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Editor's Note

The following article will appear as part of a forthcoming book entitled Taking Sides: The Collected Social and Political Essays of Irving Layton (Mosaic Press/Valley Editions: Oakville, Ontario) April, 1977, edited and with an introduction by Howard Aster. The article is an edited version of Irving Layton's M.A. Thesis, A Critical Examination of Laski's Political Doctrines submitted to McGill University in 1946.

HAROLD LASKI: THE PARADOXES OF A
LIBERAL MARXIST

Irving Layton

I

Few living political thinkers are better known than Professor Harold Laski. Educated at Oxford, he came to this continent during World War I and taught first at McGill and afterwards at Harvard. At both universities he promptly got into hot water with the authorities for publicly expressing (to them) objectionable opinions. Receiving an appointment as lecturer at the London School of Economics, Laski returned to England in 1920. A prolific writer, he has built up a solid and enviable reputation for exact scholarship (all who have met or heard Laski testify to his phenomenal memory) brilliant rhetoric and complete sincerity. A forceful and eloquent speaker, he has received this century's most positive accolade of fame — his speeches are reported. Today, the chairman and influential spokesman, he is also sometimes referred to as the one-man brain trust of the British Labour Party.

In 1939 Laski elevated a number of eyebrows, academic and otherwise, by calling himself a Marxist in an article written especially for the American liberal weekly, *The Nation*, which was then running a series under the heading of *Living Philosophies*. There he wrote that the periodic wars, crises, general insecurity and stagnation of our capitalistic era had all convinced him that, broadly speaking, the philosophy of Marx was unanswerable. "Ours is that age", he asserted, "the coming of which was foreseen by Marx, in which the relations of production are in contradiction with the essential forces of production" and that "at the historical stage we have reached, the will of the people is unable to use the institutions of capitalist democracy for democratic purposes. For

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at this stage democracy needs to transform class relations in order to affirm itself; and it will not be allowed to do so if the owning class is able to prevent that achievement.”¹

In this thesis I have undertaken an examination of Laski's political doctrines with a view to determining to what extent, if any, Laski is justified in thinking of himself and in getting others to think of him as a Marxist. I have, that is to say, taken Laski at his own word and diligently sought for the evidence to validate his claim in the main body of his work which includes books, articles, brochures, as well as in the public pronouncements he has made from time to time. I have compared what I found therein with the writings of Marx and Engels, the founders of the body of doctrine known as Marxism, and with those of Lenin, whom rightly or wrongly I regard as their successor and best disciple. The conclusion which I have reached is that Laski's claim is utterly lacking in foundation and must be disregarded by any alert and well-informed student of the subject. This conclusion (my thesis) is what I have undertaken to defend in the following pages. More than that, I have also tried to set forth the reasons for my conviction that Laski, by employing Marxian terminology for his own purpose, has robbed Marxism of its revolutionary content, thereby completely emasculating and distorting it. That purpose, I believe, was to graft his earlier political doctrines, his individualistic pluralism, upon the vigorous tree of Marxism; and the result, I have tried to show, is the rather spongy fruit — Social Democracy.

Laski's first book *The Problem of Sovereignty* appeared in 1917. This was followed at two-year intervals by *Authority in the Modern State* and *Foundations of Sovereignty and Other Essays*. With these books Laski emerged alongside J. Neville Figgis, A.D. Lindsay, and G.D.H. Cole as an erudite and eloquent champion of political pluralism, a point of view which challenged the reigning monistic conception of the state as unitary and omni-competent. Laski argued that, in practice, the doctrine of a sovereign state was untenable since private groups had from time to time successfully resisted government encroachment upon their powers of inner jurisdiction and self-control. For proof of this he pointed to the determined resistance of three great ecclesiastical groups in the nineteenth-century against state interference and their triumphant assertion of extensive rights despite the opposition of the British Government.² Against Leviathan, Laski upheld the claims of the individual conscience, asserting that “the basis of obedience is consent”.³ Furthermore, the state, he affirmed, did not dare to “range over the whole area of human life”. He meant by this that state and society could not

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be equated since every society was composed of various natural and voluntary organizations with claims to the loyalties of their members as majestic as that of the state itself. The state "does not exhaust the associative impulses of men". "The group is real in the same sense that the state is real". Possessing physical superiority, the state could crush group opposition by brute force; such action, however, did not establish right. Ethically the state competed on equal terms with trade unions, churches, political parties, co-operative associations and friendly societies for the individual's allegiance. "The only ground for state-success is where the purpose of the state is morally superior to that of its opponent."⁴

Laski held that his theory of the state was more "realistic" than that of political monists. A careful reading of Laski's writings, however, will show two things: (i) that his attacks upon the political monists (Bodin, Hobbes, Austin) are based upon a simple misunderstanding and (ii) that he is not self-consistent. My reasons for thinking so are set out at some length in the following pages. My conviction is that it was mainly an outraged sense of justice which excited Laski's anti-state doctrines. From the very beginning he was aware that some groups in society, especially those who can live only by the sale of their labour-power, were disadvantaged by the state's operations. Undoubtedly, too, he was greatly influenced by the theories of the French Anarchosyndicalists. Since what he really wanted was the diffusion of sovereignty rather than its disappearance, I would consider that phase of Laski's political thought as Neo-Anarchist, as Anarchism domesticated and made palatable for Englishmen. Looked at from another angle, Laski's early doctrines were an extreme but logically permissible extension of nineteenth century liberalism. And the truth is that both liberalism and anarchism have the same social roots in the middle-class. With this important difference, however. Liberalism is the expression of a confident, self-assured middle-class, whereas anarchism expresses their bewilderment, incomprehension and rage before the advance of monopoly capitalism. Anarchism is the political philosophy of the frightened petit-bourgeois. It appeals to the small shopkeeper, white collar workers, civil servants, clerks and even makes inroads into the immature sections of the proletariat. Its primary and distinguishing feature is a wholesale ignorance of the necessary laws of capitalist development. On its gravestone (since anarchism today is no longer a political force) is engraved a single word, "Illusion". Laski's previous theories, I say, simply mirrored or were the rationalization of the bewilderment and frustration of the petit-bourgeois. Not the capitalist class, not the cap-

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italist system was responsible for their social and economic predicaments — but the evil state! Abolish the state or improve it, so ran their cry, and Justice will once more dwell in the land.

Laski's doctrines, then, were hardly "realistic". They were if anything romantic, extravagant and doctrinaire. They flew in the face of the facts; moreover, Laski failed to realize that the monistic conception of the state was the theoretical justification for the transfer of power from the feudal and land-owning class to the merchants and burghers, who had established themselves as the dominant class in society.⁵ As a consequence, an air of unreality clings to Laski's earlier volumes which neither his brilliant rhetoric nor his cogent reasoning ever seem quite able to dispel. Time, that great ironist, has in fact so managed it that the more solemn and earnest the argument — I say it quite respectfully — the more baroque it appears. Fertilized by illusions Laski's volumes were the colossal miscarriage of an erudite brain. They were elaborate gestures of futility which might intrigue his professional colleagues or move them to reply but whose total effect upon the state's impregnable purpose was exactly nil. In a fit of high academic scorn Laski might assert "that it would be of lasting benefit to political science if the whole concept of sovereignty were surrendered",⁶ but it was as if a mummy had heaved a sigh out of a moment of eternal Silence. He might indeed go on to argue that "the State is obviously a public service corporation" or that "the State is the body which seeks so to organize the interests of the consumers that they obtain the commodities of which they have need", but to the cynical realist it merely signified that Laski was drunk with a sense of hypothetical power. Something was evidently lacking, call it realism if you will, which could convert the mould of erudition and logic into genuine political penicillin. That something being absent, those volumes are already, I suspect, museum pieces.

Since, however, my aim has been also to indicate a basic continuity in Professor Laski's outlook despite his announced conversion to "Marxism" I shall set down without apology two rather large excerpts from one of his earliest books. In doing so I hope to bring into sharper focus one or two persistent problems which have continued to agitate Laski up to the present time. Readers of his *The State in Theory and Practice* will immediately recognize the ancestor of many passages in that book in the following excerpts:

No political democracy can be real that is not as well the reflection of an economic democracy; for the

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business of government is so largely industrial in nature as inevitably to be profoundly affected by the views and purposes of those who hold the keys of economic power. That does not necessarily mean that government is consciously perverted to the ends of any class within the state. So to argue is to project into history a malignant teleology from which it is, in so small degree, free. But when power is actually exerted by any section of the community, it is only natural that it should look upon its characteristic views as the equivalent of social good.⁷

Government is in the hands, for the most part, of those who wield economic power. The dangers of authority become intensified if the supreme power be collected and concentrated in an institution which cannot be relied upon uniquely to fulfil its theoretic purposes. That is why the main safeguard against economic oppression is to prevent the state from throwing the balance of its weight into the side of the established order. It is to prevent it from crying peace where in fact the true issue is war. For, important as may be the process of consumption, it is in nowise clear that the state treats equally those who are benefited by the process. It is by no means certain that the standard of life of the worker is not better safeguarded by his trade union than by the state.⁸

Made aware by the impact of events of the extremely academic nature of his views, Laski set about to save them in the best way he could. And to say the least, the device he employed was both ingenious and simple. It merely consisted of rigidly segregating the two main and incompatible elements of his political doctrines which had hitherto been inextricably bound together (see the above excerpts) — idealism and realism — and giving to them separate and extensive treatment. This was accomplished in *The State in Theory and Practice*, a book which appeared in 1935 and which was hailed by some as an authoritative discussion of the Marxian theory of the state. It was, of course, nothing of the sort. Attempting to transform a defect into a virtue, Laski decided that if his earlier doctrines were futile they could at least be made philosophical; hence in the first chapter of this volume he

developed his philosophic conception of the state. This time, however, his pluralistic arguments (modified, to be sure, to square with his "Marxism") were arrayed against the philosophical idealists with Hegel as whipping-boy. Here again, as in his controversy with the political monists, I have tried to show (i) that he has misunderstood, or, at any rate, has given a misleading picture of Hegel's teachings and (ii) that Laski is himself too far committed to idealism to cry "thief". Granting that many of Laski's arguments against Bosanquet and the other philosophical idealists are shrewdly made I still feel that he and Bosanquet are merely on the opposite sides of the one pasture looking for the same mythical four-leaf clover. I cannot, that is to say, persuade myself that Laski's differences with the philosophical idealists are of any practical or even theoretical significance.

The second chapter of this volume is significantly titled *State and Government in the Real World*. It is here, if anywhere, that diligent seekers of Laski's "Marxism" must look if they hope to find it. And, to speak truthfully, there is much in these pages to convince the unwary reader that here at last is the authentic article. If I may be forgiven a personal note, I myself was taken in by them five years ago. This, of course, was several years before a deeper acquaintance with the Marxian classics had taught me to differentiate the spurious article from the genuine. For Laski is an eclectic who has tried to marry (in his career as a political thinker) an ineradicable strain of idealism, first to Pragmatism and latterly to Marxism. The first marriage was, if anything, the more successful of the two since Pragmatism (as its subsequent career has shown) can quite easily accommodate the political or the religious idealist. But not so with Marxism. Marxism is critical, revolutionary and materialistic; it is, if I may employ a violent metaphor, a blazing furnace which rapidly consumes as so much rubbish all teleologies, all perfectionisms; it is the declared and uncompromising enemy of absolutisms in any form, of all ethical and idealistic hankerings. It seeks for an explanation of what men think in their practice; and it examines that practice to discover general laws which men may afterwards use as levers for changing the world in which they live. In brief, Marxism purports to be a science, a guide to effective action.

It is, however, apparent to even the most casual reader of Laski that his sociological concerns are ethical rather than scientific. From the very outset, from indeed his first book on, Laski has attempted to discover the morally unshakeable foundations for political authority. It is this ethical and idealist outlook which Laski has attempted to unite to Marxism, with the most unfortunate consequences to both. The result

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of this eclecticism has been ambiguity, confusion and sophistry as well as the unavoidable distortion of Marxism. Marxism will simply not accommodate people who talk abstractly about Justice, Morality, Right, etc. A single example of the kind of confusion which results when the attempt is made to combine idealism with Marxism will indicate what I mean. Thus Laski argues that "the full exploitation of (the means of production) does not necessarily mean a *just exploitation*. That depends upon whether the class-relations which the system of ownership involves permit an equal response to the claims made upon the product to be distributed."⁹ (My italics). Seeking Justice (and Laski has been a diligent and untiring seeker for almost thirty years) Laski has said something which is either meaningless or contradictory. For a moment's reflection; in fact, some of Laski's own words will convince anyone that so long as classes are in existence (there can be no "class-relations" without classes) the system of ownership cannot and, what is more, does not allow the equal satisfaction of claims upon the social product. This might be possible if the system of ownership were public, but then classes, and with them class-relations, will have entirely disappeared.

Here, then, appropriately I might explain the use of the terms noumenal and phenomenal which appear in the following pages. It occurred to me as I proceeded to study Laski's writings that he was the victim of a crippling ambivalency. He inhabits, that is to say, two sharply distinct worlds which permit of no bridgement. One is the world of reason, truth and decency; the other the world of unreason, of brutal and terrifying fact. The first I have chosen to call the noumenal world; the second, the phenomenal. Into Laski's noumenal world I have somewhat arbitrarily unloaded his idealism, his individualistic pluralism and other various odds and ends of his political doctrines which could not be considered as derivable from contemporary political fact. The phenomenal world, I think, is self-explanatory.

It is, I believe, precisely because Laski suffers from self-division that his writings possess their arresting quality. Profoundly democratic and humanitarian, Laski is also actually aware of the harsh nature of our political and social involvements, which jeopardize, at every turn, the appeal to humanity and decency. Himself a reasonable man, he is haunted by a sense of inevitable disaster as men seem deliberately to choose the paths of unreason and violence. Having the intellectual's love of order, he fears whatever may interrupt or destroy it; the word that most frequently drops from his pen is "catastrophe". Here, and here alone, must be sought Laski's repeatedly expressed alarm at the possibility of a proletarian revolution, and his effort, as a political

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thinker, to persuade an aroused working-class to take the inoffensive and constitutional path of Social Democracy.

II

Laski's schematism is a device whereby he can cement, can join together his two states, the noumenal and the phenomenal. It is the broad platform which enables the idealist and materialist, the pluralist and the Marxian, the man of action and the erudite scholar, to embrace. As a sheer intellectual achievement, it is breath-taking in its impressiveness, and convinces as much by the neatness of its execution as by the splendour of its final construction. Of course there are some hypercritical cynics who will declare that it was done by a trick and will even insist upon examining for themselves the timber with which the platform was constructed: such fellows are evidently lacking in aesthetic appreciation. Dull fellows — they are given beauty and they demand logic!

But first the state must be sent to the cleaners to have any taint of oppression removed from it.¹⁰

And now let us consider the following definitions of the state which Laski makes:

(i) "The state is a legal instrument for making the claims of private owners to the resources of production dominant over other claims from those who do not own."¹¹

(ii) "This state-power, as I have already pointed out, has to be exercised by men; and those who are entrusted with its exercise constitute the government of the state. Their business is to use the state-power for the purposes for which it was instituted, and these, I have argued, may be summarized by saying that the end of the state is the satisfaction, at the highest possible level, of its subjects' demands."¹²

The ordinary philistine, not educated to understand dialectical subtleties, may be forgiven if he stands confused before what at first blush appears to be a contradiction. He is told that the state is a class weapon; and since that appears to him a reasonable viewpoint he has no difficulty in assimilating it. Yet a moment later, indeed with the same breath, Laski assures him that the state exists to promote the greatest possible satisfaction of the citizen's demands. One can understand his bewilderment. But let us hasten to assist him. We must explain to him that Laski is here speaking of two states, the ideal and the actual. The ideal or noumenal state is simplicity itself. Its function is to ensure the

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fullest use of the instruments of production (the Marxian bridge) and to distribute their products in just measure to all its citizens. Unfortunately the historical development of the productive forces has engendered cancerous class divisions in society which prevent the noumenal state from carrying out its "theoretic purpose". Fallen from its heavenly dwelling-place it develops a secular bias in favor of the owners of the means of production, the ruling class in every society. It begins to squint, and instead of ideal justice we have class justice, that is, injustice; instead of equality, inequality; instead of harmony, conflict. The noumenal state, temporarily covered with unsightly class encrustations, appears as the phenomenal state. The latter, far from espousing justice, equality, or the happiness of its citizens, is never neutral in the struggle waged between the possessing and non-possessing classes, is constantly favoring the one as against the other. Sovereignty, i.e. supreme coercive power, is now effectively possessed by owners of the productive instruments and is nothing else but the will of the rulers enforced by a standing army, police, prisons and all the other machinery of coercing the truculent lower orders to obedience. As for the government, it too has suffered a declension and, instead of serving the noumenal state-purpose, now acts as the agent, as the executive committee of the ruling class in power. Furthermore, since law is the will of the government, that is, the ruling class, it also is severed from its noumenal abode (justice) and never transcends the particular class interest to promote the welfare of society as a whole. Sovereignty, government and law, each has fallen back a step, but they have done so in good order, preserving like well-drilled soldiers an equal and uniform distance between themselves and their ideal counterparts.

In brief, Laski has invented an ingenious parallel construction which enables him to step easily from one kingdom to another. If however, his person be examined a curious document will be found. It is his passport, the term sovereignty. One side of the document bears the stamp "State Purpose"; the other, "The Ruling Class". It is, I maintain, this semantic ambiguity which confers upon Laski the rights of citizenship in the two separate states, the phenomenal and the noumenal.¹³ Yet (and this is the whole, indeed the very crux of the matter) the two states turn out to be not so very different after all. For observe that the noumenal purpose has been defined as the satisfaction of maximum demand *through the fullest possible use of the productive forces*. And the actual historical mission of the phenomenal state (after fumigation at the cleaners) turns out to be nothing else but the successive embodiments or realizations of the noumenal purpose as defined above. The

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phenomenal state, that is to say, actualizes according to Laski a portion of the ideal at every moment of its historical career. It fulfills the noumenal purpose continuously, and with each successive advance, each successive growth, there takes place a corresponding growth of justice, freedom and equality, all close to the heart of the pluralist and the idealist.¹⁴ This — this is nothing other than evolutionary democratic socialism, but in a disguise so ingenious, so resourceful and so brilliantly executed as to be all but impenetrable. But all the same it is democratic socialism and not Marxism.

To complete the disguise, however, one further misrepresentation, one more distortion and falsification of a Marxian tenet was necessary. And this was accomplished in the following passage where Laski writes: "This is the truth in the Marxian argument that *in a classless society the state, as we know it, will 'wither away'*. For the state as we know it has always had the function not of preserving law and order as absolute goods seen in the same broad way by all members of the state; the function of the state has always been to preserve that law and that order which are implicit in the purposes of a particular class-society."¹⁵ (My italics). The tricky and misleading words are "the state as we know it". The state, *as we know it*, will not "wither away". This fate is reserved, according to Marx and Engels, for the Dictatorship of the Proletariat, which, as they pointed out from time to time, had ceased to be a state in the true and essential meaning of that word since "The first act of the State, in which it really acts as the representative of the whole of Society, namely, the assumption of control over the means of production on behalf of society, is also its last act as a state."¹⁶ It is not "the state as we know it" which withers away but the most complete democracy. As Lenin puts it: "The capitalist State does not wither away. . . but is *destroyed* by the proletariat in the course of the revolution. Only the proletarian State or semi-State withers away after the revolution."¹⁷

But revolution and the proletarian state are the last things in the world that Laski wants to talk about. What better way to camouflage this reluctance than by a reference to "a classless society" whose Marxian ring sounds so much less menacing since it comes from such a conveniently remote distance? Today it is a more difficult matter to distort Marxism since it requires for its achievement a combination of virtues and powers possessed by few people: high-mindedness, erudition, marked controversial gifts and a cool, unflinching impudence. Yet it must be acknowledged that Laski, using a Marxian terminology for just that very purpose, has all but succeeded. Nevertheless, I submit that

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Laski's idealistic social democracy and eclectic hodge-podge have nothing in common with Marxism which rigorously eschews all ethical and teleological presuppositions in its attempt to evaluate social phenomena scientifically. Laski's wish to envelope Marx in the same ethical fog in which he himself habitually dwells; his naive effort to equate *Das Kapital* with the Sermon on the Mount; exchange value with the Categorical Imperative; his magnificent zeal to present his teleological idealism in the guise of Marxian dialectics are, to one who has studied the Marxian classics, as futile as they are pathetic. But the wish, the effort, and the zeal are all characteristic of present-day Social Democracy.

III

For the Marxist the basic antagonism in modern society is that which exists between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat; Laski substitutes for this the opposition between capitalism and democracy. "The assumptions of capitalism", he affirms, "contradict the implications of democracy."¹⁸ By the assumptions of capitalism Laski means the subordination of the productive mechanism to the profit-seeking motive which necessarily limits welfare and happiness to the privileged few who control the instruments of production. Democracy, on the other hand, implies equality. The union of capitalism and democracy was due to an historical accident which required of the middle-classes to grant certain concessions to the urban proletariat and the peasantry to win their support in the struggle against feudalism. The offspring of that marriage was therefore not economic but political, that is, formal democracy. Laski points out that political democracy, which held out to the masses the promise of the eventual elimination of social abuses and inequalities, worked quite well as long as capitalism was in its expanding phase. Capitalism was then progressive, due entirely to the fact that its prosperous advance enabled it to afford certain concessions as the necessary price for the avoidance of social strife. Now, however, capitalism is no longer progressive; instead of expanding it has begun to contract; the capitalist system has entered upon that extremity foretold for it by Marx in which the relations of production are in contradiction with the indispensable forces of production. As a consequence of this situation capitalism has begun to revoke its former generosity and to favor repression as a means for dealing with the legitimate claims of the disadvantaged sections of the population.

Eventually, that is to say, the unstable equilibrium established by the

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French Revolution of 1789 must give way, and either capitalism or democracy triumph. For the ethic of the one is unalterably opposed to that of the other. Capitalism restricts economic and political advantage to the owners of property, while democracy, Laski thinks, is a one-way street to equality. Between the two no compromise is possible. And the lesson of Fascism, Laski insists, is that the property-owners will not hesitate to suspend the democratic processes the moment they realize that the propertyless are prepared to make use of them to increase their share of the social product. With Fascism the class struggle does not come to an end; it is merely transferred to another plane. Fascism is the use of unrestrained violence against those groups, mainly the proletariat, which aspire to challenge the supremacy or to destroy the privileges of the ruling class. It is, first of all, a direct assault upon the living standards of the masses; and to that end the destruction of all their defence organizations (trade unions, workers' clubs and newspapers, etc.) as well as the destruction of representative institutions in general are essential prerequisites. Whenever, that is, the capitalist class feels itself threatened it will use the power of the state to crush democracy; in doing so it must resort to terror and continue to maintain its authority by naked repression. Fascism is the open dictatorship of the bourgeoisie.¹⁹

This, broadly speaking, is the dilemma confronting all capitalist democracies; and no one has argued with greater trenchancy than Laski the significance of that dilemma for our time. As a description of *one* of the major social tensions of today it is, I believe, largely true. No one, to be sure, can seriously disagree with Laski when he argues as follows:

In a capitalist society, therefore, liberty is a function of the possession of property, and those who possess property on any considerable scale are small in numbers. There is always, therefore, a perpetual contest in such a society for the extension of the privileges of property to those who do not enjoy its benefits. There is, from this angle, a profound contradiction between the economic and the political aspects of capitalist democracy. For the emphasis of the one is on the power of the few, while the emphasis of the other is on the power of the many. Granted only security, the less the interference with economic aspects by the political power of the society, the greater will be the benefit enjoyed by the

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few; granted security, also, the greater the political interference the more widely will economic benefit be shared. The permanent drive of capitalist democracy is therefore towards the control by the state of economic power in the interest of the multitude.²⁰

This picture, I say, is largely true; but it is also much too simple. It depends for its complete validation upon the construction of a model which ignores much of the essential and characteristic processes of capitalist society. It carries conviction to the mind chiefly because it is presented as the antithesis of two opposed principles one of which is, by definition, good as the other is evil. In what sense, for example, is it true to say that capitalist democracy leads on to socialism, for presumably that is what Laski means by "the control by the state of economic power in the interest of the multitude"? As an abstraction, as a principle of good, as a selection of one single aspect from the welter of social phenomena, it is certainly permissible to speak of democracy as opposed to capitalism. But what we are dealing with here is not "pure democracy" but "capitalist democracy" and to assert of the latter that it has for its end socialism is, to say the least, begging the question. Certainly such a statement cannot stand without some very serious qualifications; and these qualifications, as we shall see, are such as to throw some doubt upon the validity of Laski's over-simplified model. It is, for instance, a prime essential to the effectiveness of Laski's construction that capitalism should yield security; but this, both by definition and fact, is precisely what capitalism is incapable of assuring us.

We may legitimately identify capitalist democracy with parliamentarism; and, in essence, Laski's practical programme shakes down through many siftings to a somewhat diffident apologia for parliamentarism: the working-class can achieve its emancipation by placing the necessary legislation upon the statute books. Laski counsels a reliance upon constitutional methods, upon legalism, upon the formation of a Labour Party which will confine its revolutionary activities to "getting out the vote". This, of course, is the programme of Social Democracy everywhere. The acceptance of this counsel and its application in practice were mainly responsible for the complete degeneration of the once powerful and respected German Social Democratic Party.²¹ In fact it is not too much to say that Scheidemann and Noske by incessantly preaching constitutionalism to the German workers unwittingly paved the broad highway upon which Hitler's tanks afterwards rumbled into

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the working-class districts of Berlin, Hamburg and Leipzig. Wherever the programme of Social Democracy has been tried it has ended in disastrous failure or in humiliating debility. The experience of two Labour Governments under the late Ramsay MacDonald is, it goes without saying, no exception to this consistent record of failure, impotence and humiliation.²² However, it is unnecessary to develop this point further; history has already made its wry commentary upon the futile tactics of Social Democracy.

In praising bourgeois democracy, therefore, Laski is helping to foster those illusions which led to the defeat of the working-class in Germany, Italy and Spain. He is only repeating what every bourgeois likes to hear. That bourgeois democracy is better than no sort of democracy is, of course, true; but it is the kind of truth whose utterance comes more gracefully from the lips of a liberal philistine. What the Marxist, according to Lenin, must strive to convince the masses is that "bourgeois democracy. . . remains and cannot but remain under capitalism, restricted, truncated, false and hypocritical, a paradise for the rich and a trap and a snare and a deception for the exploited, for the poor."²³ Since Lenin presented the question from the point of view of the enslaved and oppressed masses he characterized capitalist democracy as "democracy for the rich", adding that it was precisely in the most democratic countries — America, England, France and Switzerland — that the masses were more deceived and misled than in other countries. The following passage reveals quite clearly the tremendous difference in approach towards capitalist democracy between a Marxist and a Social Democrat. (For Kautsky in this passage simply substitute Laski):

Take the bourgeois parliaments. Can it be that the learned Mr. Kautsky has never heard that the *more* democracy is developed, the *more* the bourgeois parliaments fall under the control of the Stock Exchange and the bankers? This, of course, does not mean that we must not use bourgeois parliaments (the Bolsheviks have made better use of them than any other party in the world, for in 1912-1914 we captured the entire workers' curia in the fourth Duma). But it does mean that only a Liberal can forget the historical limitations and conventional character of bourgeois parliamentarism as Kautsky does. Even in the most democratic bourgeois states the oppressed masses meet at every step the crying

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contradiction between the formal equality proclaimed by the "democracy" of the capitalists, and the thousand and one *de facto* limitations and restrictions which make the proletarians *wage-slaves*. It is precisely this contradiction that opens the eyes of the masses to the rottenness, hypocrisy and mendacity of capitalism. It is this contradiction which the agitators and propagandists of socialism are constantly showing up to the masses, *in order to prepare them* for the revolution. And now that the era of revolution has begun, Kautsky turns his back upon it and begins to extol the charms of moribund bourgeois democracy.²⁴ (Lenin's italics).

In the light of this passage, one is simply left wondering that Laski can still pose as a Marxist!

By artfully ignoring the profound differences which divide communists from socialists, differences which extend far beyond the belief or lack of belief in the reality of a constitutional victory (indeed, this is rather a crude way of stating the difference), Laski finds the most dexterous way of covering up his own troublesome vacillations and uncertainties, and would like, it would seem, to involve the communists in them. In fact, as any Marxist knows, communists are not out to "demonstrate" that reformism is an illusion. For a professor it may be an academic question, but not for the workers who will most certainly have to pay with their own lives for the mistaken policies of their leaders. When communists offer to form a united front with socialists, they do so for a very practical reason — to better the living conditions of the workers and to prepare them for the next round of struggle. In truth, Laski seems unable to rid himself of the catastrophic or climacteric picture of revolution, of thinking of revolution in terms of sudden upheaval, as a spontaneous outbreak of violence against the old order. His revolutionary horizon (revealing all the fears and ignorant terrors of the liberal philistine) is severely limited to Blanquism; and, as we have seen, he bends all his efforts to dissuade the exploited wage-slaves from preparing their formations for a possible attack upon the bourgeois state. The lessons of the Bolshevik revolution — the most peaceful revolution in history — are completely unassimilated by him. For Laski, therefore, the only alternative to revolution is reform;²⁵ and it is to the path of reformism that Laski would commit the working-class.

The Marxist, on the contrary, while believing that reforms are both

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useful and necessary, insists that the capitalist state must be shattered by a frontal attack and its place taken by a proletarian dictatorship (or a proletarian democracy, that is to say, democracy for the poor) before socialism on any broad and permanent scale can be realized. The social reformist — and Laski for all his exasperated incertitudes must be numbered among them — believes that capitalism can be reformed from within; the Marxist regards reforms as concessions which are wrested from the capitalist class and which enable the proletariat to consolidate its forces, such a consolidation assuring it ultimately of an easier and speedier victory. For the Marxist, therefore, reforms are not the alternative to revolution but, in a sense, its pre-condition; they help, as all concessions won from the capitalist class do, to organize and educate the workers for the final effort to overturn the system which keeps them enslaved. Needless to say, historical, economic and psychological considerations will greatly determine the difficulty or the ease with which the exploiting minority will be eliminated. But the Marxist relies upon unrelenting struggle and preaches it unremittingly to the working class. The social reformist preaches parliamentarism and the reliance upon constitutional methods even when, as with Laski, he already senses the hollowness and insecurity of both.

The Marxist, then, believes that in a certain historical context might is sanctified by right. He therefore accepts without lamentation or despair the proletariat as the active and revolutionary agent for changing contemporary capitalist society. This is what is meant by scientific socialism. Not appeals to abstract justice or reason or any other ideal category in the mind of the political philosopher, but only the revolutionary temper and maturity of the proletariat can abolish inequality and exploitation and usher in the prerequisites for a classless society. Here I might digress long enough to say that the transvaluation of values of which Nietzsche wrote will be accomplished by the triumphant working-class. It is not usual in radical circles to mention Marx and Nietzsche in the same breath: nevertheless I am firmly persuaded that future historians and thinkers will reckon Nietzsche as great an anti-bourgeois, as great an emancipating force, as Marx himself. Nietzsche was the poet of the proletarian revolution as Marx was its prophet. Marx analyzed the economic foundations of the old society and foretold the nature of the new foundations succeeding to it; Nietzsche witheringly dissected bourgeois psychology and morality and with the intuition of genius celebrated the morality and conduct of the future.²⁶ Moreover, both men were dedicated to the faith that mankind can become the confident master of its environment.

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Laski's great obsession is that in any showdown between capital and labour, the result must be the curtailment of "liberty" and the establishment of either a Fascist or a Proletarian dictatorship. And, as we have seen, Laski is equally hostile to both of them, insisting that when "men fight to destroy existing authority, the victors are bound to embark upon an attack on freedom in order to consolidate their power."²⁷ And since it is exactly such a battle that is shaping up it is not surprising that the note of elegiac despair, of mournful threnody, makes its appearance in Laski's later volumes. For as a liberal, as a social democrat, Laski's ultimate allegiance is to the Ideal and to those ardent few within whom, as within himself, the Ideal has taken up its anti-septic residence. His agony is caused by the twofold awareness that the Ideal must step down into the arena of men, there to give battle, and that in any event the Ideal is powerless to arrest or direct the turbulent passions of our era. Such surely is the despairing mood of the following passage: "There are", Laski urges, "in every society little groups of devoted men and women who know that the spirit of evil can be exorcised where there is the will to find the terms of peace, the ardour to discover the conditions of fellowship. But it seems the inexorable logic of a material and unequal society that their voices should hardly be heard above the passionate clamour of extremes. If we make Justice an exile from our habitations, respect for her advocates lies beyond our power of achievement. We confound her claims with our own; we confuse her principles with our self-interest."²⁸ Not the maturity, the revolutionary temper, the patient and resourceful construction of a working-class party prepared to lead the exploited masses but the goodwill and insight of the select few; not the dictatorship of the proletariat but the benevolent dictatorship of Justice; these alone, Laski believes, may establish the socialist society of the future. What is this but a restatement of the discredited utopian socialism against which Marx and Engels levelled their deadliest and most ironic attacks? Laski, it would appear, actually deplors the growing strength and militancy of the working-class which finally enables it to challenge the rule of the capitalists; for him, it is only an ugly instance of the "passionate clamour of extremes", of evil "self-interest". Laski the idealist, with the remarkable instinct of a homing pigeon, always returns to where he started from.

Finally, since Laski asserts that Marx was over-optimistic; that is to say, unscientific, in his prognostications concerning the future;²⁹ since, moreover, Laski himself has never transcended the narrow horizons of "bourgeois justice" and "bourgeois rights"; since, also, Laski believes

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that some kind of political authority will always be necessary so long as men are organized in societies; and since, furthermore, for Laski parliamentarism and democracy are sacrosanct idols, the timeless and indeed inevitable forms of all wise government,³⁰ it must be stated that Marx not only criticized parliamentary institutions but urged their supersession by a working corporation that would be legislative and executive at one and the same time and envisaged, for a later period, the disappearance of democracy itself. For, as Lenin pointed out, the "withering away" of the state actually means the "withering away" of democracy. For democracy, Lenin argued, "is a *State* which recognizes the subjection of the minority to the majority, that is, an organization for the systematic use of *violence* by one class against the other, by one part of the population against the other."³¹ And Marxists set themselves, as their final aim, "the task of the destruction of the State, that is, of every organized and systematic violence, every form of violence against man in general."³² Under Communism "there will vanish all need for force, for the *subjection* of one man to another, of one section of society to another, since people will *grow accustomed* to observing the elementary conditions of social existence *without force and without subjection*."³³ That is, without that political authority whose operation upon the most ideal terms it has been Laski's effort, from beginning to end, whether as pluralist or "Marxist", to discover.

This task, I conclude, was the task of a liberal philistine, of one who had not yet freed himself from bourgeois prejudices and reasoning; of one who was fundamentally an idealist in temper and not a materialist. It never was, and it never could have been, the task of any genuine Marxist.

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Notes

1. Harold Laski, "Why I am a Marxist" (Jan. 14, 1939) *The Nation* Vol. 148, No. 3, pp. 59-61.
2. Harold Laski, *Problem of Sovereignty* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1917) Ch. I and Appendix A.
3. Harold Laski, *Authority and the Modern State* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1919) p. 34.
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 45, 46.
5. See, however, Harold Laski, *Rise of European Liberalism* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1938).
6. Harold Laski, *Grammar of Politics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1925) p. 45.
7. Harold Laski, *Authority and the Modern State*, p. 38.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 92.
9. Harold Laski, *The State in Theory and Practice* (New York: 1935) p. 139.
10. See *The State in Theory and Practice*, pp. 100, 115, 118, 145, 179. It is relevant to my argument to point out that each time Laski ventures an explicit definition of the state.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 145.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 138.
13. By giving the term sovereignty a double meaning Laski has taken out an insurance policy against the future: should the bourgeoisie yield peacefully and democratic socialism triumph, Laski can point to the realization of the state-purpose; should they not, and after a violent revolution of the proletariat establish its dictatorship, Laski can involve the other, class rule. The ambiguity, in short, is a reflection of Laski's own divided and deeply troubled mind.
14. *The State in Theory and Practice*, pp. 78, 181, 295.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 181.
16. Friedrich Engels, *Anti-Dubring*, p. 315.
17. V.I. Lenin, *State and Revolution*, p. 125.
18. *The State in Theory and Practice*, p. 111.
19. *Ibid.*, pp. 136, 289.
20. Harold Laski, *Democracy in Crisis* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1933) pp. 205-206.
21. Eisler, Norder and Schreiner, *The Lesson of Germany*, pp. 60-62, 100-102.
22. John Strachey, *The Theory and Practice of Socialism* (London: Gollancz, 1937) pp. 440-444. The partial socialistic achievements of the present labour government under Prime Minister Attlee should not blind us to the fact that it is, quite literally, the exploited workers and

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peasants of India, China, Egypt, Iran, Greece and Italy who are paying the price for them. This is nothing other than labour imperialism.

23. V.I. Lenin, *The Proletarian Revolution and Renegade Kautsky*, p. 26.
24. *Ibid.*, pp. 28-28. Now that, as a consequence of the successful war to defeat fascism the European masses are beginning to take the revolutionary path towards their emancipation, Laski is reported to have told the French, Belgian and Dutch socialists to refuse the Communists' proposal for United Action.
25. *The State in Theory and Practice*, p. 109.
26. Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, pp. 105-108.
27. *Democracy in Crisis*, p. 208. Lenin argued that under a proletarian dictatorship freedom and democracy were a million times greater than under bourgeois democracy.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 267.
29. Harold Laski, "Marxism After Fifty Years," (March, 1937) *Current History*, Vol. 38, pp. 691-696.
30. Harold Laski, *Parliamentary Government in England* (New York: 1938) p. 77.
31. V.I. Lenin, *The State and Revolution*, p. 187.
32. *Ibid.*, p. 187.
33. *Ibid.*