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Introduction to Contemporary Politics

SELECTED LECTURES

by

HAROLD J. LASKI

Given at the University of Washington
Winter Term, 1938-1939

Edited by

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Foreword

Students in the University of Washington during the winter term of 1938-1939 had the opportunity of hearing Mr. Harold J. Laski of the London School of Economics and Political Science deliver a series of lectures. These lectures no doubt constitute a significant moment in the history of the University. They will not be forgotten by those who heard them whether students or faculty; rather a whole generation of students will be able to affirm or reject that body of propositions which constituted the substance of Mr. Laski's addresses. But such propositions bear directly on the larger issues of the contemporary world; we must therefore hope that Mr. Laski has made a contribution to thinking about economic and political issues in this area of the United States.

A selected number of the lectures given at the University of Washington are here reproduced. This volume is intimately a publication for students and not for the general public. It is primarily for those who heard him deliver the lectures, but it is also for those students of the social sciences who might be stimulated by reading them even though they did not hear Mr. Laski. Those who heard the lectures and now read them will be reminded of his forensic power, and of his warm and moving eloquence. Every effort has been made, therefore, to keep the lectures just as they were given in this community. This volume must not be regarded as an official publication by Mr. Laski; on the contrary, it is a contribution of the lecturer to the students and faculty of this University, a memento indeed of his short visit. That Mr. Laski has permitted this publication at all is a token of his affection for us here at the University of Washington.

Several points in explanation of the content of this volume must be mentioned. It is unfortunately true that not all of the lectures were taken down in shorthand while they were being given. For this reason it would not be possible to include all of the class lectures of Political Science 195. Even had they been taken down and were they available, it is doubtful whether it would be possible to reproduce all of them here. It will be recalled that Mr. Laski was entirely generous in giving his time and effort to groups that wanted to hear him. But the main effort of this volume is to reproduce the class lectures, and those given on the campus or off the campus under University auspices.

The reader may be assured, on the other hand, that every essential argument presented by Mr. Laski is included in the present lectures. Some of these arguments or analyses occurred from time to time in his discussions as he spoke before different groups. In the preparation of this volume preference has been given to class lectures,

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and others have been included as they add new points of view or amplify arguments that had not been developed before.

Mr. Laski's interpretations of political and economic problems range from the evaluations of the sober political scientist to those of one of the leaders of the British Labor party. And whatever may be these points they are of interest because of the qualities of Mr. Laski and because of the importance of the problems he attacks. For Mr. Laski is one of the provocative and able political minds of our generation. He is one of the most brilliant and important interpreters of our own times to us. Because of this one discovers himself in reading or in hearing Mr. Laski speak. As a master of English prose and one of the ablest academic speakers of the times, he could not fail to force his hearers to think, and to know their own intellectual apparatus.

A person of almost any political faith will find much with which he can agree in the ideas presented in these lectures; but it is also true that a person of almost any political view will find much with which to disagree. For instance, the Communist and the Republican will dislike certain ideas here presented. The Communist of the Stalinist persuasion will feel that Mr. Laski does not go far enough, while the Republican who stays with the party through thick and thin will feel that the speaker goes too far. And it was so in Seattle for those who actually heard him speak and who did not rely on second-hand or garbled accounts of what was said in his lectures. Those who did not hear him, of course, must find information on Mr. Laski from the numerous books he has written.

Mr. Laski's intellectual history is one of absorbing interest to those who are students of present-day world problems. He has always been a liberal; he has always been for tolerance, and for the desires and demands, as he says, that humble men and women make upon the society in which they live. Unlike many academic men, he has constantly sought to find ways through which his ideals of life in society can be realized. Hence, he has always been profoundly moved by the immediate situation and the question raised by the contemporary problem. In doing this, however, he has never lost sight of the long-run issues which underlie necessarily any current problem.

As a young man Mr. Laski became associated with the British Labor party, but the official program of that party did not exhaust his social theory. At the same time he saw in the developing hypothesis of pluralism a means to make liberalism real. Pluralism, forgotten for the moment in the troubled world in which we live, objected to the monolithic state, and the doctrinal explanation of that state, the conception of sovereignty. Pluralism, it may be argued, was the final chapter in the interpretation of liberalism before it began its present historic retreat. Mr. Laski became one of the most outstanding of the exponents of this view of political life. But the events

of the World War and the post-war period, the disintegration of the nineteenth-century political and economic system, demonstrated that pluralism for the time being at any rate could not be realized in practice. Such a realization forced men like Mr. Laski on to other terrain, and to other intellectual convictions.

The clarification of the situation seems to have come from a development of his earlier economic evaluations, and from a careful philosophical appraisal of what was implied in these judgments. And the sharp development of fascism during the last few years has had the same terrific impact on other liberal men as it has had on Mr. Laski. How can democracy be defended against disintegration? What sort of a practical program can be stated which will enable the better elements of culture to survive? These are the questions that Mr. Laski is asking throughout this series of lectures at the University of Washington. While many may not have agreed entirely with his judgments, none could deny that a powerful and brilliant mind was at work on problems that concern each one of us.

A brief note on Mr. Laski's life should be included in this foreword. He was born in Manchester, England, in 1893. Upon completion of his work at New College, Oxford University, he became a lecturer in McGill University in Canada, remaining in this institution from 1914 to 1916. From 1916 to 1920 he was associated with Harvard University, meanwhile delivering special lectures at Yale during 1919-1920. Since 1920 he has been connected with the London School of Economics and Political Science, and he has held the rank of professor since 1926. During 1931 he was a visiting professor at Yale University; he has also been a lecturer at Magdalene College, Cambridge University, and at numerous other institutions. In addition to his academic work, Mr. Laski has held significant assignments on government committees, and in the field of administration. It hardly needs to be mentioned that he has written a large number of books, and that his reputation as a scholar is world-wide.

Unless otherwise indicated the lectures included in the volume were given before the large upper division class, in which were found students from all of the social sciences and which were attended consistently by many members of the faculty. It is a privilege to edit them and to be able to have a share in offering them to the students of the University. All of us must be appreciative of the fact that Mr. Laski has permitted this volume to appear, to all of us it will be a means of recalling his association with the faculty and students of the University.

The stenographic reports of the lectures were prepared by Miss Claire Holcomb. She was assisted in checking names and places by Miss Harriet Leach and Miss Elizabeth Henry of the Reference Department of the Seattle Public Library. The editor wishes to express his appreciation of the assistance given by the staff of Law

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Library of the University of Washington in checking the cases cited in this volume. Members of the Department of Political Science have also been of assistance where possible. But of necessity the editor must assume responsibility for the errors and misrepresentations of the speaker's thought that Mr. Laski would himself have avoided had he been performing the same task.

Perhaps the greatest appreciation of all should go to Professor Charles E. Martin, Chairman of the Department of Political Science, who, through his friendship and intimate association with Mr. Laski, assured him that he should permit the publication of these lectures.

Seattle, Washington
July 1, 1939.

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