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### Bringing republican ideas back home. The Dewey-Laski connection

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## Bringing republican ideas back home. The Dewey–Laski connection

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## ABSTRACT

This article explores J.G.A. Pocock's insight that "traces" of civic republican discourse survived within the dominant liberal paradigm of modern political thought. It does so by tracking classical republican themes in the works of American pragmatist John Dewey and English pluralist Harold Laski. The main contribution of the article is to show that the 1920s pluralist theory of the state can be interpreted as a reformulation of the classical republican critique of modern liberal conceptions of state sovereignty. In particular, I suggest that Laski can be viewed as a kind of republican pluralist inspired by Aristotle and Harrington as well as by American pragmatism, itself a late outgrowth of the republican tradition in US history.

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## Introduction

In the period from 1870 to 1940, the exchange of political ideas across the North Atlantic could best be described as a one-way flux: it was in Europe that most political conceptual and practical innovations were produced, and the degree to which America was a interested recipient has only recently been given due recognition.<sup>2</sup> And yet this imbalance did not preclude fertile dialogue between thinkers on the two sides of the Atlantic. This paper discusses one of the numerous discursive links connecting the New to the Old World. The two main protagonists of this dialogue are the English pluralist Harold Laski (1893–1950) and the American pragmatist John Dewey (1859–1952). Their common interests included debunking the state and promoting pluralism, even though important differences can be detected concerning their conception of personal development. By and large, Laski and Dewey shared a similar understanding of the tripartite relation between individuals, groups, and the state. As I shall try to show, behind this shared understanding one finds a common discursive tradition, civic republicanism.

The story of the emergence and development of the republican paradigm in the social sciences, notably in history, political theory and legal studies, is arguably an interesting one.<sup>3</sup> From its early days in the 1960s when Bernard Bailyn, Gordon S. Wood, and J.G.A. Pocock joined forces to provide an alternative to Louis Hartz's Lockean paradigm, to its most recent stages in the hands of legal theorists such as Cass Sunstein or Frank Michelman, by the 1980s and 1990s, republicanism as a discursive universe had steadily grown to become an alternative to both liberalism, of a more juridical and individualistic nature, and communitarianism, a paradigm which associates a shared set of cultural values with successful individual development. I thus think it premature to claim, as Daniel T. Rodgers does, that civic republicanism is currently "thinning out in the atmosphere, as intangible and ubiquitous as the Hartzian liberalism of the 1950s".<sup>4</sup> In fact, its

E-mail address: [fcs23@ics.ul.pt](mailto:fcs23@ics.ul.pt).<sup>1</sup> His most recent book is *Mead and Modernity. Science, Selfhood, and Democratic Politics* (Lexington Books, 2008).<sup>2</sup> I refer to D. T. Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings. Social Politics in a Progressive Age* (Cambridge, MA, 1998).<sup>3</sup> The best available survey article on republicanism is D.T. Rodgers, 'Republicanism: The Career of a Concept', *The Journal of American History*, 79 (1992), 11–38.<sup>4</sup> Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings*, 37.

most articulated theoretical expression was not written until 5 years after Rodger's claim. I refer to Phillip Pettit's *Republicanism* (1997), a book aimed at providing a contemporary re-examination of the tradition associated with Cicero, Machiavelli, and Harrington. For the purposes of this article, it is noteworthy that the republican political philosophy Pettit is arguing for is associated with a conception of democracy that "follows deliberative patterns of decision-making, that includes all the major voices of difference within the community, and that responds appropriately to the contestations raised against it".<sup>5</sup> Republicanism, political pluralism, and deliberative democracy all seem to come together in Pettit's work.

Before I embark on the analysis of the relationship between Dewey and Laski, some words are needed to clarify the intellectual and historical context of this discussion. To begin with, what are the distinctive traits of a republican view of politics? First of all, one should be aware of the protracted definitional issues that have characterized the "republican revival" in political thought. These include the basic distinction between the neo-Aristotelian and the neo-Machiavellian versions of republicanism: the former emphasize a communitarian version of republicanism as direct democracy,<sup>6</sup> while the latter tend to pay more attention to the role of the individual as an active political agent (which can be found, for instance, in Pettit and Quentin Skinner's work). Still, all versions of republicanism include some sort of reference to a distinctive conception of liberty,<sup>7</sup> the importance of a set of civic virtues (even if its contents may vary), the notion of a "mixed constitution", and the conception of the human self as a socially constituted organism, which is related to two other claims: the importance of civic and political participation (a citizen is not a mere bearer of rights; a citizen is first and foremost one who takes part in the political life of the community) and the correlate condition for a competent and egalitarian participation by every member of the body of citizens – universal education.<sup>8</sup> As we shall see, both Dewey and Laski subscribe to most of these themes as alternatives to the predominant liberal understanding of politics.

As far as pluralism is concerned it is important to bear in mind two crucial distinctions. Firstly, social pluralism and political pluralism are two different notions: while the former refers to a sociological reality (the "fact of pluralism" of the forms of life), the latter is a specific model of political life which grants groups the status of the crucial, intermediate arena between individuals and the state.<sup>9</sup> Secondly, one should distinguish between postwar political pluralism and the pluralist conception of the state of the first decades of the twentieth century.<sup>10</sup> Of course, there are many analytical categories one can use to study pluralist thought – some distinguish several generations of pluralist thinkers, others prefer to study it from the perspective of intellectual national traditions<sup>11</sup> – but the point I wish to stress is this: Dewey and Laski's theories of political pluralism comprehend normative dimensions that are completely absent from the postwar, interest-group political pluralism of Dahl, Truman and others. Probably the best way of explaining this difference is to take into account the evolution of the discipline of political science. While in the first decades of the twentieth century it was still possible to claim, as Dewey did, that political science was not essentially different from political philosophy,<sup>12</sup> in the postwar period, the empirical bent and the behaviourist orientation of political science led to the disqualification of such claims as "non-scientific".

On the eve of World War I, political pluralism was rapidly gaining currency as a third way between the individualist and the statist alternatives. Pluralism can thus be seen as a response to a number of symptoms of a deep civilizational crisis, of which the war was but its most glaring expression. Other signs of crisis included the growing dissatisfaction with parliamentary democracy, the fear that the bureaucratic state would impose its instrumental rationality on all spheres of life, the problems of mass urban centres and the discontent of the working class, and the anxiety concerning the consequences of mass democracy. In short, the intellectual atmosphere of the time was marked by a sense of "diffuse revolt against the conventions of nineteenth-century thought. The rebels called themselves pragmatists, intuitionists, syndicalists or pluralists".<sup>13</sup> There was a particularly intense debate on which role the state should play: Laski and Dewey (as well as G.D.H. Cole and R.H. Tawney) were amongst those who argued for a limited role for the state, while Herbert Croly, Walter Lippmann, and Walter Weyl championed a strong and interventionist state.<sup>14</sup> It was a pluralist understanding of the state, i.e. a criticism of the orthodox conception of sovereignty (statist, idealist) that brought Laski and Dewey together.

The third element I would like to relate with civic republicanism and political pluralism is the conception of democracy as a deliberative process. The historical relationship between deliberation and republicanism is, of course, well-known. The origins of both traditions can be traced back to the work of the same author, Aristotle. It should then come as no surprise that,

<sup>5</sup> P. Pettit, *Republicanism. A Theory of Freedom and Government* (Oxford, 1997), 200.

<sup>6</sup> H. Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago, 1958) is a consummate example of this variant.

<sup>7</sup> See, for instance, Q. Skinner, 'The Republican Ideal of Political Liberty', in Gisela Bock et al., eds., *Machiavelli and Republicanism* (Cambridge, 1993), 293–309; *Liberty Before Liberalism* (Cambridge, 1998).

<sup>8</sup> The classical republican account of the role played by education is to be found in Aristotle, *The Politics* (London, 1962) Book VII, Chapter 14. For contemporary accounts see, for example, B. Barber, *A Passion for Democracy: American Essays* (Princeton, 2000), especially Part III, and J. Annette, 'Character, Civic Renewal and Service Learning for Democratic Citizenship in Higher Education', *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 53 (2005), 326–40.

<sup>9</sup> For a definition of political pluralism, see A. Eisenberg, *Reconstructing Political Pluralism* (Albany, 1995), 2.

<sup>10</sup> On the latter, see J. Meadowcroft, *Conceptualizing the State: Innovation and Dispute in British Political Thought, 1880–1914* (Oxford, 1995).

<sup>11</sup> For an approach of the first kind see K. McClure, 'On the Subject of Rights: Pluralism, Plurality and Political Identity', in *Dimensions of Radical Democracy: Pluralism, Citizenship, Community*, ed. C. Mouffe (London, 1992), 108–27. An example of an approach of the second type is C. Laborde, *Pluralist Thought and the State in Britain and France, 1900–25* (Basingstoke, 2000).

<sup>12</sup> J. Farr, 'John Dewey and American Political Science', *American Journal of Political Science*, 43 (1999), 526.

<sup>13</sup> Laborde, *Pluralist Thought*, 3.

<sup>14</sup> M. Stears, *Progressives, Pluralists, and the Problems of the State. Ideologies of Reform in the United States and Britain, 1909–1926* (Oxford, 2002).

as Skinner has reminded us, the Renaissance republican model of moral and political debate revolved around the idea of “*audi alteram partem*, always listen to the other side”.<sup>15</sup> The relation between deliberation and political pluralism brings us back to Dewey. Dewey’s model of democracy “as a reflexive form of community cooperation”<sup>16</sup> is based upon his social and political pluralism: while the plurality of viewpoints promotes the rational solution of problems, individual development requires the fragmentation of political power. Following Aristotle, Dewey argues that human reason is a sort of inner dialogue: “Deliberation is a dramatic rehearsal (in imagination) of various competing possible lines of action”.<sup>17</sup> This dialogical conception of rationality is soon extended to the realm of morals and politics. For Dewey, the solution of a moral or political problem is ultimately a problem of communication between different perspectives. The Peircean, democratic ideal of cooperation on the part of researchers is behind Dewey’s thesis that political problems can only be rationally solved by means of democratic deliberation, which in turn requires a plurality of perspectives. A similar connection between deliberative democracy and pluralism has been recently explored by Bernard Manin.<sup>18</sup> However, only the postwar, interest-groups pluralism is dealt with in Manin’s paper. By considering the pluralist theories of Dahl, Truman, and Sartori as “traditional pluralism”,<sup>19</sup> he does not show sufficient sensitiveness to the distinction between the pluralist conception of the state of the 1920s and postwar pluralism. As a consequence, Manin’s (sophisticated) theoretical reflection on deliberative democracy does not benefit from that particular moment in history when civic republicanism, American pragmatism and British political pluralism intersected through the work of Dewey and Laski. The remainder of this article is devoted to the discussion of this episode in the history of political ideas. After discussing Dewey’s political thinking from the standpoint of the influence of republicanism, I examine the return of republican ideas back to Europe through Laski’s encounter with Dewey’s political proposals. This will be followed by a comparative discussion of their work. Finally, the paper comes to a close with the suggestion that the political pluralism of Dewey and Laski is a critical political theory because of their shared orientation towards an alternative paradigm to liberalism, the classical language of civic republicanism.

### Dewey’s democratic pluralism

Skinner’s metaphor of the conflict is a suitable instrument for the analysis of some of the most important Deweyan political texts.<sup>20</sup> A case in point is the debate which opposed Dewey to Walter Lippmann (1889–1971), author of two books that reflect the disillusion of the Twenties generation, *Public Opinion* (1922) and *The Phantom Public* (1925). This debate is particularly significant as both Dewey and Lippmann regularly wrote for a weekly magazine that had Montesquieu’s civic republicanism as its main ideological reference, the *New Republic*.<sup>21</sup> In this forum of political ideas founded in 1914 under the model set by the English *New Statesman*, and in which Laski was one of the few British participants, there were two opposing republican tendencies in operation. On the one hand, there were authors such as Herbert Croly and Walter Lippmann for whom the republicanism of Machiavelli and Montesquieu ought to be directly transplanted in an America in crisis due to the disappearance of the virtue of former times.<sup>22</sup> On the other hand, there were those, like Dewey, who saw in Jefferson’s commercial republicanism the native solution to the problems of the American republic:

There still exists among us a kind of intellectual parochialism which induces us to turn to political philosophers of the old world who do not measure up to the stature of our political thinkers—to say nothing of their remoteness from our conditions.<sup>23</sup>

The question to which both tendencies required an answer and which Lippmann explicitly formulated in his book of 1925, was “How can a republic exist without a public?” The Dewey–Lippmann debate is based on the different replies that each gave to this question. For Lippmann, the notion of “omni-competent citizens” that he associated with the pragmatist theory of democracy, was an illusion, and as such, the conduct of public affairs should be left to citizens whose competence and availability were guarantees of greater efficiency.

Dewey’s reply was not late in coming, first in a critical appreciation of Lippmann’s *Public Opinion*, and then in the work *The Public and Its Problems* (1927). In the first case, while Dewey agrees with Lippmann’s diagnosis (which pointed out the absence of a competent public), he rejects the solution offered. “Democracy demands a more through-going education than

<sup>15</sup> Q. Skinner, *Reason and Rhetoric in the Philosophy of Hobbes* (Cambridge, 1996), 15.

<sup>16</sup> A. Honneth, ‘Democracy as Reflexive Cooperation. John Dewey and the Theory of Democracy Today’, *Political Theory*, 26 (1998), 765.

<sup>17</sup> J. Dewey, MW, 14, 132. Dewey quotations are listed in the text using notation referencing its location in the three editions of *John Dewey: The Collected Works* as indicated below, followed by the specific volume, and then the page number, if applicable:

EW: (1967–1972) *The Early Works of John Dewey: 1882–1898*, ed. J.A. Boydston, 5 Vols. (Carbondale).

MW: (1976–1983) *The Middle Works of John Dewey: 1899–1924*, ed. J.A. Boydston, 15 Vols. (Carbondale).

LW: (1981–1990) *The Later Works of John Dewey: 1925–1953*, ed. J.A. Boydston, 17 Vols. (Carbondale).

<sup>18</sup> B. Manin, ‘On Legitimacy and Political Deliberation’, *Political Theory*, 15 (1987), 338–68.

<sup>19</sup> Manin, ‘On Legitimacy’, 355.

<sup>20</sup> See Q. Skinner, ‘Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas’, *History and Theory*, 8 (1969), 3–53; ‘A Reply to my Critics’, in *Meaning and Context: Quentin Skinner and His Critics*, ed. J. Tully (Cambridge, 1988), 231–88.

<sup>21</sup> On Dewey’s participation in *New Republic*, see J.P. Diggins, *The Lost Soul of American Politics. Virtue, Self-Interest, and the Foundations of Liberty* (New York, 1984), 580.

<sup>22</sup> See J.P. Diggins, ‘Republicanism in the History and Historiography of the United States’, *American Quarterly*, 37 (1985), 572–98.

<sup>23</sup> Dewey, LW, 14, 203.

the education of officials, administrators and directors of industry”.<sup>24</sup> The reason why the enterprise of democracy is so challenging lies precisely in the circumstance that this general education is at once so necessary and so difficult to guarantee. In the case of *The Public and Its Problems*, written in reply to Lippmann’s second book, Dewey puts forward a reply that clearly demonstrates his political–ideological position. It broadly consists of an analysis of the nature and functions of the state, as well as of the relationship it establishes with civil society or the “public”, to use Dewey’s terminology. His immediate rejection not only of political currents that proclaim the state as the epicentre of political life, but also of those who scorn it, is a significant indication of the political concept he favours.<sup>25</sup> In a characteristically pragmatist way, Dewey avoids entering into discussions where premises are limited by long-standing and rigid dichotomies. As such, the state is seen as a political actor that does not oppose the “public”; such a distinction is, in fact, regarded as the source of centuries of interminable philosophical discussions, precisely because they seek answers to questions that cannot be answered. Dewey, on the contrary, had a concept of “public” that was not opposed to the bureaucratic and institutional machinery of the state. For this reason, it is fundamental for the “public” to be conceived as a group or community whose collective action results from the perception of a common interest: “[t]hat is, those affected by the consequences are perforce concerned in conduct of all those who along with themselves share in bringing about the results”.<sup>26</sup> To the degree to which, in the name of the interest of all, this community chooses certain members to carry out political, judicial, legislative and other functions, this political association takes on a growing organizational form to which the name of government and public administration is usually applied. Individuals associate in progressively more complex and sophisticated forms until their political organization is so autonomous that it appears to oppose the entity that gave it origin and that is its ultimate reason of being. Therefore a historically discernable *continuum* exists between the citizen and the state based on the idea of general interest and common good that refers to the cardinal virtue of justice.

Dewey, like Mead, systematically criticizes the political tradition of natural rights for its ahistorical individualism.<sup>27</sup> But, going further than Mead in the implications of this criticism, Dewey associates the instrumental rationalism of Whig political theory with a concept of history the heroes of which are abstract individuals and the meaning of which points to a single line of progress and evolution. In sharp contrast, Dewey considers that modern political democracies are the result of multiple and conflicting socio-economic forces that exercise a significant influence on individual and collective political agents.<sup>28</sup> In the specific case of North American democracy, Dewey, again like Mead, is far from describing an imaginary, founding social contract of the American republic. Instead he subscribes to a historic perspective in which concepts of continuity, citizenship and the common good are the basic values. Echoing the agrarian commercial theses of Jefferson’s republicanism, Dewey believed that “American democratic policy was developed out of genuine community life, that is, association in local and small centers where industry was mainly agricultural and where production was largely carried out with hand tools”.<sup>29</sup>

Dewey believes that one of the most valuable features of the eighteenth century American political regime was lost as the dimension and complexity of the republic increased. What he has in mind is the existence of “natural aristocracies” who, unlike inherited aristocracies, used to come to power through free elections. Of crucial importance here was Jefferson’s educational project, by means of which the “‘natural aristocracy’ of intellect and character would be selected”.<sup>30</sup> This is the *leitmotiv* of *The Public and Its Problems*. Pace Lippmann, Dewey wanted to determine what had happened to the “public” from the foundation of the American republic to the nineteen thirties. Dewey criticizes Lippmann’s technocratic realism because of its presupposed paternalism. If, for the latter, the “public” created an obstacle to good governance insofar as it is not, never was and never will be sufficiently competent to adequately influence its representatives, Dewey accurately accuses the bureaucratic technocracy of the state of fostering that of which Lippmann complains, the apathy and ignorance of the “public”. This is not the only cause of the difficulties that the North American “public” undergoes in the period between the wars. Dewey thinks he has found the principal problem facing the American “public” at this stage in the industrial modernization that produced a “Great Society” to the detriment of the small communities that lay at the origin of American democracy. To Dewey, the main challenge the “public” has to face is that of converting the “Great Society”, in which subjects are rationally orientated to the attainment of private interests, into a “Great Community”, where ties of solidarity are maintained by processes of inter-personal communication. The foundations of Dewey’s understanding of democracy as a way of life were thus set.

A crucial distinction in Deweyian political theory comes to the surface at this point. Although they are related, Dewey insists on separating analytically “political democracy”, which includes institutional mechanisms such as universal suffrage, periodic and competitive elections, and majority rule, from democracy in its “social generic sense”. The latter, as Dewey is

<sup>24</sup> Dewey, MW, 13, 344.

<sup>25</sup> Dewey, LW, 2, 252.

<sup>26</sup> Dewey, LW, 2, 257.

<sup>27</sup> Dewey writes: ‘The idea of a natural individual in his isolation possessed of full-fledged wants, of energies to be expended according to his own volition, and of a ready-made faculty of foresight and prudent calculation is as much a fiction in psychology as the doctrine of the individual in possession of antecedent political rights is one in politics’, LW, 2, 299. Similarly, Mead writes: ‘The abstract political individual of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and the abstract economic individual of the nineteenth century were quite concrete, everyday persons’, G.H. Mead, ‘Natural Rights and the Theory of the Political Institution’, in *G.H. Mead. Selected Writings*, ed. Andrew Reck (Chicago, 1981), 154.

<sup>28</sup> ‘Instead of the independent self-moved individuals contemplated by theory (...) persons are joined together, not because they have voluntarily chosen to be united in these forms, but because vast currents are running which bring men together’, Dewey, LW, 2, 301.

<sup>29</sup> Dewey, LW, 2, 304.

<sup>30</sup> Dewey, LW, 14, 210.



eager to point out, transcends political frontiers: “Regarded as an idea, democracy is not an alternative to other principles of associated life. It is the idea of community life itself”.<sup>31</sup> Dewey believes that the challenge of shifting to the “Great Community” can only be met by means of this broader sense of democracy soundly grounded on the idea of civic participation in local communities. As Dewey stressed, “participation in activities and sharing in results are additive concerns”, and both “demand *communication* as a prerequisite”.<sup>32</sup> The aim of the Deweyian democratic theory consists, therefore, in a communicative reconstitution of the Rousseauian concept of “general will”, with the intent of philosophically establishing a new form of political association based on new technological possibilities of communication. In this way, the republican idea of civic participation gains a new configuration by which it adapts itself to modern societal conditions of irreducible pluralism of ways of life.

It is precisely from the conjugation of these two elements, civic participation and social pluralism, that Dewey reconstructs the republican tradition he inherited from Jefferson and through it he expresses a powerful criticism of “old liberalism”. A good example of Dewey’s pluralist conception of politics can be found in his famous *Lectures in China, 1919–1920*. In a clear pragmatist fashion, Dewey tries to supersede the dichotomy that opposes the individual to the state; his alternative points to a political model in which the state is an instrument to promote and protect other voluntary forms of association. In particular, Dewey suggests the state should be seen as “the conductor of an orchestra, who makes no music himself but who harmonizes the activities of those who [do]”; Dewey then adds: “Pluralism is well ordained in present political practice and demands a modification of hierarchical and monistic theory”.<sup>33</sup> To the question – How to conceive an alternative to Anglo-Saxon empirical individualism and German idealist theories of the state? – Dewey’s answer pointed to a pluralist model in which pragmatism’s aversion to rigid dichotomies is reconciled with the ideas of civic virtue and common good characteristic to Jeffersonian republicanism.

Unlike some contemporary authors who praise the sharing of an *ethos* as the centre of political life, Dewey sees in the plurality of social forms an incentive to civic participation. We ought to contribute to the public good, not because we share a set of values, but because it is the best guarantee of our autonomy and individuality. Dewey’s reconstruction of the republican notion of civic participation is guided by its democratic pluralism and the anti-paternalism that is associated with it. Civic participation was reconstructed by Dewey as a way of cultivating the critical attitude he believed would be found in experimental science, transforming private interests into generalised interests, and of promoting (although dependent on it) a political culture of freedom – i.e. civic participation as a process of interpersonal communication that originated “what metaphorically may be termed a general will and social consciousness”.<sup>34</sup>

Hence, one needs to go beyond the Dewey–Lippmann debate and bring the discussion to a higher level of abstraction, that of the debate on the pluralist theory of democracy of the nineteen twenties and thirties. This move comes justified by the paradigmatic influence that civic republicanism and American pragmatism had on Laski, perhaps British pluralism’s major theorist. I will thereby be describing the intellectual migration that brought the *Old Whig* canon of Milton, Harrington, Sidney and Montesquieu, as well as the Greek, Roman and Renaissance traditions, back to Europe. This return to Europe was, nonetheless, preceded by a long digression, in the midst of which the tradition was appropriated, first, by the American oppositionists to eighteenth century English colonialism and subsequently reconstructed by pragmatists to respond to the challenges of the “Great Society” of the nineteenth and twentieth century. In particular, I will show that the 1920s pluralist theory of the state can be interpreted as a reformulation of the classical republican critique of modern liberal conceptions of state sovereignty.

### Republican ideas in digression

I would now like to explore an insight put forth by John Pocock in his *The Machiavellian Moment* (1975). I refer to the survival of a republican vocabulary in nineteenth and twentieth century American political thought. If Pocock demonstrated how, during the seventeenth century, civic humanism<sup>35</sup> and classical republicanism crossed the Atlantic from the England of Harrington, Sidney and Milton, in this paper I try to explain how, in the first half of the twentieth century, not only American pragmatists resorted to republicanism to critique the liberal paradigm, but how these ideals, having in the meantime been appropriated and reconstructed by various generations of North American thinkers, returned to an England that had seen them leave two centuries before. This was the intellectual migration of a linguistic universe that only a diachronic reconstruction such as Pocock’s can identify. The leader of this intellectual migration is, I argue, Harold Laski, “The most influential and widely read political theorist in the English language in the first half of the twentieth century”.<sup>36</sup>

One can identify four aspects in the intellectual atmosphere in the 1910s and 1920s that help frame the contributions of Laski: (1) pluralism is in the centre of the intellectual agenda; (2) the influence of William James and Dewey is prominent; (3) the concept of sovereignty is crucial; (4) Otto Gierke’s theories of association, concession and group personality exert great

<sup>31</sup> Dewey, LW, 2, 328.

<sup>32</sup> Dewey, LW, 2, 330.

<sup>33</sup> Dewey, MW, 12, 196.

<sup>34</sup> Dewey, LW, 2, 331.

<sup>35</sup> The notion of “civic humanism” was first introduced by H. Baron, *Crisis of the Early Italian Renaissance* (Princeton, 1966).

<sup>36</sup> P. Hirst, ‘Introduction’ to H. Laski, *Studies in the Problem of Sovereignty* (London, 1997), v.

influence upon the British pluralists.<sup>37</sup> Between the beginning of World War I and the publication of his monumental *Grammar of Politics* (1925), Laski can be described as a Fabian socialist who explicitly advocates the breaking up of state sovereignty. Laski's alternative, inspired by James's thesis that the pluralistic universe was more like a "federal republic than like an empire or a kingdom",<sup>38</sup> points to a participatory state which involves substantial functional devolution. According to Laski's federal system, each group would benefit from great autonomy – both functional and territorial – in its sphere of activity. In the early nineteen twenties, however, Laski becomes increasingly dissatisfied with this conception of functional devolution. In his *Grammar*, Laski argues in favour of a "co-ordinator state",<sup>39</sup> which would regulate the activity of social groups by means of advisory bodies in order to promote the common good. As the twenties progressed, Laski grew less and less hostile towards the state, eventually abandoning pluralism altogether in the following decade, when he became a Marxist (he would remain a Marxist for the rest of his life).

If Graham Wallas<sup>40</sup> can be said to have introduced the notion of the "Great Society" that Dewey and Lippmann discussed in the twenties and thirties, it was Laski who conceptualized the idea of "pluralism", introducing it into the vocabulary of political science as a critical perspective directed against conservative political theory associated with "state monism".<sup>41</sup> But where, may I ask, does this idea of pluralism originate? As Laski explained in his first work on political theory, the philosophic pluralism of James and Dewey was one of the chief sources of this critical perspective. It was Dewey, in particular, who alerted him to the dangers of an absolutist image of the state and its sovereignty,<sup>42</sup> and also Dewey who suggested a pluralist, decentralized and federalist perspective of political power as an alternative:

Such difficulties as this the pluralist theory of the State seems to me to remove. As a theory it is what Professor Dewey calls "consistently experimentalist", in form and content. It denies the rightness of force. It dissolves – what the facts themselves dissolve – the inherent claim of the State to obedience. It insists that the State, like every other association, shall prove itself by what it achieves.<sup>43</sup>

In a remarkable confirmation that methodological historicism, civic republicanism and American pragmatism criss-cross in multiple moments of history, Laski finds the historical basis for his proposals in the political tradition of civic humanism.<sup>44</sup> In particular, Laski finds in Aristotle and the idea of "mixed constitution" a precursor of pragmatist political theory. "[O]ne of the main comforts I derive from Aristotle", Laski explains, "is the conviction that he attempted to delineate a pragmatist theory of the State. He gave to his rights the rich validation of experience; and surely a right that has no consequences is too empty to admit of worth".<sup>45</sup> If the "mixed constitution" system and Aristotle's concept of rights are, in this way, called upon to trace the genealogy of the pluralist theory of the state, Laski finds in Harrington's *The Commonwealth of Oceana* a historical argument in favour of the existence of an informed and participative public, precisely the central political problem of the 1920s:

Nothing would be more fatal to the working of democratic government than a permanent divorce between the process of politics and the life that is led by the mass of men. (...) But, he explains, "the active cooperation of the body of citizens" demands "the perpetual and widespread discussion of men and measures, the ceaseless instruction of the public mind, at which Harrington aimed in the clubs that formed so attractive an element in his Utopia. It means the continuous existence of an urgent public opinion". And, returning to the problem of the "Great Society", he concludes: "That is, as Mr Wallas has recently shown, no easy matter."<sup>46</sup>

The pluralist theory of the state developed by Laski results from the confluence of the paradigm that comes from Aristotle to Harrington with the pragmatism of Dewey and James. In particular, Laski's conception of "social federalism" results from a combination of a methodological historicist approach with a republican theoretical and pragmatist orientation. The assumption on which it is based is the Aristotelian idea that the individual is an eminently social and political creature, a *kata phusin zoon politikon*. The challenge faced by this idea, soon elevated to an ideal, is the pressure exercised by the modern state on the individual citizen: "The very size of the modern state makes the individual citizen a voice crying in the wilderness".<sup>47</sup> It is for this reason that voluntary associations are of primordial importance. They operate on a scale that enables effective

<sup>37</sup> Eisenberg, *Reconstructing Political Pluralism*, 63–65. See also D. Nicholls, *The Pluralist State: The Political Ideas of J.N. Figgis and his Contemporaries* (London, 1994).

<sup>38</sup> William James quoted in J.-A. Pemberton, 'James and the Early Laski: The Ambiguous Legacy of Pragmatism', *History of Political Thought*, 19 (1998), 273.

<sup>39</sup> H. Laski, *The Grammar of Politics* (London, 1982), 84.

<sup>40</sup> Graham Wallas invited Laski to go to the LSE, after the personal and academic problems he had had in Harvard in 1919.

<sup>41</sup> As Gunnell observed, 'By the mid 1920s, the concept of pluralism and the idiom of pluralistic theory had become common currency, while a decade earlier the concepts had been virtually absent from the literature', J. Gunnell, 'The Declination of the 'State' and the Origins of American Pluralism', J. Farr et al., eds., *Political Science in History. Research Programs and Political Traditions* (Cambridge, 1995), 24.

<sup>42</sup> In 1917, Laski stated, 'The thing of which I feel afraid, if the State be admitted limitless power', Professor Dewey has felicitously expressed in a single phrase: 'It has been instructed [he is speaking of the German State] by a long line of philosophers that it is the business of ideal right to gather might itself in order that it may cease to be merely an ideal', Laski, *Studies in the Problem of Sovereignty*, ed. P. Hirst (London, 1997), 20.

<sup>43</sup> Laski, *Studies in the Problem of Sovereignty*, 23.

<sup>44</sup> For an analysis of the role played by history in Laski's political theory, see D. Runciman, *Pluralism and the Personality of the State* (Cambridge, 1997), 180.

<sup>45</sup> Laski, *Studies in the Problem of Sovereignty*, 18.

<sup>46</sup> Laski, *Studies in the Problem of Sovereignty*, 41.

<sup>47</sup> Laski, *An Introduction to Politics*, ed. P. Hirst (London, 1997), 38.

approximation to the problems or activities from which they originated and the purpose of their existence lies in the fact that their internal organization increases the democratic participation of their members. Laski even confers on them an important political function – the systematic criticism of the legal imperatives that sustain the state. His apologia for associativism culminates in the defence of a political solution of a federalist nature for the problems of demo-liberal societies between the wars.

Associating social pluralism and political federalism, Laski saw in administrative decentralization the most suitable form of political organization with which to confront anomic individualism, without lapsing into the benevolent paternalism proposed by realists. The solution he proposes, influenced by the republican notion of civic participation and by the pragmatist concept of creativity, consists in stressing the importance of the deliberative component of political life. Laski begins by arguing that “[d]iscussion produces, if not consent, at least the impression in those affected that their knowledge has been used, their experience weighed, in the making of decisions”, and then concludes: “They have that sense of creativeness which comes from being an active and integral part of the law-making process”.<sup>48</sup> Laski, in other words, signals the marked contrast between the monism of the sovereign state and the federation of voluntary organizations that respect social pluralism and potentiate civic participation through a deliberative practice in which the strength of the better argument is sustained by the human creative capacity.

### Dewey and Laski compared

As hinted above, Laski’s engagement with pluralism in the 1910s and 1920s would eventually give way to a position closer to Marxism. One thing, though, remained fundamentally unchanged throughout Laski’s career – his unrepentant individualistic conception of the human self. This marks what is perhaps the chief difference between British and American pluralism. While Laski’s understanding of the relationship between individual and society is “more individualistic than anything the inheritors of the new liberal mantle would have associated themselves with”,<sup>49</sup> Dewey and the pragmatists never ceased to emphasise the social nature of the human self. This, of course, entails considerable political implications. A case in point refers to the notion of freedom.

Explicitly rejecting the laissez-faire individualistic conception of freedom as non-interference, Dewey conceives of liberty as social rather than individual. Already in his early paper, “The Ethics of Democracy” (1888), Dewey can be seen advocating a positive or social conception of freedom: liberty, he wrote, “is not mere self-assertion, nor unregulated desire”; rather, it demands “the realization of personality through the formation of a higher and more complete unity amongst men”.<sup>50</sup> This last remark points to Dewey’s conception of individuality, the universal human ability to adapt to the social environment and to choose in a conscious and reflective way a given course of action. As Matthew Festenstein observes,<sup>51</sup> there are two other components to Dewey’s conception of freedom. Apart from being identified with intelligent self-control (a well-known pragmatist theme), his notion of freedom is also associated with the Aristotelian conception of *eudaimonia* (i.e. we are free as long as we engage in activities which promote our “human flourishing”) and with the idea that we are free as far as we take an active role in the affairs of our multiple groups of belonging: liberty, Dewey explains, is “that secure release and fulfilment of personal potentialities which take place only in rich and manifold association with others: the power to be an individualized self-making a distinctive contribution and enjoying in its own way the fruits of association”.<sup>52</sup> Civic participation and human flourishing, two classic republican themes, can thus be seen to play a major role in Dewey’s conception of freedom.

At first sight, this social conception of individual freedom could lead some to think of Dewey as a predecessor to contemporary communitarianism. Despite some thematic similarities, the fact remains that Dewey’s political theory, unlike communitarianism, relies on pluralism.<sup>53</sup> There is, of course, a statist strand in Dewey evident in some of his writings on “social control” or “social action”. Nevertheless, it is essential to understand that, in Dewey, republican discourse carried out its function as a conceptual reservoir for the self-criticism of liberalism through a pluralist concept of the state, power and political power in general, very much in vogue in the first half of the twentieth century. Deweyian political pluralism is based on the recognition of the fact that a plurality of groups, associations and collectivities exist, the nature and objectives of which do not necessarily contribute to the common good. Setting himself apart from some of the theses conventionally attributed to the pluralist theory of the state, Dewey did not want to establish pre-defined limits for the action of the latter, preferring to confer on it the role of a maestro conducting life in society, a maestro who should intervene whenever an undesirable group (i.e. a criminal association), or a too powerful association (i.e. an economic group) threatened, by the consequences of their actions, the common good understood as the pluralism of ways of life in society.<sup>54</sup> His refusal to

<sup>48</sup> Laski, ‘An Introduction to Politics’, 40.

<sup>49</sup> M. Freedon, *Liberalism Divided. A Study in British Political Thought, 1914–1939* (Oxford, 1986), 299–300.

<sup>50</sup> Dewey, EW, 1, 244, 248.

<sup>51</sup> M. Festenstein, *Pragmatism and Political Theory* (Cambridge, 1997), 66–71.

<sup>52</sup> Dewey, LW, 2, 329.

<sup>53</sup> E.g. Eisenberg, *Reconstructing Political Pluralism*, 40–53.

<sup>54</sup> As Dewey clarified, ‘Our doctrine of plural forms is a statement of fact: that there exists a plurality of social groupings, good, bad and indifferent. It is not a doctrine that prescribes inherent limits to state action. (...) Our hypothesis is neutral as to any general, sweeping implications as to how far state activity may extend’, Dewey, LW, 2, 281.



suggest any concrete political measures is a direct result of this consequentialism. As the activity of the plurality of social groups, the state included, is to be evaluated by the consequences of their activities, it is impossible, Dewey argues, to attempt to define future courses of action the implementation and implication of which are the result of a set of circumstances whose historicity resists any effort at prescience.

The implications of Dewey's pluralism for his conception of civic participation should not be underestimated. Each citizen, as a member of multiple associations or social groups, should keep an observant eye on his/her interests by taking part in the life of these collectivities. Only in this way can the common good be preserved, and the society not become an easy prey for the excessive power on the part of the state or of any other collective actor. In Dewey, the common good is defined by opposition to the worst threat to the life of a democratic society, the totalitarianism of a social agent whose tentacular monism may affect all. Concomitantly, civic participation is virtuous in that each one directs his activity in a prudent, tolerant, courageous and, above all, just manner, i.e. in a manner which aims at the civil concord of which Cicero spoke and which Dewey would reconstruct from a pluralist perspective of politics. At this point, it is worth noting the remarkable parallelism between the Deweyan concept of common good and the following description of one of the dangers that affects the liberty of a political community: "The other and more insidious danger arises when a powerful individual or faction within a city reduces it to servitude by seizing power and ruling in their selfish interests instead of promoting the common good". These words were written by Skinner<sup>55</sup> to explain the origin of the liberty of the city–state of Florence, during the first half of the XV century.

Laski subscribes to a similarly pluralist conception of the common good. Explicitly rejecting that the state should direct its action by reference to an organic ethical community, Laski argues that public activity should facilitate the conditions for the "good life", whose definition was entirely dependent on individual perceptions of what the good was.<sup>56</sup> Laski shares with Dewey a sceptical attitude towards the definition of the common good as a substantive entity; on the contrary, their commitment to pluralism leads them to a procedural, individualistic notion of the common good. From this point of view it would seem that the recent neo-communitarian appropriations of Deweyan thought are faced by a serious difficulty.<sup>57</sup> In fact communitarian authors distance themselves from one of the main points of Dewey's political theory by, first, emphatically rejecting a pluralist perspective of politics and society; second, associating it to the cultural relativism resulting from the concept that human experience is decisively influenced by the historical context in which it takes place; third and last, arguing that the faculty of judgment, *pace* Kant, is the product of that particular, contingent experience. While Dewey underlines the importance of communication between different individual and collective actors as a way of guaranteeing the coexistence of a plurality of ways of life and avoiding a centralizing political solution, communitarians stress that only a shared *ethos* can pull together the various groups composing that multiform society.

## Conclusion

This seems to be the most appropriate moment to evaluate the meaning of the following words of someone who grew up in New Zealand, did his doctorate in Cambridge and whose academic career evolved in the United States: "Many of the themes I wish to treat contain the idea of the traversing of wide distances, both between cultures and between disciplines, and the successful establishment of homes and settlements on distant shores".<sup>58</sup> This is as fine a description of a diachronic reconstruction as I could think of: the narration of a voyage in search of ideas that left a certain place at a specific moment, and whose destiny accompanies those who express it wherever they go.

In this paper, I have suggested that the nineteen twenties pluralist theory of the state, a normative enterprise with little resemblance to postwar pluralism, can be interpreted as a reformulation of the classical republican critique of modern liberal conceptions of state sovereignty. Despite the more pronounced individualism of Laski's perspective, the fact remains that Laski's socialist pluralism and Dewey's pragmatist pluralism share the same critical positioning towards the dominant liberal paradigm.<sup>59</sup> That this sort of paradigmatic influence makes itself felt as a discursive constraint should come as no surprise. What is interesting though is that the civic republican discursive universe – with its emphasis on universal education, civic participation, a "general interest" view of the state – can be seen operating in Dewey and Laski's pluralist theories as a sort of underlying critical conceptual reservoir. Of course, my own frame of reference is determined by the Pocockian methodology I have mobilized. For instance, in the case of Laski's pluralism, one should not forget the formative influence played by the three-decade long debate about federalism, decentralization, and state sovereignty triggered by the work of Gierke, Maitland, Figgis, Duguit, and Tawney. My aim, however, has been not so much to thoroughly reconstruct all

<sup>55</sup> Q. Skinner, 'Political Philosophy', in *The Cambridge History of Renaissance Philosophy*, ed. Charles B. Schmitt et al. (Cambridge, 1988), 418.

<sup>56</sup> Laski, *Studies in the Problem of Sovereignty*, 14.

<sup>57</sup> E.g. P. Selznick, *The Communitarian Persuasion* (Washington, 2002), 11.

<sup>58</sup> J.G.A. Pocock, 'Working on Ideas on Time', in *The Historian's Workshop. Original Essays by Sixteen Historians*, ed. L. Curtis (New York, 1970), 154. From the same author, see also *Politics, Language and Time: Essays in Political Thought and History* (New York, 1971); 'Virtue and Commerce in the Eighteenth Century', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 3 (1972), 119–34; *The Machiavellian Moment. Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton, 1975).

<sup>59</sup> By this I do not wish to diminish the internal diversity within classical liberalism and the fluid boundaries between paradigms. John Stuart Mill, for example, has been enlisted in the republican tradition himself. Rather, my point is that both Dewey and Laski shared a similar distrust towards central features of what both conceived as the "liberal tradition". I thank the anonymous reader for this point and for providing me the example of Mill.

the relevant contexts of interpretation, as to identify a distinctive republican way of thinking in the writings of Laski and Dewey.

The episode in time in which their common interest in political pluralism brought them together seems, so I argue in this paper, to confirm that the criticism of dominant paradigms requires an alternative vocabulary. This is what the language of classical republicanism, whose first transatlantic crossing has been magisterially described in Pocock's *Machiavellian Moment*, seems to have provided to both Dewey and Laski. Take Dewey's criticism of "old liberalism". Underlying his arguments for a "renascent liberalism" that replaces the atomistic emphasis on "the individual", one finds the even older language of virtues, *eudaimonia* and social cooperation. The rejection, by both Dewey and Laski, of a monist, idealist conception of the state points to a political pluralism that complements their frequent subscription to the republican discursive universe. Their political pluralism is a critical political theory because of the distinctive republican elements with which they complemented it: from Laski's numerous references to classic republican themes and authors, to Dewey's subscription to Jefferson's commercial republicanism, the ancient language of civic duties, of democratic solidarity, of universal education, and of civic participation, is time and again recovered as an alternative conceptual reservoir to dominant liberalism.

The second transatlantic crossing here described – the return to Europe of the classical republican ideals that had survived in American political thought long after the American Revolution – should make us sensitive to the capacity held by political concepts to travel through time and space. This is especially true at times when the criticism of dominant paradigms is as urgent as it is difficult; today, as in the 1920s, the task of building a *critical* political theory seems to point to the need of articulating political pluralism, deliberative democracy, and civic republicanism by means of a historicist methodology.