

The Evolution of Harold J. Laski's Political Thought: An Overview

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Abstract:

Harold J. Laski who has been hailed as a scholar, a political philosopher, a politician, an author, a talented teacher, a great friend and compared to Montesquieu and De Tocqueville in respect of his political ideas, occupies an important place in modern political thought. Laski did not confine his ideas to a particular philosophy. He was the child of his age and so in his writings he reflected the spirit of the period he was living in. We may, remember that the times in which he was born and lived was the period of revolution and reform. The liberalism of the Victorian Age was crumbling down and various theories like those of communism, Fabian Socialism and Pluralism were becoming more and more popular. Under the influence of these theories Laski studied the political institutions of his times and tried to reform the same. He was not an arm-chair thinker but on the contrary he was out and out a practical thinker. He was always ready to admit his mistakes and revise his political ideas according to the changed political and economic conditions. He had no theory of mankind, and no objective criteria to enable him to evaluate the varying aspirations of the human heart. He had no abstract conception of justice, nor any belief in a natural law-nothing to protect him from the dreadful alternation between individualism and tyranny, nothing to provide a nonmaterial standard whereby to set a bound to liberty, or a restraint upon the exercise of power. So while he had the instincts and many of the gifts of a prophet, he drifted through life with the limitations of

an advocate in a sphere where mere advocacy is scarcely respectable. That in the course of this life he managed to win and charm a host of those who did not admire his achievements or accept his opinions, is rather a tribute to his endearing nature than to the brilliant gifts which he squandered rather than usefully employed.

Keywords

Liberty, pluralism, rights, sovereignty, state.

Introduction

Harold Laski has been hailed as the greatest political philosopher of the twentieth century. He was born in 1893 at Manchester in a Jewish family. He was appointed a lecturer in political science in the Montreal University. Laski was a great teacher and scholar. He impressed everyone by his ability, knowledge and affection. He loved his students from the core of his heart and he was a very much beloved teacher of his pupils whom he helped in every way and at any hour of their personal difficulties.

In 1920 he joined the staff of the London School of Economics and six years later became professor of political science. A brilliant lecturer, Laski had a tremendous influence over his students. Kingsley Martin wrote: "He was still in his late twenties and looked like a schoolboy. His lectures on the history of political ideas were brilliant, eloquent, and delivered without a note; he often referred to current controversies, even when the subject was Hobbes's theory of sovereignty."

Another student, Ralph Miliband, added: "His lectures taught more, much more than political science. They taught a faith that ideas mattered, that knowledge was important and its pursuit exciting... His seminars taught tolerance, the willingness to listen although one disagreed, the values of ideas being confronted. And it was all immense fun, an exciting game that had meaning, and it was also a sieve of ideas, a gymnastics of the mind carried on with vigour and directed unobtrusively with superb craftsmanship. I think I know now why he gave himself so freely. Partly it was because he was human and warm and that he was so interested in people. But mainly it was because he loved students, and he loved students because they were young. Because he had a glowing faith that youth was generous and alive, eager and enthusiastic and fresh. That by helping young people he was helping the future and bringing nearer that brave world in which he so passionately believed."

In addition to teaching and writing he indulged in a lot of free lance journalism. He wrote for the daily press and journals. He had also a keen interest in the politics of his country. He aligned himself with the Labour party and played an important role in Labour politics during the 1930's and 1940's. Laski was the author of several books including *Studies in the Problem of Sovereignty*, *Authority in the Modern State*, *Political Thought in England from Locke to Bentham*, *Karl Marx*, *A Grammar of Politics*, *Liberty in the Modern State*, *The Dangers of Obedience*, *Democracy in Crisis*, *The State in Theory and Practice*, *The Rise of Liberalism* etc.

II Three Periods of Laski's Literary Career:

Laski Ideas on State Sovereignty

Laski's ideas on state sovereignty fall under three periods. During the first period of his literary career lasting from 1914 to 1925 Laski is a pluralist. During this period he constantly attacks the monistic view of sovereignty. He writes: "No sovereign has anywhere possessed unlimited power and the attempt to exert it has always resulted in the establishment of safeguards. Even the sultan of turkey in the height of its power was himself bound down to a code of traditional observance obedience of which was practically compulsory upon him. In law, there was no part of the social fact he could not alter; in practice he survived only by willing not to will those changes which might have proved him the sovereign of Austinian jurisprudence". The discovery of a sovereignty in a federal state is an impossible venture. Not only in a federal state but in a unitary one also it is difficult to locate the sovereign. According to Laski, the testimony of Sir Henry Maine is sufficient to show that from the historical point of view, "The Austinian theory is artificial to the point of absurdity".

During this period, Laski's attack on sovereignty is double barreled. Firstly, he says that the citizens do not obey the state always. Every often they disobey it when its commands come into conflict with the demands of the charet or Trade Union. Thus when the people do not render it a habitual obedience, it cannot claim sovereignty for itself. Secondly, the sovereignty of the state is ethically indefensible. The state is not by any right entitled to absolute obedience of the people. It must prove its claim to sovereignty by what it does not by what it seeks to do. Not the purpose announced but the purpose achieved should be the basis of its claim for allegiance. From whatever point of view the theory of legal sovereignty is examined, it is found

untenable. As a matter of fact, there is a lot of convincing evidence against it. At this stage, Laski defines sovereignty as the degree of consent that its actions can win from its citizens. In other words, state does not have sovereignty as such, its sovereignty rests on the consent of each of its members. Laski's definition of sovereignty clearly implies demarcation between state and society and between state and government. There are, according to him, social relationships which are primary as the individual relationships with the state.

Laski during this period, is afraid of the concentration of power. His desire to prevent the power of the state from being concentrated at any single point within it leads him to attack the idea of the state's sovereignty. He wants to see the power split up, divided, set against itself and thrown widespread among men by various devices of decentralization, and he wants to be certain that the civil, economic and social rights of individuals and groups are ensured against the encroachments of those who exercise power. Laski finds that in practice this power is used for the welfare of the capitalists. Laski makes it clear that his fundamental objection is to the capitalist state and not to the sovereign state.

Laski's concept of pluralism undergoes a change during the second period of his literary career, i.e., between 1925-31. During this period he gives less attention to the problem of sovereignty; instead he puts forth a positive theory of the state. He writes, "It would be of lasting benefit to political science if the whole concept of sovereignty was surrendered. That in fact with which we are dealing is power, what is important in the nature of power is the end it seeks to serve, and the way in which it serves that end." The legal theory of sovereignty is unassailable on its own grounds. As a substitute for the orthodox theory of sovereignty he now proposes a purely pragmatic

standard for determining the nature and extent of the powers of the state. Now according to him, the state must possess all those powers which are necessary for the accomplishment of the purposes it seeks to achieve. The sovereignty of the state is a power only to fulfill certain purposes and obligations. What powers does the state belong is to be determined by what purpose does it seek to serve. He now finds the essence of the state to be its power to enforce its norms upon all who live within its boundaries and its supremacy over all other forms of social grouping the state will is a sovereign will, legally though not morally prominent over all other wills. This means a great shift from his earlier position. According to Laski the state must be given the power to coordinate the functions of other groups and to interpret the rules by which the rights of these groups are defined. In this view, Laski approaches very near to the orthodox view of sovereignty and modifies his earlier pluralism. Though during this period, Laski leans towards the Austenian concept of sovereignty yet he is anxious to maintain the autonomy of the groups. He draws a distinction between the general activities and specific activities, and holds that the state should control only the general activities and leave aside the specific activities. In short, Laski at this stage, recognizes more and more the need of the state and gives greater and greater powers to it than what he was prepared to give to it during the period 1914-25.

Laski again changes his views during the third period of his career, i.e., 1931-35. After the incident of 1930 which Laski called 'Revolution from the Palace' wherein the Labour government was replaced by the conservative one due to the sudden change of lines by Ramsay Macdonald and the crisis that he had brought by withdrawing unemployment benefits without consulting his colleagues in the cabinet and thereby favoring the lot of capitalists. Now, he

adopts the Marxian view of the state and like Marx he regards the state as an instrument in the hands of the capitalist class to maintain their exploitation. The state according to Laski, does not exist to promote the social good but to maintain the given system of class relations and for maintaining that system it must claim sovereignty for itself. Laski, at this stage, gives up his earlier liberalism and pluralism and comes to regard the existing state a capitalist state. The state now for him becomes the executive instrument of the class which holds economic power in society. During this period, Laski regards fascism as the last stage of decaying capitalism. It may, however, be noted that though Laski adopts a Marxian view of the state; he, however, does not become the whole Marxist. He was not prepared to accept the theory of the dictatorship of the proletariat and the necessity of a small revolutionary party to function as the spearhead of revolution. He believed in the theory of revolution by consent. To quote Kingsley Martin, "he was prepared to agree that to encroach on civil rights might be justified during revolutionary period. But he could never go the whole Marxist hog, because he believed fundamentally in individual liberty.....because he hoped that most of the property class could be bought over and persuaded to accept the new system; because while he believed that strong historical trends made for violent revolution, he did not regard it as inevitable."

From the above analysis of Laski's ideas on state sovereignty, it becomes clear that Laski has been changing his views from time to time according to the needs of circumstances. From a liberal in 1914 he became a Marxist in 1931. However, pluralism remains always in the core of his heart though sometimes he may be moving away from it. He was very anxious to see that the state is responsible for its actions. He wanted power of the term enjoyed by any

government subject to periodical renewal. He felt that an unconditional power has always proved disastrous to those over whom it is exercised. The state should be made to protect certain rights. He felt that the concept of an absolute and independent sovereign state is incompatible with the interests of humanity. At the most, the state can exercise a partial control over its members. He wanted the parliament to devolve some powers upon the territorial and functional assemblies in order to draw a larger number of people into an active relationship with the work of government.

III Laski's concept of rights

During the first phase of his literary career, when he was a pluralist and had a hostile attitude towards the state, he expressed sympathy with the natural rights as it helped him to suppress the idea of sovereignty and limits the political power by postulating the existence of certain rights which were inferior to the state and had to be safeguarded against state's interference. During this period he rejects the legal theory of rights. Laski begins his analysis of natural rights by considering the purpose for which the state exists the development of its member's capacities for good. In Laski's view, the individual has a right to expect the state to fulfill its purposes, that is, to make it possible for him to attain certain good; the precise nature of these goods and the level of expectation will change in the course of historical development. When Laski comes to write his book 'Government of Politics', he defines rights as these things without which 'I cannot realize myself as a moral being'. At another place in the same book he defines rights as those conditions of social life without which no man can seek to be himself at his best. Since the purpose of the state is to make it possible for each man to achieve this self-realization it must secure the substance of these rights to every citizen. Rights are, therefore, prior to the state in the sense that

recognized or not, they are that from which its validity derives. Rights are not historical in the sense that they have at sometime won their recognition. They are not natural in the sense that a permanent and unchanging catalogue of them can be accepted. According to Laski, any system of rights has three different aspects and those are the interests of the individual, the group and the community. Rights must aim at the enrichment of all the three. Laski opines that there are three general conditions which facilitate the task of guaranteeing the rights to the people. The first is that the state must be a decentralized one. The second is that the central government must be surrounded by consultative bodies. The third is that the state should refrain from interfering in the internal life of other associations. As to the question whether an individual has any right against the state, Laski answers in the affirmative. According to him, it is the obligation of the state to guarantee those conditions to the individuals which are essential for the development of their personalities. But Laski is aware that rights also carry duties. The larger the number of rights a man enjoys, the greater must be the duties which are discharged by others. According to Laski, "The maintenance of rights is much more a question of habit and tradition than of the formality to enactment."

IV LASKI'S IDEAS ON LIBERTY

Laski's ideas on liberty reveal wide fluctuations. At one stage he examines the concept of liberty by analyzing the nature of the self which is the goal of the process of realization. At another moment he shifts to historical analysis and maintains that the meaning of liberty will differ from age to age. Still at another moment he holds that in each age the substance of liberty will be found in what the dominating forces of that age must greatly want. The real point which Laski seeks to make out is that in

the present hierarchically organized economic and political order, opportunities for creative self-expression are denied to all but a small group of men. Liberty in the sense of free play for the creative impulses of men is incompatible with the existing system of property because it has led to the concentration of powers which makes the political personality of the average citizen ineffective for any serious purpose. In the preface to the 2nd edition of his book 'Grammar of Politics' he writes, "In 1925 I thought 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 restraint can alone safeguard the personality of the citizens." In his book, 'Liberty in Modern State' he writes: "I mean by liberty the absence of restraints upon the existence of those social conditions which in modern civilization are the necessary guarantees of individual happiness." He now insists that there is an antithesis between liberty and authority and that limitations must be imposed upon what the rulers may expect from the people.

Laski classified liberty into three kinds: private, political and economic. By private liberty he means the opportunity to exercise freedom of choice in those areas of life where the results of my effort mainly affects me. Private liberty is that aspect of which the substance is mainly personal to a man's life. It is the opportunity to be fully himself in the private relations of life. By political liberty Laski means the power to be active in the affairs of the state. This means that I can let my mind express freely about the substance of public business. According to Laski, two conditions are necessary for the exercise of liberty and these are a free press and education. Economic liberty means an opportunity to find reasonable security in the earning of one's daily bread. Citizens should have freedom from fear of want and insufficiency. According to Laski, liberty

and equality are not incompatible but go together. Equality means that adequate opportunities should be laid open to all. Adequate opportunities do not mean equal opportunities. It only means that all these opportunities should be provided to each individual which are necessary for his growth and without which there is frustration of personality. Both are the basic conditions for the development of man's fullest capacities. Without these essential conditions of self-development man cannot be himself at his best.

V CONCLUSION

There is some controversy as to the place of Harold J. Laski in political thought and its contribution to it. Herbert Deane holds that Laski was not a profound political philosopher; he was mainly a political thinker and a writer on the leading political concepts like those of sovereignty, liberty, rights, equality, democracy and the nature of state authority. He did not give us any consistent political philosophy as he kept his ideas changing from time to time. If he was a pluralist during the years 1914-25, he was a Fabian socialist during 1925-31 and a Marxist during the 1930's. From 1939 till his death in 1950 he was writing sometimes for fascism, sometimes for communism and sometimes for liberalism. On the other hand, there are critics like Kingsley Martin who regard Laski as the greatest thinker of the living age. He has been hailed by Kingsley Martin as a progressive intellectual, pragmatic philosopher and a great democrat.

It may not be denied that Laski admitted some fundamental principles of political philosophy. He admitted that the individual is the end of the state. He put great faith in the individual. He was always in search of a solution which could reconcile the individual liberty with state authority. He was not concerned with abstract principles of political philosophy but with practical solutions of the economic and political problems. He asserted that

human nature is dynamic and evolutionary. He regarded the state as a means to offer opportunities for the creative expression of the diverse impulses of man. He felt that each man must be encouraged to realize his personality. He was opposed to the state's idealism.

Laski's undogmatic approach and sincerity to the individual welfare made him popular both among the common men and the intellectuals. He looked at problems from close quarters and presented a well argued thesis on individual liberty. He followed a middle path between the empty individualism of Adam Smith, Ricardo, Bentham and Mill and the pseudo-Hegelianism of thinkers like Green and Bosanquet. The age in which Laski lived was an age of question and criticism. He asked his people to judge things on the basis of their usefulness in social life. He was thus an intellectual leader of a great number of people in England and exerted great influence in shaping the various policies of the country. If he did not stick to one political idea it was due to his realization that no static idea can serve the need of every age and every society. In the end it may be said that whereas the other thinkers failed in adjusting the claims of the individual to those of the state being too much academician, Laski, on the other hand, succeeded with his factual and realistic approach to the political problems.

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