

DAVID EASTON'S POLITICAL THEORY

The Political System: An Inquiry into the State of Political Science.

By David Easton. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1953). Pp. xiii, 320, x. \$5.95.

A Framework for Political Analysis. By David Easton. (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1965). Pp. xvi, 143. \$7.50.

A Systems Analysis of Political Life. By David Easton. (New York : John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 1965). Pp. xvi, 507. \$9.95.

An appraisal of David Easton's contribution to political science must come to terms with the self-assessment that emerges in his own writings. If we consider what Easton says, first, about the relation of the behavioral movement to earlier political science and, second, about the standing of his systems approach among behavioral approaches generally, we are led to the conclusion that his systems theory is the towering achievement of an effort, now almost 2500 years old, to develop a philosophical or scientific understanding of political life. While I shall call this high assessment into question, my estimate of Easton's work is by no means wholly unfavorable. His theory of the political system, developed in great detail over the course of two decades, stands as the most imposing theoretical structure yet to emerge from the behavioral movement in political science. No other behavioral theorist has spoken to so broad a range of issues, both methodological and theoretical. I intend to show, however, that there are fundamental difficulties in Easton's methodology and theory which undercut his claim to have advanced decisively beyond traditional political philosophy.

I

It is possible, on the basis of Easton's published writings, to distinguish three stages in the development of his thought. The first stage extends from the late 1940s to about 1953, when *The Political System* appeared. In this preparatory stage, he succeeds in elaborating a comprehensive view of the nature of political science and political theory. He lays a methodological foundation for the construction, in the following decade, of a conceptual framework for political analysis. The second stage in his development, the

constructive stage, culminates in the publication, in 1965, of two major theoretical works: *A Framework for Political Analysis* and *A Systems Analysis of Political Life*. Inasmuch as he has promised still another work on empirically-oriented political theory, devoted to the structural forms of political life, one must assume that he will continue to elaborate his theoretical position. Nevertheless, there are indications that his thinking might, by the late 1960's, have entered a new stage—one of reappraisal. Easton served as President-Elect and then as President of the American Political Science Association during the time when the established leadership of the Association, as well as behavioral inquiry itself, came under heavy attack from political scientists with radical or activist commitments. In his Presidential Address for 1969, entitled "The New Revolution in Political Science,"¹ he calls for some substantial modifications in the direction that political science has taken under the influence of the behavioral movement. Interestingly enough, this reappraisal leads him to emphasize some themes that had appeared initially in his writings but had languished after he turned to the construction of a general theory.

A. *Preparation. The Political System* continues to stand as Easton's primary work in the methodology of political science. Looking back on this work in the mid-1960's, he could describe it as the initial volume of a tetralogy on empirical theory. *The Political System* is best understood, however, in light of his search in the late-1940's and early-1950's for solutions to the major problems of methodology. It is possible to trace the development of Easton's thinking about methodology by considering *The Political System* alongside his major articles of the years prior to 1953. In essays on Bagehot² and Lasswell,³ he looks critically at the way other social scientists have dealt with the major issues of methodology. In two subsequent essays, "The Decline of Modern Political Theory"⁴ and "Problems of Method in American Political

¹*American Political Science Review*, Vol. LXIII, No. 4 (December, 1969), pp. 1051-1061.

²Walter Bagehot and Liberal Realism, " *American Political Science Review*, Vol. XLIII, No. 1 (February, 1949), pp. 17-37.

³Harold Lasswell, Policy Scientist for a Democratic Society, " *Journal of Politics*, Vol. 12, No. 3 (August, 1950), pp. 450-477.

⁴*Journal of Politics*, Vol 13, No. 1 (February, 1951), pp. 36-58.

Science,"⁵ he begins to develop a methodological position of his own.

Perhaps the first feature of Easton's early writings to impress the reader is their somber tone. They assume that the present age is one of social and intellectual crisis. The essay on Bagehot begins with a theme that the younger generation of political scientists would return to in the 1960's—the "threatened eclipse of liberalism" in the modern world. Liberalism is waning, Easton argues, because of the glaring contradiction between its doctrines of freedom, equality, and popular rule, on the one hand, and the realities of life in liberal society, on the other. In his study of Lasswell, he speaks of the threat of self-destruction which hangs over the world. "Decline begins from the problem of why the twentieth century, in contrast to earlier periods of social conflict and change, has failed to produce creative speculation about politics. In *The Political System*, he declares that "by any measure, a civilization has seldom been faced with a crisis weighted with graver consequences than that confronting us today." He traces the social and intellectual crisis of our time to a growing pessimism about the benefits of scientific reasoning.

Accompanying and in some measure offsetting the pervasive sense of crisis in Easton's early writings is a steadfast confidence in man's ability, with the help of science, to overcome the modern crisis. Political scientists, in particular, can help to fill the need for reliable and useful knowledge of political life if they will but repudiate the prevailing mood of disenchantment with science and recognize the validity and promise of the scientific approach. Easton applauds the liberal realists, Bagehot, Mosca, and Pareto, for undertaking a scientific study of politics as a means of sustaining liberalism, even though he concludes that their science of politics was, in the final analysis, distorted by a conservative bias. In "Decline" and again in *The Political System*, he exhorts political scientists to commit themselves unreservedly to a scientific approach to political inquiry.

The dominant theme of Easton's methodological writings is the need for political theory. He finds it necessary to oppose a variety

⁵*International Social Science Bulletin*, Vol. IV, No. 1 (Spring, 1952) pp. 107-124.

⁶*The Political System*, p. 40.

of intellectual currents which, in one way or another, deny the possibility or the importance of political theory. Part of the blame for the impoverishment of political theory in the twentieth century is placed on the prevailing mode of theoretical analysis, which Easton calls "historicism." Historicism sees the only meaningful task of political theory as one of studying older theories and their relationship to the historical milieu in which they arose.' The conception of science which has prevailed in political research during this century has also impeded the development of theory. "Hyperfactualism," as Easton terms this unacceptable interpretation, sees the purpose of scientific inquiry as one of amassing a great body of facts, classifying them, and relating them in singular generalizations.⁸ Finally, there is the view that political science is primarily an applied science or a reforming discipline. Easton calls attention especially to Talcott Parsons' argument that political science cannot become a distinctive theoretical field but must instead devote its efforts to applying the basic knowledge acquired by the other social sciences.'

In "Decline" and later in *The Political System*, Easton draws a crucial distinction between two aspects or kinds of political theory: "value theory" and "causal theory." Let us be clear, from the outset, about his view of the relationship between these two kinds of theory. The primary question is this: Are value theory and causal theory to be regarded as distinct and separable kinds of theory which can be developed in relative independence of each other or as merely identifiable parts of a single theoretical structure? Although he seems later to alter his position somewhat, his early view is that the two types of theory are inseparable: "It is deceptive to counterpose value to causal theory; in practice each is involved in the other."¹⁰ The distinction refers only to different types of propositions that are to be found in any comprehensive political theory, including the great political theories of the past. Descriptive or factual propositions refer to observable facts; causal propositions to the assumed relations between facts; value propositions to the state of affairs that the theorist would like to bring into existence; and applied propositions to the conditions whereby given ends can

⁷ "Decline," pp. 40-44; *The Political System*, pp. 233-254.

⁸ *The Political System*, pp. 66-78.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 60, 78-89.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

be attained.' Even to speak of different kinds of propositions is deceptive, he adds, since these propositions do not, in practice, exist in a pure form: "Strictly speaking, we ought to say that these are several logical aspects of propositions since no statement can ever refer exclusively to facts, values, or theories."¹²

Easton's explicit position in his early writings is that value theory and causal theory are inseparable parts of a unified conceptual framework. One cannot be brought to completion independently of the other. A general theory of politics must, in addition to providing categories for analyzing facts and causes, "provide categories for examining the moral premises out of which the theory itself emerged."¹³ Yet to state a principle and to follow it in practice are two quite different matters. When Easton discusses the nature and tasks of causal theory, he fails to explain how it might possibly be integrated with value theory. Furthermore, he neglects value theory altogether in developing his own conceptual framework.

If we compare Easton's discussion of political theory in *The Political System* with the account which had appeared two years earlier in "Decline," we see early evidence of that deemphasis or depreciation of value theory which occurs unmistakably in his mature writings. In "Decline," he begins with value theory and devotes the major part of his discussion to it. Historicism, he declares, has "driven from theory its only unique function, that of creatively constructing a valuational frame of reference." He expects that the revival of creative value theory will have beneficial consequences for political practice and political research alike. Insofar as political life is concerned, the creative study of values will equip the political scientist to offer guidance to citizens and statesmen in practical matters of urgent concern. By elaborating "a sophisticated system of values," he can help men in political life to define their situation in evaluational terms. The construction of a value theory will require him to frame goals for society that will satisfy human needs, as these needs are conceived by his particular age. He must also provide an assessment of the actual situation and propose means for achieving the desired goals.

¹¹ "Decline," pp. 37-38; *The Political System*, pp. 309-314.

¹² *The Political System*, p. 310.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 319.

Insofar as scientific research is concerned, a critical attention to values will help the political scientist to identify the major problems of society to which theory should be addressed. Furthermore, it will help him to recognize the values that shape his own empirical studies. In both "Decline" and *The Political System*, Easton takes a strong stand against the ideal of a value-free social science, as envisioned, for example, by Max Weber. Calling attention to the research of Karl Mannheim and others, he argues that values are an integral part of our personalities. The social scientist must hold values; and these values will inevitably influence his selection of problems for research, his selection of data, and the interpretation that he places on his findings. Easton had provided support for this position in his essays on Bagehot and Lasswell by showing that the political theories of these writers were shaped decisively by their values. Although he insists that values enter unavoidably into social science, he refuses to conclude that the findings of social science are necessarily biased or distorted by their influence. It is true that values may distort research. The elitist theories of Bagehot, Mosca, and Pareto were, in his opinion, reflections of their conservative, anti-democratic values. Yet in the case of Lasswell, a commitment to democratic values permitted him to see problems and phenomena that had been concealed from view by his earlier elitist outlook. The chance of value bias is greatly reduced, Easton concludes, when the social scientist raises his values to the level of consciousness, appraises them critically, and holds them up for public inspection. Yet these tasks are so difficult that the social scientist needs special training in order to perform them properly. The revival of value theory is needed, therefore, as a means of training social scientists in "the analysis and reconstruction of their value systems."¹⁴

Easton's treatment of value theory in *The Political System* is somewhat different from that in "Decline." His emphasis from the beginning is on the need for scientific or causal theory in its most general form. Value theory, which is not reached until well past the middle of the book, receives much less attention than causal theory. Furthermore, its functions are defined somewhat more narrowly than in "Decline." In the earlier essay, value theory had

¹⁴"Decline," p. 46.

been justified on two broad grounds: it can provide direct guidance to citizens and statesmen about the goals of political life and the means of achieving them; and it can help the social scientist to clarify the values that influence his empirical research. Easton says very little in *The Political System* about the first of these functions. He takes up value theory as part of his discussion of the influence of a political scientist's moral frame of reference on his observations and theories; and he justifies it almost entirely by its usefulness to research workers and students of general theory in clarifying their moral assumptions. In "Decline," value theory had seemed to be a co-equal branch of political theory with its own distinctive function of guiding political practice. Now it appears chiefly as the handmaiden of scientific theory.

Easton's reticence about the potential contribution of value theory to political practice is linked to his broader tendency in *The Political System* to give pure research priority over applied science. In his earlier essays, Easton had called attention to the utility of scientific knowledge in resolving the immediate problems of society. In *The Political System*, however, he issues a strong warning against excessive attention to the practical applications of scientific knowledge, at least in the early stages of a social science. Premature efforts at political reform are blamed, equally with "hyperfactualism," for retarding the construction of causal theory. The major resources of political science should be directed toward the discovery of reliable scientific knowledge; and problems of application or reform should play only a secondary role until reliable generalizations have been established about uniformities in political behavior.

Easton's major purpose in *The Political System* is not to construct a scientific theory of politics, although he does sketch out the view, later to be developed in massive detail, that the central activity of political life, and therewith the central focus of political science, is the authoritative allocation of values for a society. He seeks instead to clarify the nature of scientific theory, its role in empirical research, and the barriers to its construction in American political science. He wishes, above all, to show that the study of politics can be a basic theoretical science in the same sense as the other major social sciences. As we move forward, we shall see how he establishes that political science has its own distinctive subject matter, which lends itself to theoretical treatment. At this point,

our concern will be his general view of the nature of theory.

Let us begin with Easton's understanding of the problem to which theory is addressed. When we look out on the concrete world of reality, we perceive a bewildering display of phenomena. If we are to orient ourselves in the world, either as actors or as scientists, we must select certain phenomena as worthy of attention while disregarding other phenomena. This process of isolating an event and choosing some aspect of it as a "fact" worthy of attention presupposes some assumptions, some frame of reference, which, when raised to the level of consciousness, can be called a theory. There are no "pure facts," perceived independently of the observer's interests and assumptions. A fact is "a particular ordering of reality in terms of a theoretical interest."⁷⁵ By contrast to common-sense reasoning, science attempts to bring theoretical principles to the surface, extend them to include the relations of large numbers of facts or variables, and test them by reference to the data of experience. Theories may vary in their scope or level of generality. Easton attempts to clarify the nature of theory by distinguishing three levels of generalizations. Singular generalizations, which state the observed uniformities between two isolated and easily identified variables, should not properly be regarded as scientific theories. At a higher level, there is "synthetic or narrow-gauge theory," consisting of "a set of interrelated propositions that are designed to synthesize the data contained in an unorganized body of singular generalizations." The name "theory" may properly be applied to this set of generalizations because it permits the understanding of phenomena not included in the singular generalizations whose data it synthesizes. At the highest level of all, there is "broad-gauge," "systematic," or "general" theory, which Easton identifies as "the conceptual framework within which a whole discipline is cast."¹⁰ A general theory consists, in the first place, of a framework of concepts by reference to which the political scientist can identify and isolate phenomena of a political nature. These concepts correspond to the relevant elements or "variables" of political life. Scientific inquiry seeks to establish uniform relationships between variables. Accordingly, a general theory will contain,

¹⁵ *The Political System*, p. 53.

¹⁰ *The Political System*, pp. 52-57; "Decline," pp. 54-55; *Systems Analysis*, pp. 7-8.

in addition to orienting concepts, statements about the relations among these concepts or, we might say, principles of covariation. The concepts and principles of general theory refer, of course, to the most general features of the field of phenomena under investigation. In its most mature form, general theory is a deductive system, such that from a few basic premises, there follows a series of narrower generalizations and, finally, singular generalizations which can be tested empirically. The validity of such a deductive system can be affirmed or denied in whole or in part according to the outcome of empirical testing at the specific level. Sophisticated theories of this type can now be found in physics and economics. Easton doubts that general theory in the social sciences can reach this level of maturity in the foreseeable future, but he contends that the first steps, at least, must be taken toward the construction of a general conceptual framework for political science. By depicting the major variables of the political system and their possible relations, general theory can give meaning, coherence, and direction to empirical research. It can facilitate the comparison of research findings, point to areas where new or additional research is needed, and indicate the kinds of data that are relevant to political research.¹⁷

This view of the nature of scientific theory is maintained consistently by Easton throughout the constructive stage of his development. Nevertheless, it is possible to identify some important changes, after 1953, in his broad understanding of political science. First, Easton sharply revises his somber appraisal of the condition of political science as the behavioral movement begins to flourish in the mid-1950's. By 1957, he can write that "a tremendous transformation is under way" in social and political science in the United States.¹⁸ By 1965, he is able to speak of "gargantuan strides" in the discipline of political science, offering as evidence the wide recognition of the need for empirically-oriented theory: "Only a diminishing and archaic few remain who would deny the utility of efforts in this direction."¹⁹ As Easton's confidence grows in the prospect for a scientific study of politics, he appears

¹⁷*The Political System*, pp. 57-63.

"Traditional and Behavioral Research in American Political Science," *Administrative Science Quarterly*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (June, 1957), p. 110.

¹⁹*Framework*, p. 3.

to adopt a more hopeful view of the condition of modern society. In any event, we may list, as a second change, the disappearance of the sense of social crisis that had pervaded his earlier writings. A third change has to do with his understanding of the relationship of his project to traditional political theory. In "Decline," he had called for the restoration of the great tradition of Western political theory. Later, he seems to regard himself more as a radical innovator than as the restorer of a broken tradition. Although he continues to point out that causal theory was anticipated in the writings of traditional theorists, he speaks, at the same time, of "a radical transformation in conceptions of the tasks and functions of theory." The traditional image of the nature and tasks of political theory has been shattered by the rise of what may be "described as descriptive, empirically-oriented, behavioral, operational or causal theory."²⁰ The new political theory is "unlike anything that had preceded it in the previous 2000 years." Only the "barest glimmerings of the modern kind of theory were visible" in the older approaches to theory. While only a beginning has been made in the development of empirical theory, it represents, even in its paucity, "a break with the past, the enormity of which is only slowly²¹ being absorbed into the consciousness of political scientists." A fourth change in Easton's position has to do with the standing of value theory. We have taken note of his apparent tendency even in *The Political System* to depreciate value theory. Easton refers occasionally to value theory after turning to the construction of causal theory, but he has little to say about its functions or its importance. Even though he had maintained, in *The Political System*, that causal theory could not be developed independently of value theory, he fails to provide us with an account of his own moral position. Indeed, there are indications, as we shall see, that he has moved to the view that scientific theory need not rest on specific values, such as those associated with Western democracy. Finally, Easton tends, in his later writings, to draw an even sharper distinction between theory and practice than had appeared in *The Political System*. He continues to hold, consistently with his position in that work, that

²⁰*Systems Analysis*, pp. 4-5.

²¹Introduction, in David Easton (ed.), *Varieties of Political Theory* (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1966), pp. 1-2.

efforts to utilize political knowledge in the solution of urgent practical problems of society must be deferred until causal theory has been developed successfully in its most general form. The first and foremost task of political science is the pursuit of pure or unapplied knowledge; Yet whereas he conceded, in *The Political System*, that "questions oriented to reform are the essential stimulus to pure research" and that "the moral framework of the investigator sets his problems and thereby the major social incentive for any research," he moves to the view that the patterns of research should be determined not by practical interests or ethical criteria but by criteria intrinsic to the theoretical enterprise itself."

B. *Construction.* In the years since 1953, Easton's efforts have been directed toward the construction of a substantive theory of political life of the type that he calls for in *The Political System*. He acknowledges that his "systems analysis," as he calls his approach to general theory, has been inspired by broader intellectual currents of the modern world. "System," Easton declares, "is one of the thunderous concepts of the century." Starting in the natural sciences, it quickly reverberated "not only through the social sciences but on into such apparently remote fields as education, art, and aesthetics." We may note that the major figure in the natural sciences to advocate a systems approach has been the biologist Ludwig von Bertalanffy who, prior to World War II, conceived of "general system theory" as a framework for the unification of the sciences. His post-War writings helped to inspire the founding, in 1954, of the Society for the Advancement of General Systems Theory (soon renamed the Society for General Systems Research). Since 1956, Bertalanffy has edited the Society's yearbook, *General Systems*, which serves as the major source of information about the development of general systems theory in the various sciences. Two important figures in the development of general systems theory, the mathematician Anatol Rapoport, who co-edits *General Systems*, and the psychologist J. G. Miller, were close associates of Easton at the University of Chicago and later at the Mental Health Research Institute of the University of Michi-

²² *The Political System*, p. 85; "Political Science," in the *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* (New York: The MacMillan Co. and The Free Press, 1968), Vol. 12, pp. 291-292, 296.

²³ *Framework*, p. 24.

gan. In describing the backgrounds of his particular approach, Easton calls attention above all to systems conceptualizations in the communications sciences or cybernetics. Fortunately, we need not explore these broader formulations of systems analysis in order to understand Easton's position, for he tells us that he has found it necessary to develop a novel variant of the systems approach in order to study the political system. He cautions that his meaning of systems analysis should be derived operationally, "that is, it should be inferred exclusively from the text and not from the varied meanings given it by others in the whole area of the systems sciences."²⁴

In explicating Easton's conceptual framework, I shall begin from his concise summary of the premises upon which his systems analysis is built:

1. *System.* It is useful to view political life as system of behavior.
2. *Environment.* A system is distinguishable from the environment in which it exists and open to influences from it.
3. *Response.* Variations in the structures and processes within a system may usefully be interpreted as constructive or positive alternative efforts by members of a system to regulate or cope with stress flowing from environmental as well as internal sources.
4. *Feedback.* The capacity of a system to persist in the face of stress is a function of the presence and nature of the information and other influences that return to its actors and decision-makers.²⁵

This list of premises serves as a convenient basis for indicating

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. ix-x. Easton provides some useful insights into the most immediate influences that helped to shape his thought in the Preface to *Framework*. For Bertalanffy's conception of general system theory and his assessment of developments in this area, see "General System Theory," *General Systems*, Vol. I (1956), pp. 1-10; and "General System Theory, A Critical Review," *General Systems*, Vol. VII (1962), pp. 1-20. Rapoport surveys the development of general systems theory and makes a helpful distinction between organismic, mathematical, and technological approaches in "Systems Analysis: I. General Systems Theory," *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, Vol. 15, pp. 452-458.

²⁵ *Framework*, pp. 24-25. See also *Systems Analysis*, p. 18; and *A Systems Approach to Political Life* (Lafayette, Ind.: Publication #104 of the Social Science Education Consortium, 1966), p. 3. This last work, apparently available only in mimeographed form, provides a concise summary of Easton's overall position. It was prepared as part of a project, directed by Lawrence Senesh of Purdue University, whose purpose was to outline the major concepts, structure and methods of the social sciences in a way that would be useful to teachers and curriculum planners even in the earliest grades of elementary school.

the apparent development of Easton's thinking about general theory. He tells us that he had begun to consider a systems approach even before writing *The Political System*.²⁶ Yet, contrary to expectations engendered by the title of this work, only a few of its pages are devoted to the idea of a political system. Only the first of the above premises, the idea that political life can usefully be viewed as a system, is expressly developed. By the mid-1950's, Easton had developed the concepts associated with the second and, to some extent, the third premises. They are elaborated, for example, in a famous and widely-reprinted article, "An Approach to the Analysis of Political Systems," which appeared in 1957.²⁷ While Easton observes in this article that one task of research is to "establish the relationship between outputs and succeeding inputs of the system," he fails to discuss feedback as such, even though a feedback loop is included in an illustration of the essential parts of the political system. Another article from the period explores the idea of a general systems theory and criticizes Bertalanffy in particular for attributing steady state equilibrium to all systems, but there is no indication in it that Easton had yet formulated his own distinctive notion of "persistence."²⁸ As Easton moved to the view that the primary goal of political analysis is to understand how political systems manage to persist through time, the feedback function, which is indispensable to persistence, came to play a dominant role in his theory. The notion of feedback is developed comprehensively in *Framework* and *Systems Analysis*. In the latter work, he describes the concept of information feedback as "the dominant and most fertile intellectual innovation" of the present age. He deems it to be comparable, in its importance for social thought, to the great seminal ideas of Newton and Darwin.²⁸

²⁸*Framework*, p. xii.

²⁷*World Politics*, Vol. IX, No. 3 (April, 1957), pp. 383-400.

²⁹Limits of the Equilibrium Model in Social Research, " *Behavioral Science*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (April, 1956), pp. 96-104. For other early statements of Easton's theoretical position, see: "Political Anthropology," in Bernard J. Siegel (ed.), *Biennial Review of Anthropology* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1959), pp. 210-262; "The Perception of Authority and Political Change," in Carl J. Friedrich (ed.), *Authority* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1958), pp. 170-196; "La naturaleza de la teoria politica," *Revista de Ciencias Sociales*, Vol. 3 (1959), pp. 555-562; and *A Theoretical Approach to Authority*, Office of Naval Research, Technical Report #17 (Stanford, Calif.: Department of Economics, Stanford University, 1955). I have not been able to examine these last two writings.

Systems Analysis, pp. 367-368.

Easton describes the concept "political system" as his "major and gross unit of analysis." Yet the political system, like all social systems, is itself comprised of still more basic elements. Easton denies that social systems can properly be understood as aggregates of individual persons. He argues that "all social systems are composed of the interactions among persons, and that such interactions form the basic units of these systems."³⁰ Interactions, therefore, are his basic unit of analysis. While it might seem that an "interaction" is an abstraction with no visible referent in the real world, Easton insists that interactions are to be understood as the concrete, observable behavior of biological persons.³¹

As we have seen, the first task of a theory of the political system is to establish criteria for selecting out of the world of phenomena those activities or interactions that are political in nature. Easton's account of the phenomenal world, in his early writings at least, resembles what had come to be known in the nineteenth century as a dialectical view of reality. In the world of concrete phenomena, "everything is related to everything else."³² Furthermore, everything is in a condition of unceasing change. "General systems theory" can be understood as an offshoot of Hegelian philosophy. Yet Easton refuses to conclude, as Hegel and his successors had done, that the task of theory is to understand in systematic fashion the laws that govern this whole body of interrelated phenomena. The tools of scientific investigation are not adequate to this task. The scientist must simplify his task by isolating some specific phenomena for investigation. He must chop the world up into manageable units of inquiry. Science is necessarily selective or "analytic." The social scientist must engage in selective analysis by identifying, first of all, the body of phenomena that forms "society" or the "whole social system." He must then abstract some specific variables from the whole social system for detailed study. Whereas the economist, for example, gives attention to that subsystem of social phenomena which is formed by "economic" variables, such as price, supply, demand, and choice among wants, the political scientist gives attention to the subset of political variables. Easton attempts to uphold the standing of political science as a distinct theoretical discipline by arguing that there are social interactions

³⁰ *Framework*, p. 36.

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 44, 35-45.

The Political System, p. 97.

of a political nature which require independent treatment. In all stages of his development, he emphasizes that the scientific study of society is necessarily analytic or selective, but he apparently changes his mind about the nature of phenomenal systems themselves. In *The Political System*, he indicates that we can identify systems in the phenomenal world by the fact that their constituent variables tend to cohere and to enjoy a close relationship. It appears that a political system can be identified as such because of the close coherence of its parts." In *Framework*, by contrast, he no longer deems it important to hold that there really are identifiable systems in the phenomenal world, constituted by the close coherence or interrelationship of their parts. A system, he finally concludes, consists of any set of variables that we might choose to select for research purposes.³¹ We might say that he moves from the Hegelian view that all phenomena are related to the Humean view that all phenomena can be related by the mind.

From the time of *The Political System*, Easton has employed a single principle for establishing the boundaries of political systems. The political system consists of all those activities or interactions that relate more or less directly to the authoritative allocation of values for the whole society. Interactions that do not partake of this characteristic are excluded from the political system and viewed as external variables in the environment. The environment, which may be divided into intrasocietal and extrasocietal, also contains distinguishable systems, such as ecological, biological, personality, and social systems. The political system is open to influences from its environment; and the environment is affected in turn by actions of the political system. To use Easton's terminology, the political system and its environment are linked by an input-output relationship. The political system itself is conceived as a conversion process, whose work is to convert inputs into outputs

³¹*Ibid.*, pp. 96-100. The phenomena that make up the political system, Easton indicates, "tend to cohere and to be mutually related." They "show close enough interaction to be considered part of the political process." They show "a marked political relevance that is more than purely accidental or random." The task of research is to "discover" the "determinate relations" of the elements of political life, Political science abstracts from the whole social system "some variables which seem to cohere more closely than others." See also *ibid.*, pp. 291-292.

³⁴*Framework*, pp. 27-34.

and thereby to insure the survival of the system. Easton compares the political system to a huge and complex factory, which takes in raw materials and transforms them into finished products. Again, he compares it to a gigantic communications network into which one kind of information flows and out of which another kind of information emerges.³⁵

The input-output exchange between the political system and its environment can be summarized in the following manner. There are two basic kinds of inputs into the political system : demands and supports. These inputs provide the raw material or information that the system must process as well as the energy that keeps it going. Demands have their root in the fact that scarcity prevails in all societies with regard to most of the things that men want or value. Human wants become demands-and thus inputs of the political system-when individuals or groups voice a proposal that authoritative action be taken with regard to them. Some demands, termed "withinputs" by Easton, originate within the political system from persons acting in political roles. The input of supports permits the political system to perform its work of satisfying demands. Supportive behavior may consist either of overt actions or of attitudes that predispose a person to act in support of the political system. It is extended to three. major "political objects" in a system : the authorities, the regime, and the political community. Systems manage to maintain a steady flow of support and thereby to gain the energy needed to convert demands to decisions in. two main ways: through outputs that meet the demands of the members of society and through political socialization. The characteristic outputs of a political system are decisions and implementing actions that authoritatively allocate valued things. These outputs may generate support either by satisfying demands or by threatening various kinds of sanctions. Yet a political system may endure, even though its satisfaction of demands may be low or its use of coercion limited, if its members have learned through the socialization process to regard the system as legitimate and its outputs as authoritative.³⁸

³⁵*Systems Analysis*, pp. 72-73.

³⁶This portion of Easton's theory is developed, with some, terminological differences, in the early article entitled "An Approach to the Analysis of Political Systems." It should be noted that I have not considered, for purposes of this analysis, those writings on political socialization that Easton has written in collaboration with others.

If we should concern ourselves with the input-output exchange at a particular point in time, ignoring its long-term implications for the life of the system, we would have overlooked the distinctive problem of systems analysis as Easton conceives it. The fundamental goal of the political system is to insure its own survival or persistence. The input-output exchange must therefore be considered in light of the effort of the political system to persist over time. In other words, we must attempt to understand what Easton means when he speaks of the political system as "responsive" or "adaptive."

As we have seen, the political system is open to influences or inputs from the environment in which it is imbedded. In a dynamic model of political life, these inputs are seen not merely as raw material to be processed but as influences that threaten to change and even destroy the political system. Those influences from without or even from within that tend to bring about a change in the way a system operates are spoken of by Easton as "disturbances." Disturbances are "stressful" if they threaten to prevent the system from functioning in the ways required to sustain itself. Stressful disturbances are transmitted to the political system through fluctuations in the input of demands or the input of supports. Generally speaking, stress occurs when the inflow of demands becomes too heavy or when the inflow of supports becomes too light. Either excessive demands or insufficient supports can endanger those basic functions or "essential variables" on which the life of the political system depends, namely, allocating values for the society and inducing members to accept these allocations as binding.³¹

Demands are excessive and therefore stressful if their volume is too great for conversion into decisions ("volume stress") or if their substance is such as to require excessive time for processing ("content stress"). The consequence of excessive demands ("demand input overload") is "output failure," i.e., an inability on the part of the system to produce outputs sufficient to hold the requisite support of the politically significant members. We see that the sheer volume or type of demands can overload a system and undermine its capacity to produce outputs, even though the authori-

"Framework, pp. 90-98; Systems Analysis, pp. 22-25.

ties might have both the inclination and the resources to fill these demands if time permitted.³⁸

The erosion of support for the authorities, the regime, or the political community is the second major cause of stress for a political system. Let us note that Easton draws a crucial distinction between specific and diffuse support. Specific support is the direct result of outputs that satisfy specific demands. It "flows from the favorable attitudes and predisposition stimulated by outputs that are perceived by members to meet their demands as they arise or in anticipation."³⁹ Diffuse support, by contrast, is not linked directly to specific material rewards and satisfactions or to coercion. It cannot be understood as a *quid pro quo* for the fulfillment of demands. Diffuse support is a sense of attachment to or loyalty for the authorities, regime, or political community that is more or less independent of specific benefits. It is support for a political object for its own sake rather than for what the individual expects to derive from it. As a reservoir of good will, diffuse support is not easily depleted through disappointment with outputs. It should be noted that specific and diffuse support are not, in the final analysis, completely distinct: "Each kind of support will spill over to the other and influence it."⁴⁰

Support stress may arise from the erosion of either specific support or diffuse support. As might be expected from the close relationship of specific support to allocative outputs, "output failure" is the fundamental reason for a decline in the level of specific support: Output failure occurs when authorities fail to meet the specific demands of the relevant members of the system, when they fail to anticipate and forestall potentially objectionable developments, or when their decisions are regarded as inappropriate or unacceptable responses to demands. Output failure can stem from a variety of causes, e.g., "demand input overload," the indifference of the authorities, their incompetence, or their lack of resources. Yet the most basic cause of output failure seems to be "cleavage," i.e., internal dissension or conflict which so divides the relevant

³⁸*Systems Analysis*, pp. 37-69; *Framework*, pp. 119-122.

³⁹*Systems Analysis*, p. 273.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, p. 343; pp. 273-277.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, pp. 363-364; pp. 430-464.

members of the political system **that** they can no longer reach an acceptable output resolution. Cleavage appears also to be the fundamental cause of the erosion of diffuse support. Disputes arising from differences in attitudes, opinions and ways of life or from conflict among groups can erode the sense of a system's legitimacy, the acceptance of the idea of a common interest, or the members' identification with the community.⁴²

We see that stress, arising from excessive demands or insufficient supports, tends to undermine the capacity of the political system to perform its life-sustaining functions of making decisions and gaining their acceptance as authoritative. If the system had no capacity to cope with stress, it would eventually be destroyed. Yet the political system, as Easton envisions it, has a remarkable capacity to sustain itself by responding constructively to stress. Its members may anticipate and act to prevent disturbances in the system's environment. They may reshape the conditions of the environment in such a way as to correct or offset stressful disturbances. They may adapt the political system to changing conditions without altering it greatly. If conditions require, they can transform the structures, processes, and even the goals of the political system in order to insure its survival. The political system, Easton emphasizes, is "a goal-setting, self-transforming and creatively adaptive system."⁴³

At this point, we can see why Easton attaches such importance to feedback. Let us note that Easton draws a distinction between "information feedback" and "the feedback loop." He observes that "strictly speaking and customarily, the concept 'feedback' applies only to information."⁴⁴ In various systems theories, biological, technological, and social systems are said to regulate their behavior by monitoring, through information feedback, the consequences of their outputs for the environment. For example, the speed regulator on a motor and the thermostat of a heating system readjust outputs on the basis of information feedback. By the same token, feedback provides political authorities with the information that they need to cope with stress. Included here is information about conditions prevailing in the system and its

⁴² *Ibid.*, pp. 230-243, 277.

⁴³ *Framework*, p. 132.

⁴⁴ *Systems Analysis*, p. 366.

environment, about the general state of mind of the members concerning support, and about the extent to which outputs have managed to meet demands of politically relevant members. There are some fundamental differences, however, between social systems and other systems, technological and biological, that readjust their behavior on the basis of information feedback. A technological system typically readjusts output within the limits of goals that are pre-set by agents outside the system. In a social system, by contrast, the limits of adaptive behavior may be broadened, narrowed, or fundamentally altered from within the system itself. New goals may be selected if existing ones prove uncondusive to the persistence of the system. This ability; if need be, to transform themselves fundamentally makes social systems more adaptive than even biological systems.⁴⁶

The concept "feedback loop" is used by Easton to identify not only the information that returns to the system, but all the actions that result from the effort to take advantage of this information. The authorities use information feedback to determine successive outputs, which in turn affect subsequent inputs, and so on. When the input-output exchange is viewed as a process that continues over time, it appears as an unbroken cycle in which each phase influences succeeding phases. Easton distinguishes four distinctive phases in this cycle, which he calls the "systemic feedback loop." Since it does not matter where we break into this continuous loop, we may begin, as Easton does, with the authoritative outputs of the political system. In a "dynamic response model" of the political system, these outputs and their various outcomes must be viewed not as terminal points but as stimuli for members of the political system. In the second phase of the feedback loop, there is a response to these output stimuli by members of the political system, in which they may modify their demands or vary their support for one or more of the basic political objects. In the third phase, this response is communicated to the authorities as information feedback. Finally, the authorities may "react to the response by follow-up outputs and this reaction may be considered the start of another cycle in the flow of effects and information along the systemic feedback loop."⁴⁸

⁴⁵ *Framework*, pp. 98-101, 127-130; *Systems Analysis*, pp. 68-69, 367-371.

⁴⁸ *Systems Analysis*, pp. 31-33, 379-464; *Framework*, pp. 127-130.

If stress arises from excessive demands and from insufficient supports, it is obvious that an adaptive system might cope with stress by reducing demands to manageable proportions and by increasing the level of support. We have seen that demand stress arises when the volume or content of demands is such that they cannot be processed in the time available to the system. The political system has a variety of mechanisms by which it can reduce the number of demands or modify their content. First, it can restrict the entry of demands into the system by inhibiting the conversion of the manifold "wants" of its members into articulated demands. This is accomplished by regulating the behavior of those members (boundary "gatekeepers") whose roles permit them to give voice to demands and also by modifying the cultural norms that determine which wants are appropriate topics for political action. After demands have entered the system, they can be combined, modified, or eliminated (by intrasystem "gatekeepers") as they flow through the channels of the conversion process toward the areas where binding decisions are made and implemented. Only a limited number of the initial demands become issues for serious consideration by the authorities. The pressures of demand input overload can also be relieved by increasing the capacity of the system's channels for processing demands.⁴⁷

The political system has several ways of coping with support stress. The most immediate response is likely to be an effort to generate specific support through allocative outputs which meet the current demands of the members or anticipate and abort possible future demands. The degree to which outputs will stimulate specific support depends on a number of factors, e.g., the perceptions and expectations of the most influential members, the accuracy of information fed back to the authorities about the overall effects of past outputs, and, insofar as the authorities themselves are concerned, their responsiveness to demands, the timing of their response, the material resources available to them, and their native talents, organizational capabilities, and procedures for storing and retrieving information.⁴⁸

The political system might seek a long-range solution to support stress by acting to create diffuse support. Easton is thinking here

⁴⁷ *Systems Analysis*, pp. 70-149! *Framework*, pp. 122-123.

⁴⁸ *Systems Analysis*, pp. 275-276, 343-468; *Framework*, pp. 125-127.

of direct efforts to create a more favorable state of mind, not merely of allocative outputs that may, as a spill-over effect of tangible benefits, produce a general sense of good will. For example, the authorities might act to inculcate an ideology or to require participation in certain ceremonies, hoping thereby to instill a belief in the legitimacy of the established order, a willingness to subordinate personal interests to an alleged common good, or a sense of identification with the political community.⁴⁹ Actions directed toward the production of diffuse support are, strictly speaking, outputs, even though no allocation of goods is involved. Yet whereas the authorities alone are in a position to assign those tangible benefits that generate specific support, any member or group in the system may act to build up the sentiments of loyalty and good will that constitute diffuse support."

A political system might attempt to cope with support stress through means other than the generation of specific or diffuse support. One alternative is the threat or use of coercion.⁶¹ All efforts having failed to gain voluntary or involuntary support for the political system as it stands, there remains, finally, the alternative of modifying or fundamentally transforming the system.⁶² It is this capacity for self-transformation which makes the political system more adaptable in the face of stress than most other kinds of systems.

The preceding discussion will help us to understand the distinctions that Easton draws between systems analysis and other theoretical approaches. Let us take note, first, of his distinction between "allocative theories" and "systems theories." Allocative theories, such as the group approach to politics, theories of power and theories of decision-making, represent one of the major contemporary approaches to a general theory of politics. The focus of their attention is the factors that contribute to the kinds of decisions or allocations that a political system makes. Systems theories regard as problematical what allocative theories take for granted, namely, the persistence of a political system which is capable of allocating values authoritatively. For systems theories, the first problem is to explain the conditions under which a system

⁴⁹ *Systems Analysis*, pp. 267-340, 464-468; *Framework*, pp. 124-125.

⁵⁰ *Systems Analysis*, pp. 464-466.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 276.

⁵² *Systems Analysis*, pp. 249-266, 320-325, 371-372; *Framework*, p. 124.

of political interactions manages to persist at all.⁵³ Easton goes on to distinguish between two forms of systems theory: functional analysis and systems analysis. Functional analysis typically concerns itself with the way in which systems maintain themselves in a stable condition. While stability, technically speaking, can mean the constancy even of a condition of unpredictable, violent flux, functionalism tends to assume that it means a constant state of cohesion, peace and harmony. Systems analysis, on the other hand, denies that a system tends to maintain a given state over time. A system may adapt creatively and even transform itself as a means of surviving in the face of dangers.⁶⁴ Easton does not believe that systems analysis (or persistence theory) is tinged with the conservative bias that critics have found in functional analysis (or maintenance theory): "A system may persist even though everything else associated with it changes continuously and radically."⁵⁴

C. Reappraisal. We come, finally, to the most recent stage in Easton's intellectual development, a stage in which he reappraises the behavioral movement in political science. As I have suggested, this reappraisal finds expression in his Presidential Address to the American Political Science Association in 1969. The most striking feature of this address is the degree to which Easton returns to positions that he had taken in his early writings but later abandoned. In fact, he criticizes, implicitly and explicitly, some important tendencies of his mature thought.

Easton's address opens with the frank admission that "a new revolution is under way in American political science. The last revolution-behavioralism-has scarcely been completed before it has been overtaken by the increasing social and political crises of our time."⁵⁶ The "post-behavioral revolution," as Easton calls this new and latest challenge to the behavioral approach, arises from a deep dissatisfaction with the direction of contemporary

⁵³"Political Science," p. 294; *Systems Analysis*, pp. 473-477.

⁵⁴"Political Science," pp. 294-295; *Systems Analysis*, pp. 19-21; "The Theoretical Relevance of Political Socialization," *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, Vol. I, No. 2 (June, 1968), pp. 125-146. For earlier discussions by Easton of equilibrium analysis, see *The Political System*, pp. 266-306; and "Limits of the Equilibrium Model in Social Research."

⁵⁵*Framework*, p. 88.

⁵⁶"The New Revolution," p. 1051.

political research. It indicts behavioralism on a variety of grounds, e.g., its concern with precision at the expense of relevance, its implicit conservatism, its indifference to the development of new value frameworks, and its failure to put knowledge to use for the advancement of humane value and the reconstruction of society. While the post-behavioral revolution has obviously shaken Easton's confidence, so evident in his writings of the mid-1960s, in the permanency of behavioralism's victory in political science, it has not caused him to abandon his long-standing belief in the value of a scientific study of politics. He speaks of "the rich potential just on the horizon for understanding social and political processes. The agony of the present social crisis is this contrast between our desperate condition and our visible promise, if we but had the time."⁶⁷ Nevertheless, he is uncertain whether the post-behavioral revolution will reject what he regards as the undeniable gains of the behavioral movement or whether it will merely supplement them with its own distinctive contribution to the evolution of political science. He concludes that post-behavioralism should be viewed not as a threat to scientific inquiry but as an opportunity for necessary change. While it seeks to propel political science in new directions, it does not necessarily deny the gains achieved by the behavioral movement, as had those earlier opponents of behavioralism who wished to restore classical or traditional approaches.

Easton responds to the post-behavioral critique by proposing an "optimizing strategy" that will allow political science to cope with the transparent need for practical relevance while continuing to add to its stock of basic social knowledge. First of all, a far larger part of the discipline's resources, though by no means all of them, should temporarily be devoted to applied research: "We need to accept the validity of addressing ourselves directly to the problems of the day to obtain quick, short-run answers with the tools and generalizations currently available, however inadequate they may be." Second, systematic attention should be given to the underlying value assumptions of current research, which seem to have prevented political science from anticipating the crises that are upon us. Finally, there should be bold and creative speculation

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 1053.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 1055.

about "new kinds of political systems that might better meet the needs of a post-industrial, cybernetic society."⁶⁹ By speaking of the construction of value theory as a task equal in importance to the construction of empirical theory and by emphasizing its utility in guiding practice as well as in clarifying the presuppositions of scientific research, Easton returns to the long-neglected position of his early writings.

By admitting that it is not tenable, in a time of crisis, to insist that the first and foremost task of political science is the pursuit of pure or unapplied knowledge, Easton exposes himself to a decisive criticism. Throughout his address, he implies that the present social crisis is one that developed after political science had adopted the behavioral model of political inquiry. "New conditions of the modern world," he observes, "force us to reconsider our image of what we want to be."⁶⁰ Yet as we have seen, Easton insisted in his early writings that the present age was one of social and intellectual crisis. It is scarcely conceivable that this crisis abated, only to be replaced by another. Easton has merely rediscovered the crisis that existed prior to the rise of behavioralism. If the behavioral model of inquiry is inappropriate in a time of social crisis, then Easton was wrong from the beginning in urging political science to embrace it. While he now concedes that the priorities of the discipline must be revised, he urges that we continue to place our hopes in modern behavioral science. He speaks of the rich potential "just on the horizon" for understanding social and political processes. Yet this advice is inconsistent with the statement with which he concludes his own massive effort to construct a scientific theory of politics :

What has been and could only be attempted here is a modest and small step, a slow inching forward toward a distant horizon on which, some day, we may hope that there will appear a reasonably helpful macrotheory about political and social behavior.

II

Having surveyed the development of Easton's political thought, I shall discuss, in this section, some difficulties in his methodology

⁶⁹*Ibid.*, p. 1058.

⁶⁰*Ibid.*, p. 1053.

⁸¹*Systems Analysis*, p. 490.

and, in the sections to follow, some difficulties in the conceptual framework that he proposes for the analysis of political life. Easton's consistent purpose, from his earliest writings to his latest, has been to convince political scientists of the desirability of converting the study of politics into a more rigorously scientific discipline modelled on the methodology of the natural sciences. Adherence to the methodology of natural science, he insists, will enable political scientists to establish reliable, objective knowledge about all political systems. Generalizations about political behavior can be discovered that are valid from one time or place to another. Yet as Easton recognizes, especially in his early writings, there is widespread disillusionment with modern science. Powerful intellectual currents have arisen in the twentieth century to deny that the scientific method can obtain knowledge, particularly knowledge about man and society, that is generally reliable. In this section, I shall explore the following problem: Is Easton able to defend his project successfully against these currents of opposition?

Easton has properly identified the major contemporary opponent of the modern conception of science by speaking of historicism. As he recognizes, the term "historicism" has come to have a variety of meanings since the turn of the century. It has been used principally to designate the epistemological view, as developed by such writers as Karl Mannheim, that all ideas are historically conditioned and therefore relative to time and place. As Easton points out, this theory of knowledge leads to the conclusion that "there can be no universal truths except perhaps the one truth that all ideas are a product of a historical period and cannot transcend it."⁶² It is clear that historicism, in this sense of the term, poses a fundamental challenge to Easton's hope for a general theory of the political system. In another context, I have

⁶² *The Political System*, p. 235. For a concise discussion of the history of the term "historicism," see Maurice Mandelbaum, "Historicism," *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (New York: The Macmillan Co. and the Free Press, 1967), Vol. 4, pp. 22-25. For Mannheim's conception of historicism, see his *Essays on the Sociology of Knowledge* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1952), particularly the first essay entitled "Historicism"; and *Ideology and Utopia* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1949). For a recent examination of historicist tendencies in twentieth-century philosophy, see Stanley Rosen, *Nihilism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969). This epistemological position is incorporated into some formulations of general systems theory. See Ludwig von Bertalanffy, "An Essay on the Relativity of Categories," *General Systems*, Vol. VII (1962), pp. 71-83.

argued that the "post-behavioral revolution," as Easton terms the most recent protest against the behavioral approach in political science, draws its view of human knowledge from the ascendant historicist epistemology and cannot, as Easton supposes, be reconciled with behaviorism and the positivistic theory of knowledge on which it rests.⁶³

Easton has an inescapable responsibility to defend his conception of political science against the epistemological critique of historicism. We find, however, that he devotes his attention instead to a rather narrow manifestation of historicism, namely, the tendency of leading scholars to neglect the constructive functions of political theory and to focus instead on the relationship of earlier theories to the historical contexts in which they appeared. Easton fails to meet the epistemological objections which historicism has raised against projects such as his own. In fact, as his many favorable references to Mannheim would suggest, he embraces some of the very principles of historicism that undermine the quest for a scientific theory of politics.

The dispute between historicism and positivistic social science has centered around the role of "values" in scientific inquiry. Historicism typically insists that values are an intrinsic part of each person's thought and perception. Values are among the assumptions and preconceptions that form his "perspective" or "world-view." They help to determine what he perceives and the meaning he attaches to his perceptions. Furthermore, the values which shape thinking and color observation are said to vary in an inexplicable way from one epoch, culture, or society to another: Men think and perceive differently at different times and places because their values are different. Historicists have disagreed as to whether a person must unavoidably adopt the prevailing values of his society and epoch or whether he can free himself from the prevailing values and create others. They have disagreed also about the degree to which values can be raised to the level of consciousness. There is agreement, however, that no one set of values and, consequently, no single way of thinking and perceiving can, in the final analysis,

⁶³This analysis is contained in my paper entitled "Positivism, Historicism, and Political Inquiry," which was presented at the 1970 Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association and will appear in a forthcoming issue of the *American Political Science Review*.

be established as more reasonable or valid than another. Thought and perception must change with variations in the determinative values; and there is no absolute standpoint for obtaining knowledge that is true for all times and places. The observations and interpretations even of scientists are colored by their distinctive values and thus cannot have the status of final or objective knowledge.

There seem to be two principal ways of avoiding the historicist conclusion that final or objective knowledge is rendered impossible by the relativity of values. First, one might concede that values distort the processes of cognition and perception, but argue that the scientist, at least, can, by deliberate effort, set aside his values and avoid their distorting influence when he inquires about facts and causes. This is the path followed by those, such as Max Weber, who have called for a value-free social science. There is, however, a quite different path by which one can avoid the conclusion of historicism that final knowledge is impossible. One might concede that evaluation is an inseparable part of knowing, but argue that the human mind can obtain reliable knowledge of the principles on which the evaluation of things should be based. This path was followed traditionally by political philosophers who, before the last century at least, agreed that men can discover the truth about what ought to be as well as what is. I intend to show that Easton rejects both of these paths and, even though he explores still a third path, is unable to uphold the possibility of general scientific knowledge against the historicist critique.

Let us begin our analysis by asking what Easton means by "values." In traditional usage, the term "value" refers primarily to an object's worth as measured by some standard. Easton seldom uses the term in this sense. In *The Political System*, he adopts as his "working assumption" an interpretation of values which, he points out, is common to positivistic social science and historicism. According to this interpretation, "values can ultimately be reduced to emotional responses conditioned by the individual's total life-experiences."⁶⁴ Values, by this definition, are either desires or sentiments of approval and disapproval. Yet Easton fails to adhere consistently to this or any other definition of "values." The term is

⁶⁴*The Political System*, p. 221.

sometimes applied not to emotional responses but to the standards by reference to which a person's judgments, particularly his moral judgments, are made. A person's values, in this sense, would consist of his set of guiding principles or ideals, his "moral premises" or "moral frame of reference."⁶⁵ Leaving the subjective realm of desires, emotions, and ideals, we find that Easton wishes to treat values as "observable facts." Values, in this sense, seem to be statements or propositions of a certain type. Values are "expressions of sentiments" or expressions of our preferences.⁶⁶ Having discovered that Easton uses the term "value" to apply, variously, to a person's desires, his sentiments of approval or disapproval, his principles or ideals, and his statements, it is not surprising to find yet another meaning of the term in his writings. As we have seen, Easton defines political science as the study of the authoritative allocation of values for a society. Values, in this sense, are goods that serve as the objects of human desire, i.e., "valued things."⁶⁷ I would not argue that the various things to which Easton applies the term "value" are unrelated or unimportant for ethical inquiry. I do contend that these various usages are confusing to the reader and indicative of confusion in Easton's own thinking about ethics and political philosophy.

We have seen that Easton affirms, from his earliest writings to his latest, that all research rests of necessity on certain value assumptions. He thus rejects the claim of Weber and "classical positivism" that research in the social sciences can be "value free."

Values are an integral part of personality and as long as we are human, we can assume that these mental sets and preferences will be with us. The ideal of a value-free social science has revealed itself as a chimera. Even where a research worker should claim utter impartiality, there can be no doubt that he has simply driven his moral views so far underground that even he himself may no longer be aware of them.⁶⁸

Values influence empirical research at several critical points. They influence the choice of concepts and variables for inclusion in a theory. They guide the selection of problems for investigation.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 80, 220, 225, 226-227, 230, 255.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 221-222, 253, 260.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 131, 135, 136, 137, 220.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 225.

Finally, values influence the selection of data for use in testing a theory and also the interpretation that will be placed upon these data. Even the ability to perceive certain relations among facts "may depend upon insight gained from immersion in one or another moral outlook."⁶⁹

Easton quite often cites one of the foremost historicists, Karl Mannheim, to support his case against the "myth" of value-free research. Yet one must ask if this concession to the historicist position undercuts the possibility of a social science with universal validity. If our values determine which facts we perceive and what meaning we give them and, in addition, if values "can ultimately be reduced to emotional responses conditioned by the individual's total life-experiences," it would seem that disagreement about facts must necessarily be both widespread and irreconcilable. Mannheim, at least, had concluded from these premises that no generalizations about man and society can be true or valid for all epochs and cultures. Yet Easton, having accepted Mannheim's premises, strongly opposes his conclusion that political science, at most, "can hope only to discover principles of politics true for a particular time and place."⁷⁰ An optimistic view of the development of social science, Easton asserts, would hold that a large number of generalizations will be discovered that are true for all cultures. We must look further at Easton's teachings about the cognitive status of values in order to see if there is any basis for his optimism.

Having granted that values enter unavoidably into scientific research, Easton could uphold the general reliability of scientific knowledge by maintaining that there are some values which, because of their truth or soundness, favor an understanding of the factual world as it is. Generally speaking, this was the position of traditional political philosophers, who held that we can establish which way of life is best for man and society, and thereby gain a reliable standard for the evaluation of political things, by considering the needs, potentialities, or passions of human nature. In his early writings at least, Easton declares that his intention is to "restore theory to its natural and traditional role." Nevertheless, he can never bring himself to endorse the traditional view

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 225-227.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

that there are true standards of evaluation, grounded in a universal human nature. The question of the existence of natural standards arises in his early essay on Lasswell, which asks : "Can the social sciences pass 'beyond the relativism of the Weberian tradition? Can they say whether the goals of a democratic society are superior to those of dictatorial communism?"⁷¹ Easton finds in Lasswell's mature writings a tendency to hold, in opposition to his earlier insistence on a value free social science, that the social scientist can know what the goals of social life ought to be. Lasswell suggests that all human beings have certain basic impulses and needs. The best kind of social order is one that satisfies man's basic need for self-respect or deference. While Easton refrains, in this essay, from denying explicitly that there is a universal human nature from which reliable standards can be derived, he indicates very strong reservations about this "attempt to remarry science and philosophy through the bond of human nature." He goes on to give a list of objections that "social scientists" might raise against the effort to derive moral standards from a human nature.⁷² In "Decline," he suggests that political theory can establish its goals by reference not to universal needs of human nature but to human needs as they are conceived by the age in which the theorist lives. In *The Political System*, he clearly opposes the effort to find absolute standards in a universal human nature. Values are emotional responses conditioned by the total life-experiences of the individual or group that holds them. Unlike factual propositions, value judgments cannot be established as true or valid. Easton does maintain, in opposition to what he calls "equalistic relativism," that to assert that values are related to social conditions "does not by itself necessarily imply any opinion about the merit or demerit of these preferences. It does not demonstrate values to be either equal or unequal in worth."⁷³ One value cannot be judged better or worse than another except by reference to some standard of comparison. Yet Easton makes it perfectly clear that no moral standard, valid for all times and places, can be established either by reasoning or by experience. No one set of values can claim to have a higher truth than any other set on logical or factual

⁷¹ "Harold Lasswell," p. 450.

⁷² *Ibid.*, pp. 455-458.

⁷³ *The Political System*, p. 261.

grounds. Nevertheless, Easton sees no reason why an individual may not affirm, vigorously and forcibly, that his own values constitute a superior moral frame of reference for all men.⁷⁴ Many relativists, hoping to erect a barrier against intolerance, have argued that since there is no rational ground for judging some values as superior to others, all values must be regarded as equal in worth. Easton rejects this argument in order to protect the possibility of creative value theory. In his view of the nature of values and value theory, Easton returns not so much to traditional political philosophy as to Nietzsche and radical historicism.

Having admitted that values unavoidably shape our knowledge of facts and causes, Easton might have protected the objectivity of scientific research by holding that there can be final knowledge of values; but we see that he denies that reliable standards of evaluation can be discovered in nature or otherwise established by reason or experience. Can he avoid the conclusion that scientific generalizations must vary, along with their attendant values, from one time and place to another?

In his mature writings, Easton appears to hold that political theory can achieve a general reliability by abstracting from those values that are controversial from one political system to another. In *Systems Analysis*, he criticizes what he calls "normative theory." Normative theory "adopts a value as its objective and evolves an explanation in terms of the conditions necessary to maximize the selected value." An example would be a theory whose ethical focus is the perpetuation of democracy as a preferred type of political system. What Easton here criticizes sounds very much like "creative value theory" as he had described it in his early writings. His early view had seemed to be that all political theory must be constructed upon some specific values, such as those appropriate to a democratic regime. His mature view seems to be that the theorist should avoid committing himself to the goals or values of any particular regime:

The very fact that some value has been adopted as the principle that gives coherence and relevance to the theory restricts the range of interests to particular classes of phenomena and of systems. What is lacking is a broad way of formulating a theoretical question, one

⁷⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 247-248, 251-254, 260-265.

that will deliberately refrain from fixing on specific goals or even upon the vital matters of democratic systems but one that will extend its scope and address itself to the permanent and enduring problems faced by all types of political systems... .

Once we affirm that all political life in its varied manifestations may properly become our universe, the substance of a theoretical inquiry would have to change radically. It would no longer suffice to assert some central value that is associated with an interest bred by the historical experience of Western civilization. Rather, our attention will be directed, of necessity, to the most general kind of matter that must be faced by all political systems regardless of time or place, from the most democratic to the most dictatorial, from the most primitive to the most industrialized, from the most traditional to the most modern.⁷⁵

It seems that political theory must be guided by the one value that is common to all political systems, namely, the survival of the political system as such. By freeing himself from "an interest bred by the historical experience of Western civilization" and from the specific values of a democratic regime, the political theorist gains a comprehensive standpoint for understanding political systems as such, a standpoint which yields scientific knowledge of universal validity. The outcome of this type of analysis is, of course, systems theory, which focuses on the life processes of any and all political systems while treating the survival of a particular regime, such as democracy, as a second-order problem.

Is it possible, however, for the social scientist to detach himself from the values of particular regimes, including the regime under which he lives? In his address on the post-behavioral revolution, Easton argues that such detachment is not only possible but desirable. The social scientist, he asserts, "needs to be denationalized" He should be released "from bondage to the unique needs and objectives of his own national political system":

If Mannheim is correct in describing the intellectual as the least rooted of all social groups, the professional social scientist ought to view himself as committed to the broadest of humane values. These need to be the touchstone that he brings to bear on social issues [sic.]. Yet many barriers block the way. Of these identification with the goals and interests of one's nation is prominent. Political scientists have still to escape the crippling effects for scholarship of unwitting commitment to national goals and perspectives.

⁷⁵ *Systems Analysis*, pp. 13-15.

⁷⁶ "The New Revolution," pp. 1059-1061.

Easton seems to be recommending a position that is different from both the positivistic ideal of value-free inquiry and the traditional quest for final standards in nature. By a process of denationalization, the social scientist frees himself from national goals and interests, but not of values altogether. There remain "those civilized, human values known to most men."⁷ No claim is made that these "humane values" are supported by reason or experience or that they are grounded in human nature. They owe their standing to agreement or convention, to the fact that they are acknowledged or recognized by most men. Far from distorting political research, these values point to the proper concern of a general theory of politics, namely, the vital processes that allow any and all political systems to persist.

Assuming that I have correctly described Easton's emerging solution to the problem of values, it is doubtful if he can, by this argument, avoid the unfavorable conclusion that historicism has drawn about the possibility of reliable generalizations about political life. First of all, we are given no indication of the content of these humane values that are supposedly known to most men. Are these values peculiar to the present age or are they recognized in all ages? There is little reason to expect that they will be recognized in the future unless they are somehow self-evident to man as man or inherent in human nature. Yet Easton, in the very essay where he speaks of these values, dismisses natural law theories with some disdain. If, however, these values are simply the opinions that happen to prevail in our time, then the mere fact of their wide acceptance would, as Easton himself has recognized,⁷⁸ be no convincing reason for their acceptance by a rational, inquiring mind. Furthermore, if the humane values of which Easton speaks are simply expressions of the contemporary worldview, then the scientific research which these values inspire and shape should likewise be restricted in its validity to the present age.

In judging Easton's success in upholding the possibility of scientific theory against the epistemological critique of historicism, it is important that we give attention also to what he says about theory itself. If theory is to have universal validity, it would seem that the objects of theory must have permanent qualities or uniform relationships. A theory would be generally reliable if its prin-

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 1059.

⁷⁸ *The Political System*, pp. 254-260.

ciples conformed or corresponded to those permanent or uniform features of the world. Writers in the empiricist and positivist traditions have typically affirmed that there are uniformities in the phenomenal world to which the principles of theory must correspond if they are to be valid. This, correspondence of theory to reality is to be determined by reference to the facts of experience. Historicists have objected to this view of theory on the following ground: The experience of which we are aware has already been selected and shaped by the mind itself, according to preconceptions and values that are essentially variable from one epoch and culture to another. It is futile, therefore, to attempt to determine, by reference to experience, whether a concept or theory corresponds to "reality." Theories must be evaluated by some standard other than correspondence, e.g., their utility in promoting acceptable solutions to practical or theoretical problems of the age. Each theory reflects the perspective or world-view of the age in which it appears and cannot claim validity beyond that age.

Easton leaves no doubts about his commitment to the view that there is a real or natural world external to man which can be known reliably through scientific inquiry. In *The Political System*, he takes what we might call a "realistic" view of the nature of theory. A theory is valid if it can be shown by experience to correspond to reality. Yet what is the reality to which scientific theory generally, and political theory in particular, must correspond? Easton's early position seems to be that there are, in the world of phenomena, various clusters of phenomena which tend to cohere closely and retain their identity through time. These "systems" of closely related phenomena are discovered in nature and not created arbitrarily by the observer. The idea "that the elements of the political process have a real tendency to hang together" is "the necessary foundation for any conceptual framework."⁷⁹ The validity of a systematic political theory will depend on whether or not its concepts correspond to the important variables of the empirical system and identify correctly the relationships among these variables: "Systematic theory corresponds at the level of thought to the concrete empirical political system of daily life."⁸⁰

⁷⁹*Ibid.*, pp. 291-292.

⁸⁰*Ibid.*, pp. 97-98.

In his theoretical writings of the mid-1960's, Easton continues to hold that the worth of systematic theory depends on the correspondence of its concepts and generalizations to the empirical world: "In empirical science, as compared to such deductive sciences as mathematics, the value of every symbolic system lies in the adequacy with which it corresponds to the behaving system which it is designed to explain."⁸ Yet Easton now embraces a position regarding the status of political systems that seems incongruent with a correspondence test for the worth of theories. Systems, he now contends, are not to be regarded as naturally coherent sets of interactions that "lie in nature waiting for the observer to discover and explore them."⁸² He adopts a "constructivist" position, according to which any aggregate of interactions that we choose to identify may be said to form a system. There is no logical reason, he tells us, why political strife among the Bantu and party politics in the United States or, for that matter, a duckbilled platypus and the ace of spades, might not be regarded as forming a political system.⁸³ Yet if there are no systems in nature, it is difficult to see how Easton can maintain that the value of a theory lies in the adequacy of its correspondence to "the behaving system which it is designed to explain." As he admits, the political theorist can invent a great number of alternative symbolic systems which correspond, in some way, to variables in the phenomenal world, but which are, as political theories, trivial and worthless. Correspondence to facts counts for little when the facts have no meaning or significance in themselves. Easton appears to have moved toward the view, often adopted by historicists who reject the correspondence theory of truth, that the theorist imposes meaning on empirical data rather than discovering meaning in the data. Rather than trying to decide if a set of activities constitutes a natural or intrinsically meaningful system, the theorist will ask if the set "is an interesting one, in the sense that it is relevant and helps us to understand some theoretical problems, or whether it is worthless or trivial from this point of view."⁸⁴ Rather

⁸ *Framework*, p. 26.

Ibid., p. 27.

Ibid., pp. 28, 32. It seems, however, that a duckbilled platypus and the ace of spades would be logically excluded as elements of the political system by the requirement that such elements be social interactions.

Ibid., p. 30. Even here, Easton does not seem to embrace the con-

than judging the worth of utility of a theory by its correspondence to significant facts, we judge the worth or utility of selected facts in terms of our prior theoretical interests. In deciding if a set of interactions is to be adopted as our political system, we ask if it composes "a sufficiently adequate and comprehensive body of referents to enable us to answer some of the major problems that have been raised historically with regard to political research or that appear currently relevant for an understanding of political life."⁸⁵ The nature of a political system is, by this standard, entirely relative to the kinds of questions or problems that theorists entertain. It makes sense to speak of *the* political system only if there are permanent problems or issues of politics that concern man as man. In *The Political System*, Easton had conceded that "each age is called upon to reformulate its own views of the limits of political research."⁸³ The questions raised by Western political science are determined by the cultural and ethical demands of Western society: "Western society has required that certain kinds of questions central to the kind of civilization that has been growing up, be answered."⁸⁷ Though he emphasizes, in later writings, that theoretical rather than practical criteria should guide the formulation of political research, there is no reason to suppose that the questions deemed relevant to theory will not change from one age to another, producing concomitant changes in the very meaning of a political system. In fact, he appears to embrace the historicist interpretation of scientific development, according to which every discipline is a captive of a set of fundamental assumptions, or a research paradigm,⁸⁸ which shifts inexplicably from one age to another.

We see that Easton's methodological position is marked by conflicting tendencies. On the one hand, he appears to agree with the positivist tradition that social scientists can establish theoretical knowledge that is generally reliable and objectively valid if they test their speculations against the facts of experience. Social

structivist position entirely, for he goes on to say that an interesting system is one whose parts, in addition to being relevant to some theoretical problems, "show some degree of interdependence and seem to have a common fate."

⁸⁵*Ibid.*, p. 45.

⁸⁸*The Political System*, p. 125.

⁸⁷*Ibid.*, p. 147.

⁸⁸"The New Revolution," p. 1053

research moves incrementally toward the truth about social and political reality. Yet in his treatment of facts and values and his discussion of the nature of theory, Easton makes concessions to historicism which undercut the possibility of scientific knowledge that is objective or generally reliable. He vacillates between a view of the theorist as a pioneer, blazing new paths in causal and moral knowledge, and a view of the theorist as an unwitting spokesman for the prevailing assumptions of his age. He holds out the prospect that there lies just on the horizon a general theory that will enable us to understand the fundamental processes of political life. Yet he tells us that a final and eternally valid conceptual framework is "a goal that *in principle* lies beyond the realm of possibility."⁸⁹ He advises us to give up the illusion of the classical tradition that "there must be one theory and only one, that can be right."⁹⁰

III

In assessing Easton's theoretical position, one must remember that he does not claim to have developed a full-fledged general theory of politics. A general theory, in its mature form, would contain a great number of theoretical generalizations or laws asserting the covariance, under specified conditions, of two or more things, activities, or events. Ideally, its assumptions and generalizations would be ordered as a deductive system of thought. While Easton believes that his theoretical analysis contains a number of generalizations and reaches a high level of logical coherence, he acknowledges that it does not amount to a general theory in the proper sense. He believes, nonetheless, that he has taken an important step toward the development of a general theory of politics. Specifically, he claims to have elaborated a comprehensive set of concepts, a "conceptual framework," which identifies the area of human activity to be included within a systematic study of politics and indicates the critical variables and relationships within this area that should command attention. He has delimited the subject matter of political science and provided criteria of relevance to guide political research.⁹¹

The adequacy of Easton's conceptual framework must be judged

⁸⁹ *The Political System*, p. 125. **Italics added.**

⁹⁰ *Systems Analysis*, pp. 472-473.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 9-13, 471-490.

by its success in resolving the two major problems to which it speaks. First, there is the problem of giving a satisfactory answer to the question: "What is political?" Throughout his career, Easton has described the first task of political theory as one of identifying those aspects of concrete social activity that are "political" and distinguishing them from non-political phenomena:

What we would need to know is how we are to orient ourselves to the things that we have learned to call political. Where does the political begin and end, and how is it distinguishable if at all, from other kinds of data that we call economic, sociological, psychological, and so on through the whole catalogue of the established social sciences? The very idea of systematic theory, in other words, raises the question of the gross outlines of the concrete empirical system to which a system of theory is to refer.⁹²

The second problem has to do with Easton's contention that political science must be concerned primarily with the question of how political systems manage to persist through time. In order to answer this question, we must have some criteria for deciding when a political system has ceased to persist, either by disappearing completely or by changing into something fundamentally different. In brief, our first problem is one of identifying the political. Our second problem is one of deciding when the political system has maintained or lost its identity.

The problems which Easton hopes to resolve by his conceptual framework are treated explicitly in the earliest writings on political science. Some attention to an ancient treatment of these problems, specifically, that of Aristotle, will help us to explicate Easton's analysis and to assess his claim that systems analysis represents a vast improvement over traditional approaches to political science. Aristotle's *Politics* opens with the question of the nature of the political or, more precisely, the nature of the *polis*, the political community, from which our term "political" is derived. The political community is distinguished from other human communities, or associations by its inclusiveness. It includes all other communities, such as the family, but is not itself included in any other. The inclusiveness of the political community is not to be understood merely in a spatial sense. It refers, above all, to the

⁹² *The Political System*, p. 92; see also *Framework*, p. 48.

fact that the political community incorporates the ends of subordinate communities in its all-encompassing or inclusive end. All communities are established for the sake of some end or good, but whereas other communities seek some limited or partial good, the political community is formed for the highest and most inclusive good that men can seek. This final good, for the sake of which all other good things are pursued, is happiness. The family, for example, can provide for the needs basic to life and, in addition, for the perpetuation of the species. Yet a larger community is needed to provide for a good or happy life. When Aristotle speaks of the political community as self-sufficient, he means that it has the resources to provide not only for protection and preservation but also for human happiness. The political community is a unified whole, but its order does not come about instinctively, like that of a beehive. It is established by deliberate action, according to some rules of justice and some conception of the good life. Each political community must assign the final authority, the right to rule, to men of a certain type, whether to the rich, the multitude of poor, the middle class, the nobles, or the good, i.e., men of merit. Each of these groups of men can defend its claim to rule by some principle of justice, some view of why political authority belongs properly in its hands. Each group has its distinctive view of the good life, of the end toward which political activity should be directed. There are several alternative ways of ordering or constituting a political community, depending on which type of men, and therefore which conception of justice and the good life, are placed in the ruling position. The political community owes its identity, its distinctive character, to its internal constitution or regime (*politeia*). Political communities with different regimes, e.g., democracies, oligarchies, aristocracies, and so forth, are essentially different from each other. To conclude, the referent of the term "political," for Aristotle, is the inclusive community of human beings as constituted according to some conception of justice and the good life.⁹³

Defining the political is a critical problem for Easton because of his manner of conceiving political research. The political scientist looks out on an inexhaustible field of phenomena; and his first task is to separate political from non-political phenomena. Yet in order

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Politics 1252^a1-1253^a38, 1274^b32-1289^a25.

to perform this task, he must have some knowledge at the outset about the kind of activity in general that is to be regarded as political. After stating this problem in *The Political System*, Easton goes on to consider and reject the possibility that either "the state" or "power" can serve as a suitable concept for identifying the major political variables and guiding political research. Turning for assistance, as Aristotle had done, to "the common sense idea of political life," Easton finds that men in common life use the term "political" to refer to activities that relate in some way to the making and executing of authoritative policy for a society. Common-sense usage thus supplies Easton with a criterion for differentiating political activities from social activities in general: political activities are those that relate to the authoritative allocation of values for a society.⁹⁴

As Easton recognizes, his definition of political activity contains a number of terms that must themselves be defined if the overall definition is to be comprehensible. "Values," in this context, are to be understood as the goods, both material and spiritual, that men desire. For purposes of research, a policy, i.e., a web of decisions and actions that allocates values, may be regarded as authoritative "when the people to whom it is intended to apply or who are affected by it consider that they must or ought to obey it." This is, as Easton recognizes, a psychological rather than a moral explanation of the term "authoritative." Political activities, Easton concludes, are those activities which allocate values authoritatively "for a society." It is clear that by this definition, we cannot grasp the meaning of "political" until we have identified that object which Easton refers to variously as "a society," "the whole society" and "the social system." It is here, I believe, that we encounter the principal difficulties in his attempt to say what is political.

Let me restate the problem in Easton's definition of political activity. The term "political," as used by Easton, does not refer, as in the case of Aristotle, to a specific type of community of human beings. It refers instead to certain interactions that occur within the framework of what Easton calls "a society." "Society" refers to a group of biological persons, while "political" and "political

⁹⁴ *The Political System*, pp. 126-129.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 132.

system" refer only to some particular interactions of these persons. "Political community," as Easton uses it, is an even narrower term, for it encompasses only a portion of those social interactions that are political in nature. Although he sometimes speaks of the political community as a "group," his technical definition of the term precludes the possibility that it can be a group of persons. Easton's definition of the political is intended to help us separate one type of social interactions from other types, or to help us define the boundaries of the political system within the social system as a whole. Yet it is of no help whatever in identifying the boundaries of society itself, within which political activities are located, or in distinguishing social from non-social phenomena. By his definition, we cannot possibly understand what is meant by political until we have an independent grasp of what is meant by "society." Easton's definition of the political is worthless unless it is accompanied by a clear definition of society.

It is obvious that not just any group of persons constitutes the kind of society whose political system is of interest to political scientists. Political science "seeks first and foremost to understand the way in which values are authoritatively allocated, not for a group within society, but for the whole society."⁹⁸ As this statement indicates, society cannot be defined in terms of the presence of political activities, for such a definition, aside from being circular, would be useless. Many groups, in addition to "the whole society," develop mechanisms for allocating values authoritatively for their members. The mere presence of such activities cannot warrant the conclusion that we are dealing with a society in the proper sense. In later writings, Easton uses the term "para-political systems" to distinguish the internal political systems of groups such as a family, a trade union, or a church from "the societal political system."⁹⁹

What are the distinguishing characteristics of "the whole society," if not the presence of mechanisms for allocating values authoritatively? Easton gives only passing attention to this crucial question, even though the nature of a political system must remain in doubt so long as society is not clearly identified. In *The*

⁹⁸*Ibid.*, p. 134.

⁹⁹*Framework*, pp. 50-56.

Political System, he describes society as "a special kind of human grouping the members of which continually interact with one another and in the process develop a sense of belonging together."⁹⁸ Yet inasmuch as groups other than societies experience this feeling of togetherness, societies must be identified by a second and apparently unique characteristic, namely, their self-sufficiency. The "societal group" is distinguished from other groups

by the fact that it seeks to solve all the problems usually associated with the survival and perpetuation of a group of people. The activities of a society, in other words, are broader than those of any of its component groups. Briefly, the broadest grouping of human beings who live together and collectively undertake to satisfy all the minimum prerequisites of group life is what we refer to when we speak of a society.⁸⁹

Turning to Easton's later writings, we find that very little is said about even these minimal criteria for distinguishing "society as a whole" from other social groupings. There are passages which suggest that society is bound together by a sense of community and that it consists of a great number of people who live and work together in order to fill their needs." Yet in his thematic discussion of the problem of identifying the political, Easton calls attention to only one distinguishing characteristic of society, namely, its inclusiveness. A society, he writes, is "the most inclusive social unit we know."

Regardless of how we might define the term for substantive purposes, it at least incorporates all other social systems and therefore refers to the overarching, inclusive, suprasystem in which a group of biological persons participates. In this sense, society constitutes a unique kind of social system. We would find it impossible to specify the whole range and variety of interaction in which the component persons engage. In referring to society, we are conceiving of all behavior undifferentiated as to type, what we might call the apperceptive mass of observations present to our senses. As a concept, society calls attention to the gross mass of conceptually unorganized social interactions that we might perceive if we were able to take in the whole of a society, literally, in one glance.¹⁰¹

⁹⁸*The Political System*, p. 135.

⁹⁹*Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰See *Systems Analysis*, p. 185.

¹⁰¹*Framework*, p. 38.

Inclusiveness, as used here, means only that society, as distinguished from whatever analytic systems of interactions the scientist might choose to isolate, includes "all the social interactions of the biological persons involved."¹⁰² This definition is quite compatible with the view which Easton may well have adopted, that an aggregate of persons forms a society merely because we choose to regard them as such for purposes of research. This view of society would be in keeping with his mature conclusion that systems are constructs of the mind rather than entities given in nature. It would disarm critics who might, for example, question his argument that there is an "international society," with its own political system. Yet if Easton adopts a "constructivist" view of society, his definition of the political can be nothing more than an arbitrary postulate, with no rational or empirical foundation whatever.

I conclude that Easton's conceptual framework fails in its most essential task, namely, identifying the object of political inquiry. Even granting that Easton succeeds in distinguishing this object, the political system, from other systems of social interactions, it is clear that he fails to define "society," the association within which the political system, along with other social system, is said to be located. He might have reached a satisfactory definition of society if he had given further thought to the meaning of "self-sufficiency" and "inclusiveness," properties which Aristotle had regarded as distinguishing characteristics of the political community. It is clear, even from the little that Easton says about the nature of society, that he moves away from Aristotle and the classics in the direction of modern liberalism. For example, whereas Aristotle understands self-sufficiency and inclusiveness in terms of the good and happy life, Easton is silent about the quality of life as an appropriate consideration in defining society. Society owes its existence, but not its identity, to a political mechanism whose function is to resolve disputes which cannot be settled informally about the allocation of scarce goods. Political activity is merely one type of behavior that contributes to collective existence, not the formative principle of a community wherein men pursue their distinctively human purposes. Having denied that society owes its identity, its essential unity, to its political element, Easton, like most contemporary social scientists, comes to treat "society" as something

¹⁰² *ibid.*, p. 47.

that can be understood independently of political considerations. Yet it is doubtful if the political scientist can, in practice, identify the "society" which is of interest to him without taking political criteria into account from the beginning.¹⁰³

IV

Let us finally consider how the subject of political change is treated within Easton's conceptual framework. It is obvious that great varieties of changes occur in the political sphere which are of no interest to the student of politics. In dealing with the problem of political change, therefore, one must begin by deciding what kinds of changes are to be regarded as significant. We shall again find it helpful to consider Easton's position in light of Aristotle's. Beginning, as is his practice, from the common-sense understanding of the matter, Aristotle points out that the question of when there has been a decisive change is one that arises frequently in political life. For example, political authorities sometimes refuse to fulfill the contracts or other obligations of previous authorities, claiming that the political community is no longer the same as it was when these obligations were first incurred. He then poses the question: On what principles ought we to say that a political community has retained its identity, or, conversely, that it has lost its identity and become a different political community? He observes that changes, even drastic ones, may occur in the territory or population of a political community without leading men to say that there has been a decisive or essential change. A political community owes its identity, its distinctive character, to its internal constitution or regime. When the regime changes, the political community ceases to be the same political community and changes its identity. This solution agrees with the common-sense view that an essential or decisive change occurs when a revolution destroys the old regime and produces a new one."

¹⁰³ Easton refers to geopolitical boundaries, which "stand as the politically defined boundaries for the whole society" and "help to define the claims to and acceptance of the jurisdiction of a particular set of authorities." (*Framework*, p. 67) I am questioning Easton's apparent assumption that "the whole society" can be identified without reference to such politically defined boundaries. If it cannot, then the social must be defined in terms of the political and not vice versa.

¹⁰⁴ *Politics* 1276^a5-1276^b 15.

Easton takes a position regarding the nature of political change that is strikingly different from the Aristotelian (and common-sense) view of the matter, but the substantive differences become fully visible only after some terminological differences have been clarified. Easton invites confusion by likening his position on political change to the traditional one. For example, after calling attention to historic constitutional changes in the German, British, and French political communities, he writes :

This distinction between what is often called the constitutional order and what I have named the political community has been familiar to students of politics from time immemorial. But its theoretical implications for the persistence of systems in the face of change need to be spelled out. Following an old tradition, I shall call this object of support the regime.¹⁰⁵

The fact is that Easton uses the traditional terms in a quite untraditional way. In traditional thought, a "political community" (polis, civitas, commonwealth, nation) was understood as an inclusive association of human beings. It seems that the nearest equivalent to this traditional term in Easton's writings is "society." Yet Easton is not concerned, as Aristotle is, with change in the inclusive association of persons, i.e., in the political community as traditionally conceived or in what Easton calls society. He is concerned instead with the persistence of that set of interactions within society that he terms the political system. He uses the traditional terms "political community," "regime" and "authorities" to refer to three distinct components of the political system, i.e., to subsets of political interactions. The political community refers, strictly speaking, not to an association of persons but to a set of perceptions. It is a shared awareness of participation in a political division of labor." The regime, traditionally understood as the internal ordering or constitution of a community of persons, is defined by Easton as "the general matrix of regularized expectations within the limits of which political actions are usually considered authoritative."¹⁰⁷ The regime is broken down into three ingredients :

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^{loc} *Systems Analysis*, p. 190.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 171-189. The political community is referred to unequivocally as a "group" at *ibid.*, p. 325.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 193-194.

the political values and principles which impose constraints on the purposes for which the energies and resources of the system may be committed; the norms or rules which specify the ways in which members of the system are expected to behave in political life; and the structure of authority roles which empower and constrain those who make and execute decisions." The final component of the political system, the authorities, consists of those specific members of the system who occupy the authority roles.¹⁰⁰

Change in a political system is defined by Easton as change in one or another of the three basic objects of political support—the authorities, the regime, or the political community. But under what conditions will we say that the political system itself has failed to persist? Here we find a decisive difference between Eastonian and Aristotelian political science. In Aristotle's view, since the political association owes its identity to its regime, a change in regimes produces an essentially different political association, even though other features of the association remain the same. In Easton's view, all three of the basic political objects must change fundamentally and simultaneously before we can consider that the former system has failed to persist. A change in regimes is not sufficient to terminate one political system and produce another. In fact, the modification of its regime is seen by Easton as one of the ways a system copes with stress from the environment and insures its own persistence. So long as there remains, even after interruptions, a political community, i.e., a common awareness of participation in some sort of division of political labor, along with some way of making authoritative allocations of values, the political system itself must be said to persist. In effect, Easton holds that a political system must disappear completely before we can say that it no longer persists. No part of the political system, including the regime, is so essential as to produce, by its own change, a change in the identity of the system as a whole. A political system cannot lose its identity and thereby cease to persist by changing into an essentially different system. Nonpersistence "points to a condition that involves more than mere change. It suggests the complete breakdown and evaporation of a political system." **ll**

⁹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 190-211

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 212-219.

¹¹⁰ *Framework*, pp. 82-83.

Easton believes that his conceptual framework will serve to advance both scientific inquiry into political processes and creative speculation about new kinds of political systems to meet modern needs. Yet insofar as its treatment of political change is concerned, one may doubt that this conceptual framework is favorable to the advancement of either scientific or ethical inquiry. Easton tells us that the primary goal of political analysis is to understand how political systems manage to persist through time, but his conceptual framework virtually eliminates the possibility of non-persistence. By his definition, a political system persists until effective allocative processes disappear completely, perhaps because of some destructive catastrophe to society, such as an earthquake or epidemic, or because a society loses its residents through emigration or fails to reproduce itself biologically.¹¹¹ Extraordinary events, such as civil wars, revolutions, or military defeats, cannot be said to destroy the political system of a society so long as a system of some sort eventually arises again. In Easton 's view, the British political system has maintained its basic identity from medieval times, notwithstanding the many decisive alterations in its geographic scope and its regimes. The French political system has persisted at least since the French Revolution, despite numerous drastic transformations in its regimes. Easton states that non-persistence is neither impossible or unusual, but he can find few examples in history and none in the twentieth century.¹¹² The remarkable capacity to persist which Easton finds in political systems is due largely, one might say, to his manner of defining persistence.

In addition to virtually ruling out the possibility of non-persistence, Easton 's conceptual framework requires us to regard any change in the political system as an example of successful adaptation to stress, just so long as some kind of system persists. Even a radical change in regimes must, by definition, be regarded as an example of successful adaptation by the political system in the face of stressful disturbances: " If a political system under stress transforms itself from a democratic to a totalitarian one or from a weak to a strong presidential democratic system, the capacity of the society to sustain some kind of political system has not been impaired."¹¹³ Easton 's position, let us remember, is that so long as

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹¹² *Framework*, pp. 82-85 ; *Systems Analysis*, pp. 179-180.

¹¹³ *Framework*, p. 95.

men regard themselves as members of a common division of political labor, the political community and therewith the political system persists. A person remains part of a political division of labor even when he is completely subjugated to the unlimited power of another: "It will be enough if a person sees his role as one of complete passivity and acceptance of the absolute authority of others over him."¹¹⁴ The persistence of a political system requires only that its allocations be accepted as authoritative, not that they be regarded as legitimate: "Thus, a totalitarian usurper may be able to allocate values through the political processes even though a majority of the members in the system consider his power to be illegitimate. Yet out of fear of the consequences they may accept his decisions and actions as binding."¹¹⁶ Violence is a recognized procedure for arriving at authoritative policy and is "as much a part of the political process as peaceful means."¹¹⁶ We see that a political community would persist, by Easton's definition, even under the most complete tyranny; and the change from a non-totalitarian to a totalitarian regime would have to be regarded as adaptation to stress. Easton tells us that the German political system continued to persist "although the imperial order fell to the Weimar Republic which in turn yielded to the Nazi regime to be succeeded by a third order after World War II." Of this passage, the sociologist Ralf Dahrendorf comments that some political system may have persisted, "but what a miserable, indeed almost inhuman, way to describe the most dramatic changes in the composition and substance of Germany's political order!"¹¹⁸ Dahrendorf calls attention also to a later passage in which Easton writes that "the German political system shifted from the Weimar Republic to a totalitarian regime and in this way adapted to the stresses attendant upon defeat in World War I and its ensuing economic inflation."¹¹⁹ Easton attempts to protect himself against the unfortunate implications of his position by adding that a considerable range of

¹¹⁴ *Systems Analysis*, p. 178.

¹⁷⁶ *Political Science*, p. 287.

¹¹⁶ *The Political System*, p. 141.

¹¹⁷ *Framework*, p. 84.

¹¹⁸ *Essays on the Theory of Society* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1968), pp. 142-144.

Framework, p. 89.

alternatives was possible for the German political system at this time :

Variable policies, structures, and innovations are available and may be equally successful in assuring the persistence of *some* pattern of authoritative allocations. The particular path adopted is a function of more than the capacity of the members of a system to cope with change. My approach to the analysis of political systems will not help us to understand why any specific policies are adopted by the politically relevant members in a system. Furthermore, the capacity to adapt does not thereby dictate that any specific, successful way of doing so is morally better or worse than any other even if, under the circumstances, someone might prove that it was a necessary and, therefore, inescapable condition of persistence.'

The fact remains, however, that we are required by Easton's conceptual framework to consider a change from a non-totalitarian to a totalitarian regime as an example of successful adaptation to stress; and we are not provided with any basis for saying that an "adaptation" of this type is undesirable. Easton tells us that humane values become visible when one abstracts from the goals of specific regimes. We see, however, that the effort to understand political change in abstraction from the essential differences between regimes leads necessarily, though, to be sure, quite unintentionally, to an inhumane conclusion.

Easton speaks of a desire to restore inquiry about the goals or ends of political life, but his conceptual framework abstracts from those political problems from which such inquiry arises and gains relevance. The most fundamental dispute in political life has to do with the best regime for the political community, i.e., who should rule and for what ends. Political philosophy, from the outset, sought to provide guidance to men in political life by resolving this dispute. It addressed itself to the question of which regime is best, both in itself and in specific circumstances, with the intention not of describing political change, but of guiding it. Easton sets aside the question of which regime is best and even the question of how an established regime, on whose goodness men agree, can be preserved. The survival of democracy, for example, is "a second order

problem logically, at the theoretical level, even though it is a first order problem ethically, at the practical level."¹²¹ Easton's political thought takes its bearings not by the practical and ethical problems of political life but by problems that emerge when political inquiry is conceived on the model of biology.

The perspectives of a systems analysis of political life impel us to address ourselves to the following kind of question. How can any political system ever persist whether the world be one of stability or of change? It is comparable to asking with respect to biological life: How can human beings manage to exist? Or for that matter, what processes must be maintained if any life is to persist, especially under conditions where the environment may at times be extremely hostile?¹²²

Systems analysis is concerned with the life processes of any and all political systems rather than with "the specific structures or processes that make a particular kind of regime viable."¹²³ We must ask, however, if systems analysis, as a kind of political biology, is concerned with questions that are, properly speaking, political in nature. Insofar as human beings are concerned, we distinguish between the biological problem of how life is sustained and the ethical problem of the way of life that men should choose. From the ethical standpoint, the central phenomenon is not a man's life processes but his character. The fact that men have common life processes, is of much less significance than the fact that they have different characters. A man must be alive in order to have an identity, but his identity is determined not by his vital processes but by his character and way of life. Political things must be understood by analogy with ethics rather than biology. A political society must exist if its members are to choose a regime and therewith a way of life, but the society owes its identity to the kind of regime and way of life that is chosen, not to processes that sustain any kind of regime whatever. The study of identity and change in political life must take its bearings by changes in regimes, not by the disappearance or death of authoritative decision-making as such. If a study of political change is to make an intelligent distinction between beneficial

¹²¹*Systems Analysis*, p. 481.

¹²²*Ibid.*, pp. 14-15.

¹²³*Framework*, pp. 78-79.

and harmful changes, it must be guided by an understanding of the good and just regime. Earlier, we found reason to doubt that Easton's conception of knowledge permits a reliable answer to the question of the good political order. We now find that the question does not arise in his conceptual framework because he turns away from the regime as the focus of political inquiry. It is not merely accidental that Easton has failed to develop the "value theory" which he has long advocated. His theoretical position does not favor the revival of serious inquiry about the ends of political life.

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