Chapter seven

Laski and Lasswell

A new world

The First World War undermined the empirical basis for two articles of nineteenth-century liberal faith: the utility of *laissez-faire* as a means of advancing peace and prosperity; and the fundamental rationality of humankind. Following the dismemberment of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the defeat of Imperial Germany, Central Europe was in ferment between the wars, a highly unstable mix of nationalities, ideologies and classes. One consequence was a migration of European intellectuals across the English Channel and the Atlantic Ocean. New ideas came with them, including the work of Sigmund Freud. He offered a new and powerful model of man to compete with the partly discredited assumption of universal human rationality.

The Russian Revolution of 1917 also had profound consequences. For example, it provided a dramatic example of a rapidly modernising society dominated by public officials. The Soviet case suggested that control by the state might be an alternative to control by big business. The Russian Revolution did for Karl Marx what the French Revolution had done for Tom Paine and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. It gave his ideas the immense prestige of being associated with the overthrow of an old order and the creation of a new one.

Nineteen seventeen changed the context of the debate on capitalist democracy. The nineteenth century had been dominated by the American experiment. Exponents of a European liberal tradition fashioned in societies where aristocratic influence, though declining, remained powerful, had anxiously looked on as Andrew Carnegie's world took shape. By contrast, the twentieth century was to be dominated by the Russian experiment. Increasingly, big business in the United States took up the role of anxious spectator. It hoped for the disintegration of the Soviet Union as ardently as the British aristocracy had cheered on the seceding South during the American Civil War.

The two men whose writings are examined in this chapter had to

come to terms with a very different world from the one in which Bryce, Veblen and Hobson had grown to maturity. Their distinctive approaches to capitalist democracy were developed during the 1920s and 1930s at a time when the United States and Britain were both 'in between'. Despite its international decline, the patina of aristocratic grandeur and the trappings of imperial power still clung to British society. In spite of its tremendous economic capacity and potential, America had not yet taken up a global role.

The politics of experience

Harold Laski and Harold Lasswell were born in 1893 and 1902 respectively. They both had strong links with Anglo-American liberalism of the pre-war period. Lasswell's teacher at Chicago, the political scientist Charles E. Merriam, had been a great admirer of James Bryce (Karl 1974: 36, 40). At Oxford, Laski was taught history by H.A.L. Fisher and constitutional law by A.V. Dicey, respectively Bryce's biographer and one of his closest friends.

Laski taught at Harvard University between 1916 and 1920. His American friends included Oliver Wendell Holmes of the US Supreme Court. Another was the journalist Walter Lippman, a past pupil of Graham Wallas, Laski's predecessor as Professor of Political Science at the London School of Economics and Political Science. Laski took up this post in 1926 upon Wallas's death, and held it until his own death in 1950.

Laski held radical views. He ran into trouble at Harvard in 1919 for some remarks he made which were sympathetic to the Boston policemen, then on strike. He later wrote for the Labour party's newspaper, the *Daily Herald*, and was active in the British general strike of 1926. Laski advised the Labour government of 1929 on various matters, served on the London County Council's education committee, became an alderman on Fulham's borough council and sat on the National Executive Committee of the Labour party. In the victorious year of 1945 he was party chairman.

Lasswell was a graduate student at the University of Chicago in the early 1920s. He was particularly influenced by Robert Park, the sociologist, and Charles E. Merriam, 'the father of the behavioral movement in political science' (Karl 1974: *viii*). Lasswell began his teaching career at Chicago and remained there until 1938 when he moved to Yale as Professor of Law and Political Science. He regarded Laski as

> [an] articulate and devoted teacher . . . . There was no doubt in [his] mind that, unless an intellectual bridge was built between the dogmatisms of conservative capitalism and the collectivizing trends of the age, there would be a catastrophic age of terror and

> revolutionary violence . . . . For a vast congregation of former students Laski personified an informed intelligence and a sympathetic personality attuned to the major issues of his day and concerned with clarifying and affecting history by reaching the minds and consciences of everyone within the sound of his persuasive voice or able to read his unceasing flow of books, articles and declarations. He brought to the forum of learned debate the policy issues of the moment. For him, they were framed in the great tradition of the perpetually oscillating balance between the claims of order and liberty.
>
> (Lasswell 1963: 168–9)

Harold Lasswell's praise was directed at a man who had felt, like himself, that democracy was both incomplete and endangered. Both men rejected theories based upon the supposed preferences and actions of rational individuals and a sovereign state. Their immediate intellectual predecessors had defined the 'task of the hour'. In Lasswell's words, this task was

> the development of a realistic analysis of the political in relation to the social process, and this depends upon the invention of abstract conceptions and upon the prosecution of empirical research. It is precisely this missing body of theory and practice which Graham Wallas undertook to supply in England and which Charles E Merriam has been most foremost in encouraging in the United States.
>
> (Lasswell 1951a: 46)

It is worth pausing, briefly, at the names of Wallas and Merriam. In *Human Nature in Politics* (1948) and *The Great Society* (1914), Graham Wallas produced a psychological interpretation of contemporary politics. He dismissed the assumption that human nature normally exhibited decency and rationality. Ostrogorski's regret at the worldly naughtiness of machine bosses caused Wallas to comment: 'One seems to be reading a series of conscientious observations of the Copernican heavens by a loyal but saddened believer in the Ptolemaic astronomy' (Wallas 1948: 125). James Bryce was likewise committed to an old-fashioned idea of democracy formulated as if 'human nature were as he himself would like it to be, and as he was taught at Oxford to think that it was' (127). Without actually saying it outright, Wallas condemned Bryce, the self-proclaimed 'professional optimist', as unscientific. If Bryce's 'hope-for-the-best' approach to contemporary politics were adopted it would be as if 'an acknowledged leader in chemical research . . ., finding that experiment did not bear out some traditional formula, should speak of himself as nevertheless "grimly resolved" to see things from the old and comfortable point of view' (129).

Charles E. Merriam of Chicago University agreed with Wallas's view

that the non-rational side of human nature should be accepted as a datum and built into the theories of political science. However, 'Wallas found it difficult to put into actual practice the doctrines he preached, and never made much use of the experimental or statistical methods' (Merriam 1925: 73). Merriam contributed to the latter of these tasks by helping to build up a tradition of well-funded political science research in the United States. He was, for example, a powerful figure in the dealings of the national Social Science Research Council and the Local Community Research Committee at Chicago University.

Merriam also got involved in Chicago politics. He campaigned for the position of mayor in 1911 and 1915, arguing for efficiency and planning in local government. On neither occasion was he successful, although he blamed ballot rigging for his defeat in 1911 (Karl 1974: 71). Merriam makes a nice contrast with an earlier figure. If Joseph Chamberlain of Birmingham was a highly effective local politician who did not quite make it as a practitioner of political theory, Charles E. Merriam of Chicago was a very successful academic who failed to establish himself in the real world of politics. Neither made a satisfactory fusion between theory and experience. This last point returns the argument to the main theme.

Laski and Lasswell had both been strongly influenced by the distinctive American philosophy of pragmatism. This approach, developed by John Dewey, William James and C.S. Peirce, laid stress upon the special validity of learning acquired through experience. According to this approach, thought is stimulated when practical activities are frustrated in some way. For the pragmatist, the 'truth' of an idea or concept is best tested by seeing if it 'works' in the sense of solving specific practical problems. From this common beginning, Lasswell and Laski moved in very different directions.

Both were interested in the complex interplay of perception, personality and power. However, while Lasswell focused upon 'the private basis of public acts' (Lasswell 1951a: 7), Laski emphasised the public context of private lives. He sought a way of 'making the State find place for the personalities of ordinary men' (Laski 1980: 15).

Lasswell developed a 'manipulative' political science based upon 'contemplative' analysis of political and psychological aspects of the social order (Lasswell 1951b: 318). He drew heavily upon the work of Freud. Laski set out to provide 'A new political philosophy' for 'a new world' (1980: 15) and drew from it a series of practical proposals for social and political reconstruction. He became increasingly reliant upon a Marxian perspective.

The good life

The intellectual consequences of the break-up of the old central European empires in 1918 have already been mentioned. In fact, the influx of German ideas into the English universities had begun long before the First World War. One major manifestation during the late nineteenth century was the idealism of T.H. Green and, a little later, Bernard Bosanquet. Green drew upon Hegel and Kant to criticise, among others, J S Mill. Breaking with the individualism of the utilitarian approach, Green argued in *Prologomena to Ethics* (1883) that self-realisation is achieved only through relations with others. You transcend your individual consciousness and contribute to a higher morality through participation in the wider consciousness which permeates society and its institutions. In his *Philosophical Theory of the State* (1899) Bosanquet stressed that all human achievement depends upon shared activity which draws people outside themselves. The isolated individual could achieve nothing worthwhile. It was necessary to participate in the encompassing spirit of the group.

By the early twentieth century, many English intellectuals were turning away from idealism. Some, like Laski, retained its sense of moral purpose but adopted a revised epistemology. Others rejected the demand that you should merge the self in something higher and deeply spiritual. Among the latter, G.E. Moore, author of *Principia Ethica*, told his readers that the most valuable things they could know or imagine were 'the pleasures of human intercourse and the enjoyment of beautiful objects' (Moore 1962: 188).

Moore's message was much welcomed among the Cambridge and Bloomsbury sets to which John Maynard Keynes, among others, belonged. They were a powerful antidote to puritan demands that you should make the best of yourself and do your social duty. Whatever the strengths and weaknesses of Moore's philosophical approach, Keynes was later to write that it had the negative effect of protecting his friends and himself from 'the final *reductio ad absurdam* of Benthamism known as Marxism' (quoted in Skidelsky 1983: 143).

Keynes did not stray as far from the world of Bentham and Ricardo as that comment implies. In fact, although he found Say's Law a convenient straw man, Keynes insisted that his own 'general theory' did not dispense with the classical economics of the Manchester School. He advocated a large extension of central state controls over taxation and interest rates, but argued that if such controls succeeded in establishing full employment 'the classical theory comes into its own again from that point onward' (Keynes 1973: 378). The result of increasing the powers and functions of the state would be to preserve an economic system which gave ample scope for individualism, 'the best safeguard of personal liberty' (380).

The grammar of politics

Harold Laski proposed a much more radical reordering of economic and political institutions. In *The Grammar of Politics*, which first appeared in 1925, he joined the revolt against English idealism. He turned Green and Bosanquet on their heads, substituting for their idealism 'a purely realistic theory of the state' (Laski 1980: 29). At its centre was the proposition that the state's purpose was to enable men and women to express their personalities and satisfy their impulses within a shared life. The citizen's capacity to apply reason and sound judgement should be developed to the greatest extent possible. The shared life of society should have the benefit of the most expert advice and the widest range of experience available.

Laski's approach to rights, duties, liberty, equality, property and authority was shaped in accordance with the purpose just stated. The key test was functionality. For example, 'By a functional theory of rights is meant that we are given powers that we may so act as to add to the richness of our social heritage. We have rights, not that we may receive, but that we may do' (40–1). The action required of citizens was that they should fulfil the best in themselves. They should contribute their individual experience and 'instructed judgement to the public good' (29).

Three important conditions were attached to this formulation of citizenship rights and duties. First, individual personality was not to be subsumed within some overriding 'general will'. Differences among people and the variety of their individual experiences were precious resources for the state. In Laski's view, 'since the State is seeking to realise the fruits of social experience, it must clearly act upon the largest interpretation of experience that is open to it. It can neglect no source that, even potentially, has hints and ideas to contribute. That is the real case for democratic government' (36).

Second, it was the responsibility of the state to ensure that 'avenues of creative service' were available to 'any who were willing to utilise them' (41). This responsibility included the task of providing citizens with the means to develop their intellect and powers of judgement. An efficient and open education system was desirable, as was a press which supplied 'an honest and straightforward supply of news' (147).

Third, the obligation upon any citizen to obey the state depended upon that citizen's assessment of the extent to which the state was fulfilling its responsibility to him or her. In order to command our obedience, the state had genuinely to seek to achieve the purposes outlined. Furthermore,

> We are the judges of that achievement. What it is, and the difference therein from what it has the actual power to be, is written into the innermost fabric of our lives . . . . Power is thus morally neutral; what gives it colour is the performance it can demonstrate.
>
> (Laski 1980: 26–7)

For Laski, citizens were not passive spectators at a drama. They were active participants, awarding credits and demerits to the producer. If the state performed in a way which frustrated the efforts of an individual to realise his or her best self, that individual had no obligation to obey the state.

A major casualty of Laski's theory was the concept of irresponsible, unlimited state sovereignty. Authority in the polity envisaged by Laski was decentralised, consultative and conditional. Unity was to be achieved by 'a process of so associating interests that each, in the solution effected, finds sufficient concession to itself to experiment with the result' (263). Creative obedience resulted from self-imposed discipline. Authority was to be federal in the sense that it acquired legitimacy and elicited consent because it 'coordinates the experience of men into solutions that harmonise the needs they infer from those experiences' (224).

Laski supported a positive form of liberty built upon economic and political equality. He was uncomfortable with Mill's attempt to define strict limits to state interference since 'All conduct is social conduct in the sense that whatever I do has results upon me as a member of society'. In Laski's view, liberty was society saying to the individual 'do the best you can'. In his words: 'Freedoms are . . . opportunities which history has shown to be essential to the development of personality' (144). They should be available in both the political and the industrial spheres, for example in the form of works councils.

Liberty implied guaranteed minimum levels of income, education and political rights for all. This was because no individual could achieve self-realisation except in cooperation with others who are also making the best of themselves. Where power and property were divorced from legitimate functions they should be abolished, whether in the House of Lords or the City of London. The actual amount of wealth enjoyed by an individual should reflect his or her value to society: 'My property is, from the standpoint of political justice, the measure of economic worth placed by the State upon my personal effort towards the realisation of its end' (87–8).

Under the general supervision of central government, much greater powers could be transferred to local government than had been customary. This would 'revivify the quality of local life' (427). The distribution of powers between local and central government should be roughly equivalent to the relation between the states and the federal government in the United States.

Within a democracy the political parties played a vital role. Laski did

not adopt the hostile line of Ostrogorski or express the suspicions of Bryce and Veblen. In his view, the parties provided 'the most solid obstacle we have against the danger of Caesarism' (Laski 1980: 313). The first line of defence against the threat of despotism and its corollary, a completely passive electorate, was not the town meeting (Tocqueville), enlightened and independent gentlemen (Bryce) or proportional representation (Mill). It was a two-party system:

> The life of the democratic State is built upon the party-system . . . . [For example], parties arrange the issues upon which people are to vote. It is obvious that in the confused welter of the modern State there must be some selection of problems as more urgent than others. It is necessary to select them as urgent and to present solutions of them which may be acceptable to the citizen body. It is that task of selection the party undertakes. It acts . . . as the broker of ideas . . . . What, at least, is certain is that without parties there would be no means available to us of enlisting the popular decision in such a way as to secure solutions capable of being interpreted as politically satisfactory.
>
> (Laski 1980: 312–13)

Laski acknowledged the tendency of parties to stimulate pugnacious conflict, group separatism, falsification and personalisation. However, 'the services they render to a democratic State are inestimable' (313). Such views may not be surprising in a book published very shortly after the Labour party achieved office for the first time in 1924.

The rule of the 'elected amateur' would ensure 'a direct and continuous relation between government and public opinion' (424). However, party government, argued Laski, should be supplemented by expert advice and administration. Contact with ordinary people was equally desirable for administrators and the judiciary. Government would also benefit from the expertise and experience of social scientists, professional bodies and other experts, organised through a panoply of commissions, advisory committees and so on. The machinery of representation and consultation should combine both the territorial principle (e.g. the interests of Scotland) and the functional principle (e.g. the interests of the coal industry).

Laski's approach to political economy – especially with respect to imperialism, state control of industry, inheritance and redistribution – owed a great deal to John Hobson, his colleague on the editorial board of the *Nation*. However, Laski paid more attention than Hobson to the need for a balanced mix of professional expertise and representative democracy within industrial structures. He was in favour of employees helping to set work standards within their own industries although he did not go down the syndicalist path taken by Veblen. Laski preferred a

system of vocational associations regulating their function in conjunction with central government, a pattern reminiscent of Emile Durkheim's *Professional Ethics and Civic Morals* (1957).

In *The Grammar of Politics* Laski proposed using the resources of capitalism to raise minimum economic standards throughout the population while also introducing democratic practices into industry on a large scale. The problem with this approach was that the main beneficiaries of capitalism were opposed to an extension of democracy while the principal beneficiaries of democracy had very serious reservations about the existing economic order. In Laski's words:

> The working-classes of the world have no longer any faith in capitalism. They give it no service they can avoid. It implies a distribution of property at no point referable to moral principle. It means waste and corruption and inefficiency. Nor, historically, can it avoid the difficulty that political power has now been conferred upon those who least share in the benefits it secures; there is not, I think, any evidence of men coming to the possession of political power without trying, as a consequence, to control economic power also. This may, of course, be resisted. But the result of such resistance on any large scale will inevitably be revolution, and there will then be precipitated exactly the situation predicted in the communist analysis.
>
> (Laski 1980: 507)

Capitalism and democracy were, potentially, in open conflict. Laski continued:

> I do not say that revolution will be successful. I do, however, urge that even its defeat will destroy the prosperity of capitalism, on the one hand, and imply such an iron dictatorship of the capitalist, on the other, as to usher in a period of guerrilla warfare almost certain to ruin the prospects of civilisation. It is to the avoidance of such a dilemma that the view here urged is directed.
>
> (Ibid.)

During the next decade Laski became increasingly aware of the obstacles to be overcome before the kind of society he had envisaged in *The Grammar of Politics* could actually be achieved.

Democracy in crisis

In *Liberty in the Modern State* (1930) Laski turned away from the positive view of liberty adopted in *The Grammar of Politics*. He was less sure that the state would encourage the development of its citizens' capacities and inclinations. On the contrary, individuals needed protection from the state.

Laski drew closer to Mill's approach. Like Mill in the 1860s, Laski in

the 1930s had little confidence that political power would be exercised in a civilised way. Like Mill, he responded by insisting that a strong barrier should be erected around the individual. People should learn to value this protection of their individuality since

> liberty is essentially an expression of an impalpable atmosphere among men. It is a sense that in the things we deem significant there is the opportunity of continuous initiative, the knowledge that we can, so to speak, experiment with ourselves, think differently or act differently, from our neighbours without danger to our happiness being involved therein. We are not free, that is, unless we can form our plan of conduct to suit our own character without social penalties.
> (Laski 1930: 35)

Laski did not relinquish the objective of a social order driven by the 'instructed judgement' of all its citizens. However, three aspects of such a social order were emphasised. First, active consent by the people was a necessary condition, implying relative equality: 'the absence of such consent is, in the long run, fatal to social peace' (214). Second, empathy and effective two-way communication were essential. Political leaders have to be able 'to interpret the experience of their subjects as these read its meaning' (223). Third, people had to overcome the dogmas and stereotypes which bedevilled rational thought: 'I do not know how to emphasize sufficiently the quite inescapable importance to freedom of the content of the educational process' (183). Laski placed his faith in reason since 'Where there is respect for reason, there, also, is respect for freedom' (256).

The fate of the 1929 Labour government showed that the opponents of reason were not just ignorance and dogma but also economic interest. In 1931, during the severe economic depression, the Labour Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald agreed to accept cuts in unemployment benefit in order to preserve Britain's international creditworthiness. Only four Labour ministers accepted this policy. However, MacDonald agreed to implement it at the head of a National government dominated by Conservatives. It was a severe blow to Laski's hopes. In a pamphlet entitled *The Crisis and the Constitution* (1932), he admitted that 'the road to power is far harder than Labour has, so far, been led to imagine' (9).

Laski's subsequent reflections on the condition of capitalist democracy were contained in *Democracy in Crisis* (1933). In two further books – *The State in Theory and Practice* (1935) and *The Rise of European Liberalism* (1936) – he developed this argument further. In his view, liberalism as a doctrine was 'a by-product of the effort of the middle class to win a place in the sun' (Laski 1936: 258). Under pressure from socialism and the trade unions, as well as thinkers like Green, Arnold and Tocqueville, liberals had adopted a positive conception of the state in

the late nineteenth century: 'The revolutionary challenge was to be avoided by the gospel, as Mr Chamberlain termed it, of "ransom" ' (241). However, the 'social service state' arrived too late. The share of capitalist wealth expended on social objects had been insufficient to 'assure itself against attack' (1933: 165).

Until 1914, the socialist critique of liberalism was typified by the Fabians. Their hopes for a gradual transition to a socialist state were shattered after the First World War. Capitalists began to question the viability of a democratic order which demanded high spending on amenities for the masses. The economic depression severely limited the tax-raising capacity of a system based upon private profit:

> Capitalist democracy worked admirably so long as the environment was stable enough to maintain the self-confidence of its governing class. But inherent in it was a new struggle for power. It offered a share in political authority to all citizens upon the unstated assumption that the equality involved in the democratic ideal did not seek extension to the economic sphere. The assumption could not be maintained. For the object of political power is always the abrogation of privilege.
> (Laski 1933: 53)

The First World War had disrupted the psychological conditions underlying popular acceptance of nineteenth-century liberalism. In Keynes's words, it had 'disclosed the possibility of consumption to all and the vanity of abstinence to many' (quoted in Laski 1936: 257). Laski pointed out that despite scientific advances which greatly expanded the productive capacity of the industrial system, the capitalist regime after the First World War lowered the living standards of the people in order to preserve itself. Laski moved beyond the analyses of Hobson and Veblen towards a Marxist approach:

> The basic factor in any given society is the way it earns its living. . . . Changes in the methods of economic production appear to be the most vital factor in the making of change in all the other social patterns we know . . . . In any society . . . in which there are groups whose relations to the productive process is fundamentally different, conflict is inherent in the foundations of the society.
> (Laski 1935: 108–12)

After 1931 Laski was convinced that 'A capitalist democracy will not allow its electorate to stumble into socialism by the accident of a verdict at the polls' (Laski 1933: 77). The opposition of the US Supreme Court to President Roosevelt's New Deal supplied American evidence for this point. A future Labour election victory in Britain would probably be followed by a flight of capital and, soon afterwards, the suspension of the parliamentary system either by the defeated

Conservative administration or the incoming Labour regime.

Fascism offered a way for capitalism to hang on to political power and suppress democratic opposition from the working class in the political and economic spheres. Such an authoritarian regime would not prevent a serious split emerging between finance capital on the one side and, on the other, the technicians (here resembling Veblen) and *petite bourgeoisie*. Both groups would become proletarianised.

Revolution was a very likely outcome, although it was hardly guaranteed success. The Russian Revolution of 1917 had occurred under very special circumstances, including a defeated and divided army. These were unlikely to be reproduced in Britain or America. In view of this analysis, it was 'essential that any party which is seeking to transform the economic foundations of society' should 'maintain as long as it can a constitutional order which permits it openly to recruit its strength' (Laski 1935: 320).

In *The Rise of European Liberalism*, he had considered an alternative approach which contradicted his own argument:

> If it is demonstrable that capitalism can always find a practicable way out of its crises, that a depression like that by which the world has been afflicted since 1929 is merely a halt on the road to recovery rather than a symptom of a fatal disease, then, clearly, it becomes possible, with recovery, to transcend the immediate contradictions of the system by moving to a new productive equilibrium in which the demands of the working-classes for material benefit can be satisfied at a new high level. Where this can be effected it is unlikely . . . that there will be an effort by the working class to re-define the class-relations of the society.
>
> (Laski 1936: 183–4)

According to Laski, two schools made this alternative argument. One was the Keynesian school, which assumed an extension of state intervention in the economy as 'an impartial arbiter' concerned with optimising 'total well-being'. Such a scheme envisaged 'a *via media* between capitalism and socialism . . . without any change in the essential structure of class-relations' (185–6). The other school assumed the abandonment of a great deal of social legislation and a return to 'a rigorous policy of *laissez-faire*' (184). Ironically, although Laski thought that neither approach was likely to succeed, they summarise the main themes of capitalist democracy since the Second World War.

In *Reflections on the Revolutions of Our Time* (1943), Laski suggested that the war against Hitler provided an opportunity for a non-violent democratic revolution, permitting the abolition of capitalism. He argued that 'The possibility of evolution by consent' existed for a short period at least while 'the drama of war makes the common interest more

compelling than the private interest' (161). In fact, the policy of the 1945 Labour government fell far short of Laski's ambitions. To a great extent this was because it

> was bound to look to the United States for aid in its attempt at revolution by consent . . . . It could not avoid becoming the apparatus for defending middle-class supremacy in America and maintaining it against the challenge of socialism in Western Europe.
>
> (Laski 1952: 110–11)

Promise and performance in America

Following the Second World War it was clear that 'World history is more likely to be shaped by American history than by any other element in its making; [and] how it is to be shaped depends on how Americanism is shaped' (Laski 1948: 751). Laski had been deeply familiar with Americans and America since the First World War. These were the subjects of his longest book, *The American Democracy* (1948) which was 'written out of deep love of America' (*ix*). He gave the object of his affection a pretty hard time.

In between two introductory chapters on the tradition and spirit of America, and a concluding chapter on Americanism as a principle of civilization, Laski provided chapters on a series of interlocking themes. These included political institutions, business enterprise, labour, religion, education, culture, minorities, international relations, the professions and the media.

Despite its promising theme and the great knowledge of its author, the book is a disappointment. It reveals more about Laski's aspirations and frustrations than about the nature of American society. In brief, his argument was that America confronted a serious crisis of national purpose, compounded by internal divisions. Businessmen were the principal source of America's ills. They still represented 'the problem foreseen by Tocqueville' (52). As Veblen had pointed out, they were wedded to a wasteful culture of conspicuous consumption and an antiquated economic philosophy. They were hardworking, optimistic, apolitical, conformist, hospitable and ignorant.

By contrast, labour offered the potential basis for a decisive movement beyond *laissez-faire* and towards socialism. In particular, Laski hoped for the creation of an independent political party representing this emancipatory force. Its opportunity might be at hand, because America was at a crossroads in the 1940s. In Laski's view,

> the factor which is going to alter the whole basis of the party system in America is the twofold coincidence that the conclusion of the pioneering age is accompanied by its need to accept the

> responsibility of leadership in an interdependent world . . . it is, I think, certain that [the United States] will become altogether a society which tries to fulfil the democratic ideal or a society which tries wholly to deny it.
>
> (Laski 1948: 82)

America was faced with 'a grave choice between a profound diminution in its standard of living and an embarkation on a policy of economic imperialism'. Before either course was well advanced a successful challenge to the existing party structure was likely. There would be reactionary tendencies but 'impersonal forces' seemed to be moving America 'in a democratic direction which no party can deny and yet survive. Here is the real promise of American life' (82).

So far, promise was not being matched by performance. Sadly, organised labour in America was divided and unable to see clearly the fundamental contradiction between capitalism and democracy. Despite the fact that 'America stands on the threshold of its third great revolution' – Laski meant the revolution leading to democratic socialism – 'the psychological preparation of its people has been declined by the very agency which should be taking the lead in its making' (262). Unfortunately for Laski, the unions were too American to see his point.

Subjectivity and the state

In the same year that *The American Democracy* was published, Harold Lasswell presented his own analysis of the problems confronting democratic societies, including the United States. Like Laski, he focused upon the dimension of political power. However, as the title of his book *Power and Personality* (1948) implied, the other dimension of his analysis was not economic, but psychological. In order to make democracy work, the key issue was not to put the economic structure right but to get personality right. Scientists paid considerable attention to shifts in the physical environment, but:

> Our self-observatories are in a less-advanced state . . . . We need a never-ending inventory of the character–personality structure [with special reference to the requirements of democracy] of our one-year olds, our two-year olds and so on up. These annual cross-sectional patterns can be chosen by proper sampling methods throughout all accessible cultures, all strata in society, and hence during all crisis and intercrisis situations.
>
> (Lasswell 1948: 169)

Lasswell proposed that cross-sectional reports on 'environmental and predispositional factors' should be made. These would permit

experiments to be carried out for the sake of determining the relative usefulness of different ways of changing the environment to help in 'the formation of the democratic personality' (Lasswell 1948: 169). Taken by itself, this example makes Lasswell seem rather like Dr Strangelove. However, it should be seen in the context of Lasswell's earlier career.

Lasswell began by focusing upon the political impact of individual and collective attitudes, moving beyond formal political theory and traditional political biography with the help of pragmatism and Freud. He moved the armoury of scientific detachment into an arena heavily occupied by interest and emotion. The style is sometimes faintly reminiscent of Machiavelli, at other times it recalls Clausewitz.

Later in his career, Lasswell placed more emphasis upon the role of political science as one of the 'policy sciences' whose 'function is to provide intelligence pertinent to the integration of values realized by and embodied in interpersonal relations' (Lasswell and Kaplan 1950: *xii*).

When Lasswell wrote his most renowned book – *Politics: Who Gets What, When and How?* (1951b) – in the mid 1930s he 'was concerned with sketching a "general physiology" of the political process rather than working out the strategies appropriate to any postulated system of public order. This task was deferred' (1958: 210). The task of the policy science developed by Lasswell was to show how democracy could be made to work as well as possible. Lasswell took up this task following the Allied victory in the Second World War. The 1940s were as crucial for Lasswell as the 1930s were for Laski.

In fact, it is convenient to think of Lasswell's career in three phases. First, during the 1920s he was developing a distinctive methodology. A colleague from those days recalls his versatility and brilliance:

> Merriam sent him to England and he came back with an English accent, he sent him to Vienna and he came back with a full-grown psychoanalytical vocabulary, he sent him to the Soviet Union and when he came back he showed that Marx could be reconciled with Freud.
>
> (Harold Gosnell, quoted in Bulmer 1984: 194)

Major works from this phase are *Propaganda Technique in World War I* (1971), originally published in 1927 and *Psychopathology and Politics* (1951a), which appeared in 1930.

Second, during the 1930s he sketched out his model of the relations between personality, politics, society and the international order. The most interesting books from this phase are *Politics: Who Gets What, When and How?* (1951b), originally published in 1936, and – not so well known but equally fascinating – *World Politics and Personal Insecurity* (1965), which appeared in 1935. They are both more readable than the highly abstract 'summa theologica' entitled *Power and Society* (Lasswell and Kaplan 1950) which summarised the concepts

and assumptions embedded in Lasswell's approach.

In the third phase following the Second World War, as has been noticed, the emphasis upon policy science became strong. A key text is *Power and Personality* (1948).

Tension and fantasy

Tocqueville and Mill had feared the irrationality of public opinion. Through its agency, prejudice was liable to challenge the rule of the rational. Lasswell demonstrated that nearly a century later the tables had been turned. The rational procedures of science and bureaucracy were fully equipped to create fantasy and strengthen prejudice within public opinion. In his study of propaganda during the First World War he showed that this function was systematically organised by the state. By directing a flow of signs and symbols for the attention of the target audience at home or abroad, the propagandist sought 'the instigation of animosity toward the enemy, the preservation of friendship between allies and neutrals, and the demoralisation of the enemy' (1971: 46).

Lasswell concluded that propaganda by print, screen and so on was the modern substitute for the tribal tom-tom: 'print must supplant the dance' (221). He suggested that in order to create the unity and determination needed for war, irrational forces within the psyche had to be mobilised. However, the appearance of reason had to be maintained. Preachers, lecturers, journalists and other professional word-spinners were brought into play: 'All is conducted with the decorum and the trappery of intelligence, for this is a rational epoch, and demands its raw meat cooked and garnished by adroit and skilful chefs' (221).

The skill of the propagandist consisted not only in bedecking his or her appeals with the garnish of rationality, but also in working out where the most combustible 'reservoir of explosive energy' was to be found within a society. This expertise consisted in knowing about the society's 'tension level' (190). (As was seen in an earlier chapter, Chamberlain's speeches on property and the people showed him to be a gifted practitioner in this area.) The propagandist concerned with stirring passions in wartime typically wanted to put a match to the bonfire. The peacetime politician was usually more interested in pouring water over the danger area. This was a central theme in *Psychopathology and Politics* (1951a).

In this book Lasswell dismissed the idea that politics was about rational discussion and democratic consultation. In a passage which took a point of view diametrically opposed to the line adopted by Laski in *The Grammar of Politics*, Lasswell complained about the 'vast diversion of energy towards the study of the formal etiquette of government'. He added:

> In some vague way, the problem of politics is the advancement of the good life, but this is at once assumed to depend upon the modification of the mechanisms of government. Democratic theorists in particular have hastily assumed that social harmony depends upon discussion, and that discussion depends upon the formal consultation of all those affected by social problems. The time has come to abandon the assumption that the problem of politics is the problem of promoting discussion among all the interests concerned in a given problem. Discussion frequently complicates social difficulties, for the discussion by far-flung interests arouses a psychology of conflict which produces obstructive, fictitious, and irrelevant values.
>
> (Lasswell 1951a: 196–7)

In Lasswell's view, the problem of politics was less to solve conflicts than to prevent them occurring. Political activity should direct society's energy at 'the abolition of recurrent sources of strain in society'. The tension level should be reduced as far as possible through 'preventive politics'. This should be guided by 'the truth about the conditions of harmonious human relations, and the discovery of the truth is an object of specialized research; it is no monopoly of people as people, or ruler as ruler' (197).

The covert analogy is with medicine. Medical researchers develop the knowledge necessary for applying preventive medicine to the human constitution. Political scientists provide a similar service enabling preventive politics to be applied to the political constitution.

By the use of a psychopathological approach relying on evidence such as individual life histories and techniques such as free-fantasy, the personality systems of both rulers and ruled could be analysed. Careful analysis of childhood experience could reveal typical patterns producing, for example, the agitator and the administrator.

Lasswell concluded that 'Agitators as a class are strongly narcissistic types. Narcissism is encouraged by obstacles in the early love relationships, or by overindulgence and admiration in the family circle' (125). By contrast,

> As a class the administrators differ from the agitators by the displacement of their affects upon less remote and abstract objects. In the case of one important group this failure to achieve abstract objects is due to excessive preoccupation with specific individuals in the family circle, and to the correlative difficulty of defining the role of the self.
>
> (Lasswell 1951a: 151)

Lasswell proposed a general formula for the developmental history of political man. It was $p \} d \} r = P$. In this formula, p represents private motives, d equals displacement on to public objects, r means rationalization in terms of public interest, P refers to the political man and the sign $\}$

indicates 'transformed into'. Lasswell argued that the political man has similar private motives to everyone else in early life. Like some of his fellow men he displaces these private motives on to public objects. What marks out the political man as singular, however, is 'the rationalization of the displacement in terms of public interests' (Lasswell 1951a: 262). For example, a political agitator is, in fact, looking for love or 'response' to himself as an individual, but he is likely to present himself as, say, the saviour of his class or country.

Ironically, although this was very much opposed to the spirit of Laski's work, Lasswell's approach overlapped with his at a key point. Laski had made the subjective experience of the citizen a litmus test which determined the legitimacy or otherwise of the state. He abhorred the idea of the state making overriding and irresistible claims upon the individual on behalf of society. Lasswell was sympathetic to such a view, for he argued that an observer might choose 'specific subjective experiences, such as a sense of loyalty to the community, and say that all who have this experience [and/or certain others] under specified conditions make up the state' (241).

Such a method assumed (as Laski assumed) that 'The group is not a superindividual phenomenon but a many-individual phenomenon' (241). One consequence of this approach was that although the state was 'independent of any one individual . . . it ceases to exist when enough individuals change their minds or die without procreating' (242). Building upon a similar assumption, Laski had argued that politicians and officials should, on the one hand, become as familiar as possible with the experiences of ordinary people and, on the other hand, cultivate knowledge and rationality ('instructed judgement') among the population at large.

Lasswell certainly accepted the first point. Social administrators and social scientists should 'mix with rich and poor, with savage and civilized, with sick and well, with old and young' (201). However, in doing this Lasswell's expert would be not so much obeying the injunction to 'educate and be educated by his clients and constituents' (as Laski might have said) but the command to get into 'direct contact with his material in its most varied manifestations' (201).

Laski supported reason in the sense of informed discussion among interested parties. By contrast, Lasswell backed reason in the form of scientific intervention eased by the acquiescence of those who constituted the scientists' 'material'. As he put it: 'The preventive politics of the future will be intimately allied to general medicine, psychopathology, physiological psychology, and related disciplines. Its practitioners will gradually win respect in society among puzzled people who feel their responsibilities and who respect objective findings' (203).

Elites and the mass

In *Politics: Who Gets What, When and How?* (1951b), Lasswell's interpretation was based upon 'the working attitude of practising politicians' concerned with 'influence and the influential' (7). The book is organised in three parts. The first part distinguished between the elite and the mass according to their success in obtaining values such as deference, income and safety within the social order. Elites could be analysed in terms of their capacity to manipulate a variety of techniques which kept them at the top of the pyramid of values. Their economic and other characteristics could also be considered. Most of the book is devoted to an exploration of these two dimensions of elites.

In the section on the manipulative techniques of actual and would-be elites, Lasswell illustrated their use of symbols, controlled violence, material goods (e.g. through rationing or pricing policies) and political techniques (such as centralisation of government or careful dispersion of power). The next section examined the characteristics of the elites which resulted from such manoeuvres. They exhibited a variety of skills including fighting, organising and bargaining, and came from a number of class backgrounds. They represented different personality types including, in conditions of insecurity and crisis, types driven by inhibited (or even uninhibited) rage. A wide range of attitudes was found, including, in Western Europe, a mixture of militancy, parochialism and external orientation, e.g. aggressiveness towards neighbours.

The book just described was complemented by *World Politics and Personal Insecurity* (1965). This was an attempt to come to terms with world-wide shifts in the pattern of elites and the symbols associated with them since the Russian Revolution of 1917. Partial incorporation of the new social pattern had occurred outside Russia in the form of the European fascist movements with their single-party rule, extension of government bureaucracy, reliance on functional rather than territorial representation, and use of plebiscites.

Since 1929 these political movements had flourished in a context of intensified economic parochialism which was undermining the world market. The consequent insecurity could be analysed using a mixture of 'extensive' and 'intensive' procedures. Extensive procedures were typified by the work of Marx and Engels in 'tracing the lineaments of social development'. Intensive procedures included studies of 'the genetic sequence of personality development' (Lasswell 1965: 18), relating to each other the career lines of people living in the same epoch. Using these techniques the analyst could work out how mass tension was likely to be discharged – in response to which social changes and which symbols – and encourage ways of doing this which were less costly than wars and revolutions.

In the body of this work Lasswell applied these extensive and intensive

procedures. He examined the role of nations and classes as symbols of identification, the effects of a shifting international balance of power, and the impact of the war crisis, independence movements and imperialism. Economic conditions, migration patterns and the mass media were also considered. One conclusion was that inter-state hostility, increased popular participation in politics, and world depression had produced a dangerous situation by the mid 1930s:

> Diminished material income has provoked efforts to increase psychological income by restoring a new sense of significance to damaged personalities, justifying their existence in relation to the building of a 'Socialist Society' of a 'Third Reich'; new substitutes for bread are supplied by self-selected specialists on the manipulation of symbols, the modern masters of political propaganda.
>
> (Lasswell 1965: 124)

The United States had been relatively isolated from world-wide tendencies. In any case, the slavery issue had inhibited the development of strong class identifications. Lasswell teasingly suggested that socialism might make more headway in America if it called itself 'organized individualism' (166). He offered a prescription for 'an American *Capital*' to inspire collectivist enthusiasm. The book would have to have a slogan-like title and be thick: 'Thickness conveys authoritativeness and discourages reading by the masses who must revere the book as a symbol.' It should have a battery of charts, graphs, tables 'and other impressive impedimenta of exactitude'. The style should be emotive, invidious, ambiguous, obscure, contradictory and, if possible, 'dull, in order to reduce the danger that the work will be extensively read' (167).

More seriously, Lasswell noted that America had fewer 'cultural shock absorbers' than 'more stable civilizations' (174): no confident ruling elite enjoying mass deference, no prestigious bureaucracy, no consensus about action for common goals, no integrated style of living. Increased insecurity was liable to produce rigid centralisation, revolutionary movements and war 'unless the emotional tensions of the nation are handled with skill, luck and persistence' (176).

Personality and power

In *Power and Personality* (1948) Lasswell laid down the main outlines of a policy science designed to serve 'the specific needs of democracy' (109). In this book his treatment of the psychological bases of political careers was approximately the same as in his earlier books, but a change had occurred in his discussion of power. In contrast to his earlier

focus upon elites he now stressed that

> it would be a mistake to imagine that . . . we are wholly taken up with the few rather than the many . . . . Power is an interpersonal situation: those who hold power are empowered. They depend upon and continue only so long as there is a continuing stream of empowering responses.
>
> (Lasswell 1948: 10)

Earlier he had treated values such as income, deference and safety in terms of their distribution: 'Those who get the most are *elite*; the rest are *mass*' (Lasswell 1958: 13; original emphasis). The emphasis had shifted from the distributional to the relational.

In fact, those at the top of the pyramid were now described in terms of leadership, rather than exclusive elite membership. The boundary between elite and mass became very blurred:

> The term 'elite' is used in descriptive political science to describe the social formation from which leaders are recruited . . . . Democratic leadership is recruited from a broad base and remains dependent upon the active support of the entire community. With few exceptions every adult is eligible to have as much of a hand in the decision-making process as he wants and for which he is successful in winning the consent of his fellow citizens. There is no monopoly of power in a ruling caste when such conditions prevail, and the whole community is a seedbed from which rulers and governors come. The elite of democracy ('the ruling class') is society-wide.
>
> (Lasswell 1948: 109)

This set the tone for the rest of the book. Abandoned was the narrow-eyed realism of *Politics: Who Gets What, When and How?*, which dealt with the tool-kit of crafty wheezes available to manipulative elites. In this new post-war approach, the masses were not subject to devious manoeuvres by elites. Instead, leaders strove to acquire consent from below. The language changes, investing democracy with positive vibrations: 'Our conception of democracy is that of a network of congenial and creative interpersonal relations. Whatever deviates from this pattern is antidemocratic and destructive' (110). And what had happened to the politics of prevention, an approach stressing the deliberate reduction of tension rather than rational discussion to solve social problems? Lasswell now thought that

> catharsis is not enough. We do not want to protect democracy by manipulating the community into a variety of activities deliberately encouraged or designed for the purpose of preserving as much of the status quo as possible. Any status quo deserves rational, selective,

> progressive change. We want a social equilibrium in which men receive the intelligence they need for the making of rational choices, and in which they possess the skill and the will to make decisions in a free society.
>
> (Lasswell 1948: 130–1)

At first sight, Lasswell had beaten a path back to Laski, who also placed great emphasis upon rational discussion and informed judgement. However, Lasswell did not just want a noble-minded democratic leadership capable of encouraging careful discussion of shared values and goals. He also wanted a nation-wide team of political scientists trained to run social observatories. As has been seen, these would monitor the psychic crises and political imaginings of children and young people. Unfortunately for Lasswell, the personnel were not available. Nor did political scientists have as much prestige as their colleagues, the economists who came 'close to providing a symbol that stands for some degree of special competence in describing certain collective features of our common life'. Lasswell observed that

> As for the symbol 'political scientist' or 'professional student of government', there is almost no public image. So little, in fact, that Harold J. Laski and other members of the London School of Economics and Political Science find it convenient, on most occasions, to forget the 'political science' and call themselves economists (not always to the satisfaction of the matured-in-wood economists).
>
> (Lasswell 1948: 133)

In fact, as will be seen, the attempt to manage democracy with which Harold Lasswell and his mentor Charles E. Merriam were so closely associated was already under fierce attack from leading economists in the United States.

Conclusion

Three issues focus attention upon the major points of overlap and difference between Laski and Lasswell. They are their treatments of the interplay between rationality and subjectivity, the relationship between the public and private spheres, and relations between political establishments and ordinary citizens.

On the first point, as far as Laski was concerned, individual experience leavened by education was the proper basis of good judgement. A polity should draw upon as wide a range of subjective experiences as possible. It should provide full opportunity for rational discussion among all individuals or groups whose experiences were relevant to specific policy decisions. These discussions should be timed and located within political

and economic institutions in such a way as to transmit the distilled wisdom they produced as directly as possible to the effective points of decision-making.

In turn, political and economic institutions should be organised so as to maximise the opportunities for individuals to have experiences in which their intellectual and other functions were expressed to the fullest possible extent. In such a society, the subjective experiences of all citizens would contribute fully to rational policy decisions; and rational policies would establish an occupational structure providing fulfilling experiences for all citizens.

By contrast, Lasswell's interest in the subjective states of individuals was that of a scientist wishing to discover how these states were related to their social performances and to tendencies within social institutions. Subjective experiences had a determinate relationship to individual behaviour which could be uncovered by the scientist on the basis of data about several individuals and the application of psychological and other theories. The subjects of the research were probably ignorant of both the theories and the data.

Rational analysis of the situation was carried out by the external observer, the scientist. As Lasswell wrote (to paraphrase), the discovery of truth was a specialised business. Irrational behaviour swayed by fear, envy and other emotions was extremely commonplace. Indeed, such behaviour could be scientifically produced in wartime using appropriate techniques. In peacetime, the political scientist could advise governments how to minimise tension and even, perhaps, nurture 'congenial and creative' relationships between individuals. Democracy was about the manipulative formation of an appropriate personality type by trained professionals.

Second, as mentioned above, Laski envisaged the setting up of a 'virtuous circle' of mutual support between the state and the private citizen. His scheme of positive liberty assumed that the powers of government would be used to advance the interests of individuals throughout society. A 'vicious circle' was also possible leading to a withdrawal of legitimacy by citizens. This possibility was, unfortunately, being brought closer. Achievement of the desired balance between the public and private spheres was being prevented by the state of relations between property and the people. Capitalist interests inhibited the democratic processes which would enable the necessary reform of institutions and attitudes to take place.

Lasswell's model also focused upon the 'internal dynamics' of the relationship between individual citizens and the realm of government and politics. However, as seen, he introduced a third party – the political scientist – as regulator of the relationship. The possibility of a conflict between capitalism and democracy did not come on to Lasswell's agenda.

He adopted an elite model of politics which treated the possession of income and the manipulation of material goods as just two possibilities within a more complex typology of power resources and political techniques.

Third, both Laski and Lasswell took for granted that political life would be organised 'from above' through the activities of political establishments organised into elites and parties. However, they had radically different attitudes towards individualism and activism on the part of ordinary citizens. Laski was a great supporter of active citizenship and the free expression of opinion at all levels. Such active citizens could all too easily become classified as, to use Lasswell's term, 'agitators'.

Lasswell argued that agitators had failed to resolve certain childhood experiences in a satisfactory manner. They were trying to work out their personality problems in the public arena. When popular participation in politics increased between the wars he suggested it was due to the widespread existence of 'damaged personalities'. In 1835 Tocqueville had treated the high level of active citizenship he found as a sign of considerable maturity and strength. In 1935 Lasswell considered that high levels of participation were an indication of immaturity and weakness. Something had changed.

Chapter eight

Schumpeter and Hayek

The challenge from Vienna

During the early part of the twentieth century the social sciences were beginning to provide new techniques and justifications for intervention by the state in society. Laski's form of political science drew upon Marx and envisaged wholesale social engineering. Lasswell borrowed from Freud and worked on schemes for intervening at the level of the individual. The claims of social science were given credibility by the power of both its major clients, the state and big business.

Justification of intervention had to relate to its contribution to achieving the goals of capitalist democracy. A consensus was beginning to emerge within the American and British capitalist democracies that the crucial test of economic and political arrangements was their capacity to produce decent living standards for the vast majority of the people. 'Decency' in this context meant reasonable availability of material and cultural goods, sufficient leisure and income to enjoy them, and a degree of choice with respect to consumption and use of free time.

The consequences of increased intervention could be judged in terms of a trade-off between individual liberty and social progress in respect of living standards. Joseph Schumpeter and Friedrich A. Hayek both calculated the losses and gains produced by this trade-off. As will be seen, they arrived at conflicting conclusions.

In 1944 Friedrich A. Hayek's book *The Road to Serfdom* (1976a) was published. Harold Lasswell's teacher, Charles E. Merriam, reviewed it in the *American Journal of Sociology*. He did not like its contents:

> The author [wrote Merriam] vigorously denounces any and all forms of planning, expresses his reservations about mass democracy, and holds as suspect 'conscious social control.'. . . The author blandly brushes aside all the many forms of city planning, state planning, regional planning, national planning, with one stroke of his pen. Since the socialists have employed the term 'planning' it must be placed on the black list . . . . But this is not argument, academic or