

Introduction:

MacPherson is considered the father of the idea 'possessive individualism', which was coined by him in his magnum opus *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke*, when the book was published originally in 1962. It is important to note that MacPherson wants to bring attention to the notion of Possessive Individualism, rather than the idea of 'individualism'.

The idea of possessive individualism as propounded by MacPherson identifies with the notion that an individual is conceived as the sole owner of his or her skills and abilities, for which the person has no obligations of any sort to the society in general. These 'abilities and skills' are open for sale in the marketplace, and according to MacPherson such a society displays an undying craving for the 'consumption of these skills. In his book, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism*, he analyses how this idea of 'possessive individualism' originated in the seventeenth century, and is implicitly mentioned in the writings of John Locke, Thomas Hobbes and James Harrington. He also analyses how these ideas have pervaded the liberal-democratic

political philosophy since then, and how they have dominated liberal literature.

Critique of Liberalism

Liberalism as a concept has been criticized in several ways by many conservative thinkers. Edmund Burke, who is considered as the father of modern conservatism, was a staunch critic of the French Revolution and its pretext of liberty for every individual. However, the strongest criticism against the idea of liberalism was put forward by the Roman Catholic Church. This disagreement led to a long tussle between the state and the Church. The argument of the Church rested on a pillar similar to those of the conservatives and asserted that the principle of liberalism led individuals to work only for their self-interest and material gains, which greatly undermined several social values. People who supported the left side of the political spectrum too criticized some aspects of the philosophy of liberalism. However, their criticism was rooted against the economic principles that are associated with the idea of liberalism. This criticism is at the crux of MacPherson's criticism of the principle of what he calls possessive individualism. Just like the proponents of the left believed that liberalism has led to an economic system that

advances exploitative practices, practices which in itself go against the democratic principles of liberalism. It is in this aspect that MacPherson's philosophy comes into play. He wanted to bring back to 'liberalism' what he felt was missing in it. A sense of morality in individuals towards both, themselves, and the community.

"Its (modern day liberalism) possessive quality is found in its conception of the individual as essentially the proprietor of his own person or capacities, owing nothing to society for them. The individual was seen neither as a moral whole, nor as part of a larger social whole, but as an owner of himself." MacPherson (1962): MacPherson argued that in modern day liberalism, the mere possession of skills and abilities of a person was associated with the person being free. He stated in his book "it was thought, is free in as much as he is proprietor of his person and capacities. The human essence is freedom from dependence on the wills of others, and freedom is a function of possession." MacPherson (1973):

As can be seen, MacPherson criticized a specific aspect of liberalism. This aspect is something which he identified as 'possessive individualism'. It is imperative to further

understand the basic notions behind this coined term.

Concept of Possessive Individualism

The concept of possessive individualism begins with the basic premise that what makes a person human is the freedom from the dependence on the will of others. MacPherson describes his understanding of this concept in his book in the following enumerated ways.

1. The individual is the owner or proprietor of his own person and capacities or skills, and for these skills he owes nothing to the society. These abilities have been developed by the individual on his own and therefore he has the sole interest over those. This view denies his commitment to other individuals, traditions, practices, and conceptions of the good. Gauba (2000)
2. As has already been discussed above, MacPherson argues that for a person to be human, there must be freedom from the dependence on the will of others. He furthers this by stating that freedom from dependence includes the freedom to not have any relations with others. However, a person can enter into relations with other individuals

provided they have been entered 'voluntarily' and for the 'self-interest of the individual'.

3. Although the individual cannot detach the whole of his property (because he himself is an aspect of that property), he may detach his capacity to labour. What this essentially means is that a person can use his skills and abilities to do some productive work (labor). This work was achieved with the help of the individual's abilities and now becomes a part of his own property (person).

4. Human political society is nothing but a series of market relations. A market where in addition to goods, a person's own capacities and abilities can be exchanged.

Parallel with Locke's Theory

A striking parallel can be found between MacPherson's conception of "possessive individualism" and one aspect of Locke's theory of natural rights. As the person who influenced the Enlightenment more than anyone else, Locke's theory of natural rights is also inextricably linked with the notion of 'possessive individualism'.

Locke propounded in his Second Treatise of Government that all individuals are born equal. He further stated that this 'equality' is

in the sense that all persons are born with some "inalienable" natural rights. These rights were God Given and could not be taken away from the individuals by anyone. These rights were namely the Right to Life, Liberty and Property. It is the third or namely the Right to Property that we are concerned with. However, property does not connote the same meaning as it does in its conventional sense. Property according to Lockean Theory is something more than the physical moveable and immoveable goods that a person has rights over. As soon as an individual is born, the first and foremost thing that he owns is his own self. This is what Locke argues. An individual is firstly the owner of himself, i.e, he has a property claim over himself. If an individual has a claim over himself, it is but a foregone conclusion, that an individual also owns his abilities, skills or capacities and the work that the person does with these capacities (labor). This concept corresponds with the idea of possessive individualism as coined by MacPherson.

Work on Democracy

MacPherson's conception of democracy flows from his conception of the idea of possessive individualism, which is why he places more emphasis on the substantive

aspect of democracy which involves the advancement of individual liberty and dignity and human empowerment. He was considered a "critical liberal" - which means that he was a liberal, but at the same time was critical of several aspects of liberalism as was seen from his critique of liberalism. MacPherson analysed several theories of democracy, while also giving his own theory of democracy.

MacPherson analysed different models of democracy and gave the following clarifications:

Classical Theory of Democracy- The classical theory of democracy, discusses the philosophical aspect of democracy. It considers democracy as a form of government which results in the direct empowerment of the common masses. This is further classified into philosophical/classical model of democracy as:

Protective Model- This model defines democracy as a form of government which is essential for the protection of the liberties of the masses. Locke and Bentham are proponents of this model. As per this theory, individual liberty can only be protected when

the government acts as per the will of the people.

Developmental Model- Coming to the developmental model, as can be seen in the works of John Stuart Mill, democracy is necessary for the absolute growth and development of human personality and individuality.

Modern Theory of Democracy - While the classical or normative theories have tried to explain the philosophy of democracy, modern thinkers and their theories have tried to show the "real picture" of the state of democracy.

1. **Elitist Theory** - MacPherson was highly critical of the elitist theory of democracy. To understand his criticism, it is first necessary to understand the basic notions behind the elitist theory of democracy. This theory basically propounded that power with the masses is a myth in a functioning democracy, because the real power always rests in the hands of the elites of the society. This theory is also called the market model of democracy as propounded by Max Weber and Shuchmpeter. An analogy is also used to describe how democracy is also an example of a market economy. Wherein the political leaders are the entrepreneurs and voters are

the consumers. MacPherson's criticism lies in the fact that elitist theory of democracy reduces the meaning of democracy by limiting it to the process of elections and forming the government. It is concerned more with the 'procedural aspect' of democracy, than it is with the 'substantive aspect' which aims for the development and empowerment of the masses. "Elitist theory of democracy implies that citizen participation is not a necessary condition of democracy. Thus, for Schumpeter, running of government and framing of public policies is the task of professional politicians; the role of ordinary citizens is confined to vote for the politicians." Gauba (2000).

2. **Pluralist Theory of Democracy** - Robert Dahl, foremost proponent of the pluralist theory of democracy described liberal democracies as 'polyarchies'. He meant that in a democracy, the real power is exercised by the various people's associations. MacPherson's criticism of this theory is along similar lines, in the sense that this too overlooks the substantive aspects of democracy. Just like the elitist theory puts undue focus on the role of political parties, the pluralist theory focuses a lot on the role of several pressure groups that exist in

society. It is in reference to this, that MacPherson coined the term "Schumpeter-Dahl Axis" to describe how both these theories reduced from a humanist aspiration to a market equilibrium system. Gauba (2000). Macpherson has attacked the elitist-pluralist theory of democracy as espoused by Joseph Schumpeter and Dahl He has pointed out that the classical theory of democracy was erected on a moral foundation. It saw democracy as a developmental process, as a matter of emancipation of the common masses

The elitist-pluralist theory on the other hand, treats democracy as a mechanism whose essential function is to maintain an equilibrium. Under this theory "democracy is reduced from a humanist aspiration to a market equilibrium system. And although the new orthodox theory claims scientific neutrality, its value judgement is obvious enough: whatever works, is right— that's, whatever enables the prevailing class-stratified society to work." MacPherson (1973). The classical theory treated democracy as a means by which all men could enjoy and develop their personal abilities. The exponents of the elitist-pluralist theory, MacPherson argued diminished democracy to a means by which men can

register their wants as consumers in the political market. This theory implicitly makes democracy a political system which makes the majority of the population irrelevant, since they do not hold power in society. With the acceptance of this principle of domination, the principle of equality is relegated to the background.

MacPherson's Model

Although MacPherson is often identified as a liberal, his work has been highly critical of several aspects of liberal democracy. His criticism mainly focuses on the inegalitarianism present in liberal democracies. His most prominent observations on the reality of democracy are as follows:

1. As an exponent of the radical theory of democracy, he sought to expand the scope of democracy to make it more equitable. In his book *The Real World of Democracy* (1966), Macpherson argued that the liberal societies which grant universal suffrage, a choice between political parties, and civil liberties, have no exclusive claim to the title of democracy. Gauba (2000) He asserted that it is wrong to believe that only 'liberal' systems can be democratic, which is to say that it is

possible to have a democratic system without having the type of liberal democracy that western countries have.

2. He argues that other types of systems can also be democratic. He recognized and acknowledged that socialist democracy as well as one party systems can also be called democracies provided, they fulfil certain criteria. Socialist democracies can be accepted, if they were to go for intra-party elections and open up their closed and detached bureaucracy. Coming to some third world countries, where one party system is prevalent, he contended that for them to be recognised as 'democracies' they must enjoy widespread political support among the masses. Thus, it could be said that MacPherson focused more on achieving the ends (prosperity of the common people), rather than the means to the ends.

His Concept of Power in Democracy

Rather than the conventional view on power, MacPherson very closely analysed the constructive concept of power, which focused on the 'empowerment of the masses'. He made a distinction between two parts of power - a) extractive power and b)

developmental power. A person's ability to use others' abilities to serve his or her own purpose or 'power over' others is what is known as extractive power. It basically refers to an individual's power to extract benefit for himself through others. Many modern political philosophers have focused on this aspect of power. Developmental power on the other hand represents a person's ability to use his or her abilities to make steps towards the achievement of self-determined goals.

MacPherson argued that in a liberal-capitalist democracy, the owners of land and capital have undue extractive power because of which they are able to use the physical and mental capacities of others for their own wellbeing. MacPherson asserted that "developmental power of a person enables him to develop his truly human capacities. MacPherson identified three impediments to the growth of developmental power of individuals in society. These were: (a) lack of adequate means of life; (b) lack of access to the means of labour; and (c) lack of protection against invasion by others. He argued that these issues could be overcome with a 'new system' of democracy which worked for upholding civil and individual

liberties and combined it with a socialist mode of production.

MacPherson asserted that a 'truly democratic' system of government was one where the developmental power of the people was maximum and the extractive power of the elites was minimum. This is another reason why he considered 'western liberal' democracies to be imperfect, since in these countries' capitalists (people who own land and capital) had maximum extractive and developmental power, while the poor and common people had negligible amounts of both.

Views on Creative Freedom

Although MacPherson personally never claimed to be a Marxist, his ideas resonate very closely to Marxist ideologies and thinking. He has also criticized capitalism vehemently throughout his writings, which is why he has sometimes been referred to as a 'Neo-Marxist'. Barry (1989) He argued that 'creative freedom' or self-direction in order to achieve one's goals is what distinguishes man from animal.

"Man is unique in the world for having both the capacity for choice and ability... his activity is directed by his own design and not

at the dictate of another.” MacPherson (1973). MacPherson asserted that there are two principles guiding western democratic theory. a) maximisation of utilities - In this, man is nothing but a consumer of utilities that are produced by society. b) maximisation of powers - This is an ethical principle which treats man as a doer demanding development of his uniquely human capacities. For achieving creative freedom, man needs to maximise his developmental power. It is in reference to this principle that MacPherson argues that in a capitalist society, since the poor have negligible developmental power, the poor are forced to sell their capacities on the open market to the more ‘powerful’ and are unable to achieve true creative freedom. This is why MacPherson lamented the lack of creative freedom for ordinary folk in a capitalist society.

Criticism of Capitalism

MacPherson's criticism of capitalism mainly rests on the premise that, in a capitalist society, owners of land, capital and factors of production are able to exercise power over other people (non-owners), which perpetuates a system of inequality. Such a system leads to a continuous net transfer of powers. According to MacPherson, human abilities

are reduced to goods which are to be purchased in the open market for a contracted period of time (as propounded in the idea of possessive individualism). Even though the work is done by the contracted individual using his own person and abilities, MacPherson asserts that “In the real sense, the actual work is owned by the owner of the capital. He, having purchased the ability to labour, has the right of ownership in the labour that is actually performed.” MacPherson (1973). He also opposes the capitalist open market system by stating that it has reduced human abilities and talents to commodities that conform to the economic principles of demand and supply. He argues that this restricts the true growth of oneself to his full potential. To overcome this, he proposes for a welfare state that would look after the equity of opportunity for all, so that they can achieve true ‘creative freedom’ and not be bound by the shackles of the market.

Opposition to Friedman

MacPherson vehemently opposed the argument of Milton Friedman. Friedman identified capitalism as a necessary condition of freedom, which implies repudiation of equality for the sake of maintaining freedom. Gauba (2000) Friedman argued that the

government is only responsible for maintaining and supplementing a free market, which would then lead to freedom for the masses.

For MacPherson, capitalism and freedom could not be concordant with one another. He argued in his book *Democratic Theory: Essays in Retrieval* that “: "This would mean the government moving out of almost all its welfare and regulatory functions. Controls on, or support of, any prices, wages, interest rates, rents, exports, imports, and amounts produced, would all have to go; so, would present social security programmes, housing subsidy programmes, and the like.”

However, it can also be stated that much of the disagreement lies in the fact of their respective interpretations of freedom. Friedman identified ‘freedom’ as negative which means absence of any restrictions on choice. He viewed ‘positive freedom’ with contempt and associated it with communism. While on the other hand, MacPherson termed freedom as ‘positive’ which meant the ability to achieve one’s true potential.

Criticism Of MacPherson’s Theory

He recommends combining a socialist ownership structure with liberal democratic

institutions to prohibit the exercise of extractive power and encourage the development of all human beings. He suggests that the programme be expanded. The welfare state's role is to make it easier for citizens to get commodities and services on the basis of need rather than a desert dictated by capitalist principles. As a result, he aspires to create a system in which the benefits of capitalism are maximised, while still having the advantages of a welfare state. He wanted to combine finer aspects of both, which in reality is an extremely difficult task.

As Norman Barry has observed: "The difficulty with Macpherson's argument is that he evaluates existing liberal democracy by reference to some 'ideal version' of democracy, rather than by comparing it directly to existing alternatives.” Barry (1989) His belief that complete harmony in a democracy would be achieved only when the exercise of extractive power would be restricted is also characterised as a false statement. This is because MacPherson assumes that the only reason for disharmony in modern democracies is due to exercising extracting power, and no other factors contribute to the discord prevalent in society.

References:

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