The Young C. B. Macpherson on Capitalism, Fascism, and Democratic Socialism

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Abstract: This paper concerns C. B. Macpherson’s youthful understanding of fascism, a political event unfolding around him that he saw as an ideological and political challenge to democracy. An avowed socialist when he arrived at the London School of Economics in 1933, he saw fascism as an enemy. Fascists had seized power in Italy and Germany. They were on the rise in Austria, France, Spain and England. England would prove itself an exception; but at the time, Macpherson feared otherwise and grappled with the question of whether developments in Germany and Italy might also transpire in England. This worry spills into his Master’s thesis. For political and intellectual reasons, Macpherson needed to understand fascism. He perceived fascism as a response to what he saw as the crisis of his time—the concentration of economic power that made bourgeois democracy impossible. He concludes in the interwar years that the future held a choice: “socialist democracy” or “capitalist fascism.” I suggest in this paper that his analysis of fascism tells us a great deal about how he understood class dynamics, the prospects for socialism, the use of violence to that end, and the relationship between ideas and politics. My paper contributes an in-depth study of Macpherson’s early thought on fascism and socialism, and it does so by drawing on archival material never seen before. It also adds to the scholarship on fascism the insights of one of Canada’s most influential political theorists.

This paper concerns the young C. B. Macpherson, his years as a graduate student in London (1933-35), before he became the famous political theorist he is known as today. In tracing his intellectual engagements during these critical years, I aim to investigate the roots of his later political theory. I suggest that the young Macpherson’s analysis of fascism tells us a great deal about how he understood class dynamics, the prospects for a democratic socialism, the uses of violence to that end, and the relationship between ideas and politics. In so doing, I seek to demonstrate the ways in which these understandings are rooted in and informed by a Marxist critique of political economy and a liberal-socialist conception of democracy as individual self-development.

To do this, I make use of hitherto unpublished archival material. In particular, I draw from two unpublished diaries from the years 1933-35, the contents of which have yet to be commented upon. The same is true of a series of letters between Macpherson and his older brother, Bill Macpherson. I quote at length from both journals and letters as these texts provide a first-time window into Macpherson’s ideas and whereabouts during these years. Finally, I also rely on Macpherson’s unpublished Master’s thesis, Voluntary Associations Within the State 1930-1934, with Special Reference to the Place of Trade Unions in Relation to the State in Great Britain from 1935.

In his Master’s thesis, Macpherson argued that the liberal industrial state perpetuates class antagonism through judicial rulings and legislations that serve to maintain the existing private property structure. His analysis of liberal capitalism is centered on an analysis of private property. We shall see that Macpherson adopts Marx’s notion that private property is an expression of class antagonism. Capitalist class relations are inherently antagonistic. The fact that some own the means of production while others engage in production and are dependent on the owners for their very survival is the root of all social antagonisms. Economic class differentiation is thus insurmountable as long as a private property relation prevails. It is an economic divide that only political action can undo. According to Macpherson, then, only political actions could facilitate the transition into a socialist economy.
In a letter to his brother on February 12, 1934, Macpherson identified the essence of democracy in his definition of socialism: the aim of socialism “is to remove the institutions and the system which prevents people from finding their own level in all aspects of life.” Liberal, or political, democracy, in Macpherson’s eyes, only goes so far. The moral foundation underpinning Macpherson’s criticism of liberalism is thus predicated on the liberal state’s failure to realize one fundamental universal democratic value: the right to self-development. Macpherson is thus convinced that capitalism in his day is an economic system that is not only inherently unjust but also incorrigible. There could, in his words, be no adequate compromise between capital, labour and the state that guaranteed economic democracy. The structure of capital, labour and the state had to be “rearranged.” His proposal for such a rearrangement is a socialist regime in which every individual is provided with the right to self-development suitable to his or her own particular nature.

In regard to the rise of fascism, he doubted the liberal state’s ability to confine the growing antagonism between the labourer and the propertied in a stagnating economy where inequality has grown and wealth is concentrated in the hands of a few. For Macpherson, capitalist or liberal democracy was not the solution to the fascist threat: it was part of the problem, its main cause. He identifies two possible scenarios resulting from the challenge against the liberal state’s monopoly of violence from the class forces unleashed by the failure of capitalism to overcome the recession of the 1930s. One way in which one of the two classes could keep the other at bay in a liberal state – albeit for a limited time – was by means of an alliance between the capitalists and the fascists that would violently break working class resistance; an alliance Macpherson predicted would result in a fascist capitalist regime. The alternative outcome – and the one he himself proposed – was to overcome capitalist class differentiation by replacing capitalism with socialism. Socialism would not only overcome the injustice he sees perpetuated by a capitalist economy, but also fend off the danger of fascism. Put differently, I will suggest that Macpherson viewed socialism as (i) an active strategy, which was to create a more just society, and (ii) as a defensive strategy, simply to withstand fascism. Macpherson believed he lived at a time of crisis when things were coming to a head. Change was inevitable. The only thing in question was the direction of the change.

I. Birth and Education

Crawford Brough Macpherson, was born in Toronto, November 18, 1911, and would later die of emphysema in the same city in 1987. The youngest son of two teachers, he grew up in a middle class family. In 1929, Macpherson began his undergraduate degree at the University of Toronto, just as the Great Depression was to unfold. He graduated in 1932, moving to London the following September for his graduate studies in Economics at the London School of Economics (hereafter LSE), under the supervision of Harold Joseph Laski. He lived in a university residence, the London House (known today as Goodenough College), together with other international students at Mecklenburg Square in Bloomsbury.

On October 5, 1933, after meeting Laski at the LSE for the first time, Macpherson writes in his journal: “I’m to do modern political theory (since 1689), with a thesis on the place of voluntary associations in the state as seen in that theory, and have arranged to take some of the best lecture courses mostly by Laski, Tawney and Ginsberg.” He was initially unimpressed by the standard of the seminars and, throughout the first year, his academic work is second to the time he spends with friends and his interests in classical music, the arts and architecture. He does not write much on the thesis until the coming summer; he is discouraged, doubting his own abilities, comparing it with the confidence of others. The rise of fascism on the continent makes him feel that his work is insignificant; however, he tells himself in the winter
of 1934: I will “push on with my German and my thesis work and hope that it will seem more important as I get on with it.”\textsuperscript{11} He plans to visit Germany in the summer of 1934, but ends up going to Scotland instead. Some of his friends visit the Soviet Union. He reveals no such desire, and is curiously silent about the Bolsheviks in his journals and letters from the time.\textsuperscript{12} He travels to Italy, France and Spain in the company of friends, witnessing the rise of fascism on the continent with his own eyes.\textsuperscript{13} The fascists had seized power in Italy, Germany, and Austria and were on the rise in France, Spain and England. Although England would later prove itself an exception, he feared otherwise at the time and grappled with the question of whether the developments in Germany and Italy might also transpire in England. This was a worry that would spill into his Master’s thesis.

The topic of his Master’s thesis was the relation between labour unions and the British state. In the second and third chapter (out of a total of five), he analyzes the historical and contemporary “limitations” placed by the state on trade unions’ “powers.” In chapter two, he specifically surveys parliamentary legislation and judicial rulings that pertain to the power of unions.\textsuperscript{14} He reaches the conclusion that “the State regulates the place of trade unions always with a view to maintaining the existing property structure of society.”\textsuperscript{15} Macpherson generalizes this trend to hold true regardless of the state and the existing property structures. In regards to the capitalist state, he argues, the state withdraws rights to voluntary associations in direct relation to the existing threats to property structures.\textsuperscript{16} The withdrawal of union rights in Germany, he suggests, eased Hitler’s rise to power. In chapter four, the key chapter, which reflects his immediate political interest and concern, he examines the “aim” and “development” of labour unions’ policies in a capitalist, socialist, and fascist state, as well as in the period of transition from a capitalist to a fascist or socialist state.\textsuperscript{17} The chapter’s emphasis is on a potential transition period in England. The reason for this, William Leiss has correctly suggested, is that Macpherson worries about “the emerging social contract between capital, labor and the state” on the basis that it cases “the possibility” of a “fascist” solution.\textsuperscript{18} If a future Labour government first turned England into a semi-corporate state and successively lost an election to the opposition, then the “new government in its attempt to make the rule of property secure would have in their hands an industrial ownership and management structure whose form expedites a transformation to a Fascist state, as well as a state incorporated trade union movement without sufficient power to resist that change.”\textsuperscript{19} I return with a more detailed analysis of his Master’s thesis below.

II. Socialism and human nature

“I was just as Socialist a year ago as I am now,” Macpherson writes on Feb. 12, 1934 to his brother Bill.\textsuperscript{20} This statement is a reply to his brother, who had attributed Macpherson’s socialist beliefs to his need to soon enter the “competitive struggle” for employment. Macpherson repudiates this idea by reminding his brother that he attained his socialist conviction prior to any such concern, referring specifically to two socialist papers he wrote for the Anomalous Society in his undergraduate years as a case in point, and reminds his brother that although his future career is unknown, he is nevertheless “comparatively one of the privileged.”\textsuperscript{21} Against his brother’s claim that socialism is a “leveling out process,” Macpherson “insist[s] that socialism is not intended to put people at or nearer a level; it is to remove the institutions and the system which prevents people from finding their own level in all aspects of life.”\textsuperscript{22} Eight years later, in a 1943 article titled “The meaning of Economic Democracy,” he defines democracy around one fundamental right: “the securing of an equal right of individuals to self-development.”\textsuperscript{23} Equal right to individual self-development, he argues, is only attainable in a socialist economy. He understood economic democracy as socialist democracy.
Macpherson’s early view of democracy owes quite a bit to liberalism, although he does not acknowledge this heritage at the time. The idea of self-development figures prominently in John Stuarts Mill’s version of liberalism, and the very idea of self-development contains an element of the individualism that is characteristic of all versions of liberalism. This unaccounted for tradition for his understanding of democracy came to play an important role in Macpherson’s mature political theory. After World War Two, he identified and differentiated between two liberal traditions, “possessive” individualism and “developmental” liberalism, the latter corresponding to his socialist understanding of democracy. Macpherson argued that every individual has a set of “developmental powers,” the most important of which is the capacity to work. The individual’s actualization of his or her power is decided by the rules and conditions of a wage-labour market, which in turn are determined by class relations. In order for an individual to actualize their potential, they must have access to the means of production. Access to the means of production in a bourgeois market society is primarily controlled by private ownership. He advocates for the abolishment of private ownership until the end of his career.

Macpherson had become a committed socialist in the third year of his undergraduate studies and traces the roots of his political conviction to having been “sieged with a sense of the injustice of this system” in a letter a few months later. He does not believe that capitalism can be reformed to “dispose of the root of injustices and [remain] sufficient.” It is with a view to justice that Macpherson argues that socialism is indeed compatible with human nature. He identifies his brother as an adherent of “rugged individualism,” or what he refers to as the “philosophy of capitalism.” His own philosophy was socialism, which he found compatible with human nature:

I know as well as you that men aren’t angels or Christians yet it seems possible that men who will do such a big thing as to die with purely non-grab motives (as in “patriotic” wars), will be willing to order their lives less by the grab philosophy when the use of that philosophy shall have become not, as now, the only means to worldly success. Now, I grant you, you will find few to forego it, but how far is this due to “human nature” and how far to the fact that in a capitalist world you’re got to act in a capitalist way? I’m not denying that there is an aggressive spirit in men which must have an outlet; I only wonder if it must be that outlet?

While he doubts that the “abstract sense of justice” is stronger than the “instinct of personal struggle” in most people, he insists that the instinct of personal struggle can be “expressed” in a different way than “the present disastrous one in economic competitive individualism mixed with capitalist feudalism.” He questions his personal observations on human nature from a historical point of view attained through his studies, stating that this is the question for him: “[F]or if my study of past political thought and history has done anything it has borne upon me the truth of the generalization that in every age men always confuse the system they live under with the unalterable laws of human nature and that they have always been wrong, for the systems have changed.” He thinks human beings are not inherently selfish, though they can and do act selfishly under social conditions that encourage individual competition.

His belief in a peaceful transition towards socialism has, however, been “shaken” by his time in England. He tells his brother that while he himself “would be willing to give up considerable monetary advantage for the privilege of ceasing to live in a sick and shoddy civilization like today’s”, he asks if “everybody else feels sufficiently that way to make a peaceful Socialism possible?” This is a question that is only rhetorically posed as he had already begun to doubt middle class support for a socialist transition. The “only realistic view to take”, he concludes, is that the middle class will be forced to accept a socialist economy if
there is a successful violent revolution.\textsuperscript{32} He names the “injustice” of the capitalist system and the “intellectual quality” of socialists in comparison to other politicians as the two reasons why he does not abandon his socialist views altogether, after he began to think of the transition into socialism as improbable.\textsuperscript{33}

III. Violent revolution and communism

Macpherson raised the question of the necessity of armed revolution in the transition towards socialism for the first time in his journal on February 5, 1934. During his twenty-two months in Europe, he met with people who had fled the continent in the wake of the fascist seizure of state power in Germany and Austria, and was profoundly affected by their views. The first and most significant among them was his housemate, Franz L. Neumann, then a researcher at the LSE, who would later become known to the broader public for his analysis of Nazism in his \textit{Behemoth}, and who fled Germany after he learned of his arrest order following the Nazi seizure of power. Neumann’s “views” and “experience” “turned” Macpherson’s “notions upside down.”\textsuperscript{34} It was a rude awaking. The German émigré not only anticipated a coming war between England and Germany, he welcomed it as a necessary step in the revolutionary cause. Macpherson writes:

>[F]or the sooner [war comes] here, the sooner the opportunity to make a social revolution. For a successful revolution cannot be made now or in any time of peace or at the beginning of a war, but only when the army is tired, hungry & disillusioned. Then, they have arms, and a small determined minority within them can do the rest.

As soon as war is declared he [Neumann] will go back to Germany & fight in the German army so as to be ready after the war has worn on a for a while to swing, or help in an armed revolution. It is rare to find a man so sure of the necessity for a social revolution as to will and do such things for it in a cold rational light. For there is nothing fanatic about him [...] it is simply that he seems to take it for granted that that is the only thing worth doing in the world, & is impatient with the obtuseness of anyone who doesn’t see it that way. Yet this is not from faith in any socialist-dogma but from his own deeply-rooted view of human nature which he has got through his experience. He joined the German army a few months before No. 11, 1918 and was stationed in Saxony. Just as the Revolution of Nov. 7-8 was breaking out, these troops were ordered to move against the Czecks. There were 2000 troops; of them 200 absolutely refused to go; a ballot was taken among the soldiers in which very few voted so that the 200 were enough to swing the decision. After getting this settled, they occupied the University of Frankfurt, imprisoned the Director, barricaded the streets and fought.

During the Kapp Putsch he was president of the student union at Leipzig and the students asked the Chief of Police for arms to repel the Putsch. They were given them on condition that they found themselves also to fight against the Communist revolutionists as well as the fascists. They promised, got the arms, and immediately handed half of them over to the Communists so that the fighting was slightly more general than the Chief of Police bargained for.

From experience like this he \textit{concludes that in any political struggle only force of arms will prevail}, and that the only way to get Socialism is to have a war then a revolution.\textsuperscript{35} Macpherson then appraises Neumann’s views, and evaluates how they have altered his own:

It is hard to discredit this view now; if I had read it in print I should have refuted it easily in my mind, but hearing it from a man who has been an active leader in two revolutions & who holds the view so utterly that it never occurs to him that it could be
doubted nor that its implications for him could be refused, facile arguments against this view are not so forthcoming. The very fact that there are men who feel & believe this way makes this view all the more likely to be the true one. The only thing is that though what he says may be true of Germany it may not hold for England. Is it a universal maxim, or one which is true only for the peculiar circumstances of contemporary Germany, that only armed revolution can achieve substantial political change & that education, propaganda & constitutional means are no good?\textsuperscript{36}

Yet, instead of answering this question, he turns to reflecting on his mood: “My mind is getting a lot of rude shocks these days; I feel more third-rate, useless, aimless and faithless every day […] The sense of values on which I prided myself a year or two ago is gone and there seems to be nothing to take its place.”\textsuperscript{37} His socialist values had been challenged by the case that violent revolution is a necessary precondition in the transition towards socialism.

Nine days later, on February 14, 1934, after having heard Laski give a talk in a series on Marxism, Macpherson notes in his journal that the only development in Laski’s thought concerns revolution: “he seems more inclined to the necessity for forceful revolution in the change to any socialism. Yet he was quite clear that we in England at any rate should aim first at constitutional procedure, the conditions not being ripe for revolution.”\textsuperscript{38} In advocating for a violent revolution for socialist ends, Laski departed from the constitutional approach adhered to by the majority of the unions and the Labour Party’s membership, as well as the Fabian Society, in which both he and Tawney were members. For Laski, as it was for Neumann, the question of revolution had become foremost a question of the right conditions. Again, Macpherson does not weigh in on the question in his journal. He has little to add. The end-mean rationale for the necessity of a violent revolution had not come to occupy the place that his socialist-democratic values had left vacant.

In a letter to his brother written two days earlier on February 12, he had predicted: “Capitalist democracy is doomed. That uneasy combination cannot exist much longer but either capitalism or democracy may win out, so that we’ll have a Fascist capitalism or a Socialist democracy. As things are going now I should say the former was most likely”—an forecast substantiated in his Master’s thesis a year later.\textsuperscript{39} In the same letter, Neumann’s take on revolution is reflected in Macpherson’s own prediction about the future:

I imagine that after all the big nations have gone sufficiently Fascist there will be another international war, which will be finished by socialist revolutions by a socialist dictatorship of the most unpleasant kind and after that god knows what. If so it makes all this discussion rather useless. We can only wait and see. The riots in Paris last week have ended in an unconstitutional government of the right-wing which is a good first step to Fascism; the last report of the time of writing this indicate that the socialist general strike & riot in Austria is being put-down with artillery in Vienna quite thoroughly and a fascist government is being set up there, and so it goes.\textsuperscript{40}

Over the next month, Macpherson joins in marches down to Hyde Park to attend various protests with the Marxist club contingent at the LSE.\textsuperscript{41} On March 4, Macpherson listens to a speech delivered after a demonstration at Trafalgar Square by a man he identifies as “Gessner” in his journal (though he is unsure of his name), an Austrian socialist leader who escaped alive from the Fascist Heimwehr coup (Heimwehr was a paramilitary organization similar to the German Freikorps) which occurred in the week of February 12, 1934. Of his conversation with Gessner, which leaves a strong impression and confirms the fear he had expressed to his brother, Maepherson notes in his journal:
Ever since 1927 the Heimwehr party has been strengthening, with the assistance & direction of Mussolini who hopes there to build up a secure neighbor. The socialist party, has had constant opportunities to seize power in the whole country ever since, being armed & trained assisted by France & CzechoSlovakia, but being a Socialist party they disliked bloodshed & considered that power was very nearly within their reach constitutionally, having long governed Vienna & having 42% of the whole Austrian electorate. Hence the majority of the Socialist-party would never allow the leaders to take armed action against the growing armed Heimwehr. By last year it was apparent that the Heimwehr would attempt a coup d’état, & the Socialist finally made plans for a general strike to be follow if necessary by armed action. They planned the strike for the morning of Feb. 12, 1934. Their plans for armed action were, for greater secrecy, divided into sections and only a few leaders knew each one section. On the 11th they found out that the gov[ernment] was planning the total suppression of the Socialists on the 12th, but instead of rushing ahead their plans by a day the Socialist decided to wait to see the effect of the general strike before taking armed action. Also they preferred that the gov[ernment] + Heimwehr should start things, so that they would have the constitution on their side.

The result was that on the 12th all the Socialist leaders were arrested & imprisoned so that those who were left did not know the plans & couldn’t use them. Also the machinery arranged for giving notification of the strike was broken up so that only a few sections of the workers struck, & the people were in such confusion that they didn’t know whether it was a Socialist or Fascist strike. The detachments of Socialists in charge of the various armed Socialist strongholds (the municipal workers buildings) got no orders to begin an attack so they stayed in the Hausen ready. The Heimwehr police & gov[ernment] forces then mopped them up one by one bringing the whole of their forces against each separate Socialist detachment. Hence the Heimwehr victory.42

The main lesson learned is that the socialist party missed the opportunity to proactively take action outside the constraints of the constitution; as a result, the Heimwehr party beat them to it.

IV. The fatal policies of the trade unions and the labour party

Just like the Social Democratic party in Austria, Macpherson argued in his Master’s thesis that the British Labour Party (BLP) strived for socialism through “democratic” and “constitutional” means only.43 The Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB), on the contrary, advanced socialism by “force”.44 For this reason, the Labour Party refused an “alliance with Marxist-Socialist bodies” and the CPGB.45 In addition, Macpherson reports that, at the 1934 Weymouth Congress, the unions “decisively reject[ed] the proposals of the Communist Party for a united front against war and fascism on the ground that, on the two occasions when the T.U.C. had formed a united front, it had been used by the Communists to attempt to destroy entirely the influence of the Labour Party and the T.U.C., and that the Communists’ aim was avowedly to convert the unions to the tactics of revolution and the dictatorship of the proletariat.”46

In his examination of the aims of trade unions in the years before and after the fall of the Labour government in 1931, Macpherson concludes that the unions remained faithful to “constitutionalist philosophy” for a democratic transition towards socialism.47 He surveys the labour movement’s strategy, until, and after, Labour is again voted into power. He identifies Labour's future plans through a study of the annual union congress. This was warranted, as
the party “was built up largely by the trade unions, and the trade unions still have the largest voice in framing the decision and programs of the Party.” He argued that his interest is with the potential policies of a future Labour government and their potential political effects.

The aim of the trade union movement is to use it [the Labour Party] to carry out a policy of rapid economic planning under central direction, including the immediate transference to public ownership of the financial system, the basic industries and the land, and a reorganization of industries not under public ownership in such a way as to achieve efficiency and give trade unions a share in their administration and direction. This is to be done by purely democratic and constitutional procedure. Emergency powers are to be taken only temporarily, but the constitutions will be altered by the abolition of the House of Lords.

If these aims were implemented, Macpherson concluded, Britain would be transformed into a semi-Socialist corporatist state. While envisioned by the unions as being a transitional stage to socialism, he makes the case that these policies would not “ensure the attainment of a socialist economy.” He likens England with Germany to make his case. In case of a victory, the British trade unions would be reduced to a “largely administrative” role, as many of the unions’ “functions” would be facilitated to a great degree by the semi-Socialist corporatist state, as was the case in Germany from 1919 until its demise in 1930. He identifies two main problems when unions adopt a “static and administrative role in the state.”

First, unions would become complacent with their new role in the state and not push for a full transition into socialism. The remaining power of the capitalist class over public opinion through the press, church and schools, together with “the hostility of the small traders and industrialists,” would generate sufficient support to vote Labour out of government. The “succeeding government in its attempt to make the rule of property secure would find an industrial structure (partly public ownership of the larger corporations) whose form expedited a transformation to a Fascist State.” The transformation into fascism is then likely since for the new government, “no other technique than the Fascist one would be sufficient to ensure both the continued productivity of industry and the maintenance of control in the State by the property-owning class.”

Second, the loss of the union’s “militantism” and traditional functions would ease a fascist takeover. Weakened by their incorporation into the state, the unions would not have “the will and ability to resist” when the state turns against the workers’ rights and programs with the help of the fascists, which would “lead to their [the unions] final destruction.” The unions' policy, he concludes, is self-destructive—Labour could unwittingly pave the way for fascism.

A Labour victory could result in the partial socialization of Britain’s economy, giving effective control over finance and much of industrial production to the state. Fascists, aided by elements of the bourgeoisie opposed to socialism, could then use these new powers in the state to their own advantage, were they to defeat the Labour government at the ballot box in a subsequent election (something Macpherson considered to be likely). The policies of a future Labour government would create the economic structure that would ease a fascist takeover, and since they refused to complete the transition by non-constitutional means, they would end up selling themselves short. England’s transition into a right-wing authoritarian fascist state is facilitated by the unions’ adherence to the rule of law. The essential lesson to be learned from Germany speaks to the “British unions’ inability to push towards full socialism when an active policy may be necessary to that end.” Despite having argued for the need for extra constitutional power in the hands of the executive for the period of transition to socialism, nowhere does Macpherson back in his own name a direct policy recommendation that the Labour government should suspend constitutional rule in their transition into socialism.
does, however, make the case in his journal and Master’s thesis that, if they do not, England will most likely end up like Austria and Germany.63 Meanwhile, not only were Labour’s policies insufficient for a transition into socialism, Macpherson believed they were betting with time they did not have.

V. The rise of fascism in England and Europe at large

The positive end for which Macpherson strived was the establishment of socialism. He predicted, however, that Fascist capitalism would win the day before Labour was voted into power again. And, even if the Labour party was given a second opportunity to form a government, it most likely would have resulted in a successful “Fascist capitalist” counter-revolution. In a letter from July 27, 1934, responding to his brother’s charge that he makes too much of the rise of fascism in Europe, and England in particular, he admits that he “doesn’t expect that Fascism here [England] will go to the lengths it has gone in most European countries, for the economic position of the lower-middle class is not as bad here as there, and as you say the British are more stable or more habituated politically. It is nearly three hundred years since the last civil war in England and perhaps the tradition is dead.”64 Nevertheless, he not only stands by his initial position, but he cements it further:

Yet my prophecy stands. The English mentality is no such stout bulwark against Fascists habits of thought as you have judged. A few years ago almost everybody paid lip service at least to the idea of democracy; now almost nobody does. All the middle class and upper class people I have met feel like you that ‘expediency must outweigh ethics’ [...] and that a de facto dictatorship backed by force, where the economic stranglehold and politeness are insufficient, is the best thing to have now (or as soon as needed) in their own vital interests, or, as the most uncritical of them say, to save the country and the Empire. These people will welcome as much fascism as they can handle [...] of course no matter how favourable the middle and upper classes are to it there will be no Fascism of importance until the lower classes’ mentality is favourable. Here it is harder to get at the facts. Large numbers of them appear indifferent to politics, treating it as a side-show like the movies or football and I don’t take it on myself to predict about them. There is a small active socialist and communist minority & with them Fascism has no chance of acceptance. Then there is the large section of skilled workmen in the trade Unions and the Labour Party. So far their socialism is of the lukewarm variety which too easily changes into Fascism under sufficient stimulus. The real mainstay of any fascist party is in the class naturally called lower-middle, that is office clerks, shop assistants and the like, and it shouldn’t be hard to get a lot of this class in. They feel themselves a cut above ordinary workmen (you can’t conceive the extent of the snobbishness between class division in England), they are not already organized to any extent and the glamour of uniforms and pay and Saving Britain is calculated to act on them most strongly. The last class in the strata of English society, the unskilled manual labourers is meat for the Fascists, too. Not many of them are already organized, and some of them as aren’t active socialists or communists and are considerably attached to Fascism. For they are wretchedly of and unsatisfied and don’t know why. The Fascists hold out to them the prospect of more immediate action and betterment of their condition than any other party – they pay them and clothe them and give them action, and that makes a powerful appeal to uncritical minds in their state.65

Key for Macpherson’s analysis is that the economic antagonism has produced destitution among the lower classes on whose support the fascist depends. If Labour party and the
unions influence over the lower classes is limited. The transition to socialism is imperative to withstand fascism. The situation is dire as he then turn to describe the British Union of Fascists (BUF) to his brother as “a rapidly growing, well-organized and well-endowed body which despises polite discussion [...] and relies rather on action than talk. Its members are drilled in military discipline with military objects and they boast about it publicly as much as they dare.” 66 Yet, BUF, he adds, had “not yet reached the Hitler standard of sub-machine guns and howitzers.” 67 He disagrees with this brother that the fascists required the support of the majority to seize power and argues that an “organized minority can always climb into powers over a disorganized majority.” The fascists of Italy and the Nazis of Germany, he notes,

had their origin in the chaotic postwar conditions [...] where the people of the lower and middle classes were economically desperate, the old parties politically bankrupt, and anybody fit for reasons, stratagems and spoils. The movement sprang from the lower middle classes, & were aided and abetted by the owners of capital who didn’t care much for national regeneration but saw that this would do away with the unrest which threatened their control by canalizing some of it in their favours and suppressing the rest with violence.68

He expands on the rise of fascism two weeks later, on August 26, 1934, in a letter to his brother. It is in the economic class division of the capitalist state that Macpherson locates the cause for the political enmity:

In the countries now Fascist the mass of people were disorganized at the time these parties rose to power – suffering economically and unanchored spiritually or ideologically, owing allegiances to no system, no body, no ideals, the old faiths or habits shattered by the events of the war and the peace. It was natural that a body headed by a magnetic leader offering a new hope of economic recovery and a new faith of national regeneration and immediate action for them should rapidly gain support. At the time of the Fascists taking over supreme power I expect they had the majority of the people supporting them.

But whatever sincerity there may have been in these ideals & these hopes at the time, it soon became obvious that the Fascist supremacy was becoming a system of force directed to maintaining the capitalist system, and I can see no new basis for believing that it is other than a definite engine of oppression of the majority in the interests of those who control the system. It is financed by the capitalist owners, all working-class organizations such as trade unions have been abolished and new Fascist controlled ones set up which can do nothing contrary to the Fascist policy, the protective labour legislation has been steadily forced down. Protest is chocked by lopping the ringleaders as soon as they are spotted, by preventing wide combinations through censorship of information so that one group can’t know the situation of the others and make connected plans.69

Macpherson viewed fascism as minority rule over the majority through the support of the capitalist class, the military and the cunning of its leaders. Once in power, the Fascist minority applied the old and tested stratagem of divide (the majority) and conquer:

Once a Fascist party is in control it is quite possible for it to stay there against the will of the majority for several years. Not only do they have a sizeable army or series of armies at their back but they have the support of money, practically all the money in the country, and the dictators have all shown considerable tactical skill. The combination of these three elements can overrule a majority. The active hostility of a majority in such a situation can be quelled by such a minority for the simple reason
that the latter has, to begin with, all the force, and has it united under one control. As opposition appears the whole weight of this force is brought against the scattered forces of the opposition which is divided in time & space. It is merely a ruthless application of the old maxim “Divide and Rule”. The minority can rule the majority because the latter is never majority & is thoroughly prevented from becoming so unified. Where rule is by force and terrorization and opinion is not allowed to become articulate there is no such thing as majority opinion.70

Beside thus suppressing the opinion and feelings of the dissatisfied, the rulers have been astute enough to give it other outlets by stirring up on directing their wrath against e.g. the Jews or the Reds whom they are told with a persistency greater than the Lucky Strike advertising (for rival brands are not allowed to advertise) are to blame for their plight. Scientific propaganda combined with censorship of everything hostile is developed in the press, the stage, the cinema, the radio, the schools & universities so as to keep people’s minds off their troubles & keep them in a fever heat of excitement & loyalty.

You may think that all these methods would not suffice. They couldn’t put it over on you that way. But everybody is not like you. And the ones that are, mostly keep quiet, fearing concentration camps, loss of their livelihood, or death. It can’t last forever, of course; you can’t fool all of the people all the time especially when they’re hungry. Hitler and Mussolini will crash some day, perhaps not till after a last bid to maintain their power by starting a foreign war, which has hitherto always been a successful expedient for keeping in power a while longer, successful for obvious reasons.71

Fascisms adverted the attention away from internal problems by bellicose nationalism that re-aligned the political class distinction to a political distinction along national borders. It is a prescient letter, foreseeing war and the eventual disillusionment with fascism. He ends the letter with a comparison of Germany four years earlier to England and Canada: “I do not see any essential differences to prevent things here & with you from developing along largely the same lines though I fancy they will not go so far, and will assume different names and forms.”72

Most of the fall is spent writing; “foggy” days deepen his already somber mood. There are few journal entries in the winter and spring, and hardly any after his father’s death in February. He finishes his Master’s thesis on a rented typewriter and defends without any revisions in April 1935. Two months later, in June, he sails for Canada as planned. Before his departure, he learns, to his great relief, of his appointment as a lecturer in Political Theory at the University of Toronto.75 He leaves a Europe in tumult, in the wake of another world war.

VI. Conclusion

We have seen how Macpherson applied a Marxist political economic analysis to the study of politics. He linked historically changing political structures to property structures. In assigning an economic cause to legal and political processes, he could answer why there exists an insurmountable class division in the industrial capitalist state that not only negates democratic moral ends, but also breeds fascism and leads to war. (1) Industrial capitalism caused the socio-economic situation out of which fascism grew, (2) industrialists and landowners supported the Fascist movements, and (3) Fascist ideologies were generated by the propertied class to serve their economic interests.

He saw his world to be in crisis with only two conceivable outcomes: a Fascist capitalist state or a socialist democracy. He chose the latter. As a newly converted socialist in
Toronto – two years after the stock market crash of 1929 – he had thought that the transition to socialism could ensue by non-violent means. There were others, such as his friend Neumann, or his teacher Laski, who advocated for violent revolution. Macpherson did not. He favored victory through the ballot box. The textual evidence from this period shows that Macpherson never supported a violent-revolutionary transition into socialism, even after he became convinced that a revolution was most likely required to establish socialism. Anticipating violent resistance from elements of the bourgeoisie and the fascists, he was willing to entertain the idea of something approximating the dictatorship of the proletariat, but only as a transitional measure. The historical circumstances – specifically, the unequal concentration of capital, the rise of fascism, and the already increased power of the executive – necessitated the employment of non-constitutional powers in and after the transition to socialism.

Back in Toronto, Macpherson continued his investigation into the causes of fascism as the situation in Europe turned worse by the day. The central questions that concerned him in a series of reviews written in the years before and during the war were: Why did the fascists seize power in some European countries and not in others? Would a Fascist regime also seize power in North America? He feared not that the Axis powers would impose a Fascist regime in Canada in the event of winning the war, but that Canada would turn fascist from within. In 1941, Macpherson gave himself the task of constructing a democratic theory as a line of defense against the growth of Right-wing authoritarianism. In 1943, he outlined this democratic theory in “Economic Democracy.” The theory was not only defensive but also sketched how the present liberal society – under threat – should change to fulfill the democratic demands of its population. “Economic democracy” is a considered brief for socialist democracy. It built on his analysis of the shortcomings of liberalism that can be found in his treatment of fascism.

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1 York University (karld@yorku.ca). June 2, 2016. For presentation at the CPSA 2016 Annual Conference,

2 The papers of C. B. Macpherson [B1987-0069 and B1999-0028] are located in the Special Collection, University of Toronto Archives (UTARMS), John P. Robarts Research Library.

3 The first dates Sept 22, 1933 to June 26, 1934 and the second from June 28, 1934 to April 28, 1935. (Box: 010, File: Journal 22 Sep, 1933 to 26 June 1933; Journal 28 June 1934 to 28 April 1935. Feb 5, 1934)

4 Macpherson sent the first letter – or “political installments” as he called them – on February 12, 1934, and his brother sent the last letter on March 21, 1935. B1999-0028] Box: 001 File: Letters between Brough + Brodie, Feb 12, 1934.

5 Thanks to William Leiss, a copy of the Master’s thesis now exists among the Macpherson papers.


7 Macpherson had been introduced to Laski’s thought by a Professor at University of Toronto, Otto B. Van der Sprenkel, who had himself been a student of Laski. Leiss writes that Van der Sprenkel’s “teaching, and reading of some of Laski’s books, lead to a decision by CBM to do graduate study with Laski at LSE” [Box 5, File: Miscell corresp. William Leiss, “Notes on Conversation with C. B Macpherson, July 2, 1986”, July 11, 1986] p.1).

8 Box: 010, File: Journal 22 Sep, 1933 to 26 June 1933. Entry: Sep. 25, 1933. His stay in London was paid by a loan from the family’s savings (Box: 001, File: Letters between Brough + Brodie)

9 Box: 010, File: Journal. Entry: Oct. 5, 1933. Macpherson notes in his journal that “[Laski] promise well though his humour has a tinge of stereotyped cleverness about it and he seems to be developing a high-and-might pose, but he can hardly be blamed for this as the class looked like dull dogs […] sub-consciously I was expecting something brighter than at Toronto, but so far they’re not.” (Box 010, File: Journal 22 Sep, 1933 to 26 June 1943, Entry: Monday Oct. 9). A month latter, November 9, after that Laski speaks at a formal occasion, Macpherson praises him for his “exquisite wit uttered with a polished & studied brilliance” (Box Box: 010, File: Journal. Entry: Nov. 9, 1933).
10 His journals and letters included long descriptions of the arts he sees and hears. He visits the theater, the opera and the ballet, and makes extensive reflections on architecture and modern art. His days are filled with classical music (mostly Bach, Beethoven and Mozart) and time spent with friends. He attends concerts and listens to classical music on the radio, buys records, plays squash, and drinks beer and sherry. Most of his time is spent with Betty Lang, who he knew from Toronto. They dance, lunch and dine, look for records together, go for walks, and go on weekend trips to the country side.

11 Box: 010, File: Journal. Entry: Feb. 1, 1934. Six months later, on May 1, 1934, he writes in his journal after a meeting with Laski to discuss his thesis: “He is not such a bad teacher after all, in spite of all his posing as a lecturer, for he succeeded in giving me, in ten minutes, a fresh impetus for the work which has lasted three days so far.” Nine days latter, May 10, he hands Laski his introduction. On May 14, they meet again to discuss the introduction and the “thesis plan”. The meeting leaves him with needed encouragement: “He said it raised his opinion of my abilities considerably, which obviously means, as I suspected, that he did not think much of me before, for which I can’t blame him. If only I can keep this work up to his level all will be well.” The two do not meet again until early after the New Year. On the 21 of February, Macpherson note that Laski was “pleased” with the “long [Second] chapter” that Macpherson had handed to him before Christmas, yet he worries about the shorter third chapter, which he thinks is weaker. Over the next three months he completes the two final chapters and defends in April.

12 An exception is a comment in a letter to his brother about J. M. Keynes’s contribution to a debate between George Bernard Shaw and H. G. Wells (whom both Macpherson and his brother read with critical care) in the New Statesman over the latter’s conversation with Stalin: “Except Keynes’ contribution, which I thought shamefully weak and dishonest for he has perverted some facts about communism which he knows quite well, in order to ride his liberal-economist's hobby-horse (Box: letter: Nov. 13, 1934).

13 Macpherson comments on his visit to the tenth annual exhibition of Fascism in Rome in his journal: “They have made a very modern building in dark solid coloured cement and chromium and it is arranged inside to show the progress of the movement as springing out of the War, that is, from 1914 to 1922. The whole propaganda is designed to fortify whatever feeling the Italians people may have of the glorious effort of fascism which brought them where they are out of the chaos of 1914. It units very cleverly three residus — to the attainments of Fascism are hitched the appeal to the feeling of having been victorious in the War and the dignity and greatness of ancient Rome, with several symbols of which the “fascists” motif is mostly prominent. In one corner there is a huge figure of a man, presumably symbolism of the common people of Italy, bowed down beneath the weight of several huge books — Marx, Engels, Lasalle etc. The whole of the rest of the exhibition is apparently meant to show the glorious liberation of the people from these heavy burdens of socialism, there are several figures of Mussolini brooding over the process & being sternly triumphant about it. […] one cannot help admiring it as a piece of splendid propaganda.” (Box: 010, File: Journal. Entry: Dec. 26, 1933)

14 Master thesis, Voluntary Associations Within the State 1930-1934, with Special Reference to the Place of Trade Unions in Relation to the State in Great Britain, (B1987-0069. Box 28) in which he had examined of the “principles underlying the relations between voluntary associations and the State […] and to construct from this a realistic theory of the nature and place of voluntary associations in the modern state.” The particular civil society institution that Macpherson looks at (his object of analysis) so as to draw general conclusions about the “place of voluntary associations in the modern state”, is trade unions (Unnumbered pages). He examines the relation between the state and trade union with a survey of the relevant constitutional case law. The judicial decision shows conclusively that the “State’s action in response to the claim of trade unions has been the result of its unchanging determination to maintain the existing property structure of society. It is the capitalist private property structure of England that determines the relation between the state and the unions.” It is on the basis of this principle, of the maintenance of existing capitalist property structures, that Macpherson contends one can project the trade unions future “place in the state” (Unnumbered pages).


16 To emphasis the importance of the present conjunction, he points out that current threats to property structures are as great as during the Reformation, the French and Russian revolution. Macpherson, Master’s thesis, p. i. and p. vii, p. 318-321.

17 Macpherson, Master’s thesis, p. i. and pp. 193-246. In the fifth chapter he examines the medical professional associations’ relation to the state for comparison before he concludes his thesis.


19 Macpherson, Master Thesis, p. 240. See also Leiss, C. B. Macpherson, pp. 40-41 on this question.
Bill Macpherson was a natural “scientist” by training, worked with photography, and wrote plays during his spare time.


He sees his mood reflected in the T. S Eliot’s poetry and adds: “I’ve noticed lately that my energy is diffused [...] nothing seems very worth-while; every day in the research study I catch myself clock-watching.” (Box 010, File: Entry: February 5, 1934).


While Macpherson points out that while different in many other respects, the British and the Weimar constitution both granted “specific recognition” to unions.


Macpherson, Master’s thesis, p. 227-233. Trade unions when “[f]illing an established place in a semi-Socialist State it would be less inclined to move to the attainment of full Socialism than to remain in the position it had then attained.” (p. 233).

Macpherson, Master’s thesis, p. 240 and p. 238. “The means to power in a political democracy is the influencing of electoral opinion, and the three chief avenues [media, schools and churches] to that influence will remain largely in the hands of the property-owning class.” In his journal, Nov. 9, he reports from a lecture on the topic of democracies dependence on public enlightenment by Kingsley Martin: the “belief that the press could be made an instrument of enlightenment and the spread of information, and could appeal to the reason rather than the passion of mankind. How this was to be done under the capitalist system, which he was envisaging, he did not say, so that the whole central thesis of his lecture fell down.” (Box 010. Journal. Entry Nov. 9, 1933).

Curiously, Macpherson, however, seems opposed any infringement on individual civil liberties. In a letter from July 24, 1934, he strongly opposes the 1934 “Disaffection Bill” (legislation against the circulation of communist propaganda among the armed forces) expressing views like Neumann’s. Macpherson writes his brother that even though these extra-constitutional measures are directed at one group (Communists in this case), soon enough, other groups will be subjected to its reach on an arbitrary bases, as it is “interest”, rather than “justice”, which sways the action of those in power. (B1999-0028. Box 001, File, July 24, 1934.) He likened his brother’s approval of the bill with that of the Communists: “Perhaps you and the Communists are right, that you might as well try to condemn or justify an earthquake ethically as to sit in judgment on these things. Maybe it is ordained by nature that there are rulers and ruled and that to the extent of their awareness and of their force they will fight each other to death no matter what we think of it so we might as well get in on one side or the other or sit back and watch while we can.” Macpherson here entertains the idea that the ruler-ruled (command-obedience) division is ordained by nature, and not only due to economic class configurations. He lacked the moral principle to join the communists in their violent class-warfare. Macpherson do not “get in on one” of the sides as there is still time to “sit back” and watch the two fight to death. Class-warfare was not an existential (life-and-death) matter for Macpherson at the time. The obligation to kill or to be killed would never present itself as an existential necessity for Macpherson—a Canadian citizen, who did not serve abroad during World War Two, and lived out his life as a socialist-liberal in Canada. He worked in Ottawa as an Executive Officer at the Wartime Information Board for 18 months (1941-43), “Macpherson’s job was to review and write reports on the coverage by the Canadian press of the federal government’s conduct and policies.” (Liess, C. B. Macpherson, p. 28).

Over forty years later, in 1976, Macpherson answers the charge that he has not “accepted the revolutionary way”: “My reason for not accepting the revolutionary theory as necessary is fairly simple. It is not [...] that I consider the probable cost in terms of denial of individual freedom to be always too high. That is a judgment that must be made for each time and place. I do not think it can be made in advance. But to assert the necessity of forcible revolution is to do just that. It is no doubt true that the creation of a good society requires the conscious and active participation of those who are to live in it, but it does not follow that in all circumstances that much be forcible revolutionary participation. (Macpherson, “Humanist Democracy and Elusive Marxism: A Response to Minogue and Svaček”, Canadian Journal of Political Science, Vol. 9, No. 3 (Sep., 1976), pp. 423-430, p. 424.

On Feb 12. 1935, Macpherson reports to his brother that he had written his undergraduate professor, Urwick, asking in a roundabout way for a position. Professor, Urwick, also a previous student of Laski, was then Department Chair (Department of Political Economy at the University of Toronto). B1999-0028. Box 061. Also Leiss, “Notes on Conversation with C. B Macpherson, July 2, 1986”, July 11, 1986, p.2 (Box 005, File: Miscell. corresp).