

LIBERAL DEMOCRACY AND CAPITALIST HEGEMONY: A REPLY TO LEO PANITCH ON THE TASK OF SOCIALIST POLITICAL THEORY

Ellen Meiksins Wood

I

I want to take up again the question: What is the task of socialist political theory? Having said this, I should add that this will involve first, another fairly long discussion of Macpherson before I move on to other matters. There is, as I said the first time, a large and important area of political theory which socialists have left for Macpherson to deal with virtually alone. It is, therefore, impossible to take up these aspects of political theory from a socialist point of view without coming to terms with Macpherson. Any attempt to build on the ground he has broken is likely to proceed as if it were a personal encounter, a dispute, with him. This is what it means to be the major reference-point in a debate.

My argument with Macpherson is at first a methodological one concerning the study of political thought in general and liberalism in particular; but it is a methodological dispute with larger, practical implications. Underlying the methodological differences are different assumptions not only about the meaning of liberalism and its function in capitalist society but, more generally, about the nature of the socialist project, what that project suggests about the historic conditions of socialist struggle and about the terrain on which it must be waged, and what tasks this imposes upon socialist intellectuals. It is these programmatic, political issues that I want to explore further in what follows.

Some Preliminary Points

Leo Panitch never confronts—or even perceives—the essential point about the relation between theory and practice, the practical implications of Macpherson's theoretical and methodological strategy, or the sense in which his theory and method are 'incommensurate' with his commitment to socialism.' Panitch does, however, have a few things to say about Macpherson's method; and since it is here that our disagreement begins, something should be said about it before we engage each other on the larger questions.

Panitch accuses me of 'failing to see' the substance of Macpherson's argument because I do not understand his method, which is based on the recognition that 'to demonstrate a theory's inconsistency one must confront it on its own terms'.² He refers specifically to my

misunderstanding of Macpherson's judgement that pluralist-élitist theories are 'substantially accurate' as descriptions of the political system in Western democracies. I shall have more to say later about the programmatic implications of Macpherson's method. For the moment, I am particularly interested in Panitch's understanding of Macpherson's approach and of what it means to attack an argument by 'confronting it on its own terms'.

The most arresting statement made by Panitch on this score is his suggestion that Macpherson's approach is similar to that of Ralph Miliband in *The State in Capitalist Society*.³ In response, I simply ask the reader to consider this: Macpherson says, 'As a description of the actual system now prevailing in Western liberal-democratic nations, Model 3 [the "equilibrium" or "pluralist-élitist" model] must be adjudged substantially accurate.'⁴ He says nothing further to qualify this judgement about the descriptive accuracy of the 'model', reserving his criticisms largely for its 'justificatory' aspect. Miliband says:

One of the main purposes of the present work is in fact to show in detail that the pluralist-democratic view of society, of politics and of the state in regard to the countries of advanced capitalism, is in all essentials wrong—that this view, far from providing a guide to reality, constitutes a profound obfuscation of it.

He then proceeds to devote an entire book to proving the point. It takes an over-subtle mind to equate these two approaches.

Miliband is indeed meeting his adversaries on their own ground—not by accepting the accuracy of their description, even in the most limited sense, but by marshalling empirical evidence to refute it. His critique of pluralist theories is based on the proposition that '... the political process in these societies is mainly about the confrontation of these [class] forces. . .'.⁵ Macpherson's judgement that the pluralist-élitist model is essentially correct in its descriptive aspect is made possible only by factoring class out of the political process or 'system'. The political 'system' must, therefore, be abstracted from its social content and defined in purely formal terms, in precisely the 'obfuscating' mode of his pluralist adversaries. When class reappears in Macpherson's critique of the pluralist-élitist model in its 'justificatory' aspect, it does so simply in the form of *inequality*, the unequal distribution of political 'goods' which puts in question the implicit justificatory claims of pluralist theory. In short, Macpherson's assessment of pluralist-élitist theory and its descriptive adequacy depends upon adopting the very theoretical and methodological principles on which his adversaries rely to maintain the plausibility of their argument. It is only by taking great conceptual pains and accepting their way of defining the basic unit of political analysis that Macpherson can avoid challenging the pluralists on their favourite empirical and descriptive ground. There is much more involved here than a mere quibble (as

Panitch would have it) over 'terminological purity'. Where Miliband attacks pluralist theories on their own ground, Macpherson not only meets them on it but effectively concedes it to them.

This procedure is characteristic of Macpherson's approach in general and typifies what I have called his 'theoretical ambiguities'. Panitch simply evades this issue when he triumphantly denies that Macpherson has 'no conception of the state as an institution whose function it is to sustain a particular social order, that is a particular set of productive relations and a particular system of class domination'.⁷ It should, perhaps, be said for the record that in the phrase quoted by Panitch, I am referring specifically and explicitly to 'pluralists like Robert Dahl', adding, parenthetically, '-and, apparently, Macpherson-' to indicate the consequences of asserting that the pluralist-élitist model presented by people like Dahl is 'substantially accurate' as a description of the political system in Western capitalism. There are, as I suggested, other less equivocal passages in Macpherson's work, some of which express a more critical assessment of political power in capitalist society; but these do not cancel out the many instances where he concedes essential theoretical ground to his adversaries. These concessions are substantial and systematic; they occur at critical points in Macpherson's argument; and they go far beyond rhetorical necessity. The crux of my argument, therefore, is that they must be treated as theoretically and politically significant.

Macpherson's Project: Class Struggle or Fabian Philanthropy?

Let us first pursue the implications of Panitch's own criticisms, which are not as opposed to my own as he seems to think. Three major themes in his argument are especially important: 1) Panitch suggests that Macpherson has, since the mid-1960's, rejected the 'central ingredient' in the Marxist theory of transition: 'the theory of class struggle as the agency of change, and of the proletariat as the revolutionary class'.⁸ This, argues Panitch, constitutes a sharp break with Macpherson's earlier writings, the consequence of which is that, 'while continuing to employ Marxian political economy in his critique of liberal democracy, he dissociated himself from Marxism when addressing the question of transition to socialism'.⁹ 2) Panitch argues that Macpherson shares with Marxist political theory generally a failure to deal adequately with the tension between discipline and consent which inevitably arises in the revolutionary project;¹⁰ and that this failure is particularly evident in the 'rigid economic determinism' which—for example, in *The Real World of Democracy*—allowed Macpherson to account for Stalinism as simply the consequence of a necessary, if dangerous, 'vanguard route' demanded by conditions of 'material scarcity'. 3) Panitch concludes that, by confining his work to a critique of liberalism instead of helping to reconstruct Marxist theory itself, Macpherson has incurred the danger of limiting himself, 'in classical

Fabian fashion, to trying to educate the ruling class, in this case its theorists, to socialism'.¹

Here, Panitch has gone straight to the heart of the matter. At least, he has isolated the most critical *symptoms* of what he and I both regard as weaknesses in Macpherson's approach. Identifying the *causes* is something else. The question is whether or not the problems in Macpherson's argument implicate the theoretical foundations of his work, whether they are accidental and contingent or whether they are systematic and ultimately grounded in precisely those theoretical—and political—ambiguities to which I referred in my own criticism. Some immediate questions arise: does Macpherson's abandonment of class struggle and the revolutionary agency of the proletariat really constitute a radical break in his thought, or is it implicit in the very foundations? Does this abandonment really apply only to his conception of the transition to socialism, or is class struggle substantially absent from his critique of liberal democracy? What is the relation between Macpherson's attitude toward Stalinism during part of his career and his lapse into a kind of Fabianism? Does this, too, constitute a sharp break in his development, or is there a continuity and consistency which can be traced to the premises that inform his whole work, his conception of the socialist project and of the social reality that confronts it?

This brings us back to the methodological issue and how Macpherson deals with the relation between liberalism, capitalism, and socialism. Whatever changes Macpherson's work has undergone, there has been a fundamental methodological continuity in his analysis of liberal democracy and the function he assigns to that analysis in advancing the cause of socialism. Macpherson's critique of liberal democracy is and always has been essentially an exercise in moral persuasion harnessed to an acute philosophical analysis designed to expose the ideological content and logical contradictions in liberal political and economic doctrine. Even historical analysis—which unquestionably plays a larger role in Macpherson's work on political philosophy than it does in conventional philosophical treatments—is subordinated to moral and logical argumentation. This project implies a number of crucial assumptions: above all, the project implies a particular audience and assigns to that audience a predominant role in the transformation of society, in preference to other possible 'agencies of change'. A careful consideration of Macpherson's work as a whole and the tasks he has set himself may suggest that the lapse into 'classical Fabianism' which Panitch warns him against is not merely contingent but lies at the very heart of his intellectual and political project.

I argued in my original essay that in *Life* and Times. . . Macpherson treats the link between liberal democracy and capitalism as if it were temporary and contingent, that he presents socialism as essentially an

extension of liberalism, and that he falls into an 'empty formalism' which evacuates the socio-historical substance of liberalism simply in order to establish a philosophical link between liberalism and socialism.¹² My suggestion was that this method of argumentation could be merely a tactical ploy adopted to further his project of persuading liberals to become socialists, but that this explanation seemed to be insufficient and that Macpherson may also have been 'seduced' by certain liberal assumptions and theoretical practices. I did not intend to reject the first explanation but only to supplement it. If I appeared to present the two explanations as alternatives, I was wrong to do so and would now argue that the one entails the other, that Macpherson's very choice of project and method rests on certain fundamental attitudes he shares with his liberal adversaries.

Macpherson's procedures—indeed, his definition of liberalism itself—suggest certain things about his intentions. What, after all, is the point of the proposition that the essence of liberal democracy is an ethical commitment to the self-development of all individuals? This proposition clearly is not intended as an empirical statement about liberal democratic institutions or even liberal democratic ideas as historical phenomena, associated with particular social conditions, political conflicts, class struggles. Even as abstract textual interpretation of a few individual thinkers—notably J.S. Mill—it is at least debatable and, in any case, remains empty and formal as long as the thinker's commitment to 'self-development' is abstracted from its particular content—what he identifies as the 'human capacities' that must be fulfilled and what he believes to be the social conditions for their fulfillment. Even if we accept Macpherson's claims about the primacy of this ethical commitment in the doctrines of J.S. Mill and the 'ethical liberals' who succeeded him, does this really tell us very much about them? It could be said about both Karl Marx and, say, Milton Friedman that they have such an ethical commitment. Is it only a logical error that prevents Friedman from becoming a Marxist, only a failure to perceive that since the conditions for overcoming 'scarcity' have been achieved his commitment to individual freedom and self-fulfillment no longer requires 'market assumptions'? Macpherson's definition of liberalism and his emphasis on the essential continuities between liberalism and socialism are not *explanatory* but above all *persuasive* propositions intended to convince liberals that they ought to be socialists. In this sense, his very definition of liberalism already from the outset implies what Panitch identifies as the 'classical Fabian' project.

An intellectual project such as Macpherson's has political implications. It implies that socialism—if it comes at all—will be a gift from a segment of the 'educated' ruling class; and it tends to assume—or purports to assume—a fundamental common interest between the ruling class and the subordinate classes on whose behalf they will bring about socialism.

Macpherson's intellectual strategy proceeds as if it were based on just such an assumption. The rejection of class struggle, then, seems to be implicit in the very foundations of his theoretical enterprise.

Class struggle may have disappeared only in the sixties from Macpherson's vocabulary, as Panitch suggests; but it can be argued that it has never had an essential place in his critique of liberalism or his analysis of capitalism. Panitch has not succeeded in dispelling the impression that insofar as Macpherson has a concept of class, its practical function in his argument seldom takes it far beyond the (Weberian?) notion of 'class' accepted by conventional social science—a concept of inequality more than a concept of class. To differentiate himself from liberal definitions of class, it is not enough—as Panitch seems to think—for Macpherson to define class 'in terms of property' or even to acknowledge that the 'inequitable' distribution of wealth in capitalism is a necessary and inevitable consequence of the 'capitalist market relation'.¹³ It is worth noting that Max Weber himself (as I argued before¹⁴) was quite willing to identify 'property' and 'lack of property' as the 'basic categories' of 'class situation' and even to define these 'basic categories' in terms of relation to the means of production. The point was, however, that he rendered these definitions sociologically and politically inconsequential—in deliberate opposition to Marx—precisely by locating the significance of class differentials not in the social relations they entail—relations of conflict and struggle—but simply in the consequences of 'market chances': property gives its owners an advantage, even a monopoly, in the acquisition of goods and services.

The extent to which Macpherson remains within the limits of this Weberian concept of class and the suppression of class struggle is perhaps suggested by *precisely* that concept which Panitch identifies as the most characteristically Marxist in Macpherson's theoretical vocabulary: the 'net transfer of powers'. No single concept can be as important in identifying his intellectual and political standpoint as is the character of his project as a whole; but it may be revealing to consider how this particular concept—the key to his whole critique of capitalism—is shaped by the fundamental assumptions of that project.

'Anyone who confronts seriously Macpherson's concept of the "net transfer of powers",' writes Panitch, 'cannot fail to see that it is entirely founded on the theory of surplus value, only *extending* it to point out that, in addition to the material value transferred by the labourer to the capitalist. . ., there is an additional loss to the labourer,'—that is, the loss of 'the satisfaction he could have got from using it [his labour-power] himself' and the loss of 'extra-productive powers', the powers to engage in the self-fulfilling exertion of his other, extra-productive, human capacities. Now there can be no doubt that Marx's surplus value connotes the kinds of material and human losses to which Macpherson's concept

refers and that this is crucial to his moral argument against capitalism. There is, however, more to Marx's critique of capitalism than a recognition that the capitalist wage-relationship necessarily and inherently occasions such losses and inequalities, and even causes dehumanisation. Otherwise, there would be little to distinguish Marx fundamentally from other moral critics of the injustices attendant upon property ('property is theft'). Marx's concept of surplus value is not simply a technical economic category, but neither is it simply a *moral indictment* of capitalism. It is a sociological category that denotes exploitation not simply as an *injustice* but as a focal point of *class struggle*, both its cause and its consequence. 'Surplus value' expresses a need, specific to capitalism, for the intensification of exploitation, the imperative of capitalist accumulation to maximise surplus appropriation, the effects of this imperative on the organisation of production and the labour-process, and the real conflicts these create at the point of production and beyond. It thereby locates the points of antagonism around which classes in capitalism polarise, and implies that the expansion or contraction of surplus value is conditioned by the configuration of *class* power, the relative strength and organisation of the *classes* that stand behind the individuals who embody the direct exchange between capital and labour. In other words, class struggle is not something that suddenly happens at the moment of transition.

Macpherson is undoubtedly aware of all these things; but the important point is that they do not figure essentially in his concept of 'net transfer'. If anything, his formulation directs our attention away from the sociological and political insights entailed by the concept of surplus value and its inextricable link with class struggle, and simply invites us to make a moral judgement about the evil consequences of capitalist exploitation and a philosophical judgement about their logical incompatibility with the ethical professions of liberalism. Macpherson's notion of 'net transfer' certainly begins with an apparently Marxist view of the relation between capital and labour as a coercive relation of production, and not merely a 'market relation', when he stresses that it must produce and reproduce inequalities and losses to the worker which accrue to the benefit of the capitalist. This important insight, however, has no apparent practical consequences for his analysis of capitalism and the conditions of its transformation. What is most striking about his conception is that social relations of production and class (when they figure in his argument at all) have little function in his analysis of capitalism except as the source of inequality, an unfair exchange between individuals, or *inequitable distribution*, even if the 'goods' inequitably distributed are expanded to include non-material goods such as the capacity for self-development. In this respect, Macpherson neutralises his own criticism of liberalism and the 'commodity fetishism' of classical political economy, traditions in which class struggle has no essential place in the analysis of capitalism because

class is never confronted except possibly as inequality of distribution. It is at this critical point that Macpherson departs from Marx's concept of surplus value and fails to pursue the implications of its focus on capital as a social relation of production, rather than simply a 'market relation'.

Macpherson's account of the 'net transfer', while it correctly stresses the worker's loss, directs our attention away from the struggle implicit in the exchange—a struggle that is never one-sided—and focuses on the (individual) worker as passive victim. In this respect, Macpherson returns to the forms of socialism which Marx spent most of his life endeavouring to surpass by transforming, as Hal Draper has argued, 'the economic question from merely a lament or indictment of suffering (passive) into the driving mechanism of class struggle (active)'.¹⁶ It was just such 'indictments of suffering' that tended to view socialism as a kind of philanthropy, a benefaction conferred by the most advanced sections of the privileged classes upon a passively suffering working class. Conversely, Marx's transformation of socialism from moral exhortation to economic and political analysis was inextricably bound up with the notion of class struggle and the self-emancipation of the working class.

Even in his 'net transfer of powers' Macpherson remains bound to a project from which class struggle has been ejected, as if there were an essential harmony of interest in society and no irreconcilable conflicts to impede the transformation of capitalism by the good will of an enlightened ruling class. However conscious Macpherson may be of the fundamental antagonism of interest inherent in the 'net transfer of powers', his intellectual project bypasses that antagonism and appeals to the common, 'human', interest of the two antagonists. This, again, requires abstraction from the class struggle—not only at the moment of 'transition' to socialism but in the account of capitalism itself. Indeed, the possibility of rejecting class struggle as the agency of change and expelling it from the process of transition, the 'rejection of the proletariat as the revolutionary class', can be said to presuppose the exclusion of class conflict from the analysis of capitalism itself.

It is not enough to say that Marx also looked to a common, universal human interest as the object of revolutionary change. What raised his own commitment to that universal interest above mere utopian moralism was precisely that he relentlessly pursued the implications of the antagonism of class interests which stand in the way of a common humanity. The universality of human interests was, in his analysis, mediated by the 'universality' of the proletariat as a revolutionary class—in opposition to another class. The fundamental antagonism of interest inherent in the relations of production between capital and labour for him meant the necessity of class struggle as an agency of change. His political project, therefore, was firmly grounded in, and commensurate with, both his commitment to socialism and his analysis of capitalism.

Macpherson's 'Vanguardism'

The affinities cited by Panitch between Macpherson's project and that of the Fabians may also place his attitude toward the Soviet Union in a different light. Panitch suggests that Macpherson's analysis of Stalinism as largely the consequence of economic 'scarcity' stems from his Marxism—or, at least, from the kind of uncritical Marxism that expresses itself in a 'rigid economic determinism' and a failure to deal adequately with the 'tension between discipline and consent', direction and democracy, which necessarily confronts the revolutionary project. It can, however, be argued that Macpherson's view of Stalinism has its roots in the same *divergences* from Marxism that characterises his analysis of capitalism. Again, the example of Fabianism is instructive.

Especially in the 1930's, the Soviet Union held a strong attraction for many non-Communist, non-Marxist socialists, including Fabians, and not least, the Webbs themselves. It may seem paradoxical that this product of a dramatic revolution should appeal to socialists whose most notable characteristic until then had been faith in a smooth and gradual transformation of society by parliamentary means, in which not class struggle but piecemeal reform would be the agency of change. But as many commentators have pointed out, there were significant affinities between the Soviet regime and the Fabian conception of socialism as collectivism imposed from above by the state through piecemeal reform and social engineering.

There is a striking congruence between the view of socialism that regards it as a philanthropy conferred by a converted and morally regenerated section of the dominant classes and a particular interpretation of the Soviet experience in which the Party represents a 'vocation of leadership' whose object is 'to induct a politically uneducated people into an understanding of public duties.'⁷ In this Fabian interpretation of the Soviet Union and the function of the Party, the emphasis is on the 'faults of human nature'⁸—more particularly, the inadequacies of the unregenerate—and on the vocation of the few 'in whom nature has implanted a turn of public work'¹⁹ to 'guide and instruct the mass'.²⁰ What unites the parliamentary gradualism of classical Fabianism with this apparently antithetical approval of the Soviet Union in the Stalinist era is a thinly disguised contempt for the 'mass' and a view of socialist transformation as a kind of education and moral regeneration in which the conversion of a superior few is followed by a more or less protracted—and in some cases, such as 'backward' Russia, necessarily authoritarian—period of tutelage for the masses, while the state imposes collectivism and 'democracy' from above. If Marxists have failed to deal adequately with the tension between direction and democracy or the necessity—and the difficulty—of keeping democracy alive in society while the direction and discipline of a revolutionary state hold sway, in this élitist non-Marxist form of socialism that failure is

not a mistake but is essential and endemic.

Macpherson's own political history and commitments have not been those of a Fabian; but there are important points at which his opinions on the Soviet Union, like the premises of his intellectual project in general, converge with Fabian attitudes such as those expressed by the Webbs in the early thirties. This is particularly true of his views on 'vanguardism' and the interpretation he gives to that vexing principle of **Marxism-Leninism**.²¹ Again, what is most striking about his account is the tendency to push class struggle and the revolutionary agency of the proletariat into the background. It is worth noting that the work in which his defense of the Soviet Union and the 'vanguard state' appears in its simplest and most uncritical form—*The Real World of Democracy*--is also a work in which class struggle as the agency of change and the revolutionary proletariat disappear from view. This series of radio lectures dates precisely from the mid-sixties, which Panitch identifies as the period when Macpherson abandoned these 'central ingredients' of Marxist theory. Here, there is an account—and a defense—of 'vanguardism' in which the 'vanguard' does not figure clearly as the advance guard of the working class. The context of Macpherson's 'vanguardism' is not class struggle and a distinction between the most advanced, class-conscious section of the working class—or even its representatives—and the mass of the exploited classes whom they will lead in the struggle and the revolutionary transition. Instead, the division between the 'vanguard' and the 'mass' tends to be cast in terms of a division between an enlightened and morally regenerated few and an ignorant passive many whose debasement and dehumanisation by society render them incapable of generating change. The problem of revolutionary transformation thus presents itself to Macpherson in this form: 'How can the debasing society be changed by those who have themselves been debased by it?'

People who have been debased by their society cannot be morally regenerated except by the society being reformed, and this requires political power.

In a revolutionary period, therefore, when a substantial part of the society senses uneasily that it is dehumanized but does not know quite how, or when it is so dehumanized that only a few of the people at most can be expected to see that they are dehumanized, there is no use relying on the free votes of everybody to bring about a fully human society. If it is not done by a vanguard it will not be done at all.²²

This interpretation on vanguardism has significant consequences. It places at the centre of the revolutionary project the inability of the 'mass' to act as a revolutionary force. More than that, it takes for granted that social conditions—those very conditions of oppression and 'dehumanisation' that must be transformed—incapacitate their victims to be agents of change; and it opens a very wide gulf between the superior few and the

'less than fully human' many. This is in contrast to any form of vanguardism that retains a belief in the necessity—and possibility—of class struggle. In such cases, the vanguard cannot claim to be anything more than the vanguard of the working classes—the most class-conscious or the most strategically sophisticated element, not a different order of humanity. What is required of the revolutionary masses is only class-consciousness, not some more exalted state of intellectual and moral vision; and the assumption is that the social conditions demanding revolutionary transformation—the conditions of exploitation and class conflict—are the very conditions that will heighten rather than suppress the development of this consciousness. Recent historical experience may not inspire confidence in revolutionary vanguards; and there can be no doubt that the notion of 'vanguardism' in any form—even the most benign—raises serious questions about the relation between discipline and democracy, state power and popular power. These are questions that Marxist theory has tended to pass over in embarrassed silence; but in a formulation like Macpherson's, which seems to grant a positive moral status to 'substitutism' and revolution from above, such questions are swept even further under the rug and cease even to be an embarrassment.

It may be that these formulations are forced upon Macpherson by the audience he is addressing; but, while the necessity of addressing the unconverted can certainly not be denied, the extent and nature of the constraints which the audience is allowed to impose depend on one's project, the object of addressing them. There is a 'socialist' project with a long tradition which addresses bourgeois audiences on the grounds that it is from the middle and upper classes that the transformation of society (gradual, from above) will come. This is a very different project from one that takes for granted class struggle—and the self-emancipation of the working class—as the moving force of social transformation. The difference here is not necessarily between 'reformism' and revolution, since there can be—and, indeed, probably must be in the conditions of contemporary Western capitalism—a Marxist 'reformism' which is not based on parliamentary gradualism, state-socialism, or 'revolution' from above, but acknowledges the necessity of conflict and class struggle, however protracted.²³ In the final analysis, the difference between these two kinds of socialist project—the one relying on philanthropy, the other on class struggle—lies not only in the greater political realism of the second but in its more convincing commitment to democratic values.

II

What, then, is the task of socialist political theory, and what stance should it adopt toward liberalism? Leo Panitch proposes a Marxist 'raid' on the liberal tradition. Indeed, he suggests, Macpherson's most important contribution to socialist theory may have been to prepare the ground for such

a raid. Marxism, argues Panitch, badly needs to draw upon liberal theory to fill the yawning gaps in its own treatment of politics and the relation between state and individual. The critical lessons can be learned by extracting from liberalism, as Macpherson does, those insights that are 'non-historically limited', those elements 'that can be found to be consistent with a non-market, classless society'.²⁴ Leaving aside the question of whether this is in fact Macpherson's purpose in abstracting liberalism from its historic conditions, let us proceed to ask whether the project itself is a useful one, whether this is indeed how the task of socialist political theory should be conceived, or whether the instructive functions of liberal democracy are rather subverted than advanced by such a 'raiding' operation.

Panitch and I seem to agree that there is in liberal institutions a legacy worth preserving and that Marxist theory has not adequately confronted the problem of the state arising from its own revolutionary goals. His suggestion that 'raiding' the tradition of liberal *theory*, however, goes beyond acknowledging the practical value of liberal democratic forms now and in the future; and I should like to consider the implications of the theoretical task which Panitch invites Marxists to undertake. Again, my premise is that the intellectual enterprise has programmatic consequences and that it carries a burden of implicit assumptions about the socialist project and the role of the intellectual within it, about class struggle, about the nature of ideology and its function in class struggle, about class hegemony and counter-hegemonic strategies.

Liberal Democracy and Capitalist Hegemony

Liberal democratic theory derives its ideological potency not from its philosophical persuasiveness or its ethical professions but from the efficacy of liberal democratic *practice*. The particular effectiveness of liberal democratic institutions rests not only on their performance—in common with other forms of state power—as coercive instruments, but also on their uniquely powerful *hegemonic* functions.

The legal and political institutions of liberal democracy may be the most potent ideological force available to the capitalist class—in some respects even more powerful than the material advances achieved under the auspices of capitalism. The very form of the state itself, and not simply the ideological or cultural apparatus that sustains it, is persuasive. What gives this political form its peculiar hegemonic power, as Perry Anderson has argued, is that the consent it commands from the dominated classes does not simply rest on their submission to an acknowledged ruling class or their acceptance of its right to rule. The parliamentary democratic state is a unique form of class rule because it casts doubt on the very existence of a ruling class.²⁵ It does not, however, achieve this effect by pure mystification. As always, hegemony has two sides. It is not possible

if it is not **plausible**.²⁶ Liberal democracy is the outcome of long and painful struggles. It has conferred genuine benefits on subordinate classes and given them real strengths, new possibilities of organisation and resistance which cannot be abandoned to the enemy as mere sham. To say that liberal democracy is 'hegemonic' is to say both that it serves the particular interests of the capitalist class and that its claims to universality have an element of truth.

The point is not that people are necessarily duped into believing that they are truly sovereign when they are not; it is rather that, with the triumph of representative institutions and finally the achievement of universal suffrage, the outer limits of popular sovereignty on a purely *political* plane really have been reached. Thus, the severe restrictions imposed upon popular power by the character of parliamentary democracy as a *class* state may appear as the limitations of democracy *itself*.²⁷ At least, the full development of liberal democracy means that the further extension of popular power requires not simply the perfection of existing political institutions but a radical transformation of social arrangements in general, in ways that are as yet unknown. This also means putting at risk hard-won gains for the sake of uncertain benefits. A major obstacle to the socialist project is that it requires not merely a quantitative change, not simply another extension of suffrage or a further incursion by representative institutions upon executive power, but a qualitative leap to new forms of democracy with no successful historical precedent.

Capitalist hegemony, then, rests to a significant extent on a formal separation of 'political' and 'economic' spheres which makes possible the maximum development of purely juridical and political freedom and equality without fundamentally endangering economic **exploitation**.²⁸ Liberal democratic legal and political forms are compatible with, indeed grounded in, capitalist relations of production because, with the complete separation of the producer from the means of production, surplus extraction no longer requires direct 'extra-economic' coercion or the producer's juridical dependence. The coercive power on which capitalist property ultimately rests can thus appear in the form of a 'neutral' and 'autonomous' state. Not surprisingly, therefore, the separation of political and economic spheres that characterise the liberal state in *practice* has also been enshrined in *theory*, particularly in the English-speaking world where the liberal tradition has been especially strong. The effect has been to produce various modes of political analysis which abstract 'politics' from its social foundations: for example, in political philosophy, where concepts like 'freedom', 'equality', and 'justice' are subjected to intricately formalistic analysis deliberately divorced from social implications; or 'political science', which scrutinises political 'behaviour' or political 'systems' as if they were devoid of social content. For socialist political theory, the significance of such theoretical manoeuvres does not, as Leo

Panitch suggests, lie simply in the fact that this formalism and abstraction, this evacuation of specific social content, are an open invitation to a Marxist 'raid'. What is more important is the way these procedures give theoretical expression to the abstraction of 'politics' in the liberal democratic state and to the appearance of 'universality' or 'neutrality' on which its hegemony rests, and how they urge us to accept formal equality and freedom without looking too closely at the substance enveloped in the form.

Counter-Hegemonic Strategies: Politics and Ideology

In light of the hegemonic power exercised by liberal democratic practice, how should we assess the intellectual strategy proposed to Marxists by Leo Panitch, his 'raid' on liberal theory? If liberal democracy is at the core of capitalist class hegemony, it is presumably the task of socialist political theory to approach liberal democratic theory 'counter-hegemonically'. How the counter-hegemonic project is conceived, however, very much depends on what one means by 'hegemony'; and there is a way of thinking about 'hegemony' that produces practical effects not so very different from those we have up to now associated with Fabianism: the effective replacement of class struggle and its chief protagonist, the working class, by intellectuals and their 'autonomous' activity as the principal agency of revolutionary change. One of the essential premises of this conception (as it appears, for example, in certain recent interpretations of hegemony in which Gramsci's notion is manipulated and grafted onto Althusser's theory of ideology²⁹) is that the hegemony of the ruling class over subordinate classes is one-sided and *complete*. Such formulae tend to expel *class struggle* from the concept of hegemony. There is no struggle here; there is only domination on one side and submission on the other. There is only one definition of social reality accepted in most essentials by all classes—a definition that corresponds to the interests of one class while it draws others into self-deceiving acquiescence. 'Hegemony' thus ceases to represent a distillation of class conflict which necessarily bears the marks of the subordinate classes, their 'consciousness', values, and *struggles*.³⁰

In this vocabulary, to speak of establishing the 'hegemony of the working class' becomes, oddly, not a way of describing the self-emancipation of the working class but precisely its opposite. It suggests that working class 'hegemony' is created by means of 'autonomous' theoretical and ideological practice—on behalf of, not by, the working class; and that intellectual activity can produce a counter-hegemonic 'culture', an *ideal* consciousness for a working class whose *real* consciousness, absorbed by capitalist hegemony, is 'false'. Again, we have the vision of an illuminated few who—probably through the instrumentality of a Party—will 'bring the public mind to reason. . . take culture away from [the] enemy. . . and instil it, suitably transformed, into the working class'.³¹

It may be unfair to suggest that the intellectual project outlined by Panitch—the proposal to detach from liberal theory its 'non-historically limited insights' and appropriate them to socialism—sounds rather like an effort to 'take culture away from the enemy' in order to transform it and make it suitable for presentation to a 'hegemonised' and 'falsely'-conscious working class. But if this is too extreme a judgement, it must still be said that—unless he has simply failed to think through the implications of his proposal—his view of what socialist political theorists should be doing rests on assumptions and has programmatic consequences; and these need to be carefully scrutinised. He has not spelled out these assumptions and consequences himself, but it may be possible to reconstruct them.

Panitch's proposed 'raid' on liberal democratic theory assumes that its constituent elements can be treated as autonomous and ideologically neutral. This assumption implies one of two things: either these elements are not class-determined in origin and meaning and constitute a neutral ground on which capitalism and socialism meet; or, whatever the historical and social origin of these ideological principles, they have no specific social meaning and are reducible to a few broad, merely formal propositions which can be manipulated to suit the values of socialism as well as those of capitalism. The task of the socialist intellectual in dealing with liberal democracy, then, is simply to abstract and redefine its concepts for socialist purposes.

We can perhaps look elsewhere for a 'theorisation' of this ideological strategy. Ernesto Laclau, in his important recent studies of ideology and politics, has provided a theoretical basis for treating ideology as autonomous and empty of specific social meaning, and indeed for a view of class struggle as a succession of ideological 'raids'.³² Significantly, Laclau seems to believe like Panitch that Macpherson's chief contribution to the socialist struggle is his reclamation of democratic principles from the bourgeoisie, his detachment of these principles from their apparently indissoluble link with bourgeois ideology so that they can be reappropriated by socialists.³³ In Laclau's formulation, the programmatic implications of this intellectual strategy, the meaning it gives to class struggle and the socialist project, become more evident.

The argument begins with a distinction between ideological expressions ('interpellations') that are determined by class contradictions and struggles, and those that are generated by other kinds of contradictions, especially 'popular-democratic' struggles in which the 'people' (a category that cuts across classes) is counterposed to a dominant 'power bloc', notably in the form of the state. Such non-class ideologies always appear in association ('articulated') with class ideologies; but because they are in principle autonomous, neutral, not class-specific, they can be detached or 'dis-articulated' from one class ideology and assimilated to another. For example, the hegemony of the dominant class rests to a great extent on its

ability to neutralise opposition by appropriating popular-democratic ideology to itself.

Here, then, is the crux of the argument. These detachable, class-neutral popular-democratic 'interpellations' are 'the domain of class struggles par excellence'.³⁴ Indeed, since a great deal of importance is attached here to ideology, these autonomous ideological elements can be said to represent the central arena of class struggle. The significance of this argument is that, 'although the domain of class determination is reduced, the arena of class struggle is immensely broadened'.³⁵ A theoretical basis has thus been provided not only for political alliances that transcend class—one might say a 'theorisation' of the Popular Front³⁶—but apparently also for locating the principal agents of class struggle outside class. Laclau gives us certain hints about who such agents might be. By putting the burden of class struggle so much on the 'articulation' and 'disarticulation' of autonomous ideological 'interpellations', he makes class struggle appear to be in large part an 'autonomous' intellectual exercise in which the 'autonomous' intellectual champions of each class compete in a tug-of-war over non-class ideological elements, victory going to that class whose intellectuals can most convincingly redefine these elements to match its own particular interests.

Here is a view of class struggle in which Panitch's raid may indeed look like a major invasion. According to such a view, the appropriate intellectual strategy to adopt toward an ideological system like liberal democracy would appear to be first to detach its non-class—especially popular-democratic—'interpellations' from their (temporary and arbitrary) class associations. This can perhaps be accomplished by abstracting them, emptying them of their specific social and historical content. They can thus be reduced to more or less formal propositions of more or less universal application, which can then be reconstituted for articulation with a new set of socio-historical interests. If the hegemony of the bourgeoisie rests on its ability to claim popular-democratic 'interpellations' for itself, the counter-hegemonic task of the socialist political theorist is, first, to 'disarticulate' these ideological elements from bourgeois ideology by demonstrating their non-class character—just as Macpherson has done with liberal democratic theory (according to Panitch) in preparation for a 'raid' by socialists.

It is probably necessary to stress that I agree wholeheartedly about the need to claim democratic values for socialism (though the need is greater in practice than in theory); but even granting the importance of theoretical activity in challenging the ideological hegemony of the ruling class, the strategy of 'raiding' or 'disarticulation' rests on a shaky theoretical foundation. Of course not all social conflicts are class struggles and not all ideologies implicated in political struggles—even in class struggles—are specifically class ideologies. It is also true that the 'democratic' elements of liberal

democracy have, under certain historical conditions, been taken up by various classes. Nevertheless, an ideology that can claim the allegiance of more than one class, an ideology that has a certain *universality*, does not thereby necessarily cease to be a *class* ideology—that is, not simply a neutral element *articulated* with a class ideology but an ideology that is itself class-determined in origin and meaning. Ideology may contribute to class hegemony by giving the particular interests of one class the appearance of generality; and it may be true, as Laclau suggests, that the ideological hegemony of the bourgeoisie rests on a 'consensus' that 'many of the constitutive elements of democratic and popular culture... are irrevocably linked to its class ideology'.³⁷ The success of these claims has not, however, been achieved merely by adopting popular-democratic ideologies that 'have no precise class connotations' and making them appear to be the exclusive property of bourgeois class ideology. If anything, the reverse is true: bourgeois ideological hegemony rests on the ability of the bourgeoisie to present its particular class interests (plausibly and with an element of historical truth) as if they had 'no precise class connotations'. The ideology of the dominant class undoubtedly incorporates elements of popular struggles against its own dominance, and in this sense to some extent 'neutralises' them; but to say this is to say no more than that class ideology is the product of class *struggle*, which is never one-sided.

To counter the ideological hegemony of the capitalist class, therefore, the task of the theorist is *not* to demonstrate that what *appears* universal in bourgeois ideology really *is* universal, having 'no precise class connotations'—which is, in effect, precisely to accept the hegemonic claims of the dominant class—but rather to explain how what appears universal is in fact particular; not simply to extract from liberal democratic forms a sense in which they do *not* express capitalist class interests, but also to understand clearly the sense in which they *do*; not to empty ideological formulae of their specific social content but to explicate the specificity and particularity of meaning in them; not to abstract ideology from its historic conditions in order to convert particular class interests into universal principles available for 'raiding' or 're-articulation', but to explore the historic conditions that have made possible the generalisation of a particular class interest and conferred 'universality' on the capitalist class.

This is, again, not to say that socialist political theory must, by reducing liberal democracy to class ideology, dismiss it as pure mystification or sham. The point is simply that an account must be given of liberal democracy which makes clearly visible not only its limitations but also the *discontinuity*, the radical break, between liberalism and socialism. If the defeat of capitalist hegemony rests on the reclamation of democracy by socialism (and insofar as that reclamation can be assisted by theoretical means), it cannot be achieved simply by 'disarticulating' democracy

from bourgeois class ideology. New, *socialist*, forms of democracy must be defined whose specificity is clear and which represent an unmistakable challenge to the claims of bourgeois democracy that its particular form of 'popular sovereignty' is universal and final.

Liberalism and Socialism

In confronting non-liberal regimes, particularly fascist or other forms of dictatorship, a case can be made for the principles of the Popular Front and a corresponding ideological strategy in which the continuities between liberalism and socialism take precedence over the discontinuities. Doubts must exist even here about incurring the risks of a strategy that seems to suppress class struggle, subordinate the interests and independent action of the working class, and postpone the struggle for socialism; but even if we accept the necessity, in such cases, of courting these dangers, no such argument can be made in the circumstances of liberal democracy. In the liberal democratic state, where the limits of popular power consistent with a class society have essentially been reached, the struggle for socialism stands apart at the top of the agenda. An intellectual strategy is needed which goes beyond the union of liberalism and socialism in a theoretical Popular Front. There are, of course, many immediately pressing battles to be fought in all of the liberal democracies—against nuclear annihilation, for example, or, for that matter, to protect the gains of liberal democracy itself—and these require broad alliances; but in all these battles and alliances, the specificity of the socialist struggle must always remain clear.³⁸ An intellectual strategy must, then, be found which can, while acknowledging the value of liberal institutions, preserve that specificity and clearly define the break, the 'river of fire', between liberalism and socialism.

This is a large question, but one or two suggestions can be briefly made. We should not, to begin with, be too absorbed by the formula 'liberal democracy', so that our attention is focused on the opposition 'liberal democracy' versus 'socialist democracy', as if the major issue were the difference between two forms of democracy. It may be useful to resituate the discussion by *contrasting* liberalism ('democratic' or 'pre-democratic') to democracy, to define democracy as *distinct* from—though not in opposition to—liberalism. If we concentrate our attention on the differences between the problems to which 'liberalism' and 'democracy' are respectively addressed, we can recognise the value of liberalism and its lessons for socialism without allowing liberalism to circumscribe our definition of democracy.

Liberalism has to do essentially with 'restricting the freedom of the state'—through the rule of law, civil liberties, and so on. It is concerned to limit the scope and the arbitrariness of political power; but it has no interest in the *disalienation* of power. Indeed, it is a fundamental liberal

ideal even in its most 'democratic' forms that power *must* be alienated, not simply as a necessary evil but as a positive good—for example, in order to permit fundamentally individualistic human beings to occupy themselves with private concerns. This is why for liberalism *representation* is a *solution* not a *problem*.

In contrast to liberalism, *democracy* has to do precisely with the disalienation of power. To the extent that some form of alienated power or representation continues to be a necessary expedient—as in any complex society it undoubtedly must—from the point of view of democratic values such representative institutions must be regarded not only as a solution but also as a **problem**.³⁹ It is in confronting this problem that socialism has something to learn from liberalism—not about the disalienation of power but about the control of alienated power. This is the essential point that Leo Panitch, for example, misses when he cites 'representative government' itself as one of the 'valuable and non-historically limited' elements of liberalism which Marxism should **incorporate**.⁴⁰ Even democratic power will undoubtedly present dangers about which liberalism—with its principles of civil liberties, the rule of law, and protection for a sphere of privacy—may yet have lessons to teach; but the *limitation* of power is not the same thing as its disalienation. Democracy unlike liberalism even in its most idealised form, furthermore, implies overcoming the opposition of 'economic' and 'political' and the superimposition of the 'state' upon 'civil society'. 'Popular sovereignty' would thus not be confined to an abstract political 'sphere' but would instead entail a disalienation of power at every level of human activity, an attack on the whole structure of domination that begins in the sphere of production and continues upward to the state. From this point of view, just as the coupling of 'liberal' and 'democracy' may be misleading, the joining of 'socialist' and 'democracy' should be redundant.

NOTES

My thanks to Frances Abele, David McNally, Peter Meiksins, and Neal Wood for their very helpful criticisms and suggestions.

1. Perhaps because of this failure of perception, Panitch consistently misreads and even misquotes me. I did not, for example, question Macpherson's commitment to socialism or claim that he 'locates himself within liberal democracy' (Panitch, p. 152). What I did was to point out that his standpoint seems to vary, that some works are more critical than others (although my clearly stated object was to consider one work in particular, *The Life and Times of Liberal Democracy*), that even in his most critical works there are 'theoretical ambiguities which open the way for a convergence with his opponents' (Wood, 'C.B. Macpherson, Liberalism, and the Task of Socialist Political Theory', *Socialist Register 1978*, p. 216), and that these theoretical ambiguities have programmatic implications.

One or two more specific examples: **Panitch** writes, 'As against Macpherson, Wood contends that **Marxian** class analysis involves understanding that capitalism is "the most perfect form of class exploitation: the complete separation of the producers from the means of production. . ."; and he castigates me for failing to notice that 'this has *always* been the centrepiece of Macpherson's analysis'. (Panitch, p. 147). Now my object in the passage quoted (or *misquoted* out of context, Wood, p. 229) is clearly *not* to rehearse this obvious fact about capitalist exploitation—'as against Macpherson' or anyone else. The *unmistakeable* point of the passage is to stress that this very characteristic of capitalism is the basis—not the antithesis—of the 'universality' and 'autonomy' of the capitalist state and its appearance of class-neutrality; and that this is the crux of the link between liberalism and capitalism.

Later, **Panitch**, having generously praised the 'strength' of the argument in the latter part of my essay, laments that the argument 'remains vitiated, unfortunately, by her conclusion that Macpherson is virtually indistinguishable from Mill, and has been seduced by liberalism's "huge mystification"'. (Panitch, n. 59). It is, perhaps, unimportant that I did *not* say that Macpherson is 'virtually indistinguishable from Mill'. At any rate, the 'huge mystification' to which I refer in this passage (and which I credit Macpherson with being one of the first to challenge, though he has not gone far enough) is clearly not *liberalism* but an intellectual tradition that abstracts the history of political thought from its social and historical foundations. (Wood, p. 240).

2. **Panitch**, p. 150.
3. **Panitch**, p. 166.
4. C.B. Macpherson, *The Life and Times of Liberal Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 83.
Ralph Miliband, *The State in Capitalist Society* (New York: Basic Books, p. 4.
6. Miliband, p. 16.
7. **Panitch**, p. 151, quoting—again out of context—from Wood, p. 222.
8. **Panitch**, p. 160.
9. **Panitch**, p. 160.
10. See Ralph Miliband, *Marxism and Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), pp. 180-190, on the tension between 'direction' and 'democracy'.
11. **Panitch**, p. 160.
12. e.g. Wood, pp. 226 and 231.
13. **Panitch**, p. 159.
14. Wood, p. 224.
15. **Panitch**, p. 148.
16. Hal Draper, *Karl Marx's Theory of Revolution. State and Bureaucracy* (New York and London: Monthly Review Press, 1977), p. 142.
John Maynard, *Russia in Flux* (New York: Macmillan, 1949), p. 293. Maynard—a Fabian, for many years a civil servant in India, and several times a Labour candidate—derives the notion of the Party as a 'vocation of leadership' from the Webbs.
18. Maynard, p. 294.
19. Maynard, p. 296.
20. Maynard, p. 294.
21. It is also interesting to compare Macpherson's conception of the two (or three) dimensions of 'democracy'—one exemplified by the liberal West, the other by the socialist East—with Maynard's account of the two 'halves' or 'fractions' of democracy, developed respectively in the West (legal and political) and in Russia (economic) and waiting to be brought together into a 'complete whole'.

See Maynard, pp. 513-14.

22. Macpherson, *The Real World of Democracy* (Toronto: Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 1965), pp. 19-20.
23. See Miliband. *Marxism and Politics*, ch. VI.
24. Panitch, p. 163.
25. Perry Anderson, 'The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci', *NLR* 100, November, 1976-January, 1977, p. 30.
26. For a very fine discussion of this aspect of class hegemony, see E.P. Thompson on the rule of law as the expression of ruling class hegemony in 18th century England in *Whigs and Hunters* (London: Allen Lane, 1975), especially pp. 262-3.
27. Anderson, p. 30.
28. See Wood, pp. 228-30. See also my article, 'The Separation of the "Economic" and the "Political" in Capitalism', *NLR* 127, May-June, 1981.
29. For a discussion of some recent interpretations of Gramsci that suggest such a view of hegemony, see Tom Nairn's review in the *London Review of Books*, 17 July-6 August, 1980, pp. 12-14. See also E.P. Thompson, 'Eighteenth Century English Society: Class Struggle without Class?' *Social History*, vol. 3, no. 2, May, 1978, pp. 162-4, and n. 60.
30. This is arguably the effect of Althusser's conception of ideology as a kind of systems-maintenance device embodied particularly in 'Ideological State Apparatuses' which ensure the reproduction of the social structure.
31. Nairn, pp. 12-13.
32. Ernesto Laclau, *Politics and Ideology* (London: NLB Verso, 1979).
33. This judgement is at least implicit, for example, in Laclau, p. 170; but Laclau has made the point to me more directly in commenting on my original article.
34. Laclau, p. 109.
35. Laclau, p. 110.
36. In fact, it can be argued that Laclau's theory of ideology, although it claims a greater generality, is precisely an attempt to 'theorise' the Popular Front—and especially in a Latin American context. Whether or not Laclau gives an adequate account of populism or fascism and the conditions of struggle against it, my concern is with his 'theorisation' and the attempt to universalise it into a general theory of ideology.
37. Laclau, pp. 110-111.
38. See, for example, Raymond Williams, 'The Politics of Nuclear Disarmament', *NLR* 124, November-December, 1980, for a discussion of this point in relation to disarmament movements.
39. Wood, 'C.B. Macpherson. . .', pp. 223-234.
40. Panitch, p. 163.