

19.2 Is there only one kind of “Democracy”?

Source: <https://www.cbc.ca/radio/ideas/the-1964-cbc-massey-lectures-the-real-world-of-democracy-1.2946802>

Background: During the Cold War, countries aligned with the United States and the Soviet Union debated rival ideas about democracy drawn from different traditions in the “West,” the Communist bloc nations, and the unaligned Third World. These excerpts are taken from the 1964 Massey Lectures for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. C. B. Macpherson was a political theorist at the University of Toronto.

Questions

1. “Liberal democracy” is the form of government and society predominant in the West including the United States. It couples an electoral process and limits on state authority with defined rights for individuals and groups. However, according to Macpherson, liberal democracy is also a “system of power . . . exerted by the state over individuals and groups” and it “exists to uphold and enforce a certain kind of society.” Do you accept this description of “liberal democracy”? Explain.
2. In section B, Macpherson argues that non-liberal systems that ensure an economic standard for citizens have a right to call themselves “democracies” although they may not provide the basic freedoms associated with democracy in the United States. Do you agree? Explain.
3. In section D, Macpherson claims “liberal-democracy and capitalism go together.” In your opinion, what are the implications of that statement?
4. Macpherson wrote in the 1960s when Soviet-style Communism competed with Western liberalism and capitalism for influence with and as a model for unaligned nations. Soviet-style Communism was largely discredited by the collapse of the Soviet Union between 1989 and 1993. In your opinion, are Macpherson’s ideas about democracy valid?

“The Real World of Democracy”

A. “It is clear that the real world of democracy has changed. And it is probable that it will go on changing. We in the West are gradually realizing that the West no longer has a monopoly on civilization or world leadership. Old habits of thought diehard. It has not been easy to give up the assumption that the future was bound to go our way . . . Liberal-democratic nations can no longer expect to run the world, nor can they expect that the world will run to them.”

B. “Democracy is not properly to be equated with our unique Western liberal-democracy, but that the clearly non-liberal systems which prevail in the Soviet countries, and the somewhat different non-liberal systems of most of the underdeveloped countries of Asia and Africa, have a genuine historical claim to the title of democracy....

C. “Our liberal-democracy, like any other system, is a system of power . . . It is a system by which people can be governed, that is, made to do things they would not otherwise do, and made to refrain from doing things they otherwise might do. Democracy as a system of government is, then, a system by which power is exerted by the state over individuals and groups within it. But more than that, a democratic government, like any other, exists to uphold and enforce a certain kind of society, a certain set of relations between individuals, a certain set of rights and claims that people have on each other both directly, and indirectly through their rights to property. These relations themselves are relations of power.”

D. “Liberal-democracy and capitalism go together. Liberal-democracy is found only in countries whose economic system is wholly or predominantly that of capitalist enterprise.”