

simplification of court structure—amazing even against the background of normal judicial conservatism. So we must say that this is an excellent job in an important corner of court administration; but it is to be viewed as only a beginning. “Manifestly judicial reform is no sport for the short-winded or for lawyers who are afraid of temporary defeat.”⁵

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THE POLITICAL IDEAS OF HAROLD J. LASKI. By Herbert A. Deane. New York: Columbia University Press, 1955. Pp. xiii, 370. \$5.75.

I MUST begin in all candor by writing a personal confession which might well be thought to put me out of court so far as this review is concerned. Somewhere about 1928 I was a member of an undergraduate society at Oxford called, I believe, the Christ Church Essay Club. One evening the members of this society were gratified to entertain a distinguished guest, Mr. Harold Laski, then at the height of his fame at the London School of Economics. His paper, as I well remember, was on the French revolutionary François Noël Babeuf, and his thesis—noted, I was amused to see, by Mr. Herbert Deane in his scholarly book—was that the ideas of Babeuf had played a notable part in forming the opinions, first of Karl Marx, and later of the Russian Communists.

This theory, intrinsically by no means implausible, was clinched in Laski's paper by a personal anecdote so remarkable as to leave an indelible impression on the mind of a youthful hearer. It seemed that Laski was sauntering down Charing Cross Road one day when he fell upon an old edition of Babeuf's work in the remainder shelf of a secondhand bookseller. As he idly turned the pages, he noticed at once heavy underlinings and marginal comments in a handwriting that seemed vaguely familiar. He purchased the volume and, hurrying back home, was gratified but not altogether surprised to find that the marginal comments were unmistakably in the handwriting of Karl Marx himself.

The incident made a considerable impression on me, and I had no particular reason for doubting the facts until some years later, when Laski wrote in the press accusing King George V of playing an unconstitutional part in the crisis of 1931. This thesis, perfectly sustainable on theoretical grounds (though I happen to disagree with it), was corroborated by the claim that one of Laski's friends had access to the contents of a waste paper basket emanating from Buckingham Palace. In the waste paper basket was, I think, a Daily Mirror, and, believe it or not, the margin of that Daily Mirror contained a number of strongly worded comments in a very well known handwriting indeed.

When I told the story in an Oxford senior common room a well known professor cried out “Good God! The fellow has done the same thing to me.”

At that moment I made a vow that I would never read another word written

5. VANDERBILT, MINIMUM STANDARDS OF JUDICIAL ADMINISTRATION xix (1949).

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by Laski, and I am happy to say that, puritanical as my attitude may now seem, with very few exceptions I never have.

The result is that I am trebly disqualified from reviewing a work about Harold Laski's political ideas. In the first place, I have probably read less of Laski than almost any other contemporary writer. Secondly, I do not accept the truth of any statement of fact contained in Laski's writings not independently corroborated, and this, I fear, makes it extremely difficult to evaluate some of the judgments of fact contained in Mr. Deane's book, which assume the truth of some of the statements of Laski—for instance, in his correspondence with the late Justice Holmes. And finally, while as impressed as anyone else with the extreme prolificacy of Laski's pen I have always refused to take Laski seriously as a political writer. As a propagandist he was impressive. As a teacher he had great ability, and rightly won the affection of his pupils. But as a thinker, he was wanting in the necessary element of intellectual integrity, and the inconsistencies which Deane exposes so mercilessly in his book are due to something less reputable than confusion of thought, or the changes of opinion developing over a long period of time. Now, I am quite sure that in the above judgment I shall seem biased and unfair, and from one point of view in particular it is a judgment I particularly regret having had to make. Harold Laski was a man of refinement and charm. When I met him again more than twenty years after the meeting in those undergraduate rooms in Christ Church, it was he, not I, who recalled the occasion, and he somehow contrived to make me feel that his chance encounter with a strange undergraduate of adverse political views had left a pleasing impression upon his mind. If at any time I had been his pupil I know I should have fallen under his spell like countless others, and despite his shortcomings I know I should have held his memory—indeed as it is I hold his memory—in affection and respect.

Yet it is impossible to assess his work, and equally impossible to review a book devoted to it, without recognizing the ultimate moral and intellectual weakness of its subject. His views on political theory changed not so much because Laski had any objective reason founded on abstract thought to change them, but because the political attitudes that he was making it his business to justify or adopt had changed, and their defense required the background of a different political theory to support them. The result is, as Mr. Deane shows, that there is absolutely nothing intelligible or consistent about Laski's political thought viewed over a period of years. But one always knows which side he is on.

For Laski was fundamentally less of a philosopher than a partisan, and less of a theorist than an advocate. "I have," he wrote in 1939, "I suppose, been a socialist in some degree ever since the last years of my schooldays."¹ Now it may be difficult to gather what, if anything, in the realm of theory remained constant in his political thinking between 1913 and 1950. It is also entirely

1. P. 53.

obscure what, if anything, he meant by socialism. But it is easy enough to see at any moment where he stood politically. From first to last, Laski was the partisan of the Labour movement in Great Britain, and, along with the Labour movement, of certain causes and policies not universally assented to. The constant support of a developing political movement on theoretical grounds demands a certain freedom of manoeuvre in political theory. This freedom Laski expressed to a remarkable degree, and since his mental gyrations were typical of those exhibited by a large minority of his British fellow countrymen, less articulate, less sophisticated, and it must be added less talented, it is perhaps worth-while to view his changes of front not as an essay in political consistency, but as the reaction of a highly gifted political partisan to the changing fortunes of British socialism. This truth is divined at least to some extent by Mr. Deane, for he divides Laski's work into five periods, 1914-1924, 1925-1931, 1932-1939, 1940-1945 and 1946-1950, and each of these periods corresponds to a basic change in the fortunes and prospects of the party that Laski supported.

Laski grew up in a dominant atmosphere of political Liberalism. The Liberalism was decadent, but few recognized the symptoms of decay, and Laski was not one of them. He saw the faults, the careerism, the materialist vulgarity of Edwardian society. But he did not see how quickly it was to end. As a socialist, he believed that the machinery of power was indefinitely beyond his grasp, and since it seemed beyond his grasp he taught that it should be severely limited in the scope of its operations. Odd as it now appears, the theory to which Laski first gave expression was that of pluralism: the doctrine that autonomous sources of power—in which, no doubt, he hoped that socialism would thrive—must be developed outside the state. This pluralism, or “poly-archism” as he called it, was characterized by functional decentralization and delegation to local authorities, and buttressed by a theory of political obedience dependent ultimately on the sanction of the individual conscience and understanding. These views, accompanied as they were by a theory of socialism based almost entirely on a syndicalist view of collective action, and involving a conscious rejection of Marxism and what afterward became Leninism, exemplify the classical recipe for the exponent of a political theory running counter to the spirit of the age. Laski held them for just so long as the prospect of a socialist electoral victory seemed remote.

For most British socialists, and in this respect Laski was typical, the triple catastrophe of World War I, the Russian Revolution, and the postwar disillusionment, operated as a watershed in political thought. Liberal society had been shattered by the impact of war. The October Revolution disproved the theory of the futility of violence. The postwar elections put the British Labour Party, now riveted to socialism by a written constitution, firmly into the position of the second of the two great parties of the State. It seemed only a matter of time before a general election would yield a Labour Government with a full majority, and if it did not, the general strike appeared to offer a successful means of dispensing, if need be, with a majority at all.

For this reason it was no longer necessary to believe that political power was beyond the grasp of the socialist. On the other hand, the existing institutions remained manifestly contrary to socialist demands. The question for the British Labour Party was, therefore, whether the capture of political control could be made to lead to a permanent and peaceful alteration in the organization of society. Clearly on the basis of federalism and functional decentralization the answer to this question was in the negative. A different and more authoritarian view of civil obligation was required, and Harold Laski was ready to provide it. Unhappily there was a further complication. During the period of Conservative rule Labour was largely of the opinion that a general strike could be used as a weapon to achieve political power, and such a course would run contrary to the theory of obligation which a socialist state would have to impose and which even a democratic state must recognize if it is to survive. It is therefore not surprising that during this period Laski's main problem was to marry the defense of collective disobedience to the affirmation of the political authority that would have to be wielded by a socialist majority; and at the same time to ridicule the theory of obligation on which the future of parliamentary government depends. Thus the object of the state became unlimited, instead of limited. It is "an organization for enabling the mass of men to realize social good on the largest possible scale,"² in which it is "obvious that the State cannot risk" allowing the provision of essential goods by private enterprise.³ Nevertheless, in proportion as the state increases its claims, the more contingent becomes our obligation to obey it. "Our obligation to obey the State is, law apart, an obligation dependent on the degree to which the State achieves its purpose. We are the judges of that achievement."⁴ The result of such a double view of the nature of the state and political obligation would obviously be anarchy if it were not for the fact that it was also one-sided. But Laski saw no reason why it should be otherwise, and was perfectly ready to condemn Conservative disobedience to a Labour Government even while supporting a general strike against a Conservative Government.

Despite this inconsistency, Laski's thought during this period is on the whole optimistic. Labour can look forward to electoral victories based on the vast additions to the electorate in 1918 and 1925. These victories will enable the theory of socialism to be translated into legislative effect. The possibility that the mass electorate will turn decisively away from the Labour Party in moments of grave economic crisis has not yet occurred to Laski. Capitalism can be held in check, or possibly even overthrown, in periods of Conservative rule by the threat of a general strike. If it is not overthrown the masses will realize in the end the power of the ballot box, and vote in the one manner that their class interest will dictate. For that moment Labour can, in the last resort, afford to wait. From first to last, however, as Mr. Deane shows,

2. P. 80.

3. P. 82.

4. P. 100.

Laski never gives a coherent or intelligible answer to the question what kind of millenium it is waiting for.

The economic crisis of 1930-1931, and the election of 1931, came to Laski as blows between the eyes. Labour was decisively defeated by the very votes on which it had counted for success; and at the very moment when orthodox socialism would have supposed that the suffering of the masses might drive them to adopt a revolutionary policy, the people seemed never less inclined to extra-constitutional procedures. The calamity of the economic crisis, and popular rejection, led to the most disastrous and least reputable period of Laski's thinking.

It was, of course, unthinkable either that the catastrophe was contributed to by any deficiency in the Labour Government's policy, or even that it was part of a world crisis beyond the control of any British Administration. It was, Laski proclaimed, and as the Labour Party has asserted to this day, the product of a conspiracy. His view of the crisis and its outcome was, in brief, that democracy was a sham, that "finance-capital will not permit the ordinary assumptions of the Constitution to work if these operate to its disadvantage. Socialistic measures, in a word, are not obtainable by constitutional means,"⁵ and "if Socialists wish to secure a State built upon the principles of their faith, they can only do so by revolutionary means."⁶ The new Cabinet was in fact "born of a palace revolution"⁷ and in England for the first time since the seventeenth century "what was coming rapidly into the foreground of discussion was the very thesis of Parliamentary Government itself."⁸

Unhappily this period coincided with the rise of Fascism on the European Continent, and the results of Laski's thinking were disastrous. Mr. Deane considers, with some reason, that they may even have had some influence on the morbid state of public opinion which led indirectly to British unpreparedness at the beginning of World War II. Laski's disillusionment with democracy was so thoroughgoing as to lead him on the whole to accept the general Marxist theory of the state from which he had thitherto stood aloof. Democracy becomes "capitalist democracy." The state exists to protect the vested interests in the class relations in the particular society. The judiciary itself is suspect, "for the Courts are part of the coercive machinery of the State, [and] must protect as fully as possible the interests of those who own the means of production."⁹ It was, in fact, the acceptance of this theory of politics at the time by the Labour Party, largely under the influence of Laski, that drove public opinion into two widely divergent camps, each unable to combine with the other in defense of its own values. When such a view was accepted it followed that the Labour Party was thought to have more in common with the Russian Communists than with its Conservative fellow countrymen, whilst those same

5. P. 146.

6. P. 146 n.3.

7. P. 147.

8. P. 122.

9. P. 157.

Conservative opponents were thought to differ from Fascists only in degree and not in kind. The defense of democracy as such was largely allowed to go by default by the members of left wing circles, who showed themselves more concerned to establish than to prevent a connection between Conservatives (who were themselves, as the event proved, no less warmly attached to Britain's democratic constitution) and the Fascist powers; and keener on the hopeless fortunes of the Spanish Republicans than on the obvious necessity of military preparation at home. In the meantime the ultimate aims of the Labour Party could, it was constantly being urged, only be bought at the price, if not of revolution, at least of the establishment of some form of dictatorship. Mr. Deane puts the point very well:

"The Laski-Marxist onslaught on 'capitalist democracy' was a pure gift to the Nazi propagandists who were endeavoring to exploit group differences within the democracies, and in particular, to convince the workers that their real enemies were the 'plutocrats' who dominated English and French society. It is understandable that many workers, when faced with the choice between Fascism as the overt rule of the privileged class, and 'capitalist democracy' as a more subtle form of capitalist domination, lapsed into the mood of cynical apathy or 'revolutionary defeatism' so evident in France in 1939. The attacks on the 'bourgeois' governments of England and France and the insistence that the interests of the rulers and those of the masses were completely contradictory constituted serious obstacles to the effective rearmament that was imperative if the threat of Fascist aggression was to be met. Although Laski, like many other Left-wing leaders, was clearly anti-Fascist, he continued until 1937 at least, to oppose any serious effort to rearm. Finally, by reducing the alternatives of political action to two polar opposites, Fascism and revolutionary socialism, Laski and his followers frightened off conservative and liberal groups and so lessened the chances for a strong anti-Fascist coalition with each of the democracies."¹⁰

The cynicism and pessimism that underlay almost all Labour socialist thought at this period led Laski, at once its victim and its nurse, both to belittle the work of men like Keynes, Salter or Beveridge in Britain, or Roosevelt on the other side of the Atlantic, and to minimize the weaknesses of the Bolshevik experiment in Russia, and of the Marxist theory upon which that experiment was based:

"No tool at the command of the social philosopher surpasses Marxism either in its power to explain the movement of ideas or its authority to predict their practical outcome. . . . On the breakdown of capitalist democracy, the decline of bourgeois culture, the rise of Fascism, the role of non-revolutionary socialism, it has insights not possessed by any alternative method of analysis."¹¹

It is true that he continued to advocate the use of constitutional opportunities rather than violence, but he felt that the Labour Party needed

10. Pp. 163-64.

11. Pp. 201-02.

"the inexorable faith of Lenin in the coming of our opportunity, his un-resting preparation to be fit for the hour when it came. British Socialism has passed the stage when it can indulge in the carefree dreams of youth. The time has come when it should assume the intellectual responsibilities of manhood. . . . I wish my own party could command the same fervent and selfless devotion from its members [as the Russian Communist Party]."¹²

Against this background it is fair to recall that later, during the crisis of 1940, Laski worked with his customary tireless zeal to promote an Allied victory, and between 1940 and the end of 1942 he was a loyal and stalwart champion of the coalition. His attitude during the latter part of the war was, however, less creditable and less intelligent, for he attempted to persuade the leaders of his party to break the coalition unless the Conservative ministers agreed to start the movement of socialism before the achievement of victory. As the immediate prospect of a Nazi victory began to fade, the old dogmas began to reemerge from their hiding places, and Laski began to preach that if returned at the election anticipated after the end of hostilities, the Labour movement should adopt some of the methods of a dictatorship by packing the civil service and the courts, corrupting the armed forces, and even, if necessary, persecuting Conservative political ideas. It was this period of wild theorizing, based upon a complete misapprehension of the national mood and, it is fair to add, of the Labour Party itself, that led Mr. Attlee in the hour of victory to recommend for Laski a period of silence as beneficial to all concerned. It is perhaps not unfair to say that even from the practical point of view, if anything could have prevented the Labour victory at the polls in 1945, it would have been the policy recommended to the Party by Harold Laski.

Laski lived for four years under the Socialist Government he had striven so long to achieve. For Laski, however, they were years of judgment rather than triumph. During this period he survived to see almost every prediction he had made prove false in the event. The new Labour victory was based upon a massive movement of public opinion, as heavy, and perhaps as excessive, as that which had destroyed the second Labour Government in 1931. There was no attempt by finance capital within or without the country to defeat the prospects of the Socialist Administration. The Conservative Party was content to recreate itself by patient work in the House of Commons and in the constituencies, and to plan a constitutional reversal by political means. Socialist Britain was buoyed and protected from the consequences of transition to a peace economy by the farsighted policies of Capitalist America. There never was any prospect of a wholesale repeal of socialist measures by a resurgent Conservatism. Nor has there been evinced any permanent enthusiasm for the socialist conception of society by the pragmatic British electorate.

Worst of all, Socialist Russia proved the implacable foe, as Capitalist America had proved the indispensable friend, of Britain and the Labour Government. Laski lived to see the beginning of the cold war, but

12. P. 218.

was unable to appreciate its implications. Characteristically, he blamed both West and East in equal shares. His intellectual commitment to the East prevented him from placing the blame where it belonged. But his basic loyalty to his country and to his party prevented him from exonerating the East from all blame.

At the end of his book Mr. Deane is driven to conclude that Laski was a failure. He had never achieved the distinction as a political theorist or as a scholar that his early works had promised. His failure was in fact brought about by the defect of his character to which I adverted at the beginning. As Mr. Deane puts it:

“The power of his emotions and his sympathies was not matched by his intellectual depth and acuity. As a consequence his statements and judgments were often irresponsible, and he was led to ignore the moral demands imposed upon the serious writer.”¹³

At the same time it is fair to Laski to remind the reader that Laski's failure was, to some extent at least, the failure of his age and generation, and to an even greater extent was due to the ultimate intellectual sterility of the British left wing within that generation. Despite his fecundity of expression, Laski was ultimately devoid of any original ideas about the presuppositions which alone give meaning to political, or any other, abstract thought. Although brought up in an orthodox Jewish family, he had no fundamental metaphysical beliefs of any kind. Had he been a thoroughgoing materialist he would, I think, inevitably have drifted into the Communist camp. But he was far too refined and civilized a personality to be a thoroughgoing materialist, and too much the child of his age to feel the want of any other philosophy not materialistic in conception, or to appreciate the relevance of such a philosophy to political ideas. He had no theory of mankind, and no objective criteria to enable him to evaluate the varying aspirations of the human heart. He had no abstract conception of justice, nor any belief in a natural law—nothing to protect him from the dreadful alternation between individualism and tyranny, nothing to provide a nonmaterial standard whereby to set a bound to liberty, or a restraint upon the exercise of power. He was too Jewish to accept the pragmatic limitations of the British Labour Party, too English to adopt wholeheartedly instead a consistent intellectual theory of politics. So while he had the instincts and many of the gifts of a prophet, he drifted through life with the limitations of an advocate in a sphere where mere advocacy is scarcely respectable. That in the course of this life he managed to win and charm a host of those who did not admire his achievements or accept his opinions, is rather a tribute to his endearing nature than to the brilliant gifts which he squandered rather than usefully employed.

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13. P. 341.

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