," 424.

³⁰ <https://www.cbc.ca/radio/ideas/the-1964-cbc-massey-lectures-the-real-world-of-democracy-1.2946802>. On this site, the lecture is wrongly dated to 1964.

headed its Policy Committee. He controversially propelled the organization from a strictly-defined anti-nuclear towards a more generally anti-war and pro-neutrality stance.³¹ The arguments of one CCND paper from a policy committee he chaired, *A Canadian Policy for Peace*, flowed almost directly into *Real World*:

The world is no longer divided into Communist and anti-Communist nations. There is a large new sector, comprising most of Africa and south-east Asia, which is now independent, uncommitted to either East or West, and intends to remain so. East and West can no longer hope to make their way of life prevail in the world, or even save their way of life from extinction, by cold war. Only by policies which recognize the just claims of the newly-freed third of the world, can the West hope to save and extend the values of freedom and humanity enshrined in the UN Charter.

At the same time, the emergence of these new nations has made another difference in the Cold War. The very existence of the uncommitted nations, and their powerful voice in the UN General Assembly, have taken some of the strain out of the cold war. And if the new nations are allowed and helped to develop, they will be able to take more of the strain out of it. Yet the major powers, so deeply enmeshed in Cold War patterns of thought and action, cannot help the new nations, except in order to advance their own cold war strength. Canada, being a middle power, can take an imaginative lead here which the bigger nations seem unable to take.³²

In January 1964, as an activist with the Canadian Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CCND), Macpherson slammed the Liberal government's decision to acquire nuclear warheads, a "miserable contrast" with its "messages of peace and goodwill for the New Year."³³ In March, he criticized the "self-defeating" argument that Canadians should not "get too far out of step with the U.S.: "If you're afraid to get out of step, you can't expect to change the policy or have any influence at all."³⁴ In November 1964 he visited External Affairs Minister Paul Martin to urge him to support the admission of Communist China to the United Nations.³⁵

In September 1965, he followed up the broadcasts with a lecture in Regina on the "Strange World of Modern Ideologies" that declared "the Western nations must give more financial and technical aid to newly-independent underdeveloped countries of the world, or the chances of human and democratic development in these countries could be irretrievably lost." This audience received a deftly trimmed-down version of *Real World*:

'We now have in sight a society of abundance...but our whole society is organized on the basis of scarcity,' he said.

³¹ "Proposal - C.B. Macpherson, Summary, (3) i-vi, viii-x," n.d., file "Meetings - Minutes and Reports," vol. 1, Canadian Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CCND), MG 28 I389, LAC.

³² "Draft Statement of Policy - 'A Canadian Policy for Peace,'" Summer 1963, file "Meetings - Minutes and Reports," vol. 1, Canadian Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CCND), MG 28 I389, LAC.

³³ "Anti-bomb organizations deplore A-heads here," *Ottawa Citizen*, 3 January 1964.

³⁴ "CCND Chief Predicts NATO Force Boycott," *Edmonton Journal*, 21 March 1964.

³⁵ He had earlier voted against this very policy: "Handwritten Minutes of Board of Directors of CCND, Montreal," afternoon, 26 October 1963, file "Meetings - Minutes and Reports," vol. 1, Canadian Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CCND), MG 28 I389, LAC.

...The West, he said, must try to make the ‘tremendous intellectual effort’ necessary to switch from an ideology based on scarcity, to one based on abundance, and it must impress upon its political and financial leaders, the reality of the revolutionary world in which two other ideologies based on abundance exist.

He said the first step would be the positive decolonization of underdeveloped countries, with technical and capital aid to enable them to make their own take-off.

These countries, as the Communist countries, reject the competitive capital and multi-party principles of the Western ideology, and have the same humanist views Karl Marx had.

But they reject the Communist idea of class analysis—claiming once foreign powers leave, they have a classless society.

‘Some speak of Communist imperialism alongside of Western imperialism,’ he said....

‘If we care about the quality of democracy, the quality of human society, we have a choice. We can help them maintain and improve the levels or make them do it all on their own and this would probably mean slipping backwards in the democratic scale...’³⁶

This speech calls sharply into question the myth of Macpherson the “Stealth Marxist,” ensnaring the innocent in his cunning web of sophistries and abstractions. There are no indications his liberal audience in Regina was outraged by anything they heard. After all, a fellow student of Laski, Pierre Trudeau, riding a wave of revulsion against nuclear weapons and equally reviled by some as soft on Communism, would four years later come to power with what seemed a somewhat ‘Macphersonian’ program of participatory democracy and, perhaps, the extraction of Canada from Cold War polarities.³⁷

It is telling that the book, rather than the lectures themselves, stirred up controversy. It passed through nine further impressions from 1966 to 1974 as a publication of the CBC (and incidentally generating an unexpected windfall for the Macpherson family).³⁸ Some reviewers were appreciative. Geoffrey Barraclough, the renowned European historian and recent author of *An Introduction to Contemporary History*, considered Macpherson’s book a refreshingly “clear-headed” re-evaluation of the simplistic notion that liberalism and democracy were inseparably linked, and agreed that “We are...

³⁶ “Six speakers arranged for Plain Talk Series”; “Poor nations need support,” *Leader-Post* (Regina), 18, 28 September 1965.

³⁷ In contrast with the vast majority of leftists in Canada, Macpherson later offered Trudeau his critical support for military aid to the civil power under the aegis of the War Measures Act in 1970. He thought the government, having relied upon an argument, should give itself a strict timetable for stopping it. “I note that, however strong the case was at the time, it has now lost much of its strength. The search and detention powers that you were persuaded were so urgently needed have now been used, in the widespread way the police thought necessary. Advantage has now been taken of the element of surprise; it cannot have the same effect again.” C.B. Macpherson Fonds, 887-0069/005, Folder, “Letter to PM., etc.,” C.B. Macpherson, F.R.S.C., to Trudeau, 18 October 1970.

³⁸ His daughter Sheila recalls that on the proceeds of the Massey Lecture, her family was able to purchase a dishwasher with the proceeds, which ever after bore the name “the Massey dishwasher.” Interview with Sheila Macpherson, Toronto, 4 April 2017.

are the laggards in the race to the 21st century.”³⁹ For Alexander Brady, eminent political scientist at U of T, the book was “brilliantly argued, forcible and highly provocative.”⁴⁰ A.H. Hanson, Professor of Politics at the University of Leeds, writing in the *Times Literary Supplement*, considered Macpherson to be not only a “very learned Marxist” but also an “exceptionally civilized and persuasive one.”⁴¹

Yet Hanson was mixing his praise with the delicately phrased insinuation that Macpherson was coming from a very problematic ideological location. Many reviewers followed this path. Of the nine substantive contemporary reviews of *Real World* I have located, only Barraclough failed to register some sharp objections to it. In the *Tribune*, the flagship of the Labour Party left in Britain, journalist Anthony Arblaster, later to write his own big book about liberalism, judged *Real World* to be “a very disappointing book on a very important subject,” in part because of its “intolerably abstract and schematic manner.”⁴² As Brady pithily put it, “It is unfortunate that politics is not such a tidy subject as geometry.”⁴³ “Macpherson begins brilliantly, but then tails off into some very thin Marxist metaphysics,” political theorist Bernard Crick complained.⁴⁴

At a time when a reified “liberal democracy” vs. “Communism” dichotomy seems to have entranced so much of the academic and non-academic world, many reviewers rejected Macpherson’s attempt to rethink both of this dichotomy’s poles. Rather than clearing up the “muddle” on democracy, Macpherson’s use of the term risked making it “so compendious as to deprive it of meaning,” Hanson complained.⁴⁵ Writing in *Canadian Dimension*, philosopher Anthony Mardiros agreed: Macpherson was “much too ready to accept as democracy that which claims to be democracy.”⁴⁶ Brady thought Macpherson had oversimplified liberalism’s complicated history by intertwining it with that of capitalism.⁴⁷

A red flag to many critical bulls was Macpherson’s handling of the Soviet Union. Arblaster faulted Macpherson’s treatment of the regime: his account seemed “to take it for granted that the Soviet system is aimed at the achievement of equality, and, incredibly, makes no mention of Stalin or Stalinism.”⁴⁸ Trotskyist Leslie Tolmin scored Macpherson’s “inclination to rationalize the power of existing authority.” In effect, he was offering “a rationalization of Stalinism” and defending “the permanent authoritarian rule’ of the Soviet bureaucracy.”⁴⁹

³⁹ Barraclough, “Canadian Iconoclasm,” 472.

⁴⁰ Alexander Brady, “Social Studies, National and International,” *University of Toronto Quarterly* 35,4 (July 1966), 469.

⁴¹ A.H. Hanson, “Marxist Democracy,” *Times Literary Supplement*, 9 June 1966, 510.

⁴² Anthony Arblaster, “History made tidy,” *Tribune* (London), 6 May 1966, p.13.

⁴³ Brady, “Social Studies, National and International,” *University of Toronto Quarterly* 35,4 (July 1966), 457-471 (review essay on recent publications in social science).

⁴⁴ Bernard Crick, “All for democracy,” *The Observer*, 10 April 1966, 21.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ Anthony Mardiros, “The Ideological World of C.B. Macpherson,” *Canadian Dimension* 3, Nos. 3-4, 21.

⁴⁷ Alexander Brady, “Social Studies, National and International,” *University of Toronto Quarterly* 35,4 (July 1966), 457-471 (review essay on recent publications in social science).

⁴⁸ Anthony Arblaster, “History made tidy,” *Tribune* (London), 6 May 1966, p.13.

⁴⁹ Leslie Tolmin, *Socialism & the Professor* (Montreal, Edmonton, Toronto and Vancouver: League for Socialist Action, n.d. [c.1966], 4-5, 7, 8, 10.

Such a severely critical tone anticipated much of the academic treatment of *Real World* in the 1970s and 1980s. Kenneth Minogue of the London School of Economics (and also editor of an edition of Hobbes's *Leviathan* competitive with that of Macpherson and soon to be a star of the neo-liberal Mont Pelerin Society) delivered a blistering critique of Macpherson in the mid-1970s that used *Real World* extensively as a primary source and can be taken as a model of an emergent *genre* of Macpherson-bashing.

For Minogue, Macpherson's supposed proclivity towards totalitarianism was the seemingly ineluctable consequence of his rationalist propensity for constructing social blueprints. Here was a man, like the educated hedgehog of Archilochus, who knew just one big thing. (Minogue was blatantly drawing on, but curiously not citing, a text from Isaiah Berlin).⁵⁰ Macpherson's proto-totalitarianism arose in part from his method of abstraction: he was intent on stretching "abstractions in order to grind down all distinctions which stand in the way of the one fundamental criterion: a fully human life." Minogue nonetheless detected in him a dire agenda for a completely collectivized order, perhaps "a kind of kibbutz life with ping pong and hi fi after work in the communal hall," in which there would be private property (excepting, *perhaps*, underwear and toothbrushes), no privacy, and no money. In it, "*everything* will depend upon political decisions." Only in a society "entirely homogeneous in desires, tastes, levels of energy, and intensity of adherence to roughly the same set of beliefs" would such a future be possible. Breaking down all the barriers existing between people, envisaging "free-floating human beings tied to nothing at all," Macpherson might seem to be offering "a vision of liberation," but would be the outcome of his agenda if not "the most profound enslavement, indeed the most elaborate thwarting of human development, that could be imagined"?⁵¹

Macpherson responded Minogue's total critique with his customary restraint. Besides pointing out his critic's mistakes in logic, he observed that the utopian future imputed to him by Minogue offered a prospect "which revolts me as much as it revolts him." The attempts to reach a "non-contentious *and* non-totalitarian society," as evidenced in nineteenth-century utopian communities or in the "Soviet system in this century," had "all failed." Whether they had done so because of the "impossibility of isolating a non-market community from an engulfing market society" in the first case or the "monstrous real scarcity with which it began" in the second, "no one can say for certain."⁵² It was a very patient reply from someone who for more than a decade had marked his distance from Soviet-style regimes.

Some critical reviewers faulted Macpherson for failing to provide solutions for what he had diagnosed as the challenges confronting democracy in the world. J. Roland Pennock, a political scientist at Swarthmore College, future author of *Democratic Political Theory* in 1979, thought the argument leading up to Macpherson's most prominent practical suggestion—that western governments offer massive economic aid to Third World countries as the best way to save liberal democracy—involved a "massive *non sequitur*." One might

⁵⁰ See Isaiah Berlin, *The Hedgehog and the Fox: An Essay on Tolstoy's View of History* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2016 (first published 1951)).

⁵¹ Minogue, "Humanist Democracy: The Political Thought of C.B. Macpherson," 377, 380, 384, 391, 394. Some of Minogue's polemic targeted *Democratic Theory* in general, but he also cited *Real World* extensively.

⁵² Macpherson, "Humanist Democracy and Elusive Marxism," 429.

accept as valuable Macpherson proposition that “we must substitute spiritual for material values,” and it was also possible to argue “that unless we do so our polities will cease to command the support of citizens.” The conclusion that we must therefore “increase our material aid to underdeveloped nations” did not follow from these premises.⁵³ Tolmin deemed Macpherson’s recommendations for greatly enhanced foreign aid as “singularly pathetic.”⁵⁴

That critique did capture what was distinctly middle-of-the-road about Macpherson on the Third World. He was offering, not revolutionary solidarity with its insurgent masses, but a charity model to safeguard the reputation and well-being of western capitalist societies. Perhaps with such criticisms in mind, Macpherson himself later remarked that, if he re-writing *Real World* after fifteen years, he would subject it to a substantial revision. Yet he also noted that “our students” needed to be “jerked out of their unthinking acceptance of liberal democracy as the only model of democracy.” He declined to withdraw it because “I think our students still need that jerk.”⁵⁵

Minogue suggests one of the reasons *Real World* came to be the object of such hostile criticism: many up-and-coming political theorists were awakening to the emergent hegemony of neoliberalism, which in almost every respect is the polar opposite of everything Macpherson stood for. A host of fledgling neoliberals in the 1970s and 1980s discovered the considerable polemical mileage offered by tying Macpherson as closely as they could to the Soviet model.

As we have seen, there is reason for taking *Real World* seriously not just as a contribution to his political thought and writing. Doing so means respecting its context, rhetorical strategies, and implied subject-position — not highlighting decontextualized quotations with the polemical aim of slaying an ideological foe. To some extent, Macpherson brought *Real World’s* fate upon himself, since in places his presentation of the ideological *assumptions* underlying his three models, each of them presented in highly condensed and abstract form, created the impression that he was treating as empirical realities what were in his mind, for the most part, ideological postulates. Moreover, there was undoubtedly a good-natured Enlightenment optimism present in his appraisal of all of Macpherson’s three worlds, each of which was inhabited by thoughtful people in quest of a peaceful and rational planet and willing to understand and even trust their counterparts in the other two spheres. Someone in quest of the darker side of each world — the transatlantic slave trade and predatory imperialism in the first, Stalinist repression and murder in the second, and class exploitation and militarism in the third, for instance — will come away empty-handed.

Both liberals and Marxists, unyielding in their own established conventions of assessing what was and was not democratic, thus projected on to Macpherson identities and positions that were not really his. In their drive to reduce Macpherson to a simple essence, often flouting as they did their own

⁵³ J. Roland Pennock, Review of C.B. Macpherson, *The Real World of Democracy* [with Asia Publishing House, *Freedom and Development* and Peter H. Odegard, *Political Power and Social Change*]. *Political Science Quarterly* 82, 2 (June 1967), 297.

⁵⁴ Tolmin, *Socialism & the Professor*, 20.

⁵⁵ The context was a rebuke by Steven Lukes that Macpherson had somehow overlooked neo-colonialism in the Third World. University of Toronto Archives, Macpherson Fonds, 887-0069/004, Folder, “Letters re Festschrift,” Macpherson to Steven Lukes, 8 January 1980.

professed theoretical and political precepts, they missed the most obvious message of *Real World*. In a world menaced by nuclear war, it was wise to acknowledge the ideological claims registered by the central players (which in his mind included the countries emerging from colonization).⁵⁶ The paradox here for liberals was that Macpherson not only plainly knew their own tradition intimately but, in relativizing it, he was merely reporting what was in fact the case. There was, one might say, a certain fact-resistant illiberalism to their Cold War liberalism. As Jules Townshend puts it with respect to them, “No constructive engagement with his work was attempted.”⁵⁷

Macpherson’s liminal ideological identity, liberal and (seemingly) Marxist at one and the same time was of a piece with an equally liminal Canada, an indistinctly imagined community that might (in the dreams of Macpherson and his peacenik compatriots) pursue its own independent and neutral foreign policy. Critical liberal ideas broadly accepted by many liberal intellectuals from the 1930s to the 1960s came to be perceived far more critically in the 1970s and 1980s. In the milieu in which Macpherson came to intellectual maturity, his brand of radical democracy was fairly commonplace. Tawney provided him with the inspiration for the very concept and phrase of “possessive individualism,” Laski with direct anticipations of his argument about the problematic relation of capitalism with freedom.⁵⁸ As can be seen in the subsequent efflorescence of the Canadian political economy school, which claimed Macpherson as an ancestor, he played a bridging role between that generation and a new one: but in the world of political theory especially, their trajectory was a strenuously contested one.⁵⁹ One of his most prominent graduate students, Ed Broadbent, at work in 1965 on his doctoral thesis about John Stuart Mill,⁶⁰ would become federal leader of the New Democratic Party, which itself came to sound very “Macphersonian” in its combative democratic leftism in the 1970s and 1980s.⁶¹ It was in the third quarter of the twentieth century that a somewhat egalitarian version of “democracy” became a general (but never universal) article of faith among Canadians.⁶² If ever there is a reinvigoration of interest in his vision of democracy, as a whole way of life rather than just a system of political representation, it will likely involve a more appreciative, holistic and balanced appraisal of ‘the Moment of Macpherson.’

⁵⁶ A point made by Jules Townshend, *C.B. Macpherson*, 5.

⁵⁷ Townshend, *C.B. Macpherson*, 100.

⁵⁸ As Jules Townshend notes, Laski in 1940 argued that “liberalism could survive through ‘a reinvigoration of [its] doctrinal content’ based upon a ‘new conception of property in which social ownership and control replace individual ownership and control.’ Cited, Townshend, *Macpherson*, 9.

⁵⁹ Reginald Whitaker, “‘Confused Alarms of Struggle and Flight’: English-Canadian Political Science in the 1970s,” *Canadian Historical Review* 60, 1 (March 1979), 17.

⁶⁰ See J.E. Broadbent, “The Importance of Class in the Political Theory of John Stuart Mill,” *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 1, 3 (September 1968), 270-287.

⁶¹ As is well explored in Christo Aivalis, “Tommy Douglas, David Lewis, Ed Broadbent, and the Legacy of Democratic Socialism in the Federal New Democratic Party, 1968-1984,” in Stephanie Bangarth, Roberta Lexier, and Jonathan Weier eds., *Party of Conscience: The CCF, the NDP, and Social Democracy in Canada* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2018).

⁶² For an exposition of this revisionist approach, see William Robert Langford, “‘Helping People Help Themselves’: Democracy, Development, and the Global Politics of Poverty in Canada, 1964-1979,” Ph.D. Thesis, Queen’s University, 2017.

