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Political ideas of Harold J. Laski.

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POLITICAL IDEAS OF
HAROLD J. LASKI

YOUNG JUN KIM
1961
POLITICAL IDEAS OF HAROLD J. LASKI

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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Professor Laski has been one of the most controversial figures in the history of modern political theory. His writings, which dealt with the problems he actually had faced, ranged over wide areas embracing pluralism, Fabianism, and Marxist socialism. As an able biographer has put it, "he was interested in the history of political ideas and relations of current events and the problems to a theory of government."¹ Laski's influence as a teacher on the minds of young students in England and America, as well as of those from Afro-Asian countries seems to have been great indeed.

During the fifty-seven years of his life (1893-1950), Laski witnessed the tragic drama of two world wars. He saw the Bolshevik revolution of 1917. He observed how the triumph of Democracy after World War I was soon challenged by the rising menace of Nazism in the Continental Europe. He also experienced the Great Depression of 1930s, and the accompanying misery of the mass of people, which seems to have aroused his sense of justice against the prevailing social injustice.

All such historical incidents could not escape the perceptive mind of Harold Laski without challenging him to fight for the preservation of individual freedom against the encroaching totalitarian philosophy, and for the promotion of

¹Kingsley Martin, Harold Laski (New York: The Viking Press, 1953), p. 44.
individual happiness by providing the necessary political, social, and economic conditions. Since most of Laski’s writings had direct bearings on contemporary world affairs, it would be desirable to understand the historical background behind the particular political ideas of Laski. However the task of understanding such background would have to be left largely to each reader of this paper.

Democracy is, today, challenged by another form of totalitarian philosophy. Often it has been questioned, especially among young intellectuals, whether the democratic philosophy could survive this serious challenge. It is the opinion of the writer of this paper that democracy as philosophy has reached low ebb today due to the two decades of repose prior to World War II, and it is necessary to revive the principle of democracy as a philosophy in order to meet the new challenge successfully.

In this context, I would like to analyze the political ideas of Professor Laski, whose early writings dealt mainly with the problems of democracy. Hence, this paper is primarily focused on the years between 1914 and 1931. During this period Laski was a strong exponent of the cause of liberalism and individualism. However, in order to show the political philosophy of Laski in a fuller picture, one chapter is devoted to the discussion of Laski as a near-Marxian socialist after 1932.
Harold J. Laski was born on June 30, 1893 as the second son of Nathan and Sarah Laski. His father was a prosperous cotton shipper and a leader of the Jewish community in the city of Manchester. It is said that the young Laski as a boy experienced inner conflict between his liberal sentiment and a strict Judaic dogma. This religious upbringing seems to have played an important role in the formation of his character and future outlook. Judaism is, in a sense, a way of life directed toward a sense of Messianic mission. "Conscious from his youth that his Jewishness set him apart from the main stream of his society, he felt a strong impulse to become the ally of all those whose want, ignorance, and misery were hidden behind the placid facade of the Victorian era, and who could be therefore ignored by the successful and contented." It would not be too much to say that Laski's precocity in intellectual development was largely due to the Judaic tradition of early training which could well have helped his amazing power of memory and argumentative quickness.

In 1910 Laski won a scholarship at New College, Oxford. At this time he was still interested in the field of biology, especially in eugenics, in which he displayed a remarkable talent in a short period of learning. The following year Laski secretly married Frida Kerry, a gentile. When the mar-

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riage was discovered by his parents, they did not permit him to live with his newly wedded wife for his three remaining years at Oxford. However, the marriage was a happy one for both of them, since they married not only because they loved, but also hoped together to pursue common ideals of human regeneration.3

After Laski moved to Oxford, his interest began to turn to the field of history. In his formative years, he studied under such celebrated teachers as Sir Paul Vignogradoff, Professor of Jurisprudence; Sir Ernest Barker; Herbert Albert Laurens Fisher, who lectured in history; and Frederic William Maitland, legal historian. The influence of Maitland especially was great to Laski in providing him with the basis of pluralism. Laski also joined the ranks of the Fabian Society at this period, but his action and philosophy were rather moderate than militant. This basic temper remained with him throughout his life, and even after he identified himself as a Marxist after 1932 his belief was in a revolution by consent which would not sacrifice the Western democratic tradition.

In 1914, upon finishing his finals at Oxford, he accepted an invitation by George Lansbury to work for the Daily Herald, a labor publication. He wrote many articles on behalf of the labor movement during this time. When World War I began, his

3Martin, op. cit., p. 17.
attempt to enlist failed on medical grounds. He then accepted an invitation to lecture at McGill University in Montreal and soon his life on the American continent began.

After a brief stay at McGill University, Laski was appointed as an instructor at Harvard University in 1916. By 1918 his scholarship was widely recognized and his foundation was set firmly in the academic world. Beside tutoring at Harvard, Laski devoted much of his time to the study of law, which contributed later to his analysis of the nature of sovereignty.

Liberal as he was, and as he always tried to relate his theory to actual problems, he could not stay aloof in the Boston Police strike of 1919. During the strike, he candidly expressed his sympathy for those who protested. The consequence of his stand and experience during the strike were of great importance in molding a new outlook in his philosophy. He saw how the propertied class united to defend its interests even by employing force, and how the legal system in capitalist society worked for the vested interest. "In short, harold discovered at first hand the weakness of the liberal philosophy in which he had been brought up and took a long step towards a predominantly Marxist view, the examination and elaboration of which was to be the principal substance of his future thinking."\(^4\)

\(^4\)Ibid., p. 37.
In the summer of 1920, Laski returned to London to accept a teaching position at the London School of Economics. This was the period during which many liberals were facing unprecedented challenges; Laski found many people unemployed in the midst of economic depression. The foundation of democracy was shaken by the challenge of a totalitarian philosophy. And the next decade ended in failure in achieving any genuine alliance between the West and Soviet Russia to defend themselves against the threat of Nazi aggression. It was in the early 1920s that Laski began to turn to practical politics and began to be interested in economics. When the Great Depression of 1929 hit the world with an unprecedented blow, he began to concede the weakness of pluralism as a means of realizing a just society, because pluralism failed to provide a strong central authority which could carry out basic social reform.

The defection of Ramsey MacDonald convinced Laski that social revolution through Parliamentary measures was a difficult, if not impossible, task. After this incident, the left wing of the Labor Party, including Laski himself, gave up its traditional optimism and changed to a more militant outlook in social reform. After that Laski engaged in party politics more actively while teaching at the same time in the School of Economics. It was his deep conviction that academic theory must be related to practical politics. This was also
said to be the founding philosophy of the School of Economics.

During World War II, Laski saw an opportunity for a revolution by consent, since, according to him, a war generally brings a great intermingling of the class and property relations. Thus during the war, he continuously emphasized the need for a new social order in the post-war period and not to return to the old order.

In 1942, at the annual party conference in London Laski said in part, "the age of competitive capitalism is over. A democracy means nothing more than a society of equals planning production for community consumption." This view was a considerable change from his earlier philosophy, but one should not make a hasty judgment of labeling him an orthodox Marxist. For example, Laski looked to President Roosevelt, not Stalin, for the realization of just society in post-war world. Thus when Laski heard the news of Roosevelt's death, he wrote to Justice Frankfurter in part, "this is a blow almost beyond words. If you know how much I had counted on him for the first years of peace..." From this, it would not be too much to say that he was a liberal democrat, at least in the method he wished to employ to realize the egalitarian society he had in his mind. Laski did not approve the Russian

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5Ibid., p. 154.
6Ibid., p. 158.
authoritarianism, but he was rather generous to Russia in the sense that he urged us to see the revolution in a longer historical perspective. He viewed the Russian revolution as an inheritor of the French Revolution and he hoped liberty would prevail in future years.

In the American scene, Laski emphasized the need for the birth of a labor party similar to that which existed in England. What he wanted was to bring American political parties to a closer alignment to their ideological base. Laski believed that the two parties in America were both conservative in their nature, and unable to represent the real interests of the working class.
CHAPTER II
THE NATURE OF THE STATE

Laski's Attack on the
Monistic Theory of State

The monistic theory of the state came under the severe criticism of Laski. His early writings were primarily directed to attack the monistic theory. To him this theory was against the basic principle of liberal tradition. Monists in general viewed society as a single unit in which individual members have meaning only in relation to the whole. Such a view of a state thus contained the possibility of justifying the absolute obedience of the people to the state under the name of unity. Although the existence of numerous groups within a society might be recognized, their interests should be subordinated to that of the state for the purpose of maintaining social order and harmony.

The origin of this philosophy could be traced back as far as the Greek Polis, when Plato expounded the existence of absolute idea, and when Aristotle wrote of the supreme power of the state. Hence, it could be said that the seeds for the emergence of Leviathan state were sown already twenty-five centuries ago. This basic idea was inherited by the Roman Republic and Empire. It was again inherited by such men as Bodin and Hobbes in modern times, and the very philosophy became the midwife, in large degree, at the birth of the modern nation state.
It is necessary to discuss the philosophical foundation of the monistic theory of the state in order to understand what Laski was attacking, and where it was that he departed from this monism in developing his ideas of pluralism. As mentioned briefly above, the origin of the monistic theory of state was found in the idealism of Plato. The essence of Platonic idealism was its acceptance of the absolute idea which was perfect and the model of everything that ought to be, as an autonomous reality. Plato believed in the existence of a complete and perfect universe which embodied the perfect state. This metaphysical ideal was more real than that which we could perceive through our senses. To Plato this eternal idea was the thought of god.

Plato also derived the concept of the organic view of society, where order, harmony, and unity prevail, from the experience of the Greek city-state. Due to its small size and the relatively simple nature of its political and economic structure, and also due to the comparatively homogeneous nature of the interests of its citizen, the city-state demonstrated sufficiently the desirability of order and harmony in unity.

Hegel later shared a similar belief in the existence of the idea of absolute. Thus Hegel argued that we were all parts of this absolute whole and each individual had meaning only within the context of this organic whole, namely the state. Since he beatified the state to such a degree, the inherent logic seems to have led him to regard the state as
an end in itself rather than the means to realize individual happiness. Such a logical deduction was derived from metaphysical assumptions (which Laski of course rejected) such as, (1) the whole is greater than the sum of the individual parts, (2) the whole is prior to the parts, and (3) the whole is more real than the parts. Laski rejected the idealism which was based on such metaphysical assumptions on the ground that it never enabled us to come to grips with facts. In Laski's opinion, those idealists thought so largely in terms of a beneficent teleology to soften the distinction between political oppositions. Idealism beatified the status quo by regarding each element as an integral part of a process, which it insisted on viewing as a totality.

The organic view of society led even a man like Rousseau, who was extremely liberal in his early thinking, to accept totalitarian philosophy. His concept of the General Will became a seedbed, in later days, for the growth of totalitarian philosophy, because obedience of individuals to the General Will, whatever it may be, was required even by use of coercive means. Obviously, when the conformity to a certain view was required by the state (which is comprised of small group of persons) by the use of force if necessary, the concept of the General Will becomes authoritarian in its nature.

Laski rejected this concept of General Will on the ground that, first of all, "if it means that right must prevail,
it dwells in the realm of purpose without necessarily effecting realization."\(^1\) Secondly, it is difficult to accept the assumption that the majority will is always right, if it means majority will by the General Will. And thirdly, it should be added that there is no way of assuring that a government is acting according to the General Will, since a government consists of a small group of men not differing from any other man.

In rejecting the view of society as an organic whole which embodies the General Will, Laski argued as follows in part:

When we accept the idea of the state as an organism, what is emphasized is subjection of its parts to the welfare of the whole. But in sober fact, the welfare of the state means nothing if it does not mean the concrete happiness of its members. In that aspect, the concept of an organism is, as Dr. McTaggart brilliantly insisted, inapplicable. For the individual regards himself as an end not less than he so regards the state; and we are here again confounded by the important fact of refusal of absorption into the whole that is greater than ourselves.\(^2\)

In his book, *Studies in the Problems of Sovereignty*, Laski discussed extensively why he had to reject Hegel's metaphysical concept of state. In fact, as shown above, Laski's approach to the nature of the state was a pragmatic one. He insisted that we accept the authority of the state because we find some goodness in its intentions. In this light, the

\(^1\)Laski, *Liberty in the Modern State*, p. 17.

right of the individual could not be derived from the metaphysical assumptions, but rather from the awareness of the individual as to what constitutes his happiness.

For the purpose of coordinating different interests of individuals and associations, there must be a single authority in any society. The state, thus, has to have a superior power over all the other associations to make and execute laws. This we call legal sovereignty, and it is by definition absolute and unlimited in a sense that there can be no legal power within a state superior to it, and that there can be no legal limit to the law-making power of the state. In this absolute nature of sovereignty, Laski saw an inherent danger to individual freedom. An absolute legal sovereignty was, to Laski, to constrain the members of society to a certain unity. The monistic state, in which the power was concentrated into a single center, based on such a concept of sovereignty was both "administratively and ethically inadequate," to Laski, because in such a centralized organization, a government would find it difficult to understand the different interests within the society. Also in such a society, individuals would become less responsible in their political activity, because the problems they encountered would not be felt to be immediate or personal to each member of the society.

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Laski rejected the notion of absolute sovereignty, observing that sovereignty was secure only when it was exercised with responsibility, and legal sovereignty was by definition unlimited and, therefore, irresponsible. Since he did not accept the assumption that a government at any historical moment represented the interests of the society as a whole, it seemed very dangerous to him to give such an absolute power to a government based on the theory of legal sovereignty. A state based on such a legal theory of sovereignty would disregard the capacity of individuals or groups of people to judge the policies of the state. On this subject, Laski argued as follows:

The monistic theory of the state, making it sovereign and, therefore, absolute, runs counter to some of the deepest convictions we can possess. I have argued that it will ask from us sacrifices it is against our conscience to give.... In the monistic theory of the state there seems no guarantee that man will have any being at all. His personality, for him the most real of all things, would prove to have feet of clay.4

All in all, the concept of sovereignty in the Austinian sense would produce servility among the people, if it were applied. Thus he argued that it was necessary to divide or decentralize government in order to prevent such servility. Unified opinion and well-ordered society might mean nothing else than a predominance of the interests of a single group which happened to command the authority of the state. In

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any society it is natural that there would be many diverse opinions and interests if these were left to the free expression of the people. Instead of making the opinion of one group of people prevail predominantly, what Laski wanted was to balance and coordinate many diverse and different opinions and interests by admitting the right of their own existence apart from the encroaching power of the powerful state.

The liberal sentiment of Laski was incompatible with the idealism which claimed that conformity to a code, and even a compulsory obedience to it, was the very essence of freedom. The monistic view of the state seemed to Laski to imply not only the paralysis of individuality. To him each of us is ultimately different from all others, and that is the ultimate fact of human experience. The idealists, in Laski's opinion, failed to see the fact that people who lived differently also thought differently and that in so varied a civilization as ours an absolute standard for human conduct was out of place.

To Laski, in the *Foundation of Sovereignty*, a society is not based on the identical interests of its members, therefore it is difficult to assume that a government, which usually represents the interest of an economically superior group in the society, would act for the interests of society as a whole. This argument is not necessarily substantiated in the workings of modern representative institutions, which
can, in most cases, reflect various interests of different groups in a given society. But since Laski believed that a government at any historical moment represented only the interests of a single group—which dominated the economic apparatus of the state—he thought it was desirable to limit the authority of government in order to safeguard the basic right of the individual.

Decentralization of governance for the promotion of individual happiness was incompatible with the idea of legal sovereignty in the Austinian sense. Thus the argument he proposed for the purpose of promoting individual happiness was his pluralism. Between 1914 and 1925, it was his intention to exploit the pluralistic nature of society to counteract the evils of totalitarian philosophy which had begun to gain momentum in states like Germany and Italy. In that sense, Laski's argument for pluralism should be seen as his crusade against the increasing threat to individual freedom.

**Pluralistic Nature of Society**

The core of pluralism is in the acceptance of the premise that the parts of the state are as real and as self-sufficient as the state itself. According to Laski:

> We do not proceed from the state to the parts of the state, from the One to Many, on the ground that the state is more unified than its parts. On the contrary, we are forced to the admission that the parts are as real, as primary, and as self-sufficient as the whole.  

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This idea was almost diametrically opposed to the concept of the monistic theory of state. Laski thought that individual happiness could best be promoted by admitting this pluralistic nature of society, and by incorporating this principle in the system of government.

Although pluralism has been considered to be Laski's profound contribution to political theory, he was deeply indebted to some preceding thinkers -- to the influence of Mc Taggart, Robert Mac Iver, and especially Frederic W. Maitland who said, "our fellowship is no fiction, no symbol, no piece of state machinery, but a living organism and real person." This idea was of great importance to Laski in the formulation of his ideas on pluralism.

To Laski, modern society consisted of many different interest groups. And the government in such a society usually represented the interest of economically superior groups. Therefore, it was necessary to have a less powerful central government and to have many associations which were powerful enough to influence the central government. (However his distrust of a strong central government underwent a considerable modification when he later adopted a near-Marxist view, and when he realized that any measure for basic social reform could only be fulfilled under a strong central government. This point will be discussed further in Chapter Five which will treat of Laski's Socialism.)
According to the pluralists in general, associations spring spontaneously from the free play of human activity. They are not summoned by fiat, nor are they the product of one central source. Since associations are independent of one another in their origin, they must have equality and freedom in their activities. Since men reach out for ends plural in their nature, the structure of society must be likewise, and government must be organized to accommodate this pluralistic nature of society. Since there are many conflicting wills within a society, a group of people who share similar interests form an association in order to advance their wants more effectively. Laski put the nature of associations as follows:

The group is an attempt to advance some interest in which its members feel an answer to the wants of their experience. They are original functions of the environment. They are an effort so to adjust that the individual can by its means feed impulses which, otherwise, are either starved or inadequately nourished. The group is real in the same sense as the state is real. The state does not call it into being. It is not, outside the categories of law, dependent upon the state. It grows in the whole environment as a natural response to factors in that environment. It lives and moves as its surrounding circumstances seem to warrant.7

Laski's argument to prove the spontaneous growth and the autonomous existence of associations was extensive and detailed. For example, in his brilliant essay, "The Poli-

7Laski, Grammar of Politics, pp. 255-256.
tical Theory of the Disruption"\(^8\) which analyzed the secession movement of the Church of Scotland in 1843, Laski attempted to show that in truth the Churches lived lives of their own, independent and self-contained, and that they would not tolerate any harmful external interference.

In the essay Laski pointed out that, as the pressure of interference on the Church of Scotland by the state increased, "the Church...is compelled to seek the protection of its liberties lest it becomes no more than the religious department of an otherwise secular organization."\(^9\) Thus the General Assembly of the Established Church of England, led by the moderator, Dr. Welsh, in order to protect the freedom of the Church on ecclesiastical matters, protested to the state in 1843 by forming its own government headed by Dr. Chalmers. This raised the question of supremacy between the state and Church. If one takes the side of the traditional legal theory of the state, there would not be any question, since the answer is so obvious. However, when the Church claimed exemption from the jurisdiction of the state based on the concept of *societas perfecta*, the question arose: "is the state but one of many, or are those many but parts of itself, the One?\(^10\)

\(^8\) Laski, *Studies in the Problems of Sovereignty*, pp. 27-68.

\(^9\) Ibid., pp. 27-28.

\(^10\) Ibid., p. 28.
This was the fight of the church against the notion of an all inclusive unitary state. To the Presbyterians, "it seemed obvious that the society to which they belonged was no mere cog-wheel in the machinery of the state, destined to work in harmony with its motions. They felt the strength of personality which...was complete and self-sufficient."11 By 1874, the state admitted the Church was right in its claim, and the supremacy of the parliament on the matter of ecclesiastical freedom was denied. From this fact, "it may throw to the winds that omnicient State for which Hegel in Germany and Austin in England have long and firmly stood the sponsors."12

According to Laski, such associations -- for example, the Church of England as shown above -- were developing functional self-government, thereby working out their own rules and customs. In his development of pluralism, Laski aimed at the functional decentralization of government. By this he expected to remedy some defects of the modern representative institution.

According to his understanding, the mass of people was not sufficiently informed on political matters in making a rational judgment in an election. The public opinion that might well sway the outcome of an election was not necess-

11Ibid., p. 65.
12Ibid., p. 68.
arily the product of reason. Moreover, the problems that the legislators would face were extremely complicated and highly technical in their nature, thereby causing the legislators difficulty in coordinating different interests in the society, and also making it difficult for the general electors to understand them. Also, the modern legislative body is so overburdened with many minute problems that it is hampered in performing its basic functions. Thus Laski seems to suggest that such minute and technical problems could be solved better by those who were directly related to them, and that the legislative body should handle only those problems which were concerned with general principles.

Once the functional decentralization was introduced, each association would see a problem based on its own interests and environment. Since such a problem would be of direct interest to the association, it would have clearer understanding as to what could be the best solution for its own interests. For example, the miners and mine owners have different interests to pursue; when they have certain disputes, in order to reach a common solution that is satisfactory to both parties, the experience of both parties must have equal validity. Only then can the solution be a real one, and generally such a solution is better than one made by the representative body which usually reflects the interests of certain groups. Everybody's experience must be shared in the making of government decisions. That means that everybody has a right to be
consulted in the making of the decisions. And Laski believed that the system of functional decentralization was the best means to achieve this purpose. On this matter, Laski said in part, "the consultation of experience therefore means the right to participate in the making of decisions. For any order that is issued without my sharing will be an order for those who make it, and not for me..." Therefore to Laski a government which recognizes the pluralistic nature of society was best fit to realize individual freedom.

In the argument so far advanced for pluralism, the possibility of anarchy may have been intimated. It was Laski's belief that one did not have to obey the state, if he felt a stronger loyalty to the association and found in it moral claim superior to those of the state:

> Everywhere we find groups within the state which challenge its supremacy. They are, it may be, in relations with the state, a part of it; but one with it they are not. They refuse the reduction to unity... Men belong to /the state/; but, also, they belong to the other groups, and a competition for allegiance is continuously possible.

But it should be noted that Laski, by setting up limits to the power and function of associations, attempted to prevent such a result as political and social anarchy. The power of association is limited by the fact that it does not have

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13 Laski, Grammar of Politics, p. 248.
14 Ibid., p. 246.
the power to inflict corporal punishment upon its members. It is also limited by the refusal or willingness of individual members to accept its decisions. In his attempt to set a limit to the functions of associations, Laski said in part, "the vocational bodies... have value for the resolution of functional problems; but they are not...built to deal with the general issues which must be faced by society as a whole."¹⁶

Thus Laski was not denying the necessity for the existence of harmony in society. What he was emphasizing was that the state ought not to claim unity to the degree that it sacrifices the individual human personality. The unity, that is to say, if its existence is to be tolerated, must be such a broad and all-inclusive one that no individuality of the members of society is to be sacrificed.

Laski claimed that each association had its own sovereignty within itself, and it should be limited like that of the state. For example, vocational organizations have the right to solve problems of their own, provided that the nature of the problems are primarily their own concern. If the problems were general ones in their nature transcending the scope of their own interests, they should be dealt with by a higher organization, namely a government. It is difficult at this point as how to determine the nature of a certain issue: whether it should be dealt with by a state

¹⁶Laski, Grammar of Politics, p. 73.
or by a particular association, because no association can act in independence; the groups and associations impinge upon each other as they pursue their aims, and create a need for order and harmony. And for the creation and maintenance of order and harmony, there must exist an association to which the remaining associations must be subordinated.

However, Laski seems to have believed that the starting point should be in the hands of individuals or associations who have the sense of right and wrong, because they usually have more relevant relations with any particular issue. Only after all the pragmatic experiments by the individuals and groups fail, should the state, which is more inclusive and has a higher moral claim, tackle the problem. In such cases, each individual should pay careful scrutiny in order to prevent any misjudgment by the government, because a government is after all made of a small group of people who are not, in essence, different from any other people. The government, which contains the federal nature of society, provides better channels for the operation of an active consent of the people than any other method. The encouragement of decentralization on a geographical and functional base would help to create the sense of responsibility among men, as well as the self-government which is essential to the democratic system.

Laski's advocacy of guild socialism was abandoned,
however, after 1925 on the ground that it had practical difficulty in providing the minimum requirement for the practical unity of government. And another difficulty with guild socialism was that "there is no assurance that union of all guilds into a single body will be superior to the body of territorial representatives."\(^1\) By and large, he came to the conclusion that the state was a necessary organ for the purpose of social, political, and economic reforms. However, he proposed to check the power of the state at every level of administrative organization in order to insure the freedom of individuals and groups.\(^2\)

As Laski realized more the need of central government with enough power to cope with the general issues of the society, especially after the Great Depression of 1929, he began to move away from pluralism and came closer to the acceptance of the minisitic stand. It was historical circumstance that forced not only Laski but also the other pluralists such as G. D. H. Cole to retreat from pluralism.

\(^1\)Ibid., p. 84.
\(^2\)Martin, op. cit., p. 68.
The Aim of the State

Laski's concept of the state seems to be a mixture of an a priori moral approach in its aim and a pragmatic one in its practice. As he put the theory of the state in one of his early works; a theory of the state must be examined not so much in the context of claims of authority but by their actual validation in terms of practice. His assumption that the state existed to promote individual happiness was an a priori assumption, as he admitted himself, but he suggested that the importance of the assumption was as an index to the achievement of government, rather than as a definite nature of the state. Above all, when he said that it was helpful to be told that the object of the state was to secure the good life, the term used as the object of the state was fundamentally different one from the absolute term used in the school of idealists,\(^\text{19}\), which put the state on higher plane than its members.

While Laski was still a strong exponent of pluralism, the aim of the state was fixed to promote the good life of individual. Even in his later writings, the basic aim of the state remained the same, although the method to accomplish this aim has undergone considerable modification. To him, the only power the government was entitled to exercise

\(^{19}\)Laski, Authority in the Modern State, p. 31.
was the power delegated by the people to fulfill the aim of the state, that is to say, to promote the good life. The state should get the loyalty of people only by achieving this purpose. In order to solve the dilemma which derives from the concept of state in the idealist school of thought, to which Laski's aim of the state was very similar, and the practical example of the contrary experience under the corrupted government, Laski made a distinction between the state and the government. Laski accorded a higher moral claim to the state, because it had more inclusive power than any other association, and also because he wanted to provide some index by which to measure the achievement of a governmental action. To Laski the government was composed of a small group of fallible men; it was liable to make mistakes, and the individuals in society should scrutinize the actions of government by the index so provided. By employing such logic, Laski was able to deny the monists' insistence on an absolute claim to the authority of the state.

In some aspects, Laski's theory of the state was in accordance with the argument of a pragmatist who said:

Some make such a sharp distinction between the state and a government that, from the standpoint of theories, a government may be corrupt and the State by the same idea retain its inherent dignity and nobility. Officials may be mean, obstinate,

20Ibid., p. 28.
proud and stupid and yet the nature of the state which they serve remain essentially unimpaired. Since, however, a public is organized into a state through its government, the state is as its officials are. Only through constant watchfulness and criticism of public officials by citizens can a state be maintained in integrity and usefulness.21

Thus Laski shared the belief with Mr. Dewey that it is necessary to criticize public officials in order to prevent the state from being corrupted by its officials. There seems to have been strong influence of John Dewey's pragmatism on Laski during the latter's stay in America. Until 1925 when he wrote A Grammar of Politics, the state was to Laski not different fundamentally from any other association (as discussed above). Although he conceded a higher moral claim to the state, it was not a supreme organ to which every member of society owed unconditional allegiance. On the contrary, if one felt stronger loyalty to a group to which he belonged such as church or trade union, he was justified in making a decision against the will of the state.

As of 1921, when he wrote Authority in the Modern State, Laski rejected strongly the common will of Dr. Bosanquet, who insisted that the common will resided in society apart from the will of individual members of society. The insistence upon the existence of such common will was to Laski nothing more than "a subtle interpretation of Rousseau's

In his criticism of such argument, Laski said:

He (Dr. Bosanquet) believes that ultimate power must reside in the community as a whole; but he insists that the conception is meaningless unless the power finds some determinate expression. He places sovereignty, therefore, in the state and he defines the state as 'the entire hierarchy of institutions by which life is determined.' Sovereignty, in his view, really belongs to the general will, to the acts, that is to say, of the state's best self. But this, surely, does no more than move the inquiry back to a further stage. The state must find organs for the expressions of its selfhood; and Dr. Bosanquet gives us no criterion by which to recognize the expression. The sovereignty of the general will, indeed, is very likely the assertion that right and truth must prevail; but it does not tell us how certainly to discover the presence of right and truth...

Laski's concept of the state underwent a rather drastic revision after 1925. Some of the reasons behind his change in the role of the state were the economic depression in early 1920s in England which made him realize the necessity for a stronger central planning and control in economic activities, the increasing strength of the Labor Party, and the formation of the MacDonald government in 1931 in the period of Great Depression. Although, Laski's view on the role of the State became an almost orthodox one, he still rejected the notion of General Will, the philosophical concept of the idealist school on the state.

22Laski, Authority in the Modern State, p. 27.
23Ibid., pp. 27-28.
He still maintained that the will of the state was the will which was adopted out of the conflict of myriad wills which contend with each other for the mastery of social forces. Thus he rejected the existence of a single will of the state which transcends individual wills. But after 1925, he admitted the role of the state as a final source of reference of various contending wills of different interest groups. Since the state was an arbitrator of many conflicting wills, the actions of government should be carefully scrutinized by the people who were to be influenced by its actions. And because the state was represented by a small group of people who might pervert the purpose of the state for selfish interest, the necessity for scrutinizing the actions of government was of great necessity. This was a point of proof that he still regarded the individual as finite. Especially when he said, "the will of the state is only my will in so far as I freely lend my judgment to its enforcement...An adequate theory of social organization must always begin by recognizing that the individual is finite. If he is a member of a herd, he is also outside of it and passing judgment upon its actions," Laski was still far from believing in monistic view of state.

24 Laski, A Grammar of Politics, p. 35.
25 Ibid., p. 29.
The extent and the nature of power given to the state after 1925 was that the state must possess the powers necessary for the accomplishment of the aim of the state. In *A Grammar of Politics*, Laski argued that the modern state was the final legal depository of the social will. It set the perspective of all other organizations. It brought within its power all forms of human activity the control of which it deemed desirable. It was, moreover, the implied logic of this supremacy of the state that whatever remained free of its control did so by its permission...

Furthermore, the importance of the state was well expressed when he stressed that the state was the key-stone of the social arch, and it moulded the form and substance of the myriad human lives with whose destinies it was charged.  

This view of the state was an evidence of the revision of mind that he had undergone since the time when Laski was an earnest pluralist who saw little distinction between the state and other forms of associations except the manner of respective membership. Although the state was still an association that existed to promote the happiness of people, the aim of the state seemed to focus upon the enrichment of common life in egalitarian society. Furthermore, Laski gave a new meaning to state when he said that the state "differs from (other forms of association) in that member-

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ship is compulsory upon all that live within its territorial ambit, and that it can, in the last resort, enforce its obligations upon its subjects."\textsuperscript{27} The new role of the state as discussed in \textit{A Grammar of Politics} was Laski's admission of the importance of the state as an organization which should concern itself with the control over other associations, particularly economic groups, so that every member of the society would be assured the minimum well-being which was necessary to lead a civilized life.

\textsuperscript{27}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 37.
CHAPTER III
THE NATURE OF AUTHORITY

The Source of Authority

Laski opened the first chapter of Authority in the Modern State, quoting from Aristotle, saying, "man is a community building animal." The acceptance of this proposition meant that he admitted the necessity of authority in a given community for the maintenance of its own life. Since the authority of the state has a direct bearing on individual freedom, Laski devoted much of his attention in the analysis of authority in the modern state. For him the Hobbesian theory of authority which claimed the basis of authority to be force and fear was not satisfactory to explain why the mass of people should obey the command of one or few men. On the other hand, Laski rejected Rousseau's formula of General Will. In his opinion, when one was forced to conform to the common will by outside force, he was no longer free. Moreover, there was no way to know General Will, if it existed.

For Laski, the basis upon which the power within a state rests was the individual conscience; the judgment based on individual conscience affords rights which are beyond

1Laski, A Grammar of Politics, p. 33.
control and cannot be denied by the state. Therefore, in final analysis, the ultimate depository and source of authority resides in the individual. Thus Laski says:

Men accept /authority/ either because their own will finds parts expression there or because, assuming the goodness of its intention which lies behind it, they are content, usually, not to resist its imposition. But then law is not a command. It is merely a rule of convenience...Where sovereignty prevails, where the state acts, it acts by the consent of men.\(^2\)

The consent of people, that is to say, the source of authority, is liable to suspension at any time people think that the government is not acting for the fulfillment of the purpose of the state. Therefore, the authority of the state cannot be absolute. Moreover, the individual member of society has a duty to scrutinize the actions of government, since he is himself the source of the authority. Without scrutinizing the actions of government, he would have no right or knowledge necessary to protest or to disobey, if it be necessary, the state.

Laski believed that there was no a priori certainty that a government would be obeyed. Instead, the possibility of anarchy was theoretically at every moment present.\(^3\) He not only considered that the possibility of anarchy existed at every moment, but also believed the possibility

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\(^3\) Laski, *Authority in the Modern State*, p. 30.
to be a check on government, and thus an aid in maintaining a democratic system. He refuted the legal theory of sovereignty, saying that no man actually surrenders his whole being to the state.  

To borrow his words once again:

Whatever the requirements of legal theory, in actual fact, no man surrenders his whole being to the state. He has a sense of right and wrong. If the state, or its instruments, goes too consistently against that sense, he is pricked into antagonism. The state, that is to say, is for him sovereignty only where his conscience is not stirred against its performance. Nor is this all. He expects it to make possible for him the attainment of certain good.

Therefore, if the state is going to claim the obedience of people, it must maintain always a higher moral claim than that of the individuals or other forms of associations. It also has to provide the people with the necessary information concerning the aim and program of the state so that member of society can have fair opportunities to scrutinize the actions of the government. Only by achieving the purpose of the state, or by showing to the people that it is sincerely attempting to achieve it, can the state legitimately claim the obedience of the people.

What disturbed Laski, in actual fact, was the actions of government in practice: it was very seldom shown that

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4See the Political Theory of Disruption, pp. 27-68. in Studies in the Problems of Sovereignty.

5Laski, Authority in the Modern State, pp. 42-43.
a government acted impartially in order to realize individual happiness as a whole. On this matter he expressed a deep lamentation, saying that, "it is today a common place that the real source of authority in any state is with the holders of of economic power. The will that is effective is their will; the commands that are obeyed are their commands."^6 This could well have been the reason, when he was still a pluralist, why Laski tried so hard to limit the power of central government, and to disperse it as much as possible to prevent the misuse of the power by a small group of people. The federalized form of government, in which the power was widely dispersed, seemed to Laski the best form of government to protect the basic rights of the people. The natural rights of the people did not emerge with the birth of the modern nation state, but they preceded it. Even during the medieval states, there was the conception of natural rights, that is to say, the prince had a duty to protect his subjects as well as to rule.^^7 Thus the claim of legal sovereignty, which demanded an absolute authority under the name of unity and a priori concept of the organic nature of the state, seemed rather incredible to Laski.

In his opinion, the authority of the state ought


^7Ibid., pp. 9-10.
to be a coordinating one among the different interest groups within a society, rather than a hierarchical one in which a single will imposes from above. "Authority imposed from without can never achieve that effect over a period. Its values are personal to those who make the decisions. It fails eventually to coordinate the experience affected by its decisions. That is why, moreover, there is a point at which the administration of decisions must be decentralized if it is to be creative."^8

Authority and Liberty

Laski's insistence upon near absolute freedom has been already discussed in his argument for the pluralism. It should be also recalled that he once seemed to have preferred democracy surrounded by the possibility of anarchy over authoritarianism in order not to sacrifice the basic individual freedom. However, since authority is ipso facto a necessity for the maintenance of order, without which liberty is inconceivable, he had to compromise authority and liberty; or rather, he had to set a limit beyond which authority and liberty could not trespass. In his early writings, Laski minimized the importance of authority because of the fear of its encroachment on personal freedom. This could have been

his natural reaction against the rising totalitarian philosophy across the Channel.

In 1919 Laski wrote:

A State, after all, is no mysterious entity. It is only a territorial society into which, from a variety of historical reasons, a distinction between rulers and subjects has been introduced. The only justification for a claim by a government of its obedience is the clear proof that it satisfies the material and moral claims of those over whom it exercises control... Government is only a convention which men, on the whole, accept because of a general conviction that its effort is for good. Where the machine breaks down, where the purpose of those who drive it becomes to an important class sinister, it is humanly inevitable that an effort towards change should be made.9

What he implies here is that we must be always ready to withdraw our allegiance, if we feel that the government is not fulfilling the purpose of the state. The state is entitled to the loyalties of the people only by achieving its aim or by demonstrating that it is doing its best to realize individual happiness. And to judge whether the government is acting according to the purpose of the state is solely depended upon the individual conscience. By giving such rights to each individual, a state can be regarded to exist for the individual's freedom and happiness.

As strong authority was a great threat to freedom, to Laski force imposed from without was antithetic to free-

9Laski, Authority in the Modern State, p. 374.
dom, since it was not desired by the individual. Therefore, the best way to safeguard freedom was to limit the authority of government. "If in any state there is a body of men who possess unlimited political power, those over whom they rule can never be free." Because, in his belief, "uncontrolled power is invariably poisonous to those who possess it." It was the general tendency that the group of people who possessed the political power tended to think that what was good for them was also good for the community as a whole. Moreover, if this group or person happened to represent the higher economic interest, as was usually the case, it was difficult to expect them to act impartially.

When Laski witnessed a group of people who could not enjoy freedom due mainly to economic poverty, he realized that mere absence of restraint was not sufficient for the self-realization of an individual. He felt some need for governmental actions in order to bring them out to the center of social attention again. When he realized the need for a social responsibility for the underprivileged people, Laski undertook a considerable revision as to the role of government; that is to say, he was compelled to admit the necessity for a government with some commanding power to carry out social and economic reforms. However,

10Laski, Liberty in the Modern State, p. 2.
11Ibid., p. 2.
at the same time, he was careful to set a clear line beyond which authority should not trespass.

As to individual rights, Laski's argument became somewhat more moderate than when he was an ardent pluralist. In *A Grammar of Politics*, Laski said in part that, "there are rules...which I ought obey even if I disapprove; for, obviously, if each man is to follow his every impulse wherever it leads, an organized social life would be impossible. It means that force must be used in those directions only where the common sense of society is on the side of the type of conduct it seeks to compel." 12 Thus some limitations upon freedom seemed essential to promote the happiness of men and to maintain a necessary order, especially when he said:

I might not resist if I am convinced that the state is seeking, as best it may, to play its part; and for most that perception will doubtless result from what inquiry they undertake. I ought not, further, to resist unless I have reasonable ground for the belief that the changes I advocate are likely to result in the end I have in view; I must, moreover, be certain that the methods I propose to realize my end will not, in their realization, change its essential character: men have often enough sought power for good and ended by exercising it for its own sake. 13

By 1925 Laski came to the conclusion that there must be a balance between the liberty we need and the authority

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13 Laski, Ibid., p. 39.
that is essential to maintain an order for the protection of those who were economically underprivileged. Laski was increasingly disturbed over the knowledge that, when everybody was left alone under the free economic system, it was almost certain that the society would be divided into two classes, whose respective interests could not be reconciled in the long run. The consequence of such a circumstance was usually the loss of liberty by those who did not have sufficient economic means. For example, it was difficult for those who were uneducated due to the lack of financial means to participate in state affairs freely or to enjoy full citizenship.

The Problem of Obedience

In consideration of the nature of the state that Laski discussed earlier, it becomes rather obvious that the state has no absolute title to the obedience of the people. Thus a question arises as to how one should explain or make legitimate the obedience. Since there exist various conflicting wills in a given society, the will of the state ought to be that one of those wills which proves itself to be pre-eminent and superior in its utility over the other wills. The argument that we have to obey the law, since it is the command of the state, does not answer the fundamental question, because it returns to the old question of whether a command of the state is a legitimate one or
not. Moreover, to Laski, law was a rule of convention rather than the command of the state, because, the origin of law was not in the a priori assumption of the state, but in the consent of the individual members of the state. Hence, he regarded man as a free and responsible moral agent who was capable of rendering a sound judgment in most cases. Thus he argued that "man should do that which he deems morally right, and that the only obedience he can render is the obedience consonant with his ethical standard."¹⁴

Whether or not the conduct of the government was in agreement with the aim of the state was for an individual to judge, but not for the agent of the state. If a man believed that any given act of the government was against his own will, he not only had a right to refuse obedience to it, but also had a moral obligation to register his active dissent from the decisions of authority. Here arises the question of the validity of individual judgment. Of course, Laski did not accept the proposition that every individual could make a rational judgment in all occasions. On the contrary, he assumed that human being was not completely rational animal. But Laski seems to have preferred a state in which a danger may arise from the dissent of an individual, to the danger of Leviathan state in which a handful of men have control over the entire population.

¹⁴Laski, Authority in the Modern State, p. 206.
Laski's extreme individualistic view of the problem of obedience was shown well when he stated that, "the only ground upon which the individual can give or be asked his support for the state is from the conviction that what it is aiming at is, in each particular case, good." Then he went on to say that, "we deny...that the general end of the ideal state colours the policy of a given act of a special state. And that denial involves from each member of the state continuous scrutiny of its purpose and its method." 15

It is of some interest to note Laski's change in his view on the problem of obedience. By 1925, when he wrote _A Grammar of Politics_, he seems to have begun to realize the importance of maintaining a greater degree of social order in order to achieve the aim of the state. It should be remembered that the year 1924 was the time when the Labor Party came into power for the first time in its history. From a practical viewpoint, if any social reforms were to be opposed, as may have well been expected, by the minority opposition party, it would lead to great difficulty in realizing the aim of the state as envisaged by the Labor Party, even if it were supported by the majority of the people. But there is no reason why Laski's argument for disobedience should not be applied to an opposition party

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15 Ibid., p. 46.
that does not agree with the Labor programs. In order to meet this difficulty, he revised his earlier view on the problem of obedience after 1925. It is not surprising, however, to see the modification he made on the problem, since he was a theorist who always tried to theorize in terms of practical politics. For this reason he has been accused of being inconsistent in his argument, but it should not be assumed that he completely abandoned the individualistic view on the matter of individual rights. It was rather his attempt to compromise the individual claim with that of authority. For instance, Laski still argued in A Grammar of Politics as follows:

Our obligation to obey the state is, law apart, an obligation dependent upon the degree to which the state achieves its purpose. We are the judges of that achievement...We must obey the state, not because its theoretic purpose is a splendid one, but because of our conviction that it is genuinely seeking to make that purpose valid in events.16

But in the same book, he seems to emphasize the human being as a community building animal. By emphasizing this aspect of human nature, Laski tried to make legitimate a certain degree of authority. Thus in a modern state, in his view, "spontaneity ceases to be practical, and the enforced acceptance of a common way of action becomes the necessary condition of a corporate civilization."17 Further,

17 Ibid., p. 18.
he went on to say that the right of disobedience is "reasonably to be exercised only at the margins of political conduct. No community could hope to fulfill its purpose if rebellion becomes a settled habit of the population."\textsuperscript{18}

This argument was a considerable revision of his earlier view which said that the state was surrounded by the possibility of anarchy. When Laski adopted the view of near-Marxian socialism, after experiencing the depression of 1929 and the defection of the MacDonald government, his theory of disobedience seems to have returned to the earlier view which stressed the right of disobedience, but the disobedience of the individual seems to have been replaced by that of a class. The further discussion of this point will be postponed to chapter five, which will deal with the political ideas of Laski as a socialist.

\textsuperscript{18}Ibid., p. 61.
CHAPTER IV
LIBERTY AND EQUALITY

Laski's Concept of Liberty

A discussion of liberty occupied one of the most important places in the writings of Professor Laski; his discussion of its meaning as well as the social and economic conditions in which liberty could be best realized was rather extensive and thorough in his writings. Like many arguments he developed in his early writings, the core of Laski's arguments on liberty were primarily directed against Hegelian idealism. Thus Laski asked whether freedom meant, as Hegel meant, to live the life that authority ordains, or whether it meant the recognition that there were certain reserves within the individual mind about which ultimate resistance must be organized. In order to understand Laski's position on liberty, it would be useful to see some aspects of the Hegelian conception of it.

Freedom in the Hegelian sense is more or less a conformity with the law and custom as interpreted by the ethical spirit of the particular society to which the individuals belong.¹ A critical analysis of the Hegelian

concept would provide us with the starting point for understanding Laski's conception of freedom. Dr. Bosanquet, a faithful disciple of Hegel, described Liberty as follows in the first decade of the twentieth century:

Liberty, no doubt, is as Rousseau has told us, so far agreeing with Mill, the essential quality of human life. It is so, we understood, because it is the condition of our being ourselves. But now that it has occurred to us that in order to be ourselves we must be always becoming something which we are not, in other words, we must always recognize that we are something more than we have become, liberty, as the condition of our being ourselves, cannot simply be something which we have, still less something we have always had -- a status quo to be maintained. It must be a condition relevant to our continued struggle to assert the control of something in us, which we recognize as imperative upon us or as our real self, but which we obey in a very imperfect degree. Thus it is that we can speak, without a contradiction, of being forced to be free.

In Hegelian sense, free will is the will which determines itself; it forms a rational whole or system of conduct in which individual will has to play certain predetermined roles for the rational whole. This means that every member of society must act according to the prescribed law and custom of society in order to be free. It is not for each individual to judge whether the law or customs are against the individual conscience. This was another aspect of the conservative nature of Hegelian philosophy. It is true that a society will end up in total anarchy, if liberty is understood as mere absence of restraint and if people act accordingly, but

2Ibid., pp. 126-27.
there is no justification for Hegelians to assume that the liberty is equivalent to the command of state.

In rejecting Hegel's thesis that freedom was conformity to law and custom, Laski refused to accept the feasibility of discovering in the social world, laws analogous in character to those of inanimate nature. 3

The attempt /to discover such laws in the social world as those that are found in the physical world/ is impossible. It neglects the fact that the social world is not only permanently dynamic but also permanently novel; the factors in its equations are the active wills of individual men who, by scrutinizing the contingent results, are in a position to change them. They make change by willing change. Laws, therefore, which have the tough consistency of natural laws, those, for example, of physics and chemistry, are impossible of attainment in the political realm. A social life according to nature, as art is man's nature; and a life according to the highest principle of art depends upon a view of beauty or goodness which can claim universal application. 4

Thus Laski was much in line with traditional liberalism with a deep commitment to social engineering for the betterment of individual happiness and the increase of individual freedom.

Individual freedom based upon one's own conscience was the center of his argument. He maintained, until he realized that individual freedom had little meaning without the social and economic means to realize it, that "the only permanent


4Ibid.
safeguard of democratic government is that the unchanging and ultimate sanction of intellectual decision should be the (individual) conscience.**5 It was the realm within which even the state cannot, as well as should not, have right to interfere. On this matter he argued as follows:

We thus insist...that the mind of each man... pass judgment upon the state; and we ask for his condemnation of its policy where he feels it in conflict with the right. That, surely, is the only environment in which the plant of liberty can flourish. It implies...insistence that the allegiance of man to the state is secondary to his allegiance to what he may conceive his duty to society as a whole.... In ordinary acceptance of the term, such an attitude denies the validity of any sovereign power save that of the right: and it urges that the discovery of right is, on all fundamental questions, a search, upon which the separate members of the state must individually engage.6

This argument was an integral part of Laski's pluralism. He believed that individual freedom could be maximized in a society where the power of the state was highly decentralized.

Liberty as an individual initiative and continuous creative activities for the mass of people was difficult to realize in the monistic state except for those few who were economically privileged. His belief that the real freedom could not be realized in the monistic state as well as under

5Laski, Authority in the Modern State, p. 55.
6Ibid., pp. 121-22.
the laissez-faire system led him to accept the positive freedom of Thomas H. Green. Although Green was known as the British neo-Hegelian, it should not be neglected that he was also influential, as the founder of the Oxford liberal movement, in the movement of Fabian Socialism in England. It was from Green, Laski adopted his definition of positive freedom. He supplemented it by, at the same time, accepting Lord Acton's axiom in order to safeguard the right of the individual claim based upon one's own conscience. By positive freedom in Green's sense, it is meant that the state should see that each member of society is provided with adequate conditions in developing oneself to the fullest degree.

Quoting from Green and Acton, Laski said:

'When we speak of freedom as something to be highly prized', said T. H. Green, 'we mean a positive power of doing or enjoying /something worth doing or enjoying/ and that, too, something that we do or enjoy in common with others.' That is more valuable than the negative conception because it insists on what, in this age, we feel to be fundamental in liberty -- the power of adding something to the quality of the common life. But it does not, of course -- though Green had elsewhere answered that question -- tell us what it is worthwhile to do or enjoy; and here again, acute difference of opinion is possible. It was as a historian that Acton approached the problem, and his answer had a connotation not to be misunderstood. 'By liberty', he said, 'I mean the assurance that every man will be protected in

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7Friedrich A. Hayek thought Lord Acton had represented the true individualism in the nineteenth century along with Alexis de Tocqueville; see Hayek, Individualism and Economic Order, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948), p. 4.
doing what he believes his duty against the influence of authority, custom, and opinion.\(^8\)

Laski's acceptance of Green's definition of freedom, which tolerates a greater degree of governmental authority for the promotion of common good, seems to be in contradiction with his argument for the individual right which can even defy the authority of state, if one's conscience tells him to resist. But, by introducing Acton's definition of freedom, Laski attempted to preserve his original position of safeguarding the right of individual. By employing both terms, Laski was able to resort to the definition of Acton when he wished to defend the individual rights; and to that of Green when he was fighting for the interest of the social and economic under-dog.

The focus of his discussion of liberty rests upon the fact that, in the capitalistic society, the opportunities for a creative self-expression were enjoyed only by those who possess economic power. His egalitarian philosophy did not allow him to be contented with such social injustice. Warning not to confuse the absence of restraint in the economic sphere with freedom, Laski said, "there may be absence of restraint in the economic sphere, for example, in the sense that a man may be free to enter any vocation he may choose. Yet if he is deprived of security in em-

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\(^8\) Laski, Authority in the Modern State, p. 55.
ployment he becomes the prey of mental and physical servitude incompatible with the very essence of liberty. That could have been the reason why, in spite of his great emphasis on the value of the individual he accepted Green's definition of positive freedom, which acknowledged the role of government to set a minimum standard below which no member of the society should fall. Such a remark as 'to compel obedience to rules of convenience which promote right living is not to make a man unfree' has been regarded by some as fundamentally not different from Hegelian conception of freedom which insisted that individual had to be forced to be free. But, under a closer scrutiny, it should be noted that the rule of convenience Laski had in mind was rather a broad norm of social conduct derived from the experience of the individual members of society. It was, moreover, quite distinct from Hegel's ethical spirit which transcends individual experience and, therefore, beyond the reach of scrutiny by the knowledge and conscience of the individual.

Although Laski did not define the individual right clearly, he said that the individual right was something the pragmatist would understand. By stating that the individual right was something the individual ought to concede because experience had proved it to be good,

9Laski, Liberty in the Modern State, p. 4.
Laski gave relative value to the right as the source of individual freedom.

**Economic Equality and Liberty**

As discussed above, the primary reason for Laski's acceptance of positive freedom seems to be his belief that without a certain economic basis liberty becomes almost meaningless for those who have to exhaust themselves in acquiring their daily bread. Thus equality, especially in the economic sense, becomes an important condition for realizing freedom; to Laski, freedom and equality are not antithetic but complementary to each other. To Laski, therefore, the mitigation of inequality was a path to freedom.

In Laski's opinion, capitalistic democracy lacked the necessary conditions of realizing freedom, due to its inherent nature of inequality. Laski argued that men cannot achieve freedom when a few citizens enjoy special privilege, or when the right of some depends upon the pleasure of others, or when the incidence of the power of the state was biased in favor of one group.  

For him the absence of special privilege, adequate opportunities for individual initiative, and the minimum guarantee of economic well being sufficient to enjoy a civilized life were the essen-

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tial conditions of liberty. Such a belief led him closer toward the orthodox Marxism after 1930, and more about him as socialist will be discussed in the following chapter.

In his argument for the complementary nature of liberty and equality, Laski argued as follows:

It (liberty) means the guarantee of avenues through which that initiative may find its way to its appointed end. Obviously, therefore, liberty is inseparable from equality, since the a priori distinction which announces differences of access restricts the chance of liberty to a few fortunately situated persons in the state. A society in which men are given an equal opportunity of self-realization is, also, a society in which there is justice.  

Certainly, then, equality as an equal opportunity for self-realization does not contradict the idea of freedom. Laski denied an equality meaning an identity of treatment, but he meant that each individual had a equal right to claim his happiness.

It was after 1920, when he returned from America, that Laski began to pay grave attention to the importance of economics. It was the time when the post-World War I boom gave way to a depression, and the number of unemployed was increasing with alarming rapidity. Such a situation, in which the mass of people devoted their energy to acquiring daily bread, convinced Laski that economic insecurity was antithetic to the realization of freedom. It also convinced

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him that certain political action was necessary to solve such economic problems. Thus he came to regard it as a positive duty of the state to secure for its members a certain minimum standard of economic life, possibly through the means of a planned economy.

Although a certain degree of economic equality was necessary for freedom, as discussed above, equality and freedom were not the same thing to Laski. People can be equal under a despotic rule without enjoying any freedom; equality does not necessarily produce freedom. But freedom requires a certain degree of economic equality. Thus he argued that, "we are in the difficulty that every step we take towards freedom is a step towards the equalization of privileges now held unequally."\(^{13}\) And he went on to say that, "the penumbra of freedom, its purpose and its life, is the movement for equality."\(^{14}\) Laski believed that economic equality provided the necessary conditions for people to be free.

Liberty involves equality; the two are not antithetic; liberty only begins to operate significantly upon the plane of equality; without the it is but a name of noble sound and squalid result, for equality supplies the basis out of which liberty comes to have a positive meaning. All are therefore equally entitled to those rights which are necessary to the leading of the good life; these rights are natural, precisely because they are its necessary condition.\(^{15}\)


\(^{14}\) Ibid., pp. 216-17.

\(^{15}\) Quoted in, Roger M. Soltau, "Professor Laski and Political Science," Political Quarterly, XXI (July 1950), p. 304.
The aim of the state to realize individual freedom is the positive role of the government in providing equal opportunities to the citizen. For example, compulsory education is not in this sense against the spirit of liberty, because, "an illiterate man has no real means of performing the functions of citizenship." Also, "it is no use offering a man freedom of speech unless he has been trained to articulate." Furthermore, those who are physically and mentally exhausted in the sheer effort to acquire daily bread have little opportunities for freedom. Thus the government should see that no member of the society is deprived from enjoying the freedom due to economic reason.

Laski's concept of freedom underwent a serious modification in the late twenties. His early insistence on positive freedom may appear to have given way to the utilitarian view of liberty as a mere absence of restraint. For example, in the preface to the second edition of *A Grammar of Politics* published in 1929, Laski said in part, "in 1925 I thought that liberty could most usefully be regarded as more than a negative thing. I am now convinced that this was a mistake, and the old view of it as an absence of restraint can alone safeguard the personality of citizen."

The reason why he took a seemingly negative concept of

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17 Laski, *Democracy in Crisis*, p. 207.
freedom is a question that requires careful study. It may appear strange that Laski, who inclined closely towards orthodox Marxism (which advocates a positive role of the state at least in the early stage of control of the state), had taken the position of believing the absence of restraint as freedom. Perhaps Laski took the position of negative freedom realizing that the kind of egalitarian society he wished had proved to be too difficult to bring about due to the opposition of the vested interests who were in control of the state apparatus.

In closer scrutiny, it would be found that the negative freedom position he took at this period was different from negative freedom in a Utilitarian sense. He said in the opening page of Liberty in the Modern State, "I mean by liberty the absence of restraint upon the existence of those social conditions which, in modern civilization, are the necessary guarantees of individual happiness."^18

Here it should be noted that the absence of restraint did not apply to individual action, but to those social conditions which were necessary for individual happiness. Thus it was in agreement with his earlier view namely that freedom was the system of conditions that enables the individual to attain self-realization. The attempt to bring about such social conditions should not be obstructed by

the authority of a hostile government. Laski may have meant that there should not be any outside restraint if the working class should attempt to set up an egalitarian society. Also such a measure as compulsory education was not contradictory to his argument which said that liberty was an absence of restraint upon the necessary social conditions, since such a measure was to get rid of illiteracy in order to bring about the necessary social condition (where everybody was highly informed and able to express his view on daily political occurrences). Thus he could say without contradiction that, "a compulsory training of mind is still compulsion. It is a sacrifice of some liberty to a greater freedom when the compulsion ceases."  

In view of such an argument, it could be justly said that he was not far away from his earlier position when he advocated positive freedom.

However, as he leaned closer towards Marxian socialism, he reasoned that the state in the capitalistic society was perverted for the interests of a specific group, and he was, more or less, logically compelled to employ the concept of negative freedom to denounce the attempt of the privileged class to oppose any major social reform, or

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19Ibid., p. 5.

20In 1919 Laski rejected this idea saying that to argue that a government was perverted to the ends of any class within a state was, 'to project into history a malignant teleology from which it is, in no small degree, free.'
their opposition to alter the basic legal and social structure. The change in his conception of freedom could be more readily understood in connection with his transition towards Marxism. Therefore, I would like to discuss briefly why he gradually adopted the socialistic view to preserve and maintain freedom and equality. Further discussion of Laski as a socialist will be devoted to the following chapter.

Laski expressed his view that a society divided into a small number of rich and a large number of poor persons was not adequate for the self-realization of the individual. Where society is divided between the exploiters and exploited, there cannot be a genuine democratic government, because the real meaning of the democratic government is the equal weighing of individual claims to happiness by social institutions. 21 Thus he presumed that democracy cannot exist in a capitalistic society which denies economic equality. In a capitalistic society, there is a class with the power to use the authority of the state for its interests. Such a society is a house divided and, in Laski’s words:

A wealthy class strives, inevitably, to protect its advantages at their maximum; and the poor are driven to attempt their invasion as the only way of enjoying their results. The state, therefore, is compelled, if it seeks to realize its ends, so to organize its activities as deliberately as mitigate the consequences of this material inequality. . . .

For every improvement in education, or health, or

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housing among the poor leads to an increased intensity of demand for further concessions. They realize the inadequacy of a social system which does not relate proportionately the toil and the gain of living. The passion for equality, in a word, is a permanent feature of human nature.  

By 1930 Laski conceded the practical difficulty of the near absolute freedom which he so ardently advocated at the time when he was a pluralist. By this time, also, he admitted the necessity to compromise freedom to authority in order to reach a certain balance between the two. Thus, about the limit on freedom, Laski argued as follows:

We cannot, however, say that the right to these freedoms is unlimited. The state must, because its business is the preservation of order, concern itself to see that the peace is maintained. It is, therefore, entitled to say that any utterance which directly incites to immediate disorder is subject to penalty; and that any association which embarks upon action likely to threaten the maintenance of order shall, also, be subject to penalty.  

Thus individual freedom must be limited when there is an imminent threat to the social order. However, too many times the limitation of freedom has been employed for the preservation of the unequal social order. Although Laski was very unhappy about this fact, once he saw the possibility for the victory of the British Labor Party, he argued:

It /the British Labor Party/ is concerned, if it can, to implement the socialist principles for which it stands by the procedures of democratic consent; but granted that it receives the

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22Laski, An Introduction to Politics, pp. 32-3.
23Ibid., pp. 39-40.
authority of the electorate for its programme, it cannot allow the dissent of a minority, however vociferous and powerful, to stand in the way of its achievement....

Such an argument as this runs quite contrary to his earlier argument for the right of dissent if individual conscience tells him to do so. Partisan sentiment seems to have clouded the scholarly objectivity of Laski. Laski's position could be defended, if one insists that his early argument for individual right was directed toward the theory of the Leviathan state rising across the Channel, and that the argument -- quoted above -- was motivated from his sincere conviction that programs put out by the Labor Party were the path to freedom and equality. But it is difficult to deny that Laski became rather dogmatic in his belief. It is highly regrettable that Laski took such an attitude, since he was the one who always warned us not to be dogmatic in the field of political belief.

It could also be assumed that the abandonment of his pluralism in 1930s and the adoption of Marxian socialism marked a new phase in Laski's political ideas. Of course, it is true that he became more dogmatic in his view of history, but he never completely abandoned the liberal sentiment of his earlier thinking, and this distinguished Laski from other more doctrinaire Marxists.

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CHAPTER V
SOCIALISM OF LASKI

When Laski was beginning his study at Oxford, he was already a member of the Fabian Society. But he was at that time, it is said, at least as much a liberal as a socialist.\(^1\) It should be also mentioned that Laski at this period did not play any prominent or conspicuous role as a socialist. He was more moderate than militant in his political opinions. Looking back in 1939, Laski affirmed that he became a socialist partly due to the influence of a great school master, Mr. Petan, and "something, too, was the outcome of a Jewish upbringing, the sense it conferred of being treated differently from other people and no obviously assignable cause."\(^2\) But the most important reason for his having become a socialist seems to be the strong sense of the injustice he saw in his contemporary world; "up to 1920, I think, as I look back, that my socialism was above all the outcome of a sense of injustice of things as they were... ."\(^3\)

Throughout his writings, he has always been proud of being a socialist. His idealism never dimmed throughout his life. Sometimes he was discouraged and other times he seemed to have fallen into a deep sense of despair. But he

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1 Martin, op. cit., p. 13.
3 Ibid., p. 60.
never compromised what he believed to be justice under any circumstance.

Laski, in a broad sense, accepted the dialectical materialism of Marxism. It seems rather ironic that Laski took the dialectical materialism of Marx, which was essentially based on Hegel's philosophy which Laski had been refuting with his utmost efforts. The dialectical method had some advantage over the traditional method in explaining the development of history. According to Engels, the traditional method dealt with the natural objects in isolation and repose, while the dialectical method comprehended things in their essential connection, concatenation, and motion. Laski seems to have employed this method in explaining past history as demonstrated in one of his books, namely The Rise of Liberalism.

The attempt to explain past history based on this view manifested itself as an economic interpretation of history. According to this view, there are two basic factors in the economic condition of any society which characterize the economic structure of this society. The two basic factors are (1) the material forces of production and (2) the knowledge necessary to utilize the material forces of production. The conditions of production give rise to certain relations of production in order to utilize these conditions of production

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efficiently. The relations of production depend upon the conditions of production, that is to say, the relations of production in a capitalistic society, such as legal, political, educational, and religious institutions, are a mere superstructure of the conditions of production.

At certain stages of economic development, according to Marxism, the material forces of production come into conflict with relations of production; the forces of production outgrow the relations of production. Such contradiction is the inherent attributes of a capitalistic system according to Marxism. This contradiction stems from the fact that, in the capitalistic economic system, the modes of production are socialized in a sense that they are used by a society as a whole for the purpose of production, while they are in practice owned by individual capitalists. Only a violent means of revolution can bring a new harmony between the outjointed conditions of production and the relations of production, since those who own the means of production never voluntarily abdicate their privileges.

Laski accepted this concept of the economic interpretation of history in a broad sense, thereby attempting to explain the development of history based on the economic conditions of a given time. For example, "he saw the rise of liberalism in Europe as a result of the Reformation and the predominance, economic and subsequently political, of
the bourgeoisie.⁵ The book written in this manner is The Rise of Liberalism as mentioned briefly above.

On the subject of historical materialism, Laski felt that the Marxian philosophy of history was the insistence that the primary motive force which caused social changes was the system of economic production. All the other forms of effort would adjust themselves to the economic needs, whether consciously or unconsciously. In accepting this view in a broad sense, Laski interpreted historical materialism as follows:

Nor does it /economic interpretation of history/ insist that economic conditions are the sole cause of change; it merely argues that they are its main cause. Roughly speaking, it is an argument to the effect that man's situation is the preceptor of his duty, and that in that situation economic elements are paramount simply because the means of life are the first thing to which men must pay attention.⁶

Here, one example of Laski's attempt to soften the Marxist dogma could be noticed. In Communism, Laski warned against a dogmatic attempt which tried to interpret all historical development based solely upon economic conditions saying, "the communist reliance upon a kind of natural law in social revolution leads him seriously to underestimate the power of


⁶Laski, Communism, New York, 1927, p. 77.
forces which are of a non-economic kind." Then he went on to argue that:

The degree to which nationalism, for instance, will resist economic necessity is remarkable.... An English working-man ought, doubtless, to feel that he has more in common with the French or German worker than with the English capitalist. The fact remains that, in general, he gives no sign of such feeling.

Although Laski did not accept the economic interpretation of history literally, he acknowledged the importance of economic relations on the other social institutions, especially on the nature of government, as shown when he said, "there is no department of human life in which the governing ideas and institutions will not be found, upon examination, to be largely a reflection of a given set of economic conditions." By 1931 Laski leaned more closely towards the orthodox theory of Marxism, and held the view that the character of any particular state would be determined by the economic system. In a society where extreme economic inequality prevails, those who control the economic power would command the legal systems for their own class interests. The state, in such circumstances, would not act to promote the general well-being of a community, but for the interests

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7Ibid., p. 88.
8Ibid., pp. 88 ff.
9Ibid., p. 78.
of the dominant economic group. Here his early insistence that "the government is not consciously perverted to the ends of any class, and that so to argue is to project into history a malignant teleology from which it is, in no small degree free," has been greatly modified. 10

Along with historical materialism, Marx developed the theory of surplus value in order to explain the phenomenon of exploitation in a capitalistic system. Marx asserted that the socially necessary labor power embodied in commodities was the sole determinant of their value. The surplus value was the difference between what workers receive in order to subsist and what is totally derived from what they have created. Thus Marx contented that the workers actually created more value than they were paid. Marx further reduced capital as the product of past labor, and asserted that workers alone produce all the values.

Laski did not accept this theory of surplus value as being valid as theory:

I do not myself believe that the Marxian theory of value has, despite all the refinements of its advocates, stood the test of time. It was in its day a fair answer to the Ricardian school; but with the progress of economic doctrine its rehabilitation is no longer seriously possible. But it is worthwhile to note that its theoretic inadequacies neither stood, nor are likely to stand, in the way of its acceptance by most of those who feel bitterly and suffer from the inadequacies of our present economic

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10 See above, p. 56.
arrangement.  
Thus, although Laski did not take the theory of surplus value too seriously in a theoretical sense, he accorded much credit to it in the sense that "Marx's theory of value appeals to (the poor) as a simple and direct explanation of his distressed condition..." He did not underestimate the propaganda value of the theory.

It was also the contention of Marx that as long as the institution of private property remained, the surplus value would be pocketed by the bourgeois class, and the class struggle between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat would be inevitable. Further Marx asserted that as the capitalist system developed further, the wealth would be concentrated into the hands of fewer rich, and the misery of the poor would be intensified. Then the proletariat would grow class conscious and it would, in the end, over-throw the capitalist system by violent means, because the bourgeois class would not abdicate their privileges voluntarily.

Laski also viewed the history of capitalism as the history of a relentless defense of each phase of the rights of property; they were always defended without regard to justice. He thought that there might be periods of concession by the bourgeois class, as in an epoch of expanding

12 Ibid.
trade, but once any vital point was affected by the workers' demands, they were met, as in the French Revolution, by armed resistance.\textsuperscript{13}

Laski saw the rise of fascism in this light; when the foundation of capitalism was threatened by the demands of workers, and when the capitalists were unable to make major economic concessions in a time of economic contraction, they turned to the outlaws to defend their economic privileges:

The essence of fascism, whether in its German or its Italian form, is the use of the outlaw by the privileged to defend themselves against the demand of the masses for justice. That demand is made when the contraction of the economic system brings out the inherent contradiction between the forces of production and its relations.\textsuperscript{14}

Hence, he argued during World War II, unless capitalism was transformed to a socialistic economic order, "we shall find ourselves confronted by the precisely the same grim issues about which we are fighting today."\textsuperscript{15} This argument of Laski seems to be an over-simplification of the causes which contributed to the rise of fascism; he seems to have underestimated such factors as the traditional Prussian militarism, the evil genius of Hitler, the influence of Romanticism which fermented such a fanatic nationalism in Germany, and the effect of the Peace of Versailles, along with the threat of

\textsuperscript{13}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 693.

\textsuperscript{14}\textit{Laski}, "Revolution by Consent", \textit{Nation}, V. 157, (September 18, 1943), p. 349.

\textsuperscript{15}\textit{Ibid.}
communism, which all contributed to the rise of fascism. In his argument, Laski also seems to have neglected the flexibilities of a free society, which could adjust itself to the changing demands of time; he overlooked the possibility of that the capitalistic society could take more responsibility for the social and economic welfare of its members within the framework of a free and democratic political system.

Although Laski himself wished to see the basic reform brought about by peaceful means, he was always skeptical about the possibility of those property holders making a major concession voluntarily, and he constantly warned of the outbreak of revolution unless serious popular grievances were remedied by legal means. Laski realized the difficulty and said once: "I have been arguing that, when the political democracy seeks to transfer (the instruments of production) to the community, the capitalist class will, if it can, use the state power to suppress democratic institutions." 16 So he implied that a violent revolution might be inevitable.

Laski's attitude was understood and reported by some of the conservative papers in England as one advocating a violent revolution. This resulted in the famous Libel Case brought by Laski against the Newark Advertiser and South

Notts Gazette in 1946. Laski lost the case despite his gallant defense that what he was insisting on was, "with the end of war, if the reform were not brought about by constitutional means, there was danger of drifting toward violence and revolution."\(^{17}\)

Laski was against the use of violent means towards social reform, because, along with many other reasons, such a violent upheaval did not necessarily contain an a priori assurance that it would produce an idyllic society as envisaged by Marx. According to Laski:

> Violence on the grand scale, in fact, so far from providing an avenue to communism, would be the one kind of existence in which the impulse demanded by a communist society would have no hope of emergence. For the condition of communism is the restraint of exactly those appetites which violence releases; and the communist had nowhere shown how this difficulty can be met except by affirming that dictatorship will destroy them.\(^{18}\)

Laski expressed a deep skepticism concerning the oversimplified Marxian dogma which contended that, after the proletariat revolution, the dictatorship of the proletariat would be followed by a classless society. Laski argued that there was a great over-simplification of the historical process in Marxism; "the struggle for justice is not ended by the creation of a classless society. Nor will the observer be tempted to admit, if he can maintain some measure of ob-

\(^{17}\)"Laski Libel Case", Nation, V. 163 (December 21, 1946), p. 714.

\(^{18}\)Laski, Communism, p. 174.
jectivity, that the victory of the proletariat is any more certain than the victory of men like Napoleon or Mussolini... "19 Laski's disagreement with Marx on this subject was conspicuous when Laski said that:

Nor is it easy to see why Marx' view of the communist state should be accepted. If the revolution he foresaw became universal, there is no inherent reason why the result should be the kind of society he desired... While economic classes might, by hypothesis, disappear, another form of class rule, that of doctrinal aristocracy, for example, might take its place. The poison of power is notorious, and it is difficult to see why communists should be held immune from its toxins.20

Unlike Marx, Laski did not exclude the possibility of compromise between the two classes, although he admitted that the chances for such a compromise were extremely slim. Laski acknowledged the possibility of some alternatives to the violent revolution, namely a revolution by consent. This very attitude distinguished him from the deterministic dogma of orthodox Marxism. Laski's insistence on revolution by consent was an argument much qualified when it was to be applied in practice: it was his firm belief that the peaceful change of the fundamental political and economic institutions was of utmost difficulty in its nature, and if it is possible, it would be carried out most likely in a state like England where the people had been accustomed to

20Laski, Communism, p. 86.
the representative institutions for a long period of time, and where there had been also a long period of liberal tradition.

On the nature of the state, Laski's view was similar to that of Marx, who believed that the state in a capitalistic society was an organ whose primary purpose was to suppress and exploit economically weak ones. Such a state aimed at the creation and maintenance of an order in order to legalize and enable economic exploitation. In Laski's opinion,

what occurs in any state where there are great material differences between classes is simply a perversion of the end of the state to the interests of the rich. Their power compels the agents of the state to make their wishes the first object of consideration. Their conception of good insensibly pervades the mental climate of administration. They dominate the machinery of the state. By justice they mean the satisfaction of their demands. By lessons of history they mean the deposit of their experience... 21

Then Laski went on to argue that the Greek city-state was biased against slaves, the Roman empire against the slave and the poor. States in the medieval world were biased in favor of the owners of landed property. Since the industrial revolution, the state has been biased in favor of the owners of the instruments of production as against those who have nothing but their labor power to sell. 22 Then he proceeded

21 Laski, An Introduction to Politics, pp. 43-44.
to conclude that the state could never be neutral in any society where there were class distinctions. In Laski's opinion, the state was merely a coercive power used to protect the system of rights and duties of one process of economic relationship from invasion by another class.23

Marxian philosophy is dominated by a deep rooted historicist attitude combined with a rigid determinism. Therefore it is not strange that Laski, whose approach to political problems was primarily pragmatic, did not accept the Marxian dogma, although his zeal for the realization of egalitarian society made him adopt the Marxian view in a broad sense. He was in favor of government control of those industries, such as the mechanism of national credit, coal and electric power, transport, and the ownership of land, which were vital to the national life.24 The transformation of such key industries should be brought about by peaceful means. When the British Labor Party won the general election of 1945, Laski exclaimed that "the Labor Party in their name /the name of the people/ will seek to make a revolution by consent. It will try to build the socialist commonwealth for the creation of which it has a decisive mandate by the process of constitutional democracy."25

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23Ibid., p. 100.
During World War II, Laski also expressed, in his open letter to the American students, the hope and possibility, however slim it might be, of revolution by consent under the leadership of President Roosevelt in America. He believed that the revolutionary character of the war made the fundamental change of the social institutions easier than before:

The first is that war itself has compelled profound changes and so induced a mood in the nation that is prepared for great experiment. Crisis always breaks the cake of custom; and it is folly not to take advantage of the mood while it lasts.26

Also to Laski, the mass of people seemed to be more willing and able to use their political power to bring about the basic social reform. Laski also hoped that those who possess the instruments of production would learn in due time that, to live in peace, the sharp class distinctions had to disappear.27


As has been mentioned above, Laski began his career as a proponent of ardent liberalism. In the earlier period of his writing he devoted his utmost efforts to meeting the challenge of totalitarian philosophy; his arguments for pluralism have to be appreciated, therefore, in this context. It is true that his argument lacked a logical consistency at times, but, to the writer of this paper, it seems to be a realistic modification of his view as he faced newer problems rather than the lack of scholarly insight.

He started his academic life as an ardent advocate of individual right and freedom, and ended up as a proponent of socialism in order to secure common good for the people by setting up a certain standard below which nobody should fall. However, this change of outlook did not conflict with his aim to maximize individual happiness; it should be noted that it has been the general trend of the Western liberalism which adopted a more positive role of government for the promotion of public interests.

In his argument for pluralism, granted that his aim for the preservation of individual freedom was noble, he seems to have failed to explain how the necessary coordination was to be achieved among the various institutions, namely many conflicting interest groups whose functions could impinge
upon one another. Such a failure, as a result, left enough room to be criticized by such an unsparing critic as Herbert Deane, who pointed out that the pluralism of Laski "leaves unsolved the basic problem -- who is to decide when the activities of the church cease to be of concern to itself and begin to affect persons outside the group."\(^1\) Granting the practical inadequacy of pluralism, we should not fail to understand that the main aim of his argument was to prevent the state from turning into a false god by setting up the state as superior and indifferent to its component individuals.

At times, when Laski discussed the nature of the state, his argument pertaining to the aim of the state seems to merge with that of the idealism which he was mainly attacking; the influence of T. H. Green on Laski in this respect cannot be ignored. But it was Green as a founder of Oxford Liberalism rather than as a successor of German idealism who influenced Laski. With all the likeness to idealism in his discussion of the aim of the state, the method he proposed to implement the aim of the state was almost diametrically opposed to that of idealism, that is to say, his approach was largely pragmatic. Even after he had adopted a near-Marxist view, he was violently opposed to any restriction of

\(^1\)Deane, *The Political Ideas of Harold J. Laski*, p. 27.
freedom of thought. To Laski,

this is not a static world, and there is no means of making it so. Curiosity, discovery, invention, all of these jeopardize by their nature the foundation of any society to which their results are denied admission. Toleration is therefore not merely desirable in itself, but also politically wise, because no other atmosphere of activity offers the assurance of peaceful adjustment.2

It was in 1941, when many branded him an orthodox Marxist, that Laski said himself, "understanding comes to those only who have been permitted to examine without penalty the clash of ideas in the market place. If their free examination is denied, the price is always paid in an easy acceptance of naive dogma."3 If the toleration of a different belief is a main attribute of liberalism, and if that toleration has been denied in Soviet Russia, it could safely be said that Laski has been in the camp of liberals rather than in that of doctrinaire Marxism. If Laski sympathized with Marxism, it was mainly by identifying himself with the humanitarian aspect of Marxism. And if he were a Marxist, at least he was a "Marxist with a difference" as one of his biographers mentioned.4

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2Laski, Liberty in the Modern State, p. 280.
4Martin, Harold Laski, p. 81 f.

Mr. Martin also says in the same book that, "Laski's argument might be derived from Marx, but at the final test he was a follower of William Morris rather than of Lenin. If he was a Marxist it was because, as his friend Louis Levy put it, 'the socialism of Karl Marx was essentially humanist,' and Joules, Blum, and Harold Laski were all socialists who empha-
Naturally, Laski was opposed to such a simple formula as that it was necessary to build a small revolutionary party which would, in the final resort, overthrow a government by civil war and set up a dictatorship of the proletariat. In spite of his often expressed distrust of the representative institution, an attempt to resort to a violent means seemed rather immature to Laski, especially in a country like England which has a long period of liberal tradition. 

Although Laski did not approve of the method which the Bolsheviks had employed for their ascendency to power, Laski more often than not expressed his sympathy with the Soviet Union, especially with its planned economy. Looking back on the political ideas of Laski in the longer perspective, "it is true that Laski traveled all the way from an individualist propounding the theories of pluralist society to a near-Marxist prepared to overlook the evils of totalitarian means for the sake of its gains." How far Laski was willing to sacrifice individual freedom for the realization of an egalitarian society is not certain, but, as the abandonment

sized 'this human side of Marxism' and linked 'the inventor of scientific socialism with the main current of French Revolutionary thought.' Like William Morris, he held that socialism and fellowship are the same thing... " p. 256.

5Ibid., p. 82.

of pluralism shows rather clearly, he was ready to make some concessions in the realm of individual freedom and rights. Granted that it was from his sincere desire to disseminate the opportunities of self-realization on a wider basis, still it is true that he recoiled to some degree from the position of an individualist in favor of a greater degree of collectivism. Thus Laski, disapproving of the dictatorial method employed by the Soviet regime, praised the Russian revolution as the inheritor of the French Revolution, and believed that, in the long run, freedom would prevail in Russia.

In 1945 Laski said, in praise of planned economy, "free enterprise and the market economy mean war; socialism and planned economy mean peace. We must plan our civilization or we must perish." With so much emphasis on planned economy, it is not so clear how far he was willing to sacrifice individual liberty and other political safeguards for the preservation of democracy, because planned economy may well lead to political collectivism. The dilemma was, as put by Mr. Metha, who was once a student under Professor Laski and Indian Ambassador to the United States, "by rejecting both the democratic way and the Communist method, he had nothing to fall back upon since he failed to evolve an alternative in place of the means he rejected."  

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The dilemma of Laski seems, to the writer of this paper, to have originated from his over-simplification of the western economic system, especially its flexibility. It has been evidenced since the conclusion of World War II that, through the institutions of representative government, especially in England, much social legislation has become effective leading towards the goal of a welfare state. For example, since 1945, the British society has undergone such a change that the working-class in England appears to have accepted the institutions of representative democracy as a means of improving its lot. The acceptance of welfare-state philosophy by the British Conservative Party seems to have made the Labor Party less attractive to the eyes of working class people as evidenced by the successive conservative victories in the Parliamentary elections. It is doubtful, but speculated by the writer of this paper, that if Laski lived today, he might have regained some of his confidence in the flexibility and capacity of democratic representative institutions as a means of realizing individual happiness through peaceful means.

Looking backward, ten years after his death, we can see some of his weakness; he seems to have exaggerated his capacity to influence practical politics by writing pamphlets and making speeches. "As a politician Harold set his sights wrong. He did not recognize the limitations of his method, nor realize that he could not successfully combine the role
of eminent grace with that of popular leader." But as a teacher he excelled the others in the world of learning. At times, it is regretted that he failed to reach scholarly maturity by devoting much of his time and energy to partisan politics. Perhaps it is true that he "neglected those periods of lonely thought out of which creative ideas spring," but it should be remembered that, "Laski was one of the few teachers who sought to bring political science to earth, to relate political concept to economic trends, and yet hitch the wagon to the star." As he was so successful and influential as a teacher, it said that hundreds of letters of sorrow and gratitude poured in, not only from England, but also from all over the world, upon the news of his unexpected death in 1950.

In his political thinking, if Laski advocated a revolution, it was a theory in the Lockean-Jeffersonian rather than Marxian sense. Therefore, to the writer of this paper, it seems to be unfair for one to attempt to build him into a gauleiter commissar; on the contrary, his influence as a liberal democrat, at least throughout most of his lifetime, with the rich heritage of liberal faith, seems to have blocked the inroads of revolutionary communism. What he

9 Martin, Harold Laski, p. 248.
10 Ibid., p. 247.
11 G. L. Metha, op. cit., p. 23.
12 Martin, op. cit., p. 249.
teaches us today is the lesson that democracy does not mean mere maintenance of the status quo, but continual transformation of our society to satisfy the basic needs of its individual members through peaceful and constitutional means. He also warns us that we must constantly guard against the danger of any dogma, because it is an obstruction to progress. Above all, the greatest lesson one can get from his teaching is that, as he so consistently insisted, the individual should be an end in itself, but never a means toward other ends however noble they may appear.
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