

Ideological Reconciliation in the Thought of Harold Laski and C. B. Macpherson

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Introduction

The similarities between the political ideas of Harold Laski (1893-1950) and C. B. Macpherson (1911-1987) reflect their personal links and intellectual affinities. In this article we draw attention to the exploration by the two thinkers of the flexibility of liberal and socialist ideologies. Macpherson studied for his Masters degree under Laski's supervision at the London School of Economics in the early 1930s, and was much influenced by his teacher.¹ He continued to express his admiration in a number of reviews in which he commented favourably on the contemporary relevance of Laski's humanist Marxism.² Macpherson recognized that, like himself, Laski transgressed ideological boundaries, which are often drawn rigidly. Both thinkers stressed that the liberal democratic tenets of individualism, liberty and human flourishing were frustrated by the historical association between liber-

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- 1 See Jules Townshend, *C. B. Macpherson and the Problem of Liberal Democracy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), 6-14; William Leiss, *C. B. Macpherson: Dilemmas of Liberalism and Socialism* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1988), 25-45; and Isaac Kramnick and Barry Sheerman, *Harold Laski: A Life on the Left* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1993), 336.
 - 2 C. B. Macpherson, "Review of 'Faith, Reason and Civilisation: An Essay in Historical Analysis,' by Harold J. Laski," *Canadian Journal of Economics and Political Science* 11 (1945), 310-11; and "Review of 'The Dilemma of Our Times: An Historical Essay,' by Harold J. Laski," *Political Studies* 2 (1954), 176.

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alism and capitalist economic relations. Drawing on the resources of Marxism, each argued that capitalism needed to be superseded by an egalitarian democratic society.

Liberalism and Marxism

Macpherson acknowledged in 1976, in response to critics from the left and right, that he was concerned to reconcile elements of liberalism and Marxism. His life's work had been "to work out a revision of liberal democratic theory, a revision which clearly owes a great deal to Marx, in the hope of making that theory more democratic while rescuing that valuable part of the liberal tradition which is submerged when liberalism is identified with market relations."³ Macpherson later identified himself as someone who neither accepted existing liberal democracy nor would replace it totally by Marxian theory and practice. He accepted the values of human development read into liberal democracy by theorists such as J. S. Mill and T. H. Green, but rejected the contemporary liberal democratic society and state as incapable of realizing these values.⁴

Laski's earlier, similar, belief can be appreciated by noting the development of his thought. As a prominent member of the English pluralist school from 1915 until the mid-1920s, he challenged the sovereign authority of the state.⁵ In the 1930s and 1940s, he built, not uncritically, on that early position;⁶ his pluralism was, he argued in 1938, "a stage on the road" to his Marxist position.⁷ The pluralist aim of limiting the state's power would require power to be removed from the class that dominated the state. In his final manuscript, in 1950, he argued: "The *malaise* of our civilization lies in the contradiction between the pressure to liberate . . . individuality and the refusal of so many powerful interests to recognize the validity of this pressure and make way for its release."⁸ Like Macpherson, he considered that many of the problems of liberalism stemmed from its intimate connection with capitalism.

3 C. B. Macpherson, "Humanist Democracy and Elusive Marxism: A Response to Minogue and Svacek," this JOURNAL 9 (1976), 423.

4 C. B. Macpherson, *The Rise and Fall of Economic Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 56.

5 For a selection and discussion of Laski's early writings, see Paul Q. Hirst, ed., *The Pluralist Theory of the State: Selected Writings of G. D. H. Cole, J. N. Figgis, and H. J. Laski* (London: Routledge, 1989).

6 See Peter Lamb, "Laski's Ideological Metamorphosis," *Journal of Political Ideologies* 4 (1999), 239-60.

7 Harold J. Laski, *A Grammar of Politics* (4th ed.; London: Allen and Unwin, 1938), xii.

8 Harold J. Laski, *The Dilemma of Our Times: An Historical Essay* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1952), 84.

Abstract. Both Harold Laski and C. B. Macpherson attempted to reconcile elements of liberalism and Marxism in their work. Macpherson offered a clearer and more precise argument about the ways in which capitalist market relations frustrate freedom, equality and the development of the individual. Laski provided a clearer and more consistent account of human nature, which is necessary to sustain such an argument. Macpherson, in turn, reformulated the distinction between negative and positive liberty, which had remained an unresolved problem in Laski's account of human nature. The respective strengths of Laski and Macpherson may be combined to provide a coherent and cogent ideological position.

Résumé. Dans leurs oeuvres, Harold Laski et C. B. Macpherson ont tous les deux tenté de réconcilier des éléments de libéralisme et de marxisme. Macpherson a offert un raisonnement plus clair et plus précis sur les moyens par lesquels les relations du marché capitaliste entravent la liberté, l'égalité et le développement de l'individu. Laski a fourni une explication plus claire et plus logique de la nature humaine, qui sous-tend de manière fondamentale un tel raisonnement. Macpherson, à son tour, a reformulé la distinction entre la liberté positive et négative, ce qui était resté irrésolu dans l'explication de la nature humaine soutenue par Laski. Il est possible d'intégrer les atouts respectifs de Laski et Macpherson afin de fournir une position idéologique qui soit en même temps cohérente et convaincante.

Problems of Liberalism

Laski and Macpherson each saw the exercise of power in capitalist societies as a problem for human development; each considered that the key liberal values of liberty and equality are threatened or frustrated by capitalism. On both of these points Macpherson offers the clearer analysis. Laski, on the other hand, looked more closely at the role of the state, and was more attentive to the limitations of liberalism.

In the 1920s, Laski rejected the egoistic foundations and elaborate calculus of utilitarianism, believing instead that social good involved an ordering of personalities whereby each would enrich their common fellowship. The rights of citizens would be counterbalanced by the duty to enrich the common life; rights that required society to enable each to realize their best selves in common with others. Invoking the late-nineteenth century thought of T. H. Green, he argued that each should be secured in those things without which one cannot realize one's self as a moral being.⁹

Never losing sight of this ultimate political goal, Laski nevertheless became increasingly fearful that common humanity had, throughout history, been undermined by artificially constructed classes and suppressed by states. By the 1930s, his view was that liberalism had been born at the time of the Reformation as a means to justify the

9 Harold J. Laski, *A Grammar of Politics* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1925), 24-25 and 39-40.

power of the newly emerging capitalist class, and had been continually developed to sustain the interests of that class.¹⁰ Though liberal ideas had helped diminish privileges based on status, the ideas were so bound up with capitalism that, under the guise of sovereignty, the state resorted ultimately to force and suppression in the name of those very liberal principles that placed individuals before the state.

Laski identified two traditions within liberalism that would later be set out far more clearly and concisely by Macpherson. The first included Locke and Bentham, the other Green and Hobhouse: “the one negative, the other positive, the one atomic, the other organic, the one finding the essence of the individual in his antagonism to the state, the other finding his essence in the context given him by the state.”¹¹ Laski sympathized with the second tradition, with the regulation of the economy and society in favour of the masses.¹² Laski’s problem was with the belief of Green and Hobhouse that a pre-existent good in society made the action of the state a neutral expression of a common mind and common good in society. As Laski wrote: “When Green rejected the view that force is the basis of the state, he refused to look the facts in the face.”¹³

Laski stressed the importance of analyzing the state in practice. He saw the state as a coercive authority that bound citizens through its legal supremacy, but which could not demand allegiance on the grounds of its nature. “Any enquiry into the nature of states,” he insisted, “is at least as much an enquiry into the realized intentions of power as into the announced purposes by which its operations are justified in theory.”¹⁴ The coercive authority could only demand with justification the obedience of citizens to the degree that it satisfied demand.

A vital idea of Marx and Engels was, Laski argued, the identification of the state not as a neutral organ serving society as a whole, but as a coercive power enforcing on the working class the social discipline essential to the preservation of the interests of capitalism.¹⁵ The answer to this problem was not to reformulate liberalism; after all, the returns from political democracy were, Laski argued, “always limited by the power of an economic oligarchy to exact privileges prior in sta-

10 Harold J. Laski, *The Rise of European Liberalism* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1936).

11 Harold J. Laski, *The Decline of Liberalism* (London: Oxford University Press, 1940), 7.

12 Laski, *The Rise of European Liberalism*, 240-41.

13 Laski, *The Decline of Liberalism*, 13.

14 Harold J. Laski, *The State in Theory and Practice* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1935), 17-18.

15 Laski, *The Rise of European Liberalism*, 239.

tus to the claims of the masses to benefit.”¹⁶ This was, in fact, something upon which Macpherson would present a stronger thesis, discussing it in terms of the transfer of powers that takes place in capitalism.

For Macpherson, an important analytical thread which ran through much of his work was the argument that the justifying theory of liberal democracy “rests on two maximizing claims—a claim to maximize individual utilities and a claim to maximize individual powers.”¹⁷ The maximization of utilities is evident, he argued, in the liberal tradition from Locke to Bentham, and is based on a conception of the human being as “essentially a consumer of utilities” and “a bundle of appetites demanding satisfaction.” Liberal or liberal democratic society, with its associated capitalist market economy, is said by the early liberal tradition to maximize individual utilities by offering individuals the widest freedom of choice, and to maximize aggregate utilities equitably, if not equally. Capitalism is characterized as the unlimited right of accumulation, which is seen as a necessary incentive for endlessly increasing productivity in the face of scarcity, which, in turn, is the best means of satisfying unlimited desire.¹⁸ Macpherson called this a theory of possessive individualism.¹⁹

Macpherson located the maximization of powers claim in the work of J. S. Mill, Green and other liberal democratic critics of Benthamite utilitarianism. Here the human being is not “a consumer of utilities but . . . a doer, a creator, an enjoyer of his human attributes . . . not a bundle of appetites seeking satisfaction but a bundle of conscious energies seeking to be exerted.”²⁰ Liberal democratic society is said, by Mill and others, to allow individuals to develop most fully their uniquely human capacities.

Macpherson criticized the maximization of powers claim of liberal democratic theory by demonstrating that, rather than permit all its members to exercise their powers of development, the associated capitalist market society permits the transfer of powers from some human beings to others. This argument was based on a crucial distinction between developmental and extractive power. Developmental power is the potential to use and develop “uniquely human attributes or capacities” and the “potential for realizing some human end.” In capitalism, those who do not own the means of production are denied free access

16 Laski, *A Grammar of Politics*, 4th ed., xxiv.

17 C. B. Macpherson, *Democratic Theory: Essays in Retrieval* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), 3.

18 *Ibid.*, 4 and 17-18.

19 C. B. Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962).

20 Macpherson, *Democratic Theory*, 4-5.

to the means of exercising at least some of their developmental power and must buy access with their labour power. Those who own the means of production, and charge for access to it, are thus able to exercise extractive power, which is the “ability to use other men’s capacities”; the “power over others, the ability to extract benefit from others.”²¹

Macpherson summed up the diminution of developmental power caused by lack of access to the means of production as follows: first, a transfer from non-owners to owners of the ability to work, the ownership of the work, and the value added by work, which is measured by the excess of the value added over the wage paid for the labour; second, a further loss, but not transfer, of non-owners’ essentially human satisfaction of control of their own productive capacities; and third, a diminution of non-owners’ control of their extra-productive power, that is, developmental power which could be exercised outside the process of production. The second and third deficiencies are, he noted, measurable by comparing different individuals and classes within society and different models of society.²² Macpherson may have derived the notions of extractive power and the transfer of powers from Marx, but the concept of developmental power was taken from liberals like Mill and Green.

Stressing that a purely descriptive approach to the analysis of power is inadequate, Macpherson saw in the concept of developmental power an ethical element which alone could yield insights about the transfer of human powers and diminution of the human essence.²³ He argued that liberals should take seriously the Marxist postulate of the dehumanizing nature of capitalism, for it “does not depend on the ability of Marx’s labour theory of value to explain market prices (which has been the main complaint about his economic theory).”²⁴

It should perhaps be noted briefly that both Macpherson and Laski argued that capitalism frustrates freedom of choice by manipulating human wants and satisfying only those that have money to back them.²⁵ Macpherson also argued that it is impossible to demonstrate that a capitalist market society maximizes individual utilities. To do so would require a common scale by which to measure and compare individual satisfactions. For utilitarian liberalism there is no such common measure, and if it did exist, then it, and not the market, would be the

21 Ibid., 42, 8 and 9.

22 Ibid., 65-70.

23 Ibid., 9-10.

24 Macpherson, *The Rise and Fall of Economic Justice*, 326-42.

25 Macpherson, *Democratic Theory*, 182 and 62; and Harold J. Laski, *Socialism and Freedom* (London: Fabian Society, 1925), 8.

appropriate means of distributing utilities.²⁶ Furthermore, Macpherson argued that it is impossible to demonstrate that the market equitably maximizes utilities. The market rewards various resources, and it is not possible to demonstrate that any given distribution of these, particularly land and capital, is equitable.²⁷

As mentioned above, Laski's analysis of human diminution and exploitation under capitalism was less sophisticated than that of Macpherson. However, by criticizing the idea that liberalism could be reformed fundamentally, Laski expressed confidently a problem on which Macpherson was rather hesitant. Macpherson recognized the intimate relationship between liberal ideology and capitalist society; but he continued to seek a fundamental redevelopment of liberal democracy. Laski, on the other hand, came in the 1930s to see the need to establish an entirely new society.

Resources of Marxism

Though both Laski and Macpherson drew on Marxism to analyze the problems of liberalism, there is disagreement about the extent and orthodoxy of their Marxism. This indicates not only that Laski and Macpherson refused to remain locked within narrow ideological boundaries, but that the ideologies of liberalism and Marxism are themselves fluid and contestable.

Critics from both the left and right have doubted that Macpherson was a Marxist. From the left, Andrew Levine claims that Macpherson fails to break his conceptual and political affiliation with liberalism, and remains within social democracy.²⁸ Ellen Meiksins Wood, perhaps Macpherson's most acute Marxist critic, argues that he was "seduced by liberalism itself, in theory and practice."²⁹ The non-Marxist Bhikhu Parekh holds that "Macpherson is primarily committed to liberalism and absorbs as much of Marxism as his liberal assumptions permit."³⁰ On the other hand, non-Marxists have characterized Macpherson as a Marxist. Isaiah Berlin notes that although seldom referring to Marx,

26 Macpherson, *Democratic Theory*, 7, and *The Real World of Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966), 53.

27 Macpherson, *Democratic Theory*, 7-8, and *The Real World of Democracy*, 51. For a discussion of Macpherson's critique of liberalism and capitalism, see David Morrice, "C. B. Macpherson's Critique of Liberal Democracy and Capitalism," *Political Studies* 42 (1994), 646-61.

28 Andrew Levine, "The Political Theory of Social Democracy," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 6 (1976), 191 and 192.

29 Ellen Meiksins Wood, "C. B. Macpherson: Liberalism and the Task of Socialist Political Theory," in Ralph Miliband and John Saville, eds., *The Socialist Register 1978* (London: Merlin, 1978), 217.

30 Bhikhu Parekh, *Contemporary Political Thinkers* (Oxford: Martin Robertson, 1982), 73.

Macpherson's work is nevertheless characterized "by his unswerving application of Marxist methods of analysis."³¹ Michael Lessnoff has characterized Macpherson as a "liberal Marxist" and a "humanist Marxist," whose "explanatory framework" and "ethical perspective" are essentially those of Marx.³² From a Marxist perspective, Victor Svacek judges Macpherson to be "five-sixths a Marxist."³³ Macpherson accepts the Marxist notions of essential human equality; the class-based nature of society; the way that unequal class relations impede the realization of the good; the materialist basis of knowledge; and a theory of history related to transformations of the relations of production. The crucial missing sixth is the belief that revolution is necessary to replace capitalism with communism, a point that Macpherson was willing to acknowledge.³⁴

Perhaps the best summary of Macpherson's relationship to liberalism and Marxism is offered by Leo Panitch, who suggests, in response to Wood, that Macpherson did not locate himself within the revolutionary socialist movement, but, standing outside it, was able to bring the insight of Marxism to another (liberal) set of ideas and enrich them. "*To demonstrate a theory's inconsistency one must confront it on its own terms. To transcend it, one must move to an alternate problematic.*"³⁵ From this perspective Macpherson was well aware not only of the problems of liberalism and capitalism but also the deficiencies of existing socialism, including the neglect of individual rights and freedom, the net transfer of powers in a non-capitalist economy, and the failure to maintain democracy.³⁶

We have observed that Laski turned to Marxism in order to resolve the weaknesses of his earlier opposition to the authority of the state. As Ralph Miliband suggested, crucial to this ideological shift was Laski's embrace of the materialist conception of history.³⁷ But it is important to stress that Laski's continued belief in the emancipatory

31 Sir Isaiah Berlin, "Hobbes, Locke and Professor Macpherson," *Political Quarterly* 45 (1964), 445.

32 Michael H. Lessnoff, *Political Philosophers of the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 3 and 93.

33 Victor Svacek, "The Elusive Marxism of C. B. Macpherson," this JOURNAL 9 (1976), 419.

34 Macpherson, "Humanist Democracy and Elusive Marxism," 424-25.

35 Leo Panitch, "Liberal Democracy and Socialist Democracy: The Antinomies of C. B. Macpherson," in Ralph Miliband and John Saville, eds., *The Socialist Register 1981* (London: Merlin, 1981), 150; emphasis in the original.

36 Macpherson, *Democratic Theory*, 15; C. B. Macpherson, "Individualist Socialism? A Reply to Levine and Macintyre," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 6 (1976), 196; and *The Life and Times of Liberal Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 109.

37 Ralph Miliband, "Harold Laski's Socialism," in Leo Panitch, ed., *The Socialist Register 1995* (London: Merlin, 1995), 240.

potential of individuals and groups meant that he would never accept a deterministic interpretation of Marxism; a commitment to human freedom and welfare remained his central concern.³⁸ Nevertheless, the claim of Michael Newman that Laski “sought to absorb Marxism into the liberal tradition” is slightly misleading.³⁹ Laski’s view was that to be realized universally, the valuable tenets of liberalism would need to be absorbed into, and reformulated by, socialism.⁴⁰ Hence it is inaccurate to claim, as did Herbert Deane, that Laski abandoned his earlier ideas for a Marxist doctrine made incoherent by his acceptance of neither economic determinism nor doctrines of revolutionary violence.⁴¹ But neither is it accurate to suggest, as does W. H. Greenleaf, that Laski’s earlier ideas merely underwent a change of packaging.⁴² Laski’s thought underwent a genuine and substantial ideological shift in which his early ideas were rethought, revised and combined with what he considered valuable in the work of Marx.⁴³

The point is not whether Laski and Macpherson are essentially Marxist or essentially liberal, but whether, by drawing judiciously from the two ideologies, they produce an essentially coherent political theory which offers a critique of capitalism and a promise of a better society. We explore this question in the next section.

Comparing the Liberal-Marxist Approaches of Laski and Macpherson

Macpherson’s criticism of liberalism and capitalism is based on his concept of human nature. Capitalist market society permits the transfer of power, and thus the diminution of developmental power; it manipulates needs, neglecting true ones and creating false ones, and it meets only those needs that have the money to back them. Macpherson acknowledged that his crucial “developmental concept of power clearly depends on the adequacy of the concept of ‘essentially human capacities;’ ”⁴⁴ but his concept of human nature may not be adequately clear and unambiguous to do the critical job required of it. Laski had a clearer and more coherent concept of human fulfillment, based on the

38 Harold J. Laski, “What Socialism Means to Me,” *Labour Forum* 1 (1948), 18.

39 Michael Newman, *Harold Laski: A Political Biography* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1993), 293.

40 Laski, *The Rise of European Liberalism*, 239.

41 Herbert A. Deane, *The Political Ideas of Harold J. Laski* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1955).

42 W. H. Greenleaf, “Laski and British Socialism,” *History of Political Thought* 2 (1981), 573-91.

43 See Peter Lamb, “Laski on Sovereignty: Removing the Mask from Class Dominance,” *History of Political Thought* 18 (1997), 326-42.

44 Macpherson, *Democratic Theory*, 53.

notion of freedom of choice and autonomy. In striving to articulate his account of freedom, however, Laski never adequately escaped the problematic negative/positive dichotomy. Macpherson, on the other hand, did escape it, defining freedom in terms of developmental and extractive power. These respective strengths and weaknesses will now be examined.

Human Nature

For Macpherson, human nature incorporated the capacity for rational understanding, moral judgment and action, aesthetic creation and contemplation, friendship and love, religious experience, work, leisure and entertainment.⁴⁵ He held that the various capacities may be developed as ends in themselves, and he assumed, importantly, that all the essentially human characteristics may be developed harmoniously without necessary contradiction within any individual and between individuals.⁴⁶ Note, as partial support for this assumption, his argument that abandoning the postulates of scarcity and unlimited desire allows one to abandon also the postulate of the inherent and permanent contentiousness of humans.⁴⁷

Macpherson was fairly clear what the essentially human capacities are, but he was, perhaps, less clear about their status. The usual question about the status of human nature is whether it is a given and fixed essence, or something that is subject to change. Macpherson suggested “that the problem of needs and wants is both an ontological and a historical problem.”⁴⁸ That is, for Macpherson human nature was an essence, and this essence was change and development. It was a merit of the liberalism of Mill and Green that it recognized what the older liberalism of Bentham did not recognize: that the essential human capacities could develop and generate a higher range of wants. However, this developmental liberalism was not historical enough. It failed to recognize something that Marx knew very well: capitalist market society had shaped the impoverished range of human wants of the time. For Marx, the realization of fully human wants and needs would be possible only if humanity could overthrow capitalism and the alienation it produces. Macpherson noted, with seeming approval, that Marx’s future good society would provide “freedom for people to develop their own needs and wants in whatever ways they liked.” For

45 Ibid., 4 and 54; Macpherson, *The Real World of Democracy*, 38.

46 Macpherson, *Democratic Theory*, 54.

47 Ibid., 236.

48 C. B. Macpherson, “Needs and Wants: An Ontological or Historical Problem,” in Ross Fitzgerald, ed., *Human Needs and Politics* (Rushcutters Bay: Pergamon, 1977), 27.

Marx, this free “creative transformation of nature and of oneself and one’s relations with one’s fellows” was “the only truly human need.”⁴⁹

Macpherson criticized capitalism for frustrating the development of essential human capacities. But to substantiate this argument Macpherson would have needed to demonstrate clearly the distinction between proper development and improper change. In particular, he would have needed to distinguish the improper market manipulation of wants and the proper free development of fully human needs. Also, despite Macpherson’s assumption that all fully human capacities can be developed harmoniously, there surely can be no guarantee that all free individuals will choose compatible goals and life plans. Thus, in any better society beyond capitalism, it might be necessary to evaluate competing freely chosen wants and needs. Macpherson’s insistence that human nature is both ontological and historical presented him with the problem of showing clearly how the human essence could be developed for the better, as distinct from the worse. If, as Macpherson claimed, “the adequacy of a political theory is to be assessed by the penetration of its analysis of human nature,”⁵⁰ then it may be necessary to conclude that his own theory is not fully adequate.

Laski, who provided a more coherent argument that human fulfillment requires freedom for autonomous action, did not get entangled in the distinction between ontological needs (fixed in nature) and historical needs (developed freely by human action). He equated freedom with the pursuit of self-realization by autonomous individuals who respect the social good. After attempting rather confusingly in his early work to fuse elements of the work of Green and Lord Acton,⁵¹ he went on to argue in 1920 that self-realization may be found “not less in working for the common good than in the limited satisfaction of [the] narrow desire for material advancement.” “Our liberty,” he went on, “means the consistent expression of our personality in media where we find people like-minded with ourselves in their conception of social life. The very scale of civilisation implies collective plans and common effort.”⁵² Cautious, however, of the authority of the state, he argued the following year that the abstract monism of Green and Bosanquet did not “dissect the state in terms either of the functions it performs or of the way in which its task is in practice achieved.”⁵³

49 Ibid., 34.

50 Macpherson, *Democratic Theory*, 202.

51 Harold J. Laski, *Authority in the Modern State* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1919), 54-55 and 90-91.

52 Harold J. Laski, *Political Thought in England from Locke to Bentham* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1920), 238.

53 Harold J. Laski, “Recent Contributions to Political Science,” *Economica* 1 (1921), 87.

Laski was concerned with the nature of the individual. The individual is real to himself, Laski argued in 1930, “not by reason of the contacts he shares with others, but because he reaches those contacts through a channel which he alone can know.”⁵⁴ It is, he argued, only through isolated meditation that the true self contributes, in society with others, to the common good. Criticizing Idealism from his Marxist perspective five years later, he made a similar point: unity, he argued, “is not there as something given; it is made as men discover it by seeking similar ends. But the discovery is always a voyage made in isolation. It is private to me in a sense which means that no other person can be aware of its meaning save as I report upon it.”⁵⁵ Laski thus had a clearer view than Macpherson of human nature. The essence of the individual remained constant notwithstanding any outside influences. A collectivist society consistent with human nature would be one in which individuals recognized that their needs and aspirations could be met more equitably by their contributions to the social good. But Laski also stressed that individuals who are not prepared to act upon their insights “cease to be moral beings in any sense of the word that has meaning.”⁵⁶

Laski did, however, argue during the Second World War that human nature is malleable and subject to conditioning. The acquisitive society, in his view, “becomes merely one of the forms of social behaviour through which the impulses of man receive expression.”⁵⁷ This idea has distinct affinities with Macpherson’s argument that possessive individualism was built on a form of human nature conditioned by the rise of capitalism. But an important implicit point in Laski’s work is that the essence of human nature would always survive social conditioning. Claiming that it is “only in an intense caring for one’s fellow men that one attains to genuine possession of oneself, and thereby to freedom,” he stressed that this could only in fact be attained through the recognition of a universal humanity.⁵⁸ In this context, he described freedom as “the sense of a power in the ordinary citizen of self-affirmation.”⁵⁹

Laski thus linked human nature to freedom. But a problem with his work was that he was unsure how to define it. As we shall see, Macpherson provided a far clearer theory of freedom.

54 Harold J. Laski, *Liberty in the Modern State* (London: Faber and Faber, 1930), 25.

55 Laski, *The State in Theory and Practice*, 58.

56 *Ibid.*, 83.

57 Harold J. Laski, *Faith, Reason and Civilisation: An Essay in Historical Analysis* (London: Gollancz, 1944), 99-100.

58 *Ibid.*, 200.

59 *Ibid.*, 20 and 39.

Liberty

Although in *A Grammar of Politics* of 1925 Laski portrayed liberty as “a positive thing” which “does not merely mean absence of restraint,”⁶⁰ he countered Bosanquet’s theory that all state action exercises the real will of society. For Laski, this seemingly general will would involve the “paralysis of will,” as the citizen’s true self is “the self that is isolated from his fellows, and contributes the fruit of isolated meditation to the common good which, collectively, they seek to bring into being.”⁶¹ Laski’s individualism is thus evident even in his positive conception of liberty; the channels provided by the state for self-realization would have to allow individuals to determine their own paths and destinations.

Liberty, according to Laski, consisted “in nothing so much as the encouragement of the will based on the instructed conscience of humble men.” This necessitated citizens to have active minds, and be given both “the habit of thought” and “avenues through which thought can act.” The most efficient way to achieve this would be collectively, with democratic restraints on actions which impede the essential requisites of modern society. “It is,” he argued, “essential to freedom that the prohibitions issued should be built upon the will of those whom they affect. . . . If I have the sense that the orders issued are beyond my scrutiny or criticism, I shall be, in a vital sense, unfree.”⁶² Laski thus separated positive liberty from its potentially undemocratic implications. But in a new preface to *A Grammar of Politics* in 1930, he signalled baldly that he had abandoned the positive conception altogether, and had begun to adopt a negative interpretation. The rise of fascism indicated more clearly than ever the susceptibility of the positive conception to authoritarian manipulation.

Laski had always recognized the complexity of the concept of liberty, commenting in the early 1920s that liberty “seems to me an atmosphere which restrains the ruler and encourages the initiative of the subject.”⁶³ But it was not until an encyclopedia article of 1933 that he clarified his position: the “affirmation by an individual or group of his or its own essence” is, he argued, a permanent character of liberty. This required “on the negative side, the absence of restraint upon the exercise of that affirmation; and it demands on the positive the organisation of opportunities for the exercise of continuous initiative.”⁶⁴ The

60 Laski, *A Grammar of Politics*, 142.

61 *Ibid.*, 31.

62 *Ibid.*, 142–44.

63 *Ibid.*, 592.

64 Harold J. Laski, “Liberty,” in Edwin R. A. Seligman, ed., *Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences*, Vol. 9 (London: Macmillan, 1933), 444.

positive side was thus left open, and the opportunities to exercise initiative would have to be defended by law. Nevertheless, Laski had attempted in *Liberty in the Modern State* of 1930 to describe liberty in wholly negative terms as “the absence of restraint upon the existence of those social conditions which, in modern civilisation, are the necessary guarantees of happiness.” Liberty, he went on, is “essentially an absence of restraint. It implies power to expand, the choice by the individual of his own way of life without imposed prohibitions from without.”⁶⁵

Laski was clearly unable to escape the negative/positive dichotomy. He continued to wrestle with that dichotomy in the 1940s when, looking forward to a planned democracy after victory over fascism, he again described freedom in positive terms. In his view, the negative concept was employed in the existing order to “save the rights of owners from invasion.”⁶⁶ Unlike capitalist society, the planned democracy would conquer poverty, ignorance and disease, thus creating opportunities for the freedom of the many.⁶⁷ He might have conveyed his position more clearly had he been able to abandon the traditional positive/negative terminology.

Macpherson reformulated the negative/positive distinction in a way that was consistent with his conceptions of power and human development, and also largely with Laski’s views on the relationship of the individual, society and state. Macpherson challenged Berlin’s highly influential distinction between negative and positive liberty.⁶⁸ Defining negative liberty as the absence of restraint, Berlin included in restraint only direct physical obstruction; he excluded withholding the means of life or labour. As Macpherson suggested, Berlin did not see capitalism itself as a restraint on human freedom. Macpherson was, moreover, critical of Berlin’s purely abstract definition of positive liberty as the ability to form one’s own conscious purposes. By thus arguing that positive liberty, as metaphysical rationalism, was the enemy of real liberty, Berlin excluded the crucial matter of access to the means of life and labour.

Macpherson’s alternative division of liberty redefined negative liberty as “immunity from the extractive powers of others (including the state),” or “counter-extractive liberty.”⁶⁹ Genuine positive liberty, understood as “individual self-direction,” he redefined as “develop-

65 Laski, *Liberty in the Modern State*, 11.

66 Harold J. Laski, *Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1943), 356.

67 Harold J. Laski, “Choosing the Planners,” in G. D. H. Cole et al., *Plan for Britain* (London: Labour Book Service, 1943), 115.

68 Macpherson, *Democratic Theory*, 95-119.

69 *Ibid.*, 118.

mental liberty.”⁷⁰ As he suggested, the advantage of this reformulation of the division of liberty is that it makes clear that developmental liberty requires counter-extractive liberty, and does not negate it.

Later contributions to political theory also questioned the now traditional distinction between negative and positive liberty. Philip Pettit challenges Berlin’s distinction and presents what he terms a republican concept of freedom: “Freedom consists, not in the presence of self-mastery, and not in the absence of interference by others, but rather in the absence of mastery by others; in the absence, as I prefer to put it, of domination. Freedom just is non-domination.”⁷¹ Elsewhere, Pettit links freedom with justice, and the issue of redistribution. He argues that, whereas the negative concept of liberty, as the absence of interference, introduces a presumption against redistribution by treating it as interference, republican freedom does not. Redistributive measures may be justified by showing that they will achieve the reduction of arbitrary interference or domination, and so achieve greater freedom for the less advantaged.⁷² Pettit’s republican liberty is not, in general principle, incompatible with Macpherson’s revision of Berlin’s distinction between negative and positive liberty. The advantage of Macpherson’s concept of liberty is that it is quite specific about the features of capitalism which permit the transfer of power, and which permit domination to be exercised in modern society. It is also suggestive of how a better society, which does not permit extractive power, might be organized.

Conclusion

The projects of both Laski and Macpherson were bold, drawing not uncritically on two strong and distinct political traditions. It is this that gives the works of the two theorists their enduring attraction. Each avoided the mistake of assuming that ideologies develop within closed intellectual boundaries. Having examined the respective arguments

70 Ibid., 108 and 199.

71 Philip Pettit, “Republican Freedom and Contestatory Democracy,” in Ian Shapiro and Casiano Hacker-Cordon, eds., *Democracy’s Value* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 165. Pettit develops his concept of republican freedom at greater length in *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997). Quentin Skinner, who acknowledges the influence of Pettit (who in turn acknowledges the influence of Skinner), develops a similar concept which he prefers to term the “neo-Roman” theory of civil liberty. See Skinner, *Liberty Before Liberalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

72 Philip Pettit, “Republican Political Theory,” in Andrew Vincent, ed., *Political Theory: Tradition and Diversity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 125-28.

they developed from the perspectives they shared, we have shown that Macpherson is the stronger at dealing with the inadequacies of liberal theory and capitalist practice. But his failure to provide a convincing account of human nature is a problem that can be addressed with reference to the work of Laski. Laski, furthermore, paid more attention to the limits of liberalism; however, he never satisfactorily resolved the tension between negative and positive liberty. In this regard, Macpherson's reformulation of liberty in terms of power is more satisfactory.

Taken together, the works of Macpherson and Laski make interesting reading in the present ideological climate. Political experience at the beginning of the twenty-first century indicates a disillusionment with both Marxism and liberalism, or at least with certain manifestations and varieties of them. Certainly there is, following the collapse of communism in the Soviet Union and eastern Europe, no obvious desire to experience again authoritarian socialist politics and command economics. There is also widespread concern that neoliberal free-market policies implemented across the liberal democracies in the 1980s left in their wake significant problems. The attempts to apply liberal economic policies in the former communist countries have not always been happy experiences. Hence, it may be useful to consider the importance of Macpherson and Laski as critics of market capitalism.

Now that liberalism is under attack from alternative approaches such as communitarianism, we might consider the use by Macpherson and Laski of enduring liberal concepts such as liberty and individual development. Attempts to devise a third-way politics, between the extremes of old fashioned state socialism and neoliberalism, which are sometimes presented as a reformulation of social democracy are notoriously vague.⁷³ The abandonment of Marxism and the embrace of more pluralist perspectives has produced, in some theorists, not a reconciliation of older ideologies, but, rather, postmodernist ideas and theories of doubtful political relevance.⁷⁴ The focus of the postmodernist left upon identity is pursued at the expense of rethinking the broader problems of human equality and liberty.⁷⁵ The work of Laski and Macpherson, we argue, contains the resources for a clear analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of liberalism and Marxism, and of the possibilities for reconciliation of the two ideologies.

73 See Anthony Giddens, *The Third Way* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998), and *The Third Way and its Critics* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000).

74 To choose only one example, this is true of Ernesto Laclau, whose work includes *Emancipations* (London: Verso, 1996), which lacks clear political application.

75 Boris Kagarlitsky, *The Return of Radicalism: Reshaping the Left Institutions* (London: Pluto, 2000), 40-97.