Laski’s Political Philosophy Today: Socialism for an Individualist Age

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The individualistic environment of contemporary politics and society in Western liberal democracies makes it difficult for traditional collectivist socialism to appeal to a wide audience. Socialists who wish to gain a broad base of support need somehow to show that their ideas for a better society will help provide for the flourishing rather than suppression of individuals. Repackaging the old ideas will do little to achieve this aim, and may even be counter-productive if people suspect that they are being misled. In this situation the political philosophy of Harold Laski (1893-1950) retains its resonance more than six decades after the death of this radical thinker of the early to mid-Twentieth Century.

‘Manchester born and Manchester bred’ (Laski, 1951: 9) as he put it shortly before his death in a posthumously-published lecture, Laski began to formulate his political views during his childhood and youth. Born in the Cheetham Hill area of the city in 1893 to wealthy, actively Liberal Jewish parents, Laski read voraciously as he fought against ill health as a child. He went to the Manchester Grammar School where the egalitarian-minded High Master John Louis Paton influenced his thought profoundly. In his youth Laski came to adopt socialism and atheism. Inspired moreover by the non-Jewish suffragette Frida Kerry, whom he married in 1911, he became a staunch advocate of women’s suffrage. His rejection of religion and his marriage to a Gentile meant that his relations with his family had degenerated seriously by the time he took up a place at Oxford that year (Kramnick and Sheerman, 1993; Newman, 1993). He thereafter moved significantly to the left of his
liberal upbringing, his thought nevertheless retaining some remnants of it that would make his socialism so distinctive.

After graduating with a First in 1914 Laski was deemed unfit for military service at the outbreak of war. Subsequently, he began his academic career in North America, where he held posts at McGill University in Montreal and then Harvard. As an undergraduate he had been influenced by G.D.H. Cole’s Guild Socialism, and also by the liberal pluralist ideas of J.N. Figgis and F.W. Maitland. When as a young academic he began to publish his ideas, his critique of the role of the state became central to his early political philosophy.

By the time of his return to Britain in 1920 to take up a lectureship at the London School of Economics (LSE), Laski had begun work on what would become his most famous volume: *A Grammar of Politics* (1925). In the opening pages of that book he proclaimed that there was a deficiency more generally in political theory. Even the works of great theorists such as Bentham, Hegel, Rousseau and Marx were, he considered, too simplistic to account for the problems and possibilities of democratic and international politics in the twentieth century. ‘A NEW political philosophy’, his first sentence proclaimed boldly, ‘is necessary to a new world’ (1925: 15; 1938: 15).

The socialist recommendations of Laski’s new political philosophy were built on foundations which stressed that individual human beings should be recognised as the basis of society and community. Drawing on but revising his earlier contributions to British pluralism—contributions which were themselves distinctly of the left—his socialist political philosophy of the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s combined significant elements of individualism with other features that might be described broadly as communitarian tenets. Laski’s conceptions of equality, liberty, obligation, rights and fellowship all mesh together in a way that can serve to offer food for thought for the Left in the Twenty-First Century.

A prominent public intellectual in his own time, Laski’s prestige was short-lived after his death in 1950, in part because of Herbert Deane’s influential critique, which implied that almost nothing Laski had written warranted attention (Deane, 1955). In the Cold War environment Deane’s
work unsurprisingly became the standard text on Laski’s political thought. A wider problem was that the normative tradition of political philosophy fell out of favour in Anglo-American academic circles in the 1950s. Peter Laslett (1956, ix) perceived Laski as one of the tradition’s last practitioners. Since that time, notwithstanding a minor revival in recent decades, his distinctive socialist thought, based as it was upon a focus on the human individual, has never enjoyed the attention it attracted in his own lifetime.

**The call for a new philosophy and the strength of the old**

Part of the problem that brought about the decline of interest in Laski’s work was that he expressed much of his thought in response to developments his own time which appeared to him, and to many others on the left, to have more far-reaching consequences than actually became the case. Liberalism would, he opined, soon face a decisive challenge in this transitional time, during which the ‘call is loud for a new social philosophy’ (Laski, 1938: ii). In the 1930s the liberal state, which had developed over a period of three hundred years, seemed to Laski to be on the verge of its period of decline after a century of supremacy. This would also be a theme of one of his major works of the 1930s, *The Rise of European Liberalism* (Laski, 1936). It was, he conceded, too early to predict with confidence the type of stability that would be attained as a result of transition.

Liberalism did not, of course, decline either irrevocably or permanently, surviving the War against Nazism in some countries and enjoying revival in others. This was, perhaps, largely because of sophisticated means by which the state maintained the status quo—means that Laski, as will be discussed in a moment, recognised. It is thus rather strange that he considered the end of the liberal order to be in decline when he actually also offered some strong analysis in which he identified why that existing order was so firmly established.

Laski knew that the existing ethos, and the state built upon it, must change if a system of real and substantive equality and freedom were to be attained. He was aware of the difficulties of such change, but unaware that Antonio Gramsci was at that time discussing as the problem of hegemony. Hegemony, Gramsci argued, is achieved when the ruling class gains consensus on values
and norms even among potential opponents. The morality permeates the political, social and legal institutions (Gramsci, 1971: 12-13, 160-161, 245-246, 365-366). Laski’s awareness of this process can be detected in his pamphlet of 1930 *Justice and the Law*, in which he cited a range of examples of legislation and judicial decision in Britain as evidence of class bias in the distribution of power. People who dominated the economic system would, broadly, determine the substance of law. He stressed that this did not mean that the courts consciously acted with bias. The point was that the predominant mental climate influenced the way in which the economic system operated. The character of all the state’s institutions reflected this climate. He was sure that actors working within the institutions, along with members of the class they represented, sometimes genuinely believed that biased decisions were just (Laski, 1930a: pp. 5-7).

Laski recognised that the notion of sovereignty was a key part of the legitimation of the current state’s power. As a means of securing and maintaining compliance of citizens with the existing order, sovereignty was basically a fiction. It was a social construction serving to mask class dominance in society (Lamb, 1997; 2004: 93-113). His work demonstrates how sovereignty and hegemony can be seen to go hand in hand (Lamb, 2012). His views on how to challenge such dominance reach back to the individual. The new philosophy he offered was firmly socialist but also based distinctly on a view of the capacity of individuals to reason that a socialist policy was best for them in their communities.

**The individual and the community**

The concern for the individual in Laski’s normative political philosophy was not that of the utilitarian tradition which remained popular in his time and indeed for many decades afterwards. In a letter to his friend Justice Holmes of the US Supreme Court in 1917, Laski criticised the nineteenth century political philosopher Henry Sidgwick for trying, in his utilitarian classic *Elements of Politics*, to create a political system in abstract, without any real study of actual political processes (Howe ed., 1953: 105). Laski died thirty-three years later whilst in the process of writing a book-length manuscript (published in 1952 in its unfinished state) in which he was critical of the intuitionism that G.E. Moore
employed to make individualistic utilitarian judgements. Moore, according to Laski (1952: 211-219), defended the existing social system on the basis of his own intuition, drawing on a very limited experience of society, which had little historical grounding.

Laski sought to offer an alternative to the utilitarian theories which the Hegelian Idealist challenge since the 1880s had failed to dislodge from prominence in British political thought. In a letter to Holmes in 1919 he said that he always had the sense ‘of how difficult Utilitarianism is to answer and yet how impossible it is as a system’ (Howe ed 1953: 181). In his introductory chapter to the fourth edition of *A Grammar of Politics* in 1938 he gave an indication of the problems of the utilitarian system and its association with liberalism. Liberal theory, he argued, held that ‘the title of the state to obedience lay in its performance of three functions: (1) it secured order, (2) it provided a technique of peaceful change, and (3) it enabled demand to be satisfied on the widest possible scale’ (Laski, 1938: iii). The problem with this, he argued, was that the order maintained by the state neither provided ‘a technique of peaceful change’ nor permitted ‘demand to be satisfied on the largest possible scale’ (Laski, 1938: iii). His inclusion of the third of these functions indicates that he considered liberalism in the way it was being presented in his time, as indeed broadly utilitarian.

This fourth edition of *A Grammar of Politics* was published at a time when British and international events had persuaded Laski to adopt a Marxist element into his political philosophy. The new introductory chapter just quoted expresses that element very clearly. Nevertheless, he still maintained much of his earlier pluralist and social democratic thought (Hoover, 2003: 92-104; Lamb, 1999a; 2004: 17-44; Newman, 1993: 133-60). Indeed, but for the new chapter, the fourth edition contained only a few minor changes from the first. In a passage identical in the first and fourth editions Laski conceded (1925: 24; 1938: 24) that his political philosophy followed Bentham in insisting that social good is produced by planning and coordinated intelligence, and is the means to the avoidance of misery and the attainment of happiness. He stressed, though, that where his outlook differed from that of utilitarianism was ‘in its rejection of the egoistic nature of impulse and the elaborate calculus of pains and pleasures...’ (1925: 25; 1938: 25). Laski’s view was ‘rather, first,
that individual good cannot, over a long period, be usefully abstracted from the good of other men and, second, that the value of reason is to be found in the degree to which it makes possible the future, not less than the immediate, harmony of impulses’ (1925: 25; 1938: 25).

In Laski’s view political philosophy in the twentieth century needed to take into consideration the way in which contemporary society was characterised by complexity unforeseen by the earlier great thinkers. Even Bentham, Hegel, Rousseau and Marx had, he stressed, seen the world in overly simplistic terms. The optimism of the Benthamites that led them to believe the possession of the franchise would entrench liberty and equality in society now seemed misplaced (Laski 1925: 15-16; 1938: 15-16). Although society needed to be planned according to reason it was also necessary for the appropriate institutions for effective democracy to be devised. After all, reason was not always the dominant factor in the thought of individuals. The appeal to reason alone could not provide the basis of a good society in which the views of citizens would be heard and taken into account. A representative democracy was therefore needed, but one in which elected experts would be accountable through a complex, geographical and functional, distribution of power (1925: chs 7-9; 1938: chs 7-9). This view reflected his early pluralist thought in which he advocated the representation of functional groups as well as geographical areas as features of a more democratic society (see Nicholls, 1994; Hirst, ed., 1989; Laborde, 2000: 69-95; Runciman, 1997: 177-194; Vincent, 1987: 181-217).

In the early to mid-1920s as he wrote *Grammar of Politics* Laski stressed (1925: 17; 1938: 17) the necessary to examine the foundations of the state. Reiterating this point from a more radical perspective in the introductory chapter to the 1938 edition, he suggested that any political theory had limited value outside of the conditions in which it was conceived. Just like previous eras, the present was ‘an age of critical transition in which ... a new social order is struggling grimly to be born’ (Laski, 1938: i). Society’s scheme of values was now in the melting pot, and at such times people had always turned to the foundations of politics in an attempt to explain the nature and functions of the state. As he had said in the first edition which, as mentioned above, remained almost unchanged:
'The mere fact that there is a property-instinct does not go to prove that the present method of response to its demands is anything more than one of the ways in which it might be answered. The present method is a problem for analysis, not a solution of the problem.' (1925: 17; 1938: 177)

Whilst he had clearly been attracted to Marxism in the 1930s, Laski was not a teleological political philosopher. He neither placed any conception of the good before right, nor believed that history followed a particular path. His view that society constantly changed was based on the study of trends, and he recognised that social change required new political philosophies to understand the requirements of emerging societies. Such a view would not sit very well in a communitarian setting. Perhaps surprisingly, therefore, Laski made the following statement in *Grammar of Politics* that can actually be viewed as broadly communitarian:

> Man finds himself, in the modern world, living under the authority of governments; and the obligation to obey their orders arises from the facts of his nature. For he is a community-building animal, driven by inherited instinct to live with his fellows. Crusoe on his desert island, or St. Simon Stylites upon his pillar, may defy the normal impulses which make them men; but, for the vast majority, to live with others is the condition of a rational existence (Laski, 1938: 17; 1938: 27).

Laski believed, however, that rather than belonging naturally to any community, what required people to live with others were necessities of rational existence: ‘If the habits of peaceful fellowship are to be maintained, there are certain uniformities of conduct which must be observed’ (Laski, 1925: 17; 1938: 17). In so far as it is communitarian, Laski’s thought bears similarities to the more subtle of the later variants such the socialist view of community expressed by David Miller (1989: 227-251). Rather than consider community to be static, unitary and natural, Laski, like Miller, saw it as a series of relationships having a substantial element of artifice. For each of these thinkers a socialist egalitarian community will seek to reshape itself as necessary in order to pursue the common interests of citizens. Laski’s socialism, indeed, assumed that individual, rational people came to realise that crucial common goals are worthy of pursuit. There is, moreover, in this socialism no notion of an identity of wills, represented by the state, at which point the real will might be found. Laski (1925: 29-30; 1938: 29-30), indeed, criticises this notion directly. The decisions that determine what are to be considered the common goals to be pursued will be democratic ones.
Rather than being characterised by fellowship by nature, Laski argued, humans are driven partly by reason and partly by impulse. For humankind to prosper it was necessary to work actively for the social good. This required scrutiny of situations and attempts to discover ways to satisfy wants in the ever-changing world and society. As he put it: ‘the same good never occurs twice,’ and thus ‘immobility in a changing world must spell disaster’ (Laski, 1925: 24; 1938: 24). Reason was thus valuable to the degree to which it made possible both the present and future harmony of impulses. ‘Social good’, as he saw it, ‘is thus such an ordering of our personality that we are driven to search for things it is worth while to obtain that, thereby, we may enrich the great fellowship we serve’ (Laski, 1925: 25; 1938: 25).

Laski’s thought can be contrasted with substantially communitarian views. The latter often include (1) descriptive claims that people are social beings; (2) normative claims stressing that community and solidarity should be celebrated, and (3) meta-ethical claims that say political principles mirror shared understandings. Laski certainly celebrated the values of community, solidarity and public participation, but would not have accepted claims that people are, to the extent that communitarians sometimes imply, social beings with identities shaped by their communities. He would have agreed with other communitarian descriptions of people as partially embedded in, but able to distance themselves from, the values and norms of, their communities. He would not have accepted that political principles should necessarily mirror shared understandings.

For Laski, neither individualistic nor social thinking was foundational to the human psyche. The individual is real to himself, he argued in Liberty in the Modern State in 1930, paraphrasing a point he had made in Grammar of Politics, ‘not by reason of the contacts he shares with others, but because he reaches those contacts through a channel which he alone can know’ (Laski, 1930b: 25; 1925: 31; 1938: 31). Only through isolated meditation could the true self contribute, in society with others, to the common good. Unity, he would later suggest in The State in Theory and Practice, ‘is not there as something given; it is made as men discover it by seeking similar ends. But the discovery is always a voyage made in isolation. It is private to me in a sense which means that no other person
can be aware of its meaning save as I report upon it’ (1935: 58). The essence of the individual remained constant, notwithstanding outside influences. Laski did, however, perceive human nature as malleable and subject to conditioning. The present acquisitive society, he insisted in 1944, in *Faith, Reason and Civilisation*, ‘becomes merely one of the forms of social behaviour through which the impulses of man receive expression’ (Laski, 1944: 99-100).

Laski held that the appropriate social and political arrangements would not necessarily be sustained on the basis of thought conditioned by the present order of society. He placed the onus on real people to adopt a view of fellowship from which to judge whether the existing arrangements were appropriate. This optimism, crucial as it is to a non-authoritarian socialist position, underpinned his view that people were justified in disobeying a government that did not provide the kind of society that social, economic and technological conditions at any particular time were capable of producing. This was based on an understanding of individuals associating in groups involved in processes guided by institutionalised rules and relations that were subject to change. Policy-makers should respond to demands of citizens that would not always be guided by the prominent norms of the era. Institutions and their rules should thus be accordingly flexible. The state should take a dynamic approach to meeting human expectations, rather than rely on a static set of principles.

Laski’s political philosophy involved a view that people may come to prefer a society where each placed the social good, rather than individual interests, first. He accepted such elements of liberalism as were compatible with his socialist beliefs. For him, solidarity in groups was essential to individual flourishing.

**Political possibilities and problems**

The association of people in groups was, for Laski, conducive to democratic participation in society. This is perhaps clearest in essays which, originally published in 1918 and 1919, were reprinted in his book *The Foundations of Sovereignty and Other Essays* of 1921, during what is now known as his pluralist period. He criticised the Benthamite idea that, human endowments being broadly equal,
with differences reflecting environments, ‘[the] more training was equalised, the more power would be distributed in just proportions throughout the State’ (Laski, 1921: 35). He argued that in both the United Kingdom and the United States people who held economic power wielded political power at each geographical level. The existing political system defended the status quo by equating the private and common good. This, he proposed, should be replaced by a system that transfers decision-making authority from the nominally sovereign state to levels where decisions could be made by those directly concerned. Functional units would convey the specific interests of industries and professions, whilst geographical levels of government would be retained to safeguard the shared needs of people in their areas. The central government would ensure that the functional and geographical bodies did not act against the social good. State intervention in capitalist societies had, since the late nineteenth century, reflected on the one hand the failure of the capitalist system and on the other hand the growing strength and solidarity of the trade unions and professional organisations. If educational needs were satisfied, the unions would soon negotiate with the employers at functional levels with comparable strength. Eventually industrial democracy would replace capitalist economic power and the unions would control industry (Laski, 1921: 30-102).

Laski’s view of the future of industrial democracy was certainly, with hindsight, based on an over-optimistic view of the place and capabilities of the trade unions. Nevertheless, this should not mean his views on the matter are worthless today. Self-government remains a popular concept. What was crucial to his argument for such a form of government was his view that the supposed unity of the state was false.

Laski argued (1921: 232-249) that the monistic state was ‘an hierarchic structure in which power is, for ultimate purposes, collected at a single centre,’ and this was ‘both administratively incomplete and ethically inadequate’ (Laski, 1921: 240). In the midst of the new movement demanding self-government the hierarchical state could not survive for much longer. This new movement, he believed, ‘finds its main impulse in the attempt to disperse the sovereign power because it is realised that where administrative organization is made responsive to the actual
association of men, there is a greater chance not merely of efficiency but of freedom also’ (Laski, 1921: 243).

Laski’s belief in the changing character of people in their socio-economic environments is evident in these early writings. People would not accept certain situations if conditions would clearly allow change for the better. Self-government would reflect the pluralistic nature of a changing society. In *Grammar of Politics* he modified this pluralist position, still advocating widespread political participation through functional organisations, but envisaging a more extensive role for the state when all citizens shared common interests, guided by input from the functional spheres (1925: 75 and 139; 1938: 75 and 139). The territorially based legislative system would be retained alongside functional and territorial decentralisation in specific activities. Policy decisions would require compulsory consultation with representatives of relevant groups (1925: 295-540; 1938: 295-540). The state’s functions, however, would be ‘confined to promoting certain uniformities of conduct’ and would ‘shrink and enlarge as experiment seems to warrant’ (1925: 25; 1938: 25).

One way to demonstrate the nature of Laski’s ideas is to note both affinities with and distinctiveness from the public reason tradition of political thought that has in recent decades become prominent, especially in the work of John Rawls. Public reason, which is the reason that citizens are expected to apply in their dealings in the political sphere, has often featured in the history of liberal political thought. Public reasons for acting are justified by being reasons shared by all. An agreement on shared fundamental principles legitimises states that act on those principles (Ivison 1997: 125-147).

The difficulties of building a political system around public reason can be appreciated if one examines Laski’s essay ‘Law and the State,’ published in 1929. His discussion of the consequences of complexity in modern society has striking parallels with Rawls’s later work, but also important differences. In a democratic society, Rawls conjectured in *Political Liberalism*, ‘public reason is the reason of equal citizens who, as a collective body, exercise final political and coercive power over one another in enacting laws and in amending their constitution’ (Rawls 1996: 214). Rawls
considered that public reason applied to constitutional essentials and matters of basic justice. Although conflict deriving from status, class, race and gender could limit reconciliation by public reason, political liberalism could prevent such conflict from arising. Acceptance of principles of justice in the domain of the political would bring agreement to respect them reciprocally. To the extent that institutions conformed to those principles, a just constitutional regime could largely eradicate the potential conflict. Significantly Rawls insisted that public reason should not extend into the background culture of civil society (Rawls 1996: lx).

For Laski, as a result of the complexity of modern society there was, except for the formality of the law, no single common good. To be successful in coordinating demands arising from society when making decisions, he argued in ‘Law and the State’, governments had to take full account of interests that such decisions affected. Validation of the decisions that introduced laws did not depend upon the source of the decision, but rather on acceptance by the community. However, satisfaction of demands was never total. Compromise needed to be sought, and a sovereign power should conform to an institutional pattern he had described in Grammar of Politics, wherein the state would have crucial but distinctly limited power (Laski, 1929: 279-83; 1938: 279-83). He stressed that there was nevertheless a problem. In societal conditions that did not allow equality in the effective claims to well being, the state functions as an instrument of the advantaged section of the community. The division in modern capitalist societies, of people into a small number of rich and a large number of poor, inevitably brought about bias in the character of actions of the state. He thus recognised problems in attempting to build a political system on the basis of a condition often referred to as public reason. Significant, nevertheless, is his belief that individuals can, if they deliberate sufficiently, help bring about measures that will be for the good of the community. This does perhaps indicate that he believed something like public reason may prevail if people can overcome disagreements.

Laski’s recognition of the problems of public reason, and his idea of the responsibilities that individuals must bear, can be detected in Grammar of Politics, where he stressed that the analysis of
the state may, ethically, compel persons to seek that state’s overthrow (Laski, 1925: 39; 1938: 39). As he put it in ‘Law and the State,’ his pluralism was ‘an attempt to recover the individual conscience as the only true source of a law which claims obedience from its subjects’ (Laski, 1929: 283). Laski would have called for ordinary people to question constitutional essentials and the elements considered to comprise basic justice. He argued in *State in Theory and Practice* that in a collectivist society consistent with human nature individuals would recognise that their needs and aspirations could be met more equitably by contributions to the social good. Individuals who were unprepared to act upon their insights, he also stressed, ‘cease to be moral beings in any sense of the word that has meaning.’ Such individuals ‘associate truth and justice and right automatically with the possession of physical power.’ A people prepared thus to abdicate its humanity was not ‘likely to be long capable of creative achievement’ (Laski, 1935: 83). Whilst Rawls was optimistic that consensus could be found on public reason in a substantially reformed liberal capitalist society, Laski hoped that if people delved into their consciences they would find that they could reach a new consensus on a less individualistic ethos, yet one reached by individuals who would be concerned to improve their society.

The demands from people in society, Laski argued, change with what that society is able to provide. Rather than assume, as would Rawls later, some form of liberal society to be the best option for all, Laski believed that as society was capable of providing ordinary people with more than the capitalist system is able to provide, liberalism would become increasingly outdated. The obligation of people to obey is contingent upon what that state does, rather than upon the theoretical or ideal purpose of that state. Crucial to Laski’s thought in this respect, was his idiosyncratic theory of rights (Lamb, 1999b). For him, rights are generated and develop as society becomes able to serve what they demand. A general expectation forms because of the capacity of society to improve social conditions. Society should serve those rights adequately; otherwise, people are justified in disobedience. He called this ‘contingent anarchy’ (Laski, 1925: 144; 1930b: 76; 1938: 144), to which we return in a moment.
Laski based his idea of the justification of disobedience not on a natural duty of justice, but rather on the capacity of society and state to provide for rights-based demands, given the level of development reached at any particular time. His was a reciprocal theory of rights and democracy. On the one hand, the protection and maintenance of rights was necessary for democracy to operate efficiently with popular control of government and responsive rule. On the other hand, an efficient democracy would protect and maintain rights (Lamb, 1999b: 16-17). A system of socio-economic rights, he insisted in Grammar of Politics, would have three aspects: ‘There is the interest of the individual, always, at least ultimately, finally isolated from his fellow men. There is the interest of the various groups in and through which his personality finds channels of expression. There is the interest of the community which is the total result of the whole pressure of social forces.’ (Laski, 1925: 141; 1938: 141)

Laski made clear in A Grammar of Politics that he could not accept a theory which held consent to this or any other system be no more than ‘an inert acceptance of orders accepted without scrutiny’ (1925: p. 22; 1938: 22). Between citizens and rulers in modern societies there was a ‘vast abyss’, which was ‘filled by the devices that power and its varied mechanisms bring into being’ (1925: 241; 1938: 241). To appreciate his reasons to be sceptical of traditional notions of consent it is worth quoting at length in order to capture his thought:

> We are told that public opinion wills this and desires the other. But we have no satisfying channels either for the garnering of public opinion or for placing before it the materials upon which it may build an edifice of demand which represents its wants. Consent may in practice mean any of a score of things from blank ignorance through dumb inertia to deliberate coercion. It may mean, not the fusion of wills to achieve some purpose warranted by the facts, but the overcoming of wills which feel, sometimes actively, sometimes passively, that the thing proposed is wrong or mistaken or inadequate (1925: 241-242; 1938: 241-242).

A satisfactory form of consent could, in his view (1925: ch. 7; 1938: ch. 7), be achieved only by a form of self-government in which authority would derive its validity from, firstly, the system of interest representation in the state’s decision-making process; secondly, a system of rights; and thirdly, accountability to an adequately educated citizen body. He sought thus to fill the vast abyss which
separated citizens from the levers of power. For Laski, only in this way would popular control produce equitably responsive government.

Laski’s views on consent bring us back to the issue of obligation. In both *A Grammar of Politics* (1925: 144; 1938: 144) and *Liberty in the Modern State* (1930b: p. 76) he argued that what was needed in order to safeguard against abuse by the state-power was the threat of “contingent anarchy”. A passage from each book needs to be cited in order to shed light upon this notion. A government’s acts, he argued in *A Grammar of Politics*, are ‘built upon their obligation to labour that the citizens of the State may have full opportunity to realise the best in themselves’ (1925: 36; 1938: 36). Moral support for governmental policy was gained as it met this obligation. Whether it was met, however, could only be determined by historic experience that citizens must scrutinize. ‘The power of government’, he elaborated, ‘is the right of government in the degree to which it is exercised for the end of social life. There is a note of interrogation at the end of every governmental pronouncement. It is for the citizen to decide in what manner the question shall be answered’ (1925: 36; 1938: 36).

For Laski, answers given by citizens should be guided by their judgement of whether the government was acting within its right - or, in other words, in a way which was adequately fulfilling the purpose of the state. In this aspect of its purpose, he claimed, the state ‘becomes an organisation for enabling the mass of men to realise social good on the largest possible scale’ (1925: 25; 1938: 25). He believed that citizens were obliged to obey the state not ‘because its theoretic purpose is a splendid one’, but, rather, because of their ‘conviction that it is genuinely seeking to make that purpose valid in events’ (1925: 26-27; 1938: 26-27).

Turning to *Liberty in the Modern State*, Laski’s doctrine of “contingent anarchy” becomes clearer if one focuses on his view of the legitimate holding of power. Such holding should not be for the sake of power itself but, rather, to enable those with it to achieve ends that will bring about the happiness of all. Whether those with power did achieve such ends must be determined by scrutiny by the citizens of the state. ‘If’, he insisted, ‘what they do is a denial of the purpose they serve; if, as we meet their acts,
there appears in them an absence of goodwill, a blindness to experience alien from their own, an incapacity imaginatively to meet the wants of others, what alternatives have we save a challenge to power or a sacrifice of the end of our life?’ (1930b: 76). This was a key element of his political philosophy. Indeed, he made similar claims about the right of disobedience in his essay *The Dangers of Obedience* (1930c: ch. 1, esp. 21-30) and his book *An Introduction to Politics* (1931: 32 and 44-45).

Laski’s theory of obligation is vulnerable to the response that citizens will not all agree at any one time - if at all -on what a government must do in order to fulfil the state-purpose. As William A. Robson (1931) suggested in the early 1930s, Laski was not clear as to how it should be decided whether the case to disobey is stronger than that to obey. ‘If the good is purely subjective’, Robson argued, ‘it is difficult to see how one can obtain any judgement beyond a majority decision of unique individual wills based on individual experiences of absolute validity. Yet this is somehow unsatisfying’ (1931: 133). As he acknowledged, (1931: 134), Laski urged that rebellion was sometimes a positive duty. During the same period W. Macmahon Ball raised the question: "If a good law is one that people want, how many people must want it before it becomes good?" (1932: 134). As he suggested, (1932: 134-135), Laski can have meant neither that a law is just because a majority desire it, nor that the belief of one individual that a law is unjust makes it unjust. Laski was not, indeed, very clear on this issue. But a central theme of contingent obligation and contingent power can be detected. He was aware that the problems of obligation presented a dilemma which only authority could resolve. There are rules, he conceded, in another passage that justifies a lengthy quote to capture his message,

> which I ought to obey even if I disapprove: for, obviously, if each man is to follow his every impulse wherever it leads, an organised social life would be impossible. It means that force must be used in those directions only where the common sense of society is on the side of the type of conduct it seeks to compel. But it means also that, in extreme cases, I may decide that I shall disobey the law and accept whatever punishment it inflicts. That is the only way, at least ultimately, in which I can make the unique contribution of my personality to the life of the community (1925: 33; 1938: 33).
Laski’s argument can be illuminated with reference to a recent article by Bhikhu Parekh (1993), who argues that most discussions of obligation have failed to distinguish between political obligation, which is owed to one’s fellow citizens, and civil obligation, which is owed to the civil authority. According to Parekh, this civil obligation includes both the legal obligation to obey the civil authority and, in its wider form, cooperation with and support for that authority. Laski’s theory can be codified in these terms. He believed that the political obligation to our fellow citizens took precedence over civil obligation. Political obligation itself required that there be adequate channels and equal resources for political participation. If these democratic conditions were satisfied, citizens could judge whether the state had earned their civil obligation, which would be contingent on that state fulfilling its proper role of serving the social good. If individuals felt that their political obligation to their fellow citizens required them to withdraw their cooperation, and even disobey the law and take the punishment for so doing, they will have placed their political obligation before their civil obligation.

With Parekh’s dichotomy in mind we can see that, for Laski, obligation revolved around the judgement of individuals as to whether their society was an egalitarian democracy. In his essay A Plea for Equality of 1930 he argued that the democratic principle ‘offered a plane where the claims of men to a share in the common good could be admitted as equal’ (1930c: p. 211). It was, in his view, ‘only where men have an equal interest in the result of the common effort that there is a bond of genuine fellowship between them’ (1930c: p. 215). States which sought the postponement of equality, he suggested, ‘have always in themselves a festering sore which is bound to break out sooner or later’. Such states, he went on, lacked ‘the essential condition of stable government, which is a widespread sense of allegiance to the constitution as the protector of the equal rights of men’ (1930c: p. 230).

In the years that followed the publication of Grammar of Politics his awareness grew of a problem presented by the promotion in liberal society; it was problem of a theory of rights based on the norms of capitalism, which were inconsistent with those of his socialist ideology (Lamb, 1999b: 18-19). Nevertheless, although by the early 1930s he had come to accommodate elements of
Marxism in his outlook he also retained much of his earlier pluralist and social democratic ideas in a distinctive theoretical amalgam. Indeed, whilst attention was drawn above to both affinities and a contrast with Rawls regarding public reason, there were other similarities between their political philosophies. Isaac Kramnick and Barry Sheeran have suggested that Rawls’s treatment of distributive justice resembled some of Laski’s thought (Kramnick and Sheeran, 1993: 229-230).

David Runciman makes a similar point, quoting Laski’s claim in Grammar of Politics that: ‘Distinctions of wealth and status must be distinctions to which all men attain and they must be required by the common welfare’ (Runciman, 1997: 203; Laski, 1925: 157). Furthermore, as Ben Jackson has noted, Laski, like Rawls, saw the necessity for and endorsed incentives (Jackson, 2003: 100-102). Also, very importantly, like Rawls Laski held freedom/liberty in a prominent position in his political philosophy.

Some may find it surprising for a thinker who declared himself a socialist to consider liberty, rather than equality or welfare to have priority; but his was a conception of freedom to which socialists may be attracted. ‘[T]he more equal are the social rights of citizens’, Laski stated in Liberty in the Modern State, ‘the more likely they are to be able to utilize their freedoms in realms worthy of exploration.’ ‘The more equality there is in a State’, he went on, ‘the more use, in general, we can make of our freedom.’ (Laski, 1930b: 17) Equality, he stressed, seems ‘inescapably connected with freedom’ (Laski, 1930b: 18-19).

Although he did not consider the notion of private prosperity inherently wrong, Laski believed that the more equal the distribution thereof, the lesser would such prosperity dominate our minds. People would be less likely to be ‘set over against society, either snatching from it some chance opportunity of advantage, or seeking to exploit it to some end which their conscience tells them to be mean and dishonourable’ (Laski, 1925: 217; 1938: 217). Although a materially poorer society might initially emerge, with fewer wealthy people, this he believed, would bring positive results. Without such people there would not be the ‘conspicuous display which has made so much of our social life seem crude and tawdry’. This would, nevertheless ‘be a society of deeper spiritual values, from which the worst tyranny, that of man over man, will have been banished. For fellowship
is possible where men are won to a common service, and they can join together when that by which
they live is born in justice’ (Laski, 1925: 217; 1938: 217).

Laski, as we have seen, whilst being aware of the difficulties of achieving significant change,
called for ordinary people to always be aware of new possibilities, and to demand greater change if
those possibilities were not acted upon by political rulers. He recognised that this would require
transformation of the foundations of the state. This enabled him to recognise the difficulties of
transition very clearly, but also to work on the basis that a change of ethos was possible.

Conclusion

The change of ethos would certainly be difficult to achieve, not least because of the trend since the
1970s for citizens to prefer a less regulated form of capitalism than that which social democrats
were able to build in the first few decades after the Second World War (Newman, 2005: 138-140).
The value of equality is not now widely-shared in the richer capitalist countries (Newman, 2005:
141). The trade unions today have not grown stronger as Laski predicted, but have rather been
significantly weakened. Nevertheless, his call to take control over more elements of one’s life is
certainly one that has potential to draw interest. Linked as this is in his work to a view that
individuals can find their own way to supporting principles of the left and withhold consent to
governments which do not respect such principles, this may appeal to the many today who insist on
thinking for themselves rather than being led.

Having a genuine, democratic say over one’s life rather than relying on paternalism or chance as
offered by conservatism and liberalism was indeed one of the goals of socialism as it grew into an
organised movement in the late nineteenth century. To this extent socialism was indeed
individualistic (Sassoon, 2014: ix-x).

References

pp. 273-89.


Lamb, P. (1997), ‘Laski on Sovereignty: Removing the Mask from Class Dominance’, *History of Political Thought* 18, 2, pp. 326-342


