

ascriptions of interests become 'the object of practical discourse'.⁶⁴ If my interpretation of Habermas's understanding of universalization, set out above, is correct, he assumes that such practical discourse will lead to an endogenous change of preferences and perspectives on the part of the communicators such that shared needs and 'consensual action'⁶⁵ will predominate. Yet how can one rationally resolve this difference between two such rational men? How can one conclude which is rationally and morally superior—Kohlberg's Stage 6 or Habermas's Stage 7, and the norms and judgements they respectively generate—other than by *deciding* between them? Of course, one might at this point maintain that the very distinction between 'decision' and 'rational argument' is misleading here. After all, would not any such decision be based on *reasons*: do we not decide on the basis of *rational grounds*? But neither Habermas nor Kohlberg (nor Rawls) has shown that there is a neutral or objective standpoint from which the reasons grounding alternative decisions can themselves be assessed as more or less rational.

So I conclude that this line of argument also fails to establish the critical vantage-point that Habermas seeks and that we have not yet escaped the Weberian gods and demons.

⁶⁴ Habermas, *Communication*, p. 90.

⁶⁵ Habermas, *Communication*, p. 110.

12 C. B. Macpherson and the Real and Ideal Worlds of Democracy

Brought Macpherson's democratic theory strikes a distinctive note. Resolutely Anglo-Saxon in its range of reference and its crisp, clear, analytic style, it unites a Marxist-inspired critique of 'capitalist market society with its class-division'¹ and of the underlying market assumptions of the justifying theory of liberal democracy with the constructive 'liberal' aim of 'retrieving' from that theory the 'notion of a democratic society as one that provides equally for the self-development of all the members of a political community'.² His motivating animus is against possessive individualism—'this perverse, artificial, and temporary concept of man', inherited from 'classical liberal individualism', as 'essentially a consumer of utilities, an infinite desirer and infinite appropriator' whose over-riding motivation is 'to maximise the flow of satisfactions, or utilities, to himself from society'.³ His positive commitment, by contrast, is to a 'co-operative and creative individualism' which rescues 'the humanist side of Mill's liberalism (the side based on his idea of man as essentially an exertor and developer of his human capacities) from the possessive individualist side (based on the Benthamite concept of man as essentially consumer and appropriator)'.⁴ Thus he places himself among 'those who accept and would promote the normative values that were read into the liberal-democratic society and state by

This chapter was first published in 1979.

¹ Macpherson, *The Life and Times of Liberal Democracy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), p. 21.

² Id., 'The False Roots of Western Democracy', in Fred R. Dallmayr (ed.), *From Contract to Community: Political Theory at the Crossroads* (New York and Basel: Marcel Dekker, 1978), p. 26.

³ Id., *Democratic Theory: Essays in Retrieval* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), 20, 63, 24; id., *Life and Times*, p. 43.

⁴ Id., 'Individualist Socialism? A Reply to Levine and MacIntyre', *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, 6/2 (June 1976), p. 198.

John Stuart Mill and the nineteenth- and twentieth-century idealist theorists, but who reject the present liberal-democratic society and state as having failed to live up to those values, or as being incapable of realising them.⁵

Macpherson's project, therefore, has four main components. First, to identify the origins of market assumptions in the political theories of the seventeenth century and to trace their history from Locke through the classical economists to Bentham and James Mill and thence down to the present. Second, to trace the distinctive features of liberal democracy in 'the real world of democracy', in contradistinction to the communist and the populist or 'underdeveloped' variants. The 'life and times of liberal democracy' is portrayed as the historical amalgamation of possessive market ideas and ethical humanist claims that, in the nineteenth-century economy of scarcity, were, rightly, seen as necessarily linked together: the only way to free all individuals 'to use and develop their human capacities fully' was 'through the productivity of free-enterprise capitalism'.⁶ The third component, therefore, is an argument to show that actual or prospective technological developments make possible a post-scarcity form of liberal democracy in which there is 'a possibility of our discarding the market concept of the essence of man, and replacing it by a morally preferable concept, in a way that was not possible when previous generations of liberal-democratic thinkers, from John Stuart Mill on, attempted it'.⁷ Hence, the fourth component of Macpherson's project: to inquire into 'a possible future model of liberal democracy' which is based on 'the equal right to self-development',⁸ being a model of 'participatory democracy', combining 'a pyramidal council structure with a competitive party system',⁹ involving 'a stronger sense of community than now prevails'¹⁰ and new and expanded conceptions of liberty,¹¹ property,¹² and human rights.¹³

This project is subject to various criticisms. Two are worth singling out, both of which deny the feasibility of a democratic theory's discarding one side of liberalism while building on the other.

⁵ Macpherson, 'Do We Need a Theory of the Stage?' *Archives européennes de sociologie/European Journal of Sociology*, 18/2 (1977), p. 224.

⁶ *Id.*, *Life and Times*, pp. 21–2.

⁷ *Id.*, *Democratic Theory*, p. 37.

⁸ *Id.*, *Life and Times*, pp. 21–2.

⁹ *Ibid.* 112.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* 100.

¹¹ See *id.*, *Democratic Theory*, chap. 5.

¹² See *ibid.* chap. 6.

¹³ See *ibid.* chap. 13, sect. 5.

From a Marxist perspective, its attempt to preserve continuity with liberalism (or one side of it) and 'bourgeois political practice' may be judged to be 'reformist'. On this view, there is no 'possibility of "retrieving" the old order, while doing away with its defining characteristic: a market in labour and goods: what is required is a shift of terrain... a shift in politics, a changed political practice, a changing of sides in the class struggle'. Macpherson's position is social democratic, a form of left-wing liberalism, an effort to 'reform or manage' capitalism, mitigating its worst features while obscuring its essential traits, and resting 'its faith on the development of productive capacities and the progressive and continuous evolution of political forms'.¹⁴

From an oddly parallel liberal standpoint, Macpherson's project of breaking with liberalism's market assumptions while retrieving its ethical core may be judged to be unrealistic, on the argument either that the former are ineliminable, applying to all advanced or all non-stagnant, growth-oriented societies, or that the former are inseparable from the latter or that there is, indeed, no conflict between them, since 'self-development' is compatible with, indeed may essentially require, market incentives and competitive striving. Thus many contemporary liberal thinkers, among them John Rawls and Robert Nozick, argue (in different ways) for *both* a market system based on incentives and a Humboldtian/Millian vision of the maximal development of human individuality.¹⁵ At issue here, between Macpherson and such thinkers, may be an account of what constitutes human fulfilment, or of the conditions under which it may be approximated, or both.

Neither of these criticisms of Macpherson's project seems compelling to me. On the contrary, I take it to be a project that is of the greatest interest and importance, above all at a time when the advanced capitalist states are undergoing a cumulative 'legitimation crisis',¹⁶ and the issues of the limits of the state's intervention in the economy, of the costs of growth and of market morality, and of

¹⁴ Andrew Levine, 'The Political Theory of Social Democracy', *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, 6/2 (June 1976), esp. pp. 191–3.

¹⁵ See Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), pp. 523–5; Nozick, *Anarchy, State and Utopia* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1974), pt. III.

¹⁶ See Habermas, *Legitimation Crisis*, trans. T. McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press; London: Heinemann Educational, 1976); James O'Connor, *The Fiscal Crisis of the State* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1973), and the writings of Claus Offe.

forms of widening democratic participation are on the agenda of public debate.¹⁷ Indeed, it is especially relevant to the Mediterranean liberal democracies where 'Eurocommunism' has raised in a new form the whole issue of continuity with liberal democracy in the transition to socialism.¹⁸

So while endorsing Macpherson's project, I shall rather address a number of problems arising out of his execution of it. I shall say nothing about its first component. Here his achievement has been the most considerable and the most effective, especially his brilliant interpretation of the seventeenth-century roots of market theory. Of course, all kinds of questions can be, and have been, raised with respect to his controversial interpretations of Hobbes, Locke, the Levellers, Bentham, the Mills, and so on, but I shall not be concerned with such questions here.

As for the second component, his view of the 'real world of democracy' does raise a number of problems, chief among them the following. His account is in terms of the 'justifying theories' of liberal, communist, and third-world democracy, seen as ideological contenders on the world stage—'three concepts of democracy actively at work in the world today', none of which can realistically be claimed to be 'the only true democracy' and each of which is claimed by its adherents to be superior.¹⁹ But he does not attempt, in relation to the latter two kinds, any analysis of the relation between theory and practice, concept and reality. Thus liberal democracy gets

¹⁷ See Michael Best and William Connolly, *The Politicized Economy* (Lexington, Mass.: D. C. Heath, 1976).

¹⁸ To which one might add today (1990) that the post-Communist societies of Eastern Europe face, or will face, issues to which Macpherson's project is relevant, as they (re)introduce the market while simultaneously seeking to (re-)establish liberal democracy.

¹⁹ Macpherson, *The Real World of Democracy* (New York and Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1966), pp. 38, 35, 36–7. Macpherson does not come clean as to how much of a moral/political relativist he is. Are these concepts incommensurable, such that there are no common standards to which they appeal, or are they competitors in the same race? He suggests the latter when he describes them as sharing 'the same ultimate moral end'—'to provide the conditions for the full and free development of the essential human capacities of all the members of society'—but differing 'as to what conditions are needed, and as to how they must move to achieve those conditions' (p. 37). But this argument would be undercut if the contending concepts of democracy involved different accounts of what constitutes 'the full and free development of the essential human capacities'. Macpherson appears to believe that there is one and only one correct account, but he offers no argument to support this belief.

bad marks for failing to live up to its values, being tied to 'an inherently unequal market economy',²⁰ but the other two are not marked at all, but treated rather as alternative concepts 'prevailing' elsewhere,²¹ as though theory adequately described reality. Not only does this approach ignore the extent to which societies of these kinds fail by their own standards (and the structural reasons for this) but it also precludes consideration of the extent to which there are shared common standards by which all three systems may be judged.

It is, perhaps, for this reason that Macpherson can say of communist states that they could plausibly claim to be democratic in the 'broader sense' that contains 'an ideal of human equality' which 'could only be fully realised in a society where no class was able to dominate or live at the expense of others', since although there is an 'absence or severe restriction of civil and political liberties', there is, according to the 'socialist model' [*sic*], no 'transfer of powers from some men to others for the benefit of the others'.²² And perhaps it is for the same reason that he can characterize 'newly independent underdeveloped countries' (in the mid-1960s) as examples of a single type, whose democratic doctrine invokes 'the will of an undifferentiated people as the only legitimate source of political power' and in which 'there are few or no exploitative class divisions once the foreign rule has been ended', since, with a few exceptions (such as the Congo and Vietnam) 'the independence movement has expelled the foreigners decisively enough that the class analysis is inapplicable'.²³

These judgements are, to say the very least, not very persuasive and accordingly they have the effect of weakening an analysis that purports to be of 'the real world'. According to that analysis, 'societies that have rejected the capitalist system' (the communist and newly independent underdeveloped countries) have the (inherent) 'moral advantage' of not diminishing 'any man's satisfaction by a compulsive transfer of part of his powers to others for the benefit of others' and the (temporary) 'moral disadvantage' of not providing the same civil and political liberties—which, however, they 'have every reason to introduce . . . as soon as they can afford them'.²⁴

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 'The False Roots', p. 19.

²¹ *C.B.*, *id.*, *Real World*, pp. 35–6.

²² *Ibid.* 22; *id.*, *Democratic Theory*, pp. 14–15.

²³ *Id.*, *Real World*, pp. 23, 29, 31, 32. Macpherson here appears to deny the reality of 'neo-colonialism', 'dependency', 'unequal development', the role of 'national bourgeoisies', etc., on which there is by now a vast literature.

²⁴ *Ibid.* 66.

(their non-introduction presumably being explained by low productivity). Such a balance-sheet could only begin to be convincing after a full description of the actual moral record of the societies in question, an attempt to explain their failures (indicating to what extent these are structural and inherent), and a clear statement of the standards against which they are being judged.

On the other hand, Macpherson does give us a highly suggestive sketch of this kind with respect to liberal democracy, from which he concludes that it has a poor record when measured against its own ethical and humanist ideals by virtue of its class division and in particular of 'scarcity and the extractive market situation that have made people behave atomistically'.²⁵ To the extent to which these features are removed, he argues, a non-market and egalitarian form of liberal democracy becomes possible.

This raises the central problem of the third component of Macpherson's project: what socialists traditionally call 'the problem of the transition'. This is, of course, not just Macpherson's problem. But his formulations raise a number of specific problems to which I shall merely allude here. Does 'the prospective conquest of scarcity',²⁶ which is the precondition for the transition, imply a no-growth society? If so, is it realistic in the context of the contemporary international economy, and, if it is, does not ideal democracy then become the privilege of the affluent in a highly unequal world? What, in the transition, is the role of class-based politics and class struggle? Which social or political forces are progressive and democratic, in Macpherson's sense of moving towards the abandonment of the (capitalist?) market?

More generally, what, in the transition, is the relation between a change in consciousness and political action? In 1965, Macpherson argued, with respect to communist societies, that

[p]eople who have been debased by their society cannot be morally regenerated except by the society being reformed, and this requires political power... there is no use relying on the free votes of everybody to bring about a fully human society. If it is not done by a vanguard it will not be done at all.²⁷

²⁵ Macpherson, 'Individualist Socialism?' p. 199.

²⁶ *Id.*, *Democratic Theory*, pp. 22-3.

²⁷ *Id.*, *Real World*, pp. 19-20.

In 1977, with respect to liberal democracies, he wrote of a kind of dialectic between changes in consciousness and increasing democratic participation—finding the possible 'loopholes' in the 'vicious circle' which links consumer consciousness, social inequality, and low participation (such weak points including the increasing awareness of the costs of economic growth, and of the costs of political apathy, in local communities and at the work-place, and increasing doubts about the ability of corporate capitalism to meet consumer expectations while reproducing inequality).²⁸ A crucial question, to which we need an answer, is why the 1965 answer should not apply to liberal democracies (especially since Macpherson holds that in them individuals are 'culturally conditioned to think of themselves as infinite consumers'²⁹ and are thus, presumably, 'debased by their society') or, for that matter, why the 1977 answer, or some version of it, should not apply to non-liberal democracies. Needless to say, such questions are of the greatest contemporary moment, and it is a virtue of Macpherson's work that it raises them in an acute form.

It is with Macpherson's attempt at the fourth component of his grand project—to develop a 'non-market theory' of liberal democracy—that the remainder of this chapter will be concerned. To anticipate, my argument will be that this attempt is successful in separating out the developmental from the possessive elements of liberal individualism but that it fails in so far as it does not carry the argument through to the criticism of that very individualism itself.

It is probable, Macpherson argues, that 'the continuance of Western societies combining individual liberties and democratic rights depends on those societies providing their members with an equal right to realise their essence as exeters, enjoyers and developers of their individual human capacities'.³⁰ Thus his theory of ideal democracy invokes an 'ontological' view of man's 'essence', and, in particular, the supersession of one such view by another.³¹ 'the postulate of man as essentially consumer and appropriator' must be superseded by the 'concept of man as essentially an exeter and enjoyer of his own powers'.³² Or, in another formulation, it must be realized that 'man's essence is not maximisation of his utilities but

²⁸ See *Id.*, *Life and Times*, p. 106.

²⁹ *Id.*, *Democratic Theory*, p. 62.

³⁰ *Ibid.* 36.

³¹ *Ibid.* chap. II.

³² *Ibid.* 37, 32.

maximisation of his human powers'.³³ How, then, does Macpherson conceive of these powers and how are they to be maximized?

In earlier formulations, he writes of the 'ethical' concept of a man's powers as signifying 'a potential for realising some human end' and necessarily including 'not only his natural capacities (his energy and skill) but also his *ability* to exert them'.³⁴ In a later, and clearer, formulation, he speaks rather of the 'developmental concept of power' (in the singular) as signifying 'a man's ability to use and develop his capacities'.³⁵ The amount of a man's power 'always depends on his access to the means of exerting his actual capacities' and is to be 'measured in terms of the *absence of impediments* to his using his human capacities'. In short, 'a man's power, defined as the quantity of his ability to use and develop his human capacities, is measured by the quantity of external impediments to that ability'. The amount of a man's abilities, he writes, 'depends on present external impediments'; the amount of his capacities 'on innate endowment and past external impediments'.³⁶

Thus 'ability' is seen as the absence of 'external' impediments (and might, therefore, more naturally be called 'opportunity'; we will, however, stick to Macpherson's usage). 'Capacities', by contrast, appear to signify an 'inner' potential, which may or may not be externally blocked. This distinction between 'external' and 'internal' is problematic: how it is drawn depends on how the 'individual' is conceptualized, where the boundaries of the agent's self are taken to lie, what he may be taken, and take himself, to have internalized.³⁷ For example, are moral or legal obligations, or the requirements of loyalty, say, to an individual or a group or an institution, or the cultural imperatives of the 'success ethic' to be counted as 'external' or 'internal'? It is true that, in one lonely paragraph, Macpherson acknowledges that 'society' is not 'only an impeding agent' but also 'a positive agent in the development of capacities', a 'medium' and a 'necessary condition' of their development.³⁸ But this acknowledgment does not extend to his seeing social relations as in part constitutive of the identity of the individual, which is, accordingly, transformed as those relations change. It is just because, on the

contrary, he sees the individual ('man') abstractly as an atom whose nature ('capacities') is independent of the relations in which he is involved, that he can suppose his capacities and his ability to be separately identifiable (indeed measurable) and independently generated. If, however, the nature and identity of the individual is, even partly, determined by his social relations, then these will also play a role in determining both his potentialities and the impediments to their realization.

We have seen that Macpherson, in explication of his central concept of 'developmental power', whose maximization is to be the touchstone of a future liberal democratic system, uses three inter-related notions: *ability*, *impediments*, and *capacities*. Let us look at them more closely.

Let us begin with 'capacities'. These are described variously as 'natural', 'human', and—most often—'essentially human'. At one point, they are classified as 'rational, moral, aesthetic, emotional, and productive in the broadest sense'.³⁹ Somewhat more specifically, he writes that they may 'be taken to include the capacity for rational understanding, for moral judgment and action, for aesthetic creation or contemplation, for the emotional activities of friendship and love, and, sometimes, for religious experience', and also 'for transforming what is given by Nature' (in a sense broader than 'the capacity for materially productive labour'), 'for wonder or curiosity', 'for laughter, and 'for controlled physical/mental/aesthetic activity, as expressed for instance in making music and in playing games of skill'.⁴⁰

While acknowledging that the essentially human capacities 'might be variously listed', and that 'such a list could be extended and rearranged in many ways', and whether they are 'attributed to divine creation, or to some evolutionary development of more complex organisms', he takes their existence to be a 'basic postulate' which is both 'empirical', 'verifiable in a broad way by observation', and 'a value postulate, in the sense that rights and obligations can be derived from it without any additional value premise, since the very structure of our thought and language puts an evaluative content into our descriptive statements about "man"'.⁴¹ That postulate is, as we have seen, the 'view of man's essence not as a consumer of utilities but as a doer, a creator, an enjoyer of his human attributes'⁴²—such attributes consisting in the capacities listed above.

³³ Macpherson, *Democratic Theory*, p. 32.

³⁴ *Ibid.* 9. ³⁵ *Ibid.* 40, 58, 71, 52.

³⁷ See the essay 'Power and Structure' in my *Essays in Social Theory* (London: Macmillan, and New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1977), and also Joel Feinberg, *Social Philosophy* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1973), chap. 1, esp. pp. 12–13.

³⁸ *Id.*, *Democratic Theory*, p. 57.

³⁹ *Ibid.* 61–2.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* 4, 54.

⁴¹ *Ibid.* 53–4.

⁴² *Ibid.* 4.

Various perplexing problems arise here. Take, in the first place, the capacities listed. To suppose that, as characterized, they are sufficiently determinate for their degree of realization, and thus their maximization, to be specified is to beg a set of crucial questions. For people widely disagree about what *constitutes* 'rational understanding', 'moral judgment and action', 'aesthetic creation and contemplation', true 'religious experience', and so on. (Thus liberals and Marxists disagree with one another, and among themselves, about how rationally to explain their social world; utilitarians, contractarians, intuitionists, and perfectionists give conflicting accounts of morality; proponents of high and low culture disagree about the nature of art; adherents of different religions notoriously disagree about the nature of religion, etc.) To label human capacities by reference to their achievement is either to leave their nature indeterminate or to suppose such contested questions resolved in one way rather than another, which, to say the least, requires argument, and is question-begging, since alternative answers may be tied to alternative theories of human nature. Furthermore, history, especially recent history, gives some chilling lessons concerning the dangers to a liberal society, let alone liberal democracy, of a society's supposing such questions to be authoritatively resolved.

In the second place, one may ask, *why this list?* What, for example, of the human capacities for consumption and acquisition, for emulation and competition, for status-ranking, for domination and subjection, for the infliction and the acceptance of suffering, or indeed for malevolence, cunning, degradation, destructiveness, and brutality of all conceivable kinds? What principles govern the selection of Macpherson's (admittedly vaguely specified) list? Is his argument not really a way of endorsing certain forms of life by dignifying them, without warrant, as uniquely realizing 'essentially human capacities'?

This question cannot be resolved, as Macpherson suggests, empirically ('by observation') since the capacities I have mentioned, and doubtless many others, are indubitably characteristic of humans, even 'essential' to them—and not obviously less in evidence than those on Macpherson's list. Moreover, they are often held to justify forms of social and political life that he would reject, and some of which he would abhor. Nor will it resolve the question to appeal to 'the very structure of our thought and language', since 'we' differ about human nature and what is essential to it, and some—from

Plato and St Augustine to de Maistre, Nietzsche, and Dostoevsky's Grand Inquisitor, not to mention Locke and Bentham—have asserted very different basic postulates and drawn very different social and political conclusions. Furthermore they have, in general, assumed that the social and political problem is not to maximize human capacities but rather to minimize the harmful consequences of their exercise.

This difficulty, of establishing a determinate set of 'essentially human capacities' as the basis for a justificatory theory of democracy, is only rendered more acute by a further assumption Macpherson makes, which he admits to be 'at first sight ... a staggering one': namely, the 'postulate of the non-opposition of essentially human capacities'.⁴³ The case for a democratic society, he argues, fails without this assumption. A 'fully democratic society is only possible when both genuine and contrived scarcity have been overcome'; then 'the essential human capacities may all be used and developed without hindering the use and development of all the rest'.⁴⁴ But surely this assumption is pretty staggering at second and third sight too. For why should we suppose that there ever could be a society in which 'rational, moral, aesthetic, emotional and productive' activities and relations would not be subject to regulation, limitation, and mutual adjustment, in the light of principles of justice, rendered necessary by conflicting claims and interests? To reply, as Macpherson might, that such regulation and limitation could never constitute a diminution of human capacities, if it were just—according, perhaps, to rules 'that can be rationally demonstrated to be necessary to society, and so to [man's] humanity'⁴⁵—is, once more, to beg the question. For such a reply would, once more, build a particular moral vision into the notion of 'essentially human capacities'.

What we have so far shown is that Macpherson's 'essentially human capacities', with respect both to their content and their selection, presuppose, rather than ground, a particular moral theory. In the absence of any transcendental or quasi-transcendental argument to the contrary (à la Kant or Rawls or Habermas) such a conclusion is inescapable. And indeed, of course, Macpherson appeals to such a moral theory—which, he claims, derives from 'Western humanist and Christian traditions that go back to the

⁴³ Macpherson, *Democratic Theory*, p. 55.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* 56.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* 55, 54.

Greeks and to medieval natural law' and which he invokes by speaking of 'the *equal* right of every man to make the best of himself'.⁴⁶ This is basically a form of individual moral perfectionism. For Macpherson's argument to stick, such a theory must play the role of specifying ideal possibilities whose realization is blocked by actual social and political arrangements and to whose realization social and political action is to be directed. But, unfortunately, Macpherson says very little about how such possibilities *are* to be specified—what constitutes human excellence and, most importantly, what forms of social life or what sorts of social, cultural, and institutional activities and relationships would enable it to flourish, indeed *constitute* its flourishing. In the absence of such specification, we simply have the promise of an abstract, anti-utilitarian, individualistic moral perfectionism, formulated in the language of man's essentially human capacities.

To all this, Macpherson might reply that one must start at the other end: we 'must start', he writes, 'from the hindrances' or 'impediments' to the realization of such counterfactual, ideal possibilities.⁴⁷ Thus his analysis 'concentrates on the hindrances in modern market societies . . . because this is what requires most analysis if we are to find a way through from a liberal market society to a fully democratic society'. A 'social and political theory can only be concerned with impediments that are socially variable', as opposed to 'physical impediments which cannot be altered by any action of society'; moreover, he focuses on *external* rather than 'internalised' impediments on the arguments, first, that the latter were external before they were internalized, and, second, that they are 'analytically more manageable'; besides, they interact with internal ones, each reciprocally reinforcing the other, but, conversely, a rational analysis of external impediments may contribute 'to the breakthrough of consciousness, and so to a cumulative reciprocal reduction of both kinds of impediment, and a cumulative realisation of democracy'.⁴⁸ Accordingly, the following impediments are 'deduced from the human condition': 'lack of adequate means of life', 'lack of access to the means of labour', and 'lack of protection against invasion by others'.⁴⁹

The great virtue of this position is that, under the first two

⁴⁶ Macpherson, *Democratic Theory*, pp. 32, 21.
⁴⁸ *Ibid.* 57, 59, 76.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.* 59 and 60 ff.

headings, it considers constraints or restrictions on liberty which most liberal theorists systematically ignore, and in particular the restrictions upon choice implicit in the manipulation of demand and in the consequences of material inequality, especially of the ownership of property. However, once one leaves the more obvious forms of deprivation (e.g., poverty or unemployment), the specification of 'impediments' becomes more problematic. Macpherson's key idea is that non-ownership of—or the lack of free access to—'materials to work on or work with' (land and, more particularly, capital) constitutes such an impediment, diminishing non-owners' powers since they have to 'pay for the access with a transfer of part of their powers'.⁵⁰

This argument will only really carry conviction when supplemented by a specification of the precluded possibilities that non-ownership impedes (which would, I believe, show that non-ownership is not the only way of denying access to the means of labour). Only then can a satisfactory argument be mounted against those who claim that the market and private property are not impediments to but rather conditions of the liberation of human possibilities. What is missing, in other words, is a detailed demonstration of what desirable and possible forms of relationship and activity are blocked by the central institutions of capitalism. In its place we have an abstract argument, purporting to show that, because these institutions involve 'a continuous transfer of power' between 'non-owners and owners of the means of labour',⁵¹ they impede the maximization of (abstract) individuals' (unspecified) powers.

This, however, points to a deeper difficulty still. The 'maximization of powers' is the maximization of individuals' 'ability' to use and develop their human capacities, as measured by the impediments to their doing so. It therefore amounts, formally speaking, to a set of counterfactuals which specify what individuals could attain but for specified present preventing causes. But how are these counterfactuals to be specified?⁵² How distant is the possible world we must imagine from the actual world? (Of course, the more distant it is, the greater the scope and complexity of the impediments or preventing

⁵⁰ *Ibid.* 64. ⁵¹ *Ibid.* 65.

⁵² On this problem, see the recent brilliant book by Jon Elster, *Logic and Society: Contradictions and Possible Worlds* (Chichester and New York: Wiley, 1978), and my 'Power and Structure'.

causes.) In other words, how much of the actual world are we to take as given in setting up the counterfactuals? Or, in yet other words, what do we hold constant in comparing the actual with the possible? In particular, do we hold the very individuals, the maximization of whose abilities (power) is in question, to be constant, or themselves subject to transformation, and, if so, to what extent? Which individuals' powers are to be maximized: present, actual individuals or future, 'morally regenerated' ones?

Sometimes, Macpherson speaks of the counterfactual 'standard' by which the theory must judge the democratic quality of any society as 'the presently attainable maximum (i.e., the maximum level of abilities to use and develop human capacities given the presently possible human command over external Nature)' and of those capacities as being 'actual capacities'.⁵³ Elsewhere, however, he stresses that it is not enough 'to claim only to maximize the use of each man's present capacities': to maximize men's powers is 'to maximize the future development, as well as the present use, of each man's capacities', including 'those whose capacities had been stunted by external impediments'.⁵⁴ Such fully developed capacities can be conceived as a quantity, being 'the amount of [a man's] combined and co-ordinated mental, physical and psychic equipment, whether as it actually exists at a given time or as it might exist at some later time or under certain different conditions'.⁵⁵ But the whole problem lies here. For what *are* these different conditions? Do they include the 'regeneration' of the individuals concerned, their reshaping or 're-education', and, if so, to what degree? How is the line to be drawn between developing an individual's capacities and changing that individual?

What I hope to have shown is that Macpherson's account of human powers raises the following crucial and difficult questions. First, the 'essentially human capacities' rely for their specification upon an abstract, individualist ethical perfectionism, not yet spelled out. Second, the impediments to their use and development remain indeterminate, as long as those capacities and the forms of social life

⁵³ Macpherson, *Democratic Theory*, pp. 58, 40.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.* 57.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.* 56. Thus, he even writes that 'the full development of human capacities, as envisioned in the liberal-democratic concept of man—at least in its more optimistic version—is infinitely great. No inherent limit is seen to the extent to which men's human capacities may be enlarged' (p. 62).

which both enable and constitute their realization remain unspecified. And third, the ability to realize them, whose maximization is the criterion of liberal democracy, is therefore indeterminate for these reasons, and for the further decisive reason that the (abstract) individuals, whose powers are to be maximized, are likewise indeterminate.

The great merit of Macpherson's liberal democratic theory is that it brings back into prominence the critical developmental perspective of the ethical and humanist side of liberalism and that it brings, from Marxist theory, a sharp awareness of the structural and institutional obstacles, within capitalism, to human emancipation. It has nothing to say about the nature of such obstacles in non-capitalist societies and it is (understandably) indecisive concerning the possible mode of transition from a capitalist to a post-capitalist form of liberal democracy.

However, it remains at an inappropriate level of abstraction and thereby bears the stamp of the liberal individualism it so acutely criticizes. Individuals and their powers and capacities are conceived in abstraction from the social relations and forms of community which, on the one hand, impede and, on the other, facilitate and constitute their further development. By reasoning exclusively in terms of man and the individual, Macpherson retains too much of the abstract humanism for which Marx criticized Feuerbach.⁵⁶ Social relations structure human activities and potentialities, which cannot be conceived independently of them, and this applies both to actual and to possible societies. Any fully developed democratic theory must get into the detailed business of comparing the actual and possible structures of living which are implicit in contemporary political struggle and debate. In short, for Macpherson's great project of retrieving liberal-democratic theory from the possessive individualism of the liberal tradition to be carried through to its conclusion, his penetrating critique of its possessiveness must be completed by an abandonment of its individualism.

⁵⁶ As Marx wrote in his sixth thesis on Feuerbach, 'the essence of man is no abstraction inherent in each separate individual. In its reality it is the ensemble of social relations'.