

Memo from Professor Richard Matthews (Lehigh University) re: Marcuse and Macpherson readings for Stanford Law, Technology, & Liberty (Winter 2017).

\*\*\*\*\*

In the readings by Herbert Marcuse and C. B. Macpherson the cold war threat posed by the Soviet Union was a central part of their frame work. While the USSR has withered away, that threat may be again on the horizon in a confrontation with Russia. But the external threat(s) Marcuse and Macpherson write about could just as well be updated to include ecological disaster, terroristic dirty bombs, or any other apocalyptic possibility the future holds.

\*\*\*\*\*

Marcuse was part of the Frankfurt School. He tried to reconcile Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud to envision a possible future without either economic or sexual repression. Or put positively, he wrote about a society where more fully developed humans could enjoy both economic and sexual freedom. The piece you are reading is from his celebrated ONE-DIMENSIONAL MAN (1964). While this was an academic “best seller,” few people actually read the entire book for reasons you will appreciate as you work your way through his text. In this book he implicitly uses a Hegelian perspective that wants to examine “the whole” and its relationship(s) to the parts. Is the whole rational? Could there be alternative conceptualization of the whole that are more rational? How do the parts relate to each other and the whole? Does this relationship advance, or hinder, humanity? While this text is now over 40 years old, Marcuse’s insightful and critical analysis of his time is, if anything, even more applicable today. And this, from a Hegelian perspective, is as should be expected, even if it is not as it ought to be.

Questions to think about as you read Marcuse:

1. What does Marcuse mean by “pacifying the struggle for existence?” (P. ix)
2. What does he mean by “And yet this society is irrational as a whole.”? (P. ix)
3. What value judgements are held in this text? (P. x) Why do they matter?
4. What are the hypotheses that ONE DIMENSIONAL MAN examines? (P. xv) How do they compare to the hypotheses of this course?
5. Marcuse claims one-dimensional society is totalitarian? (P. 3). What does he mean by that? Is it totalitarian?
6. Do we live in a society that is a “euphoria of unhappiness.”? (P. 5)
7. Marcuse writes of “needs which demand liberation.” (P. 7) What are those needs? Why are they not satisfied under the current political system?

\*\*\*\*\*

C. B. Macpherson was arguably the most articulate spokesperson for socialism in North America during the late 1960s through to the 1980s. He described himself on several occasions as “a liberal-democrat who owes a lot to Marx.” And as you will see in the reading, this is accurate. Prior to reading his text, as background, it is important to know that in other writings he argued that the way in which humans perceive themselves reflects the kinds societies that they create; that if humans alter the ways in which they see themselves as Subjects, then they would be able to alter their society accordingly. There are, from Macpherson’s perspective, at least two competing concepts of the human essence in Western liberal democracies; and, these two concepts are in tension with one another. The more recent

conceptualizes “the liberal, individualist concept of man as essentially a consumer of utilities, an infinite desirer and infinite appropriator,” Macpherson refers to this concept as human as “consumer.” In contrast, there is an older notion, which can be traced as far back in Western political thought to at least Plato and Aristotle and was brought back into the philosophical discourse by both John Stuart Mill and Karl Marx, among others, that conceives of “man as an enjoyer and exorter of his uniquely human attributes or capacities.” Macpherson calls this alternative concept human as “doer.” The conception of humans as consumers was needed to morally legitimize behavior that came about with the rise of the capitalist system, but the second conception of man as doer initially rose as early as Plato and Aristotle and resurfaced during the nineteenth century as a means of challenging and tempering the capitalist conception. Macpherson notes this shift: “From Aristotle until the seventeenth century it was more usual to see the essence of man as purposeful activity, as exercise of one’s energies in accordance with some rational purpose, than as the consumption of satisfactions. It was only with the emergence of modern market society, which we may put as early as the seventeenth century in England, that this concept of man was narrowed and turned into almost its opposite.” The ancients, who were well aware of the human tendency toward excessive consumption and the fulfillment of appetites, found this propensity to be morally unacceptable. Rather, they embraced the concept of doer, exorter of purposeful behavior. It was with the rise of the market society that a moral justification for infinite consumption would be necessary to allow consumerist market behavior to flourish. Today, as is implicit in the essay by Macpherson you will read, these two conceptions of humanity divide liberal democratic theory, but are in such tension with one another that one must ultimately win out. The conception of the individual as consumer currently is king. But the concept of human as doer is also present and could be brought back into the dialogue about democratic possibilities.

Questions to think about as you read Macpherson:

1. Why is an ethical concept of power critical to Macpherson’s approach?
2. Why does Macpherson concentrate on power; and how does he conceptualize it?
3. What is developmental power? What is extractive power?
4. What does Macpherson mean by democratic society? (p. 51)
5. What is the “net transfer of powers”? (Pp. 64 – 70). (Macpherson thought this was THE most important part of his theory.) Thinking of the power(s) of people in this course, what is lost to society as a whole under the current polity? Does this matter?
6. Why does Macpherson call this essay “Problems of a Non-Market Theory of Democracy”?

\*\*\*\*\*

The big questions that Macpherson and Marcuse raise:

1. Macpherson argues, and Marcuse would agree, that “The difficulty to be overcome ... is not primarily material but ideological.” Why is that the case and what can be done about it?
2. How do the arguments of Macpherson and Marcuse deal with the possibility of a sustainable, democratic, and genuinely human future? Can a market based system also possess the possibility of a sustainable, democratic, and human future?
3. How can law and technology help bring about a non-market democracy? Why are they more likely to be used to thwart this possibility?

