

“We may be caught in the trap of a garrison state”*: Harold D. Lasswell, the American Middle Class and the Political Legitimacy of the National Security State

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The cases of Edward Snowden and Bradley Manning were the first in recent years to attract attention to the government practice of labeling “secret” things that the public should know. Considered a fugitive by American authorities, Snowden, who has been granted temporary asylum in Russia, declared that his leak of secret documents about surveillance programs was “to inform the public as to that which is done in their name and that which is done against them” (Greenwald, MacAskill, and Poitras). Charged with passing classified information to Wikileaks and sentenced to thirty-five years in prison, Manning submitted a request for pardon to Obama, stating that he understood that he had violated the law and regretted if his actions had harmed the United States, but—he continued—“you have to pay a heavy price to live in a free society”.¹ Whatever anyone may think of Snowden and Manning, Obama himself recognized that their cases warranted a re-opening of a public and academic debate about the extent of the power of the National Security State, national security, and its impact on individual freedom and democracy. Debate that has driven the Congress to enact the (controversial) Freedom Act on June 2nd, 2015.

This debate began after 9/11 when the war on terror gave rise to a new process of state reorganization: the Patriot Act and the institution of the Department of

* Lasswell, “Prevention” 108.

¹ Manning’s official statement, qtd. in Courson and Smith.

Homeland Security increased the concentration of political and administrative functions by putting in place methods of coordination between the FBI, the CIA and federal government and between federal government and state politics, and led to more coercive control not only of immigration, but also of the civil liberties and privacy of Americans (Saldin; Baritono and Vezzosi). The fact is, however, that questions related to national security—as historians have shown—are not a new phenomenon, but one that emerged, for the most part, on the eve of World War II and at the beginning of the Cold War with the approval of the National Security Act of 1947.

The bombing of Pearl Harbor and the subsequent involvement of the United States in the World War II redefined the way most Americans thought about the responsibility of the government toward its citizens. The fact that America could be directly attacked established the concept of national security as the standard according to which future foreign policy decisions should be made. The Cold War reinforced the preoccupation with national security. American leaders worked, in the first place, to reconstruct Western Europe as an effective counterweight to the Soviet bloc and then they turned their attention to other areas of the world, as they had done during the Korean War. These concerns led to the formation of the National Security State: a more centralized and powerful federal apparatus for the management of foreign policy.

The National Security Act created the National Military Establishment, which became the Department of Defense in 1949, the National Security Council, and the Central Intelligence Agency. The National Security Agency was formally established in 1952. This and other institutions increased the defense budget and created new instruments for peacetime intelligence, new mechanisms for civilian-military dialog and cooperation between the various branches of the Military. These institutional transformations altered not only the structural face of the federal government, but also impinged on the bureaucracy and the quality of its personnel, paving the way for what President Eisenhower called a “military-industrial complex” and what Charles Wright Mills denounced as “the power elite” (Mills) of professionals in foreign and military affairs who were both academic experts and prominent figures from corporate boards and financial institutions.

Historians have singled out different aspects of this process. Michael Hogan framed the political debate on the National Security Act within a binary ideological system—the struggle between internationalism and isolationism, militarism and anti-militarism, centralization or decentralization. On the one hand, the Democratic administration and coalition were committed to the State having a positive role in promoting both social security and national security. Insofar as the Democrats considered the United States the global defender of democracy, they balanced their commitment to the New Deal with postwar international responsibility. On the other hand, the Conservative coalition invoked the old traditions of isolationism and anti-statism in order to oppose the growing bureaucracy associated with the social and national security policy. Without calling

such arguments into question, Douglas T. Stuart reconstructed the positive role that academics and policy experts played in the Roosevelt and Truman administrations by arguing that the long debate culminating in the National Security Act was not so much a struggle between two competing ideologies as a dialog about how best to adjust American values of democracy and freedom to the demands of national security.

From this perspective, it is relevant to consider the reflections of Harold D. Lasswell, the social scientist who first alerted Americans to the perils of a garrison state, a State in which every aspect of social and political life was controlled by what he called “specialists of violence.” Spokesman for the new field of Political Science launched by his mentor Charles Merriam at the University of Chicago, Lasswell studied propaganda, mass communication and public opinion, advocating the “behavioral revolution” that superseded the traditional study of government (Rogow; McDougal and Reisman).

Although Lasswell was not involved in the formulation of security policies, his writings were very influential. By the beginning of the forties his definition of the garrison state was being widely circulated. In his scientific essays and public speeches he recognized the international role of the United States and the concomitant necessities of national security, but also suggested adjustments that—to his way of thinking—would avoid the formation of a garrison state and, instead, strengthen the supremacy of civilians over the Military, favor the freedom of the press and information and uphold social security. Viewed from this perspective, what emerges from his writings was the question of the political legitimacy of the National Security State, a legitimacy that—as we will see—Lasswell based on the consensus of the American middle class.

THE MAKING OF A GREAT MIDDLE CLASS

Before considering Lasswell’s writings on the garrison state, however, it is important to briefly outline how he defined the “great” American middle class (Battistini). During the thirties, faced with the threat represented by the rise of communism and violent forms of nationalism such as Fascism and Nazism, he argued that the future of democracy depended on the political attitude of the middle class. In “Psychology of Hitlerism” (1933), he showed that in Europe, particularly in Germany and Italy, the economic depression and the resulting working class activism had materially and psychologically impoverished middle-income groups. Their subsequent insecurities had prompted them to embrace symbols of nationalism and racism as a way to counter their social and political decline. Lasswell wondered whether this drastic reaction on the part of the European middle classes could be avoided in the United States.

Looking at America in “The Moral Vocation” (1935) he argued that middle-income groups—skilled workers, farmers, professional people, business men, civil

servants and private officials—could not act together because they lacked a sense of communal identity. They were divided, without loyalty to a common body of political symbols. What the middle class needed was therefore not only a consistent policy, but also an invigorating “myth of its historic mission” (128-29). Lasswell suggested that some of the measures proposed by the Roosevelt administration increased the loyalty of middle-income groups to democracy by reducing social insecurity, favoring free economic competition, and stabilizing economic development. Nevertheless, the behavior of the middle-income groups depended on the role that American political leaders, intellectuals and social scientists could play in inducing in middle-income groups a sense of identity as a “great” middle class.

According to Lasswell, what distinguished “Americans of middle income” was the fact that they had made the most sacrifices in pursuing their studies, buckling down to hard work and upholding a sense of moral duty. The importance of such sacrifices was demonstrated in the “re-moralization of society,” namely in opposing both fascist attitudes and communist propaganda by recapturing the initiative in the struggle for “social justice” (“Moral Vocation” 130-31). He felt that the American middle class should turn to the federal government and lead national policy in favor of “job security” and “moderation of income” but that this should be done without ignoring the value of *laissez-faire*. This renewed “Americanism” would secure democracy not only in the United States, but worldwide. At the eve of the World War II, his political goal was therefore to shape the middle class as a social and political unit that would define the consensual framework of American politics (*Democracy through Public Opinion* 132-39).

THE WORLDWIDE RISE OF THE GARRISON STATE

At the time that Lasswell was developing his reflections on the American middle class, he was also elaborating the concept of the “garrison state” as a theoretical construct that defined a worldwide trend that resulted from war and the expectation of war, and so was connected with historical events (Fox; Friedberg). The first historical event in question was the Japanese invasion of China. In “Sino-Japanese Crisis” (1937), Lasswell not only stated that the specialists in violence of both states might exert a determining influence on political and social life but he also argued that, if the crisis spread, the Soviet Union would become involved and such an involvement would have an impact on the internal struggle between the civilian leadership of the Communist Party and the military leadership of the Red Army. In war—he argued—the generals would win and establish the supremacy of military methods upon a social life already governmentalized by the abolishment of the free market and private enterprise. In his opinion, because of the interconnected relationship of world affairs, “garrison states in Asia and Europe would compromise the security and undermine the prestige of civilian institutions in every nation” (643-44).

Lasswell concluded that what America had experienced was “a change in the line of historical evolution.” Working on the theories of Comte and Spencer who saw history as a political and social progress from a military phase, based on force, toward an industrial condition, based on contract and consent, he envisaged an inversion of the sequence. Nineteenth-century Europe and North America defined “the scene of a revolution” that increasingly underplayed military skills: “the people joined the network of economic activity” and “the form of civilian state.” But, from the twentieth century—because of growing colonial rivalries, the outbreak of the World War I and the advance of Communism and various forms of nationalism—America had been veering toward counter-tendencies: “the expansion of the market was taking place in a world where the expectation of violence cast a shadow on the future of human relations” (4-6). Such counter-tendencies explained the worldwide rise of the garrison state.

Lasswell analyzed this theoretical construct on the eve of the World War II, just before the attack on Pearl Harbor. In “The Garrison State” (1941), he singled out the modern conditions that influenced the rise of a garrison state. Firstly, the new instruments of warfare, in particular the air force, made it possible to maintain high the level of fear in large populations. Secondly, because of the introduction of new technologies in the field of administrative organization and public relations, the specialists in violence included in their training a large degree of expertise that was traditionally considered the domain of civilian life. As a result, the socialization of danger and the subordination of civilian knowledge to military expertise made possible a total mobilization of society. The garrison state would be characterized by an energetic attempt to incorporate the population into the destiny of the nation: the duty to obey, to serve the state and to work for the nation would become the cardinal virtues of society. Moreover, the military elite would undermine the fundamental institutions of civilian states: democratic procedures would disappear, rival political parties would be suppressed, free communication and information would be abolished. Finally, government would be centralized, all social activities would be governmentalized, and free association would disappear (455-65).

In relation to the United States, Lasswell did not consider this theoretical construct to be a given: “It might be probable, . . . but not inevitable” (456). This was why he argued that the potential displacement of the civilian state should not be ignored. His aim was to stimulate scientists—in particular social and political scientists employed by the federal government—to address their scientific work to the factors conditioning the survival of American democracy (467-68). While Lasswell recognized the need for peacetime intelligence, military leadership and economic and scientific advances in the perfecting of military armament, he posed, nonetheless, the following questions: what democratic values could be preserved, and how? How would it be possible to civilize the military elite and overcome centralization of the government? To answer such questions, he turned to the American middle class.

Between the end of the thirties and the World War II, Lasswell continued his reflections on the garrison state by co-relating the needs of the middle class and the requirements of national security. This relationship appeared for the first time in "The Relation of Skill Politics to Class Politics and National Politics" (1937). The essay analyzed the economic and social policies of the New Deal and how such policies needed common symbols of identification in order to unify the American middle class through mass communication and democratic propaganda: "under the stress of prolonged war"—he predicted—"the specialists on violence might predominate," but—he suggested—the "philosophy and program of positive, rather than negative, liberalism" could bypass such a peril and protect democracy "with a minimum of violence" (298-313).

Lasswell continued to consider these questions in "Continental Security" (1938), published also as a pamphlet for use in the classroom. He argued that the United States could not remain isolated, but should assume the global task of protecting individual freedom and social justice by harmonizing both of them in security. In his opinion, the United States could win such a challenge only if "all American citizens of middle income [were] aroused to great political activity, [and] if they reach[ed] a much more adequate political consciousness than they ever attained in Europe" (438). In this regard, Lasswell can be numbered among the intellectuals who contributed to President Roosevelt's effort to dispel the national mood of isolationism. The American middle class should understand that the survival of American democracy and abundance depended on the success of internationalism (Ninkovich 113-30).

At the beginning of the forties, the question of middle class consciousness was still unresolved. Lasswell asserted that, although the middle-income groups were numerically preponderant, they were disorganized and hostile toward one another, whereas workers seemed to be united in their conviction of the validity of Marxist and Communist ideals. This explains why he was directly engaged in mass communication. In "The Communications Front" (1942), one of his many public speeches and pamphlets hinging on democratic propaganda, Lasswell found in the four freedoms of President Roosevelt the effective symbols of identity not only for the American middle class: freedom of speech and of worship, freedom from want and freedom from fear would unite people in the struggle for the achievement of peace and democracy (762-65).

From this perspective, in the radio roundtable of July 1943 entitled "War and the Middle Class," Lasswell explained that the American middle class would not only strengthen the war effort for democracy, but would also mitigate the effect of political and administrative centralization imposed by the creation of new federal agencies for military planning. The middle class would constitute "a balance between central and local government, a balance between what the government does and what is done privately" (18-19). By mobilizing the middle class,

the United States could replicate the military efficiency of European and Asian garrison states without encroaching on its democratic values. Lasswell therefore posed two interrelated issues for the later debate on the national security policy of the Truman administration: the necessity of balancing national security with both individual freedom and social security.

THE POLITICAL LEGITIMACY OF THE NATIONAL SECURITY STATE

After the end of the war, in view of the chronic expectation of war that characterized relations between the United States and the Soviet Union, Lasswell participated in the public and academic debate on the bipolarization of world order and a growing sense of international insecurity. More than once, he stated that “the dominant crisis of our time is not socialism versus capitalism” (“Universal Peril” 325) but “socialism and capitalism versus garrison state” (“The Prospects” 900). Lasswell recognized the increasing importance of national security, but he also argued that the allocation of a substantial portion of federal resources to preparation against war strengthened “the hand of government in industry, in politics, in science and education, and in every corner of American life” (“Prevention” 108-09).

The power of Congress, State and local legislatures and courts would decline in proportion to the increased executive power of government; public opinion would be weakened because less and less information would be allowed to pass through the media; the privacy of individuals would be less and less protected; the increased foreign policy demands and subsequent costs would undermine the two foundation stones of domestic policy: high levels of employment and an improved standard of living. Lasswell therefore concluded that Americans would never take the road of “peace at any price,” but would accept only “peace at any reasonable price” (“Prevention” 108). This was the central point of his *National Security and Individual Freedom* (1950), published after the National Security Act was amended in 1949.

In the first part of the book, Lasswell analyzed all the arguments he had already advanced to define the garrison state: the trend toward a more centralized government and the resulting decline in the power of Congress; the governmentalization of society and the increasingly influential role of military professionals to the detriment of political parties, civilian officials, business groups, labor unions and civic associations; the censorship of information available to the public; the increase in police intervention and surveillance (FBI). In his opinion, all such institutional and political changes led to the crippling of a free society. His intention was not to stand against the Truman administration, but rather to “search for policies by which we can reasonably hope to attain a high level of national security without at the same time making an unnecessary sacrifice of individual freedom” (*National Security* 22).

To this end, Lasswell suggested some modifications of the National Security Act: he advocated including three civilian members in the National Security Council and making them responsible for reviewing the effect of security measures on individual liberties and for ensuring a more effective flow to the public of information related to national security; establishing committees in Congress to improve information and make it available to the public. Most importantly, Lasswell urged Americans to give greater support to the President and Congress as representatives of the civilian point of view. He exhorted the thousands of community organizations and policy associations existing at every level of national life—including political parties, business groups and unions—to set up councils on civil liberties and freedom of the press at a local level. In his opinion, “informing the public is not enough. The public must act” (*National Security* 180). And it is with this message that he appealed to the American middle class.

Lasswell stressed that an effective consensus of opinion on the part of the middle class had been increasing since the World War II. By quoting sociological and public opinion studies (Holcombe; Centers), he contended that society was becoming more urban: most Americans were going into industry and becoming wage earners, and urban middle-income groups were more influential in establishing the mood of the whole nation. In his opinion, such a great middle class—consisting of both skilled workers and white collar workers—prevented the crystallization of public opinion into two sharply contrasting creeds—communism or socialism and conservatism—and therefore frustrated any attempt either to radicalize social reforms or to vigorously oppose social security, public housing and education and labor legislation. Such a consensus, in his view, would mean that the government could be held responsible for preventing a drop in the level of the standard of living (*National Security* 72-73, 112-13).

In conclusion, at the beginning of the Cold War, Lasswell believed that the rise of a garrison state could be prevented only if the words “national security” could be embedded into the national consciousness of the middle-income groups: “because of their strategic political position, they are not out of tune with the nation as a whole” (*National Security* 112-13). From this perspective, the National Security State needed political legitimacy based upon the consensus of the great American middle class. And such a consensus depended on both the degree of individual freedom and the standard of living. Without a proper balance between security policies and civil liberties, censorship and public information, defense expenditures and social programs, middle-income groups could become antagonistic toward each other and skilled workers could embrace conflicting ideals, and the resulting social tensions and political contradictions could end up in a lack of consensus. What emerges from Lasswell’s reflections is not only an understanding of the precarious equilibrium of the consensual framework of

American society and politics after the World War II,² but also the fact that it still holds good today. Recognizing this precarious equilibrium allows us to see what would otherwise be covered up, namely that the renewed tensions and contradictions that mark the National Security State (its de-legitimacy) are linked to the longstanding decline of the welfare state and the current economic crisis. Now as then, as the terrorist attacks in Paris on January 2015 also show, the queries relating to national security cut across the problems that arise from the sustainability (and the legitimacy) of the liberal democratic ideal resulting from the experiences of the New Deal and the European welfare states. The increasing polarization of wealth and the (social and political) impoverishment of labor could not be concealed behind the issue of national security. If the “social contract” stipulated between the State and the middle class during the last century has been broken under the pressure of globalization (Sassen), new burning questions emerge: what will become of the nexus between the middle class and liberal democracy that has shaped the Atlantic world since the end of World War II and has become the default ideology around much of the world after the fall of communism in Eastern Europe (Fukuyama)? Will the twenty first century be the century of a new middle class or of the poor working masses (Therborn)? Or might we be caught in the trap of a garrison state? History can widen horizons: the current queries related to national security should be analyzed not in the ideological, national-restricted terms of “statism” and “anti-statism,” but in the historical transnational trend of the success of neo-liberalism and the concomitant downfall of the middle class, not only in the United States and Europe but across the globe.

² During the sixties and seventies, American social scientists—such as Harold Lasswell and Daniel Bell—would face the drastic upset of this precarious equilibrium by the emerging “anti-systemic movements” on class, race and gender issues (Arrighi, Hopkins, and Wallerstein). See Cento.

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