

C.B. MACPHERSON: LIBERALISM, AND THE TASK OF SOCIALIST POLITICAL THEORY

Ellen Meiksins Wood

Just as Marxist political theory or the "theory of the state" has begun to flourish, there has been a revival of formal political philosophy on the intellectual right. Whether or not these trends are directly related, it is not surprising that left and right should diverge into two modes of theorizing about politics so opposed in both substance and method. If Marxist political theory is intended to penetrate the realities of class power, academic political philosophy has often had the effect not simply of justifying those realities but of mystifying them in a cloud of philosophic formalism and abstraction. Particularly in the **English-speaking** world, conservatives have found in the discipline of political philosophy an academic home that suits them especially well; and with the recent general upsurge of intellectual activity on the political right in Europe and America, the discipline has been given a new lease of life.

The legacy of minor 20th century "classics" in the field of political philosophy has been dominated by various shades of conservatism: for example, the works of Leo Strauss and Hannah Arendt in America or Michael Oakshott in Britain. Their efforts have been abetted, at least indirectly, by analytic and linguistic philosophy, which have served the cause of political conservatism simply by denaturing, depoliticizing political theory, depriving it of any capacity for social criticism. These traditions have now been extended by a variety of apologies—usually abstract and formalistic—for inequality, bourgeois individualism, property rights, and free enterprise, by writers such as John Rawls, Robert Nozick, and Oakshott's disciple, Kenneth Minogue. On the other hand, the field has been virtually abandoned by the left, no doubt partly because of the devaluation of the "political" as "epiphenomenon" which has so long characterized Marxist theory, but also because the conventions of political philosophy have tended to depoliticize the political by abstracting it from its socio-historical substance.

C.B. Macpherson has for many **years, been** the single major voice from the left in the traditional disciplines of political philosophy and the history of political thought. His work, especially his classic *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism* published in **1962**, has been groundbreaking. Above all, it has done much to repoliticize political philosophy, giving it some

foundation in history and revealing its ideological function. Macpherson's theory and method are not, however, Marxist; and questions can be raised about what his standpoint actually is. Certainly he writes from a perspective that rejects the consequences of capitalism, but the rejection of capitalism is not consistently grounded in a commensurate *analysis* of capitalist social relations. Often Macpherson's analysis of capitalism appears to accept that system at its own valuation. At such times, the effect of his argument is not so different from the very theories he criticizes—pluralist political science, marginal utility economics, the "market model" of man and society; and he ends by confirming their ideological mystifications.

What makes it especially difficult to characterize Macpherson's standpoint is that it seems to vary. There is no doubt that throughout his career he has vigorously attacked modern political theory for obscuring social realities and the nature of capitalism, particularly for neglecting the consequences of class relations. Nevertheless, there is a continuity between his more critical works and those in which he most closely approximates the conceptual framework of his adversaries. Even in his criticisms there are theoretical ambiguities which open the way for a convergence with his opponents.

Macpherson's ambiguous theoretical approach and its programmatic implications are most visible in his latest book, *The Life and Times of Liberal Democracy*,¹ the culmination of the work on liberalism which has occupied him since *Possessive Individualism*. If his political philosophy as outlined in *The Life and Times* is intended to embody a socialist programme, that programme is contradicted by its theoretical underpinnings. Most significantly, he seems particularly unwilling here to pursue the implications of *class*, with all this entails—even when, in the analysis of liberalism, he appears to characterize that doctrine as a class ideology. This reluctance to deal with class reflects a more fundamental methodological problem. Macpherson's work, despite its historical foundations, still remains to a considerable extent within the methodological conventions of traditional political philosophy, abstracting political theory from the social realities that underlie it. Even if Macpherson explicitly proposes a programme of social and political changes that go beyond the mere reform of capitalism, considerable importance must be attached to the fact that his account of capitalism differs very little from conventional portraits by apologists for capitalism. His approach compels one to ask how an essentially liberal-pluralist *theory* can produce, or even be compatible with, a socialist *practice*.

A critical examination of *The Life and Times of Liberal Democracy* can, therefore, be instructive, especially if it is contrasted to what a Marxist theory might do with an analysis of liberalism. There are two major ways in which a study of liberal democratic principles can play a

useful part in a socialist political theory. First, an examination of the meaning of liberalism and its historic role in the evolution of bourgeois society may be a useful adjunct to an interpretation of class power in capitalist society and the nature of the capitalist state in its principal contemporary form. Secondly, a consideration of liberal democracy and the "bourgeois liberties" which it has codified may serve as a means of confronting the problem of the *political* in a *socialist* society: how and why—or whether—the "political" question persists in a classless society, and to what extent and in what ways the organization and administration of a classless society still require "bourgeois" legalism as a protection against arbitrary power. How a theory situates itself with respect to these two issues must have important strategic and programmatic implications.

If Macpherson's view of the world, with all its contradictions, were idiosyncratic, it would be enough to expose the contradictions and propose an alternative approach to his analysis of liberalism. Since, however, he is in many ways typical of a certain kind of "socialism" particularly characteristic of Britain and North America, something important can be learned from an effort to explain the very existence of a political theory such as his. It could conceivably be argued that the contradictions in his position result merely from tactical considerations. He does often write as if his primary object were to persuade liberals that some kind of socialism follows naturally from their convictions, by representing his own brand of socialism as an extension of liberalism. He often appears to be self-consciously addressing an audience that needs to be persuaded that socialism—a doctrine which, apparently, must parade in sheep's clothing as something called "participatory democracy"^w—is the last and best form of liberal democracy, preserving what is essential and valuable in the liberal tradition and devoid of its evils. Such a conspiratorial interpretation of Macpherson's argument would suggest that he *intentionally* obscures as much as he reveals about the nature of both capitalism and liberalism.

It is more likely, however, that Macpherson's approach is not merely a tactical ploy, and that his failure to produce an analysis commensurate with his apparent ethical commitment to socialism is part of a political and intellectual tradition which has been seduced by liberalism itself, in theory and practice. This is a tradition—particularly characteristic of Britain and North America—which has produced a form of socialism riddled with contradictions between its *moral* indignation at capitalism and its inadequate understanding of the social phenomenon that provokes that indignation. The tradition seems also to be part of a more general intellectual tendency which abstracts political theory from social analysis. These same factors may also help to account for the particular usefulness of abstract political philosophy as an instrument of bourgeois hegemony precisely in those countries where the liberal tradition has been strongest.

Macpherson's Argument

The Life and Times of Liberal Democracy is an account of changes in liberal democratic theory presented as a series of historically successive "models" which represent several major doctrinal shifts since the foundation of modern liberalism in the utilitarianism of Kentham and James Mill. The purpose of this schematic history is, writes Macpherson, "to examine the limits and possibilities of liberal democracy"; (2) that is, not merely to examine the nature and development of the liberal tradition up to now, but to explore its future possibilities. The book, then, is meant to be not only an intellectual history, but also—and, it seems, primarily—a political programme.

Although Macpherson proposes an explicit political programme, which he chooses to describe as an extension of liberal democracy, the concern here will not be primarily with that. The programme is far too sketchy to sustain close analysis. More significant is the project implicit in his analysis of liberal democratic theory, what that analysis says and fails to say about the nature of the society that spawned the doctrine and what it implies about the conditions and possibilities for transforming that society. It will be argued that Macpherson's characterization of liberal democracy—and his suggestion that his own programme is an extension of that tradition—may obscure the realities of capitalist society and one of its hegemonic doctrines in ways which have serious programmatic consequences. Secondly, Macpherson puts his stress in the wrong place and has missed the chance to illuminate those aspects of the liberal legacy which may be of greatest relevance to a socialist programme.

Macpherson begins by isolating what for him is the essential meaning of liberal democracy: it is the principle of "a society striving to ensure that all its members are equally free to realize their capabilities", (3) as that principle was enunciated, according to Macpherson, by J.S. Mill and the "ethical-liberal democrats" who followed him. This meaning of liberal democracy can, he argues, be dissociated from liberal democracy in its more general sense, "the democracy of a capitalist market society (no matter how modified that society appears to be by the rise of the welfare state)." (3) Up to now, Macpherson suggests, the two meanings have been combined; but "a liberal position need not be taken to depend forever on an acceptance of capitalist assumptions, although historically it has been so taken." (4)

What Macpherson calls liberal democracy is carefully distinguished both from undemocratic liberalism—such as that of John Locke—and non-liberal, or more accurately, pre-liberal democracy, such as that of Rousseau or Jefferson. The distinctions are important. Liberal democracy is specifically associated with a class-divided society; the doctrine presupposes and accepts the division of society into classes, and merely seeks to "fit a democratic structure" to a class-divided society." (10) This

foundation in class divisions distinguishes liberal democracy from those pre-19th century utopian democratic theories which were intended as reactions against class societies: for example, Winstanley's programme for a classless democracy grounded in communal property, or Rousseau's "one-class" society based on a community of independent small producers who are in a position neither to exploit nor to be exploited. Liberal democratic theory is a doctrine which emerged only in the late 18th or early 19th century precisely because it was only then that some—albeit limited—form of political democracy no longer appeared incompatible with class divisions and the security of property. (Although Macpherson does not explain why this was so, an explanation grounded in **Marx's** account of capitalism would serve very well here: with the increasing separation of producers from the means of production, what Marx calls "other than economic" modes of exploitation are increasingly replaced by "economic", and the role of the "political" in the relations of production accordingly changes. As we shall see, however, Macpherson avoids any language or mode of analysis which suggests a Marxist conception of productive relations and class domination.) Liberal democracy could now become the doctrine of those wedded to the prevailing system of property and class relations. In the 17th and 18th centuries, democracy had been perceived by the upper classes as class-rule by the wrong class, the poor, and hence as a threat. The main tradition was undemocratic or anti-democratic, until historical circumstances were such that a limited form of political democracy no longer appeared as a threat to property and class-domination. (10) **Pre-liberal** democracy, then, did not presuppose capitalist market relations; non-democratic liberalism did assume some form of capitalist market relations but regarded democracy as a threat to those relations. It is the unique characteristic of liberal democracy that it no longer assumes the incompatibility of political "democracy" with class divisions generally and capitalist market relations in particular.

Macpherson's ultimate theme concerns the future prospects of liberal democracy *without* capitalist market assumptions. "Liberalism", he writes, "had always meant freeing the individual from outdated restraints of old established institutions. By the time liberalism emerged as liberal democracy this became a claim to free all individuals equally, and to free them to use and develop their human capacities fully." (21) The linkage of liberal democracy with capitalist market assumptions was based, he argues, on an economy of scarcity which persuaded liberal democrats that only the productivity of free enterprise capitalism could achieve the ethical goal of freeing all individuals "to use and **develop their** human capacities fully." If we can now assume, continues Macpherson, that the technological limitations on the possibility of a good life for everyone have been surpassed, the linkage of liberal democratic ends with market society is no longer necessary.

The argument is an interesting one. It is certainly crucial to an understanding of liberal democracy to recognize the extent to which it is grounded in the assumption of class divisions and capitalist relations. And though Macpherson is sometimes a bit coy and cryptic about this, there can be little doubt that at the outset of the argument, liberal **democratic** doctrine is meant to be seen not as essentially and principally democratic but as the ideology of a dominant class, the bourgeoisie, whose commitment even to a limited political democracy is conditional, determined by its own changing needs in a particular historic situation.

This account of the foundation of liberal democracy as a class ideology makes the rest of the argument rather puzzling. If the doctrine is based on class-division, one must question Macpherson's characterization of its ethical position as a commitment to the free and equal development of all individuals. For that matter, one might wonder why he chooses to single out liberal democracy as the embodiment of this cherished principle when a doctrine opposed to the class-nature of liberal democracy—that is, Marxism—is more centrally and genuinely concerned with this ethical commitment than is liberalism in any of its forms. More importantly, one must ask whether Macpherson is telling us what we really need to know about the linkage of liberal democracy to "market assumptions" and capitalist relations. Is it, for example, so easy to dissociate the doctrine from its foundations in capitalism by simply assuming away the "economy of scarcity" (even leaving aside questions which may arise about the usefulness and precision of the notion of "scarcity" and the "surpassing" of scarcity)? It is typical of Macpherson's approach that he is often able to treat capitalism as if it were merely the (temporary) instrument of liberal democracy, or even of liberal democratic thinkers and their ethical goal. A very different picture emerges—as will be suggested later—from an approach that grounds the analysis of ideas and institutions firmly in social realities, making it possible to examine the foundations of liberal democracy in capitalist relations of production.

Macpherson's Four "Models" of Liberal Democracy

The four models of liberal democracy are designated as "Protective Democracy", "Developmental Democracy", "Equilibrium Democracy", and "Participatory Democracy." The first, which makes its case for democracy on the grounds that it alone can protect the governed from oppression, is found in the utilitarianism of **Bentham** and James Mill, reluctant democrats who simply felt that the needs of an essentially capitalist economy in the then prevailing conditions demanded such political reforms as the extension of the franchise. The "developmental" model, which Macpherson divides into two stages, is a more humanistic one. The model is best represented by J.S. Mill (although Macpherson recognizes the anti-democratic elements in Mill) who first articulated the

principle which for Macpherson is the essence of the tradition, that aspect of it he wants to preserve: the commitment to the self-development of all individuals equally. In the 20th century, this developmental model, represented by philosophical idealists like Barker or Lindsay, pragmatists like Dewey or "modified utilitarians" like Hobhouse, while retaining Mill's ethical commitment lost some of his realism concerning the obstacles to the fulfillment of the liberal goal posed by the realities of class and exploitation. They simply assumed that the regulatory and welfare state would suffice to bring about the desired end. The third model, the currently prevalent one, is that of modern social scientists, the "pluralist elitist equilibrium model" inaugurated by Schumpeter and developed by political scientists like Robert Dahl. This model, argues Macpherson, lacks the ethical dimension of the previous one and offers a description, and a justification, of stable democracy as a "competition between elites which produces equilibrium without much popular participation." (22) Democracy according to this model is "simply a mechanism for choosing and authorizing governments, not a kind of society or a set of moral ends. . ." (78) Having critically examined each of these models in turn, explaining the reasons for their successive failures and eventual replacement by a new model, Macpherson finally turns to the emerging model of "Participatory Democracy", which began as a slogan of the New Left student movement. He proposes to develop this into a complete model to supersede earlier ones, embodying a specific political programme and some suggestions about the kinds of social and ideological changes which would be needed to make the political programme workable.

Macpherson's analysis of the first two models is the best part of the book. More could certainly have been said about the ways in which the doctrine expressed the realities and structural needs of capitalism at a particular stage of development. One might like to hear something about how the particular nature of capitalism at that stage and in those places which produced this version of liberal doctrine affected the nature and demands of the working class. And no doubt a good deal needs to be said here about the ways in which the liberal bourgeois state has both conducted and contained class conflict and how the dominant class has maintained hegemony, not least by means of liberal-democratic theory and practice. Still, there is at least no doubt that both models in various ways responded to the practical demands of capitalism and were imbued with its assumptions, values, and contradictions; and one essential point is still relatively clear at this stage of Macpherson's analysis: liberal **democracy**—whatever disinterested moral commitments he may attribute to it—is still the ideology of a class-divided society, still an ideology expressing the needs of a class committed to the prevailing capitalist relations.

Much of the value of Macpherson's analysis is **lost**, however, in what

follows. His account of Model 3 is by far the weakest—and the weakness is particularly serious since this model is the currently prevailing one and is meant to be understood as reflecting the realities of capitalism today. Moreover, it is in his analysis of this model that the shortcomings of Macpherson's whole approach become most obvious.

Macpherson discusses this model as, in turn, a description, an explanation, and sometimes a justification of the actual political system in Western democracies, while conceding that these theoretical functions cannot always be kept distinct. Democracy in this case is "simply a mechanism for choosing and authorizing governments. . .", consisting of "a competition between two or more self-chosen politicians (elites). . ." (78) "Democracy is simply a market mechanism: the voters are consumers, the politicians are the entrepreneurs." (79) Macpherson's first and most extraordinary judgement on this model, however, is as follows: "As a description of the actual system now prevailing in Western liberal-democratic nations, Model 3 must be adjudged as substantially accurate." (83)

With this apparent acceptance of the pluralist-elitist democratic description of politics in capitalist society, Macpherson effectively sweeps away most of what it is important to know about capitalism as a system of class-relations, about class power in capitalist society, about political power as a means of maintaining class dominance, and about the liberal bourgeois state as a class state. All the apparently useful insights about liberal democracy as a class ideology, suggested in his earlier discussion, are thus also called into question. Indeed, his analysis now appears to have practically conceptualized out of of existence both *class* and state. At best, the analysis—at least implicitly—replaces them with the ideological mystifications of "elites" and "political system" and their version of the issues raised by an analysis of society in terms of class and state. Pluralists like Robert Dahl—and, apparently, Macpherson—do recognize that there are inequalities of political power and differences in access to the instrumentalities of government. There are "elites" of various kinds, but these elites compete for power and no dominant and consistent concentrations of power exist. What this means, then, is that there is no such thing as class power, or at least not in any sense that is politically relevant, and certainly that there is no *ruling* class. Above all, there is no conception of the state as an institution whose function is to sustain a particular social order, that is, a particular set of productive relations and a particular system of class dominance.²

Macpherson and the Mystifications of Capitalist Ideology

Macpherson's apparent acceptance of what can only be called the ideological mystifications of the pluralist democratic model must raise questions about his whole enterprise. Indeed, his very criticisms of the

model only serve to confirm that he shares its most fundamental premises and is unable—or unwilling—to confront in more than the most superficial ways the consequences of class power and the nature of the state in a class society. On the face of it, his criticism of the model seems at first to address itself to the problem of class:

I want now to show that the Model 3 political market system is not nearly as democratic as it is made out to be: that **the** equilibrium it produces is an equilibrium in inequality; that the consumer sovereignty it claims to provide is to a large extent an illusion; and that, to the extent that **the** consumer sovereignty is real, it is a contradiction of the central democratic tenet of equality of individual entitlement to the use and enjoyment of one's capacities. The claims for optimum equilibrium and consumer sovereignty are virtually the same claim—two sides of the same coin—and so may be treated together as a single claim. (86-87)

When Macpherson begins to specify the nature of the inequality which concerns him, however, the issue of *class* and *class power* recedes:

In so far as the political purchasing power is money, we can scarcely say that the equilibrating process is democratic in any society, like ours, in which there is substantial inequality of wealth and of chances of acquiring wealth. We may still call it consumer sovereignty if we wish. But the sovereignty of such unequal consumers is not evidently democratic. (87)

... The political market system is competitive enough to do the job of equilibrating the supply of and demand for political goods—in so far, that is, as it **does** actually respond to demands which are very unequally effective. Some demands are more effective than others because, where the demand is expressed in human energy output, one person's energy input cannot get the same return per unit as another person's. And the class of political demands that have the most money to back them is largely the same as the class of those that have the larger pay-off per unit of human energy input. In both cases, it is the demands of the higher socio-economic classes which are the most effective. So the lower classes are apathetic. (89)

The question of "unequal" political power is thus reduced to a matter of unequal "purchasing power"; and *class* has become, at best, the bogus "socio-economic class" of conventional "stratification" theory: "income groups", "inequality of wealth and of chances of acquiring wealth"—anything but a *relation* of domination and exploitation. This is a concept of inequality (*inequality*, not *class*) entirely consistent with the pluralist-democratic view and often, indeed usually, conceded by theorists whose arguments, far from recognizing the existence of class and class power, are designed to *deny* them. It is here **simply** a question of *individuals*, meeting indirectly in the market-place—in this case, particularly the political market-place—and competing for valued goods and services, all in possession of some purchasing power, but some simply equipped with more than others. The political relationship among these individuals

appears to be little more than the superficial relationship of relative advantage or disadvantage in the market-place, not a relation of power or domination. Indeed, it now seems likely that Macpherson's concept of *class* generally, even when he seems most conscious of its importance, may not be a concept of class at all. It may, in retrospect, be significant that throughout the book he consistently speaks of "capitalist market relations" rather than capitalist relations of production.

On this score, it may be useful to refer to the example of Max Weber, whose legacy so often serves those who want to evade the issues posed by Marx. Weber in his own definition of class quite deliberately and painstakingly avoids the implication of class as a *relation*, a direct relation of domination; and in particular, he carefully obscures the nature of capitalist exploitation by reducing capitalist social relations of production to the "competition" of "market relations." According to Weber, people belong to classes insofar as their "fates" are "determined by the chance of using goods or services, for themselves on the market." All goods and services, all commodities, including labour, are conflated. The difference, and the relation, between those whose "market situation" gives them control of the means of production and those who have only their labour-power to sell are reduced to the vague and neutral terms of their relative advantages in market competition for goods and services. The one thing that is conspicuously absent in this definition is the idea of class as a *relation*. The only "relation" between classes that is encompassed by this definition is their competition for valued goods and services; they come together by "meeting competitively in the market for the purpose of exchange." Nothing is said of the direct relation which is the essential consequence of an "exchange" in which human labour-power is one of the commodities. The most that Weber is usually prepared to say about the "property" and "lack of property" which are the "basic categories" of class situation is that "the mode of distribution, in accord with the law of marginal utility, excludes the non-wealthy from competing for highly valued goods; it favours the owners and, in fact, gives to them a monopoly to acquire such goods." Class struggles, then, seem to amount to little more than extensions of this competition for goods and services.³

Macpherson appears to be operating with a very similar conception of class, not only in his latest book, but in his earlier works. *Possessive Individualism*, for all its ground-breaking analysis of political theory as ideology—apparently *class* ideology—is actually remarkable for its lack of a concept of class. More recently, (and in an article selected as the first in Robin Klackburn's collection of essays by "radical scholars" on *Ideology in Social Science*), Macpherson—ostensibly attacking the mystifications of contemporary economics—defines capitalist as follows:

Are we in an era of post-capitalism? I do not think we are. The change is not as

great as some would suggest. It all depends, of course, on how you prefer to define capitalism. If you define it as a system of free enterprise with no government interference, then of course our present heavily regulated system is not capitalism. But I find it very unhistorical to equate capitalism with laissez-faire. I think it preferable to define capitalism as the system in which production is carried out without authoritative allocation of work or rewards, but by contractual relations between free individuals (each possessing some resource be it only his own labour-power) who calculate their most profitable courses of action and employ their resources as **that** calculation dictates.

... What the state does [by its interference] is to alter the terms of the equation which each man makes when he is calculating his **most** profitable course of action. Some of the data for the calculation are changed, but this need not affect the mainspring of the system, which is that men do act as their calculation of net gain dictates. As long as prices still move in response to these calculated decisions, and as long as prices still elicit the production of goods and determine their allocation, we may say that the essential nature of the system has not **changed**.⁴¹

Although this passage purports to be an attack on the ideological mystifications of conventional social sciences, there is nothing in it which is incompatible with either pluralist political science or bourgeois economics and their typical obfuscations of the nature of capitalism. Indeed, Macpherson's characterization of capitalism is significant precisely because of the extent to which it shares the fundamental premises of modern economics: the reduction of relations of production to market relations, the transformation of social to individual relations and relations of exploitation to relations among equally free and sovereign individuals, and even an acceptance of the marginal utility theory of value. All these premises have the effect of obscuring the ways in which the mode of production structures the "free" choices of individuals; concealing the special social meaning of the "free" exchange in which one party sells **his** labour-power; depriving the concept of class of any significance; and reducing the "factors of production"—notably capital and labour—to a sameness which, above all, divests the relation between them of its exploitative nature and justifies the "rewards" of capital. Furthermore, there is nothing in Macpherson's account of state intervention in capitalism that suggests an appreciation of its role in "**reproducing**" capitalist relations of production or maintaining the structure of class domination characteristic of that mode of production. Here, as in *The Life and Times of Liberal Democracy*, Macpherson's conception of political power and inequalities of political power is either devoid of any concept of class or is based on a concept of class which carries with it no suggestion of a social relation, of power and domination, rooted in and constitutive of a particular set of exploitative relations of production.

The temptation is very strong at this point to dismiss Macpherson's extension of liberal democratic theory as little more than another version—albeit unusually critical—of the pluralist democratic apology for

fundamentally capitalist relations of production. And yet, his own programme as outlined in the discussion of Model 4, "Participatory Democracy", suggests—however schematically, cautiously, superficially, and often naively—something beyond a merely reformed bourgeois-liberal state grounded in capitalist relations of production. Although he adopts for his programme the somewhat innocuous term "participatory democracy" (which, for example, the Liberal Prime Minister of Canada, Pierre Trudeau, at one point quite comfortably appropriated for his own political programme), Macpherson seems to have something rather more radical in mind. I have already suggested that these explicit proposals seem to me less significant than the programmatic principles implicit in his analysis of liberal democracy; and that I do not intend to comment on the explicit programme in detail. Still, it is only fair to say that Macpherson's programme does at least appear to take for granted that social conditions must be radically transformed if "participatory democracy" is to work; and that the bourgeois state apparatus must not simply be appropriated by the right people but must be replaced by radically different political forms. In language more reminiscent of Luxemburg than liberalism, he proposes what he calls a "responsible pyramidal councils system", with competitive parties; and he argues that such a political system would not work in the presence of class divisions and oppositions. His account of how this transformation might be achieved places considerable—though far from unbounded—faith in some of the currently fashionable expressions of social protest: environmentalism, neighbourhood organizations, and movements for "decision-making" in the work-place, and in general, growing doubts about "the ability of corporate capitalism to meet consumer expectations in the old way..." (105) Nevertheless, the programme is not simply reducible to a call for the reform of capitalism. In any case, the essential problem is that Macpherson's very sketchy programme is less significant even programmatically than the analysis of liberalism which occupies most of the book. That analysis does, after all, represent Macpherson's conception of the society which needs to be transformed and thus establishes the conditions, the possibilities and limitations, of the desired transformation. However radical the explicit programme may be, the analysis essentially contradicts it by accepting capitalism on its own terms.

Liberal Democracy and Capitalism

Macpherson argues that there has been an historic linkage between democratic liberalism and "market assumptions." The link between liberalism and capitalism, however, seems to hinge largely upon the ideals and perceptions of particular thinkers; and capitalism almost appears as an instrument of liberalism, whose commitment to the capitalist system is secondary, contingent, and temporary. He does acknowledge that certain

historical developments had to take place before even the limited political democracy of advanced liberalism could prove acceptable to the propertied classes and compatible with capitalist "market relations"; but he never explains these developments, and his mode of analysis actually discourages an understanding of them. Above all, his argument provides no means of explaining what it is in the fundamental nature of capitalist relations of production that made their linkage with liberal democracy possible and, if not actually necessary, at least very convenient under given historic conditions. There is no suggestion in Macpherson's argument—and no methodological or theoretical possibility of suggesting—that liberal democracy, though not a necessary and universal consequence of capitalist productive relations, is nevertheless firmly grounded in these relations. To put it another way, Macpherson's mode of analysis cannot explain how and why capitalist relations of production have historically been a necessary if not **sufficient** condition for the development of liberal democracy, and conversely, to what extent and in what ways liberal democracy has sustained those productive relations.

How, then, should one assess the relation between liberalism and capitalism? Two problems are of major importance to socialist theory and practice: the first concerns liberal democracy in the present, its role in capitalist society; the other concerns liberal democratic principles in the future and whether liberalism has produced a legacy that will still be useful to a socialist society.

The first question which should be raised deals with the nature of capitalist relations of production and the sense in which they form the kernel of liberal democratic principles. This question has important strategic implications. One could, for example, begin by assuming not only that the relation of liberal democracy to capitalism is tangential and contingent, but even that liberal democratic "freedom" and "equality" are somehow antithetical to capitalist domination and inequality. Such an assumption is at least implicit in Macpherson's analysis; and Social Democratic revisionism seems to have been based on a similar view, with its strategy of "patchwork reform" and passive faith in some "peaceful process of **dissolution**"⁵ which would eventually and more or less automatically transform capitalism into socialism. This strategy seems to have been based on the assumption that the liberty and equality of bourgeois democracy were so antithetical to capitalism that the mere maintenance of bourgeois juridical and political institutions, assisted by reform, would produce a tension between freedom and equality at this level and unfreedom and inequality at other levels of **society**.⁶ This tension would in a sense replace class struggle as the motor of social transformation. At the other extreme might be a position that regards liberal democracy as so completely a mere reflection of capitalism that it must be regarded as simply a deception, a mystification. This is roughly

the position of various ultra-left groups. Liberal democratic capitalist states, according to this view, are not substantially different from authoritarian or even fascist forms of capitalism. If such radically divergent programmes are associated with different assessments of liberalism and its relation to capitalism, an attempt to situate liberalism in the capitalist mode of production cannot be an insignificant task for socialist political theory.

To determine the relation between liberalism and capitalism, one might begin with Marx's own account of juridical equality and freedom as an integral part of capitalist relations of production. Equality and *freedom*—of a particular kind—are, suggests Marx, inherent in exchange based on exchange values. The relation between subjects of exchange is a relationship of formal equality; moreover, it is a relationship in which the parties, recognizing each other as proprietors, "as persons whose will penetrates their commodities" and who appropriate each other's property not by force, are *free*. Capitalism, as a *generalized* system of commodity exchange, then, is the perfection of this form of juridical equality and freedom; but here, of course, freedom and equality acquire a rather special meaning since the particular exchange which constitutes the essence of capitalism is that between capital and labour, in which one party (juridically free and "free" from the means of his labour) has only his labour-power to sell. This means that the very object of the "free" exchange between "equals" is precisely the establishment of a particular social relation, a relation of unfreedom and domination which nevertheless retains, indeed is based on, the formal and juridical freedom and equality of the exchange relationship. Thus, wage-slavery, based on the commodification of labour-power, is characterized by a kind of "freedom" and "equality" that distinguishes this form of exploitation from all other relations between exploiter and *exploited*—master and slave, lord and serf—in which surplus-extraction relies more directly on relations of juridical or political domination and dependence.

Marx goes on to comment on the "foolishness" of those socialists (specifically the French and in particular Proudhon, though he might just as well be commenting on any number of modern social democrats, revisionists, and Labourites—perhaps even Macpherson himself?) ". . . who want to depict socialism as the realization of the ideals of *bourgeois* society"⁸ and argue that the freedom and equality characteristic of that society have simply been *perverted* by money, capital, etc. For Marx, the unfreedom and inequality of capitalist relations are, of course, not perversions but *realizations* of the form of freedom and equality implied by simpler forms of commodity exchange. Thus while bourgeois freedom and equality represent an advance over preceding forms, it is a mistake to regard them as antithetical to capitalist inequality and domination.

The equality and freedom of capitalist productive relations can, therefore, be regarded as the kernel of liberal democracy, insofar as the latter is the most complete form of *merely* legal and political equality and

freedom. As Marx suggests, the "constitutional republic" is as much the juridical principle of capitalist exploitation as brute force is the juridical principle of other modes of exploitation; and both express the right of the stronger:

All the bourgeois economists are aware of is that production can be carried on better under the modern police than e.g. on the principle of might makes right. They forget only that this principle is also a legal relation, and that the right of the stronger prevails in their "constitutional republics" as well, only in another form.⁹

A proper evaluation of liberal democracy, then, implies an analysis of the ways in which the capitalist state is an active agent in class struggle, the ways in which political powers are deployed in the interests of the dominant class, how the state enters directly into the relations of production—not only on the higher planes of *class* struggle, but in the immediate confrontation between capital and labour in the work place itself; the ways in which, for example the legal apparatus and police functions of the state are the necessary foundations of the contractual relation among "equals" which constitutes the domination of the working class by the capitalists. An analysis of the link between liberalism and capitalism must recognize that the "autonomy" and "universality" of the capitalist **state** are precisely the essence of its perfection as a *class* state; that this "autonomy" and "universality" (which are not merely apparent but to a significant extent real), the appearance of class-neutrality which is the special characteristic of the capitalist state, are all made possible and necessary by precisely that condition which also makes capitalism the most perfect form of class exploitation: the complete separation of the producers from the means of production and the concentration in private hands of the capacity for direct **surplus-extraction**. It must be acknowledged that the clear separation of class and state in capitalism—expressed, for example, in the state's monopoly of force, which can be turned against the dominant class itself—is not merely a separation but a more perfect symbiosis, in effect a cooperative division of labour between class and state which allocates to them separately the essential functions of an exploiting class: **surplus-extraction** and the coercive power that sustains it.

At the same time, liberal democracy, while grounded in the juridical principles of capitalist productive relations, cannot be reduced to them. The minimal form of freedom and equality intrinsic to capitalism need not give rise to the most developed **form**. If equality and freedom of a very limited and ambiguous kind are essential and common to all capitalist social formations, liberal-democratic political institutions have not been equally common and are certainly not essential to **capitalism**—even if they have been most conducive to capitalist development under

certain historic conditions. The nature of the relation between capitalism and liberal democracy must, therefore, be further specified with due consideration not only to general structural links but to the particular realities of history. One must go beyond the function of juridical and political freedom and equality in sustaining capitalist relations of production and the position of the dominant class, and take account of the value liberal democratic political forms have had for subordinate classes, indeed, the degree to which these political and legal forms are the legacy of historic struggles by subordinate classes. The role of liberal democracy in civilizing capitalist exploitation must be acknowledged; and this acknowledgement entails a recognition of the crucial differences among forms of capitalist state. It should no longer be necessary—although it clearly often is—to point out that there is a massive difference between capitalism with a liberal face and capitalism in a fascist guise. Not the least difference concerns the position of subordinate classes, their freedom to organize and to resist. The seduction of working class movements by liberal-democratic political forms cannot be lightly dismissed as a failure of class-consciousness or a betrayal of the revolution. The attractions of these institutions have been very real in countries where the tradition has been strongest. In those countries where the tradition has been weak, recent history has surely demonstrated as dramatically as possible that the absence of these forms has serious consequences and that their acquisition and retention are worthy goals for a working class movement. Any socialist strategy ignores at its peril the hold exercised by these political principles and institutions or underestimates the legitimacy of their claims.¹⁰

To sum up: Liberal democracy can neither be completely separated from nor reduced to the principles of capitalist exploitation. Any reasonable analysis must consider both the foundations of liberal democracy in capitalist relations of production and its historic role in checking the excesses of capitalism. A just appreciation of liberalism and its role in capitalism must, therefore, be founded on both structural and socio-historical analysis, taking into account not only the fundamental structure of capitalist productive relations in general but also the specificities of particular capitalist societies and the historic struggles that have produced them.

The second major question that a socialist theory should raise about liberal democracy also concerns its association with capitalism, but from a different point of view. If liberal democracy was born out of capitalist relations of production, should it also die with them? If liberal democratic institutions have acted to *civilize* as well as to support capitalism, is the need for such institutions dependent on the persistence of capitalist relations of production, or *might* a socialist society be faced with problems that demand similar solutions? In other words, has liberalism produced a

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legacy that can and ought to be adopted by socialism?

Liberalism and the Socialist State

Macpherson tries to establish a link between liberalism and socialism by arguing that the essence of liberal democracy is an ethical commitment to individual self-development for all, a commitment that issues logically in socialism. This is a rather empty formula, however. To extract this "ethical commitment" from liberal democracy as its essential principle is to evacuate its socio-historical substance and to forget the association of liberal individualism with capitalist exploitation and class domination. If any system of ideas is fundamentally concerned with this ethical commitment, it is socialism—specifically Marxism—which attacks those very relations of exploitation and domination obstructing the free development of the individual; but, while it may be true to say that socialism could not have existed without liberalism, our understanding of either is not advanced by regarding one as a mere extension of the other and ignoring the fundamental ways in which they are diametrically opposed. Liberalism and socialism can be conflated in this way only by means of an empty formalism which voids them of their social content.

Instead of attempting to abstract from liberal democratic doctrine an ethical meaning contradicted by the social reality embodied in liberal **theory** and practice, it would be more useful to look at the concrete political principles and institutions of liberal democracies to see whether there is in them a legacy worth preserving. This requires a consideration of the social needs served by these principles and institutions, and a judgment about whether similar social needs persist in a socialist society. From this point of view, it can be argued that if liberalism is about anything worth preserving, it is about certain ways of dealing with political authority: the rule of law, civil liberties, checks on arbitrary power. This function of liberalism must be conceded even if the status of "bourgeois liberties" is at best ambiguous in a class-divided society where they may not only obscure class oppositions with a false equality but actively serve as instruments of class power and hegemony. It is not here a question of how democratic "bourgeois democracy" may or may not be. In fact, one ought perhaps to begin by again separating the "liberal" from the "democratic." It may be that the most important lesson of liberalism has little to do with democracy but is concerned with controlling state **power**—and here, the earlier anti-democratic forms of liberalism may have as much to say as does liberal democracy.

To say that liberalism has a lesson for socialism in this respect is, of course, to make a highly contentious assumption, namely that the state will persist as a problem in classless society and that the most democratic society may continue to be faced with a political problem analogous to that of undemocratic societies. Much of socialist doctrine is based on the

assumption that, if the state will not actually wither away in a classless society, state power will at least no longer constitute a *problem*. Social democrats who have unbounded faith in the *efficacy* of bourgeois democratic forms seem not to regard the state as a problem even in capitalist society. indeed, they treat it as an instrument of salvation. More interesting questions are raised by socialists who are convinced that the state apparatus of bourgeois democracy must be "smashed" and replaced by something radically different. As Ralph Miliband has argued, those who speak of the "smashing" of the bourgeois state have not squarely faced the fact that they will—indeed must—replace the smashed state with yet another, perhaps temporarily even strengthened, state; that the smashing of the bourgeois state and its replacement by a revolutionary state do *not* in themselves mean the "dictatorship of the proletariat" if that concept still carries its original democratic implications; that there is always a tension between the necessity of "direction" and "democracy", between state power and popular power, which has been consistently evaded." So serious is the problem, suggests Miliband, that democracy can be preserved only by a system of "dual power" in which state power is *complemented* by widespread democratic organizations of various kinds throughout civil society.

It must be added, however, that the problem is not likely to be confined to some awkward "transitional" phase during which a strong state will undertake to fulfill the promise of the revolution by transforming society. If, for example, as Marx suggests, the central organizational problem of *all* societies is the allocation of social labour, then there is a sense in which the *political* question will be particularly important *after* the complete overthrow of capitalism. Capitalism is, after all, a system in which that central social problem is not dealt with "politically", a system uniquely characterized by the absence of an "authoritative allocation" of social labour. It is a system with what Marx calls an "anarchic" social division of labour not dictated by political authority, tradition, or communal deliberation but by the mechanisms of commodity-exchange. One might say that it is capitalism, then, which in this very particular sense involves the "administration of things and not people"^w—or, perhaps the administration of people by things; while the new society will be faced with a new and substantial organizational problem which very much involves the administration of people.

Marxist theory has not done much to clarify the issues at stake, let alone resolve the problem of the state under socialism. Marx and Engels had little to say on the subject of the state in future society, and what they did say is often ambiguous. In particular the debate has been plagued by a vagueness and inconsistency in the use of the term "state." We are told that the *state* will "wither away" in classless society. If (as it usually but not always the case) the state is defined as a system of class domination, it

is a mere tautology to say that the state will "wither away" once classes are abolished. The definition of the state as synonymous with class domination resolves nothing. It simply evades the issue. On the other hand, if the "state" refers to *any* form of public power, it is not at all clear that the state will disappear with class—nor is it clear that Marx or Engels thought it would.

Whatever Marx and Engels may have thought about the future of the state, the real question is not whether a public power will be needed in a classless society, but whether *that* public power will constitute a problem. In other words, are there certain problems inherent in public power itself whether or not it is *class* power? I take it for granted that it is hopelessly naive to believe in an advanced socialist society administered by simple forms of direct and spontaneous democracy. It is difficult to avoid the conviction that even classless society will require some form of *representation*, and hence *authority* and even *subordination* of some people to others. That premise granted, it must be added that, whether or not one uses the term "state" to describe political and administrative power in a classless society, it seems unduly optimistic to believe that there can ever be a case in which power exercised by some people on behalf of others does not constitute a problem. Socialist political theory must, therefore, face the problems posed by representation, authority, and subordination, and the fact that their very existence makes possible the misappropriation of power.

These problems cannot be dismissed by the mere assertion that representation, authority, and subordination will present no danger in the absence of class. Among other things, it is necessary to consider the possibility (hinted at by Marx himself, for example in his discussions of the Asiatic mode of production and other pre-capitalist formations) that public power may be, and historically often has been, itself the *source* of differentiation between appropriators and direct producers. There is good reason to believe that public power, instituted to undertake socially necessary functions—warfare, distribution, direction of communal labour, the construction of vital public works—has often been the original basis of the right to and capacity for surplus-appropriation. In other words, the state—in the broad sense—has not emerged from class divisions but has, on the contrary, *produced* class divisions and hence also produced the state in the narrow sense. It does not seem wise to assume that no constant and institutionalized protection will be needed in the future to prevent the similar transmutation of "political" authority into "economic" power, public power into something like class domination.

However much Marx or Engels may have tended toward political utopianism, the view that public power in classless society will still be a problem requiring conscious and institutionalized control is entirely consistent with the fundamental Marxist view of the world and the

meaning of the socialist revolution. Marx's belief in the complete transformation of society once class domination disappears does not imply that all problems associated with class domination will automatically and forever dissolve of themselves. On the contrary, the essence of the transformation itself is that socio-historical forces will for the first time be consciously controlled and directed instead of left to chance. This is what Marx means when he speaks of man's history before the revolution as "pre-history" and thereafter as "human history." The planned direction of social forces certainly does not refer simply to "economic" planning in the narrow sense—the planning of production quotas, and so on. The "economic" is itself a *social relation*, and the social relations of production themselves must be "planned." Furthermore, if "economic" power, the power to extract surplus labour, consists in a relationship of domination and coercion, then it is also and above all *political* power; and the planning of the social relations of production must include "political" planning at every level of society, institutional measures to prevent the re-emergence of domination and exploitative relations.

Even in a classless society there will probably have to be organizations whose conscious and explicit object is not simply to complement but to *check* power and prevent its misappropriation. There will have to be ongoing institutions, not simply emergency measures such as the power of recall, to act to this specific end, and equally important, to maintain a *consciousness* of the problem. Assuming that the political form of socialism will be a *representative* system, with some kind of administrative apparatus, there will still be tension between state power and popular power. Representation is itself a problem; and to the extent that the political problem cannot be practically resolved by replacing representation with direct democracy, by further democratizing the system of political organization, the problem must still be faced on another plane. In other words, the very existence of a state—however democratically *representative*—necessarily places a special task on the agenda: not simply democratic organization throughout civil society, but—and this may not be the same thing—what Marx calls the *subordination* of the state to *society*.¹²

The debate on the future of the state ought not to be reduced to a matter of textual interpretation; but discussions of the question are bound to return to the sketchy comments made by Marx and Engels on the subject. Since it is probably easier to demonstrate that they were optimistic about the disappearances of politics than to prove that they saw the state as a continuing problem, a few remarks in support of the latter interpretation should be added *here*. Particularly interesting is what they have to say—or at least imply—about the legacy of bourgeois liberalism and its possible application to post-revolutionary society.

It must be said, first, that both Marx and Engels may have clouded the issue by asserting that in a classless society the *state* will disappear or that

the "public power will lose its political **character**."¹³ This is not the same as saying that there will *be* no public power, or *even* that the public power will cease to be a problem. Engels, who most often and explicitly repeated the assertion that the state "in the proper sense of the word" would disappear, is also the man who, in attacking the Anarchists, stressed the continuing need for *authority* and *subordination* and mocked the Anarchists for believing that by changing the name of the public authority they had changed the thing itself. Even if, as **Engels** writes, "public functions will lose their political character and be transformed into the simple administrative functions of watching over the true interests of **society**,"¹⁴ the problem is not self-evidently resolved. Is it not possible that—even in Engels' own view—institutionalized measures will be required precisely to *ensure* that the public power, vested with authority over others and subordinating others to it, will maintain its purely "administrative" character and continue to act in the true interests of society? In a class society, such a humane and "unpolitical" public power would be impossible; but, if it becomes *possible* only in a classless society, it does not necessarily become inevitable.

That Marx, too, may have perceived the state as a continuing problem is suggested by the very formula, "the subordination of the state to society." Note, first, that he does not here speak of the *absorption* of the state by society, as he appears to do in his very early work,¹⁵ nor does he refer to the state's dissolution. What, then, is meant by the subordination of the state to society? Other texts—for example, *The Civil War in France* where Marx discusses the Paris Commune—suggest it means that the public power will consist of officials who are the "responsible agents of society", not "superior to society." The problem, however, only *begins* here. How is society to ensure that its officials will remain "responsible" and not "superior" to it? Marx may seem to dismiss the problem too lightly and optimistically, since he has little to say about it except to speak of the subjection of **officials** to instant recall. It cannot, however, be taken for granted that he failed to see the problem or to recognize its magnitude.

In the "Critique of the **Gotha** Programme" where the "subordination of the state" appears, Marx hints not only that the problem of the state will persist in communist society, but that the restrictions on state power instituted by the most "liberal" of bourgeois societies may have something to teach on the score of dealing with that problem:

Freedom consists in converting the state from an organ superimposed upon society into one completely subordinate to it, and today, too, the forms of state are more free or less free to the extent that they restrict the "freedom of the state."¹⁶

"Freedom" in bourgeois society is, of course, something very different from the complete "subordination of the state to society" which can

occur only in the absence of class domination. On the other hand, Marx appears to see some kind of connection between freedom in the bourgeois state and the subordination of the communist state to society, a connection that has something to do with the establishment of checks on state power, institutionalized restrictions on the "freedom of the state." He goes on to ask: "What transformations will the state undergo in communist society? In other words, what social functions will remain in existence that are analogous to the present functions of the state?" Marx undoubtedly contributed to the optimistic notion that the state will eventually wither away; but he is here apparently suggesting that the state will persist, that it probably will have certain functions analogous to its present ones, and that it may even pose analogous problems. Furthermore, the precise nature of these analogies can only be determined "scientifically", and "... one does not get a flea-hop nearer to the problem by a thousand-fold combination of the word people with the word state." This may mean that a democratic state is still a state, and will require conscious and institutional efforts to restrict its "freedom"—which, among other things, appears to mean to restrict bureaucratization—if it is to be subordinated to society. Insofar as the most "liberal" forms of the capitalist state represent the hitherto most advanced modes of restricting the freedom of the state, it is possible that socialists have something to learn from "liberalism" in this regard.

What particular kinds of restrictions on the state's "freedom" Marx had in mind is perhaps suggested by Engels' comments on the *Gotha Programme*—and his remarks are somewhat surprising:

"... a heap of rather confused *purely democratic demands* [figures] in the programme, of which several are a mere matter of fashion, as for instance, the "legislation by the people" which exists in Switzerland and does more harm than good if it does anything at all. *Administration by the people, that would be something. Equally lacking is the first condition of all freedom: that all officials should be responsible for all their official acts to every citizen before the ordinary courts and according to common law.*"

The implication here is, again, that freedom lies in restricting the freedom of the state; and it is clear that this is not simply a matter of establishing more democratic legislative or representative institutions, but concerns above all the administrative apparatus. Particularly striking is the importance Engels attaches to the law and the court system in restricting the freedom of the state. There is a suggestion that certain legal systems represent a kind of *opposition* to the state—perhaps even an organization "in society"^m—rather than a mere instrument of the state. The common law system, the "independent" judiciary, judges who are not part of the administrative apparatus, the jury system, the recourse of citizens to "ordinary courts" against state officials—characteristics more typical of the English legal tradition and of those legal systems which emanate from

it—are being implicitly opposed to the continental tradition and in particular, its system of administrative law. In short, **Engels** appears to be suggesting—in what may seem an excessively optimistic echo of English bourgeois ideology—that the "rule of law" in the particular English sense can play an essential role in restricting the state's freedom. And if the efficacy of "liberalism" in this form as a real check on the bourgeois state can certainly be questioned, such a view cannot simply be dismissed. While **Engels** goes on to repeat the optimistic conviction that the advent of socialism will mean the dissolution of the state "in the proper sense of the word", it is not at all clear that for him—or for Marx—this means the disappearance of public power as a problem. It might be useful, then, to consider bourgeois legalism and other "liberal" restrictions on the freedom of the state and what these institutions may have to teach about the modalities of subordinating the state to society even under communism.

Liberalism and Revolution

In any case, whether or not liberalism can teach socialism anything about the post-revolutionary state, it can at least reveal something about the seductiveness of a particular political tradition, which has more immediate strategic implications. It is significant that countries in which the liberal—not necessarily democratic—tradition has been strongest, working class movements have been least revolutionary and have most consistently placed their faith in the political institutions of bourgeois democracy. Socialist movements in other countries may have *acquired* that faith; but the English, for example, have had a mainstream labour movement with an unbroken tradition of loyalty to these institutions. It seems also to be true that where liberalism has been strongest, socialist theory has been least Marxist. Even Marx himself was affected by this political tradition. He did, after all, suggest in **1872** that Britain and the United States were the countries most likely to achieve the transition to socialism by peaceful means. Addressing a meeting in Amsterdam, he said:

You know that the institutions, mores, and traditions of various countries must be taken into consideration, and we do not deny that there are countries—such as America, England, and if I were more familiar with your institutions. I would perhaps also add Holland—where the workers can attain their goal by peaceful means. This being the case, we must also recognize the fact that in most countries on the Continent the lever of our revolution must be force. . . .

Without speculating on the accuracy of **this** judgement, it is instructive to consider why Marx made it, what factors he found operating in England and America that distinguished them from other countries which would more probably require violent revolution to achieve the transformation of society. No doubt England was the most proletarian country in the

world; and Marx seems to have expected America to become "the workers' continent par excellence", as he suggests later in the Amsterdam speech. In the relevant paragraph, however, Marx does not refer to the *class* configurations of different countries, but to their "institutions, mores, and traditions." As for which institutions and traditions he particularly had in mind, it seems unlikely that the crucial "variable" for Marx was the degree of *democracy* by itself. England in 1872 was still 13 years away from universal manhood suffrage (and even further removed from a system of one man—one vote, or any kind of universal adult suffrage), and had a far from democratic political tradition; while France had already experimented with universal manhood suffrage and other politically democratic institutions long before, was on the eve of establishing a bourgeois democratic republic, and had provided the world with its most influential democratic tradition. Considered in the context of other statements by Marx—for example, in the "Critique of the **Gotha Programme**", the "18th Brumaire", and the letter to Kugelmann of April 12, 1871—the judgement of the Amsterdam speech appears to be singling out not so much the democratic elements of English and American political institutions, but their "liberalism", particularly the degree to which they restrict the "freedom of the state", in contrast to the more strongly bureaucratic and police states of the major capitalist countries on the Continent, which would almost certainly require violent revolution to "smash" their rigid state **apparatus**.¹⁹ In other words, the apparently less rigid British and American forms of capitalist state at least created the impression that the structure of domination, at the pinnacle of which stood the state, could more easily be shifted by peaceful, parliamentary means.

If Marx allowed himself a certain optimism concerning the political forms and traditions of liberalism, it is not so difficult to understand how such a large proportion of the working classes which experienced them directly could be so tenaciously faithful to a political tradition that has not been notably democratic. The recourse subordinate classes have had to judicial and political institutions in their relations with dominant classes, together with the restrictions on the "freedom" of the state itself, have created a faith in the efficacy of legal and political forms; and this faith cannot be dismissed as unreasonable, especially in the British case. A similar tradition may in part account for the peculiarities of American social movements—which the prosperity of American capitalism is not sufficient to explain. Even in the face of a state in which the working class is the most inadequately represented of any major capitalist country, and where the state has often exhibited its hostility to the working class and to expressions of social protest, the Americans have, of course, been notable for their failure to produce a serious labour movement; and equally significant, for the tendency to reduce social issues to *constitutional* questions and social protest to *civil rights* movements of various kinds.

One is always struck by the extent to which grievances are addressed to the state and the constitution, or alternatively the source of the evil is attributed to the state's overstepping its proper bounds, while the underlying social relations of capitalism are seldom called into question. It may even be significant that more immediately "constitutional" crises like Watergate seem in their effects on the public consciousness to overshadow more fundamental expressions of the *social* contradictions endemic to capitalism. In contrast, French students and workers in May, 1968, for example, seemed much more inclined to look to the social foundations for the source of their grievance—even though the student protest began over such apparently superficial issues as the size of university classes. Perhaps the nature of the French state—with a tradition progressing from absolutism to Bonapartism to rigid bureaucratism—has something to do with this different perception of the social world and the place of the state within it.

The same factors which produce an apparently unshakeable faith in the efficacy of the political and legal forms of bourgeois democracy may also help to explain the relative scarcity (at least until recently) of Marxist analysis among intellectuals in precisely those countries where the liberal tradition has been strongest. C.B. Macpherson himself is a significant case in point, an example made the more striking precisely because his commitments often appear to be radical. Although in his own analysis of liberal democracy he does not single out that aspect of the tradition which seems to have been most seductive, it can be argued that the inadequacies of his analysis—regarding class and state, the nature of capitalism, the organic link between liberalism and capitalism, his abstraction of liberalism from its social foundations—can probably be explained by the fact that he is part of that Anglo-American tradition of political thought and of socialism which for understandable historic reasons has fallen under the spell of liberalism. Again, this is an intellectual tradition which, while expressing a moral indignation at capitalism, fails to ground that indignation in a commensurate analysis of capitalism and the bourgeois state which goes substantially beyond capitalism's own evaluation of itself. This tradition begins at least with J.S. Mill; and for all Macpherson's perception of the contradictions between Mill's ethical position and his analysis of capitalism, it cannot be said that his own argument is much less plagued by the same contradictions.

It is also significant that where the liberal political tradition has been most captivating—and most plausible—"pure" *political* theory, abstracted from social analysis, has been a particularly well-developed intellectual genre; and this medium has had a special attraction for theorists whose object is to justify existing social relations. A Marxist theory of the state, therefore, is an absolutely necessary corrective to the mystifications of that political and intellectual tradition. At the same time, if Marxist political theory is to have the desired counter-hegemonic effects, it ought not to

confine itself to the "theory of the state" as it is now understood, but should meet these ideological mystifications on their own ground. Political philosophy must be firmly grounded in its socio-historical context. It is noteworthy, for example, that no socialist history of political theory has yet been written to counteract the innumerable more or less abstract and ahistorical textbooks in the "history" of political thought. Macpherson has certainly broken ground in this respect, but much more needs to be done. Particularly where the abstractly "political" tradition has been so strong in theory and in practice, socialists ought not to leave unchallenged an intellectual tradition which in its very nature, in both content and form, has been a huge mystification.

NOTES

- C.B. Macpherson, *The Life and Times of Liberal Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977). Page references of quotations from this book will be indicated by numbers in brackets in the text.
- Cf. Ralph Miliband, *The State in Capitalist Society* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1969), pp. 2-4.
- Max Weber, *Economy and Society* (New York: Bedminster Press, 1968), pp. 927-8.
- C.B. Macpherson. "Politics: Post-Liberal Democracy?" in R. Blackburn, ed., *Ideology in Social Science* (London: Fontana/Collins, 1972), pp. 29-30.
- This is how Marx describes the principles of German Social Democracy in his circular Letter to Bebel, Liebknecht, Brache et. al. of September 17-18, 1879.
- Cf. Lucio Colletti, "Bernstein and the Marxism of the Second International", in *From Rousseau to Lenin* (London: New Left Books, 1972), pp. 92-97.
7. Marx, *Grundrisse*, ed. M. Nicolaus (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1972), p. 243.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 248.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 88.
10. E.P. Thompson has shown very effectively how the "rule of law" and the principles of constitutionalism in England have both served and modified the dominance of the ruling class. See, for example, *Whigs and Hunters*.
Ralph Miliband, *Marxism and Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), pp. 180-90.
12. Marx, "Critique of the Gotha Programme", *Selected Works* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1962), Vol. II, p. 32.
13. *Communist Manifesto*, *Selected Works*, op. cit., vol. I, p. 54.
14. Engels, "On Authority".
15. For example, in "On the Jewish Question", or the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*.
16. "Critique of the Gotha Programme", op. cit.
17. Engels, Letter to Bebel, March 18-28, 1875, *Marx and Engels: Selected Correspondence* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 2nd ed., 1965), p. 293.
18. Marx, "Amsterdam speech", September 8, 1872.
19. Engels later shows less confidence in the flexibility of the American state. In his 1891 introduction to *Marx's The Civil War in France*, he cites the U.S. as the country in which the state power has most successfully made itself "independent in relation to society", rendering the nation powerless against politicians who take possession of and exploit that power—despite the absence of a standing army and a rigid bureaucracy.