

## **Harold Laski:**

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### **An Old Reasoner ?**

One of the worst features of the biblical approach to socialist theory, which was characteristic of orthodox Marxism in the 30's and 40's, was the belittlement of all contributions to social science which did not stem from the "four great teachers." It was of course true that other minor figures were officially blessed but if their ideas were unorthodox, as in the case of Rosa Luxemburg, canonisation could be combined with the partial or total neglect of their actual writings. Or more commonly, unorthodox socialist ideas and their authors were summarily dismissed as "bourgeois-liberal" or "social democratic" which was usually held to be sufficient to damn them. This approach was generally acceptable to Communists because on the one hand the intellectual achievement of Marx, Engels and Lenin was indeed very considerable by any standard, and on the other hand there were in fact liberals and even reactionaries who remained nominally "Marxists" in the 20's. The policies of the German Social Democratic Party, and in particular of such leaders as Noske and Ebert convincingly demonstrated that the label "socialist" or "Marxist" on a party or a leader had no necessary relevance to the mixture inside. Lenin's own indignant polemics against the leaders of the Second International for their behaviour during the first world war set the general tone for the treatment of non-Communist socialists in the 1920's. But what in Lenin's work was mainly principled criticism, however strong the invective, tended more and more to degenerate with his successors into a habit of unprincipled denunciation of all unorthodox ideas, including those of Communists not in agreement with the current line of the C.C. of the C.P.S.U. on any particular question, and those of any left wing socialists who criticised various aspects of Communist policy in the 1930's. The fact that events frequently vindicated the critics did little to diminish the vehemence with which they were denounced. This ingrained habit of vilification contributed in no small measure to the ossification of orthodox marxism and to the estrangement of Communists from many potential allies in their struggle for Socialism.

Among the victims of this state of affairs was Harold J. Laski who incurred the wrath of the orthodox on many occasions. Let it first of all be admitted that like all human beings, including the "four great teachers" Harold Laski had his share of human weaknesses. The Pharisees had plenty to get their teeth into. It is not the purpose of this article to set up a new shrine for eager

worshippers who wish to substitute a new idol for one recently broken. Let it therefore be said at the outset that Laski was fond of embroidering a story, particularly a story which concerned his own relationship with statesmen, and that this habit, born partly of intellectual vanity, - led him on several occasions to behaviour which it would be difficult not to characterise as dishonest. The Beaverbrook press picture of Laski as the string-puller-in-chief behind the scenes in the Labour Party would have found some confirmation from Laski's own anecdotes but very little in reality. His mis-use of a passage from one of Dimitrov's speeches in 1946 as part of a campaign against unity with Communists ill-became one who frequently and justifiably criticised the dishonesty of the polemics of some Communist leaders (it should however be said that events partly justified Laski's prediction of the fate of East European Socialist leaders). Laski's habit of not checking over an article or even a book once he had written it was conducive to a high output but not to the avoidance of such faults as repetitiveness and minor inconsistencies in the text. His detractors, on the right, and on the left, have made the most of these and other faults, but it is my contention that despite his weaknesses Harold Laski shed more light on the relationship between socialism and liberty than any other socialist writer, and that almost alone among British Labour and Communist leaders he consistently made a balanced rational assessment of the Russian Revolution and its significance for this country and the world.

These are large claims and it would take a book rather than a short article to vindicate them. Here I intend only to initiate discussion but if this article succeeds in reawakening interest in Laski's ideas and stimulates renewed study of his major books and pamphlets then it will have fulfilled its purpose.

Laski's interpretation of the British Constitution was based upon a profound knowledge<sup>1</sup> of the history of political institutions and political ideas. He was fond of giving the impression that there was scarcely anything which he had not read but it was in fact true that he had read and digested far more than most men. In addition, although he was not on quite such intimate terms with all the statesmen of the world as a wide-eyed first year student might have imagined, he did undoubtedly have a very thorough acquaintance with the actual operations of the British system of government at all levels. His active participation in Party politics very much enhanced his perception and deepened his understanding of the processes at work. When, in the early 30's this mass of knowledge and experience was illuminated by Marx's penetrating insight into property relations and class struggles the result was a series of brilliant essays which established his position as the foremost authority on the constitution. Of his books written in this period, the best known are "Democracy in Crisis," "Parlia-

mentary Government in England," "The State in Theory and Practice."

Most other writers since have drawn heavily on his interpretation including his colleagues, Jennings and Greaves who generously acknowledge their debt to him and John Gollan who describes him as "the leading social-democratic authority." The great merit of Laski's analysis compared with any other Marxist work on the British system of government was his complete mastery of the facts. He went far beyond the usual trite generalisation and hackneyed clichés ("the state is the executive committee of the ruling class" etc.) and analysed with a wealth of detail and subtle irony the actual operation of the monarchy, of Parliament, the Cabinet, the Civil Service, the Judiciary and the political parties. His merit compared with most non-Marxist work on the British Constitution was his perception of the influence of class struggles and class interests beneath the outward appearance of legal forms, traditional institutions, customs and conventions.<sup>(1)</sup> But this did not lead him into over-simplification or into dogmatism. At a time when orthodox Communist theory denied the possibility of a non-violent transition to Socialism and both the possibility and the desirability of a "parliamentary road to socialism"<sup>(2)</sup> Laski upheld the possibility and desirability of both, although he was not over-optimistic about either. Whilst Transport House regarded revolution as a plague he consistently pointed out that the peaceful abdication of a propertied class was an event which had never previously occurred in human history and that British insularity was no substitute for scientific thought. It is not surprising that Laski's refusal to make any concessions to dogmatism on either side led his opponents to regard him as "confused" or "eclectic" or as a man who wanted to ride two horses. Thus the Communists tended to regard Laski's "Marxism" as a left pose which disguised the real liberal underneath, while the "Newark Advertiser," the Beaverbrook press, and a large section of right wing opinion regarded him as an advocate of violent revolution sometimes posing as a liberal. He came within a hair's breadth of expulsion from the Labour Party at the time of the Popular Front campaign.

It is not difficult to find differences of emphasis and of substance in Laski's various writings. He himself explains that it was not until the late 20's and early 30's that he came to accept the essential truth of Marx's conception of

(1) Walter Bagshot had this perception too, but he wrote in the days before universal suffrage, at a time when the English upper class made little attempt to disguise their economic and political aims.

(2) "For a Soviet Britain" was the main line of the CPGB until 1935. The "British Road to Socialism" was not published until 1950 (the year in which Laski died).

history, so that it is easy to contrast his writings of the early 20's with those of the 30's. In the 30's, like all other civilised men, he was profoundly perturbed by the rise of fascism in Germany and the sympathetic attitude towards fascism evidenced by men of property here and in other capitalist democracies. Quite naturally and quite properly this influenced his assessment of the perspectives for parliamentary government in Western Europe. The war against Hitler Germany from 1939 to 1945 changed a great many things including the prospects for democracy in capitalist countries. Laski's writings reflected (in the sense that that word may still be used in socialist literature) these changes. In addition, Laski did not always add all the qualifications necessary to his central argument so that those who were not familiar with his position could fairly misjudge him. Thus it has been relatively simple for Laski's critics to play the game of quotation picking in order to try and discredit him. These were the tactics used in the famous libel trial in 1947, and this is also one of the features of a very long boring and superficial American critique of Laski by Herbert A. Deane<sup>(3)</sup>

The subject is a complex one but I believe that the essentials of Laski's position from about 1932 onwards may be summarised as follows:

(1) The apparatus of the state in Britain, America and other capitalist democracies has been largely subordinate to the requirements and values of the owners of capital. Laski did not merely state this thesis but documented it with a wealth of historical evidence and persuasive argument. The key positions in the executive branch of the government and the judiciary are held mainly by persons who are broadly speaking in sympathy with the propertied class. This is not to say that the apparatus can never be used for the benefit of the majority of the population. On the contrary this has frequently been the case sometimes with the consent of the property owners and sometimes in the face of their resistance. But it has not yet been possible to use the machinery of the state to make a fundamental change in property relationships, and the evidence of history is that it will be very difficult to do so. (The achievements of the Labour Government from 1945-50, important as they are, should not be over-estimated in this connection). Nevertheless some of the most important institutions and traditions developed in the popular struggle against feudal privilege and further enlarged by social reforms, can serve the working class in their efforts to transform the relations of production. This applies above all to parliamentary institutions based upon universal suffrage.

(2) Democracy and Capitalism are ultimately incompatible,

(3) "The Political Ideas of Harold J. Laski," Columbia, 1955.

The political tendencies arising from universal suffrage, parliamentary sovereignty, freedom of speech and freedom of association cannot be permanently reconciled with the privilege, wealth and power of a small minority of property owners. It is true that in a capitalist democracy the dice are heavily loaded against the working class, but while concessions, reforms, election stunts, the manipulation of the media of mass propaganda and other devices may postpone the evil day for a long time, they cannot permanently avert it.

(3) In the face of this central contradiction between the institutions and traditions of liberal democracy and the class interests of a small minority, property owners will tend to resort to unconstitutional methods to maintain their power, especially if they feel that there is an imminent and serious threat to their whole way of life. There will be a trend towards fascism in one form or another and this tendency will find support from persons in key positions in the state apparatus and particularly in the armed forces. The Labour movement must be fully alive to this danger.

(4) The strategy of the working class movement in countries such as Britain should be based upon the utilisation of this contradiction (as suggested by Engels in his 1895 Preface to the "Class Struggles in France"). Let the upper class be forced into the position of opposition to democracy and let the working class be the upholder of the Constitution, legality and parliamentary sovereignty. This strategy is desirable both on practical and on ethical grounds, for the alternative — a violent rebellion without a parliamentary majority — would isolate the revolutionaries, entail great sufferings and lead to the loss of civil liberties even in the event of success. A strategy of violent revolution is right and necessary only if the parliamentary path is blocked or non-existent.

(5) The aim of the working class movement should be the preservation of civil liberty even during the accomplishment of the socialist transformation of society. Laski differed from orthodox Communists in believing this to be extremely important for the whole future of civilisation. His knowledge of history had taught him that civil liberties once discarded were never easily regained, that the habit of toleration was a fragile plant easily uprooted, and that methods of repression, violence and regimentation of ideas originally adopted as "emergency measures" tend to become preferred and perpetuate themselves. Every student of Laski's remembers his fondness<sup>1</sup> for Lord Acton's phrase: "Tower corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely." He differed from orthodox social democrats in believing that the preservation of civil liberty, although highly desirable for the reasons given above might prove to be impossible because of the attitude of property owners and the bitterness engendered by acute class

conflicts. He was especially pessimistic, and with good reason, in the 1930's. During and after the war he was a little more optimistic, but even in the case of Britain he did not underestimate the possibility of violent resistance on the part of dispossessed property-owners or those who believed rightly or wrongly that their livelihood was threatened. With Machiavelli he believed that a man would more readily forgive the murder of his father than the loss of his property. Furthermore he recognised that in countries such as Russia which lacked any parliamentary tradition and which had scarcely even enjoyed civil liberties, violence and suppression were quite inevitable, and that the habit of toleration would take time to emerge.

Although he believed that there was only a limited chance of success in averting violent conflicts in Britain and in preserving the essential civil liberties, he nevertheless believed that the attempt was supremely worth while. In this respect Laski was almost unique among Marxist writers of this period. He realised that freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom of association, Habeas Corpus and so on were not simply bourgeois liberties whatsoever their historic origin, but human achievements of the greatest importance for the future of us all. He was never deceived into thinking that these liberties existed in the Soviet Union and he never glossed over their absence. On one occasion he attempted to convince Stalin that Habeas Corpus should be introduced there. He realised much more fully than the Webbs the ugly consequences of the disease of orthodoxy on the intellectual life of any community.<sup>(4)</sup> But he recognised always that practice is better than preaching and that the defence of civil liberties could not be associated with the defence of a dying system. He therefore hoped and worked for a socialist transformation in this country which would not destroy but amplify the tradition of liberty and toleration of unorthodoxy and non-conformism which is the greatest distinctive British contribution to human civilisation. Such an achievement could ensure the preservation of these values and their gradual spread to other socialist countries without their being associated in any way with possible counter-revolution. A socialist transformation in Britain, by diminishing the fear of war, would also help to create that atmosphere of security which is essential to the growth of the habit of toleration in any country.

It may be said that this conception of the aims of the labour movement is now fairly commonplace and would be generally agreed by many British Socialists and Communists. This is partly true and in so far as it is true I think that some of the credit is due to Harold Laski. But I believe that it would be dangerous to overestimate the extent or the depth of the agreement on these

<sup>(4)</sup>See for example his Webb Memorial Lecture on "Soviet Communism"

issues. It is true that the "British Road to Socialism" officially proclaims a parliamentary road to socialism. True also that under the impact of the Khrushchev report the section on civil liberties has been "amended and strengthened." But no one who is acquainted with the views of the leaders of the Communist Party on events in the U.S.S.R. and Eastern Europe can have much faith in the depth of their attachment to civil liberty. Not only did they maintain for 20 years that there were no serious restrictions on civil liberty in the U.S.S.R. despite massive evidence to the contrary but even when the truth was admitted by leaders of the C.P.S.U. themselves they did their utmost to minimise the significance of these admission. And when after their own grudging and belated recognition of these facts there are further ugly manifestations of the disease of orthodoxy these evoke no questioning or criticism but either blanket approval or silence. Take, for example, the recent case of the Soviet historians. Almost the entire editorial board of the leading journal in historiography "Questions of History" is arbitrarily dismissed because of their views on the history of the C.P.S.U., and their reservations about some rather recent history in Hungary. Does anyone imagine that if an event of this kind occurred in Britain or America that it would be reported in the "Daily Worker" without any comment? Everyone, including the editors of the Daily Worker knows that as far as modern history is concerned Soviet Historiography is in a lamentable state. There has been so much suppression, opportunism, distortion, hack-work, time-serving and falsification in writing the history of the U.S.S.R. from 1917 to 1957 that the whole thing must be done afresh. For the first time for 30 years some Soviet historians began very gently to reveal a few of the facts about their own history which have been concealed for so long. For obvious reasons of narrow expediency and factional orthodoxy they are purged wholesale. It was Stalin himself who said that no science can develop without freedom of criticism and he never said a truer word. What then are the prospects for Soviet historiography and other branches of social science if differences of opinion or interpretation are to be "solved" in this way instead of by public presentation of different viewpoints? And how are the social scientists of the U.S.S.R. to emerge from this "Arakcheyev" regime, to use Stalin's apt phrase, if their friends abroad do not criticise it and help them to overcome it? But the "Daily Worker" remains silent and this is the same "Daily Worker" which within 24 hours gave complete unqualified approval to Soviet policy in Hungary and to major changes in the Soviet Party leadership. So that the reason cannot be any modesty or reticence, or reluctance to comment on events in another country. This is only one example out of dozens. It is obvious to any objective person that the leadership of the Communist Party in this

country attach far greater importance to conformity with the current line of the dominant faction in the Central Committee of the C.P.S.U. than they do to any principled defence of civil liberty or freedom of expression in the sciences. As long as this is the case they have only themselves to blame if the majority of the British people simply do not believe them when they profess devotion to British conceptions of civil liberty and would certainly not entrust them with the preservation of these liberties.

As for some of the leaders of the Labour Party, although their attachment to civil liberty is less suspect, their attachment to socialism is much more doubtful. Not only do men like Sir Hartley Shawcross openly repudiate the most elementary aims of a socialist party, but others of greater influence have such doubts and hesitations that the movement is right to believe that they have no real desire to change existing property relations. The left has recently gained important successes but it is quite evident that they have not yet completed that transformation of the Labour Party from a liberal party to a socialist party for which Lenin hoped. I believe that Laski was right in thinking the place of Socialists was in the Labour Party, as an organisation established and built up by the main mass/ organisations of the British working class, I believe he was right too in thinking that Marxist ideas could not acquire decisive influence in Britain as the private property of a small orthodox sect of interpreters of holy writ with an overseas Pope, but only in so far as they were united with the main stream of the British Labour movement.

But as he himself said:

"... the future of the British Labour Movement depends upon two things. It depends, first, upon our ability to recognise the bankruptcy of the traditional horror of principles by which it has been permeated; and granted the understanding of the bankruptcy it depends, secondly, upon our willingness to adapt the essentials of the Marxist philosophy to the situation we occupy" (5)

He would have, been the last to maintain that this has been achieved. There is a long way to go before we have a united Labour movement devoted alike to socialism and to liberty. Of the two Party machines, one is concerned on the whole to maintain civil liberties but not to achieve socialism, the other is concerned to achieve socialism but not particularly concerned to maintain civil liberties. This is of course a crude over simplification but it contains an important truth which is obscured by the lip service now commonly paid to both ideals. Nevertheless it was of the greatest significance that although Laski was unpopular with the orthodox in both Party machines, he was extremely popular with two groups; first with the rank and file members of the Labour Party who persistently elected him top of the poll

(5) "Marx and Today" Fabian Society 1943.

for the E.C. and secondly with the students he taught. In my view this popularity was due to the fact that in spite of his peculiarities he consistently expressed and fought for the two ideals which can command the enthusiastic allegiance of young people and of the active rank and file of the Labour movement — Socialism and Liberty. Not one without the other, but both. The pioneers of socialism were perhaps justified in assuming that the one implied the other but historical experience has shown that it ain't necessarily so. It was Laski's great merit that he recognised this when few other Marxists did and that this did not lead him into a barren anti-Communism. Indeed at the time when he was perhaps most critical of Soviet policy during the Cold War, he said in his last lecture on the Webbs' book:

"... I am in full accord with them in believing that, with all its immense cost, the Russian Revolution is the greatest and the most beneficent event in modern history since the French revolution and that it has opened more avenues of creative fulfilment to more people than even its remarkable predecessor. What there has been in it of ugliness and of evil is, no doubt, so dramatic and impressive that, when we are not in broad agreement with its principles, these appear in the foreground of discussion. But I think that Mr. and Mrs. Webb are right in asking us to remember the remorseless accumulation both of pain and of frustration in the history of past civilisations, which have not even attempted to make what is available of goodness in living to any but a small fragment of their citizens. I think they are right also, in insisting that no other society has done so much to break down the barriers which colour or creed, birth or wealth, have placed in the upward ascent of mankind."

His deep sense of history made it possible for Laski to combine consistent approval of the great social and economic achievements of the USSR with the most devastating critique of Zhdanovism in the arts and sciences and of the police methods characteristic of Stalinism. This led his principal American critic to complain:

"Although he never totally accepts the Communist line on the Cold War, he emerges as a fairly consistent apologist for the actions of the Soviet Government at home and abroad. The pattern of his apologetic is remarkably constant. He begins by admitting the magnitude of the Communists' crimes and mistakes, but he always ends by insisting that their actions cannot be judged in terms of a "standardised ethic" and that their errors must be seen against the background of their great accomplishments and high aspirations." (6)

I have dealt with only one aspect of Laski's theory and that very inadequately. On many other subjects he had much to say of the greatest value for us today — for example on the history of political theory, on the role of ideas in history, on law and government, on the ethics of Communism, on the American system of government. In these and many other fields I believe that the British Labour movement can continue to find inspiration and

(6) Deane, Op. Cit. p. 324.

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insight from the ideas of Harold Laski. I do not think that any discussion of institutional safeguards for civil liberty and freedom of expression can afford to neglect his ideas on the Party system, on trade unions, on academic freedom, on toleration and on the law. All of this is directly relevant to recent developments in Poland, China and the U.S.S.R. But as he himself said after a discussion of safeguards:

" . . . however important be the political mechanisms on which liberty depends, they will not work themselves. They depend for their creativeness upon the presence in any given society of a determination to make them work. The knowledge that an invasion of liberty will always meet with resistance from men determined upon its repulsion, this in the last analysis is the only true safeguard that we have. It means, I have admitted, that a certain penumbra of contingent anarchy always confronts the state; but I have argued that this is entirely desirable since the secret of liberty is always, in the end, the courage to resist.(7)

Harold Laski did a little to ensure that this spirit will not die with capitalism. It is up to the New Reasoners to carry on where he left off. He certainly did not know all the answers but, he asked a great many of the right questions.

(7) "Liberty in the Modern State," Pelican Edition, p. 94.