A CRITICAL EXAMINATION OF

LASKI'S POLITICAL DOCTRINES

IRVING LAYTON

THESIS SUBMITTED
IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS
IN THE DEPARTMENT OF ECONOMICS AND POLITICAL SCIENCE
McGILL UNIVERSITY

April 1946.

C O N T E N T S

Chapter I

Introduction

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. (1) "Ours is that age", he asserted, "the coming of which was foreseen by Marx, in which the relations of production are in contradiction

---

(1) Laski, Why I am a Marxist, The Nation, CXLVIII (Jan. 14, 1939) pp. 59-61.

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 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."

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 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.

---

(2) Laski, Problem of Sovereignty, Ch. 1 and Appendix A.
(3) Authority in the Modern State, p. 34.

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."

Laski held that his theory of the state was more "realistic" than that of the 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 Anarcho-syndicalists. 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 capitalist 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. (4) 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

---

(4) See, however, his Rise of European Liberalism.

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", (5) 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 <u>The State in Theory and Practice</u> 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 business of gov-

---

(5) Laski, Grammar of Politics, p. 45.

ernment 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." (6)

"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." (7)

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 segre-

---

(6) Authority in the Modern State, p. 38.
(7) ibid., p. 92.

gating 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, but the blind are always ready to follow someone a little more fortunate than themselves, namely, the cross-eyed. 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 accomodate 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 unfor-

tunate consequences to both. The result of this eclecticism has been ambiguity, confusion and sophistry as well as the unavoidable distortion of Marxism. Marxism will simply not accomodate 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 <u>just exploitation</u>. 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." (8) (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.

---

(8) The State in Theory and Practice, p. 139.

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

Chapter II

The Noumenal State

In the noumenal world, Laski is concerned to make two important distinctions, both affording the basis for his pluralism. The first, is a distinction between state and society; the second, a distinction between state and government. The state, he maintains, must not be confused with that total complexity we call society. In order to ensure "those uniformities of conduct" without which no society can exist, a special organ is necessary. That organ is the state. Power, it follows, is of its essence. But what will that power be used for, what ends will it encompass? Obviously, if it is employed to coerce Jews to become practising Catholics, or vice versa, it is forgetting that society sets limits to the uses to which power may be put. Since there are activities outside the state-context, i.e. trade unions, churches, clubs, etc., it is well to remember that the state, although the most important, is only one of the numerous forms of social organization. The lesser forms offer as much claim for consideration from its members as the state. There is actually no inherent reason why men's prior loyalty should rather go to the state than, let us say, to the church or the trade union to which they happen to belong.

The state, of course, represents itself as seeking to promote the widest social good. But that is merely a claim, a promise, which must be made actual in fact. The state recommends itself to its subjects only as it brings order and happiness

into their lives. Although the state, in theory, strives to promote the maximum social good, it is ethically neutral and cannot be judged as a whole. Only its individual acts can be scrutinized and judged. Since it is a secular instrument for encompassing certain ends, ethical validity does not attach to it, per se, any more than to a machine. Laski defines the state as "an organization for enabling the mass of men to realize social good on the largest possible scale". (1) In another place Laski asserts that he means by the state "a society which is integrated by possessing a coercive authority legally supreme over any individual or group which is part of the society." (2) Through its possession of sovereignty, supreme coercive power, the state is distinguished from all other forms of social organization.

Although both in the Grammar of Politics and in The State in Theory and Practice Laski is intent to show that a distinction must be made between state and society, nevertheless there is a difference of emphasis between the two books that is not without significance. The distinction is insisted upon much more readily in the earlier book. There he wrote: "There is a difference between the State and society. The State may set the keynote of the social order, but is is not identical

---

(1) Grammar of Politics, P. 25. In The State in Theory and Practice "social good on the largest possible scale" has been transmuted into the Marxian metal of "satisfaction of maximum demand".

(2) The State in Theory and Practice, P. 8. This definition, we might say, is realistic as distinct from the first, which leans towards idealism. It is important to understand at the outset that Laski is working two definitions of the state concurrently.

with it. And it is fundamental to the understanding of the State that we should realise the existence of this distinction....

"Nor, in fact, can the State claim such universality as its identification with society would imply. For churches have always asserted their right not merely to transcend natural limits, but to go beyond a given social order to the expression of a world-ideal. An English Roman Catholic does not find his religious allegiance enfolded within the margins of his political loyalty. So, too, with organizations like the Labour International. Its members would admit a measure of allegiance to the State; but they would insist that they owe allegiance also to the theory of right embodied in an organization which reaches outside the boundaries of the State." (3)

In The State in Theory and Practice, while the distinction between state and society is still adhered to, the emphasis is now upon what the state can do rather than on what it cannot do.

"The State, then, is a way of organizing the collective life of a given society. It is indeed legitimate to regard it not as the society itself in its manifold complexities, but as an aspect of the society in which the totality of its life is, at least, contingently embraced. For since the coercive power of the State is supreme, there is, in theory, no activity within its jurisdiction the character of which it may not seek to define. Anyone who considers for a moment the extent of the functions of the modern State will not be tempted to underestimate the reality

---

(3) Grammar of Politics, pp. 26 - 29

of the sovereign power.... To take a rapid view of its outstanding functions is to realize the degree to which it pervades and permeates the individual life. The modern citizen is enmeshed at every turn in the network of its operations". (4)

No one, I believe, reading these two passages can fail to note the difference in mood and emphasis between them. While both contend that the distinction between state and society is a legitimate one, the former is confident that the distinction can be kept; the latter, however, takes a more sober view of the far-reaching and permeative activities of the state. There is, indeed, an almost painful awareness that in actual practice, as apart from theory, the discrimination between state and society is of very little import. What may account for this change, this shift in emphasis? I suggest that it was due to the recognition by Laski that, given certain productive relations, any society represents an indissoluble totality of which the state may be considered only as the giant driving-wheel. (5) The distinction between state and society is purely an academic one. Accepting the Marxian interpretation of history Laski now believes that "The basic factor in any given society is the way in which it earns its living; all social relations are built upon provision for those primary material appetites without satisfying which life cannot continue. And an analysis of any society will

---

(4) The State in Theory and Practice, p. 10
(5) It must always be borne in mind what Laski is trying to do. He is attempting to bridge Marxism and his earlier pluralism. Hence "the drop of Marxism" which falls from time to time into his earlier political doctrines, giving to an unchanged substance a somewhat different coloration.

always reveal the close connection between its institutions and culture and the method of satisfying material appetites." (6) This way of looking at society is quite other from that expressed in earlier books, which viewed separate institutions as seeking to embody a "theory of right". The general change in Laski's outlook may be said to be from idealism to materialism; from abstract atomism to social collectivism. (7)

The noumenal state, then, possesses sovereignty for the purpose of integrating a society. Laski maintains that the attribution of sovereignty to the state "connotes merely a formal source of reference and nothing more." (8) The great ends which the state seeks, security, integration and the satisfaction of maximum demand, although they are moral goods, do not confer moral validation upon the state. The state is merely an instrument for obtaining those goods. It is for the citizens to judge whether the state does indeed achieve them and in democratic countries, at least, they have the means for registering their verdict. The will of the state, expressed in laws, may be wise or unwise, just or unjust; their mere issuance does not confer upon them an a priori rectitude. The citizen must scrutinize each law as it gets enacted and determine for himself whether it serves the great ends which are "the theoretic purpose" of the state. "A theory of the State", Laski insists, "must be a way of valuing the achievement of actual states, a criterion of measurement, rather than a statement of reality". (9)

---

(6) The State in Theory and Practice, p. 91
(7) This change, I shall argue, has been neither thorough-going nor consistent.
(8) The State in Theory and Practice, p.9
(9) ibid., p. 6

From the assertion that the state possesses legal but not moral authority a number of conclusions follow inescapably. Firstly, a law to be morally valid must win the free consent of the individual. Obedience that is exacted through terror is worthless. A unity that is achieved through the compulsion of fear is artificial and must dissolve at the first impact of real freedom. Only the unforced assent of the individual to a law makes that law morally valid. Free citizens freely debating the function of government as that is translated into laws is the great desideratum. The law can only win that assent if it informs the lives of the citizens with some installment of that ultimate good for which the state is said to exist. (10) Secondly, the consent of the individual is worthless unless it is an informed consent, one that is given only after all the evidence has been examined and weighed. This, of course, presupposes that the citizen has been given an education that enables him to offer a reflective judgement. An ignorant man can never be free although he be a citizen of the most democratic country in the world. Again, a valid consent presupposes that the evidence offered the citizen is free from the taint of bias. The great

---

(10) We might legitimately identify the noumenal state with "pure democracy". In Problems of Sovereignty and Authority in the Modern State, Laski is a neo-anarchist seeking moral status for the individual surrounded by the all-devouring, omnicompetent state. In his Grammar of Politics he is indistinguishable from the liberal who demands the most excellent things without the overthrow of the bourgeosie. About "pure democracy" Lenin has this to say: "(It) is not only an ignorant phrase, revealing lack of understanding of the class struggle and of the nature of the State, but also a hollow phrase, since in communist society democracy will gradually change and become a habit, and finally 'wither away'; but there will never be 'pure democracy'."

organs of public opinion, radio, newspapers and books must be at the citizen's command. If the newspapers are owned by multi-millionaires who "slant" or colour the news for their own or for class ends they are violating a public trust; they are obstructing the individual in his effort to arrive at a valid judgement. A mis-informed man, no less than an illiterate man, has no real means of exercising the functions of citizenship.

Nor was Laski unaware in his earlier books that inequality frustrates the "theoretic purpose" of the state. Freedom, he insists, in actual fact belongs only to the privileged few. For only they possess the necessary leisure and education to enable them to weigh evidence and offer a valid judgement. But Laski means something more than that. A political democracy is purely formal democracy. In theory every citizen has an equal claim to the state's interest. However, since actual power is determined by wealth and the ownership of the means of production, it will gravitate towards those individuals, forming a privileged class in society, which possess them. Laski criticizes the optimists of the nineteenth century for believing that the mere granting of the vote to everyone would ensure a just and well-ordered commonwealth. The disappointment of their hopes was due to a failure to realize that "No political democracy can be real that is not as well the reflection of an economic democracy". (11)

---

(11) Authority in the Modern State, p. 38. This theme is dealt with more fully and more realistically in a later book, "Democracy in Crisis", which marked Laski's conversion to "Marxism". Since then, his effort has been to show that the marriage between capitalism and democracy is a very unstable one, leading of necessity to its ultimate dissolution. For capitalism means that the ownership of the means of production the very sources of wealth and power, are limited to the few, while democracy insists that power belongs to the many.

Society, then, is a complex totality and social manifestations, however diverse and varied they seem, are yet related to a single centre. All societies are governed by some inner logic and exhibit a recognisable pattern. Borrowing this insight from Marx, Laski recognized that the distinction between state and society was academic, of no practical significance. The "drop of Marxism" produced a similar result in his treatment of state and government. In Authority and the Modern State Laski emphasizes that government subserves the final end of the state. "The State, we broadly say, exists to promote the good life, however variously defined; and we give government the power to act for the promotion of that life". (12) He believes that Rousseau had grasped correctly the distinction between state and government. The state, for Rousseau, was the collective moral person formed by the entire body of citizens; the government was merely its executive organ. The government saw to it that the state-purpose was carried into effect. For Laski, as well, the state

---

(12) ibid., p. 28. Laski's conversion to Marxism has, it would appear, made a difference in his appreciation of Rousseau. In Authority in the Modern State, he wrote: "To introduce as he (Rousseau) did, a distinction between the "general" will and the "will of all", is, in reality simply to take refuge in mysticism", adding that Rousseau was wrong in imputing a necessarily beneficent will to the state. But in The State in Theory and Practice he has this to say of Rousseau's theory of the general will: "...the stage of its operation is set upon principles scrupulously devised to prevent the perversion of its purposes. For the whole informing spirit of his conception is the idea of equality ..... Rousseau's sovereign can claim the obedience of the members of the community because it is, and can only be the community itself". pp. 46 - 47.

"rightness"? Is it the individual's conscience? Laski most often seems to think so, as, for example, when he argues: "The State is for him (the individual) sovereign only where his conscience is not stirred against its performance". (15) Yet, as we have seen, even where the citizens have unanimously decided upon a course of action, that action may be politically justifiable but morally reprehensible. In other words, an action can be acceptable to the individual's conscience and still be wrong. It is when Laski is arguing in this manner that he seems to be closely approximating the normative view of the state and the individual held in classical theory by Plato and Aristotle. Certainly this "ethicism" is an important strand in Laski's political thinking and one which, despite many appearances to the contrary, he has never succeeded in eliminating. What, ultimately, is sovereign for Laski is neither the individual nor the state, but the state-purpose. By invoking the state-purpose he synthesizes the state and the individual into a pursuit of the ineffable; and his pluralism, which sees good as emerging from a Darwinian conflict of group-wills, is halted just short of anarchism.

For Laski the pluralist, it was supremely important to establish a difference between state and government. The state, he argued, exists to promote the good life, although as a rather

---

(14) law. But this is to idealize the individual instead of the state; in any event, Laski found it impossible to defend consistently his position of extreme individualism, and effected a reconciliation between the state and the individual in heaven, that is, through the moral majesty of the state-purpose.

(15) ibid., p. 43

wry commentary on his own definition he conceded that "There has been yet no state in history in which the consistent effort has been towards the unique realization of social good." (16) The state, however, cannot function unless it selects certain of its members to fulfill its task. The citizen's obedience, therefore, goes not to the state but to the persons who compose the government. His ultimate allegiance, it goes without saying, belongs to an entirely different category. For "few who accept on the ground of the high purpose the sovereignty of the State will urge that government is similarly sovereign." (17) And a realistic analysis shows us that what we call state-action is always, in real fact, action by government. It is a policy put before the people for their approval. Laski, I think, is somewhat ambiguous on this point, for no sooner has he termed state-action government-action than he adds: "It (policy) becomes state-action when that acceptance is predominantly operative." (18) The meaning intended, however, is perfectly clear; it is that the basis of government can only be the consent of the citizens. With a view to developing a critique for the idea of command, Laski made the utmost of the distinction between state and government. The state is invested with moral purpose, but the men composing the government are merely its temporary and quite fallible agents.

---

(16) ibid., p. 41. The apparent contradiction is solved if we bear in mind that Laski is juxtaposing the ideal, conceptual, or noumenal state with the actual state. Confusion would have been avoided if he had consistently used state-purpose where he meant the conceptual state.
(17) ibid., p. 30
(18) ibid., p. 61.

Sovereignty, that is power, may be used by them for ends that are pernicious and which violate the state-purpose. Presumably the state-purpose is known to the individual citizen; in the light of that knowledge each governmental act is either ratified or rejected. The state is what the government does; but what the government does acquires moral authority only to the extent that it conforms to the sovereign state-purpose. Laski believes that the state-purpose is an objective reference by means of which government action may be judged. Furthermore, to say that the state intends such and such a goal is not sufficient; what the individual wishes to know is what the state is doing now, in actual fact, and not in intention. And since the state never acts, but is acted for by the government, he will scrutinize carefully each of its operations and give or withold consent as his conscience dictates. The emphasis throughout is upon the consent-giving of the citizens.

The distinction between state and government, so forcefully insisted upon in Laski's earlier volumes, is given a significantly different treatment in The State in Theory and Practice. It is interesting to observe Laski's effort to temper his old sword in the new fires of Marxism. The same distinctions are employed as formerly but, as was noted in the discussion on state and society, the emphasis has been changed around. The same concepts are used, but are differently weighted and the conclusion adopted is of necessity a different one. The noumenal state is once again defined as an instrument for organizing the collective life of society. For without the state society would be rent by conflicts between the human atoms composing it as they sought the

maximum satisfaction of their desires. The state arbitrates between them and also renders possible that end which individual competition would frustrate. Once again, there is a distinction between the state and the state-purpose although, as before, the distinction is not sufficiently emphasized. Nevertheless, whatever the final and glorious purpose of the state may be, in actual fact it is an institution and must act through persons. "The State, therefore, needs a body of men who operate in its name the supreme coercive authority of which it disposes; and this body of men is what we term the government of the State." (19) All this has a familiar ring; as does the following:

"The purpose, it is said," (the "it is said" sounds like a wry commentary on his own earlier theories) "of the distinction between state and government is to emphasize the limitation upon the latter so to act that it pay proper regard to the end for which the State exists. That end, however variously defined, is the creation of those conditions under which the members of the State may attain the maximum satisfaction of their desires." (20)

But having said this, having repeated in effect the substance of previous arguments, Laski makes this interesting admission: "Yet it must be said at once that the distinction between state and government is rather of theoretical than of practical significance. (21) For every act of the state we encounter

---

(19) The State in Theory and Practice, p.11
(20) ibid., p.11 - 12
(21) Of practical significance? But Laski himself, in this section at least, is arguing for a conceptual state. It is precisely this mixture of fact and metaphysics which is so confusing. His conceptual state is devised so that it can both fly in the air and run on solid ground simultaneously.

is, in truth, a governmental act. The will of the State is in its laws; but it is the government which gives substance and effect to their content... The state itself, in sober reality, never acts; it is acted for by those who have become competent to determine its policies." (22) Laski, even in the above quotation, is still using a terminology reminiscent of his pluralistic phase, but contact with Marxism now suggests to him that the formerly all-important distinction is merely of academic interest. The organic and realistic outlook of Marxism has convinced him that the distinction between state and government is devoid of any practical import. And in accordance with that insight a corresponding shift in emphasis takes place. For, whereas in Authority in the Modern State state-action was said to be "simply an act of government which commands general acceptance," (23) in The State in Theory and Practice the stress is no longer laid on "general acceptance" but on the government's competency to enforce its decisions. Moral authority, formerly uppermost in Laski's mind, has receded into the background. Its place has been taken by "competency". But what is meant by competency? The following paragraph clearly indicates the distance Laski has travelled from earlier views. He travels, however, like Lot's wife, his face turning wistfully towards the past.

"... here we have to ask what, again in sober fact, gives them (the government) their competence. We may say that their power derives from the law. But the law, after all, is

---

(22) The State in Theory and Practice, pp. 12 - 13

(23) Authority in the Modern State, p. 31.

only a body of words until men give it the substantiality of enforcement. We may say that it is the consent of those over whom they rule which gives them the power to get their will obeyed. There is a truth in this view in the sense that Hume emphasized when he insisted that all governments, however bad, depend for their authority upon public opinion. But this cannot be regarded as the whole truth for the effective reason that there are times and places when men are ruled by a state from the policies of which their consent is actively witheld. It is hardly a proper use of language to say that the Tsarist state before 1917, or the state of Fascist Austria today can be regarded as built upon the consent of their citizens; for, in each case, many of those citizens sought to change the policies of the state by revolt against the government responsible for them". (24)

In the final analysis, then, we must admit that "the state is built upon the ability of its government to operate successfully its supreme coercive power." (25) This, of course, is the merest tautology and no more defines the real essence of the state than water is defined by wetness, but it enables Laski to mingle fact with metaphysics and thereby establish the links with Marxism for which he is constantly seeking. The state wields supreme coercive power, but the origin of that power and the uses to which it is put have been conveniently left out. This serves him in good stead, for it enables him to conceal the movement from the noumenal to the phenomenal, from the ideal to the

---

(24) The State in Theory and Practice, p. 13

(25) ibid., p. 14

actual. The following excerpt should make my meaning clearer. Discussing the state he writes: "But at any critical moment in the history of the State the fact that its authority depends upon the power to coerce the opponents of the government, to break their wills, to compel them to submission, emerges as a central fact in its nature. A state of which the purposes are challenged has to respond to the challenge or change its purposes; and if it proposes to maintain them it must do so by force. It must therefore have at its command coercive instruments, separate from the mass of the population, upon whom it can rely to enforce its authority." (26)

The confusion here is made apparent if we ask: Why should anyone in his senses challenge the purposes of the state when those purposes are, as Laski has himself told us, "the creation of those conditions under which the members of the State may attain the maximum satisfaction of their desires."? (27) Is Laski speaking of the actual state or the conceptual? The answer is - both. For, in speaking of"coercive instruments separate from the mass of the population", he is giving to historical fact the force of a logical inference. The practice of combining the existent with the theoretical is one to which Laski has frequent recourse. Are the "coercive instruments", by which Laski means the army, <u>always</u> separate from the population? If the Webbs' authority may be accepted, the Red Army is an integral part of Soviet society; it is not a cohesive force

---

(26) ibid., p. 14.

(27) ibid., p. 11.

separated from the citizens of the U.S.S.R. but is, to the contrary, nourished and supported by them as their surest protection. Why, then, did Laski make this generalization? The answer, surely is that Laski has read it in Marx and Engels, where speaking of a class-divided society they assert that such a society requires a power, a special force no longer identical with the population. But Laski has said nothing about a class-divided society. He has shown us the tail, but the horse he has left locked up in the stable! Again, on the theoretical, conceptual or noumenal side, it surely does not follow from Laski's definition of the state that such a divorce between the army and the people must take place. What Laski has done is to infuse an important aspect of the Marxian theory of the state into his own lifeless abstractions.

Men do not obey the state, Laski argues, merely for the sake of obedience. Nor do they obey it simply because it secures to them order and stability, although order and stability are of paramount importance in civilized communities. Men will question the ends to which their obedience is put and will observe the commands of the state only insofar as they see those commands resulting in the maximum welfare possible. They will judge those commands from the standpoint of the satisfactions they make possible, accepting or rejecting them as they succeed or fail in materializing those satisfactions. The expectations of what is possible will vary from age to age with men's experiences. All this for Laski implies that "the exercise of coercive authority is never unconditional." (28) The state must act by rules. There

---

(28) ibid., p. 5.

are certain purposes it is pledged to fulfill. The state's authority rests ultimately upon its ability to satisfy the legitimate demands and expectations of its citizens. Furthermore, as we have seen, it is not sufficient to show that, in theory, the state is wedded to good performance. For the citizens the state is what it does, and not simply what it announces itself as being. This means "that a theory of the state must be a way of valuing the achievement of actual states, a criterion of measurement rather than a statement of reality." (29) The following paragraph summarizes the heart of Laski's argument:

"My argument throughout will be based upon a single assumption. I shall assume that the justification of coercive authority, the only title upon which it can claim the obedience of those over whom it is exercised, is in the measure of its satisfaction of maximum demand. It is not, that is to say, its intention merely to achieve this end that is its title to allegiance; a theory of intention can never be the basis of an adequate political philosophy. It is not the purpose announced, but the purposes realized, when this is set over against the reasonable possibilities of realization, that can alone be the criterion of value in human institutions." (30)

Laski's assumption, it should be noted at the outset, is an idealistic one; its companion assumption is that a state can exist which has as its aim the satisfaction of maximum demand. And, it should be added, for Laski this ideal or noumenal end is

---

(29) ibid., p. 6.

(30) ibid., P. 7.

possible only within a state which through its government and laws makes possible the fullest use of the productive forces in society. The passage quoted above, therefore, will bear the closest scrutiny. It is the vital link, the connecting bridge, between Laski's earlier and his later "Marxian" political doctrines. Examine the phrase carefully: "satisfaction of maximum demand", remembering at the same time the important consideration that this end is realizable only in a state which employs the instruments of production to the full. Laski adopts this terminology, I suggest, because Marx has made us aware of the relationships that inevitably exist between production and consumption; later on, Laski will argue that capitalism and with it the capitalist state must necessarily frustrate the desire for maximum demand as the mode of production becomes fettered by the relations of production. Not "a state" but the capitalist state is, for Laski, responsible for such an outcome. The distinction is all-important.

To bring his earlier views into line with his "Marxism" Laski merely had to give the former a slight twist. The following passage is from his Grammar of Politics:

"That the State is, in some form or other, an inevitable organization will be apparent to anyone who examines the human nature that we encounter in daily life. (31) But to admit that it is inevitable is not to admit that it is entitled to moral pre-eminence of any kind. For, after all, the State is not

---

(31) This, of course, is the liberal view of the origin of the state, not the Marxian, and is repeated by Laski in The State in Theory and Practice.

itself an end, but merely the means to an end, which is realized only in the enrichment of human lives. Its power and the allegiance it can win depend always upon what it achieves for that enrichment." (32)

The similarity in outlook between this passage and that preceding it is evident and striking. What is asserted in both is that the coercive authority of the state is never absolute but contingent: contingent, that is, upon how men judge the state to have achieved the ends or purpose for which it is said to exist. The difference between them, the slight twist referred to above, is accomplished through the substitution of the phrase "satisfaction of maximum demand" for "the enrichment of human lives" as a description of the end to which the state is promised. Laski presumably thinks that the former is more specific and objective and therefore more capable of exact definition and measurement. But in the back of his mind, I believe, lies the knowledge based on Marx's labours that the capitalist system must inevitably frustrate the desire for maximum satisfaction; that, in other words, the capitalist system cannot make the fullest possible use of the instruments of production. By erecting that as the sole criterion to evaluate the state's proper functioning, he has again made use of a Marxian insight to stiffen the backbone of his previous political philosophy. But the backbone is still very much in evidence; and whether the use of this insight is consonant with an appeal to the state's ideal purpose, natural law, natural rights and other political categories derived from

---

(32) Grammar of Politics, p. 88

Locke or Mill is what precisely is open to question. He has poured, it seems to me, old wine into new bottles and the result is confusion made opaque by brilliant rhetoric. He has arrived at a new station but encumbered with old luggage. It is my intention now to examine that luggage.

But before I proceed to do so I must state the difficulty that confronts me as clearly as I can. It is difficult to deal with intellectual confusion without oneself becoming involved in confusion. When a thinker amalgamates two opposing outlooks as Laski has done, amalgamating liberalism with Marxism, it is a nearly impossible task to disentangle them. For purposes of exposition I have called the first, broadly speaking, noumenalism and the second, phenomenalism. Unfortunately Laski is neither a liberal nor a Marxist. He is - if for the moment we allow the possibility of such a hybrid existing - a liberal Marxist. By this I mean that he introduces, eclectically, concepts borrowed from Marxism into a scheme of things where they do not and, what is more important, cannot belong. His theory of sovereignty, in its later phase, is an impure abstraction; but it is an abstraction refined by Marxian insight, enclosed in a noumenal framework whose validity, were he alive, Marx would be the first to deny. Discussing coercive authority apart from the class struggles which originate it Laski is, in truth, attempting to extract a live nerve without disturbing the surrounding tissue - an impossible feat! The consequence is that, mirroring Laski's mind, the noumenal state is also a hybrid: half-concept, half-fact.

The difficulty is indicated by the following quotation. Here, it will be seen, Laski offers a definition of the state

which appears totally at variance with those already stated. "By its very nature", he writes, "it (the state) is simply coercive power used to protect the system of rights and duties of one process of economic relationships from invasion by another class which seeks to change them in the interests of another process." (33) The state's purpose is seen no longer as an attempt to secure the satisfaction of maximum demand, nor the growth and enrichment of human personality. Nor is its end the maintenance of a system of rights which would secure to the citizen the fullest life possible. The state is now frankly defined in Marxian terms as an instrument of class domination. How is it possible to reconcile what at first blush certainly seem like irreconcilably antagonistic views? Some critics maintain that Laski is indeed what he calls himself, namely a Marxist, and that whereas the first part of The State in Theory and Practice was written in the optative mood, the second part, from which the above definition was taken, was written in the declarative mood. The former tells us what the state ought to be, the latter what it actually is. The one is theory, the other practice. I cannot see much in this view to recommend it. For it seems to me that two very important considerations may be urged against its tenability. Firstly, it completely overlooks the fact that the Marxian conception of the state is itself a theory derivable from the historical practices of actual states. Along with the realization that this is so must be placed the further fact that the Marxian conception of

---

(33) The State in Theory and Practice, p. 100

the state cannot be picked up separately like a brick from a wall but is embedded in a unique and comprehensive view of history, economics and philosophy. I shall have occasion to deal with this latter at greater length further on. Secondly, to assert that the first section was written in the optative mood only is to ignore what I have tried in this chapter to establish: namely, that Laski is here repeating with really unimportant modifications a view of the state which he has championed ever since his Authority in the Modern State appeared in 1919. Here, as there, the ought is addressed to what is: it is not simply an ode addressed to an invisible nightingale. There is, I claim, the liberal presumption that the actual state can be modified until it functions, more or less, as Laski would have it function. Conviction on this point will, perhaps, come easier if it is remembered that Laski is a member of the Labour Party of England and espouses the view that revolutionary change may be achieved through a parliamentary democracy.

One other explanation may be offered to account for the difference between the two sections. It might be said that in the first section, propounding the philosophic conception of the state, Laski, a Marxist at heart, is nevertheless building upon certain bourgeois assumptions (I use the word "bourgeois" in a descriptive not in an invidious sense) and has pushed such a theory of the state as far as it could go. In effect, he was saying: "Very well; I shall play this parlor game of ideal ends, natural rights, etc., according to the rules they have laid down. I shall take them at their own word." Thus, having constructed

a theory of the state according to the specifications approved by the experts, he proceeded to show how the blue-print was shrivelled up in the fire of capitalism's economic contradictions. This view, likewise, has little to recommend it except its plausibility. For it assumes, what the tenor and dominant mood of the section does not allow us to assume, that Laski is arguing with his tongue in his cheek; that he is simply entertaining himself and his readers by expanding a multi-coloured bubble which he intends a moment later to destroy by introducing it into the high-pressure chamber of the "real world". And it ignores, just as the previous explanation did, that the real world, or rather the state in the real world, has a Marxian theory to account for it; that Marxism offers itself as a progressive critique of the actual practice of states.

Speaking bluntly, Laski's effort to apportion the state into theory and practice is sheer sophistry made, I suggest, with a view to reconciling his native idealism and his acquired "Marxism". There are not two kinds of states but only one, about which there are many diverse theories. And as in the field of economics similarly in political science, these theories may be divided into two sharply opposed schools of thought: the bourgeois and the Marxian. What Laski is really attempting is to straddle both. Incoherency and confusion are the inevitable result. Both the noumenal and the phenomenal states reveal dark cracks and fissures, the consequence of the unsuccessful venture to divorce theory from practice. Laski's political doctrines, as apart from <u>his</u> practice, lack an inner consistency and admit, as I show more fully in the succeeding pages, of no clear and straightforward

definition. For how reconcile the categories which he employs in the first section of The State in Theory and Practice, (34) categories such as rights, natural law, individualism, moral authority, etc., with those employed in the second section (35) where those categories are no longer unreal abstractions divorced from the social relations of a dynamically changing world but on the contrary attempt, however inadequately, to reflect those relationships as they "move towards a re-definition". Here the categories employed are "masses" instead of "individuals", "force" instead of "moral authority", "interests" instead of "justice". We have left behind the academic world of the library for the jostling market place.

Yet, with all due respect to Laski, I fail to see how he can argue in his library for the rights of the individual, his moral stature, etc., and then hurry to the market place to reproach the too timid German Social Democrats for failing to restrict the rights of the members of the ruling class in the interest of a different economic order. He even praises the Bolsheviks - for establishing a dictatorship! "It is not enough", writes Laski, "for the makers of the revolution to capture the State; they have the additional obligation of transforming it" (good-bye to democratic safeguards, rights and so on) "to the purpose they wish it to serve. Ebert and his colleagues, in 1918, made only a preliminary gesture of revolution, and then withdrew

---

(34) The State in Theory and Practice, pp. 3 - 85

(35) ibid., pp. 87 - 192

from completing it by reason of their horror at the price it would entail." (36) We might profitably stop here for a moment to enquire how Laski is employing the term "obligation". Now "obligation" is a moral category, redolent with idealistic connotations. In effect, therefore, Laski is saying that the German Social Democrats were morally justified to use force to break down the resistance offered to their programme. But he is also, at the same time, saying something much more. It is to the makers of any revolution that he is addressing himself, as a careful reading of the passage will indicate. The reference to the Social Democrats is merely by way of illustration. Now the question that immediately comes to mind is this: would Laski assert that the Nazis had a similar moral obligation to transform the state once they had captured it? Or would he admit that in such an event the term "obligation" would be quite meaningless and should be replaced by a neutral term, say "necessity"? On the basis of Laski's known political sympathies, we may confidently assume that the second answer would be returned. Yet the use of the term "obligation" in this equivocal context was not simply a careless slip of the pen. For the present, it is sufficient to say, that if there is an ambiguity here, and I think that there is, it is of a kind which is inherent in Laski's political doctrines as a whole and which springs, I repeat, from the effort to merge two opposed ideologies.

---

(36) ibid., P. 262. Ebert and his colleagues "drew back in horror" because they were good Laskian democrats with a respect for the individual's - read Thyssen's - conscience.

A second comment on the above passage may now be made. It is this: the problem which Laski presents us with is similar to that which vigorously occupies students of Plato. How do universals act upon particulars, how do we go from the one to the other? If, that is, Laski argues that the German and Russian revolutions were exceptional episodes and therefore required exceptional measures, it is still a fair question to ask, "Who and what determines their exceptionality?" And, surely, a democrat and libertarian who praises justice and upholds the rights of individuals, even those of Krupps and Thyssen, must do so, if he wishes to be consistent, to the very end. And to reply, as Laski very well might, that in such a context, i.e., conflict between the individual and the state, what we actually have is a conflict between opposing "rights", sounds of course very poignant but it is hardly illuminating. Certainly the idealist would be the first to point out that the term "rights" had in such a context been robbed of all meaning. Their moral underpinnings, as with the term "obligation", have been washed away and what we are really confronted with is force arrayed against force. But force, force as an historical necessity, is precisely what Laski's idealism prevents him from contemplating.

It is utterly impossible, therefore, to reconcile Laski the passionate libertarian with Laski the "Marxist". The neat little bridge (the state as existing to satisfy maximum demand) which he laid down between the two will crumble at the first heavy footfall; or rather, because it is placed upon such slippery ground, the first real billow must send it crashing into the

turbulent waters. My own assumption, and this it is the whole purpose of my thesis to prove, is that Laski is not and has never been a Marxist. By striving, in true eclectic fashion, to extract certain elements from Marxism while dismissing others, he has given us something which may resemble the original but which nevertheless, will deceive no one but the ignorant and the credulous.

For Professor Laski The State in Theory and Practice was only another expedition into the territory of Marxism. There were previous forays, all executed with the same aplomb and deftness. It seems, however, an unfortunate peculiarity of the Anglo-Saxon interpreters that they are unable to understand Marxism in all its living interconnectedness. English and American "What Marx Really Meanters" are legion and while there are important differences between them in subtlety of interpretation and breadth of scholarship, they have this much in common: they all believe that they understand Marxism far better than Marx did himself. The following passages, to illustrate my point, are taken from Laski's book Communism (Home University Library). It may seem unfair to quote from Laski's earlier writings, but I do so in order to show up a persistent streak of eclecticism which manifests itself whenever he ventures to discourse on Marxism.

"The essence of Marx's work lies not in any special economic doctrine (!) so much as in the spirit by which this total accomplishment was performed... It may be true that Marxian economics is in no small degree self-contradictory and it is certainly true that much of the Marxian sociology bears the obvious stigmata of its special time.

"Marxism as a social philosophy can be most usefully

resolved into four distinct parts. It is first and foremost a philosophy of history... it is a theory of social development intended to guide the party of which he was the leader. Marx in the third place outlined a tactic... He was, finally, an economic theorist.

"For Marx himself, of course, none of these aspects is properly separable from any other. They form a logical whole, the unity of which he would have passionately defended. It is, however, possible to reject the validity of his economic system, while accepting the large outlines of his social theory.

"All of this is, of course, a complete social doctrine, in which the economic theories of Marx are interesting without being integral." (37)

The book from which the above passages are taken was first published in 1927. Since the last reprinted issue appeared in 1932 we may conclude that the views expressed therein represent Laski's thinking on the subject of Marxism at that date.

The first thing to be noted is that Laski, in common with other Anglo-Saxon interpreters of Marxism, believes that certain items which he fancies can be appropriated from the main body of doctrine without injury resulting as a consequence to the latter. Marxism, on this view, is a too-vigorous tree which must be carefully pruned, and Laski, the eclectic, is ready with the pruning-hook. Secondly, notice Laski's slighting reference to Marx's economics. A brief reading of the relevant chapter in Communism will convince any student of the subject that Laski has,

---

(37) Communism, pp. 22 - 29. To assert that Marx's economics is not essential to his sociology is about as sensible as saying that Laski's skeleton is not essential to his body.

at best, an extremely superficial knowledge of Marxian economics. Here it is unprofitable to enter upon this particular aspect of Laski's aberrations. The following passage convicts Laski of careless writing or inept thinking. He writes: "Basing himself upon the Ricardian definition of value as the product of labour, Marx saw that labour must produce more than it receives. Labour, accordingly, is robbed by the capitalist since it receives only the price it can command in the market, while the surplus, however large, goes to the master." And now comes what, to be sure, is the most unfortunate bit of writing in socialist literature. "The purpose of socialism is <u>to compel the reversal of this position</u>." (38) This last sentence, completing the passage, is too wonderfully weird to require further comment.

It would appear, therefore, that from 1932 on Laski's views on Marxism underwent a considerable change. Certainly he is not so confident now that "the economic theories of Marx are interesting without being integral". (Laski sometimes writes like a poet and I should not be surprised to learn that he had been led into error by the alliterative effect of "interesting" and "integral".) In his <u>The State in Theory and Practice</u> he makes frequent use of Marxian insights into the productive mechanism of capitalism. But, characteristically, he does so in an eclectic fashion, combining them with a fundamental liberalism for purposes which Marx would have indignantly repudiated. Laski may not unfairly be called the unwilling bride of Marxism, taking

---

(38) Communism, p. 29.

each step towards the altar with distressed and painful reluctance. Nevertheless, the marriage has not yet been consummated.

In actual fact, Laski has volunteered to build a conceptual or, as I have named it, a noumenal state; but aware that the value of such states is at a discount he has introduced one or two solid bricks of historical fact to solidify his abstract construction. The attempt is significant as an indication of a type of liberal mind grappling uncomfortably with existing realities. Laski is the Mill of the twentieth century or, parodying a famous remark, he is Mill in an age of imperialism. He is a semi-Marxist, and the theoretical structure he unfolds is only as strong as the hyphen that supports it. Laski is one of an ever-growing number of economists and political scientists who extract whatever elements from Marx they require to give their suspect currency negotiability. To put it again bluntly, he is a scissors-and-paste Marxist.

Let us analyse further Laski's ingenious construction. We have seen that the state possesses coercive power to enforce its decisions. Looking at the matter realistically, it is the government - a body of men acting as agents for the state - that wields this coercive power. Where does this coercive power reside? It resides, Laski answers, in the armed forces. These armed forces are separated from the mass of the population (this is an historical fact, as I have pointed out, not a logical inference from Laski's initial assumption) and are at the disposal of whatever government is in power to exercise the state sovereignty. The army - there is the hard core of sovereignty. Furthermore,

the noumenal state must be unbiassed. Its object must be to fulfill, on the largest possible scale, the desires of its citizens. If certain desires go unsatisfied it must be shown clearly that the ends of the state are best served by the results which then occur.

"There must have been many slaves in ancient Athens who denied that their condition was compatible with justice; but we must assume, from the knowledge we have, that the Athenian State took the view that the basis of its civilization in slavery was the best method open to it of attaining its end; and it therefore put all the authority of its coercive power behind the system of slavery." (39)

It is interesting to note that whenever Laski is building his noumenal state he relies upon pure hypostatization, e.g. "the Athenian State took the view", etc. Not the Athenian slave-owners, mind you, but the Athenian State believed that "slavery was the best method open to it of attaining its end." The end here is - what? Civilization? The conceptual end? Or the practical end of maintaining the privileges of slave-owners? Can one intelligibly speak of a hypostatized abstraction possessing an end? Can confusion go any further? Nor is the difficulty cleared up but, on the contrary, is made worse by the following passage: "So, also, with Hitlerite Germany. Its rulers exclude the Jews from citizenship of that state on the ground that the ends (ideal? practical? theoretical?) they deem good (has this word any moral

---

(39) The State in Theory and Practice, p. 21.

content here? Is "good" intelligible in this context?) are not otherwise attainable. Rightly or wrongly, that is to say, the purposes of a state (ideal? practical? theoretical?) are always referred by those who operate its sovereignty to a criterion of good (!) they are prepared to defend. The defense must be in terms of reason." (40)

Such looseness of thought or expression is very bewildering. Words like "good", "ends", "purposes" are given different meanings which Laski, intent upon erecting his conceptual state, fastens upon them. What, indeed, does "justice" mean in the foregoing passage? Presumably the Athenian slave-owners or, to use Laski's convenient abstraction, the Athenian state also had a conception of "justice", one opposed to that of the slaves. Are there, then, two "justices"? But Laski fails to give a clear answer to these questions, questions which any logician would be quick to ask. He is unable to do so because he approaches the whole matter from two antithetic predications. An eclectic, Laski is neither a consistent Marxist nor a consistent idealist. He upholds, on the one hand, a normative view of social relations stemming from Plato and Aristotle which is the basic ingredient of traditional European idealism;(41) on the other hand, he accepts the materialist conception of history which Marx enunciated and which essays to explain men's notions of "justice", "good", etc. as the idealized reflex of their economic environment. Caught

---

(40) ibid., p. 21

(41) ibid., pp. 78 - 85.

by this self-initiated pincer movement, is it to be wondered at that Laski must constantly resort to an ambiguous terminology?

Laski, I am saying, is well aware that what determined slavery in ancient Athens was not the views which the slaves or the Athenian state held concerning "justice" but the mode of production then existing. But the construction of the noumenal state requires of Laski that he give this awareness a coat of idealistic varnish. The consequence is sophistry, the twin-brother of eclecticism. Never clearly expressed, the dichotomy which lies at the basis of Laski's political doctrines spreads, like a poison in a man's veins, throughout the noumenal and phenomenal realms, crippling them into paralytic futility. Thus, an important point Laski wishes to make is that the state must be unbiassed (he hastens to add further on that no state has ever been unbiassed) and that where it performs actions differentiating in the satisfaction of its citizens it must be prepared to do so in terms of reason. An interesting word that - reason. Whose reason? Everybody's reason. Mr. Churchill's reason and that of the Communist M.P., Mr. Gallacher; Mr. Henry Ford's and that of the strikers who are just now besieging his plant in Windsor, Ontario, in protest against wage reductions. (42) The assumption here is that there is a mysteriously impartial entity, a public reason, to which appeal may be made. Yet this assumption is immediately negated by the assertion that "in all matters of social constitution, the degree to which the judgement made is born of our personal relation to the result is fundamental to any objective

---

(42) The Montreal Daily Star, Jan. 2, 1946

assessment to it" (43). This is somewhat misleading since it seems to ask both the workers and capitalists to rise superior to the environment which conditions their social judgements and reach that plane of pure objective reason where all personal bias is laid aside. All that is needed is a psychoanalysis of economic motivation. The remedy for class conflict lies close at hand: we must convince both parties to the conflict that strife is bad and wasteful, that co-operation in the removal of the causes making for strife will produce a better order. There is the noumenal supposition (the phenomenalist Laski has no such illusions) that both parties have the same interest in the removal of inequality.

This reliance upon a public reason is, of course, one of the philosophical bases of democratic socialism and is very far removed from the scientific socialism of Marx and Engels. They believed that class-conflict, and not reason, was the motive force in history and that class-conflict, at a certain stage of man's development, was not only an inevitable but also a necessary instrument of social change. They believed that it was the historical mission of the working-class to overthrow capitalism and to establish a classless society. Only in such a society would the identification of the real and the rational become possible for there the man and the citizen would be one, based upon the identity of his interests with those of the society in which he lived. Marx and Engels therefore bent all their efforts towards educating and strengthening the working-class for the inevitable

---

(43) The State in Theory and Practice, p. 23.

battles that lay ahead. There was with them no question of reason, or justice, or morality, absolutes to which one half of Laski's mind continually makes obeisances; or rather, as dialectical materialists they pointed out their relativity to the all-important task of emancipating the proletariat from wage-slavery. It is precisely this outlook which Laski has never assimilated.

An eclectic contrivance, it would be surprising if the noumenal state were self-consistent. And, indeed, it is not. For the moment Laski mixing, as I have shown, fact with theory speaks of the armed forces of the state as separate from the mass of the population he has committed himself to a class-divided society wherein the state is used as an instrument of class coercion. This is an important fact to grasp and cannot be emphasized too strongly. It is only in a society where a fundamental cleavage exists due to opposing class interests that "a power apparently standing above society becomes necessary" (44). When, therefore, Laski demands that <u>this state</u> should be unbiassed, satisfy maximum demand, or observe a system of rights, he is demanding an impossibility, since these demands contradict the very purposes for which such a state has been instituted. There is a contradiction here, and one which touches at every point Laski's effort to build a conceptual theory of the state. Misled by his ambition to give logic the force and appearance of fact, he has stirred up a hornet's nest of antinomies. Where the armed forces are divorced from the rest of the population, we have a class-divided

---

(44) Engels, Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State, p. 155.

society, and where we have a class-divided society appeals to Reason, Justice and the individual's conscience as the only valid basis of law are at worst meaningless, and at best merely pious exhortations. Having himself raised the crucial issue of Power, Laski has executed a graceful pirouette and finally evaded it. On that issue all idealisms, including his own, are finally shattered.

Chapter III

State Absolutism

Other theories of the state may be distinguished from that of the Marxian by their assurance that the state originates from the very facts of human nature. On that issue both utilitarian liberals and philosophical idealists are in basic agreement, the difference between them being one of demarcation and emphasis. The utilitarian liberals, whose most influential spokesman today is Mr. McIver, argue that the state is a secular organ of the community. It is, so to speak, the paved highway of social life, bordered by fields and cities, and serving us all in some especially intimate manner. The art of statesmanship consists in keeping the highway open at all times; moreover, the wise statesman will never make the mistake of confusing the highway with the city. The common highway keeps the traffic flowing smoothly as men travel towards their different ends. It serves, or it should serve, all men equally. If, in the past, rulers and narrow groups have benefited most from its existence, this fact has not impaired its usefulness; today, at any rate in democratic theory, all citizens are entitled to the same service. Universality of law serves the common interest; the highway broadens out from precedent to precedent.

Philosophical idealists, however, have identified the city with the highway. Over-awed by the majesty with which Aristotle has endowed the state, they have argued that men are never

so much themselves, never so truly human, as when they are members of the state. Outside its framework men are egotistic, blinded by petty interests and concerns. They are likely to mistake the fleeting spasm of pleasure for their abiding interest. The state is that divine instrument which, calling upon the surrender of all that is evil, narrow and self-seeking in men's lives, leads them on to salvation. The state actually becomes a way of life because it is a way out of all which would constrict life to illiberal ends. The state is permanent in the sense that the final good which all men desire is permanent. Human nature, divided into halves of different worth, demands the state.

Now for Laski, as for other liberal thinkers, the state finds its origin as well as its justification in the facts of human nature. (1) Furthermore, the individuals within the state are construed as separate atoms, colliding with each other and possessing, indeed, nothing in common but the same hard urgency for desire-satisfaction. The psychological and moral construction, hedonist and egoistic, is of the school of Hobbes and Spinoza. Society is an aggregate of egoists. Finally, and in this Laski's un-Marxian outlook is clearly revealed, men are viewed by him apart from the social relations into which, independently of their will, they have entered. Once again, but this time speaking a flexible twentieth century prose, the socially converted savage of the contract theorists makes his appearance. For Laski, therefore, as for Hobbes and Rousseau, the facts of human nature

---

(1) Authority in the Modern State, p. 19; Grammar of Politics, p. 17; The State in Theory and Practice, p. 4.

and human organization demand "a coercive authority in society to define the permissible rules of social behavior." (2) In terms which recall Locke, the father of English liberalism and representative government, Laski writes: "Granted the nature of men, the alternative appears to be a chaos of individual decisions fatal to the emergence of settled ways of life. With the State there comes security; and security is the condition upon which the satisfactions men seek to secure are capable of peaceful attainment." (3)

Laski is certain that the state is a necessary and indeed inevitable instrument to prevent men, in their pursuit of self-fulfillment, from inflicting injury upon each other. Whatever else the state may be, its primary function is to act as a social prophylactic. The alternative, Laski assures us, is chaos or anarchy. By setting the terms upon which men may proceed in their search for purely individual goods, the state limits the areas of conflict to trivial or unimportant occasions. Without such an instrument, the only basis for social cohesion, the separate units comprising the totality would fly apart like the spokes of a wheel if the hub were shattered. "I easily grant," writes Locke, "that civil government is the proper remedy for the inconveniences of the State of Nature, which must certainly be great where men may be judges in their own case..."(4) And in another passage he affirms that "... the freedom of men under

---

(2) The State in Theory and Practice, p. 4.
(3) ibid., p. 4.
(4) Locke, Treatise on Civil Government, Book 12, Ch. 2

government is to have a standing rule to live by common to every one of that society, and made by the legislative power erected in it." (5) There is evidently a striking affinity of thought between Laski and his great liberal predecessor. Just how striking will be shown in the sequel.

"Man", writes Laski, "is a community-building animal: it is by reverent contact with Aristotle's fundamental observation that every political discussion must begin. We start with the one compulsory form of human association - the State - as the centre of analysis." (6) This at once brings us to a consideration of sovereignty. It is seen that every state, both by definition and fact, must possess supreme coercive power to enforce its decisions. Sovereignty is state-power. Sovereignty integrates society into a pattern to which individuals and associations must conform. The will of the state is binding upon all. The state differs from all other associations through its possession of coercive authority. Trade Unions, churches, clubs, or similar groups into which men form themselves for defence or comfort must all exercise a persuasion short of force upon their members. (7) The Church may excommunicate the heretic; it can no longer have him burned at the stake. The power over life and death has been transferred from the Church to the modern state.

---

(5) ibid., Book 2, Ch. 4
(6) Authority in the Modern State, p. 19
(7) Does the distinction that the pluralists drew between the state as a compulsory form of association, and associations that are voluntary, hold good today, with trade unions and other economic organizations assuming more and more a compulsory character?

But if the exercise of sovereignty is necessary, even inevitable, it is in no sense absolute. The earlier Laski attacked the monistic conception of the state, a conception which asserts that the state possesses, or should possess "a single source of authority that is theoretically comprehensive and unlimited in its exercise." (8) He grounded his attack in an appeal to history and upon logical analysis. History demonstrated, he believed, that the modern omnipotent state was the product of the religious struggles of the sixteenth century. (9) Since the state had an origin it was not divine but secular: to realize this fact was to prepare the way for a realistic approach towards the state which centred in the demand for proof of its continuing utility. Logical analysis re-inforced this demand by pointing out three things, which Laski thought had been overlooked by political monists, concerning the state. (i) If the state is an association, it is only one among many. It competes with Trade Unions, churches, etc. for the support of its members. (ii) There is no a priori certainty that this support will be given to the state rather than to the association to which one happens to belong. In a conflict, let us say, between the state and a trade union, the members may possibly feel that their allegiance should be given to the trade union rather than to the state. In other words, sovereignty is recognized not as unlimited state-power, but as the ability to secure consent. (iii) If man is a moral agent he must be allowed to judge the actions of the state and to commit

---

(8) Hsiao,, Political Pluralism, p. 2
(9) Authority in the Modern State, p. 21; Grammar of Politics, p.45

himself in the light of his judgment.

It is difficult to tell how much of this analysis Laski would regard as pertinent today. Certainly in the hurly-burly phenomenal world we know, his attacks against sovereignty strike us as being as futile as they are ingenious. The great defect of Laski's earlier volumes lies in their academic quality; their remoteness from the world of dynamic processes; their inability to reflect, even partially, the issues of our time. Conceived in the library they emerged - still-born. The force of this criticism is seen more readily if it is remembered that Authority in the Modern State appeared in 1919, one year after the Bolsheviks had seized power and set Russia, and indeed the whole world, upon an adventure whose significance we are only now beginning to estimate properly. Lenin's State and Revolution appeared in 1917. And before Lenin's classic, there existed a wealth of socialist books to which Laski, had he been free from liberal illusions, might have gone for a more realistic understanding of the nature of sovereignty. Laski's cardinal mistake was to regard sovereignty as a concept. He failed completely to see that sovereignty was merely a euphemism for class domination. He set himself to battle with a shadow. Optimistically, he thought to remove the shadow by eliminating the plaster on the wall. His appeal to history was superficial and ineffective precisely because it missed out on the main point; namely, that the rise of the omnicompetent, territorial state coincided with the rise of the bourgeoisie who indeed required such a state to batter down not, as Laski seems to think, another abstraction - the Papacy -

but the hindering relations of the old, feudal society. And the logical analysis, executed with so much adroit argument, failed to slay the dragon of sovereignty because it never even approached it. (10)

Nor, in his attacks upon the political monists, was Laski either clear or self-consistent. He has much more in common with "absolutists", Hobbes, Rousseau and Hegel, than he seems to think. By some unfortunate misunderstanding he had come to believe that political monism and moral absolutism were interchangeable terms. Yet even a casual reading of the work of Bodin and Hobbes, whom Laski calls "Prince of Monists", must dispel such a notion. Thus, Bodin defines the state as "an association of families and their common possessions, governed by a supreme power, and by reason." (11) Within the purely political realm the sovereign ruled supreme, but the sovereign was himself placed under the authority of reason. There were certain definite areas of social intercourse that the sovereign could never pass. Nor is the case otherwise with Hobbes who has been supposed, mistakenly I believe, the advocate of complete tyranny. "The Commonwealth", he writes, "is one person, of whose acts a great multitude, by mutual covenants one with another, have made themselves every one the author, to the end that he may use the strength and means of them all, as he shall think expedient, for their peace

---

(10) Very likely Laski would today agree with the foregoing criticism. It is important to remember, however, that Laski retains with but slight modifications the pluralistic structure in the noumenal state.

(11) Bodin, De Republica, I, ch. 1

and common defense." (12) Obedience to the sovereign is always conditional upon the achievement of ends (in this case, peace and common defense) for which individuals have banded themselves together. So far, indeed, is Hobbes from handing over complete and unlimited power to the sovereign that he recognizes the right of the subject to refuse, even in defiance of sovereign command, to kill himself or his fellows. And what, it seems to me, can be more explicit than the following passage: "... Subjects owe to Sovereigns, simple Obedience, in all things, wherein their obedience is not repugnant to the Lawes of God..." (13) All that the sovereign possesses is legal supremacy; more than that no monist has ever admitted. And legal supremacy is always conditioned by custom, or morality, or religion, or natural law.

If this is true, Laski's aim is no different from that of the political monists, whom he criticised. That aim is to secure moral validity for legal supremacy. It is the effort to find those social arrangements where power may be used for moral ends. And here it might be profitably stated again that there are two main elements, running parallel and frequently coinciding in Laski's political thought. They may be called respectively positivism and ethicalism. The positivism observes with a sober and critical eye what the state does. The ethicalism demands that it do better. The positivist equates state with government and affirms that state-action is, after all, only what a group of persons, constituting the governing body, declare legal. The ethic-

---

(12) Hobbes, Leviathan, II, Ch. 17.

(13) ibid., II, ch. 31

alist, on the other hand, pleads for an observance of the fact that law can be made valid only by the consent of men whose personality it enriches. The positivist element has, in recent years, allied itself with Marxism, while the ethicalist, unaffected by the union, is preserved from harm by inhabiting a world of forms. This combination, we shall discover, enables Laski to shoot from two holsters: against the monists he rears the sovereign ethical state; against the philosophical idealists the Marxian critique of capitalist production.

The ethical note is paramount in a definition such as the following: "The State controls the level at which men are to live as men." (14) This, of course, is a definition of the state to which Aristotle and the philosophical idealists would readily assent. Moreover, there is the frank recognition that the state must be the over-riding institution in the community on the grounds that it alone can protect the general interests of the individual citizen. Laski is, therefore, somewhat inconsistently, attributing a moral superiority to the state over other associations. He very definitely rejects guild socialism. For the solution of general social problems the state alone must be the responsible organ. "Vocational bodies", he writes, "have value for the resolution of functional problems; but they are not, by their very nature, built to deal with the general issues which must be faced by society as a whole." (15) What else is this but a plea for sovereignty, and in terms which neither Bodin nor Hobbes

---

(14) Grammar of Politics, p. 70

(15) ibid., p. 73.

of that labour. Our huge industrial organizations for producing commodities, while robbing the majority of the toilers of any interest in their occupations, have nonetheless made possible increased leisure. The state already employs its power to distribute goods more equitably through taxation; it must also see to it that leisure is put to richer and more meaningful uses. For the end which the state seeks is to harmonize the personalities of its members. Production may be uninteresting and toilsome, but the consumption of leisure and goods are made enjoyable by the state's intervention. The waiter should at least be able to hum Wagner as he"carries plates from kitchen to table and table to kitchen".

The above argument is reinforced by a further consideration. As producers, men compete with each other or engage in dissimilar activities. The shoe manufacturer and his employees have not the same interest in the productive process. Increasing profits is what chiefly affects the manufacturer; his employees create trade unions to convert a slice of the profits into higher wages. Again, between shoe manufacturers ruthless competition exists for available markets. Modern capitalist society, in brief, exhibits everywhere the same characteristics of division and concealed economic war. Men do not hold "the great ends in common". They live in a vast jungle, pursuing their individual goals with an exclusive intensity. All this, for Laski, is solely on the level of production. Consumption restores the broken community of interests; we leave hell for purgatory. For as consumers we are all equally human. It is not reason, as Plato

would have us believe, which makes all men identical - it is the stomach. Production unfortunately differentiates between man and man; in consumption they recognize unabashedly their common humanity. The state, then, steps in at this point, since it is always interested in men's larger, more general concerns than in their particular and exclusive ones, and legislates to protect them as consumers. "Where their needs are identical as undifferentiated persons, at least at some minimum level, it is essential to have a single centre of control to achieve them." (19) Viewed from this angle "the state is a public service corporation".(20) As such it aims to secure for the consumers the commodities they require. Catholics and Protestants, employers and workers, Mohammedans or Jews, the butcher, the baker and the candlestick maker all present equal claims for consideration to the state which possesses coercive power precisely for this purpose of satisfying them, since this supremely important function "involves a pre-eminence over all other functions". (21)

In fairness to the view set forth here it must be said

---

(19) ibid., p. 69. In the text it is not always clear whether Laski is saying that the state does, or ought to, legislate for the citizen as consumer; whether, in other words, he is speaking about the actual state or the possible. However, it is more important to note that Laski's well-intentioned liberalism demands these admirable fulfillments from a society which is based upon the exploitation of labour, upon the suppression of one class by another. Also, it is rather significant that he should have laid so much stress upon consumption - as if instinctively realizing the dangers to liberalism inherent in a realistic analysis of the capitalist mode of production.

(20) ibid., p. 69.

(21) ibid., p. 70

that for Laski the organizing of consumption is part of the wider goal which the state has. What each member is entitled to expect from the state's action "is an environment in which, at least potentially, he can hope to realize the best of himself." (22) Should the powers which the state exercises be such as to discriminate unfairly between one member and another, or between one class and another, such a state would be biassed, and a biassed state would forfeit all claims to legitimacy. Every government has a moral obligation to treat the members of the state equally. Where, for one reason or another, the government is unable to do so, it must offer such convincing reasons to the disadvantaged that the state's action will nonetheless appear an imperfect means for realizing the ultimate perfection which in theory the state seeks.

Governments, however, are composed of fallible men. They may mistake their own interests for the interests of the community. They may forfeit the total good for the sake of some partial good which they may have in view. As men, they are liable to the same passions of envy or self-interest that sway other men. There is always the possibility that poltroons or knaves may be placed at the helm. Laski offers such considerations for limiting the governmental power by postulating the necessary conditions of legitimacy. What are these necessary conditions? They are "a system of rights". By this Laski means "a set of demands which, if unrealized, prevent the fulfillment of the state-purpose". (23)

---

(22) ibid., p. 57. To this proposition both Green and Bosanquet would readily assent.
(23) ibid., p. 70.

Every state, he declares, is known by the rights it maintains. It follows, therefore, that a government's actions are legitimate to the extent that they maintain rights. A government that is indifferent to them, or seeks their abridgement, dissolves by such action its claims to the allegiance of the citizens.

An understanding of what Laski means by rights is fundamental to an understanding of his political philosophy. No contemporary political thinker has put so great an emphasis upon their need as a means for securing an unbiassed state and thereby the freedom and happiness of its members. Rights, he maintains, so far from being abstract, are capable of organization in two ways. Both ways, it will be seen, are limitations placed upon the acts of the government. There may be, in the first place, a written constitution, as in the United States, describing the rights and liberties of the citizens, which no government is ever empowered to destroy or nullify. The President of that country must find in the Constitution authority for the exercise of his will or in a special grant of power by the Congress of his country. In Belgium, the sovereign power is unable to limit religious freedom. While England possesses no written constitution, certain recognized conventions exercise a restraining hand upon the theoretically unlimited power of sovereignty.

Experience has suggested different methods - a Bill of Rights, the separation of powers, a written constitution, and other expedients with which to prevent the abuse of the state's power by those who have been chosen by the electorate to act in its name. Despotism, arbitrary rule, is a sovereignty unfettered

by any such limitation. Written constitutions, recognized conventions and so on, by setting forth the rights of the citizens, serve to remind the government in power of the great ends for which the state exists. Their violation by the governing body signalizes an approaching crisis, a shattering of the state's unity. At the same time it is an open and defiant invitation to the citizens to revolt. In the second place, Laski places great hopes in different associations, what we should today call pressure groups, to restrain and abridge sovereignty or rather to make it more plastically responsive to the needs of the citizens. He cites the Trades Disputes Act of 1906 in England and the achievement of the National Consumer's League in America, which established the minimum wage for women as instances of minority wills that secured legislative expression. The realization that innumerable associations and voluntary societies exist side by side with the state, which Laski considers a communitas communitatum, makes him plead for a decentralization of authority. These associations and societies are, in a sense, more natural than the state since they are purely voluntary. Their authority, therefore within their legitimate spheres is and ought to be "as original and as complete as the State itself." (24) It follows that interference with that authority is justified only when general consequences which impinge upon the welfare of the state result from its action.

Laski's indebtedness to the philosophical idealists, to

---

(24) ibid., p. 60

Green in particular, is nowhere more apparent than in the view he takes of rights. (25) Like Green, he conceives rights as bound up with the common good, and as establishing those conditions which enable the citizen to realize himself as a moral being. They make possible an environment in which the ends the state seeks can find immediate fulfillment in the lives of its members. Rights, in this sense, can be thought of as the harmonizing principle in society. They ensure that men's activities will be channelled into moral, that is, socially desirable courses. Where Laski differs from Green is in his recognition that men live in a changing environment and that rights, therefore, require from time to time a re-definition. The changing environment is due chiefly to economic advance. Rights, therefore, are both absolute and relative. They are absolute, in the sense that, like the absolute principle of justice or the moral end which the state seeks to encompass, they must be predicated of any social organization; they are relative in the sense that they are approximations to the ideal; and they are relative also to the changing conditions which allow the translation of the ideal into actuality.

Laski regards rights as a social precipitate which each generation distills for itself. But a Marxist would be bound to point out that Laski takes his point of departure, quite in the idealist tradition, from an abstract principle of justice. His notion of rights, therefore, leaves the whole matter exactly where he took it up from Green - in limbo. The clue to a proper theory

---

(25) Authority in the Modern state, p. 43; Grammar of Politics, p. 91; The State in Theory and Practice, p. 63

of rights lies in the class-conception of the state. In this context, rights may be regarded as defence measures taken by the oppressed on their own behalf against a class wielding dominant economic and political power. Rights, thus viewed, are no abstract, metaphysical entities fathered by an "Ought" but are as concrete a measure of defence as a loaded rifle. Laski, of course, may have reasoned that what was good enough for the bourgeoisie is good enough for the proletariat. If the bourgeois theorists used the gunpowder and fuse of natural rights and natural law to blow up the remnants of feudalism, the working-class, fighting for its emancipation, may employ the same theoretical weapons to blow up capitalism. (26) It is the time-honoured method of turning the enemy's weapons against himself. But whatever Laski's intention may be, it is needful to point out that such an approach has nothing in common with Marxism which seeks enlightenment for action not in man's growing insight into the nature of justice but in a scientific study of the actual practice of men.

Laski's whole effort may now be stated in the form of a paradox: he is attempting to ethicalize the state by proving its individual acts devoid of moral content. No one reading his books can fail to be impressed by his relentless search to establish the niceties of ethical behavior between man and man living in societies. If like the ancient Hebrew prophets he will accept nothing less than the ultimate, he nevertheless strikes a modern note by

---

(26) Needless to say, Laski's conception of natural rights and natural law differs considerably from that of the bourgeois theorists. The latter regarded rights as the creation of the state, Laski regards them as ontologically antecedent to the state's existence.

his equal acceptance of the relativities. But these very relativities are set within, and cannot be understood apart from, the framework of the ultimate. It is not the relative and the ultimate; rather it is the relative in the ultimate that provides the clue to an understanding of Laski's political doctrines. While accepting inevitable failure, his constant effort is to approximate the partial formulation to the finally complete one. But the finally complete one, like the Hebrew God, is invisible. Intimations of his presence, however, may be glimpsed in the rapt faces of his worshippers - after prolonged fasting!

His doctrines, therefore, are nothing so much as a set of riddles, moral conundrums, questions rather than answers. And this, of course, is inevitable since he has set himself the idealist problem of persuasion versus force, insisting with Plato that the employment of force in any given society is an indication of that society's imperfection. But that is not so much a solution to the problem of social evil as a statement of fact. It is readily seen that in the noumenal state Laski is seeking for the state's activity nothing very different from what Hegel, Bosanquet and Green were seeking - namely, the largest moral freedom for each individual consonant with the good of all. For them the state is the association of morally free agents where coercion has receded into the background.

But for Laski there are two kinds of states: the one limping and defective, the other laid up in heaven or in men's consciences. And as with Hegel, it is not always clear which state Laski is speaking about - the ideal or the actual. His

ideal state, or as he prefers to call it his philosophical theory of the state, is intended as a measuring-rod for the conduct of actual states. But he shares, it seems to me, the defect of the idealists whom he accuses of shifting their meanings from one realm to another. It was pointed out in the previous chapter that Laski used the word "purpose" in two different senses. Generally speaking, each Laskian concept can be considered as divided up into two sprinters, one much faster than the other. The faster sprinter, the ideal and ineffable one, is headed straight for heaven. Behind him lags the more stolid fellow, looking a most unathletic figure. But that is not all. We must also imagine the latter putting on seven-league boots and suddenly overtaking the heavenly one. Laski offers us a philosophical Punch-and-Judy show, the ideal and the actual taking turns in whacking each other about. If the philosophical idealists sometimes commit the error of transferring the meanings from the ideal state to the real, Laski commits the opposite error of transferring meanings or possibilities from the actual state (the U.S.S.R.) to the ideal.

The "pluralist" structure, I have said, which Laski had erected in his Grammar of Politics has been carried over into the first section of The State in Theory and Practice. Indeed, the former is to the latter what the raw hide of an animal is to a stiff piece of leather. The rhetorical flourishes have been omitted. There are no cries of impotent rage at sovereignty. The ideal state has been given a concrete piece of work to do (the satisfaction of maximum demand through the release of the productive forces) instead of looking pretty and mumbling abstract

phrases about "the common welfare", etc. The distinctions between state and society, state and government, are urged with much less fervor. The "real" to which Laski had so often appealed had finally caught up with him. Significantly, the first thing that happened was that Laski dropped his specious case against the political monists. He dropped it, I think, for two reasons. Firstly, it was not a valid case. He himself was committed to some overriding authority that concerned itself with the most general interests in society. Legalistically, the state was the final source of reference. And more than that, the monists had never claimed for their unitary state. They did not confuse the "is" with the "ought". The legal commands of the state were not necessarily moral injunctions. But Laski dropped it, secondly, for a more important reason. Sovereignty, he realized, was not an abstract category which could be argued out of existence by an appeal to logical analysis. Sovereignty was really a euphemism for class rule. It was the fly wheel, in particular, of the capitalist state.

At this point Laski picked up the scattered threads of his argument against the philosophical idealists, an argument he had only touched upon briefly in his earlier books, Authority in the Modern State and Grammar of Politics. (27) The first part of The State in Theory and Practice (The Philosophical Theory of the State) is Laski's most sustained effort at a refutation of philosophical idealism. Since Hegel is the philosopher against

---

(27) Authority in the Modern State, p. 67. Grammar of Politics, p. 34.

whom he levels his main attack, considering him the fountain-head of modern political idealism, I shall attempt to show that (a) Laski has misinterpreted Hegel's position, and that (b) his disagreement with Hegel is somewhat of a family quarrel. And now let us examine Laski's specific charge against Hegel and the philosophical idealists. "At bottom", he declares, "Hegel's view and, indeed, the whole idealist theory rests upon an assumption about social organization the implications of which are of major importance. The whole, it is argued, is greater than its parts: the interest of the nation-state must therefore be regarded as greater than the interest of anyone, or any body of its members. Those, therefore, who control the sovereignty of the State have, by reason of the superior interest for whose care they are responsible, a higher claim to obedience than can be made by any charged with the care of a lower interest." (28) This is quite clear. It asserts that Hegel was preaching a crushing absolutism in which the interests of particular individuals and particular groups would count for nothing beside the superior interests of the state. This, needless to say, is the familiar enough Anglo-Saxon view of Hegel. On this view Hegel advocates, in theory, a suffocating monism which in practice develops a goose-stepping militarism that periodically gobbles up Alsace-Lorraine or Czecho-Slovakia.

Can Laski's arraignment stand up under careful scrutiny? Is he presenting a true bill against Hegel? It seems to me that

---

(28) The State in Theory and Practice, p. 51

Laski has failed to distinguish the three necessary elements in the Hegelian state-conception. There is (a) the state in its natural-material aspect, represented by the family and social-economic groups. There is (b) the state in its legal-political aspect; this finds embodiment in the entire governmental system. Finally there is (c) the ethical state itself, which transcends and includes both. As in his controversy with the political monists, Laski attributes a tenet to his opponent which he did not hold. For Hegel sovereignty resides not in the state as a political organization, but, as with Laski himself, in the state as the realization of a moral end. The ethical state is the community of morally free agents, "the realization of freedom". Does Hegel commit himself unambiguously to the position that "the interest of the nation-state... must be regarded as greater than the interest of anyone, or any body of its members"? Let us see. "A state", Hegel writes, "is well constituted and internally powerful, when the private interest of its citizens is one with the common interest of the state; when the one finds its gratification and realization in the other." (29) How removed Hegel was from desiring the suppression of the individual can be seen from the following passage:

"In the State, everything depends upon the unity of the universal and the particular. In the ancient states the subjective purpose was absolutely one with the will of the state. In modern times, on the contrary, we demand an individual opinion,

---

(29) Hegel, The Philosophy of History, Scribners' edition, p. 360.

an individual will and conscience. The ancients had none of these in the modern sense; the final thing for them was the will of the State. While in Asiatic despotisms the individual had no inner self and no self-justification, in the modern world man demands to be honoured for his subjective individuality." (30)

It is the purpose of reason to seek the actualization of freedom. Furthermore, freedom has a concrete subjective content. Hegel traces the idea of freedom from the early oriental despotisms, where even the capricious despot is not a free man, through the Greek and Roman civilizations where the few enjoyed freedom at the expense of many slaves, a fact which, Hegel insists, not even Plato or Aristotle seemed to realize. Under the influence of Christianity the consciousness develops that man, as man, is free, "that it is the freedom of the spirit which constitutes its essence." Nor does Hegel stop here. The principle of freedom must be applied to political relations: "the thorough moulding and interpenetration of the constitution of society by it (the principle of freedom) is a process identical with history itself". (31) It is not surprising to learn, therefore, that Hegel praised the constitutional state of England and wrote that public opinion contained "the eternal substantial principles of justice, the true content, and the result of the whole constitution, legislation, and the universal condition in general." (32)

---

(30) Hegel, The Philosophy of Law, Scribners edition, p. 444

(31) Hegel, The Philosophy of History, Scribners edition, p. 361

(32) Hegel, The Philosophy of Law, Scribners edition, p. 459.

Hegel saw quite clearly that in an ethical community right and duty are correlatives. "What the State demands as duty", he affirms, "should directly be the right of the individual since the state is nothing but the organization of the concept of freedom." (33) Surely Laski is repeating the same notion when he writes: "He that will not perform functions cannot enjoy rights... My rights are built always upon the relation my function has to the well-being of society." (34) However, since Laski makes much of Hegel's alleged confusion of the ideal and the actual it is necessary to give a brief summary of Hegel's metaphysical views. For Hegel, the real or the actual could only be the unity, the interpenetration of such opposites as the universal and the particular. The universal is differentiated into particular ends. This provides Hegel with a criterion to distinguish actuality from existence. Where this unity of the universal and the particular is wanting, a thing is said to exist but not to possess reality. Does Hegel deny that there can be any such thing as a bad state? By no means. He explicitly affirms that bad states have existence - but only existence. True reality, however, they cannot have since in some way the unity of particularity and universality has been ruptured. And by particularity in this context Hegel means, it should be remembered, subjective freedom.

"The idea of the State", Hegel declares in a passage that should be better known both by his critics and would-be disciples, "should not denote any particular state, or particular

---

(33) ibid., p. 444

(34) Grammar of Politics, pp. 94 - 95.

institution; one must rather consider the Idea only, this actual God, by itself. Because it is more easy to find defects than to grasp the positive meaning, one readily falls into the mistake of emphasizing so much the particular nature of the State as to overlook its inner organic essence. The State is no work of art. It exists in the world, and thus in the realm of caprice, accident, and error. Evil behavior toward it may disfigure it on many sides. But the ugliest man, the criminal, the invalid, and the cripple, are still living human beings. The affirmative, life, persists in spite of defects, and it is this affirmative which alone is here in question." (35)

The ideal state could only be a commonwealth of free people bound together by a community of interest. The state = the ethical whole = Laski's erect-minded men living together. It is an equal partnership of moral beings. Did Hegel affirm that "the state is identical with society"? (36) That depends upon which state you are speaking about. If by the state you mean a political organization then Hegel certainly nowhere identifies it with the whole of society. Like the pluralists themselves, he thought the state in its legal-political aspect was only a part of the general community. It is the state as an ethical whole, as a conceptual or metaphysical ideal that Hegel identifies with society. To that ideal all organizations, including the political state, are held subordinate. It was the failure to keep clear

---

(35) Hegel, The Philosophy of Law, . Scribners Edition. p. 444

(36) The State in Theory and Practice, p. 52.

the distinction between the two states that enabled Laski to write as follows:

"As a sovereign body, it is, of course, true that every other association within its (the state's) territorial ambit comes under its jurisdiction. But that is not to say that they are part of it. The Roman Catholic Church in Russia could not admit that it was part of the Soviet state; and the rise of the 'German Christians' is due to the logical attempt of the German Evangelical Church to deny the validity of its identification with the Hitlerite state. We cannot, with justice to the facts, look upon the state as containing within itself all social purposes and defining their legitimacy. It defines their legality; it can legally seek to coerce them into submission to its requirements. But to assume that subordination to legality is anything more than a formal and conceptual inference from the defined nature of sovereignty is altogether to mistake its nature. Legitimacy is a matter belonging to a wholly different universe of discourse".(36)

Ironically enough, Hegel's intention to give content to the Aristotelian state as the perfect community, to fill it in almost pluralistically with living bodies and institutions, is precisely what draws Laski's fire. Yet, as long as it is remembered that Hegel is speaking of an ideal community there is surely nothing reprehensible in saying that all institutions must serve the general welfare or interest. In France, moreover, they have recently passed a law restricting the "rights" and liberties

---

(36) ibid., p. 52.

of the press. This was an excellent Hegelian measure, and I venture to say that Laski, despite his strong individualistic bias, would have been one of its supporters had he been a Frenchman. Secondly, Laski seems to imply that Hegel would have somehow desired the suppression of the Church by the state. Yet Hegel is quite clear on the relation which ought to exist between state and religion. "The essential difference", Hegel writes, "between the State and Religion consists in that the commands of the State have the form of legal duty, irrespective of the feelings accompanying their performance; the sphere of religion, on the other hand, is in the inner life. Just as the State, were it to frame its commands as religion does, would endanger the right of the inner life, so the church, if it acts as a State and imposes punishment, degenerates into a tyrannical religion." (37) No other statement might be expected from one who, believing that the freedom of spirit constituted the very essence of consciousness, wrote that "this consciousness arose first in religion, the inmost region of Spirit." (38) The following passage reveals unmistakably how very far indeed Hegel was from preaching a state absolutism:

"Subjective freedom is the principle of the whole modern world - the principle that all essential aspects of the spiritual totality should develop and attain their right. From this point of view one can hardly raise the idle question as to which form

---

(37) Hegel, The Philosophy of Law, Scribners', pp. 446 - 447.

(38) Hegel, The Philosophy of History, Scribners', p. 361.

is the better, monarchy or democracy. One can but say that the forms of all constitutions are one-sided that are not able to tolerate the principle of free subjectivity and that do not know how to conform to the fully developed reason." (39)

Finally, neither Hegel nor any other philosophical idealist ever confused legitimacy with legality. Laski is altogether too eager to believe that he alone is the champion of moral authority, and this eagerness betrays him into statements or imputations about the political monists and the philosophical idealists that are simply untrue. Thus, as we have seen, Laski makes it appear that Hegel and the philosophical idealists suggest that all government action is legitimate as such, despite Hegel's possible distinction between good and bad states, and Bosanquet's definition of the state as "that society which is habitually recognized as a unit lawfully exercising force." (40) Here the state acts as a moral agent on behalf of the permanent and abiding interests of society. It can be made to appear something quite other - repressive and tyrannical - by addressing to it rather malicious questions. And these, it seems to me, are exactly the kind of questions Laski addresses. They are not really questions, of course, but imputations; slurs. Thus, looking hard in the direction of the philosophical idealists, Laski writes as follows: "... nobody in his senses suggests that government action

---

(39) Hegel, The Philosophy of Law, p. 449

(40) The State in Theory and Practice, p. 52. Although I agree that Laski's arguments against Bosanquet are generally well-taken. Nevertheless, Imaintain that "The Metaphysical Theory of theState" is a monstrous Anglo-Saxon perversion of Hegel's beliefs.

is legitimate because it is government action." (41) And again, "lawfully exercising force" should mean, "force for certain purposes deemed good for reasons outside the formal realm of law." (42) "Precisely," I can imagine Hegel replying, "that is what I have been saying all along." In brief, Laski's questions and answers are merely rhetorical ones, indulged in for the double purpose of giving an air of dialectical fairness to his arguments and of discrediting an opponent. It is the repetition of a stratagem he employed against the political monists; namely, the assumption that he, rather than they, was concerned to ethicalize power.

But, surely, whatever the shortcomings of the philosophical idealists, to ethicalize power was their main intention. Any one reading Aristotle, Hegel, Bosanquet or Green is made aware that their search is for those ultimate terms upon which human life can be had with dignity, beauty and freedom. They desire (as does Laski) a synthesis of the ethical and political; or rather, since they never conceived them as separate realms, a realization of their indissoluble unity. Their conceptual ideal is an aspiration rather than a statement of fact; the longing for the good society, that perfect community where, for Hegel as for Laski, rights and duties shall be correlative, and where the greatest measure of ethical freedom shall obtain. They desired a state dedicated to the promotion of the highest social good, the

---

(41) ibid., p. 53.

(42) ibid., p. 33.

positive freedom of the individual within an over-riding and pervasive framework where, to use a Laskian phrase, men may live as men. Laski's effort, as distinct from theirs, is to find an economic rather than a metaphysical basis for his ideal state, to erect his gleaming tower by means of separate staves, i.e. natural rights, natural law, individualism, above all, the satisfaction of maximum demand by means of releasing the productive forces in any society. It is this last stave, necessarily unknown to Aristotle and Hegel, which gives to Laski's crypto-idealism its air of novelty and with which, to make use of a pun, he is enabled to beat his nearest and dearest kin over their heads.

The Idealist state is, of course, an abstraction, though a profoundly suggestive one. The best answer to Hegel, I believe, was made by Engels. "The State", he wrote, "in no way constitutes a force imposed on society from outside. Nor is the State 'the reality of the Moral Idea', 'the image and reality of Reason', as Hegel asserted. The State is the product of Society at a certain stage of its development. The State is tantamount to an acknowledgement that the given society has become entangled in an insoluble contradiction with itself, that it has broken up into irreconcilable antagonisms, of which it is powerless to rid itself". (43) This is the answer of a materialist. Nonetheless it does not negate, nor does it attempt to do so, the value of Hegel's insight into the organic nature of societies, his emphasis upon the necessary interpenetration of subjective freedom and reason and the

---

(43) Engels, The Origin of the Family, International Publishers, p. 155.

need for a strong state. On all these issues, it is not too much to say, the Marxists take over from Hegel. The first two points are too familiar to require further elucidation. With regard to the last point the following passage from Lenin's State and Revolution is relevant: "Federalism", he writes, "is a direct fundamental outcome of the anarchist petty middle class ideas. Marx is a centralist... Only people full of middle class 'superstitious faith' in the State can mistake the destruction of the bourgeois State for the destruction of centralism". (44) Laski's outlook, it should now be evident, derives not from Hegel but from Locke and the Benthamite Utilitarians. But he has also borrowed much, as we observed, from Green. This blend of empiricism and idealism makes Laski read like a sanitation expert with a turn for moral philosophy.

The idealist state, I have said, is an abstraction. But Laski's individual - is he any less an abstraction? Does he have any existence outside the library, or the noumenal state? This brings us directly to Laski's views on the nature of obedience. He has two views, one of which is really an evasion of the problem, such as, to put it crudely, when he insists that the individual should obey no one but himself. This is Laski's well-known individualism, romantic and picturesque, and based upon presuppositions remote from observable contemporary facts. Moreover, when the Laskian Hero is standing up to the state, he is always clothed in rectitude of moral purpose. The impression is sometimes got

---

(44) Lenin, The State and Revolution, Viking Press, p. 159

that he is right simply because he challenges the state. The recalcitrant one is never a Hitler or a Mikhailovitch. He is usually acting in the light of "his own certainties" and we are left with the breath-taking assurance that his step is a right one. Though not stated, the implication is that as between the state and the defiant one, the gods somehow favor the latter. This, of course, is simply a re-statement of Mills' individualistic liberalism. Freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, freedom to write whatever one pleases, etc. Certainly there is more shrewd realism in the Hegelian answer which President Boleslaw Bierut of Poland offered questioning reporters, when he asserted: "It isn't against freedom of the press, if we don't permit newspapers to print lies. Freedom of the press should serve the truth." (45) Laski's second answer is in all essentials not very different from that of the philosophical idealists. It is that both the individual and the state are morally committed to obey an indefinable abstraction, the "Good". This "Good" is objectified into the utilitarian good which makes "possible the fullest use of the means of production". This is the conceptual state - with a touch of Marx! And since no actual state performs the function of assuring that the productive forces in society are fully used (the state was not instituted for that purpose) it follows that the existing laws cannot be equated with justice. Out of this teleology - society's intent to maximise satisfaction of demand - is born "natural law", which stands as a constant reproach to the limited, incomplete laws which are actually

---

45) The Montreal Daily Star, March 30, 1946. p. 1.

existent. "Now it is clear", Laski writes, "that once we admit that there is, in some given situation, a law which ought to be, we are admitting the existence of natural law." (46) Laski therefore demands "an adequate science of natural law" as well as "a science of justice". The individual's loyalty is to the "law which ought to be".

At this exact point Laski's native idealism and his acquired "Marxism" are fused together. For what, indeed, are natural "law" and "justice" but a reflection of an insight Laski gained from Marx that man's historical development has finally reached a juncture where his productive forces can be put to the service of all humanity instead of a particular class? They are the "eternalization", the "conceptualization" in Laski's head of certain specific material processes. And just how far this fusion is from real Marxism can be seen if we set down some passages from a famous polemic Engels wrote against one Herr Duhring who, in some respects, was a precursor of Laski. Dealing particularly with pure, immutable truths, Engels wrote as follows:

"First the concept of the object is formed from the object; then the spit is turned round, and the object is measured by its image, the concept of it." (47)

"Our ideologist may turn and twist as he likes, but the historical reality which he cast out at the door comes in again at the window, and while he may think he is framing a doctrine of morals and law for all times and for all worlds, he is in fact only

---

(46) The State in Theory and Practice, p. 78.

(47) Engels, Anti-Duhring, International Publishers, p. 111.

making an image of the conservative or revolutionary tendencies of his time - an image which is distorted because it has been torn from its real basis and, like a reflection in a concave mirror, is standing on its head." (48)

"The idea of equality, therefore, both in its bourgeois and in its proletarian form, is itself a historical product, the creation of which required definite historical conditions which in turn themselves presuppose a long previous historical development. It is therefore anything but an eternal truth." (49)

Laski has turned the spit around!

To return to the formal argument: "The roots of valid law", Laski affirms, "are and can only be, within the individual conscience." (50) One failsto see, offhand, why the individual's intuitions are a better guide to policy than, let us say, a body of persons chosen to represent the community. In any case, Laski does not leave us with any method or criterion whereby to choose between conflicting intuitions. If pressed for an answer he might reply that only those intuitions are really valid which can be objectively demonstrated as benefitting the community. Any other answer makes law and government an impossibility. The trouble with Laski's individual, it cannot be said too often, is that independent of social forces, removed from those group pressures and associations that actually determine his behavior he is a pure abstraction. This is not to deny that the individual possesses a "conscience"; the rea-

---

(48) ibid., p. 112.
(49) ibid., p. 123
(50) The State in Theory and Practice, p. 65.

son, however, for the individual's significant motivations must be sought deeper than that. When, for example, Frau Goering can say that she is extremely proud of her husband, it is surely time for conventional moralists to re-examine their premises. (51)

In brief, the individual may be stupid, ill-informed, prejudiced, dogmatic, narrow and illiberal. He may, in fact, possess no conscience at all. If Laski contends that the persons who at a given moment are the government may mistake the content of eternal justice, the same may be said of the individual. Laski's extreme subjectivism is self-defeating, his individualistic theory of politics a contradiction in terms. And surely he is no more self-consistent in his controversy with the philosophical idealists than he was against the political monists. For, on the one hand, he asserts that freedom consists in the complete absence of force or restraint which might limit or modify the individual's will; on the other hand, he urges "that force must be used in those directions only where the common sense of society is on the type of conduct it seeks to compel." (52) But the above, I take it, indicates more than an inconsistency. It indicates that Laski himself is unwilling to face the logical consequences of his individualistic doctrine. To confess that the state may use force to exact certain types of conduct it deems desirable is to affirm no more

---

(51) As reported in Time Magazine, March 30, 1946.

(52) Grammar of Politics, p. 33. Failure to realize that so long as the state exists there can be no freedom and that as soon as there is freedom there will be no state, is what makes Laski's noumenal state with its guarantees and specifications for individual freedom such an unreal [illegible] construction. It is the pleasant dream of a petit-bourgeois.

and no less than what Rousseau had said: the citizen must be forced to be free.

At the beginning of this chapter I stated that Laski was the lineal descendent of John Locke. It was Locke who conceived the state in narrow empirical terms (by identifying the state purpose with the protection of property) without necessarily denying its possible connection with some ultimate ethical good. Laski, it appears to me, has conceived the state-purpose, empirically, as the satisfaction of maximum demand through the release of the productive forces while holding at the same time to a general ideal of the community conceived in teleological-ethical terms. The instrumental state is a purely secular institution among many others, and like them fallible and imperfect. The ethical state is a perfect community of free men living out their lives on the highest plane of self realization. It is precisely this two-forked conception of the state that enabled Laski to attack the political monists from one point of view and the philosophical idealists from another. Against both, of course, he brought the charge, a false one, I have attempted to show, of state absolutism: yet equally with Laski, both schools are concerned to secure moral validity for legal supremacy.

Laski's great merit consists in having stressed the importance of men's economic arrangements in any consideration of social good. Yet having said this it must be added at once that neither Hegel nor Aristotle would seriously object to Laski's main conclusions. Those conclusions, indeed, are nothing more than a truism: that the state or government must serve the people.

Both Aristotle and Hegel, it seems to me, have been dismissed too readily as reactionary or authoritarian thinkers. (In this connection it might be said that the liberals and Utilitarians have been the worst offenders.) Now that extreme individualism has run its course and some measure of collective control is seen as necessary their writings are beginning to assume a significance greater, if possible, than at any time previously. Aristotle's emphasis upon the social nature of good and Hegel's great insight that freedom can be secured only through the knowledge of necessity (natural and social necessity) are extremely valuable concepts for our generation. It is, I think, high time to find out what they did say instead of what their critics tell us they said. Finally, it must be again emphasized that Laski's Marxian borrowings are incompatible with the idealist skin in which he has wrapped them. The attempted fusion of Marxism and Idealism is the greatest single defect of Laski's noumenal state.

Chapter IV

The Phenomenal State

For proof that it is quite possible to accept the Marxian conception of history without in the least understanding it we must go back to one of Laski's earlier books. His Communism first appeared in 1927, and a reprinted version was issued in 1932. Now in Communism Laski asserts quite explicitly that "the materialist interpretation of history is, as a general doctrine, undeniable." (1) But what does Laski understand by "the materialist interpretation of history"? "It is", he writes, "simply the insistence that the material conditions of life, taken as a whole, primarily determine the changes in human thought." (2) Such a bald definition, unless it is immediately qualified, reduces Marx's theory to an absurdity, but it enables Laski to add that "Historical materialism is as old as Aristotle, and thinkers like Harrington and Madison have made it the corner-stone of their systems." (3) (Surely Aristotle is great enough without being fathered with the Materialist Conception of History.) But in the act of finding a birth certificate for the theory, Laski has greatly altered it. It has now become something quite different - economic materialism or economic determinism.

It may be stated at the outset that Laski misinterprets

---

(1) Communism, p. 90
(2) ibid., p. 58.
(3) ibid., p. 65.

"Men may choose a less advantageous order, even when its utility is obviously exhausted, because they prefer its psychological results to those of its antithesis. A state, for example, which did not afford adequate opportunity to energetic and determined men would rapidly change even if it satisfied the inert majority of its members." (5)

Furthermore, Laski has always insisted that historical materialism "has no necessary connection with the metaphysical theory of materialism", (6) although, on the contrary, Marx regarded his conception of history as an extension of the principles of dialectical materialism to the phenomena of social life. This fury to dismember Marxism into separate elements is a persistent trait of Laski, as it is of other mis-interpreters of Marx. Failure to see the underlying unity, that Marxism is a connected whole, prevents Laski from realizing that Marx's economic theories are a specific application of historical materialism to the study of the capitalist mode of production. Marx says quite explicitly that in Capital he had set himself the task of revealing the "economic law of motion of modern Society" - "tendencies working with iron necessity toward inevitable results". (7) But Marx's own words are seldom insurmountable obstacles to his would-be interpreters. For Laski, Marx was an ethicist like himself, looking for justice. "Marx", he tells us, "was seeking the criterion of a just exchange

---

(5) ibid., p. 80.
(6) ibid., p. 77. I assume, perhaps too optimistically, that Laski is referring to dialectical materialism.
(7) See Marx's prefaces to Capital ...

in a society where man obtains for the commodities he produces the ideal values he ought to obtain". (8) Laski is trying very hard to see Marx in his own image. He cannot believe that anyone who wished to abolish inequality and exploitation as passionately as Marx did could be anything else but an idealist. The following passage, if it reveals nothing true about Marx, does tell us a great deal about Laski:

"Of course, once the facts of distribution are incompatible with social justice, the theory of class-war, upon which Marx laid so great an insistence, has a large measure of truth in it. For the absence of justice in the division of the product may be held to imply a struggle for justice to which the parties are the buyers and sellers of labour-power. The conclusions, that is to say, which Marx built upon his theory of surplus value are in large part true even though the theory of labour value is itself erroneous." (9)

(Here, it is no part of my task to deal with Laski's reasons for not accepting the labour theory of value; but, in passing, one cannot help but observe how strange it is that Marx's predictions and conclusions, which Laski himself admits have been largely verified by the progress of capitalism, should have resulted from such an erroneous theory.)

Since the relationship between ideology and mode of production is conceived mechanically and not dialectically, Laski asserts (though the proof is not forthcoming) that "Ideologies produce economic systems, just as economic systems produce ideologies". (10) What, however, is still more astonishing is Laski's

---

(8) Communism, p. 114.
(9) ibid., p. 112

discovery of the fatal weakness of historical materialism. "It is," he affirms, "too exclusively pre-occupied with a rational theory of human action to remember how much of men's efforts is non-rational in character." (11) And elsewhere: "His (Marx's) view is obviously built upon a confidence in rationalism which most psychologists (sic!) would now judge to be excessive. It has in it that optimistic temper which stamps him as a child of the Enlightenment." (12) This about a theory which, as Laski himself has told us, seeks to go behind men's ideas to the social forces that produced them.

Briefly, Laski's account of historical materialism suffers from the following defects: it fails to see history as a "seamless web" where it is precisely the interconnectedness of social phenomena and their dialectical movement that must be grasped and understood. Historical materialism insists "that men do not make several distinct histories - the history of law, the history of morals, the history of philosophy, etc., - but only one history, the history of their own social relations, which are determined by the state of the productive forces in each particular period. What is known as ideologies is nothing but a multiform reflection in the minds of men of this single and indivisible history." (13) New social ideas do not mechanically reflect an abstract "economic environment", but arise out of the conflict between the novel productive forces and the old relations of production. Secondly,

---

(11) ibid., p. 80

(12) ibid., p. 85.

(13) Plekhanov, The Materialist Conception of History, p. 48.

Laski failed to understand the role of the working-class as that class which alone, in our capitalist epoch, can overthrow the old relations of production and substitute those new ones required by the growth of the productive forces. Since he has no understanding of the law of motion of capitalism he can write as follows:

"We cannot, either, overlook the possibilities that better industrial organization and the prospects of scientific discovery might easily make of capitalism a system able to satisfy the main wants of the workers... Capitalism is not an unchanging phenomenon; and the margin of possible improvement, under its aegis, is larger than its critics like to admit. The intensity of production, for instance, which might follow a general level of high wages, might, so far from leading to revolution, prove a safeguard against it by the great increase it secured in the average standard of life". (14)

Finally, Laski does not grasp the unity of theory and practice, whose expression, Marxism, is the reflection of the proletariat's struggle to shatter the capitalistic relations of production.

In a letter to Weydemeyer, dated March 5, 1852, Marx made the following important observation:

"And now as to myself, no credit is due to me for discovering the existence of classes in modern society nor yet the struggle between them. Long before me bourgeois historians had described the historical development of the class struggle, and bour-

---

(14) Communism, p. 87.

geois economists, the economic anatomy of the classes. What I did that was new was to prove: 1) that the existence of classes is only bound up with particular, historic phases in the development of production; 2) that the class struggle necessarily leads to the dictatorship of the proletariat; 3) that this dictatorship itself only constitutes the transition to the abolition of all classes and to a classless society."

With Marxists "the dictatorship of the proletariat" is a cardinal tenet, and their belief in its inevitability and function grows out of their unique conception of historical development. It was Lenin who savagely attacked the European socialists for playing down the proletarian dictatorship, suppressing it, and finally eliminating it altogether from their official programmes. He said they had betrayed and vulgarized the teachings of Marx. He called them opportunists. Today, with the texts before us, it is a simple matter to see that Lenin's accusations were entirely justified. When the First World War broke out and the various socialist parties flew to the support of their imperialist governments, Lenin called them social chauvinists. He traced the degeneration of European socialism to the falsification of Marx's doctrines in the interests of vote-getting, of parliamentarism.

A Marxist, in brief, cannot be an eclectic. He cannot pick and choose his way among the teachings of Marx as if he were standing before a bargain counter, selecting some things and rejecting others. Marxism is indivisible. It is a structural unity in which the parts fit together not like bricks in a wall or the staves of a barrel but like the cells in a living body. Marxism is an indestrictible totality, in which philosophy, history and ecn-

omics interpenetrate with one another organically. Whosoever ruptures that totality cannot be considered a Marxist. Whosoever accepts the materialist conception of history must also accept the dictatorship of the proletariat; whosoever accepts the dictatorship of the proletariat, must also accept the duty of educating and organizing the proletariat for a forcible and decisive assault upon the entrenched positions of capitalism.

What does Laski say about the "dictatorship of the proletariat"? In The State in Theory and Practice - almost nothing. In Communism - Laski brings forward the classic liberal objections taken directly from Mills' book On Liberty. Power corrupts; a governing class will refuse to abdicate voluntarily; people living in an atmosphere of tyranny and oppression become servile; anyway all dictatorships end in failure. (15) Marx's assertion that the proletarian dictatorship must lead to a classless society where the formula "From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs" will apply, Laski dismisses as rhetoric. It is worthwhile putting down the passage in which Laski gives his reasons for rejecting Marx's claim if only because it reveals the liberal's constitutional incapacity to understand what Marx was talking about. "For we cannot", Laski explains, "measure powers, especially in the realm of intellectual effort; and the only criterion of needs that is possible is one that assumes a rough identity between men and the insistence that the claim of this identity upon the social product is the first charge we must

---

(15) ibid., pp. 175 - 177.

recognize. We require, in brief, an objective test of powers and needs; and this means the discovery of a social average which rejects the individual differences of which, by implication, the communist formula professes to take account." (16) Marx's answer to Laski's "scientific" objections can be given in two sentences: human nature in a classless society will be unrecognisably different from what it is now. Moreover, the productive forces, a thousandfold more developed than they are today (one need only think of the promise of atomic power) will pour forth such a Niagara of goods that people will no more reckon their use and wastage than they now reckon the use and wastage of water.

In fairness to Laski, it must be said that The State in Theory and Practice, in its exposition of historical materialism, marks a slight advance over the earlier book, Communism. Laski is now able to distinguish fairly accurately between the forces of production and the relations of production. He perceives that it is the contradiction between the two, their dynamic interweaving, that has served as a lever for historical change and not, as he had suggested previously, an abstract, mechanical relationship subsisting between ideology and "economic environment". (17) This slight improvement apart, the objections I ventured to make above are not withdrawn. His account of historical materialism suffers from over-schematism. And Laski refuses, now as before, to draw the proper Marxian conclusions from premisses established which,

---

(16) ibid., p. 178

(17) The State in Theory and Practice, pp. 91 - 104.

I shall attempt to show, is after all the core of the matter. A clear statement of his views appears in the following passage:

"Changes in the methods of economic production appear to be the most vital factor in the making of changes in all the other social patterns we know. For changes in those methods determine the changes of social relationships; and these, in their turn, are subtly interwoven with all the cultural habits of men." (18)

Agreeing with Marx, Laski says that what ultimately determines our laws, our educational institutions, our religion and our literature is the method of production in force and the social relationships that are built upon it. In feudal society, the basic method of production was tillage of the soil, agriculture, and the primary social relation was that which existed between the serf and his lord. The lord owned the land upon which the serf worked with very primitive tools, and the laws protected his rights from any invasion by those over whom he ruled. The Church, itself a great landowner, counselled the masses to obedience. Exploitation was naked and direct. The lords exacted from their vassals feudal dues and feudal labour; and impressed them into service for predatory wars of conquest. Feudal society is divided into oppressing and oppressed classes and the state, an instrument of suppression, is employed by the former to maintain themselves in their dominant position. There is class morality. Thus, the "virtues" of a feudal lord were brutal courage and pride of birth, both of which were necessary for his military functions and the

---

(18) ibid., p. 91.

preservation of his power; the virtues of a peasant were humility and patience. All this was necessary for the preservation of the existing class society, and feudal religion sanctified it all as being established by God. The literature of the period reflects the interests and amusements of a class freed from the bondage of labour.

With the growth of the productive forces and the development of exchange, the old relationships between lord and vassal, sanctified by law, religion and morality, are completely destroyed. This work of destruction is accomplished by the bourgeoisie, the middle classes, who now proceed to establish their own social relations, relations which are more in harmony with the novel forces of production. But has oppression disappeared, have classes been abolished? Not at all. Only the form has been altered, but the stark fact of exploitation and oppression remains unchanged. The capitalist takes the place of the feudal lord; the proletarian that of the serf. As in feudal society, the means of production are privately owned, and the owners possess dominant economic and political power. Exploitation is no longer frank and direct; it is disguised in the form of a contract. Nominally the proletarian is a free man; in actual fact, however, he must sell himself and his labour to whosoever will hire him and pay him wages. Under commodity production, labour itself becomes a commodity to be bought and sold according to conditions created by the market. Since a ruling class exists, it requires an instrument of coercion to make secure its privileged position in society. The state is such an instrument.

Laski's account of the rise and development of class societies, their tensions and contradictions, are in the main clear and accurate. His claim to being called a Marxist rests, I think, ultimately upon the analysis which he makes of class-divided societies and his perception that "the power of the state will be manifested on the side of those who own the instruments of production..." (19) Yet, in sober truth, he has not gone beyond the position (see Marx's letter to Weydemer) of many bourgeois historians and economists. He has only expressed himself more trenchantly. For one thing, his description of the phenomenal state, of the state in the real world, sacrificing as it does content for the sake of logical form, is too schematic. (I explain what is meant by this term further on.) Moreover, since Laski does not think dialectically, does not, that is, think as a Marxian, he betrays curious little slips and inconsistencies. In themselves they are not particularly important, but they add up to an outlook which is idealistic and liberal. Thus on page 105 (The State in Theory and Practice) Laski writes: "... a proletariat which could live only by the sale of its labour... was disadvantaged by that position so soon as capitalism ceased to expand." But on page 107, Laski tells us that "... in any society where the instruments of production are privately owned their use... necessarily involves the continuous disadvantage of the working-class." When is the proletariat disadvantaged? With the origin and continuous development of capitalism?Or only when capitalism has ceased to expand?

---

(19) ibid., p. 118.

A tiny slip, but significant. Again, on page 119, Laski writes: "the state is always biassed in the interest" of the owners of the means of production. But on page 122, he asserts that "the reason of the government, that is, the state is often biassed and frequently mistaken." Is the state only often biassed or always biassed? Which?

On page 101, Laski is anxious to assure us that "History is meaningless when read as a struggle between competing selfish interests; so to regard it is to defame the quality of human nature. It is rather the competition of ideals for survival, the character of which is determined by their power to exploit productive potentialities at any given time." Yet a few pages further on (pp. 120-121) Laski says, "So far in history, at any rate, they (men) have not abdicated peacefully as a class, from any position they deemed vital to their well-being." Did the German bourgeoisie, and the British and French capitalists along with them, who turned to Hitler for help against the German and international proletariat do so out of "idealism" or because they wished to preserve their well-being, their privileged position in society? Was the French bourgeoisie acting selfishly or "idealistically" when it said with one voice, "Better Hitler than Marcel Thorez"? I do not wish to suggest for one moment that Laski does not know the answers to these questions. He most assuredly does. What Laski refuses to do, however, is to face up to the implications which a Marxian answer would involve, implications which call for the building up of a militant and aggressive working-class party, tough, disciplined and alert, and the need for a

dictatorship of the proletariat once the "idealistic" bourgeoisie has been overthrown. Hence the almost wistful lapses into liberalism, the constant retreats from positions which knowledge and experience have made clear to him. Hence Social Democracy. Indeed, Laski is so determined to absolve the bourgeoisie of any evil thoughts that he repeats as a constant refrain, for whose benefit one can only guess, the twaddle about rulers and beneficiaries in a class-divided society who always "identify their special privileges... with the well-being of the whole". For saying less than this, Lenin called Kautsky a sentimental simpleton.

The following passage should be studied attentively by all liberals and pseudo-Marxists. It is an object lesson in the art of castrating Marxism, of covering it up, of burying it in a heap of revolutionary-sounding phrases. And for such purpose, of course, a vigorous style is extremely useful, since it belies the timidity as well as the falsification of the actual content. It is to such purpose and in such manner that Laski writes:

"Even the idea of class-warfare as rooted in the economics of capitalism has a long and honorable intellectual pedigree from Sismondi and St. Simon downwards; the real change lies in the twofold fact that with Marx and Engels the idea became a movement, and that, with the decline of capitalism, the movement became an army prepared to do battle for its principles." (20)

Laski, it seems, is willing to say anything in order to avoid mentioning the disagreeable "dictatorship of the proletariat".

---

(20) ibid., p. 178.

Marx and Engels merely scooped up the "idea of class-warfare" and passed it along. No modifications, no extensions, no further and deeper insights! Nothing about "the existence of classes" being "bound up with particular, historic phases in the development of production". Not a word, nothing about the class struggle leading of necessity "to the dictatorship of the proletariat". Merely the idea of Sismondi and St. Simon gathering bulk as it slides down the decades. Laski is back again where he started from. All that he has learned, all that he ever learned from historical materialism is - class warfare. Truly a great Marxist!

Nor is this all. Laski's inability to divest himself of his cap and gown, to think in real, practical terms of the activity of real, flesh-and-blood capitalists makes him write on occasion something as owlishly, as professorially absurd as the following:

"Capitalism in difficulties uses the predominant position of capitalists in any society to devote the state-power to suppressing its opponents." (21)

It is not the capitalists, mind you, who behave so abominably. It is capitalism. An age of miracles when an abstraction can behave with so much cunning violence!

Very evidently, Laski has only a very dim idea of what historical materialism is all about. He has an even dimmer idea, probably no idea at all, of what is meant by the "law of motion of capitalism", a specific application of the materialist concep-

---

(21) ibid., p. 136.

tion of history. Laski has the crude notion that all that is the matter with capitalism is that there is constantly going on a conflict between the capitalists and the proletarians for a larger share of "the total social product". (Class warfare!) The capitalists desire to increase profits; the proletarians wish to increase wages. The scene thus carefully laid, Laski introduces two wonderful abstractions called respectively "advancing capitalism" and "contracting capitalism". For some reason or other, never quite explained by Laski, advancing capitalism turns into its opposite, into contracting capitalism, and the scene is now set for crises, depressions, the suspension of democracy, violent flare-ups leading ultimately to revolutions and civil wars.

All this because the workers and the capitalists disagree upon how to divide "the total social product." Truly, an unfortunate difference of opinion.

"We find", Laski writes, "a society in which the control of the instruments of production is in the hands of a small class, and that its interest in the total social product is different, so far as distribution is concerned, from the interest of the masses over whom it rules. For since the total social product is limited, it follows, to take an obvious instance, that the more there goes in wages to the masses, the less there will be in profits, rent and interest for those who control the instruments of production. Since, moreover, upon the postulates of our society, the motive to production is the capacity to make profit, it follows that the level of wages will always be set, the power, indeed, to obtain employment will be set, by its relation to that level of

profit sufficient to induce the owners of capital to use it for the purpose of production. Given the postulates of capitalism, in short, a failure to make profit must either mean unemployment or a reduction in wages." (22)

That this is a "liberal" way of regarding class antagonism and not a Marxian becomes evident as soon as we address a few questions to Professor Laski. Supposing we say, with some apologists of capitalism, that the only way to increase wages as well as profits is to increase the "total social product" - can Laski show us that under capitalism this cannot be done? It is no use bringing in a mysterious blight called "contracting capitalism". We want to know what makes capitalism contract. More importantly, we want to be shown conclusively that capitalism must contract. In fact, the notion of a contracting capitalism must be fully analysed and a very definite meaning assigned to it before it can be used as a workable concept. If the capacity to make profits is the index to capitalism's growth and decline, as Laski seems to think, then the capitalists of the leading capitalistic countries are, at the present time, making greater profits than they did a decade ago. (23) Would an observer conclude, therefore, that the economic system is much healthier now, assured of a longer lease of life, than when Laski pronounced its "break-down" in England and the United States? (24)

---

(22) ibid., pp. 106 - 107.
(23) See George Soule's illuminating discussion on post-war profits in the New Republic, January 14, 1946 and January 21, 1946.
(24) The State in Theory and Practice, p. 132. See the final chapter of Lenin's Imperialism for a Marxian dissection of capitalism's decay.

In his polemics against various capitalist theoreticians Laski can only limp along on a wooden peg which he calls "the postulates of capitalism". Laski's theory concerning the origin and meaning of class-warfare is a logical fiction. It is a simplified abstract, a dehydrated, factitious and extremely artificial description of a turbulent, many-sided process, which is full of inner contradictions and tensions. Since we have already seen the low opinion which Laski holds of Marxian economics, it is now relevant to summarize that aspect of Marx's achievement. Moreover, the summary will also make clear how little the elements of Marxism are separable.

In brief, the task Marx set himself in his monumental work Capital was to discover, as he tells us, the "law of motion for capitalism." It was to be a particular application of the materialist conception of history. Indeed, Marx's first great contribution to economics was the concept that economic systems have a definite and determinable cycle of growth and decay, and that consequently a social morphology was possible. He revealed that surplus value, "unpaid labour", was both the genesis and the essential nature of the capitalist mode of production. The history of capitalist production is, therefore, the history of the extraction of surplus value, of its realization in money forms, and its reconversion into more capital for the purpose of extracting more surplus value. The mainspring or driving motor of the capitalist system is not profits but the rate of profit having a determinable relation to the extraction of surplus value.

Marx traces this category of surplus value through a

whole cavalcade of ramified development. In essentials capitalist production is an historically conditioned process of the self-expansion and the self-production of capital by means of the extraction, realization and capitalization of surplus value. This behavior, the metamorphosis of a portion of surplus value into capital, Marx called the "accumulation of capital", and he bent his efforts towards discovering the law governing it as well as the counter-tendencies generated by the capitalist system. In the sum total of capital, there takes place a more rapid growth of constant capital as compared with variable capital. This is the "historical tendency of capitalist accumulation", the basic contradiction within the capitalist system which requires that the means of production must grow, must continuously expand and increase while consumption is kept down to the barest minimum. In the early stages of capitalism, this was a necessary and progressive requirement for the expansion of capital goods. At the present time, however, such a contradiction leads only to gluts, periodic depressions, and wars. The "antagonism" which the capitalist system sets up between productive labour and the means of production finds its expression in the class struggles between the bourgeoisie and the workers. In its wake other contradictions develop - social production vs. individual appropriation, general anarchy of production vs. efficient management and rationalization vs. the individual plant or factory - all of which spell out the death sentence of capitalism. (25)

---

(25) See Maurice Dobbs' Political Economy and Capitalism for a brilliant exposition of Marx's economics.

The Marxist, then, is one who, basing himself upon the foregoing analysis of capitalist production, studies classes in motion; that is, dialectically. Furthermore, he analyses their inter-relationships (constantly changing, constantly developing) not only from the perspective of their past, their point of origin, but also from the perspective of their future, their eventual destination. The reverse of this is to describe class-antagonism, class-conflict in the abstract, as a phenomenon frozen fast in a logical and schematic cube of ice. It was to warn against precisely this kind of lip-service to Marxism that Lenin asserted that to limit Marxism merely to the theory of class struggle was "an opportunist distortion of Marxism, a falsification of it so as to make it acceptable to the bourgeoisie." (26) (My italics). And to ensure his meaning against any possible misunderstanding, Lenin added the following vital passage:

"He who recognizes only the class struggle is not yet a Marxist; he may be found not to have gone beyond the boundaries of bourgeois reasoning and politics. To limit Marxism to the teaching of the class struggle means to curtail Marxism, to distort it, to reduce it to something which is acceptable to the bourgeoisie. A Marxist is one who extends the acceptance of class struggle to the acceptance of the dictatorship of the proletariat. Herein lies the deepest difference between a Marxist and an ordinary petty (or even big) bourgeois. On this touchstone it is necessary to test a real understanding and acceptance of Marxism." (27) (Lenin's italics).

---

(26) Lenin, Marx - Engels, Marxism, Marxist Library, Vol. 20, p.160
(27) ibid., p. 160.

This is the outlook of authentic Marxism; this is the approach of a genuine historical materialism as distinct from the truncated and doctrinaire version which Laski puts forward in its name.

The same empty and formal schematism is at work throughout Laski's presentation of his "Marxist" theory of the state.

"The claim of the state to obedience rests upon its will and ability to secure to its citizens the maximum satisfaction of their wants." (28) The foregoing sentence opens Laski's discussion of state and government in the real world. For this claim to be supportable it necessarily follows that "there must be an absence of bias in the performance of this function." (29) Laski has little difficulty in showing that in the phenomenal world the historical state has never been unbiassed in its action. The Greek city-state favored the slave-owners, as did the Roman empire which acted against the interests of the slaves and the poor. The states of the mediaevel world served the feudal lords as a machine with which to suppress the serfs. Whenever and wherever a state exists, it is simply a coercive apparatus to enforce the claims and privileges of the owners of property, of those ruling groups in any society possessing the means of production. As between the possessors and non-possessors, the state is never neutral, never impartial. This cardinal fact is as true of the contemporary capitalist state as it was true of the feudal state and of the

---

(28) The State in Theory and Practice, p. 87.

(29) ibid., p. 87.

classical states of antiquity. "The state", Laski concludes, "is a legal instrument for making the claims of private owners to the resources of production predominant over other claims from those who do not own." (30)

Sovereignty, i.e. supreme coercive power is in actual fact possessed by those who command the productive forces in society. Ultimately, that is, the laws of the state are the wills and decisions of the property-owners translated into legal terms, and a well-articulated bureaucratic apparatus (army, civil service, judiciary, and prisons) stands ready to enforce them against all challenge and opposition. (31) And, furthermore, since the government is the agent of the state it turns out that the government invariably acts "as the executive committee of the class which dominates, economically, the system of production by which the society lives." (32) In addition to a coercive apparatus the ruling class possesses other, more subtle, means for making its will acceptable. These means, by operating as a pervasive environment, condition the propertyless to accept unthinkingly the dominant mores, the ideology of their masters. The churches, the schools, the gigantic newspaper chains, each in their own way, serve the owners of the means of production by inculcating opinions and attitudes favorable to their continuing domination. Wherever we turn, Laski insists, we are hemmed in by a network of ideals and moral precepts which have as their basis the private

---

(30) ibid., p. 145.
(31) ibid., pp. 91, 118, 160.
(32) ibid., p. 115.

ownership of the means of production. In any event, should these fail, there is always the reserve power of the state.

All this is excellent and, as far as it goes, indubitably true. For the moment (and only for the moment) Laski has shifted sovereignty from the state-purpose to the capitalist class. Where formerly he argued that sovereignty could not be entrusted to any single group in society he now asserts that, in effect, it is possessed by those who command its productive forces. The state is a capitalist state and its sovereignty nothing else but coercive power put at the disposal of the ruling class, i.e., the capitalists. But how did the state arise in the first place? What is its real function? Laski's answer is worth quoting in full. "Any society", he affirms, "must seek to sustain some stable relations of production in order to continue as a society. It has to put behind those relations the force of law. It needs, that is, a coercive instrument to secure the continuance of those relations simply because, otherwise, it will not continue to earn its living... The conditions of wholesale change are not possible in any society at a given moment without a disruption in its life. Since such a disruption would threaten the foundations of the existing order, the society has need of an instrument to prevent, if necessary by force, the emergence of that threat to peace the disruption involves. This instrument, historically, has been the state. Its primary function is to ensure the peaceful process of production in society. To do so it protects the system of productive relations which that process necessitates. Its function is to evolve, under coercive sanction, the legal relations by which society maintains its life in terms of the way in which it earns

its living." (33)

It cannot be said that Laski's answer to the first question - how did the state originate? - is either clear or convincing. To say that "any society must seek to sustain stable relations of production" is to assert something which is indisputable but which fails to explain why a special coercive apparatus for that purpose was found to be necessary. Furthermore it follows, if what Laski says is true, that the state must in some way or another, be a permanent institution, since it is impossible to conceive of any society where the maintenance of economic stability will not be its paramount concern. Such a view is in no way distinguishable from that of the liberal theorist: the state arose as a beneficent and necessary means for promoting stability. A coercive machinery, that is, is a vital requirement to ensure the stable and continuous use of the productive instruments lest the society starve itself into extinction. Yet perhaps that is not quite Laski's meaning, for elsewhere he argues "that the different place occupied by different classes in the process of production gives rise to different needs and interests which, at a given point, come into antagonism with one another. <u>That point is defined by the contradiction between the relations of production and the forces of production.</u>" (34) (My italics.) The state, on this view, will favor the needs and interests of those who control the instruments of production as against those who are excluded from their owner-

---

(33) ibid., p. 93.

(34) ibid., p. 104.

ship; this partiality, at the same time, promotes stability by forcibly preventing dissension and seeing to it that society continues "to earn its living". Yet such a permissible formulation only raises another difficulty, at any rate a further question. At what exact point does the state arise? As soon as classes have taken up their different positions in the process of production; or is it only when the antagonism between the classes has become sharpened "by the contradiction between the forces of production and the relations of production"? Laski, it would appear, is committed to one of the following two explanations, or to both simultaneously: the state's origin is explicable (i) as an instrument necessary to maintain economic stability, or (ii) as the product of a contradiction of the forces of production by the established social relationships. In neither case is the explanation a Marxist one, and the second is demonstrably false.

This is how Engels explains the origin of the state: "As the State arose from the need of keeping class antagonisms in check, but also arose in the thick of the fight between the classes, it is normally the state of the most powerful, economically ruling class, which by its means becomes also the politically ruling class, and so acquires new means of holding down and exploiting the oppressed class. The ancient state was, above all, the state of the slave-owners for holding down the slaves, just as the feudal state was the organ of the nobility for holding down the peasant serfs and bondsmen, and the modern representative state is the instrument for exploiting wage-labour by capital." (35)

---

(35) Engels, Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State, pp. 156 - 157

settled economic relationships. The different emphases, I suggest, are all-revealing: the first is that of a Marxist and a revolutionary, the other that of a liberal or a social democrat.

Speaking of opportunistic falsifiers of Marxism in general, and of Karl Kautsky in particular, Lenin wrote as follows: "Theoretically (Lenin's italics) there is no denial that the state is the organ of class domination, or that class antagonisms are irreconcilable. But what is forgotten or overlooked is this:- If the state is the product of the irreconcilable character of class antagonisms, if it is a force standing above society and 'separating itself gradually from it' (37) then it is clear that the liberation of the oppressed class is impossible without a violent revolution, and without the destruction of the machinery of the state power, which has been created by the governing class and in which the 'separation' is embodied. This inference, theoretically quite self-evident, was drawn by Marx, as we shall see later, with the greatest precision from a concrete historical analysis of the problems of Revolution." (38)

This passage by Lenin makes clear, I believe, the nature and purpose of Laski's club-footed rendering of the Marxian theory of the state. Laski has skilfully emphasized the formal accident of the state rather than its real essence for to have done otherwise would have involved the commitment to the view

---

(37) This is a reference to Engel's observation that the state, as it develops, places itself above the society from which it has arisen and becomes more and more divorced from it. Laski's purely mechanical interpretation of the state does not allow for such a development.

(38) Lenin, The State and Revolution, p. 116.

that the bourgeois state apparatus must be shattered and its place taken by the naked class rule of the proletariat. And this is exactly the view to which Laski as the leading theoretician of social democracy, has consistently refused to commit himself.

But Laski's schematism does not stop here. It has a further, and it might be added, a nobler purpose. It is a device whereby Laski can cement, can join together his two states, the noumenal and the phenomenal. It is the broad platform which enables the idealist and the 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 splendor 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. (39)

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

(i) "The state is a legal instrument for making the

---

(39) 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 he stresses its protective (of necessary social relations) rather than its oppressive and repressive role.

claims of private owners to the resources of production dominant over other claims from those who do not own." (40)

(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." (41)

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 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

---

(40) ibid., p. 145.

(41) ibid., p. 138.

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 facor 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 over 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 the 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 con-

struction 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. (42) 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 <u>through the fullest possible use of the productive forces</u>. 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 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.(43) This - this is nothing other than evolu-

---

(42) 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 the proletariat establish its dictatorship, Laski can invoke the other, class rule. The ambiguity, in short, is a reflection of Laski's own divided and deeply troubled mind.

(43) The State in Theory and Practice, pp. 78, 181, 295.

tionary 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 <u>in a classless society the state, as we know it, will 'wither away'</u>. 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." (44) (My italics). The tricky and misleading words are "the state as we know it". The state, <u>as we know it</u>, 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." (45) 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 <u>destroyed</u> by the proletariat in the course of the

---

(44) ibid., p. 181.

(45) Engels, Anti-Duhring, p. 315.

revolution. Only the proletarian State or semi-State withers away after the revolution." (46)

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 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. To an examination of Laski's Social Democracy, therefore, we now turn.

---

(46) Lenin, The State and Revolution, p. 125.

Chapter V

Social Democracy

Unlike the great majority of social democrats, Laski does not accept easily the optimistic picture of the painless transformation of capitalism into socialism. His recent books show an intensifying impatience with the rather naive outlook of the Fabians and are full of gloomy apprehensions. (1) By an eloquent appeal to the reason and the good-will as well as the historical experience of men, they are intended to avert a major catastrophe one moment before the fatal stroke of midnight. They have in them that sense of impending disaster which is the essence of all great tragedy and which fascinates as much as it inspires to dread. Their dominant mood is one of desperation and urgency, the agonizing powerlessness of a nightmare. For Laski recognizes that the over-riding social issue of our time is the conflict, the tremendous antagonism between capital and labour. And possessing a lively sense of the crisis in which we move he anxiously, almost neurotically, assesses the cost in men's lives and liberties involved in the outbreak of a war between these two principal groups even as they advance into position and prepare to give battle. There is a certain poignancy manifest in Laski's latest political writings which derives entirely from his lonely and difficult effort to reconcile or amalgamate his pluralistic liberalism with

---

(1) The State in Theory and Practice, pp. 289-291; Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time, pp. 1-37; Parliamentary Government in England, pp. 46-52.

the sharp issue of class warfare. Furthermore, it is precisely this effort which gives to his political doctrines their ambiguous, eclectic, contradictory, but also arresting character. For unlike the genuine Marxist, he cannot accept without repining the proletariat as the solely active agent for changing contemporary society. Seeing their massive forces maturing for a revolutionary assault upon the citadel of capitalism, but fearful or reluctant to make use of them, Laski may not unfairly be called a latter-day Erasmus.

It is mainly in virtue of his recognition that war is present at the core of every capitalist society that seemingly justifies Laski in calling himself a Marxist. By focussing attention on the neglected issue of class-struggle (neglected, that is, by the orthodox liberal historians and political philosophers) Laski placed himself in the forefront of advanced thinkers with something significantly new to say, and began to command a following amongst those who had wearied of the traditional nostrums and panaceas, the cheerful promises that were contradicted at every point by the ugly facts of our industrial civilization. Yet, as Lenin insisted, the mere recognition of class-warfare does not produce a Marxist: a Marxist is one who extends his acceptance of class-warfare to an acceptance of the dictatorship of the proletariat. For only such an acceptance offers convincing proof of a real understanding of the methodology and tactics of scientific socialism. No political thinker can be said to have wholly divested himself of bourgeois prejudices and illusions unless he is prepared to accept the necessity of the naked rule of the working-class. Such an acceptance is the modern counterpart to Christ's

harsh but discerning injunction to the rich patrician to give all his worldly goods to the poor.

Here it is not my purpose to enter into a lengthy analysis of what is meant by the dictatorship of the proletariat. It is enough to say that Marx and Engels meant by it the actual rule of the former oppressed class, a rule which they urged as necessary to protect the new society and to destroy the obstinate vestiges of the old. Great historical questions, they insisted, were always settled by force. Indeed, Marx and Engels envisaged a long transitional period between capitalism and socialism, lasting perhaps for hundreds of years, during which the proletariat, ruling unconditionally, would create and foster the new social values just as the bourgeoisie did in the centuries of its historic ascendency. Here are Marx's own words: "Between capitalist and communist society lies a period of revolutionary transformation from one to the other. There corresponds also to this a political transition period during which the state can be nothing else than the revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat." (2) For Laski, however, the dictatorship of the proletariat is fraught with a menace which strikes at the very roots of his essential liberalism. It is the icy blast which threatens to lay waste his most cherished beliefs, the timeless ideals of freedom and equality, the dignity and brotherhood of man. The burden of Laski's fear is expressed in the following sentence: "It is", he writes, "a commonplace of history that power is poisonous to those who exer-

---

(2) Karl Marx, Critique of the Gotha Programme, pp. 44-45.

cise it; there is no special reason to assume that the communist dictator will in this respect be different from other men." (3) I pass over in silence Laski's identification of the dictatorship of the proletariat with the arbitrary rule of a single dictator revealing, if further proof were wanted, his utter miscomprehension of the dialectics of proletarian revolution. What we have here is the deliverance of a doctrinaire liberalism which is inhibited by panic or ignorance from probing beneath the surface of historical phenomena to the real forces which produce "dictators" and leaders. Moreover, it is evident that such an outlook is bound up with, or,more truthfully, springs from a facile moralism which delights in juxtaposing abstractions like liberty and tyranny, good and evil, etc., and is either unwilling or incapable of undertaking a scientific investigation of social movements.

Nor is Laski consistent; or, at any rate, he maintains consistency by suppressing one half of the argument. He is, for example, eager and able to show that political power never fails to be the reflex of economic power; that, in effect, in capitalist society we have the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie. This dictatorship of the bourgeoisie has flourished equally well under a monarchy or a republic: the forms of government have been irrelevant to its rule. Furthermore, Laski insists, whatever the pretense of appearance of democracy, essentially what exists today in the leading capitalist countries is class rule, the rule of the capitalist class. Yet Laski is unwilling to consider the need for

---

(3) Laski, Communism, p. 174.

a similar dictatorship, but this time a dictatorship in the interest of the vast majority of the population, who, having wrested the means of production from their former owners will require precisely such an instrument to consolidate their revolutionary gains, to establish the ways and values of the new society. "Dictatorship is power", Lenin wrote, "based directly upon force, and unrestricted by any laws. The revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat is power won and maintained by the violence of the proletariat against the bourgeoisie, power that is unrestricted by any laws."(4) Nor to any one who still nourishes liberal illusions and prejudices, is the following extract from Engels' letter to August Bebel, dated March 28 1875, any more comforting. There Engels wrote as follows:

"As the State is only a transitional phenomenon which must be made use of in struggle, in the revolution in order to forcibly crush our antagonists, it is pure absurdity to speak of a people's free state. As long as the proletariat still needs the state, it needs it, not in the interests of freedom, but for the purpose of crushing its antagonists; and as soon as it becomes possible to speak of freedom, then the state, as such, ceases to exist."

This conception of the proletarian state as a dictatorship which would seek out its enemies and destroy them is watered down by Laski into something as constitutionally correct as this: "The state", he argues, "is always at the disposal of that class

---

(4) Lenin, The Proletarian Revolution and Renegade Kautsky, p. 19.

in the community in which is vested the ownership of those instruments (the instruments of production). The law it makes will be law for their interest. The ownership it maintains will be their ownership. If the number of owners, therefore, in a state be few, the bias of the law will be towards the interest of that few. If the owners be the community as a whole, then the bias of the law will be towards the interest of the community as a whole as against, say, the particular interest of some given individual."(5) Here, once again, is the "fumigated" phenomenal state; here, too, is the social democratic version of the proletarian dictatorship with its idyllic picture of a majority placing socialistic legislation on the statute books to which the dispossessed exploiting minority peacefully submit. Here, also, in only slightly different words, is the very conception which Karl Kautsky set forth in his pamphlet "The Proletarian Dictatorship for which, as everyone knows, Lenin called him a renegade to Marxism. But Laski's basic idealism (Laski is a historical materialist in name only; on every crucial, that is, practical issue, he reverts to idealism) as well as the social democratic nature of his views is nowhere more clearly revealed than in the following passage:

"Proletarian dictatorship is not an inevitable stage in social evolution. It is not merely the outcome of special economic conditions; it is also the outcome of great leaders who, like Lenin, have the eye to see, and the hand to execute, the requisite strategy at the appropriate moment. The technical conditions

---

(5) The State in Theory and Practice, pp. 140-141.

under which modern government is carried on make a reversion to barbarism at least as possible an outcome of unsuccessful war as a victory of the working-class." (6)

As might be expected, Laski's fear of a proletarian dictatorship is merely an extension of his fear of a proletarian revolution. A defeatist about the one, he is also, necessarily, a defeatist about the other. Laski's main effort is to show the futility of working-class revolution, constantly harping upon its attendant risks and hazards - except where, as in Russia, the revolution has proven itself successful. It would take a chapter by itself to detail his remarkable changes in attitude towards the Soviet Union. In any case, Laski always urges that the success of the Russian Revolution was due to a special set of factors (which successful revolution is not?) such as a disastrous war and the tremendous personality and leadership of Lenin. But nowhere in his analysis of the Bolshevik's success does Laski admit that Lenin's tremendous leadership lay precisely in this: Lenin refused to accept, indeed he fought bitterly against, the reformistic parliamentarism and opportunism that had corrupted the socialist parties of England, France, Germany and the Mensheviks in his own country.(7) At every turn, significantly enough, Laski's own reformistic outlook inhibits him from undertaking a fair discussion

---

(6) ibid., pp. 286-287. It is noteworthy that here again Laski identifies the proletarian dictatorship with the rule of a single exceptional person.

(7) See the extraordinary chapter on Bolshevism in Laski's Faith, Reason and Civilization, which is remarkable chiefly by virtue of its reticences.

of the aims and philosophy of the Bolshevik leaders. For these leaders, acting in accordance with Marx's teaching, insisted that the exploiters' state had to be smashed completely by an armed insurrection of the working-class in firm alliance with the other oppressed sections of the population. As a social democrat, however, Laski lays hold of every argument to prove that such an adventure is risky and more than likely to end in complete failure. He argues fervently that all that the working-class might get for its pains was a bourgeois counter-revolution culminating in fascist repression. Without going into the rights and wrongs of Laski's position, it is evident that what he is preaching is not Marxism, but the very opposite of Marxism. Just how much opposed to Marxism it really is can be seen by comparing it with that set forth by Engels.

"Have these gentlemen (the anti-authoritarians)", wrote Engels, "ever seen a revolution? Revolution is undoubtedly the most authoritarian thing in the world. Revolution is an act in which one section of the population imposes its will upon the other by means of rifles, bayonets and guns, all of which are exceedingly authoritarian implements. And the victorious party is necessarily compelled to maintain its rule by means of that fear which its arms inspire in the reactionaries. If the Paris Commune had not employed the authority of the armed people against the bourgeoisie, would it have maintained itself more than twenty-four hours? Are we not, on the contrary, justified in reproaching the Commune for having employed this authority too little?" (8)

---

(8) Engels, Ueber das Autoritatsprinzip, New Zeit, 1913-14, Vol I, p. 39, as quoted by Lenin in The Proletarian Revolution, p. 23.

In order to show two things: (i) That Laski is a liberal social democrat, not a Marxist, and (ii) that nothing in the experiences of the international working-class movement during the intervening years between the publication of Communism and The State in Theory and Practice has made him swerve from his un-Marxian outlook, I shall put down sample excerpts from both books. It will be seen at a glance that all that Laski altered in the later book was the phraseology; the ideas remained the same.

"It is not argued here that the Marxian view of the insurrectionary act is incorrect; on the contrary, it is suggested that its substance is entirely accurate. But it is suggested that the environment for which it is suitable is of extreme rarity in history; and that even when such an environment is afforded, only a supreme genius will be able to take advantage of it." (My italics: Communism, p. 236.)

"For anyone who reflects on the history of the Russian Revolution can hardly avoid the reflection that its success in establishing a proletarian dictatorship was built above all upon two factors. The first was the weakness of the Russian bourgeoisie ... The second was the presence of Lenin not merely as the supreme strategist of the actual seizure of power, but even more, as the great architect of its consolidation." (My italics: The State in Theory and Practice, p. 287)

"That means, of course, that we need not, as Communism offers us, the formulae of conflict, but the formulae of co-operation. The sceptical observer is unconvinced that any system has the future finally on its side; that it is entitled, from its

certainties, to sacrifice all that has been acquired so painfully in the heritage of toleration and freedom." (My italics: Communism, p. 244).

"The inference which is... drawn from this is the simple one that, since liberty depends upon security, the proponents of change, if they care for liberty, must pay the price for it. This consists in guaranteeing to the class which owns the instruments of production the continuance of the privileges such ownership entails for a period at least long enough to reconcile them to the new social order." (My italics: The State in Theory and Practice, p. 289.)

Laski's real fears are expressed in the following passage: "When ideas arm themselves for conflict, the voice of reason is unlikely to be heard. When the voice of reason is drowned by the passionate clangor of arms, men have never listened to the plea for freedom. The processes of government by consent, are abrogated. Those conquer who have the weapons on their side; and it is not necessarily the case that the possession of the weapons means the better cause." (9) (My italics.)

The clear implication of this passage is that liberty and reason are absolutes already in the possession of people here and now, in capitalist society. This, of course, is contrary to what Laski has argued elsewhere, namely, that our society is irrational and that we are, in effect, living under a capitalist

---

(9) The State in Theory and Practice, p. 292. What the last sentence in this passage says is that even if the proletariat, the exploited wage-slaves, succeeded in emancipating themselves through a successful revolution it would not necessarily mean the triumph of "the better cause". This is the viewpoint of a petty-bourgeois philistine, not of a Marxist.

dictatorship. Here, once again, Laski's unshakeable idealism comes to the fore. Strangely enough, Laski is willing to admit that revolutions may occur as an aftermath to wars, and that wars are an inevitable consequence of the capitalist system, but he balks at the strategy of the Communists who prepare and who urge the exploited working-class to prepare for exactly such inevitabilities. In this connection a Marxist cannot but remark that Professor Laski is much too insular, much too parochial in his outlook. For example, the riots and agitations now sweeping across Britain's colonial empire may do more to bring about the downfall of the British bourgeoisie and with it the downfall or the radical transformation of the Labour Government now acting as their executioners upon the oppressed colonial peoples than all the labour and socialist agitation in that country for the past hundred years. Laski agrees with Lenin that the English workers or, at any rate, an important section of them, have become bourgeoisified by some of the super-profits which their masters have extracted from the starving and exploited masses of India, Egypt, China, etc. He fails to see or, at least, refuses to admit that he himself as a theoretician of social democracy is a bourgeoisified product of that very same imperialism. (10)

"A revolutionary Marxist", Lenin wrote, "differs from the ordinary philistine in that he is able to <u>preach</u> to the ignorant masses the necessity for the maturing revolution, <u>to prove</u> that it is inevitable, <u>to explain</u> its benefits to the people, and

---

(10) ibid., p. 255.

to prepare the proletariat and all the toiling and exploited masses for it." (11) (Lenin's italics).

Laski's self-appointed task is to preach to the workers the futility of revolution.

Long ago Lenin pointed out that the liberal or the social democrat is not averse to using Marxian phrases and catchwords provided nothing is said that is disagreeable to the bourgeoisie. The suppression of the bourgeoisie, the use of force and violence to disarm and scatter them - that is disagreeable! That is Revolution, that is the Dictatorship of the Proletariat. In its stead, Laski, resorting to the well-tried implements for the distortion of Marxism, sophistry and eclecticism, gives us the "fumigated" constitutional state or the sweet dreams of tomorrow. The "ordinary philistine" is only too eager to talk of tomorrow (anything except the nasty business in hand, the nasty business of organizing the preparing the working-class) and will even on occasion drool happily about "the withering away of the state". It can therefore be seen that not without reason did Marx and Lenin insist that the Marxist extend his acceptance of class-warfare to an acceptance of the dictatorship of the proletariat. Moreover, since Laski has such an unfeigned enthusiasm for Lenin's genius and leadership it is relevant to set down here what that genius and leadership consisted of; all the more so since, for some inexplicable reason, Laski has refrained from telling us. Here in Lenin's own words is the answer to the question "How did

---

(11) Lenin, The Proletarian Revolution and Renegade Kautsky, p. 70.

the Bolsheviks accomplish what they did?"

"Certainly almost everyone now realizes that the Bolsheviks could not have maintained themselves in power for two and one-half years, and not even for two and one-half months, without the strictest discipline, the truly iron discipline in our Party and without the fullest and unreserved support rendered it by the whole mass of the working class...

"The dictatorship of the proletariat is the most determined and the most ruthless war waged by the new class against the more powerful enemy, against the bourgeoisie, whose resistance is increased tenfold by its overthrow (even though only in one country) and whose power lies not only in the strength of international capital, in the strength and durability of the international connections of the bourgeoisie, but also in the force of habit, in the strength of small-scale production. For, unfortunately, very, very much of small-scale production still remains in the world, and small-scale production gives birth to capitalism and the bourgeoisie continuously, daily, hourly, spontaneously, and on a mass scale. For all these reasons the dictatorship of the proletariat is necessary, and victory over the bourgeoisie is impossible without a long, stubborn and desperate war of life and death, a war which requires perseverance, discipline, firmness, inflexibility, and unity of will.

"I repeat, the experience of the victorious dictatorship of the proletariat in Russia has clearly shown to those who have not had occasion to ponder over this question, that absolute centralization and the strictest discipline of the proletariat are

one of the basic conditions for victory over the bourgeoisie." (12) (Lenin's italics.)

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." (13) 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 cap-

---

(12) Lenin, Left-Wing Communism: an Infantile Disorder, p. 9-10

(13) The State in Theory and Practice, p. 111.

italist 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 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 dem-

ocracy; 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. (14)

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 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." (15)

---

(14) The State in Theory and Practice, pp. 136, 289.
(15) Democracy in Crisis, pp. 205 - 206.

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 emancipa-

tion 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 cours 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. (16) 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 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. (17) 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 work-

---

(16) Eisler, Norder & Schreiner, The Lesson of Germany, pp. 60-62, 100-102.

(17) Strachey, The Theory and Practice of Socialism, 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 peasants of India, China, Egypt, Iran, Greece and Italy who are paying the price for them. This is nothing other than Labour imperialism.

ing 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." (18) 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

---

(18) Lenin, The Proletarian Revolution and Renegade Kautsky, p. 26.

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 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." (19) (Lenin's italics).

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

Once again an examination of an earlier and later book by Laski will prove illuminating. For once again it will reveal how persistent his fundamental beliefs are; how little is the change they have undergone despite his so-called conversion to Marxism; how deep-rooted, in other words, his social democracy really is. Elsewhere I have pointed out that both in his Commun-

---

(19) ibid., pp. 28-29. 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.

ism and in his The State in Theory and Practice Laski accepted the bare fact of class warfare in capitalist society. Nonetheless, the acceptance of the fact of class struggle is not incompatible with the belief - held by the Social Democrats - that capitalism can be reformed from within by means of piecemeal democratic and social legislation. The Social Democrat, that is, does not believe that the bourgeois state apparatus must be completely smashed before an advance towards socialism can be rendered possible. Essentially that is Laski's own position. He differs from other Social Democrats only in this: he wishes to speed up the pace at which socialist legislation should be introduced and he possesses a sharper awareness than his colleagues of the risks and obstacles confronting such a tactic. (20)

In Communism Laski wrote as follows:

"It is, moreover, true that no ruling class in history has so far surrendered its privileges, or utilized its authority for the common good, without a struggle. Men cling to power even after the grounds which make its tenure intelligible have passed away; and there is a real basis for the assumption that the holders of power in a capitalist state are no exception to the rule." (Communism, p. 167).

"No one, certainly, who is careful of the historic truth will argue that... victory is likely to be easy. But we are not entitled to act upon the assumption of its impossibility until we have made much further experiment than has so far been attempted.

---

(20) Laski, Why I am a Marxist, The Nation, CXLVIV, (Jan. 14, 1934).

We can at least say of the alternative to the trial of parliamentarism that it involves a long epoch of bloody war in which success is problematical and defeat disastrous; and we can say of parliamentary government that it has notable successes to its credit... it is surely obvious that there is no justification for the resort to violence until the resources of reason have been exhausted." (Communism, pp. 179-180)

The very same pattern is repeated in The State in Theory and Practice:

"On the evidence, we seem unlikely to secure from a capitalist society the acceptance of the principles which the establishment of socialism involves. For this is to ask from capitalists acquiescence in their own erosion; and in Western civilization, at least, no class has yet been willing to surrender those privileges it has organized the state to maintain." (The State in Theory and Practice, p. 282)

"... It is surely common sense to insist that, if a constitutional victory is bound to prove illusory, the simplest way to demonstrate the illusion is to make the electoral victory of the working-class as speedy as possible. The tactic of the revolutionist, in British conditions ought, on these terms, to be a united front with the reformist as the surest way of proving the futility of reform." (The State in Theory and Practice, p. 269.)

The excerpt immediately above is somewhat less than ingenuous. For 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 constit-

utional 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; (21) and it is to the path of reformism that Laski would commit the working class.

The Marxist, on the contrary, while believing that re-

---

(21) The State in Theory and Practice, p. 109.

forms are both 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 considerationswill 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. (22) Moreover, both men were dedicated to the faith that mankind can become the confident master of its environment.

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." (23) And since it is

---

(22) Nietzsche, Thus Spake Zarathustra, pp. 105-108.
(23) Democracy in Crisis, p. 208. Lenin argued that under a proletarian dictatorship freedom and democracy were a million times greater than under bourgeois democracy.

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 antiseptic 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." (24) Not the maturity, the revolutionary temper, the patient and resourceful construction of a working-class party prepared to lead the exploited masses but the good-will 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 re-statement of the discredited utopian socialism against which

---

(24) ibid., p. 267.

Marx and Engels levelled their deadliest and most ironic attacks? Laski, it would appear, actually deplores 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; (25) since, moreover, Laski himself has never transcended the narrow horizons of "bourgeois justice" and "bourgeois rights"; since, also, Laski believes 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, (26) 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

---

(25) Laski, Marxism After Fifty Years, Current History, Vol.XXXVII (March 1933) pp. 691-696.

(26) Parliamentary Government in England, p. 77.

by one class against the other, by one part of the population against the other." (27) (Lenin's italics). 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." (28) 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." (29) (Lenin's italics). 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.

---

(27) Lenin, The State and Revolution, p. 187.

(28) ibid., p. 187.

(29) ibid., p. 187.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Aristotle A treatise on Government (Everyman Ed.)

Barker, Ernest, Political Thought in England from Herbert Spencer to the Present Day (London and New York, 1935)

Bosanquet, Bernard, The Philosophical Theory of the State (London, 1899)

Boudin, Louis B., The Theoretical System of Karl Marx. (Chicago, 1907)

Burns, Emile, What is Marxism (Toronto, 1943)

Carett, E.F., Morals and Politics (London, 1935)

Chang, Sherman H., The Marxian Theory of the State (Philadelphia, 1931)

Coker, Francis W., Recent Political Thought (London and New York, 1934)

Cole, G.D.H., Self-government in Industry (London, 1917)

..... Social Theory (New York, 1920)

Dobb, Maurice, Political Economy and Capitalism (New York, 1940)

Dutt, R. Palme, The Two Internationals (London, 1920)

..... Fascism and Social Revolution (London, 1934)

Eisler, Gerhart, The Lesson of Germany (New York, 1945)

Engels, Frederick, Anti-Duhring (International Publishers, N.Y.)

..... Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State (International Publishers, New York)

..... Feuerbach (International Publishers, New York)

..... Socialism Utopian and Scientific (New York 1892)

..... Marx-Engels Correspondence (International Publishers, 1892)

Figgis, J. Neville, Churches in the Modern State (London and New York, 1913)

Figgis, J. Neville, Studies of Political Thought from Gerson to Grotius (London and New York, 1931).

Green, Thomas Hill, Lectures on the Principles of Political Obligation (London, 1895)

Hegel, Georg W.F., Selections, Charles Scribners Sons Ed. (New York, 1929)

Hobbes, Thomas, Leviathan (Everyman Ed.)

Hook, Sidney, Towards an Understanding of Karl Marx (New York 1933)

Hsiao, Kung-Chuan, Political Pluralism (London and New York, 1927)

Kautsky, Karl, The Class Struggle (Chicago, 1910)

..... The Labour Revolution (London, 1925)

Kropotkin, Peter, Mutual Aid (London 1902)

..... The Conquest of Bread (London and New York, 1907)

Laski, Harold J., The Problem of Sovereignty (New Haven 1917)

..... Authority in The Modern State (New Haven, 1919)

..... Foundation of Sovereignty and Other Essays, (New York, 1921)

..... A Grammar of Politics (New Haven, 1925)

..... Liberty in the Modern State (New York, 1930)

..... Communism (London, 1932)

..... Marxism After Fifty Years - Current History XXXVII (March 1933) 691-696

..... The State in Theory and Practice (New York 1935)

..... The Rise of European Liberalism (London, 1936)

..... Parliamentary Government in England (New York 1938)

..... Why I am a Marxist - The Nation CXLVIII (jan. 14, 1939) 59-61

..... The American Presidency (New York, 1940)

..... Reflections on the Revolution of our Time (New York, 1943)

..... Faith, Reason and Civilization (New York 1944)

..... Democracy in Crisis (LOndon, 1933)

Lenin, Nikolai, The State and Revolution (Vanguard Press, N.Y.)

..... Imperialism (Vanguard Press, New York)

..... Left-wing Communism (International Publishers, N.Y.

..... The Proletarian Revolution and Renegade Kautsky, (International Publishers, New York)

..... Marx-Engels, Marxism (International Publishers, New York)

..... Materialism and Emperio-Criticism (International Publishers, New York)

..... What is to Be Done (International Publishers, N.Y.)

..... Two Tactics (International Publishers, New York)

..... Tasks of the Proletarian Revolution (International Publishers, New York)

Lindsay, A.D., The State in Recent Political Theory - Political Quarterly No. 1 (February 1914) 128-45

Locke, John, Of Civil Government (Everyman Ed.)

MacDonald, J. Ramsay, Socialism and Society (London 1905)

MacIver, R.M., The Modern State (London and New York, 1926)

Magid, Henry Meyer, English Political Pluralism (New York 1941)

Mannheim, Karl, Ideology and Utopia (London and New York 1936)

Marx, Karl, The Class Struggles in France (International Publishers, New York)

..... Capital (Everyman Ed.)

..... Critique of the Gotha Programme (International Publishers, New York)

..... Value, Price and Profit (International Publishers,N.Y.)

..... Wage-Labour and Capital (International Publishers,N.Y.)

..... The Poverty of Philosophy (International Publishers, New York)

..... The Civil War in France (International Publishers,N.Y.)

..... The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte (International Publishers, New York)

Marx, Karl, Selected Works, 2 vols., (International Publishers, N.Y.

..... Marx-Engels Correspondence (International Publishers, New York)

..... Communist Manifesto (International Publishers, N.Y.)

Mill, J.S., On Liberty (Everyman Ed.)

..... Utilitarianism (Everyman Ed.)

Nietzsche, F., Thus Spake Zarathustra (Modern Library Ed.)

Plato, The Republic (Everyman Ed.)

Plekhanov, George, The Materialist Conception of History (International Publishers, New York)

..... The Role of the Individual in History (International Publishers, New York)

..... Problems of Marxism (International publishers, New York)

..... Anarchism and Socialism (Chicago, 1908)

Rockow, Lewis, Contemporary Political Thought in England (New York, 1925)

Russell, Bertrand, Bolshevism: Practice and Theory (New York 1920)

..... Proposed Roads to Freedom (New York, 1919)

Sabine, George H., A History of Political Theory (New York, 1937)

Shaw, G.B., The Intelligent Woman's Guide to Socialism and Capitalism (Montreal, 1923)

..... Everybody's Political What's What (London, 1944).

Smellie, K.B., Reason in Politics (London 1939)

Soule, George, Post-war Profits, New Republic, Jan. 14 and 21, 1946

Stalin, Leninism, 2 vols. (New York, 1928)

..... Historical and Dialectical Materialism (International Publishers, New York)

..... Marxism and the National Question (International Publishers, New York)

Strachey, John, The Theory and Practice of Socialism (London 1936)

..... The Coming Struggle for Power (London 1933)

..... Programme for Progress (London, 1938)

Tawney, R.H., The Acquisitive Society (London 1922)

..... Religion and the Rise of Capitalism (London 1926)

Trotsky, Leon, History of the Russian Revolution (New York, 1932)

..... Our Revolution (New York, 1918)

..... The Defence of Terrorism (London 1921)

Webb, Sidney, and Webb, Beatrice, The Decay of Capitalist Civilization (London, 1923)

..... Soviet Communism, 2 vols., (London 1935)

Willoughby, Wesler W., The Ethical Basis of the State, (New York, 1930)

Woolf, Leonard, After the Deluge (New York, 1931)