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Specters and possession of neoliberal democracy: Contemporary critical political philosophies and legacy of C.B. Macpherson

In my paper, too short for any decisive analyses, syntheses and conclusions, I'm going to consider only one issue, which – as I would like to argue – is a key weakness of all contemporary critical theories of democracy: to what extent – and with what consequences – does individualism continue to shape political ontology of contemporary democracy. By critical theories of democracy I understood a theoretical inquiry focused on four main problems – as defined by Ben Rampton¹:

- Power and inequality;
- The impact of ideology on people's actions and beliefs;
- Relationship between everyday life practices and interactions with violence, domination and struggle in the broader political domain;
- Assumptions about the need to reformulate theory and practical considerations so they can become a contribution to “emancipatory interventions”.
- Further remarks about such approach to critical democratic theory – in the context of neoliberalism – will be sketched at the of this paper along with a summary of a suggested C.B. Macpherson's explicit contribution to this field of inquiry.

“Critical” Individualism?

The most recent development in critical theory of democracy is associated with the Habermasian “intersubjective turn”. It was meant to be a more effective – than the one proposed for example by the authors of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*² – attempt to counter the omnipotence of instrumental rationality in the domain of human actions and beliefs. The most advanced version of this project was presented in Habermas's *The Theory of Communicative Actions*³, which argues for a normative grounding of reason through communication – intersubjectivity. The main point of the theory concerns the process of reaching agreement, understanding, coordination and normativity in society without coercion and repression. Normative conception of communicative action provides a guarantee for social peace and the “emancipatory changes” in society which are achieved through a “decolonization” of intersubjective rationality, which tends to be appropriated by the power of func-

1 Ben Rampton, “Critique in Interaction”, *Critique of Anthropology*, vol. 21, No. 1 (March 2001).

2 Max Horkheimer, Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. G. S. Noerr, tr. E. Jephcott, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002 (originally published: 1947).

3 Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Vol. 1, *Reason and the Rationalization of Society*, tr. T. McCarthy, Boston: Beacon Press, 1984 (originally published: 1981); Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Vol. 1, *Liveworld and System: A Critique of Functionalist Reason*, tr. T. McCarthy, Boston: Beacon Press, 1987 (Originally published: 1981).

tional-instrumental reason⁴.

The aim of my paper is to present theory of possessive individualism as the missing center of critical theory of democracy. My reflections on this topic are the result of disturbing suspicion that critical theory of democracy is still based on the notion of the individual and that the political ontology of individualism constitutes a core of both philosophy of the subject criticized by J. Habermas in his *Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*⁵, as well as of Habermas's own pragmatic, transactional and intersubjective theorizing. At the same time the post-Habermasian-critical project seems to suffer from a lack of truly critical re-evaluation of the idea of the individual, accepting the prevailing philosophical, social and political traditions in which this idea is rooted most firmly. Is Habermas's program trans- and anti-individualistic to the same extent as it is trans- anti-subjectivistic?

But why in the first place should we consider anti-individualism so important for critical theory of democracy as we have – since the moment of publication of *The Theory of Communicative Actions* – considered anti- and inter-subjectivism?

Before we turn to the proper analysis of above questions (without providing satisfactory answers to them), let's highlight – one more time – continuing significance and profoundness of the problem of trans-subjectivism for the identity of contemporary philosophy in general (not only of specific project of 20-century critical theory). As it was noticed by Peter Dews in his recent evaluation of possibilities of transcending Nietzschean-nihilistic attack on the entire Western philosophical tradition (especially on its egalitarian-emancipatory promises and pretences)⁶:

“Heidegger was correct to convict Nietzsche of rampant subjectivism, to see him as part of the problem rather than the solution. The truth is, a meaning or value that we wilfully posit is no meaning or value at all. To ‘stamp becoming with the character of being’ may be—as Nietzsche claims—‘the supreme will to power’. But it is not going to fool anyone, if we know all along that *we* are doing the stamping. Nietzsche went down that quasi-solipsistic road in the first place partly because of his innate solitariness, reflected in his absurdly dogmatic claim that ‘one furthers one’s ego always at the expense of others’; but largely because, in the philosophy of his day and ours, the thought of the categorial distinctness of the subject-to-subject relation still plays Cinderella to those domineering stepsisters known as ‘Subject’ and ‘Object’. Only in the sub-tradition that runs from Fichte, via Hegel and Feuerbach, to Levinas and contemporary Critical Theory, does the encounter with the human other feature as *sui generis*, and as the primordial locus of meaning and value. Given the convergence of this subaltern tradition with what I take to be common human experience, Heidegger was right to interpret the history of metaphysics as the history of an occlusion—and Levinas was right to respond that what has been blanked out, in the first instance, is not Being, but the face of the Other”⁷.

Are contemporary critical democratic theories ready to meet the face of the Other (emerging at intersections of discourses and controversies in speculative philosophy, debates in theoretical and practical ethics, as well as in everyday life of culturally and socially heterogeneous modern societies) – with all the consequences?

Individualism, possessions and the foundations of liberal ontology

The term “individualism” became commonly used only in the beginning of the 19th century, when it had replaced concepts such as “self-love” (*amour-propre* or *Eigenliebe*) and “selfishness” (*egoisme*, *Selbsucht*). This change marked a transformation of the interest in the individual from a moral to more analytical context⁸. In the mid-twentieth century it took the form of a paradigm defining the intellectual and practical mainstream of modernity. C.B. Macpherson defining it as “possessive individualism” (owners individualism)⁹ observed

4 Maeve Cooke, „The Weakness of Strong Intersubjectivism. Habermas’s Conception of Justice”, *European Journal of Political Theory* vol. 2, No. 3 (July 2003).

5 Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, tr. F. Lawrence. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1990 (Originally published: 1985).

6 Peter Dews, “Nietzsche for losers?”, *New Left Review*, No. 86 (March-April 2014).

7 *Ibid.*, p. 109.

8 Étienne Balibar, “‘Possessive Individualism’ Reversed: From Locke to Derrida”, *Constellations*, Vol. 9, No. 3 (September 2002), p. 299.

9 C. B. Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke*, Oxford: Clarendon Press 1962. Phrase “possessive individualism” was first used by Macpherson in his 1954 essay, „The Deceptive Task of Political Theory” (*Cambridge Journal*, Vol. 7, No. 3 [June 1954]; re-published in: C. B. Macpherson, *Democratic Theory: Essays in Retrieval*, Oxford: Clarendon Press 1973). According to William Leiss (*C. B. Macpherson: Dilemmas of Liberalism and Socialism*, Montreal: New World Perspectives 1985, pp. 27-28) Macpherson invented the term as a direct reference to the idea of the acquisitive society developed by R.H.

that it has been the dominant idea relating to the social, political and economic processes taking place in Europe since the 16th century: the birth of capitalism and bourgeois society, with human beings treated as units/factors in the domain of property and ownership relations. The relations were determined by what the individuals owned, both in terms of land and objects, their freedoms and talents, as well as in relation to the deeper dimension of their self-possession, self-ownership (property in one's person). The main consequence and "product" of these transformations, but at the same time its crucial normative orientation and justification, was the idea of equality (formative idea of the modern Western democracy) where people are perceived as metaphysically and ethically (and thus politically) equal because they share identical features, "properties" and dispositions (potentials) (despite their various "capitals", available scenarios and options of achieving, fulfilling these features – called by Macpherson "powers"¹⁰) to become possessors (owners)¹¹.

Studies on possessive individualism conducted by Macpherson were designed to answer two basic questions – in accordance with analytical approach to the phenomenon of individualism documented by Balibar¹²:
- whether any form of individualism is based on the logic of appropriation (and ownership), or was it rather the development of private property that became a factor leading to mutual isolation of individuals and strengthening of individualism;
- whether possessive individualism is a reflection of the overall structure of social organization dominant in specific historical conditions, or is it rather an expression of "eternal" human nature captured by the metaphor of "homo economicus".

Analytical and social-historical context for researches carried out by Macpherson is delineated by the English Revolutions of the 17th century which resulted in the birth of the "bourgeois consciousness" – the subject, ideal type and episteme of all social changes described by modern social sciences – characterized according to Macpherson by seven axioms:

1. What makes a man human is freedom from dependence on the wills of others.
2. Freedom from dependence on others means freedom from any relations with others except those relations which the individual enters voluntarily with a view to his own interest.
3. The individual is essentially the proprietor of his own person and capacities, for which he owes nothing to society.
4. Although the individual cannot alienate the whole of his property in his own person, he may alienate his capacity to labour.
5. Human society consists of a series of market relations.
6. Since freedom from the wills of others is what makes a man human, each individual's freedom can rightfully be limited only by such obligations and rules as are necessary to secure the same freedom for others.
7. Political society is a human contrivance for the protection of the individual's property in his person and goods, and (therefore) for the maintenance of orderly relations of exchange between individuals regarded as proprietors of themselves¹³.

According to Macpherson ontology of Western democracy defined in such a way found its fullest realization in the political philosophy of John Locke, who succeeded to remove contradictions characteristic of class (bourgeois) society by equating freedom with self-possession (self-ownership).

Many commentators of Macpherson's project criticize his model. Some of them announced even the definitive refutation of the idea of possessive individualism altogether. Because of the lack of space it is impossible to present in this context the changing fortunes of "interpretations on Macpherson's interpretations"¹⁴, but as a

Tawney (Macpherson's supervisor and mentor during his studies at the London School of Economics from 1932 to 1935).

10 Idea developed more prominently in *Political Theory of Possessive Individualism...*, discussing model of possessive market society (ibid. pp. 51-61) and in the article "Problems of a Non-Market Theory of Democracy" published in: C.B. Macpherson, *Democratic Theory...*, pp. 39-76.

11 Ibid., pp. 25, 32-33.

12 É. Balibar, "'Possessive Individualism' Reversed...", p. 299.

13 C.B. Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism...*, pp. 263-264.

14 I have attempted such a project in my book, *C.B. Macpherson and the Dilemmas of Western Political Ontology: Retrieving the Possessive Individualism Thesis (C.B. Macpherson: "indywidualizm posiadaczy" a dylematy współczesnej ontologii politycznej, Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego, 2010)*. The best reconstruction of that sort so far, available in the English language, is offered by Jules Townshend in his: *C.B. Macpherson and the Problem of Liberal Democracy*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000. C.B. Macpherson's undertaking can be divided into two parts – historical analyses (Keith Thomas, Quentin Skinner, John Dunn, James Tully and other researchers gathered within the so called Cambridge School of the history of ideas are

general remark we can mention a current wave of historical-theoretical analyses that re-affirm – at least conditionally – main points of his investigations¹⁵.

Paradigm bifurcated

Étienne Balibar is one of the authors who conditionally accept Macpherson's endeavor¹⁶. In his article where he evaluates this problem in a detailed way¹⁷, he offers an analysis of the development of the idea of private ownership in political philosophy. He argues for a possibility of a reversal of the category of possessive individualism, which involves rejection of the assertion that possessive claims, rights and exchanges (famous Macphersonian idea of the "transfer of powers") are constitutive for the modern society and for the notion of the individual. Balibar exposes such an alternative history of relations between possession and individualism in the thought of Jean Jacques Rousseau, Karl Marx and Jacques Derrida¹⁸. But, what is most interesting, also in the works of key authors tested by Macpherson from the perspective of the thesis on possessive individualism – Locke and Hobbes – we can see a serious conceptual-theoretical cracks which make it impossible to maintain a notion of unanimous, homogeneous and consistent paradigm of possessive individualism in the history of social and political theory. Hobbes with his construction of absolute power which protects safety but at the same time "deprives" citizens who face ceaseless cycles of struggles (conflicts and competitions), living on the verge between natural and social worlds, would never embrace Lockean idea of self-possession – neither in its political, nor anthropological dimensions. Thus, according to Balibar, singular concept of possessive individualism must be replaced by its two different, sometimes contradictory, mutually exclusive, versions: the first model is based on the idea of life (equality in life), the second - on the idea of death (equality in the face of death). They represent two visions of the social order based on competition, rivalry. In the case of "mortal model" it takes the form of a metaphor of the war of all against all (which must be treated as reversal of the classical formula of war by von Clausewitz – as noticed by Foucault – where war is no longer perceived as "continuation of politics by other means", just the opposite: politics itself is the war, which persists, is still conducted in the "state of peace" with non-military, not directly causing death means and measures¹⁹). In contrast, Lockean "model of life" is based on the idea of competition as reciprocity and exchange with its culmination in the legal, civil order (peaceful, profitable for everyone free-market competition)²⁰.

Market, Power, Ownership

In order to apprehend successfully the concept of possessive individualism in all its richness and its implications in the light of the above presented dilemmas I propose to read both versions of the paradigm as originated from the same core, the basis of both this theory and the society described by it – the market. In the first variant, the market is understood as a battlefield, in the second – as the court and the civic public sphere. This duality becomes even more apparent when described using negative forms: owners' individualism is rooted in the belief that "no one shall be *expropriated from oneself*" and that natural barrier of politics is a resistance of the "self" against any attempt to deprive her of her property, which she rightfully possesses (prohibition to

most important contributors to the "definitive refutation" of this aspect of the thesis of possessive individualism) and systematic theory of democracy (declining fortunes of this dimension of Macpherson's project are evident for example in articles published in the proceeding from the 1989 conference [devoted to the author of *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism*] edited by Joseph Carens [*Democracy and Possessive Individualism: The Intellectual Legacy of C.B. Macpherson*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993] with John Keane, Virginia Held, William Connolly, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe as the leading authors).

15 Among scholars representing this approach one can mention Ellen Meiksins Wood, Neil Wood, Geoff Kennedy, Jules Townshend, Michael Bray (author of one of the most important treatments of this matter: "Macpherson Restored? Hobbes and the Question of Social Origins", *History of Political Thought*, Vol. 28, No. 1 [Spring 2007]), Onur Ulas Ince, Edward Adrew and Robert Ballingall.

16 Series of publications by this author – where he discusses or uses Macpherson's constructions – which he has presented for the last decade: "Possessive Individualism Reversed..."; "Is a Philosophy of Human Civic Rights Possible? New Reflections on Equaliberty", *South Atlantic Quarterly*, Vol. 103, No. 2-3 (Spring-Summer 2004), "My Self and My Own: One and the Same?", in: B. Maurer, G. Schwab (eds.), *Accelerating Possession. Global Futures and Personhood*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2006; *La proposition de l'égaliberté : Essais politiques 1989-2009*, Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 2010 (English translation: *Equaliberty: Political Essays*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), *Citoyen sujet et autres essais d'anthropologie philosophique*, Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 2011.

17 É. Balibar, "Possessive Individualism' Reversed..."

18 *Ibid.*, p. 305.

19 Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality. Volume I: Introduction*, tr. R. Hurley, New York: Pantheon Books, p. 93; *id. Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-1976*, pp. 46-48.

20 É. Balibar, "Possessive Individualism' Reversed...", p. 301.

exclude the self from its properties). In the case of Locke's theory, this prohibition refers to the human life as a foundation of society – it must be protected by the republican order derived from the constitution and from the appropriate rights. Interests of individuals are protected and strengthened at the expense of weakening the state. Limit of politics here is understood positively – as gaining of civil liberties. Hobbes identify this limit as negative one – as emptiness, lack. His approach is based on the anthropological assumptions about the individual with her natural feature of resistance of death using any available means. The state must be sufficiently strong to prevent a return to the state of nature²¹.

We can use above analysis as a basis for further investigations introducing the assumption of dialectical nature of possessive individualism thesis²². Its first moment is the relationship between the three basic terms: power, property and possession (proprietorship). In the classical versions of the theory of owners individualism power is always evaluated in relation to ownership and property. But here again we experience a fundamental conceptual bifurcation: one tradition treats property as power, the second speaks about the power of property. For Hobbes market can be understood as a metaphor for society only if it is perceived as “marketplace of power”, arena of rivalry of different ways attempted to gain control over economic resources²³. Ownership is one of the embodiments, manifestations of such efforts. It enables one person to get control over another person. However, dominance may be achieved also by other – including illegal – means, hence the need for a strong state that would keep in check unfair ways to compete in the market. Real power is a surplus of power²⁴ to influence others, to subordinate and subjugate them thanks to factors such as wealth, offices, talents and so on²⁵ (power works against the principle of coexistence in equilibrium, it contradicts the principle of equality [equality – the civic one – must be enforced], although it results from this principle).

Institution of liberty

Locke's construction is completely different. Person, individual is in his view both “homo economicus” and “homo politicus”: property does not belong to the government (power), but rather the power comes from the property. Property is a factor socializing individuals who live in the community under conditions (and in the process) of union-forming²⁶. Here we face, however, extremely difficult and fascinating question about the status of the choices made by individuals as members of civil society – the question about freedom (liberty). Who or what is the subject of freedom? Is it the “agent” forming and separating various forms of power, the property itself, understood as an abstract principle, or question of the subject of freedom relates rather to owner, individual, concrete person? Despite the allegedly obvious answer to the dilemma, which suggests the latter solution (in accordance with the most widespread understanding of the liberal tradition – with Locke as one of its main founders – that manifestation of social life must be assessed due to the right and interests of individuals: liberalism is the language of the rights of the individual²⁷, as it is claimed by its famous definition, and individual is the only conceivable “entity”, subject of any deliberations about the idea of freedom), we should rather choose the former – metaphysical, not empirical – variant. It turns out that this is property, which (“who”) “creates” the essence of the owner – it forms him/her, gives him/her the strength, power and ability to act, that is – in the language of Locke – gives him/her life and work²⁸. Locke provides two understanding of his famous, often-quoted equation from his *Second Treatise*: Liberty and Property are both names for Life²⁹, and – in reverse order – the property is a common name of life, liberty, and property³⁰. Property is therefore a condition of freedoms and liberties – only an owner, a possessor can be truly independent and free citizen.

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid, p. 300.

23 Ibid. 302.

24 C. B. Macpherson, “Introduction”, in: Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. C.B. Macpherson, London: Penguin Books 1985, pp. 32-37

25 É. Balibar, “‘Possessive Individualism’ Reversed...”, p. 302.

26 Ibid.

27 Jerzy Szacki, *Liberalism after Communism*, Budapest: Central European University Press, 1995, pp. 31-35.

28 É. Balibar, “‘Possessive Individualism’ Reversed...”, p. 302.

29 Ibid. “Man being born, as has been proved, with a title to perfect freedom, and an uncontroled enjoyment of all the rights and privileges of the law of nature (...); hath by nature a power (...) to preserve his *property*, that is, his *life, liberty* and *estate*” (John Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*, ed. C.B. Macpherson, Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1980, §87, p. 46 [emphases added]).

30 “and it is not without reason, that (Man – MT) seeks out, and is willing to join in society with others, who are already united, or have a mind to unite, for the mutual preservation of their *lives, liberties* and *estates*, which I call by the general name, *property*” (Ibid., §123, p. 66 [emphases added and changed]).

Due to the property (which Balibar calls Constitutive) the process of “legitimization” and the legal approval of life of the individual within the political community is taking place. However this means also that, in fact, the same property is a condition of freedom – if someone in a particular country, political union can be regarded a free citizen, it is only under the condition that he/she is an owner. In such circumstances we can notice a further shift of meaning – the sense of the Constitutive (source, core) Property is the lack of its reference to any pre-existing institutions. It is the very individuality (again – as a metaphysical principle, and not as a political-legal-existential person) that constitutes his/her (its) own property. This means that what is really free is the property, not the owner. Specific subject, individual can define himself or herself thanks to this property – property delineating his or her essence – only when he or she acknowledges his or her identity in the real and actual act of appropriation and acquisition³¹. Locke in his doctrine relates individual to only one authority and source of all meanings – himself or herself, that is, to the source of transcendental power of ownership, of which he or she is a “carrier” and a trustee.

Self-appropriation

The above position may be questioned on several grounds. First of all, one can object against it (as it had already been famously posed by Kant and Marx) that it confuses two orders: that of persons and that of things³². According to this criticism idea of ownership (or property) in one person treats in unjustified way people as things: because one can have, own and take possession only of things. But Balibar notices that this objection is based on the completely different theoretical (formal and legal) assumption than the project of Locke, which has primarily an anthropological character³³. Possession and self-possession relate here to the work performed by an individual over his or her own property (idea of freedom), but this implies a crucial contradiction, antithesis (and – consequently – a solution: unity of opposites), characteristic of the modern notion of individual and subjectivity. On the one hand, individual remains fully committed to his or her activities, he or she is present in them. This leads to an “alienation” of the subject into external reality and all the practical outcomes of his or her labor. At the same time he or she is not subject to any changes – he or she remains the same, unaltered. Thus on one hand individual is defined by his or her activity (practice) (he or she “is” in them), on the other – those activities are alien, separate from the individual, external to him or her. This tension can be removed only if we realize that it refers to the normative dimension of individual responsibility, which is the most important aspect of the process of work with productive activity (creativity, innovation) understood as the source property³⁴.

Now we can repeat the most important formula of Locke, which is a basis of his “possessive individualism”: “every man has a *property* in his own *person*”³⁵. Life, liberties, possessed good cease to be understood as things, objects, something that can be possessed. Possession is not about “things”, “essences”, but about the very “movement” in the process of acquisition authorized and sanctioned by law and political constitution (institutions). It is about appropriation which is the “movement of life”: a penetration and assimilation of things³⁶. The contradiction between the world of things and the world of persons is removed: these universes are joined in an alliance of appropriation and possession: “to be” means “to have”. Differentiation of people and things can be done only after this entry point – the source of their unity. Locke doesn’t say that “people (in general, in an abstract sense) possess or have themselves”, but that “every individual, concrete human person has a property in his (or her) person” (which means – as we have already noticed – that he or she is the exclusive trustee of his or her property [the one who has a disposition of/in/over this property]: “that excludes the common right of other men”³⁷). The consequence of this construction is the absolute interchangeability and convertibility between the discourse of liberation of the individual from the submission and subordination in

31 É. Balibar, “‘Possessive Individualism’ Reversed...”, p. 303.

32 See for example discussion of this issue in: Jeffrey Reiman, *As Free and Just as Possible: The Theory of Marxian Liberalism*, Chichester: John Wiley and Sons, 2012, ch. 4.

33 É. Balibar, “‘Possessive Individualism’ Reversed...”, p. 303.

34 Thus the grass my horse has bit; the turfs my servant has cut; and the ore I have digged in any place, where I have a right to them in common with others, become my *property* (...). The *labour* that was mine, removing them out of that common state they were in, hath fixed my *property* in them” (J. Locke, *Second Treatise...*, §28, pp. 19-20 [emphases in original]). C.B. Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism...*, pp. 215-216; id., “Locke on Capitalist Appropriation”, *Western Political Quarterly*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (March 1954).

35 J. Locke, *Second Treatise...*, §27, p. 19 (emphases in original).

36 É. Balibar, “‘Possessive Individualism’ Reversed...”, pp. 303-304.

37 J. Locke, *Second Treatise...*, §27, p. 19.

any form (slavery) and the discourse of power – the power of property and ownership³⁸.

Only on such a horizon as the one sketched above it is possible to introduce to Locke's construction the issue which he was supposed to start his argument (cornerstone of the liberal tradition) with: an attempt to deal with a tension between "natural sociability" (or natural selfishness) and "artificial community". The selfish individual has natural disposition and tendency to become a member of the "artificial", commercial, market community. Such inclinations become apparent in the case of labor-relations (with labor defined as a relationship of the individual to this what is external to her or him, which therefore is common to all individuals) leading to appropriation (self-ownership). Community is subject to deconstruction only to be rebuilt soon afterward thanks to the individuals's "self-own-ownership". The individual establishes, constitutes the community in order to create herself/himself: the privatization of nature is accompanied by its socialization, and by socialization of the self-possessive individual³⁹.

Summary: C.B. Macpherson and neoliberal anti-democracy

According to the initial stipulation, current paper cannot offer any definite conclusion, its summary also must necessarily be modest and incomplete. The question that prompted me to make the above inquiry concerned the importance of critical reflection in the tradition of social and political thought in shaping the world of human interactions, depending to a large extent on our choices. Unfortunately, at the moment I do not find any argument that would lead me to abandon my main gloomy assumption – the one suggesting that the current fight for social peace, equality and democratic liberties, carried out by many critics around the world (sometimes successfully), is in some way still dependent on the model of possessive individualism, rather than being an attempt to question and transcend it. "Metaphysical subtleties" and "theological niceties" observed by Marx who was describing fetishistic nature of production and reproduction of capital⁴⁰ are a consequence of, among other things, the fact that it can take on many different forms: commodity, credit, work as well as – as we should add in the 21st century, the age of neoliberalism and precarity induced by flexibility in the production processes – knowledge, information, company logo, one's own image, critical even (especially critical?) for the unemployed "working" in a "enterprise" space prepared for them by the contemporary "anti-state", "anti-

38 É. Balibar, "'Possessive Individualism' Reversed...", p. 303. C.B. Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism...*, pp. 219-220. See also: note 29 above. In another place of his work Locke argues: "But there is another sort of servants, which by a peculiar name we call slaves, who being captives taken in a just war, are by the right of nature subjected to the absolute dominion and arbitrary power of their masters. These men having, as I say, forfeited their lives, and with it their liberties, and lost their estates; and being in the state of slavery, not capable of any property, cannot in that state be considered as any part of civil society; the chief end whereof is the preservation of property" (Ibid., §85). But the difficulties of relations between freedom, power and property are not limited to the special status of prisoners in just wars. There has been a large and growing literature on relations between Locke and slavery (in the context of his personal, business involvement in the trans-Atlantic slave-trade). See for example: Charles W. Mills, *The Racial Contract*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997; James Tully, *Strange Multiplicity: Constitutionalism in an Age of Diversity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995; Barbara Arneil, *John Locke and America: The Defence of English Colonialism*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996; Uday Singh Mehta, *Liberalism and Empire: A Study in Nineteenth-Century British Liberal Thought*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999; Duncan Ivison, *Postcolonial Liberalism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002; Sankar Muthu, *Enlightenment Against Empire*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003; David Armitage, *The Ideological Origins of the British Empire*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004; Jennifer Pitts, *A Turn to Empire: The Rise of Imperial Liberalism in Britain and France*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005; Carole Pateman, Charles W. Mills, *Contract and Domination*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007; Sankar Muthu (ed.), *Empire and Modern Political Thought*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012; David Armitage, "John Locke, Carolina, and the Two Treatises of Government", *Political Theory*, Vol. 32, No. 5 (October 2004); id., *Foundations of Modern International Thought*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013 (especially ch. 7). Frank Cunningham ("Democratic Theory and Racist Ontology", *Social Identities*, Vol. 6, No. 4 [December 2000], pp. 472-473) notes: "Locke argued that slavery is justified when people have forfeited their own lives 'by some act that deserves death', which may, as Locke elsewhere noted, include the 'act' of Negroes being taken in wars (presumably of the slave raids) in Africa (...). Despite a disclaimer by Locke in this section of the *Treatise* that people cannot transfer power over their own lives to others, I believe that this argument only makes sense on the assumption that the slaves tacitly agree to slavery when they allow themselves to be taken captive rather than to die in battle or, as Locke explicitly notes, by refraining from suicide once made captive. Slavery, on this view would not be in contradiction to self-ownership but a limiting case of the transfer of powers justified by it". Another Locke researcher develops and expands Macpherson's observations on this subject: „Locke saw the natural condition of humanity to be one of war. As Richard Cox pointed out, every assertion he made in chapter 2 of *The Second Treatise* about the state of nature being peaceful and law-abiding was contradicted and superseded in chapters 9 and 11. Brough Macpherson thought the tension between the peaceful and warlike states of nature could be seen as a class war, harmony amongst the rational and industrious class and war against the idle and quarrelsome. Macpherson's Locke was rather Eurocentric, and tends to ignore Locke's participation in the Royal Africa Company and in settlements in America. The function of war is to acquire slaves and land. Slaves are captives taken in a just war, and only Machiavelli was as indifferent as Locke to the distinction between just and unjust wars" (Edward Andrew, „Locke on War and Taxes", CPSA, Annual Conference, 2012 [<http://www.cpsa-acsp.ca/papers-2012/Andrew.pdf>] [last access: 29.11.2014]).

39 É. Balibar, "'Possessive Individualism' Reversed...", p. 304-305.

40 Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, Vol. 1, *The Process of Capitalist Production*, tr. B. Fowkes, London: Penguin Books/New Left Review, p. 163.

political”, anti-social (without parentheses) capitalism (writing CVs and cover letters is one of the most famous nowadays “arts and parts” of marketing mastery)⁴¹. Therefore the “monetarist values” seem to be professed and practiced (in the form of “cultural sediment”, unconsciously – as argued by Parsons-Geertz)⁴², even by such “antisystemic” and “subversive” “saboteurs” as spokesmen and representatives of the open source movement, preaching about the need to abolish the property rights to intellectual works (first of all computer software and applications for the Internet and electronic devices), in the name of their own freedom and self-autonomy (integrity of individual-person)⁴³. Ultimately, freedom, emancipation, development and welfare – principal goals of most critical theories (and their subsequent, insinuate practice) which we study – turn out inconceivable without invocation of magic formula: individual (human person) = liberty = possession (life).

Perhaps just in this context it is worth one more time to refer to Macpherson’s work. Let us recapitulate and rearticulate his contribution to democratic theory in the light of current ambivalences of critical theories in dealing with the phenomenon of neoliberalism. I would like to claim that in his historical analyses of modern political thought he identified and tracked down three main components of overwhelming (also for critical, radical democrats) neoliberal logic⁴⁴:

- Thanks to his studies of Hobbes’s political doctrine he grasped the essence, the very core of power. Power means opportunity and ability to influence, subordinate and subjugate other people – politically, economically, but also socially, culturally, intellectually etc. Real power means the surplus of power. It produces a state of constant struggle, of war of all against all – both in the state of nature and in civil society. This explanation on one hand predates and announces (historically) and on the other confirms (theoretically, structurally-systematically) neoliberal idea of “coexistence in disequilibrium” (because of dynamic processes, fluctuations and business cycles linked to competitive market economy and entrepreneurial innovations, which – as it was maintained by Joseph Schumpeter – are a guarantee of growth)⁴⁵.

- Sovereignty of capital. This idea is a result of Macpherson’s interpretation of Locke’s political and economic theory, highlighted by Balibar’s intervention into the possessive individualism paradigm (and its inherent inconsistencies). It claims that what is really free is the property, not the owner. Autonomization, “liberation” of capital is a part of the process of separation of economy and domains of the political and the social (and the cultural) – famously (and already canonically) identified and analyzed by – among others – Karl Polanyi and Immanuel Wallerstein (with recent important complements and sometimes corrections by Giovanni Arrighi and Saskia Sassen)⁴⁶.

- Moral and theological dimension of neoliberalism. One of the most elusive – but at the same time deepest and the most far-reaching – aspects of analyses provided by Macpherson, linked with them only indirectly (as a form of critique of the possessive individualism model, developed chiefly by Jeremy Waldron). According to this idea tension between ownership and self-ownership on one hand and alienation from the products of one’s labor – on the other – can be removed only if we realize that it refers to the normative dimension of individual responsibility, expressed in the Lockean idea of the general duty of preservation of mankind. As a duty of productivity, creativity and innovation it is linked to the “Schumpeterian dimension” of neoliberalism:

“God has commanded us to work hard and subdue the earth, making it bring forth just as much plenty

41 Paul du Gay, “Representing Globalization: Notes on the Discursive Orderings of Economic Life”, in: P. Gilroy, L. Grossberg, A. McRobbie (eds.), *Without Guarantees: In Honour of Stuart Hall*, London: Verso 2000; Nancy Ettliger, “The Openness Paradigm”, *New Left Review*, No. 89 (September-October 2014).

42 Adam Kuper, *Culture: The Anthropologists’ Account*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999, especially ch. 2-3; Jack Goody, *Capitalism and Modernity: The Great Debate*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2004, especially ch. 1.

43 Rosemary J. Coombe, Andrew Herman, “Rhetorical Virtues: Property, Speech, and the Commons on the World-Wide Web”, *Anthropological Quarterly*, Vol. 77, No. 3 (Summer 2004).

44 Difficulties with providing definition of neoliberalism can be regarded as one more reason of its pervasive ambivalence (and its magnetism, not only in the case of its acolytes; see for example: Terry Flew, “Michel Foucault’s *The Birth of Biopolitics* and contemporary neo-liberalism debates”, *Thesis Eleven*, Vol. 108, No. 1 [February 2012]). The terms “neoliberal”, “neoliberalism” are used commonly in a polemical – sometimes only loose and journalistic – fashion (two of the most prominent examples are: David Harvey’s *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005] and a collection *Neoliberalism: A Critical Reader* edited by Alfredo Saad-Filho and Deborah Johnston [London: Pluto Press, 2005]). However there are serious attempts to describe this phenomenon also in an analytical, objective manner (see for example: Angus Burgin, *The Great Persuasion: Reinventing Free Markets since the Depression*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2012; Pierre Dardot, Christian Laval, *The New Way of the World: On Neoliberal Society*, London: Verso, 2014).

45 See for example: Peter Lewin, *Capital in Disequilibrium: The Role of Capital in a Changing World*, Auburn: Ludwig von Mises Institute, 2011. See also: C.B. Macpherson, *The Life and Times of Liberal Democracy*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977, pp. 77-92 (Macpherson examines analogies and significance of Schumpeter’s economic model for theories of democracy).

46 See discussion of the “Polanyian Model” in: Nancy Fraser, “A Triple Movement? Parsing the Politics of Crisis after Polanyi”, *New Left Review*, No. 81 (May-June 2013); ead, “Behind Marx’s Hidden Abode: For an Expanded Conception of Capitalism”, *New Left Review*, No. 86 (March-April 2014).

and enabling it to sustain just as many people as it possibly can. “[T]he great Design of God, Increase and Multiply”⁴⁷ and “the main intention of Nature, which willeth the increase of Mankind”⁴⁸ are what drive Locke’s sense of the importance of labor and cultivation”⁴⁹.

“Economic theology” of neoliberalism can be also analyzed in the context of multilevel, mutual “intrusions” between the economical and the religious – two main ontological dimensions of contemporary politics⁵⁰.

After enumerating significance of C.B. Macpherson investigations into the history of political ideas for current perplexities of neoliberalism its would be worthy to quote – as the final remark in this paper – a fragment of an article about contributions to critical theory of democracy from both author of *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism* and one of the main founders of anti-subjectivist (anti-possessive-individualist? – this question must remain without answer) approach in contemporary social and political philosophy, with whom we have begun above reflections, Jürgen Habermas:

“A critical theory of democracy should not only illuminate the unavoidable connection of the economic to the political, of the structures of capitalism as a system of social power to formal political institutions, a connection neoliberal discourse strives to sever, deny, or cover over. It must also retrieve the normative core of democracy and its links with solidarity among agents bound together in a common situation shaped by and through processes of mutual recognition and mutual understanding. This retrieval involves the ways in which radically reformed social institutions both make possible and arise from the transformative, developmental possibilities that individuals must be assumed to possess if the aspirations associated with alternatives to neoliberal politics are to be plausible. At the heart of these aspirations, and therefore a developmental model of democracy, is a conception of freedom in the tradition of positive or developmental liberty. This conception combines self-realization and self-determination – that is, a ‘classical’ understanding of positive liberty associated with the ideas of Macpherson – with communicative freedom, where this combination informs a robust conception of agency as intersubjective and interactive, a theme central to Habermas’s work. This is an account of freedom that neoliberalism misses”⁵¹.

47 John Locke, “First Treatise of Government”, in: id., *Two Treatises of Government*, ed. P. Laslett, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), §41, p. 169.

48 Ibid., §59, p. 183.

49 Jeremy Waldron, *God, Locke, and Equality: Christian Foundations in Locke’s Political Thought*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002, pp. 168-169.

50 William Connolly, *Capitalism and Christianity, American Style*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2008; id., *A World of Becoming*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2010 (ch. 3 and 5).

51 Brian Caterino, Phillip Hansen, „Macpherson, Habermas, and the Demands of Democratic Theory”, *Studies in Political Economy*, no. 83 (Spring 2009), pp. 90-91.