

BOOK REVIEWS

LASKI ON AMERICAN DEMOCRACY

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American culture, especially in its political aspects, has always attracted foreign observers. This was true long before we had won our unquestioned supremacy in the modern world of finance, and, under the impact of American capitalist-political dominance, that interest has been greatly intensified. Harold Laski, a British scholar, and surely no stranger in America, now joins the ever-lengthening list of foreign commentators with his flooding literary torrent, *The American Democracy*.¹

The author's uncanny genius is famous among his American friends. It is said that he can, on a single reading, quote verbatim long afterward an entire page or more from books and articles, that he confidently relies on memory for volume and page references to his source material, making the packs of index cards, so essential for the average scholar, for him a useless encumbrance. A friend tells of the terrific speed with which Laski dashes off articles and books. He had dined with Laski one evening and at nine o'clock his host excused himself, saying that he must prepare an article for *The New Republic*. An hour later he appeared and handed his guest a sealed envelope containing the finished manuscript with the request that he post it on his way home.

This book comes pretty close to being the result of Laski's life work. In wordage it has the epic proportions of a *magnum opus*. Certain reviewers rate it as Laski's "big book";² others are less certain.³ Only time can determine its true stature and usefulness, its significance for our future.

The book has been in specific contemplation only since 1937, but materials have been accumulating since 1916 when the author joined the Harvard faculty. "I realized," Laski says of this initial American engagement, "that, as a European, I had entered upon an experience wholly different in character from anything I had known."⁴ During more or less prolonged periods throughout the intervening years, he has been in America as visitor, lecturer, and teacher at various institutions, including (besides Harvard) Yale, the University of Chicago, and the University of Washington. Laski settled down among us, made innumerable friends, and got the "feel" of American life in different sections of the country. When he was not on American soil, close friends, such as Felix Frankfurter, kept him abreast of our affairs. Certainly no other foreign commentator has had such opportunities to study the vast subject of which he writes, not even de Tocqueville or Bryce—the immortals with whom Mr. Laski's publishers firmly place their author.

Their confidence in rating Laski's volume with the French aristocrat's classic, *Democracy in America* (1838) and Bryce's "great work," *The American Commonwealth* (1888)

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¹ *THE AMERICAN DEMOCRACY: A COMMENTARY AND AN INTERPRETATION*. By Harold J. Laski. New York: Viking Press, Inc., 1948. Pp. x, 785. \$6.50.

² Miller, Book Review, 166 *THE NATION* 689 (1948).

³ Commager, Books, N. Y. Herald Tribune, June 6, 1948, p. 1, and Schlesinger, Book Review Section, N. Y. Times, June 6, 1948, §7, p. 1.

⁴ P. ix.

challenges our inquiry. There are in fact points of similarity as well as of difference. All three books are works of great mass and sweep, touching nearly every aspect of our culture. All three are by writers of acknowledged learning and established repute. Here, however, similarity seems to end.

De Tocqueville brought to his work a philosophic cast of mind coupled with rare discernment and a polished literary style. As an aristocrat he naturally entertained certain social predilections, haunting doubts about democracy, though he seldom let them show through. The Frenchman came to America wanting to know profoundly about democracy, to probe its character, appraise its standing, and evaluate its future, not only in America but in the world. "I confess that in America," he wrote, "I saw more than America; I sought there the image of democracy itself, with its inclinations, its character, its prejudices and its passions, in order to learn what we have to fear or to hope from its progress."⁵

De Tocqueville, like Laski, had the advantage of writing during a period of swift transition: the former in the heyday of Jacksonian democracy, the latter as Roosevelt's New Deal was at its peak. To study a society during such surging times is an advantage because then a people's character and institutions reflect their most vivid hues, and reveal their most striking qualities. De Tocqueville's work gained in full measure from this, while a similar fortuitous circumstance in the case of Laski seems to have been less rewarding. In the 1830's de Tocqueville saw America, like France, truly in the throes of revolution. This may explain why he successfully portrayed our political tradition in all its manifold complexity. Laski prefers to minimize the changes that took place in our 1930's, considering as he does that what happened under Franklin D. Roosevelt was "in no sense a revolution."⁶ Yet here, as elsewhere, he unites richly detailed knowledge and acute observation with dogged adherence to the deterministic theory of history.

De Tocqueville saw America embarked on political experimentation attended by risk of failure but with a reasonably good chance of success. Danger had to be faced from all sides. He cited the mob passion for mere change, on the one hand, and, on the other, the stubborn refusal of privilege "to move altogether for fear of being moved too far."⁷ For him both attitudes were destructive of any orderly progress. De Tocqueville was certain that America would have to reckon with blind change as well as with blind opposition to change. But what impressed him most was our equalitarian drive for "the progressive elimination of privilege and inequality"—"the great gravitational principle of the future," he called it. On the basis of his findings over here, de Tocqueville concluded that democracy was neither "a brilliant and easily realized dream," nor was it to be identified with "destruction, anarchy, spoliation and murder."

"I have attempted to show," he writes, "that the government of a democracy may be reconciled with respect for property, with deference for rights, with safety for freedom, with reverence for religion. . . ."

Mr. Laski's pages are decidedly less reassuring. America, he holds, is now faced with hard and narrow alternatives. We must either voluntarily democratize industry, destroy capitalist dominance, or be faced with a mass protest that can be neither appeased nor suppressed. Laski views our "historic American tradition, for all its great achievements" with "uncertainty and even suspicion." "Americans have refused to ask themselves," he suggests, "whether the historic principles of their tradition can be adapted to the environment of a new time. . . . And, to the outsider, that refusal to inquire was something it was

⁵ I ALEXIS DE TOCQUEVILLE, *DEMOCRACY IN AMERICA* 14 (3d ed. 1946).

⁶ P. 177.

⁷ GEORGE WILSON PIERSON, *TOCQUEVILLE AND BEAUMONT IN AMERICA* 746 (1939).

hard not to connect with the character of the answers they were suspicious they might receive. For they were deeply aware not only of the increasing tensions of our society; even more, they were aware that when, in a period of crisis, increasing tensions demand new formulas, we must move from one set of social ideals to another set, and adapt to the claims of these the form of economic and political organization which is proving obsolete, and even dangerous."⁸

And later on Laski says: ". . . it is hardly possible, on the evidence, not to feel that the impersonal forces of the world are shaping American destiny in a democratic direction which no party can deny and yet survive. Here is the real promise of American life"⁹—*i.e.*, in vital response to world forces.

The Scottish Bryce lacked the philosophic bent as well as the literary facility of both de Tocqueville and Laski. A profound student of comparative political institutions, Bryce necessarily employed a descriptive and analytical method. He thought of his task as that of exposition rather than interpretation or judgment. Bryce wanted to know what kind of government the English had developed in America. A man of affairs and statecraft as well as an accomplished observer, he gave significance to American institutions by placing them in their comparative setting. The result is a book which Woodrow Wilson lauded, in his famous review of March, 1889, as "exact," "passionless," "discriminating and scientific."¹⁰

Bryce, even more than de Tocqueville, shies away from prophecy. In words that contrast strikingly with Laski's almost categorical certainty of what the future holds, Bryce cautiously observes: "No one doubts that fifty years hence [America] will differ at least as much from what it is now as it differs now from the America which Tocqueville described."¹¹

One sees in Laski's book something of the comparative approach that so plainly marks *The American Commonwealth*. But whereas Bryce was wont to set specific American habits and institutions off against those of his own countrymen, Laski has before him the "massive" figure of Karl Marx. "The simple fact is," Laski observes in an aside, "that the American educational system reflects the character of the economic system within which it functions. . . . One could no more expect a capitalist society to permit its teachers generally to undermine the foundations of private property than one could expect the schools and universities of the Soviet Union to admit teachers whose energies are devoted to expounding the fallacies of Marxism. . . ."¹²

⁸ P. 38.

⁹ P. 82.

¹⁰ 4 POL. SCI. Q. 153, 159 (1889).

¹¹ II JAMES BRYCE, *THE AMERICAN COMMONWEALTH* 902 (rev. ed. 1911).

¹² Pp. 22-23. As I write word comes that Mrs. Oksana S. Kasenkina, a Russian teacher, faced with the prospect of being returned to her native land, risked her life by jumping from a third-story window of the Russian Consulate in New York. For her, apparently, this was a preferable alternative.

About the same time one of the best known Russian geneticists, Professor Anton R. Zhebrak, publicly renounced through a letter to *Pravda* the "heresies" he formerly held in common with the bulk of the world's scientists. Professor Zhebrak concedes that his opponent, Professor T. D. Lysenko, is right in contending that environment rather than the gene determines the characteristics of plants. In Russia the theories of Mendel, Morgan, and others must be discarded as but part of a "bourgeois fraud" by which a dying capitalist society seeks vainly to keep itself alive. See N. Y. Times, Aug. 25, 1948, §1, p. 1, col. 6. Laski's comparison, though obviously extreme, is not entirely groundless. Witness the banning of the liberal magazine, *The Nation*, July, 1948, from the New York public school system, the notorious case of Dr. Edward U. Condon, and so on. Nor does authoritarianism always take a political form. John H. Vincent, in a letter to *The New York Times* commenting on Professor Zhebrak's announcement, points out that though American scientists may be relatively free from political dogma, they are subjected to illiberal scientific dogma. He writes, in part: "Let it be rumored that an instructor has Lamarckian leanings, and his prospects of professorship approach those of his becoming President of the United States. He will not be sent to Alaska, but he may soon find himself running a filling station." N. Y. Times, Aug. 27, 1948, §1, p. 18, col. 7.

Students of politics are well aware that liberty is never so complete (even in America) as not, on occasion, to be subjected to the arbitrary control of government or of organized groups or of mass preferences and prejudices. Nor is authority ever so complete (even in Soviet Russia) as to allow no individual freedom whatsoever. Nevertheless, Laski's rather easy equating of such academic freedom as we more or less have in America with the arbitrary political control generally exercised over individuals by the Soviet police state scarcely warrants the encomiums Wilson bestowed on Bryce's work as "thorough," "exact," "passionless."¹³

In spite of certain rather obvious predilections, Laski, being active in both academic and practical affairs in his own country, and occasionally enjoying the advantage of an insider in American politics, does give his book that "air of practical sense" which pervades Bryce's pages. Yet an important difference should be noted. Bryce's coolly factual exposition, though illuminated throughout by acute observation and suggestion, is almost completely devoid of any unifying theme or working hypothesis. Laski's materials, in sharp contrast with both de Tocqueville and Bryce, converge into a passionate, dynamic thesis. It appears, at times, almost as if Laski had settled on his conclusions at the outset and then selected from books, monographs, conversations, and his own observation the evidence necessary to sustain these conclusions. This, more than anything else, is what distinguishes his volume from the works of both de Tocqueville and Bryce. Nor is it unexpected.

Laski's political point of view, his way of handling public issues, his specific interpretation of institutions—all are well known. *The American Democracy* had to be, as the publishers say, "an examination of America from a socialist, non-communist point of view." One can only regret that the standpoint is so insufficiently integrated. The book manifests a split personality, combining the precision of the scholar with the sweeping generalization of the pamphleteer. The chapter on Minority Problems apart, this tends to be true whether the topic discussed is education, business enterprise, religion, or foreign affairs. Consider his treatment of education: Few Americans (not even Jacques Barzun in his notable *Teacher in America* (1945)) have exposed more clearly the plethora of university administration, its want of any unifying policy, its wasteful stress on devices, its blindness to the vital role of the teacher. But certain academicians may be inclined to question such statements as this: "There have been few colleges which did not assume that the character of their training should be ultimately controlled by the successful businessman."¹⁴

Members of the academic community know, or think they know, that the really influential teachers are not those who day in and day out hymn hosannas to Free Enterprise, but rather those on whom Laski himself draws, scholars who have freely queried the sanctity of "the American way," men who know that "if we are to guide by the light of reason we must let our minds be bold." Academicians and others may be able to cite quite a number of institutions where such teachers are not muzzled by wealthy industrialist-banker trustees, as Laski would seem to imply. But these academic oases should not close our eyes to obsequious hints such as those in the bronze plaque in Kirby Hall at Lafayette College, which has proclaimed for over twenty years:

This Hall of Civil Rights is the gift of Fred Morgan Kirby to provide facilities for instruction in the Anglo-Saxon ideals of the true principles of constitutional freedom including the right of a man to own property and do with it as he will. . . .

Laski's basic principle is set forth at the very beginning in two interchangeably

¹³ See note 10 *supra*.

¹⁴ P. 13.

repetitious chapters. The Marxian truism, quoted more than once, that "the ruling ideas of an age are the ideas of the ruling class" gives the theme of the book. America's ruling class is, of course, the businessmen. "There has never, as yet, been a time," Laski tells us, "when the character of the American state power has been shaped by philosophy which the owning class has not been able to define."¹⁵ The philosophy of American business not only determines the ideological context within which the teacher must operate, but also supplies "an ideal to which [the churches] have lent the immense prestige they possess."¹⁶ The businessman's interests and ideas, Laski insists, are about equally controlling in radio, cinema, and in shaping the course of our foreign policy. And so runs the Marxist refrain through long, richly rewarding chapters, full of detail, keen analysis, and biting epigram.

The severity of Laski's indictment of the "owning class" for our failure to fulfill the hopes implicit in the Declaration of Independence rests, in part, on his unwarranted assumption that our tradition was initially democratic. Except under the temporary political enthusiasms generated by the impending revolutionary struggle against Britain, our tradition has never been wholly democratic. Certain "defects" in the institutions born of democratic fervor after 1776, especially the state constitutions and the Articles of Confederation, were explained in terms of "unexperience" by men holding views as widely divergent as those of Jefferson and Hamilton. Within a few years after the breaking off from the mother country Jefferson disparaged the "unexperience in the science of government" which he saw reflected in the first constitution of Virginia. About the same time (1782) Hamilton spoke of the "very vague and confined notions of the practical business of government" with which the colonists had begun the Revolution. Hamilton reverted to the same theme in *The Federalist*, Number 26, saying that "it was hardly to be expected that in a popular revolution the minds of men should stop at that happy mean which marks the salutary boundary between *Power* and *Privilege*, and combines the energy of government with the security of private rights."¹⁷ "The science of politics," Hamilton had said in *The Federalist*, Number 9, "like most other sciences, has received great improvements."¹⁸ Madison likewise believed that new political discoveries made it possible, as he put it in *The Federalist*, Number 10, "to secure the public good and private rights and at the same time preserve the spirit and form of popular government."¹⁹

The advances Hamilton *et al.* had in mind took the form of constitutional axioms and devices whereby popular power, so unequivocally sanctioned in the Declaration of Independence, could be harnessed, checked, and divided to the end that encroachments on individual liberty and, above all, on the rights of property might be prevented. Indeed, if there was any point on which the Founding Fathers were agreed it was that stated by Elbridge Gerry on the floor of the Philadelphia Convention: "The evils we experience flow from the excess of democracy."²⁰

"Democracy," Charles A. Beard wrote in 1943, "still carried such a dangerous or dubious flavor that it was not used at all in the Declaration of Independence, or in any of the great state papers of the Revolution or in any of the first state constitutions. It did not appear in the Constitution of the United States."²¹ Beard goes so far as to say

¹⁵ P. 51.

¹⁶ P. 322.

¹⁷ *THE FEDERALIST*, No. 26 at 163 (Hentose ed. 1945).

¹⁸ *Id.*, No. 9 at 49.

¹⁹ *Id.*, No. 10 at 58.

²⁰ I MAX FARRAND (Ed.), *RECORDS OF THE FEDERAL CONVENTION OF 1787* 48 (1927). Edmund Randolph, William Livingston, and Roger Sherman, among others, expressed the same views.

²¹ CHARLES A. BEARD, *THE REPUBLIC* 30 (1944).

that democracy was not appropriate as describing the dominant characteristic, name, or symbol of our political and social faith until Woodrow Wilson and World War I. But despite such repugnance or scant recognition, Beard concedes that "the actual law of the land has been moving in the democratic direction."²²

With his customary brilliance, Laski does full justice to the powerful role played by property in the drama of our culture. He does less than justice, I think, to the effective idealism persistent in our various reformist movements and given timeless expression in the Declaration of Independence.²³ He accords insufficient attention to the substantial achievements of the peculiarly American passion that caught de Tocqueville's discerning eye—our inexhaustible urge for equality. Laski is impressed, and rightly so, by the fact that this revolutionary principle based on human rights and the popular power flowing therefrom has been constantly confronted by the counter-revolutionary principle based on rights of property.²⁴ He is almost fatally discouraged as he observes how our persistent effort to consolidate and extend the gains implicit in the American revolution has been stubbornly challenged, frustrated, and, on occasion, defeated. He may do his readers a disservice in obscuring the more vital fact noted by Beard—that vested interests, by and large, have fought a losing battle, that we have been, and are now, moving in the democratic direction. Progress has been slow but steady.

Though the Founding Fathers feared democracy and despised the mob, they did not dare repulse every democratic aspiration. In all great American debates where the issue of human rights versus property rights has been squarely posed, the claims of democracy, of human rights, have been upheld by able champions. When Hamilton and Madison advocated, in the Philadelphia Convention of 1787, separate and independent representation for property and constitutional devices to hamper popular power, George Mason, while admitting that "we had been too democratic," called an abrupt halt lest we "incautiously run into the opposite extreme." "Notwithstanding the oppression and injustice experienced among us from democracy," Mason warned, "the genius of the people is in favor of it, and the genius of the people must be consulted."²⁵ The result was that every proposal for fixing property as a basis of voting or office holding was defeated and this whole troublesome business left to the states to be dealt with as they saw fit. Here certainly was a time when American national power was shaped by a philosophy which the owning class was *not* able to define. Property qualifications of all sorts were voted down not because the "owning class" did not favor such expedients but "because they saw no prospect of getting them accepted."²⁶

A generation later various state conventions were called to level constitutional barriers which the early state constitutions had thrown around property as safeguards against popular power. As in the Federal Convention, existing constitutional barricades were strongly defended and justified by some of the ablest men in the country, including Chancellor James Kent in New York, Abel Upshur and John Randolph in Virginia, and Daniel Webster in Massachusetts. But their efforts were unavailing against the argu-

²² *Id.* at 34.

²³ The Englishman, J. B. Priestly, provides a corrective to Laski's failure to give due weight to this endemic revolutionary strain in American culture. "An American," Priestly writes in the January, 1949, number of *Coronet*, "is brought up with the high burning phrases of great revolutionaries, themselves starry-eyed, forever ringing in his ears. To forget them, to act against their hope and faith in men, is to take an axe to his own roots. . . . There is in the American mind, just because it is an American mind, an idealism that cannot be quenched, a small voice of conscience that all the hokum in the world cannot drown."

²⁴ See p. 10.

²⁵ FARRAND, *op. cit.* *supra* note 20, at 101.

²⁶ See EDWARD S. CORWIN, *THE TWILIGHT OF THE SUPREME COURT* 52 (1934).

ments of men less eminent, but more persuasive. "The tendency of universal suffrage," Kent had argued, "is to jeopardize the rights of property and the principles of liberty."²⁷ In a telling argument an obscure Mr. Cramer retorted: "Men . . . in defense of their liberties, and to protect the property of this country, have hazarded their lives. They could, without apprehension, be permitted to handle their muskets, bayonets, powder and balls; but, say the gentlemen (Kent) it will not be safe to trust them with tickets at the ballot boxes."²⁸ Cramer's argument won; universal manhood suffrage was soon achieved. Again the character of state power was shaped by a philosophy which the "owning class" was "not . . . able to define." Privilege found other and more subtle ways, it is true, of safeguarding its interests, but unconquerable idealism has continued to battle and to advance, despite the most stubborn resistance of privilege.

The victory has not been fully achieved by any means, but our idealism, our faith in the power of reason to get a hearing and thus shape human destiny, remains undiminished.²⁹ It was this clear vision of the good life to be won according to blueprints fashioned by reason (not by "large and impersonal forces") that imparted so much unconquerable voltage to Roosevelt's New Deal. Electoral acceptance of Roosevelt's reform program in 1932, in 1936, in 1940, and finally in 1944 embodied and empowered changes of extraordinary significance as to the theory of the relation of government to the maintenance of our system of private profit and free enterprise. New Deal successes are revolutionary not in undermining or destroying this system, but as marking a break with the longest and deepest line in that aspect of the American tradition which Mr. Laski so heavily underscores—"rugged individualism"—the tradition which looked upon the government with "doubt and suspicion,"³⁰ the dogma that identifies individualism with *laissez faire* and considers liberty as possible only in a society relatively free from state regulation and control. Against all this is the New Deal doctrine that under the complexities of industrialism, of highly organized group interests and sterile, self-defeating conflicts, liberty is possible only if government, and not industrial management or ownership, is the dominant though not the absolute power. New Dealers recognized that under conditions so vastly changed since 1850, our government could no longer be confined to narrow bounds of "defense and order,"³¹ that freedom is the great aim of the state—freedom to be won by the positive acts of government. Mr. Laski himself suggests a certain measure of the changes thus wrought when he concedes that "Roosevelt's policies

²⁷ REPORTS OF THE PROCEEDINGS AND DEBATES OF THE CONVENTION OF 1821, ASSEMBLED FOR THE PURPOSE OF AMENDING THE CONSTITUTION OF THE STATE OF NEW YORK 221 (1821).

²⁸ *Id.* at 239.

²⁹ The following from William Allen White's autobiography illustrates the spirit that has pervaded our history:

"Looking back now more than thirty years, I can shut my eyes and see that Bull Moose convention of 1912, see their eager faces—more than a thousand of them—upturned, smiling hopefully, with joy beaming out that came from hearts which believed in what they were doing; its importance, its righteousness.

"It seemed to matter so very much, that convention of zealots, cleansed of self-interest and purged of cynicism. I never have seen before or since exactly that kind of a crowd. I impressed it on my memory because I felt as they felt—those upturned, happy faces.

"And now they are dust, and all the visions they saw that day have dissolved. Their hopes, like shifting clouds, have blown away before the winds of circumstance. And I wonder if it did matter much. Or is there somewhere, in the stuff that holds humanity together, some force, some conservation of spiritual energy, that saves the core of every noble hope, and gathers all men's visions some day, some way, into the reality of progress?

"I do not know. But I have seen the world move, under some, maybe mystic, influence, far enough to have the right to ask that question." THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF WILLIAM ALLEN WHITE 627 (1946).

³⁰ P. 7.

³¹ *Ibid.*

gave a direction to the economic life of America from which it will be very difficult for his opponents to go back."³² The 1948 presidential election seems to bear this out.

It is hard to discover precisely what the 1930's mean to Mr. Laski. On page 36, he tells us that under F.D.R. "property was everywhere on the defensive." On page 81, he recognizes that "President Franklin Roosevelt brought into being the positive federal state." Of the period after 1933, he writes: "The era of the positive state had arrived in America as decisively as in Europe; and with the arrival of the positive state there was no room for negativism in the White House any more than in Downing Street or in the Kremlin."³³ For a culture so completely under the dominance of businessmen as Laski repeatedly says it is, for a tradition in essence individualistic, always tending, as he correctly observes, to look upon the state as at best a necessary evil, Roosevelt's achievements appear, on the author's own showing, hardly short of revolutionary.

Nor do I think it quite fair to say, as does Mr. Laski, that President Roosevelt was "driven on by large and impersonal forces which he rarely stayed to examine."³⁴ Mr. Roosevelt, beginning with his famous campaign speech at the Commonwealth Club, September 23, 1932, stated emphatically and repeatedly the far-reaching significance of the policies he then advocated and later, when in office, got enacted into law. On January 11, 1944, he formulated a new Bill of Economic Rights. These new goals he knew would have to be realized not by "large and impersonal forces" but by considered acts of government. He saw all along what Mr. Laski's book makes so clear—that our so-called free enterprise suffers chiefly from self-inflicted wounds, that the most serious inroads on the integrity of our economic system have been made by overweening economic power, and that government would have to safeguard society against such power.³⁵

Mr. Laski is able, as we have seen, to think of the transformation that took place under President Roosevelt's leadership as "in no sense a revolution," but his opponents never could do so. They saw government control of their power cartels as "overthrowing the very fundamentals of our country's tradition." One measure of the changes Roosevelt wrought is the extraordinary lengths to which the opposition went then and is now prepared to go in order to block the regulatory power of government. It is all too evident now that to forestall any repetition of New Dealism, economic privilege will strike at the jugular vein of popular government, *i.e.*, at freedom of thought and speech. "I do not believe," Robert S. Lynd writes in a recent article, "that business intends to allow another New Deal, with its free-wheeling populism, to happen."³⁶ Industrial management now seeks, Lynd says, to infiltrate opinion-making bodies—schools, churches, women's clubs, etc.—at the grass roots. Any future New Dealism might conceivably be nipped in the bud by controlling the very processes of democracy through such enactments as the Mundt-Nixon bill. This measure is only one sign among many pointing us toward the hard alternative Laski so fatalistically foresees—"to fulfill the democratic ideal or . . . wholly to deny it."³⁷

Mr. Laski's book does the reader its greatest service in confronting him sharply with the question whether a political system characterized, as ours is, by ambiguity, by balance and tension between public power and private rights, can survive in the present world. It has been possible previously, Laski suggests, to maintain the always perilous, always lopsided balance Madison envisaged, because Americans generally, regardless of status, believed

³² P. 182.

³³ P. 77.

³⁴ P. 81.

³⁵ See especially F. D. R.'s campaign speech, Oct. 14, 1936, when he argued that "It was this administration which saved the system of private profit and free enterprise." V THE PUBLIC PAPERS AND ADDRESSES OF FRANKLIN D. ROOSEVELT 480 (1938).

³⁶ Lynd, *Can Liberalism Do It?* New Century, May, 1948, pp. 5-7.

³⁷ P. 82.

so tenaciously that this system was basic to their freedom. This is no longer true, Laski thinks, because Americans in ever-growing numbers know that the balance has in fact been broken; that the much vaunted free-enterprise system, since about 1870, has been in process of destruction by concentrated economic power. And so the prospect Americans could formerly entertain of becoming independent in their own shop or trade, or on their own land, has dimmed. From now on protection of so-called free enterprise from "radicals" is not, Laski contends, likely to impress the average American as urgent or essential to his freedom. The conclusion is that the American political tradition, once unique, cannot remain so, not only because of impersonal forces at work within our own community but also because of cosmic economic and social factors beyond our borders. ". . . the peculiar complex of qualities we call Americanism," Laski observes, "is now subject to much the same forces as the peculiar complex we call European."³⁸

Laski, in short, maintains that traditional Americanism is outmoded. If the United States of America is to fulfill the democratic hopes expressed in the Declaration of Independence, the paralyzing grip of economic power must be completely broken. "Americanism must come to mean the same thing for the sharecropper of Arkansas as for the stockbroker on Park Avenue in New York City, for the steel worker in Pittsburgh as for the corporation lawyer in Wall Street . . ."³⁹ This would be a revolution!

It will not be easy, Laski admits. Lenin, he reminds us, was able to cut "the Gordian knot of passionate disagreement upon first principles by embarking upon a violent revolution . . ."⁴⁰ The task in America will be greater, Laski thinks, because (among other reasons) the bourgeoisie has a firmer hold and much more at stake. But the effort must be made, because "any interventionism [government] which seeks to maintain at once private ownership in the means of production, adequate living conditions for the masses, the power to make profit in national and international competition, and to use the State power as a neutral authority standing, without bias, between contending parties in the intricate, often antagonistic, complex of relationships in the modern community, is doomed to fail."⁴¹

Does the course of history dictate any such inevitable fate? Machiavelli says, "Fate is inevitable only if not resisted." To declare that America must go one way or else, one must read into our tradition, as Laski does, the deterministic monism of Karl Marx. One must minimize the fact, as Laski sometimes does, that our politics, for better or worse, is dualistic in foundation and in development. On the economic side, we recognize property as the basis of power and right; on the political side, we make numbers the basis of power and right. Throughout our history these two have been in competition and conflict. Our tradition has sustained class conflicts amounting at times to civil war; but is it likely that class lines will be frozen, as Laski seems to believe, to such a point that overlapping interests completely disappear?⁴² Does the fine fruit of our tradition consist, as Mr. Laski seems to think, in unrestrained dominance of the political over the economic, in substitution of the dominance of labor for the dominance of capital? Is the effort

³⁸ P. 756.

³⁹ P. 760.

⁴⁰ P. 760-761.

⁴² P. 754-755.

⁴² "The argument, drawn from history," John Dewey observes, "that great social changes have been effected only by violent means, needs considerable qualification, in view of the vast scope of changes that are taking place without the use of violence. But even if it be admitted to hold of the past, the conclusion that violence is the method now to be depended upon does not follow—unless one is committed to a dogmatic philosophy of history. The radical who insists that the future method of change must be like that of the past has much in common with the hide-bound reactionary who holds to the past as an ultimate fact. Both overlook the fact that *history in being a process of change generates change not only in details but also in the method of directing social change.*" JOHN DEWEY, *LIBERALISM AND SOCIAL ACTION* 82-83 (1935).

to hold level tension between the two, and to maintain a continually balanced relationship between the various interests within society, inevitably doomed to failure? At one point Laski himself seems to lean toward a negative answer:

Americanism is multiform, and it is also, at its very roots, nonconformist. No one can fully shape it the way he wants it to go—no president and no millionaire, no labour leader and no intellectual; and it is not even shaped by all the objective consequences of its mass production system. Something is always escaping to be itself; something is always emerging to protest that things must be done another way; there is always an ardent clash between traditionalist and reformer which makes the consequential Americanism different from what either of them dared both to hope and to fear.⁴³

Laski has similar insights elsewhere, only to lapse now and again into the attitude which Edmund Burke attributed to the French revolutionists: "Liberty is always to be estimated as perfect as property is rendered insecure."⁴⁴

Laski writes in the iconoclastic literary tradition of J. Allen Smith, Vernon A. Partridge, and Charles A. Beard (unrevised) without giving the reader the sense of adventure and discovery that made these writers exciting in their day. To regrind the academic grist of a generation or more ago is not calculated to yield a wholly satisfactory analysis of the living present. The reader's confidence is further shaken by slips of memory, as on page 78 where Burton K. Wheeler, Progressive Party candidate for vice-president of the United States with Robert M. LaFollette in 1924, is referred to as "Democratic candidate for the Vice-Presidency"; by confusion of sources, as on page 252, where the seasoned words of Charles Francis Adams, Jr., written in 1871, are erroneously credited to twenty-three-year-old Brooks Adams. Laski then ties it all up neatly with what Brooks Adams really wrote "thirty years later," actually in 1913.

The American Democracy suffers from the author's truly extraordinary gifts—his unusual memory, his great literary talent. One ventures to suggest that in this instance if Laski had spent less time in writing and more in cutting and revising, the volume would have exhibited in greater degree the sort of close reasoning which readers of his earlier works expect.

In a book so eminently worth while, one hesitates to elaborate stylistic defects—unconscionable wordage, tiresome repetition of pet ideas, illustrations, literary allusions, and phrases—all faintly reminiscent of an old phonograph record monotonously spinning along its grooves. (Among others, Mr. Laski seems over-addicted to the word "massive.")

Without being a great work, in a class with de Tocqueville or Bryce, Laski's commentary is, nevertheless, a sociological document no student of American politics can afford to ignore. His alert eye and inquiring mind have scanned our banalities, our foibles, our idiosyncrasies and defects, as well as our more seemly qualities and enduring achievements. What is more, scattered through the book are passages in which he puts what he sees in matchless prose. As a friendly, devastating critic, Laski surpasses G. Lowes Dickinson at his best. His analysis of certain American personalities, such as Henry Luce and H. L. Mencken, is at times merciless, the more so because it so often squarely hits the mark. Can anyone, after reading what Laski writes about, say, *Time* magazine or the *Reader's Digest*, allow himself to be caught with either of these fabulously popular periodicals in hand without a sense of apology, of shame?

In his earlier writings our author noted the unsettling effect of the French revolution

⁴³ P. 719.

⁴⁴ EDMUND BURKE, REFLECTIONS ON THE FRENCH REVOLUTION 43 (Maynard's English Classic Series, Nos. 160-161).

on Edmund Burke. Have the Russian upheavals since 1917 wrought similar havoc in Harold Laski? Burke's brooding fears of the cosmic force of events in France after 1790 blunted his shrewd sense of history, impaired his customary mastery of facts, moving him to pour out irresponsible rhetoric in his *Reflections on the French Revolution*. Burke's passionate concern to preserve monarchy, church, and nobility against change drove him, as Thomas Paine once remarked, "to pity the plumage and forget the dying bird," permitting him to pass over the well-nigh inexhaustible potentialities of the French revolution in terms of human freedom and social betterment. Likewise, Laski, in revolt against Czarist evils, enamoured of the Soviet Union's "massive" economic and social achievements, appears at times to be carried away by the "equal opportunities for self-advancement" he envisages for the individual in the Soviet state. But are not all such proclamations of equality, etc., appealing as they are in terms of man's spiritual aspirations and economic needs, merely "rhetorical fig-leaves" that cannot hide the naked fact, seen by President Roosevelt, February 10, 1940, that "the Soviet Union is run by a dictatorship as absolute as any other in the world"?⁴⁵ In any event, Laski seems now to have lost something of that breadth of vision, that incisiveness of mind, which earlier gave promise of winning for him a place in political philosophy alongside John Stuart Mill.

This is not, however, to minimize Laski's constructive service as the most penetrating critic of capitalist democracy in our time. It is rather to suggest that his greatest contributions have been made at a more practical, less academic level. *The American Democracy*, like all Laski's writings of more recent years, contains materials of special value for those least likely to pay him heed—the short-sighted businessman, full of power and swagger, obtuse no less to the general interest than to his own. Laski does for the American "man of property" a service equal at least to that rendered by Galsworthy to his English counterpart. This book may not find its main target; but for that, as already suggested, the author himself must share the blame.

⁴⁵ Laski does himself a disservice in this book in not making it perfectly clear that he is under no illusions about the Soviet Union's "democracy," as he has done in the columns of *The Nation* and elsewhere. See especially his articles, *Why Does Russia Act That Way*, 164 *THE NATION* 239 (1947), and *Getting On With Russia*, 166 *THE NATION* 34 (1948).