

HISTORY

**HAROLD LASKI AND
AMERICAN LIBERALISM.**

By Gary Dean Best. Transaction.
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Although his voluminous writings are little read today, Britain's Harold Laski (1893–1950) was one of the most influential public intellectuals of his time. Unlike others to whom he can be compared, such as Raymond Aron in France and Walter Lippmann in the United States, Laski was a major force on both sides of the Atlantic. At home, he became a famous professor at the London School of Economics and the British Labor Party's leading theoretician. In the United States, his books and articles reinforced the conviction, acquired by some American liberals during the Great Depression, that political democracy required "economic democracy," that is, socialism—a view, Gary Dean Best rightly points out, that "fractured the liberal movement" during the New Deal and ended up hurting the cause of progressive reform.

Laski cut a memorable figure. As historian James MacGregor Burns recalls, "With his slight physique, large round spectacles, and small mustache, he seemed almost a caricature of David Low's caricature of the little man." Blessed with a photographic memory and encyclopedic knowledge, Laski gave riveting lectures on the history of political thought and issued a cascade of writings.

Laski also worked tirelessly for the Labor Party. He was party chairman during its stunning electoral victory in 1945, when Winston Churchill was rejected in favor of the colorless Clement Atlee (a modest man, Churchill dryly noted, with much to be modest about). Soon, however, Laski was crushed by the loss of a libel suit he had brought against a newspaper for reporting that he had advocated violent revolution—a charge that was literally untrue but that a jury found might have been inferred from his writings. He soldiered on, but found himself increasingly at odds with the party leadership on its

foreign policy, which he thought too confrontational toward the Soviet Union and a betrayal of the promise to create a Jewish homeland in Palestine.

In this workmanlike exegetical account, Best, a professor emeritus of history at the University of Hawaii at Hilo, traces Laski's evolution from pluralism to Marxism. From 1931 onward, Laski doggedly insisted that capitalism's day was done and that the American working class must create its own labor party to usher in the socialist future. He thought the harsh realities of Soviet socialism would pass, and he minimized critical differences between Europe and America. In 1957, Max Lerner, whom Laski had all but anointed his chief American acolyte, observed wryly that Laski's *The American Democracy* (1948) reminded him of Clifford Odets's play *Waiting for Lefty*: "The stage is set for the hero . . . but he never shows up."

As Best points out, it would be difficult to imagine anyone "more biased in his perception of America than Laski." Best would have done well to try to explain why. Laski, after all, knew better—in *The American Presidency* (1940), he noted that "there was no residuary feudalism" in the United States, and that most American workers of the 19th century "enjoyed conditions far higher than anything the European peasant or industrial worker has ever known." Had he followed up on these insights, Laski might have recognized the grip on the American psyche of what Louis Hartz was to call, in *The Liberal Tradition in America* (1955), "irrational Lockeanism"—the dogged worship of individualism even in times of economic hardship, and the rejection of class-based ideologies as "un-American."

"*De mortuis*," Laski once punned, "*nihil nisi bunkum*." Freely translated: Of the dead speak only baloney. In his own case, alas, history has pronounced a less cosmetic verdict.

—SANFORD LAKOFF