

Harold Laski (1893–1950): political theorist of a world in crisis

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Harold Laski was a writer who exercised enormous influence in the turbulent environment of the early to mid-twentieth century. Though normally regarded as a political theorist, Laski frequently wrote on the problems of international politics. Certainly, his work was fully engaged with world issues in the inter-war and post-war periods. Like many critical and idealist thinkers of the time, he initially hoped that the League of Nations would usher in a new, international democratic system. However his early hopes gave way to a more pessimistic (and more radical) perspective, and from the late 1920s onwards he believed that the only way of transcending the existing system of sovereign states was by moving beyond capitalism. Combining a critique of both the Westphalian system and the market which he assumed underpinned it, Laski raised major questions—relevant to his own times and to ours too. Mainly ignored since his death, it is perhaps time that the work of this unduly neglected figure should be revisited.

Laski was born in Manchester in 1893 to a wealthy Jewish family and grew up as a child of active Liberal parents. As a pupil at the Manchester Grammar School, his socialist convictions were shaped by the egalitarian High Master—John Louis Paton. During his youth Laski also went on to repudiate Judaism, claiming that reason prevented him from believing in God. In 1911, at the age of eighteen, he alienated himself from his family by marrying Frida Kerry—a gentile nine years his senior whose feminist ideas he embraced. Laski commenced his studies at Oxford that year but achieved disappointing results in the sciences. This prompted him to switch to History—in which he excelled. As a student he supported the radical guild socialist movement and was active in the campaign for women's suffrage. After graduating with a First in 1914, he took up an invitation from George Lansbury to write editorials for the *Daily Herald*.

At the outbreak of the First World War Laski tried to enlist for military service; being ruled unfit he decided however to accept a position at McGill University in Montreal. Two years later he met and impressed the future US Supreme Court judge, Felix Frankfurter, at this time a professor of Law at Harvard. At the beginning of a long-standing friendship, Frankfurter successfully campaigned for Laski to be appointed to a position at Harvard where he remained until his return to England. In 1916 Frankfurter also introduced him to the conservative Justice Holmes of the Supreme Court. The two formed an unlikely friendship and remained close until the death of Holmes in 1935.

It was during his time in the United States that Laski developed his critique of state sovereignty. According to the young scholar the idea was, in essence, a fiction whose primary purpose was to legitimate the power of vested interests by depicting a false national unity. Considerable power, he argued, should be devolved to functional and regional associations. As he acknowledged, these ideas were influenced by F. W. Maitland and J. N. Figgis, who had earlier developed the English pluralist doctrine. Another source of influence was the American pragmatic thinker John Dewey, with whom he came into contact. Significantly in his first book *Studies in the Problem of Sovereignty*, Laski claimed that his pluralism was ‘what Professor Dewey calls “consistently experimentalist” in form and content’.

But Laski was no ivory tower academic, and in 1919 came out openly in support of the Boston police strike, at a time when the president of Harvard was offering the services of the University to the city. President Lowell faced threats from alumni to withhold their donations unless Laski was dismissed; and while refusing to do so on the grounds of academic freedom, he told Laski to make no more controversial statements nor to expect promotion. Laski by this time was becoming increasingly disillusioned with America anyway, and in 1920 decided to return to England—after having accepted a post at the London School of Economics.

This was a particularly prolific period for Laski and in 1921 he published a collection of his early essays: *The Foundations of Sovereignty and Other Essays*. Though still critical of the state, as he became more active in the Labour Party and the Fabian Society, he began to modify his views. But he was never a revolutionary, fearing that revolution would only lead to dictatorship. Significantly perhaps he was quite close to the liberal Alfred Zimmern who had recently been appointed to the first Chair of International Relations in the University of Aberystwyth. Indeed, after having visited the cosmopolitan Zimmern (who according to Laski must have been something of a ‘mystery’ to the inhabitants of the small Welsh town) he wrote to Holmes that he found himself ‘nine times out of ten in close agreement’ with the ideas of the great classicist. ‘Together’, he went on, ‘we dismissed the League of Nations’ and ‘agreed that every social panacea is the prelude to social disillusion’.

Laski’s *A Grammar of Politics* (published in 1925) witnessed a marked shift in his thought: in this, one of his more influential works, he advocated a powerful role for an enabling state under conditions of democracy. On global issues he argued that a ‘new political philosophy’ was ‘necessary’ for ‘a new world’ turned upside down by war, revolution and advances in science. In the new world order—he opined—the nation-state was fast losing its ability to act independently. Anticipating later theories of globalization he claimed that the whole world was fast being reduced politically and economically to ‘the unity of interdependence’. He used a striking image to demonstrate his point. The ‘politicians of Tokyo’ he noted ‘make social decisions not less momentous for New York than those of Chicago or Washington’. The logical political corollary was that international well-being required common agreement through international government. States, he believed, should be subordinate to ‘an authority in which each may have a voice, but in which, also, that voice is never the self-determined source of decision’. Whatever form a decentralised world-state might take there would be ‘no room for separate sovereignties’.

Given his outlook, it was hardly surprising that Laski began to adopt a more positive attitude towards the League of Nations. The League he now felt constituted a major step forward in international relations. In fact, for a while, he became quite

positively inclined towards the League (though was not unaware of the organization's deficiencies). For one so acute it is perhaps strange to read now his erroneous prediction that the character of the League would 'become increasingly obvious as its functioning becomes more adequate'. Moreover, while believing that it was most unlikely that the League would 'become a State in the normal sense of the word', he believed—along with many others at the time—that it could be a source of principle, propounding or accepting solutions to be administered by other bodies, 'the ultimate reserve force in society from which, in the last resort, definite action originates'.

In 1926 Laski was appointed to the influential Chair of Government at the LSE—a post he would hold for the rest of his life. 1926 more generally represented a cross-roads in Laski's life. It was about this time for instance that he became more critical of the League of Nations. This coincided with a visit he undertook to Geneva to meet Zimmern, now a most ardent defender of the organization. 'To a sceptic', he informed Holmes, Zimmern's crusade for the League 'does not help discussion'. In a lecture he delivered during the trip, Laski expressed his dissatisfaction. The League he felt was incapable of making the necessary common decisions on the basis of a rational assessment of the facts. What was required above all was greater courage on the part of the League itself. To function effectively it also had to make greater provision for the weaker states and extend more power to the International Court to defend the individual against the state. But Laski did not give up on the League entirely, and clung to the remote hope that it might still fulfil its promise. However, this could only happen if individual nation-states would allow it to encroach on their authority. If nation-states were left to act in ways they deemed fit, conflict was inevitable. 'We have', he went on, 'to find the concepts of cosmopolitan thinking as the very basis of security for civilized existence', a line he later developed further in his lecture *Nationalism and the Future of Civilization*.

The year 1926 also saw a marked shift in Laski's political views. The immediate reason for this was the British General Strike in 1926 and its punitive aftermath. Indeed, within a couple of years he was beginning to wonder whether any elected government would be allowed to challenge the basic interests of the capitalist class. This leftward evolution in his thought was later accelerated by the collapse of the Labour Government in Britain in 1931. But in spite of this, and Laski's more sympathetic attitude towards Marxism (of which he had been quite critical in the early 1920s), he still supported the idea of peaceful rather than violent change. In the case of Russia however he made an exception, and accepted that the Bolsheviks had probably had no alternative but to act in the way they did in 1917. No simple-minded apologist for the Soviet system, he nonetheless lavished praise on what he saw as Soviet achievements; he also predicted (rather naively) that the vast socio-economic changes then being experienced in the USSR would, in time, lead to freedom.

If Laski was ambiguous about Stalinism (but expected the Soviet dictatorship to be temporary) he was unreserved in his opposition to fascism; and like many at the time, saw a very real connection between the fascist phenomenon and the economic crisis. In his preface to the third edition of *A Grammar of Politics* in 1934 he claimed that fascism was 'simply the expedient adopted by capitalism in distress to defeat the democratic foundation with which it could be successfully linked in its period of expansion'. Capitalism and democracy, he now concluded, were becoming increasingly incompatible. This theme was developed at length in several of his more

popular volumes: *Democracy in Crisis*; *The State in Theory and Practice*; *The Rise of European Liberalism*; and *Parliamentary Government in England*. His work at this stage betrayed the gloom of a writer who while passionately committed to democracy, was afraid that capitalist reaction to a socialist parliamentary victory would provoke revolutionary violence—a violence he not only deplored but felt had little chance of success.

Opposition to violent change in Britain in large part explains why Laski remained within the Labour Party. The mission he thought was not to join or create something else, but shift the party leftwards. With this in mind in 1932 he helped establish the Socialist League, part of whose larger purpose was to persuade the leadership to adopt a more radical programme. A keen supporter of left unity, he also sought to ally Labour with the Communist Party. Though unsuccessful in this particular venture, he did help establish the popular Left Book Club in 1936.

If Laski's support for the politics of the Popular Front won him as many enemies as it did friends, so too did his increasingly radical views on international affairs. Even so, in 1933, Leonard Woolf decided to include Laski's essay 'The Economic Foundations of Peace' in a collection entitled *The Intelligent Man's Way to Prevent War*. While Woolf claimed that the various contributors to the book (Norman Angell, Viscount Cecil and Gilbert Murray) were amongst some of the most prominent men of their generation, he reserved a special mention for Laski. Laski's contribution he described as being the most controversial, though added for good measure that its radical conclusions were not necessarily shared by all of the other authors. In his essay Laski restated what he had said, and would say many times again in his life: that the prospects for fundamental international reform were bleak without radical measures to transcend capitalism; and that a new world order could not be built until the configuration of economic power had been transformed. Nor could the League do much to change things either. It was a noble idea perhaps, but as an organization was unable to persuade states to surrender their sovereignty. The whole dynamic of world politics he concluded was basically 'fatal to the creative functioning of the League of Nations'.

While Laski assumed (and wrote in *The State in Theory and Practice* in 1935) that true international co-operation required the establishment of a society of socialist states, he did not believe that all international problems would disappear as a result of the death of capitalism. In the future world, war might still be waged. As he noted in *The Economic Foundations of Peace*, socialism by itself would not eradicate the nation state as the basic unit of political order. Nevertheless, under socialism it was at least possible to establish the conditions of peace: capitalism as a system made co-operation impossible and it was naïve to think otherwise. Moreover those like Zimmern who assumed that an organization like the League could transcend the logic of global conflict were simply tilting at windmills. As he argued in *The State in Theory and Practice*, states were bound to promote the interests of the dominant class, and until there was a fundamental change at the level of class relations international conflict, leading to war, was almost inevitable.

The relationship between war and economics stood at the heart of one of the great debates in which Laski now became embroiled. According to Laski capitalism led to expansion and expansion to war. Many agreed with him. Many of course did not, and in a rerun of the old pre-war battle between Brailsford and Norman Angell, Laski and other British intellectuals once again became involved in a bitter debate

about the precise relationship between capitalism and international relations. Initially taking place in the letters pages of the *New Statesman and Nation*, the discussion was subsequently published in booklet form in 1935 under the none-too-original title: *Does Capitalism Cause War?* Proving the truth of the old adage that there was nothing fundamentally new under the sun, Brailsford on the one side answered in the positive, while Angell restated his old ‘interdependence’ thesis that war was bad for business—a view with which Laski strongly disagreed. In the end, the only true guarantee of peace he believed lay ‘through the reconstruction of the class relations of modern society’. This alone ‘makes possible the abandonment of sovereignty in that form which strikes at the root of peace’. As he noted in an appendix added to the 1939 reprint of *Nationalism and the Future of Civilization* (published in his book *The Danger of Being a Gentleman and Other Essays*), the ‘technical pivot upon which our power to end aggression turns . . . is the abolition of sovereignty’. But this was not enough in his view. To build a ‘new world order’ in the complete sense, it was vital to reconfigure the internal order of each state as well as the boundaries between them. Only then could humanity look forward to genuine security.

The coming of war not only confirmed Laski’s analysis (at least to his own satisfaction) but also raised his hopes; and like others at the time he not only hoped that the struggle against fascism would lead to radical reform at home, but to a major restructuring of the international order as well. He was especially vocal in his support for Roosevelt’s ‘Four Freedoms’ whose impact both upon himself and the Labour Party was considerable. Though still critical of the United States, he admired Roosevelt considerably. Indeed, even in the 1930s—when he saw little hope for fundamental socio-economic reform in capitalist society—he applauded the President’s attempt to regulate capitalism through the New Deal. A close student of American politics, he was sensitive to the fact that the checks and balances contained within the Constitution made it very difficult for politicians to encroach on the interests of business. Nevertheless, he believed that a strong democratically elected President, such as Roosevelt, could help reduce the power of capital.

In spite of his admiration for Roosevelt, Laski wanted to deepen and extend the New Deal; and in his *The Old World and the New Society* argued that Roosevelt’s Four Freedoms could only be realised within the framework of a new society. He set out these views in two important publications: *The Machinery of International Relief* and *Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time*—both published in 1943. The central claim in *Reflections* was that the Four Freedoms could only be implemented in a planned society where there was neither unemployment nor poverty. Laski was also sensitive to the world beyond Europe and argued that it was necessary to raise the standards of life in the poorest areas of the world by expanding effective demand. The objectives of the United Nations in war and peace, he concluded, were ‘incompatible with the maintenance of democracy on a capitalist foundation’.

Laski was much less clear about the institutional framework needed to create a new international order. Like a number of thinkers at the time (Mitrany, Carr and Woolf) Laski was not attracted to federal solutions; and in his book *Where Do We Go from Here* (1940) advocated the pooling of sovereignties on a socialist basis. He was uncertain though whether this should occur within the framework of an organisation such as the League of Nations, by a linked series of regional systems of states, or by the organisation of such a series within the world-wide body. It seems,

he suggested, 'that the future form of world government is likely to be more complex than the model of the League led us to imagine'. However, he was clear about one thing: there could be no return to the anarchy of the inter-war system, and if the war served any purpose it was to make sure that this never happened.

Laski's argument that major reforms should be implemented before victory was rejected by the Labour leadership, fearful that any move in that direction would lead to the destruction of the war-time coalition. Laski made himself even more unpopular by suggesting that if the Labour leader—Clement Attlee—attended the Potsdam conference, he should do so as observer only; moreover that the party as a whole should not be committed to any decision made there. Laski however continued to support the party and worked hard for its two victories in 1945 and 1950. He strongly supported the decision to agree to India's independence, and more generally endorsed progressive measures at home. But he was never satisfied with the pace of reform. In *Trade Unions in the New Society* (1949) he commended the party's nationalisation of key industries and services, the introduction of the National Health Service, the system of social insurance, its substantial housing programme, reduction in the powers of the House of Lords and the granting of independence to a number of colonies. But he warned that unless capitalism was transcended, a socialist government would be 'always walking upon a razor's edge': the government would be unable to use its coercive power 'in such a way as to outrage the vested interests'.

It was not Laski's commitment to socialism, however, but his widely publicised—and unsuccessful—libel action against several newspapers that damaged his reputation immediately after the war. Accused by a number of his political enemies of having advocated 'violent revolution' during the 1945 election campaign, he took his accusers to court, justifiably complaining that he had argued for no such thing. Unfortunately Laski was prevented from clarifying his position and he lost the case. And though the lawyer for the defence—Sir Patrick Hastings—later agreed that Laski had meant something different to that of which he had been accused, the trial still did him some damage. Things were only made worse by a visit he made to the Soviet Union on behalf of the Labour Party in 1946. In an increasingly tense world, this 'goodwill' trip was readily seized upon by his detractors.

The post-war years were hugely disappointing ones for Laski. He was especially critical of the new United Nations. Instead of challenging the existing configurations of power within and between states, the UN, he argued, only confirmed both. 'We cannot rest content', he stressed in *The Crisis in Our Civilisation* 'until we have a genuine world government expressing, through the direct choice of peoples, in a parliament responsible to them, the will of the common folk, instead of being dependent, like the United Nations, upon the sovereign wills of nation states which express, in all vital matters, the purposes of their ruling classes and subordinate to those purposes the interests of the common peoples'. Laski was equally critical of the new post-war order. In his view the threat to world peace had merely assumed a new form in the shape of a Cold War between the two superpowers. The expression in the first instance of propaganda designed for purposes of domestic consumption, the conflict was made worse in his view 'by long memories of past threats and mutual suspicions'. The Labour government, he advised, should not get drawn into this maelstrom, but rather adopt a balanced approach in its relations with the US and the Soviet Union. His plea fell on deaf ears.

Until his death in March 1950 Laski continued to insist that the post-war international settlement could bring neither security nor freedom to the peoples of the world. ‘If we assume’, he argued in 1948, ‘that the future of liberty depends upon the realisation of those Four Freedoms upon which President Roosevelt laid such eloquent emphasis, there is little reason to feel any certainty that the future of liberty is secure. Grave economic crisis over most of the world makes freedom from want an ideal that is bound to remain an empty one for long years to come. There can be no freedom from fear while international rivalry is so tense, above all when one, though only one, of the new weapons that may be used if that rivalry is allowed to drift to war, is the atomic bomb’. Two years later, in his final (unfinished) manuscript *The Dilemma of Our Times* he made much the same point. Victory could not be devoted to great ends he observed whilst ‘two great combinations of nation-states’ opposed one another in bitter ideological and military rivalry.

As much a political activist as public intellectual, Laski was an immensely influential figure in his own lifetime. A force to be reckoned with inside the Labour Party, Laski was also a vital force at the LSE where he shaped the views of hundreds of students including C.B. Macpherson, Ralph Miliband and John Saville. In spite of this, Laski’s work soon slipped into obscurity. There were several reasons why. One of course was that his particular brand of normative political philosophy fell out of favour in the conservative fifties. In an era when positivism was carrying all before it, academics tended to shun what they termed ‘ideological’ or unscientific thinking—especially the type of thinking associated with the name of Harold Laski. Laski’s views also came under attack from within the Labour Party itself, and when Anthony Crosland wrote in *The Future of Socialism* (1956) that Laski’s political philosophy sounded ‘like an echo from another world’ there were few who jumped to his defence. In the United States the situation was even grimmer. Here Laski was attacked not just for being old hat but as a threat to the national security. It was indeed in America that Herbert Deane shattered Laski’s reputation as a political theorist. Deane’s study, *The Political Ideas of Harold Laski* (published in the mid-1950s) portrayed Laski as an incoherent and contradictory writer; and largely as a result of Deane’s efforts, the conventional assumption was forged that Laski’s work was of little importance.

Laski’s work thus fell by the wayside—many would say justifiably so given his uncompromising socialism and Leninist-style analysis of the relationship between modern capitalism and global war. Yet Laski raised a series of questions—about sovereignty and the ‘Westfailure’ system, about inequality and power, and the nature of global governance—that are just as relevant today as they were back in the inter-war period. Laski might indeed draw some satisfaction from the fact that with the Cold War now over, a new generation of students are once again looking at the same sort of issues he was examining fifty years earlier. The possibility that they might not come up with identical answers is perhaps less important than that they are once again asking similar questions.

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