**Harold Laski’s International Functionalism: A Socialist Challenge to Federalism**

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**Length of article: 12000 words**

This is an Author's Accepted Manuscript of an article published in *The International History Review*, DOI: 10.1080/07075332.2018.1425892 on 30 January 2018, copyright Taylor & Francis, available online at: <http://www.tandfonline.com/> [Article DOI: 10.1080/07075332.2018.1425892].

**Abstract**

Harold Laski argued for international functionalism from his distinctive socialist perspective. He opposed the existing international system based on the principle of state sovereignty. He also criticised the international federalism proposed as an alternative to the existing system. Although Laski began to devise and present his functionalist case in the 1920s, the circumstances of the following decade led him to adopt and adapt some Marxist ideas and to place less emphasis on functionalism. During and after the Second World War he reconsidered the possibilities for international functional organisation. Although fragmented and undeveloped, his functionalist theory was innovative. By the end of the 1940s he had expressed it in a variety of publications as he reflected on the international conditions of that decade. Unlike what is probably the most well-known functionalist case of the early to mid-twentieth century—that of David Mitrany—Laski’s argument bears affinities with the later neofunctionalist theorists. Laski’s functionalism was underpinned by the critique of sovereignty which made his political philosophy distinctive. Reasons can be detected for the changes in his attitude to and emphasis on functionalism.

**Keywords**

Laski, socialism, functionalism, sovereignty, federalism

**Acknowledgement**

The author delivered an earlier version of this paper to the international workshop *“Global elite knowledge networks and Anglo-American power: think tanks, foundations and universities and the new world order, 1940-1990*” in London at the LSE and City University on 4-5 November 2016.

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**1. Introduction**

In the 1940s a range of thinkers of the British left voiced recommendations for the future of international organization. This article will discuss a significant contribution from Harold Laski—his internationalist functionalism, which explored the possibilities for far-reaching reform and the diminishment of the principle of sovereignty. Although he began to express functionalist ideas in the 1920s, he never presented an extended and thorough argument for the measures he considered necessary for the reforms to be carried out or, indeed, for them to succeed. There is, nevertheless, amongst Laski’s writings of the 1940s a fragmented but resonant case for a new world order to replace what he considered to be the highly unjust one blown apart by the Second Word War.

For several decades after his death in 1950 the standard interpretation of Laski’s intellectual development was that of a series of clear pluralist, Fabian and Marxist stages.[[1]](#endnote-1) This orthodoxy was challenged in the last decade of the twentieth century and the first decade of the twenty-first by more sympathetic Laski scholars who identified a strand of continuity which survived the changes in his ideas. This continuity contributed to Laski’s rich and complex political and international thought.[[2]](#endnote-2) His international functionalism, which however faint it sometimes became is an example of such continuity, has been mentioned briefly in some of the literature on his thought and has also occasionally received closer attention.[[3]](#endnote-3) The reasons why functionalism appeared only sporadically in Laski’s work, as he experienced the political and international events of the early to mid-twentieth century, has, however, yet to be analysed in any detail.

Laski’s political and international thought changed in a way which mirrored the growing pessimism detectable in his reflections on inter-war world affairs. His political thought clung to as much of the early pluralism as he thought feasible, whilst introducing a necessarily greater role for the state—but a state from which the mask of sovereignty would have been removed, thus requiring that state to earn rather than simply assume and demand legitimacy.[[4]](#endnote-4) The strong state combined with a scheme for functional distribution of power and authority was an alternative to federalism within states and in international relations. His interlinking political and international ideas helped enrich the latter with innovative analysis.[[5]](#endnote-5)

It is worthwhile to return to and indeed revive Laski’s international functionalism almost 70 years since his death for two main reasons. First, it was undeveloped in his writings for reasons that will be explored in this article. In turn the treatment of his political and international thought, including studies by the present author, have only considered his international functionalism briefly. Second, and more importantly, the revival helps illustrate that, notwithstanding the declarations of his socialism and Marxism that Laski sometimes made, his thought does not fit neatly into those or any other ideological categories which focus on core, shared tenets. Laski’s distinctive ideas which bear close affinities to later neofunctionalist theory could, had he developed them further, have helped position him among the pioneering theorists in the history of international thought.

To appreciate the distinctiveness of Laski’s argument it will be useful to contrast his ideas with those of British internationalists of the 1940s, such as Barbara Wootton and Olaf Stapledon who were members—in Wootton’s case a key member—of the Federal Union and the most prominent functionalist David Mitrany. The Federal Union was a pressure group which aimed to influence policy-makers. The contrast with Wootton and Stapledon is significant because, whilst like Laski they were socialists, they advocated territorial federalism, which was a principle of organisation that Laski strongly opposed. Moreover, they presented their federalist ideas in a way which rested on the utopianism which Laski considered a weakness of international federalism. As Or Rosenboim makes clear, Wootton, writing from her social-democratic position, presented ideas on federalism which contrast sharply with those of distinctly non-socialist Federal Union members such as Frederick von Hayek.[[6]](#endnote-6) Laski not only criticised territorial federalism, but also argued from a more radical socialist position than Wootton.

Another prominent socialist who explored federalist and functionalist options was G.D.H. Cole. As Leonie Holthaus notes, however, in a detailed article on his socialist internationalism, ‘Cole’s post-war strategy lacked … any suggestions for speciﬁc reforms to international institutions’.[[7]](#endnote-7) This reflects a difference between Cole and Laski noted by David Long: Laski had firmer beliefs in the legitimate political functions to be performed by the state in both domestic politics and international relations. Laski also had a stronger centralising tendency.[[8]](#endnote-8) This tendency reflects the opposition to territorial federalism—opposition which became a feature of Laski’s political thought of the late 1930s and 1940s. Cole and several other thinkers of the left will be mentioned below, to help situate Laski’s thought in its environment.

It was, indeed, not unusual for thinkers of the left to make the case for a new world order. Hence, many such thinkers may have been surprised to hear Laski argue that most socialists had hitherto been insufficiently internationalist to bring about that new order. Laski’s position was, however, distinctive. His critical approach to political theory led him to experiment with innovative strategies from which he attempted to find the most suitable for the level to which he turned his attention, whether this be local, regional, state or international.[[9]](#endnote-9) In some cases moreover, especially and significantly in his critical analysis of state sovereignty, this involved investigation at more than one level, thus transcending on the one hand politics within states and on the other hand international relations.[[10]](#endnote-10) Socialists, he contended, needed the confidence to insist that knowledge of the world need not be constrained by the old consensus. They would thus be able to promote a new understanding of international relations which, if widely accepted, could be the basis for the gradual introduction of the new world order.

Laski’s case for functionalism was, however, after the early 1930s sketchy and incomplete. Perhaps one reason for this is that he lacked the confidence which, he suggested, other socialists should grow. In his more politically-oriented rather than academic writings he tended to avoid mention of functionalism. He was pessimistic regarding the acceptability of such fundamental changes as the abolition of sovereignty and distribution of functions to non-territorial institutions. ‘No one’, he suggested in his public lecture *Nationalism and the Future of Civilization* in 1932, ‘who realizes how painfully the nation-state was born, how important were the needs it once served, can imagine that its hold upon the allegiance of men can be radically disturbed, as it were, overnight.’[[11]](#endnote-11) While he nevertheless continued in his attempt to unmask sovereignty and thus help persuade people that it should be abolished, functionalism was barely evident in his work for remainder of the decade. At a time, furthermore, when fascism was spreading though much of Europe, with war a looming outcome, experimentation with functionalism was not an immediate priority.

During and after the war Laski intermittently reintroduced functionalist ideas. His combination of a strong state with functional distribution bore similarities to what later came to be known as neofunctionalism. In order to locate his ideas in context of the relevant strands of twentieth century international thought, the next section considers just what federalism, functionalism and neofunctionalism involve. By employing the term ‘neofunctionalism’ to distinguish Laski’s functionalist theory from that of Mitrany, the attempt to locate them neatly into broad ideological categories such as liberalism and Marxism, which on their own hinder rather than help foster the understanding of their international ideas, will be avoided. The section will also offer brief accounts of some of the contributions of the most relevant theorists, thus outlining the intellectual environment. After that, there is a section which discusses the evolution of Laski’s political and international thought in order to illustrate the grounds of his functionalism. Thereafter, before the conclusion, a key section focuses on his renewed interest in functionalism after the Second World War, and the reasons for this development in his thought. It was in this later period that he presented some of his most resonant functionalist ideas.

**2. Federalism, Functionalism and Neofunctionalism**

Federalism as a form of government divides power and authority between national and geographically arranged subnational units. Although theories resembling federalism have circulated for many centuries, the framers of the American republic in the eighteenth century, Thomas Madison and Alexander Hamilton, argued successfully for the first modern federal state. The case for international federalism was made by Immanuel Kant in that century. In the twentieth century arguments for federal systems of states eventually led to the establishment of the European Union. Whether state sovereignty is ceded or divided in such systems is a topic of debate.[[12]](#endnote-12)

As alternatives to federalism in which sovereignty is passed at least in part from national to other bases, functionalist theories of international government challenge the very principle of sovereignty. Having ceded their sovereignty, states would collaborate to devolve power and authority to a range of functional units. This would be accomplished gradually, over various fields and activities. A range of specialised functional institutions would thus be formed, some on a regional basis and others on a worldwide scale. The habits of cooperation would be nurtured, meaning greater efficiency in the way functions are administered and the maintenance of international peace.[[13]](#endnote-13)Mitrany had begun to offer his functional approach to international politics in the 1930s.[[14]](#endnote-14) This was, as will be discussed below, after Laski and Leonard Woolf had done so. Governments and political processes should, Mitrany agreed, be analysed in terms of their performance of social functions. Whilst uncomfortable with political ideology and party membership Mitrany had, nevertheless, served with Laski on the Labour Party’s Advisory Committee on International Questions (ACIQ) until 1931, after which to continue to so would require party membership.[[15]](#endnote-15) Mitrany preferred to consider himself as one who could bring together useful ideas from different ideological persuasions.[[16]](#endnote-16) In the 1940s he retained his links with the left through his work with the Fabian Society.[[17]](#endnote-17) His variant of functionalism has traditionally been portrayed as liberal left. The liberal elements of his thought were, however, combined with perhaps stronger anarchist ones resulting from his early study of revolutions in South-East Europe carried out by peasants who wanted little if any interference from the state.[[18]](#endnote-18)

During the Second World War, Mitrany opposed federalist arguments for international reform as they would attempt to bring together, into a whole system, units that were not always compatible. He continued to argue that a far more effective strategy would be to build an international network of functional units.[[19]](#endnote-19) After the war Mitrany argued that the newly formed United Nations (UN), as a loose organisation of sovereign states, would not be able to take social or economic action on its own authority. A problem, however, with the international federal alternative was, he argued, that it would involve a rigid distribution, set out in a written constitution, of powers between territorial authorities of equal status.[[20]](#endnote-20) Federal government was thus by nature conservative and legalistic. Whilst any attempt to give a supranational government greater power would be anything but dynamic, a laggard federal grouping would be useless for the purposes of providing an alternative to the existing system. Such a weak federation, in which activities remained in the hands of national members, would be little more than a replica of the UN. The true choice was ‘not between the present competitive nationalisms and a lame international federation but between a full-fledged and comprehensive world government and equally full-fledged but specific and separate functional agencies’.[[21]](#endnote-21)

Mitrany thus did not see any prospect for such a combination of functional organisation and supranationalism as Laski was proposing. Commenting in 1971 on the neofunctionalist theories which combined functionalism and supranationalism, Mitrany suggested that they amounted not to ‘a “neo-functionalism”, as these efforts have been dubbed, but a *semi*-functionalism; with one half, the process, new in parts, but the ultimate prospect stuck firmly in the old sovereign-territorial concept of political organisation’.[[22]](#endnote-22) The appropriate functional approach, the characteristics of which could ‘help to mitigate the obstinate problem of equal sovereignty’, was, Mitrany argued in 1948, ‘not a matter of surrendering sovereignty, but merely of surrendering so much of it as may be needed for the joint performance of the particular task’.[[23]](#endnote-23) Mitrany consciously omitted any mention of the socialist tenets that had been crucial to the work of the functionalist pioneers Laski, Cole and R.H. Tawney. As Mitrany’s name became associated with functionalism, functionalism came to be linked with liberalism.[[24]](#endnote-24)

Federalism had, meanwhile, by the early 1940s become the subject of much political debate, including Melville Chaning-Pearce’s edited volume *Federal Union: A Symposium* in 1940 which, as will be discussed in a moment, included what might be considered as a utopian essay on federalism and socialism, written by the British philosopher and science fiction writer Olaf Stapledon. In his introduction Chaning-Pearce noted that the influential movement for federal union argued that national sovereignty led to anarchy and war.[[25]](#endnote-25) A federal union of the peoples, featuring government with the consent of the governed, was required for peace, justice and freedom for all. National self-government would be assured constitutionally in affairs solely of the national interest, while political organs representative of all citizens of the union would be introduced for affairs relevant to all. A nucleus of established democracies would grow into a world federation that would promote international cooperation.[[26]](#endnote-26)

The movement for federalism which had been growing since the late 1930s included the Federal Union in the United Kingdom. The Union’s research institute was supported by intellectuals of various ideological persuasions including Wootton who, as a socialist, often disagreed with most other prominent figures, thus making its political stance inconclusive.[[27]](#endnote-27) Other federalists on the British left included Henry Noel Brailsford and perhaps surprisingly, given that as mentioned earlier he also sometimes advocated functionalism, Cole.[[28]](#endnote-28) By the 1940s Cole had abandoned functionalism as a general principle, instead only considering it useful for particular cases such as underdevelopment.[[29]](#endnote-29) Stapledon is of particular significance because of his contribution to the cause of the Federal Union.[[30]](#endnote-30) Perhaps still more significant was, as will be discussed below, his utopianism.

Later thinkers who became known as neofunctionalists, such as Ernst B. Haas and Phillipe C. Schmitter revised functionalism in a way that sought to avoid its utopian elements. Functionalism had underestimated the importance of interest politics, which, according to Haas, needed to be channelled into an international system of integration.[[31]](#endnote-31) Haas argued that, through functional activity among representatives of states and other groups, supranational organizations could gradually emerge and develop. A key feature of this process was that of spillover. The different functionalist activities did not necessarily all operate together in a purposeful fashion aiming towards such organizations. Furthermore, background conditions made spillover and the development of the organization more likely to happen in some regions of the world than others. Writing in the early years of the European Communities, he argued that Western Europe was the region most likely to produce supranationalism.[[32]](#endnote-32)

As Schmitter, spelt out clearly, ‘spillover’ referred to the process whereby, for various motives, members of an integration scheme agree on some collective goals, but are unequally satisfied with their attainment, and attempt to resolve the dissatisfaction by one of three means: ‘resorting to collaboration in another, related sector (expanding the scope of the mutual commitment) or by intensifying their commitment to the original sector (increasing the level of mutual commitment) or both’.[[33]](#endnote-33) At the lowest level of commitment to collective decision-making, representatives of states agree to negotiate ways to achieve mutual benefits. The highest level, which would be the most conducive to spillover, would be an agreement among political actors of various sorts ‘to devolve permanently control over a policy area to some autonomous supranational body’.[[34]](#endnote-34) In favourable circumstances, the likelihood of national participants to either withdraw from or resist the expansion of regional integration schemes should decrease.[[35]](#endnote-35)

As will be discussed later in this article, after the Second World War Laski had, prefiguring neofunctionalism, proposed a centralisation of functions combined with functional redistribution of power and authority. This was a position that developed gradually in his thought. The roots can be traced in work during and in the period between the two world wars.

**3. The evolution of Laski’s political and international thought***Laski’s early writings*

Born in Manchester, England in 1893, Laski began his academic career in Canada and the United States before moving in 1920 to the London School of Economics (LSE), where he took the chair in Government five years later. His pluralist writings during and after the First World War centred on a socialist functionalist position, advocating greater control by workers in their industries. Anarchist elements can be detected in the early work of Laski, who, among other English pluralist writers such as J.N. Figgis and Cole, argued for the distribution of considerable activity to functional groups, including workers organised in trade unions. Laski, however, always insisted that the state should retain some authority, and so combined anarchist tendencies with socialist ones.[[36]](#endnote-36) In the 1920s he became a prominent figure of the British left in debates regarding international government.[[37]](#endnote-37) The international aspect first appeared in his published work in 1925, in his well-known book *A Grammar of Politics*, which was republished several times over the decades that followed.

Laski’s anarchist tendencies became far less prominent from the mid-1920s. In the following decade he adopted a broadly Marxist stance, albeit one that combined with democratic socialist and radical pluralist elements retained and revised from his earlier thought. His centralising tendency mentioned by Long is significant in this respect. Unlike Mitrany, Laski, as a socialist, believed that *laissez faire* economics had consequences which required the intervention of the state.[[38]](#endnote-38) Laski’s belief in the need for socialist planning was, nevertheless, distinctive on the left because of his insistence that this must include a system of decentralisation of functions allowing for far wider participation than that of the existing system. The trade unions would have a key role in organising industries. [[39]](#endnote-39) His functionalism led him to develop a critical approach to the League of Nations.

*Laski’s changing view of the League of Nations*

By the mid-1920s Laski had become unconvinced of the effectiveness of the newly formed League of Nations but prepared nevertheless to lend his support. He considered what the League might realistically be able to achieve amidst the international instability of the times. In his writings from 1915 until the early 1920s the critique of the sovereign state had been central to his pluralist political philosophy, which advocated the distribution of political power to geographical and functional organisations within states.[[40]](#endnote-40) During that time the Fabian socialist Leonard Woolf had begun to apply functionalist ideas to the analysis of international relations.[[41]](#endnote-41) In 1925 Laski too began, in *Grammar of Politics*, to apply the principle of functional political organisation to the international domain, stressing that the world was undergoing fundamental change. ‘The interests of men’ were ‘less and less set by the geographical frontiers of the nation-State’. ‘Social organisation’ had ‘transcended those limited boundaries’.[[42]](#endnote-42) The consumer had come to realise that ‘he is a world-citizen whether he likes it or not’. He summarised the situation as follows:

The whole world has been reduced at least to the unity of interdependence; and the politicians of Tokio [sic] make social decisions not less momentous for New York than those of Chicago or Washington. And this physical mutuality is supported by an economic system the mere description of which is so intricate that specialists hardly agree either upon its character or the results of its working.[[43]](#endnote-43)

The principle and practice of state sovereignty needed, hence, to be undermined. Just as some political decisions would have to be made at functional and regional levels within states, decisions on issues transcending state boundaries should be made at international levels. In the long final chapter of the book he offered a detailed proposal for the institutions of the League to be reformed, including distribution of significant powers to commissions dealing with social, political and economic functions.[[44]](#endnote-44)

At this stage Laski believed that the League could, through further development, provide the foundations for a new, democratic world order.[[45]](#endnote-45) This further development would, nevertheless, need to get to the heart of a deep-seated problem—that of sovereignty. Interdependence, he argued, exposed the problem of employing sovereignty as a principle of international politics. Sovereign authority required the unqualified allegiance of citizens to their states and was incompatible with the interests and well-being of humanity. Such well-being required a system of international government through which the common life of states would be a matter of common agreement. The League, comprising sovereign states, was thus no more than a foundation.[[46]](#endnote-46) He challenged the principle that international order must be built around a system of cooperating sovereign states.[[47]](#endnote-47) His view became more pessimistic in the 1930s as the frailties of the League became more visible.

In the preface to his short *book An Introduction to Politics* published in 1931, Laski informed readers that some of the views discussed had been ‘more fully set out in my *Grammar of Politics*’[[48]](#endnote-48). Indeed, this shorter book included a final chapter on international government. Whilst it did not include a detailed discussion of a functional scheme, it did state the following. ‘We have to make a functional theory of society in which power is organised for ends which are clearly implied in the materials we are compelled to use…The sovereignty of the state in the world to which we belong is as obsolete as the sovereignty of the Roman Church was three hundred years ago.’[[49]](#endnote-49) His claim that the sovereignty of the Roman church had become obsolete in the seventeenth century can be clarified by his notes for a lecture at the LSE in the 1930s on the Conciliar Movement of the fifteenth century, with which, he argued, modern political thought began. The thinkers of the movement, he suggested, asked the same questions we ask today including, importantly, regarding the nature and conditions of social obedience: why should A obey B? Although there were nationalist and constitutionalist pressures from different parts of Europe, the papacy was victorious resulting in the maintenance of ultramontanism and greater centralisation; but the conciliar movement had brought constitutional pressures to prominence, questioned papal sovereignty and thus made the path ready for Luther the following century.[[50]](#endnote-50) The challenge to the principle of sovereignty remained as a prominent element of Laski’s political and international thought.

By the early 1930s recent events in British politics and society, including the general strike of 1926, had dented Laski’s optimism regarding political reform. In 1931 the electoral defeat of Ramsay MacDonald’s Labour government, following an economic and political crisis in which the king asked MacDonald to form a national government, persuaded Laski that the British political system was weighted towards the defence of capitalist vested interests. His faith in the prospects for democratic socialism in the country was dented.[[51]](#endnote-51) Some of Laski’s correspondence of the period help illustrate the effect of the crisis on his thought. His letters to MacDonald in 1929 early 1930 were enthusiastic about the latter’s performance in government and optimistic regarding the weeks and year to come. During the crisis, however, whilst visiting the United States, Laski wrote several letters to his wife Frida commenting very critically on MacDonald’s negotiations with the Liberal leader David Lloyd George about the formation of a government. Laski opined that the best thing would be for Labour to spend some time in opposition, and commented that MacDonald had taken all the life out of the party. After Labour’s heavy defeat at the election of 1931 Laski conceded to the Fabian Society secretary Frank Galton that he found the result devastating.[[52]](#endnote-52) As he reflected on this and other events in capitalist countries in the late 1920s and early 1930s Laski came to see the British case as an episode in a broader crisis for democracy.[[53]](#endnote-53) In a period of capitalist decline, democracy was expendable. For Laski, Hitler’s seizure of power in Germany in 1933 served as further evidence that democracy and freedom were giving way to the upholding of the capitalist order.[[54]](#endnote-54) These events convinced him that Marxism provided the strongest resources for the analysis of capitalism.[[55]](#endnote-55)

In the early to mid-1930s Laski’s international thought shifted gradually leftwards. In August 1931, at a conference in Geneva, he continued to stress, as he had in *A Grammar of Politics*, that the view of states as ‘the final term in the institutional equation’ was ‘necessarily obsolete’.[[56]](#endnote-56) He insisted at the conference that the business of government should be the satisfaction of human individual need. In order to realise their potential men and women would require a world community to make their rights effective by means of international law. The form this community should take should be determined ‘through the study of the functions it must undertake’.[[57]](#endnote-57) To leave nation-states to act as they deemed fit in areas and issues of common interests would, sooner or later, result in conflict. It was thus necessary ‘to find the concepts of cosmopolitan thinking as the very basis of security for civilized existence’.[[58]](#endnote-58) His international functionalist approach recognised the growing intensity and complexity of human relations. He could understand why the view of the state as sovereign had been reasonably intelligible until now, as the reciprocal relations of states had by and large been intermittent and irregular in character. Ideas such as the sovereign state and the national state had, however, now ‘reached their apogée’ and no longer reflected the real world.[[59]](#endnote-59) The law of a new society, which would be binding upon its individual members, should be guided by a philosophy that would ‘begin by postulating the society of states, the *civitas maxima* in which all have their being, as the source from which the competence of all individual states is derived’.[[60]](#endnote-60) This new system would ‘represent the abandonment of the hypothesis of sovereignty’ and give substance to the idea of international equality.[[61]](#endnote-61) It was thus important to stress that the sovereign character attributed to the state was, basically, a fiction. Before the fundamental political changes could be completed, however, capitalism, which was inextricably linked to conflict and unable to solve the problems of inequality, would have to be uprooted and replaced by an international egalitarian economic system. There should, he argued, also be experimentation ‘with the possibilities of functional devolution’. Cotton, coal, wheat and gold should, like territorial areas, be units of governance linked with the operations of the League.[[62]](#endnote-62) By thus clinging to the League, however much he insisted on the need for its reform, his growing radicalness had not yet extended to the recommendation that the mainstream international order should be uprooted in its entirety.

As he experienced the League’s decline in the 1930s Laski argued that state sovereignty was a means of class dominance. Sovereignty could serve this purpose because it had come to imply unity within states, thereby drawing attention away from significant internal divisions. The corollary of this vision of societal unity which the concept of sovereignty engendered was an understanding of the world as a system of states which, each similarly independent and unified, existed in a natural situation of competition, imperialist exploitation and, when necessary, conflict. [[63]](#endnote-63) In 1933, two years after his lecture in Geneva, he described sovereignty as an anachronism and argued that an international society of non-sovereign units was needed.[[64]](#endnote-64) The main causes of war were economic ones. Under capitalism the power of the state would always be exploited for the advantage of the few, and war would always be an instrument of state-policy; but even an international system of socialist states would not, of itself, mean that war would become a thing of the past. ‘Until’, he went on, ‘we recognise that an interdependent economic world, whatever the internal organisation of its constituent part, is incompatible with a system of political units which bear no relation to that inescapable unity, we shall have left untouched the central cause of war’.[[65]](#endnote-65) Although capitalism would always bring about war, it was not the sole cause of war. Capitalism needed to be uprooted; but socialism was a necessary but not sufficient condition for peace. He continued to express this belief throughout the 1930s, including in his book *The State in Theory and Practice* of 1935. As he put it in that book: ‘A society of socialist states is in a position, to which no other order of life can pretend, to consider its economic problems upon a basis of genuine mutuality and goodwill. [[66]](#endnote-66) Meanwhile, his view of functionalism as a solution to the problem of sovereignty faded. He became, it seems, pessimistic about the acceptability of functionalism and his view of political priorities changed in response to political and international developments.

In 1938 in a new edition of *A Grammar of Politics* the main text remained almost identical to the first edition. It now, however, included a substantial introductory chapter reviewing the book’s arguments in the light of events of the 1930s. Fascism had spread through Europe, abolishing or suppressing socialist politics and trade unionism and dissolving the marriage between capitalism and democracy.[[67]](#endnote-67) In international relations fascism was providing a stark illustration that in a world dominated by capitalism the League was hindered by the existence of sovereign states. Just as democracy within states was expendable, so too was international law independent of the will of the powerful states. Collective security could not be achieved in such circumstances. Power politics expressed the modern relationships of states, ‘and power politics cannot give rise to a social order in which international law has a status independent of the states that assent to it’.[[68]](#endnote-68) Without such a status powerful states would withdraw such assent when they considered it in their interests to do so.

Laski’s ideas regarding international functionalism were not mentioned in the new introductory chapter to *A Grammar of Politics* in 1938. His main concern was now with the problems that had developed for the existing international system. A plan he offered the following year to the Labour Party NEC to address the problem still did not mention international functionalism. The immediate priority was that of replacing the system of sovereign states with a new form of international government but, functionalism, it seemed, would have to wait.

Laski offered his proposal to the Labour NEC just after the National government in the United Kingdom had attempted to avert war with Germany by pledging to defend Poland against Hitler’s aggression. Laski was aware, however, that the crisis was by no means over and that war with Germany was likely. The National government had allowed the crisis to deepen by appeasing Hitler before eventually stating its guarantee for Poland. The League’s principle of collective security had clearly failed as sovereign states had continued to engage in power politics. To avert a major war, Laski believed that urgent and far-reaching change was necessary. The British Labour Party should thus declare that the whole principle of national sovereignty would need to go. This would require the conditions which impelled states to maintain that principle to be changed. Labour should thus propose a union of all European states which would commit to the following actions.

I, to pool their sovereignties; II, to maintain the democratic form of government; III, to guarantee…the essential civil liberties of their peoples; IV, to pool their defence forces for the purpose of mutual security; V, to plan their collective economic life on the basis of a common currency and a customs union; VI, to arrange for the rapid transfer to national ownership of the vital instruments of production with reasonable compensation to existing owners; VII, to internationalise within the union the ownership of colonies…(a) to safeguard native rights and (b) to develop colonies as rapidly as possible…[so] they may become self-governing entities within the union; VIII, to provide by way of loan for a great scheme of international public works…[in] the transition from a war to a peace economy; IX, to develop a common international policy in conjunction with such non-European powers as are prepared to accept these principles.[[69]](#endnote-69)

Although Laski now believed from his broadly Marxist outlook that sovereignty served to underpin the vested economic interests, an article he published in 1939 indicates his belief that those states, aware that their destruction was imminent from either hostile states or uprisings from their own working classes, would agree to some form of compromise. This was his doctrine of revolution by consent.[[70]](#endnote-70)

Although Laski’s proposal for the Labour Party National Executive Committee (NEC) lacked any reference to functionalism, he was clearly not advocating international federalism either. This reflects his continuing opposition to federalism within states. In the same year that he offered his proposal he argued that in the era of capitalist decline federalism was obsolete in the US political system because a strong central government was necessary to safeguard the interests of the populace in general. The federal system had produced a situation in which some states, dominated as they were by the capitalist interests of big business, hindered attempts by progressive presidents to govern in the interests of all. Approximately two-thirds of the way through the article he announced that he was ‘not arguing that the administration of government services ought to be centralized’.[[71]](#endnote-71) He offered no indication of what sort of system should replace federalism. It seems he was careful not to offer advice on systemic political change which might damage the prospects of radical reform. The absence of functionalism in his international proposals seems likewise to indicate concern, given the likely opposition to such radical reform from capitalist interests, not to damage the chance of achieving revolution by consent. His published work during and after the Second World War indicates, however, that while he had turned his attention to the more urgent necessities he had not abandoned functionalism.

*Laski’s internationalism in the 1940s*

Laski continued to work academically and politically in the 1940s at a rate that belied his failing health. For many years he served on the Labour Party’s ACIQ. During the Second World War he worked on the International Sub-Committee of the party’s NEC, which took the ACIQ’s place.[[72]](#endnote-72) While continuing to see sovereignty in terms of class dominance and artificial unity, he began to express more overtly his uncertainty regarding the best geographical organisation for international society. In 1940 he considered in *Where Do We Go From Here?* whether this should involve world-wide expression, as in the League, ‘or whether it should attempt the more modest form of a series of regional systems of states closely linked by territorial contiguity, or whether the second may best be built within the framework of the first, I do not pretend to decide’.[[73]](#endnote-73) What was nevertheless clear was that the complexity of world government would be far greater than had been imagined in the days of the League. He began to believe once again that functionalism of some sort was necessary. There would be ‘some functions which will require territorial organs operating over a special and relatively narrow area, while others will require ad hoc bodies whose power of decision controls all activities universally within the area with which it is concerned’.[[74]](#endnote-74) His functionalist ideas were thus enquiries rather than theories. This would remain the case for the remainder of his life.

In 1943, as he continued to deliberate on the best form of international organisation, Laski declared that he had learned much from E.H. Carr’s *Conditions of Peace* published the previous year.[[75]](#endnote-75) By this time Carr, after decades of ideological prevarication, had adopted a social democratic stance.[[76]](#endnote-76) In the final chapter Carr offered a proposal for the future of Europe that, in retrospect, bears affinities to later neofunctionalist theories.[[77]](#endnote-77) As will be discussed below, this could also be said of Laski’s book *Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time*, in which he declared he had learned from Carr. He was more attentive than Carr to the obstacles to be overcome. First, there were the problems of reconciling cultural nationalisms; second, there was the danger that federations would adopt autarchy; third, each of several federations may be concerned only with the prosperity of their own citizens. What was necessary, Laski suggested, was the ‘partial correlation of functions’.[[78]](#endnote-78)

For this purpose, in *Reflections* *on the Revolution of Our Time* Laski proposed a world-wide society of nations which, while being governed by an international executive, legislature, judiciary and civil service, would allocate units of governance and administration to each particular function taking into consideration its special characteristics. In some cases, such as transport and the electricity supply, a unit of governance as large as Europe would be appropriate. For aviation and currency, a worldwide unit would be better. Functions such as education, the medical service and wireless may, however, require units of governance no wider than the national state. A large-scale effort by the society of nations would be required for the development of the poorer countries and the liquidation of political and economic imperialism. A problem was, however, that imperialist exploitation was lucrative for those with vested interests—especially when imperialism was backed up by a major power.[[79]](#endnote-79)

Laski was thus concerned in *Reflections on the Revolution of Our Tim*e to present (slipping into gendered vocabulary typical of the period) ‘less the description of a possible pattern of international government than the analysis of the central conditions without which, as I think, the idea of international government is no more than a conceptual toy with which men may play’.[[80]](#endnote-80) There would need to be an economics of plenty and crucially the use of the favourable moment to begin the process of organisation. Although, however, humans had common ends, ‘at every step, the methods those ends require are in conflict with powerful vested interests which do not easily consent to abdicate’.[[81]](#endnote-81) He was thus still acutely aware that the problems of implementing a functionalist scheme in international relations would be immense, especially if the purpose was to ensure that decision-making at the different levels was to be genuinely accountable to the citizens affected. He came, nevertheless, to believe that war-time unity amongst the allied states offered a temporary opportunity for policy makers to accept, rationally, that the capitalist system was in terminal decline. Revolution by consent was, thus, still for him possible. There was no guarantee of success, especially given that the democratic organisation which was needed to make international government accountable and effective would be opposed by counter revolutionary force.[[82]](#endnote-82) ‘For’, he stressed, ‘the purpose of democracy is to enlarge the number of those who share in the benefits of available welfare by enlarging the number of those to whom the rulers of society are responsible’.[[83]](#endnote-83) He was aware that this would be anathema to the vested interests whose influence over those rulers would not easily be broken.

Laski was aware of the immensity of the obstacles to the implementation of the programme, but expressed hope during the war-years that those in power would see the need to cooperate in peaceful evolutionary change and thus to save what they could of the old arrangements.[[84]](#endnote-84) ‘Such a programme as this’, he suggested in his essay ‘The Need for A European Revolution’ in 1941, ‘would begin, peacefully, the readjustment of the relations of production to the forces of production.’[[85]](#endnote-85) He conceded that he was not confident the programme would prove acceptable. It is perhaps not too unfair to say that this position had amounted to clutching at straws. The temporary opportunity, if in fact real, soon expired untaken. Nevertheless, undaunted in the post-war era, he continued to consider the prospects for a functionalist new world order. If he had been too hopeful that those in power would, as he saw it, see reason in the situation of the war, perhaps his internationalist socialism and functionalism still raised some enquires regarding international organization the significance of which transcended the particular circumstances of the Second World War. He continued to hint at the changes that should be attempted, and at why federalism was unsuitable, but without offering detailed analysis.

*Laski and the socialist federalists*

Chaning-Pearce’s symposium on Federal Union included Stapledon’s essay ‘Federalism and Socialism’. Stapledon saw federalism as the solution to the capitalist competitive exploitation, international anarchy, recurrent wars and thus insecurity that prevented humans from ‘having the opportunity of expressing such capacity as they have for full or truly human living’.[[86]](#endnote-86) To have such lives people would need to be ‘well-fed, well-clothed, well-housed, educated for responsible citizenship, and employed on work that is socially useful and individually satisfying’.[[87]](#endnote-87) This would require the national state to be subordinated to a federal government, the authority of which would derive from individual citizens rather than states. This government would control the use of armed force and the economic life of those citizens.

In the absence of a democratically elected federal assembly with authority superior to the national parliaments, Stapledon argued, a capitalist-controlled totalitarianism would become entrenched. A democratic federation could, he believed, become a socialist one which, were it to remain true to its principles, might contribute to the destruction of capitalism. There should not, however, simply be an attempt to convert the federal union movement to socialism. ‘I urge my fellow-socialists’, he went on, ‘rather to support the movement without ulterior motive, and to cooperate to the task of keeping it true to its own essentially democratic principles’. The movement would, steadily, be forced by the logic of those principles and the pressure of the circumstances of the contemporary world to ‘become largely socialist in spirit, if not in name’.[[88]](#endnote-88) Stapledon was utopian in so far as, without sufficient attention to difficulties and problems, he saw the prospect of a better human condition. [[89]](#endnote-89) He expressed faith in federal union as a means to bring about this better condition.

In 1941 in her Federal Union pamphlet *Socialism and Federation* Wootton presented an argument for a socialist, democratic federation which bore similarities with that which had been advanced by Stapledon the previous year. To appreciate why Laski considered functionalism likely to fare better than federalism in pursuit of a socialist internationalist project it is useful to compare and contrast his ideas with those of Wootton. Wootton argued that peace, cooperation and thus the end of international anarchy were required before socialism could be achieved.[[90]](#endnote-90) Socialists, she stressed, thus needed a constructive international policy.[[91]](#endnote-91) There was a subtle difference between Wootton and Laski in this respect. Laski had bemoaned the failure of socialists to be internationalists; Wootton suggested that socialists abandoned internationalism when international anarchy resulted in war. Federation, however, would take the instruments of war out of the hands of national states. Only then could there be talk of socialism to some purpose.[[92]](#endnote-92) Wootton quoted Laski’s view that the reason states cling to their sovereignty is to protect vested interests within, suggesting that this meant he was arguing that capitalism must be replaced with socialism before international organisation could begin in an effective way.[[93]](#endnote-93) Reflecting the combination in his thought of Marxist, democratic socialist, pluralist and anarchist elements, Laski’s position was, actually, rather more nuanced than Wootton implied. Capitalism would indeed need to be replaced with a new society, but this would be concurrent with the development of international organization. Federal Union, Laski argued in *The Strategy of Freedom*, written and published the same year as Wootton’s pamphlet, would be ‘far more likely to succeed after a series of experiments in the pooled control of particular functions for a number of years than if it is stamped suddenly upon a Europe still reeling from the catastrophe of this’.[[94]](#endnote-94) There had been examples of international cooperation and coordination during the war which could be developed gradually. It was necessary ‘to think in terms of the partial co-ordination of particular functions, rather than the total co-ordination of particular areas’.[[95]](#endnote-95) This, he conceded, was, while far less dramatic a plan than those being presented for international federalism, nevertheless one more likely to gain the support that would help bring about enduring success. Constitutions for a world state or European federalism would, he insisted, ‘only work when the parties to them have approximately equal interests in the results of their operation’.[[96]](#endnote-96)

**4. Functionalism for a post-war international order**

As we have already seen, the end of the war did not bring about the cooperation and consent from the vested interests of the existing order which Laski counted on to provide an environment conducive to a functionalist alternative to federalism. As a member, and for a period chair, of the NEC in the 1940s he clashed with Ernest Bevin and the party leader Clement Attlee, who became foreign secretary and prime minister respectively, over British foreign policy after his party’s electoral victory of 1945. Laski was profoundly disappointed that such policy was insufficiently radical.[[97]](#endnote-97) He continued, albeit sporadically, until his death in 1950 to urge the British left to adopt his internationalism and functionalism.

Laski’s interest in functionalism had been rekindled by the possibilities that had been presented during the war. In 1947, in his article ‘The Crisis in Our Civilization’, he began to reassess the international situation, and reflected on the growing interdependence in international relations. ‘A world economy’, he stated, ‘means a world government; and we cannot achieve a world government so long as the operating unit of political administration is the sovereign national state’.[[98]](#endnote-98) During the war the Soviet Union and the western powers had, to a significant degree, been able to transcend sovereignty in their common cause. Since then, however, the contrasting implications of their economic systems had meant that the difficulties between them disallowed the full cooperation required for such transcendence. The genuine world government he advocated would, unlike the United Nations which depended on the sovereign wills of nation states expressing the purposes of their ruling classes, have a parliament through which the direct choice of people could be represented. He expressed as follows his view that there was a single realistic way to surmount this problem.

The one way round what is, otherwise, a grave handicap to any serious move towards world government would seem to lie in the growth of a functional as distinct from a territorial federalism. If nation states could agree to pool their interests in certain areas of action, as in a single European railway system, or a single system of aviation for the American continent, if there could be joint ownership and control of electric power, say in the Danubian Valley, or an internationally governed irrigation and power authority in the Middle East, we should begin to think in supranational terms about problems which are not only in themselves supranational, but are rarely capable of being satisfactorily solved if they are dealt with always on the national level.[[99]](#endnote-99)

Laski’s reference to the Danubian Valley is interesting not least because, at around this time, Mitrany too showed an interest in a functionalist scheme in the valley. Mitrany was, however, not interested in a plan for electricity but, rather management of the river on a functional basis for all the groups which used it. He did not, furthermore, share Laski’s enthusiasm for world government.[[100]](#endnote-100)

In 1948, in the third edition of his popular book *Liberty in the Modern State*, Laski’s thoughts returned to such international arrangements that would be needed for a new world order to succeed. Little would be gained in the short term ‘by thinking in terms of territorial federation - of a United States of Europe, of a Federated Western Europe, and so forth’.[[101]](#endnote-101) The notion of independence and equality of states was, he went on, a harmful, juristic fiction which obscured the realities that needed to be addressed. Hence, functional federation would be the best means to make liberty possible for the many. It was ‘through supra-national planning, in fields like electrical power, or transport, an integrated economy of coal and steel, that we can best hope to attain this end’.[[102]](#endnote-102) ‘Certain functions of government’, he stressed, ‘are so clearly international in character that we cannot rely upon the co-operation of so-called “independent and equal” sovereign states to achieve the cosmopolitan law-making that has become essential’.[[103]](#endnote-103) Such planning could not be left in private hands; therefore ‘within safeguards approved by the United Nations Organization’, it was ‘essential to give the authorities charged with the application of such plans, the effective governmental authority to implement them’.[[104]](#endnote-104)

In a lecture for the Fabian Society in December 1948. Laski spelled out his vision of the new world order necessary for the achievement of genuine post-war progress. Published the following year as the pamphlet *Socialism as Internationalism*, the lecture drew attention to the difficulties that would be faced in any attempt to build the new socialist order.[[105]](#endnote-105) Adopting Schmitter’s neofunctionalist terms, one may suggest that for Laski, functions would need to be dealt with at various levels of integration. The lower level of neofunctionalism bore similarities to his concern for where best to produce particular goods. Scope was important to him in that, as we have seen, he considered that bilateral agreements would gradually develop into multilateral ones. He also envisaged functions to be administered at the supranational level. The equivalent of the key neofunctionalist feature of spillover is less prominent in his work. Nevertheless, that he conceived of something like that feature can be discerned from a passage in *Socialism as Internationalism*:

As recovery comes, the interrelations built by functional federalism may lead to currency and banking measures which assume an increasingly international character. It is already clear that common defence policies are inescapable. No small country can hope to defend itself. And if I am right the international functions of the trade union movement are going to become more important than ever before.… Gradually, and, no doubt, painfully, the nation state will, for economic purposes, become part of a functional international order, planned consciously in each of its elements for greater production.[[106]](#endnote-106)

Laski’s brief deliberations were innovative and his critique of federalism incisive. He focused on the argument which, having recently gained significant popularity, insisted that the road to socialist internationalism would involve federalism, for example a United States of Europe. All such schemes for federal union raised, without solving, he insisted in a sentence which anticipated issues bearing affinities to some of those of the European Union in the second decade of the twentieth century,

the gigantic issue involved in the fact that every nation-state with a relatively high standard of living would be threatened at once with the lowering of its standard if it surrendered its power to safeguard itself against cheap labour, or against goods produced more cheaply than it is itself able to produce them, or the threat to its pattern of living involved in any right to free migration within some larger area than those with which we are now familiar.[[107]](#endnote-107)

He rejected, furthermore, any notion that the world could be transformed quickly. People, he announced, ‘who rely upon a swift transition to world government, whether on a federal, or upon some other pattern, are engaged in Utopia-mongering’.[[108]](#endnote-108)

Although Laski did not refer to him, Stapledon’s ideas were similar to those in support of federal union that Laski criticised as utopian in the pamphlet. Hence, the brief summary of Stapledon’s position above helps one to grasp Laski’s own argument, especially as Laski’s published work did not expand upon, and was thus not really adequate to substantiate, his accusations that others were utopian. Laski intended to elaborate on utopianism in a pamphlet he began to write in late 1948 entitled *The Safeguards of Civilisation*. The penultimate of seven chapter was to be ‘The dangers of utopianism’. The final chapter would have been ‘The road to a common purpose’. We cannot know what Laski’s plans were for these chapters as the manuscript was left unfinished with only the first chapter—‘What is a hazard’—written.[[109]](#endnote-109)The idea that the great powers would surrender their sovereignty was, Laski argued in *Socialism as Internationalism*, simply illusory.[[110]](#endnote-110) He had perhaps learned from his own war-time naivety. Sovereignty was, moreover, not the only problem that he now considered it crucial for the left to grasp. Self-determination rather than internationalism had been the parallel principle to socialism in all major efforts around the world to build a socialist society.[[111]](#endnote-111) Socialists who saw federalism as the suitable basis for world order, he went on to argue, failed to see the obstacles that the present international system placed before the realisation of their goals. Until they developed a fundamental change of outlook there would be no substantial change to the society and world they occupied. Whilst he did not want ‘to belittle the value, not least the educative value, of the discussions and resolutions in international socialist congresses’, he insisted that socialists needed to be honest with themselves and recognise that there had never been an occasion ‘when loyalty to international socialism has come before loyalty to the nation-state in any large area of a given Socialist Movement’.[[112]](#endnote-112) In the same year (1948) he acknowledged in *Communist Manifesto: Socialist Landmark* that Marx and Engels had understood ‘that men make their history by their power’.[[113]](#endnote-113) Socialists needed to learn how to be internationalists if they were to generate and employ such power. The problem was, he stressed in *Socialism as Internationalism*, that, since the socialist movement began to develop in the early nineteenth century, the principle of sovereignty had, not always consciously, retained prominence over any internationalist principles. Two years earlier Mitrany had argued that Marxist socialists were now embracing the nation state. Socialism was ‘beginning to find internationalism an embarrassment’.[[114]](#endnote-114) Laski, by way of contrast with Mitrany, was seeking to draw on the resources of Marxism and to use them experimentally to try to find a functionalist alternative to the existing international order.

Although there is no indication that he was aware of the concept of hegemony offered by the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci from his prison cell in the years between the world wars, Laski was similarly concerned with ways in which knowledge was shaped by the norms and values of the existing order. Although Laski did not use the term ‘hegemony’, he nevertheless considered that the institution of sovereignty served to entrench the condition which Gramsci referred to as such.[[115]](#endnote-115) For Laski, sovereignty was instrumental to the legitimation of the existing world order. While people, including socialists, resisted internationalism and sympathised with sovereignty, the world order was masked and there was little chance of building a new international hegemony. As he put it in his article ‘An Age of Transition’ in 1943, ‘the English labour leaders had become permeated with the spirit of the bourgeoisie’.[[116]](#endnote-116) Socialists, he argued in *Socialism as Internationalism*, had not been able to pass beyond the boundary line created because self-determination inferred that ‘a nation ought to be an organised community in which there is a government exercising the sovereign power…’.[[117]](#endnote-117)

Laski stressed that socialists needed to learn to be internationalists if the universal rights being called for in the late 1940s were to be achieved. They needed thus to challenge the sovereignty that the vested interests guarded so carefully. Laski delivered *Socialism as Internationalism* in the same month—December 1948—that the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Earlier that year he had offered his advice on the content and context of the Declaration. ‘It is’, he argued, reflecting on previous declarations of rights, ‘no doubt true that they were often, even usually, written out in universal form; perhaps even their claim to the status of universality gave them a power of inspiration beyond the area in which they were intended to be effective’. That status was, however, ‘always reduced to a particularity made, so far as possible, to coincide with what a ruling class believed to be in its interest, or what it regarded as the necessary limits of safe concession’.[[118]](#endnote-118) It was, he stressed, difficult to avoid Marx’s conclusion that the ruling ideas of an age are the ideas of the ruling class. The fundamental changes that Laski considered necessary for the new Universal Declaration to be more than just an aspiration would include the undermining of the system of sovereign states, which would in turn require the demise of capitalism.[[119]](#endnote-119) Had Laski developed his fragmented thoughts and writings on functionalism in a book or paper dedicated to that topic, this would have allowed him to substantiate his claim that his own ideas of what was needed to achieve a post-capitalist society conducive to the widespread defence of human rights did not have the utopian aura of those he criticized.

In *Socialism as Internationalism* Laski did spell out cogently but, once again, rather too briefly, the means he considered necessary for progress towards a new, socialist-oriented world order. He returned once again to the functionalist alternative. A swift transition to a world government, whether federal or any other form, would not be possible. The great powers would not surrender their sovereignty and would probably split into rival blocks. In this climate socialists needed to push developments in two directions. First, he stressed once again, the way around state sovereignty would be through functional, rather than the usual territorial federation. Examples would be ‘international air lines, international railways, international power supply’.[[120]](#endnote-120) The other, complementary, direction would lead to ‘joint planning in the production of particular commodities, or plans so made that there is specialised production of one commodity in one country which is related to specialised production of some other commodity in another; and this conceptual bilateralism may become multilateral in character’.[[121]](#endnote-121) Socialism would be far more suitable than capitalism for the purposes of such planning but this would require more than simply ‘the rhetoric of internationalism’.[[122]](#endnote-122) The field for fruitful cooperation was immense. ‘But’, he insisted, ‘we need audacity and experimentalism. We need, especially in the trade unions, a profound sense of the responsibility the character of this epoch has placed upon our shoulders’.[[123]](#endnote-123) Hence, like Haas after him, Laski perceived a role for interest groups in his plans for a functionalist international system. Unfortunately, as this and other ideas were not elaborated, whilst *Socialism as Internationalism* was promising, its demands for audacity, experimentation and sense of responsibility were rather vague. Laski’s argument that socialists needed to become genuine internationalists, push for the transcendence of state sovereignty and begin to build a functionalist world order was, nevertheless, based on the innovative critique of sovereignty theory he had been expressing and developing since his early radical pluralist period.

**5. Conclusion**

Especially from the 1930s onwards, when he had come to consider himself a Marxist, Laski saw capitalism in terms of class dominance, which the notion of sovereignty served to mask.[[124]](#endnote-124) Sovereignty theory served to underpin and justify liberal understandings of order both within states and in the relations between them.[[125]](#endnote-125) The cooperation that was needed for a democratic world order to replace the existing system of sovereign states would, for Laski, require this hold on knowledge to be broken.[[126]](#endnote-126)

Laski’s argument for a new, functionalist world order was driven by a belief that socialists could achieve this goal if they were to become true internationalists and to help build a society that would eventually replace capitalism. He was aware that this project would need to overcome the domination of the international capitalist class. This domination was hegemonic in that the individual states, with their grasp of the notion of sovereignty, legitimated the actions of the international capitalist class, disguising rather than justifying the workings of the world order.

Laski argued that socialism was needed in order for the combination of functionalist organisation and supranational government to operate effectively. This must be gradual, democratic socialism to avoid reaction. Of course, the defenders of the vested interests of capital would not be oblivious to this and although Laski’s work helps show why functionalism cannot work while capitalism remains unchallenged, he did not indicate how reaction can be forestalled. He clung to the hope that the end of the war had generated an atmosphere in the United Kingdom in which people would want to change the world in which they lived. The Labour Party was now in government and, although he deemed it insufficiently radical, he continued to press the left to campaign for greater change. ‘The separation of nation from state by means of functional federalism is’, he stated in the penultimate sentence of *Socialism as Internationalism*, ‘the best road I know to the erosion of sovereignty’.[[127]](#endnote-127) He closed *Socialism as Internationalism* by expressing hope that this could be achieved. Whilst this may appear utopian there was method in his view that British socialists could have a crucial role in bringing about a new world order. ‘It was’, he suggested in his *Communist Manifesto: Socialist Landmark* in 1948, ‘in Great Britain that capitalist society first came to full maturity…’.[[128]](#endnote-128) ‘A British working class that had achieved its own emancipation’, he argued, ‘could build that working-class unity everywhere out of which the new world will finally be won’.[[129]](#endnote-129) This was not a simplistic Marxist approach. For him, such unity would require a key role for socialists who would need to work towards the removal of the veneer of national unity and international disunity which disguised class dominance. For this to happen the weaknesses of sovereignty theory needed to be exposed. The process that would eventually lead to a functionalist international system could begin with political theory and action emanating from his own Labour Party.

**References**

1. The author who did most to promote this interpretation was Herbert A. Deane, whose very critical book on Laski did much to damage Laski’s reputation from the mid-1950s onwards: H.A. Deane, The Political Ideas of Harold J. Laski (New York: Columbia University Press, 1955). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. The two key studies taking this approach were Michael Newman, *Harold Laski: A Political Biography* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1993) and Peter Lamb, *Harold Laski: Problems of Democracy, the Sovereign State, and International Society* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Laski’s functionalism is mentioned briefly in Deane, *Political Ideas of Harold J. Laski*, 328; Michael Newman, ‘Harold Laski Today’, *The Political Quarterly*, lxvii (1996), 229-38 (233) and Bernard. Zylstra, *From Pluralism to Collectivism: The Development of Harold Laski’s Political Thought* (Assen: Van Gorcum and Comp., 1968), 250-1. It has received closer attention in Lamb, *Harold Laski* and David Long, ‘International Functionalism and the Politics of Forgetting’, *International Journal*, xlviii (1993), 355-79. Even in these two studies, however, the combination of centralised and devolved functions is discussed without either sustained analysis or detailed consideration of why this aspect of his thought remained undeveloped. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Peter Lamb, ‘Laski on Sovereignty: Removing the Mask of Class Dominance’, *History of Political Thought*, xxviii (1997), 326-42. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. The interlinking of Laski’s political and international thought is discussed in detail in Lamb, *Harold Laski*, in which several chapters discuss the key concepts of Laski’s political thought before two substantial chapters discuss how he applied his analysis of those concepts to international relations*.* [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Or. Rosenboim, ‘Barbara Wootton, Friedrich Hayek and the Debate on Democratic Federalism in the 1940s’, *International History Review*, xxxvi (2014), 894-918. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Leonie Holthaus, ‘G.D.H. Cole’s International Thought: The Dilemmas of Justifying Socialism in the Twentieth Century’, *International History Review*, xxxvi (2014), 858-75 (70). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Long, ‘International Functionalism’, 364-5. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Newman, ‘Harold Laski Today’, 236-7. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Jeanne Morefield, ‘States are not People: Harold Laski on Unsettling Sovereignty, Rediscovering Democracy’, *Political Research Quarterly*, lviii (2005), 659-69 (661). [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Harold J. Laski, *Nationalism and the Future of Civilization* (London: Watts & Co., 1932), 43-4. Laski later included this lecture in an edited collection of his writings: Harold J. Laski, *The Danger of Being a Gentleman and Other Essays* (Basis Books by arrangement with George Allen and Unwin: London, 1940), in which the passage quoted here is on p. 211. In this later version there is a note at the end of the lecture, written in 1939 (p. 225), which mentions that international organisation needs to deal with a range of social, economic and political functions, but without listing them or elaborating other than to insist that this would need to be done in conjunction with a thorough egalitarian reconstruction of the internal order of each state. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Lee Ward, ‘Federalism’, in Mark Bevir (ed), *Encyclopedia of Political Theory*, Volume 2 (Los Angeles: Sage, 2010), 496-9. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Peter Lamb and Fiona Robertson-Snape, *Historical Dictionary of International Relations* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2017), 121-3. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Lucian M. Ashworth, *International Relations and the Labour Party: Intellectuals and Policy Making from 1918-1945* (London: IB Tauris, 2007), 169. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Ibid., 162-3. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
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