

ON EASTON'S THEORY: THERE MUST BE LIMITS TO CONFUSION

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Introduction **

Some theories are successful. They become part of the intellectual instruments of description, explanation and prediction. Other theories may be popular for a short time, receiving attention and then just fading away. Maybe they will be remembered for some idea or problem that will become part of the main bulk of knowledge. Or they may be discarded altogether because they led people astray.

David Easton's theory belongs to the category of theories that come into vogue and then just vanish. The decreasing attention paid to Easton may partly be due to the fact that the systems approach was never really successful. The systems approach seemed to promise what no other theories had ever achieved, a complete and integrated understanding of reality. However, the results failed to fulfil the promise.

For some people systems theories face their severest difficulties in their ethical presuppositions. It used to be maintained that such theories contain a conservative bias or other kinds of hidden assumptions. In my opinion systems theories properly constructed are in no way different from other theories as far as their relations to ethics are concerned. The difficulties presented by David Easton's theory stem not from the systems approach but from more general considerations of its internal structure. There are simply

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** In Sweden Easton's books became popular among students and scholars associated with Professor Pär-Erik Back (Lund and Umeå): Sjöblom, G., *Party Strategies in a Multiparty System* (1968), Lundqvist, L., *Means and Goals of Political Decentralization* (1972), Gustafsson, G., *Strukturomvandling och politisk socialisation* (1972), Forsell, H., *Strukturomvandling och kommunala beslut* (1972). — The best analysis of Easton in a Scandinavian language occurs in Anckar, D., *David Eastons Politiska Teori. En intern och extern modellkritik* (1974). Anckar's analysis touches upon the problems I deal with; however, my criticism is far removed from Anckar's both in content and form.

too many conventional flaws: confusion of problems, definitional circularity and conceptual obscurities. David Easton's theory is not bad because it is a systems theory. Easton's theory is bad because it is a bad theory.

Below »ET« refers to the theory that Easton puts forward in *A Systems Analysis of Political Life (SAPL)* (1965) and *A Framework for Political Analysis (FPA)* (1965).¹ I will try to spell out the deficiencies of ET in a systematic manner. The purpose is not to criticize for the sake of criticizing but to highlight some difficult theoretical problems in political science.

A. What is Easton's theory (ET) a theory about?

1. Easton's formulations of the Problems of ET

In the preface, in chapters 1 and 2 and in the concluding chapter of *SAPL* Easton presents some problems which ET is supposed to solve; they will be discussed below in connection with quotations (Q).

- (Q1) »How do any and all political systems manage to persist in a world of both stability and change? Ultimately the search for an answer will reveal what I have called the life processes of political systems — those fundamental functions without which no system could endure — together with the typical modes of response through which systems manage to sustain them.»²

In (Q1) Easton specifies two problems which he regards as central to political theory. One problem is:

- (P1) What are the necessary conditions for the persistence of a political system?

The answer to (P1) is given in sentences of the following kind:

- (S1) If a political system persists then it satisfies the conditions n_1, n_2, \dots, n_n .

The other problem is:

- (P2) What are the sufficient conditions for the persistence of a political system?

The answer to (P2) is given in sentences of the following kind:

- (S2) If a political system satisfies the condition N_1 or N_2 or N_N , then it persists.

To Easton (P1) and (P2) are the two main problems that ET is supposed to solve.

What makes ET a so-called »general theory« for Easton is that the theory covers all political systems, i.e. the *field* of ET is the whole set of political systems. This applies not only to the propositions of ET but also to the terminology of the theory. ET does not contain a classification of the set of political systems and it does not try to answer questions about the necessary or sufficient conditions for a political system being of a certain kind. Propositions of the types. (S1) and (S2) only state the necessary and sufficient conditions for the persistence of a political system of any kind. i.e. the *range* of ET is persistence and its *scope* the necessary and/or sufficient conditions for persistence. (S1) only states that if a political system of any kind — democratic,

authoritarian, traditional, primitive — persists, then certain conditions are satisfied. Inversely, (S1) asserts that if certain conditions are not satisfied, then a political system does not persist. Propositions of the types (S1) and (S2) may explain why a political system persists and does not persist respectively, but not why it is of a certain kind. If ET is to answer the latter problem, more conditions must be introduced into (S1) and (S2). With the aid of a proposition of the type (S1) it would be possible to explain why a political system failed to persist:

- (1) For all political systems it holds that, if a political system persists, then it has support.
- (2) For all political systems it holds that, if a political system lacks support, then it does not persist.
- (3) The French political system under l'ancien régime lacked support.

Conclusion: The French political system under l'ancien régime did not persist.

In a corresponding way it would be possible to explain with a proposition of the type (S2) why a political system persists.

However, in Easton's formulations of the problems as well as in the propositions of ET there is an obscurity in connection with (P1). One problem is confused with another problem:

- (Q2) »My objective will be to extricate from the total political reality those aspects that can be considered the fundamental processes or activities without which no political life in society could continue.»³

The problem referred to in (Q2) can be formulated in the following way:

(P3) What are the necessary conditions for social order in a society?

Problem (P1) and problem (P3) are not the same. There are some necessary conditions for social order, e.g. that the society persists biologically and socially and that it is not characterized by anarchy or anomie. If these conditions are satisfied, there is a frame for variations of different kinds of political systems. If a political system exists, additional conditions must be satisfied. If a political system ceases to exist, there are often other alternative political systems which can replace it. Consequently, there are two different types of necessary conditions which Easton confuses:

1. Those necessary conditions which, if they are not present, exclude social order.
2. Those necessary conditions which, if they are not present, exclude a political system.

The necessary conditions for social order set the limits within which political systems can vary, i.e. the limits of political activity; the necessary conditions for a political system set the limits for such a system.

These two problems (P1) and (P3) are both essential for political theories. If we know the answer to (P3), we know something about the conditions for

political life and political activity. If we know the answer to (P1), we know why many political systems have perished and we know something about why some political systems do persist. However, these problems should not be confused. Political systems may perish, even though the necessary conditions for political life are satisfied, because they may be replaced by other systems. When political systems perish, there is always the option between no social order and the replacement of the old system with a new one. Of course, if the necessary conditions for political life are not satisfied, it does not matter what system replaces the old one. In most cases there are alternatives and some political systems may satisfy conditions which other political systems fail to satisfy.

The two different problems are confused in one and the same sentence in Easton:

(Q3) »Here we could not help but accept the interpretation that the political system had come under stress, so severe that any and every possibility for the persistence of a system for that society had disappeared».⁴

In the first part of the sentence it is stated that a political system in a society is breaking down; in the second part of the sentence it is maintained that in the same society the social order is breaking down. If the latter state of affairs is the case, the former state of affairs is also the case, but the reverse does not always hold good. The distinction between (P1) and (P3) can be illustrated in a 2×2 table.

		(P3)	
		Existent (t_0 & t_1)	Non-existent (t_0 & t_1)
(P1)	A political system in s_1 Social order in a society s_1		
	Persisting (t_0)	1	0
	Non-persisting (t_1)	1	1

1 = logically possible

0 = logically impossible

2. The General Structure of ET: Easton's Mistake

According to Easton ET is a general structural-functional theory of the political system as an open, adaptive and stable system (a so-called »functional system»). ET investigates the necessary and/or sufficient conditions for the persistence of a political system; Such a theory has the following structure:

1. Specifications of the unit, the system, to be studied. This implies a definition of a key word and an empirical investigation of the entities belonging to the extension of the word.
2. Specification of the environment of the system.
3. Specification of the functions which must be present if the system is to persist.
4. Specification of the structures which must be present if the system is to persist.

The specification in ET of the categories 2—4 will be discussed below under B. The unit specified under category 1 is the political system. What does the phrase »the political system» mean and refer to?

Firstly, *the level of generalization* is stated in ET and the objective of ET is a study not of certain kinds of political systems but of all types of systems, past as well as present. Secondly, the key phrase is defined:

DF. A political system is a set of interactions through which values are authoritatively allocated for a society.⁵

In DF a certain set of interactions is said to constitute a political system, namely those interactions which result in an authoritative allocations of values for a society. A necessary condition for empirical entities to be political systems is that these units do certain things, i.e. perform two functions:

- a. the allocation of values for a society, and
- b. the acceptance of the allocation as binding by the members of the society.⁶

If the combination a & b does not occur in a society, there is no political system in that society. When a & b occur in a society, the society can be said to possess the »social order» mentioned above, denoted as »G» here. The presence of G is a necessary condition for the existence of a political system. But it is not a sufficient condition. The state G is only a function and in order to be called »political system» a unit must also have a structure in terms of which the function G is fulfilled. As a number of different structures can fulfil the state G, a particular structure cannot be a necessary condition for the application of »political system». Every structure that fulfils G is a sufficient condition for the introduction of »political system». And a necessary as well as a sufficient condition for the application of the phrase »political system» to concrete entities is that these units have a structure that fulfils the function G. With the aid of this *criterion of identity* a set of political systems can be identified.

However, DF is interpreted in two ways:

- (i) The functional interpretation. Only the function G is a criterion of identity of a political system.
 - (ii) The structural interpretation. The presence of a structure which fulfils the function G is a criterion of identity of a political system.
- (i). *The functional interpretation of DF.*

The criterion of identity of a political system is the function G and nothing else. If G occurs in a society, a political system occurs. If a society s_1 exists a long time and has G, one and the same political system, the political system in s_1 , exists during the same period of time. If a society, e.g. British society, exists over a period of time it is possible to determine if G occurs in that society at different times. If during a certain period, e.g. from the year 1700 to the present, G occurs in British society, it has had one and the same political system, designated by Easton as »the British political system».

In *FPA* Easton gets involved in contradictions owing to the functional interpretation. The starting-point is that there is a political system, »the British political system», which »... has maintained its basic identity as a system continuing through time»⁷, i.e. G has existed and exists. The basis of this statement is that »at this general level a *political system of some sort* has persisted through time with respect to the British society...»⁸, which is an entirely different matter. Easton confuses the functional interpretation with the structural one. The fact that there has been some kind of political system, i.e. a succession of different political systems over a period of time, is not the same as that there has been one and the same political system all the time.

(ii). *The structural interpretation of DF*

The criterion of identity of a political system is some structure which fulfils the function G. As there are different structures the operation of which may result in G, political systems can be compared structurally, provided that each structure can be analysed in variations of the same components. In *ET* these variables are specified as

- a'. political community,
- b'. regime, and
- c'. authorities.⁹

By virtue of the structural interpretation of DF two separate political systems in Britain, e.g. the non-democratic one and the democratic one, can be empirically established. Exactly how one political system is to be separated from another is a matter of convenience, which must be decided instrumentally with respect to scientific language on the one hand and theoretical considerations on the other. Exact criteria must be established as to when the structural changes in a political system are of such a nature that a new political system has replaced it.

(iii). *Comparison between the two interpretations*

Different concepts are introduced in the two interpretations. In the first case the concept refers to the state G in n society — social order. In the second case the concept refers to those structures in a society which bring about a state G. In *one* theory about political systems both concepts cannot

occur without the theory becoming inconsistent. If the necessary conditions for the persistence of a political system are sought after, the ambiguity in the use of the phrase political system» means that two different problems are dealt with:

(P1) What are the necessary conditions for the persistence of a political system of any kind?

(P3) What are the necessary conditions for social order (G) in a society?

Both (P1) and (P3) are dealt with in ET. When demand is said to be a parameter in a political system and in some values cause stress on the system, (P1) and (P3) are in fact covered:

»... the demands flownig into a system constitute one of the major sources of stress acting on its essential variables»;

and

»... the demands may become a potential danger to the persistence of any kind of system at all».

(P1) and (P3) are dealt with in one and the same sentence:

»The indentification of the breaking point for a system, when stress becomes so great that no system for allocating values authoritatively can endure...»¹⁰

The same situation occurs with regard to the discussion of support:

(Q4) »I have hypothesized that the persistence of a political system hinges not only on an appropriate regulation of the inflow of demands but on a second major condition, the maintenance of a minimal level of attachment for each of the three identified political objects. (Sentence 1) Where the input of support falls below this minimum, the persistence of any kind of system will be endangered». (Sentence 2)¹¹

Sentence 1 deals with (P1), whereas sentence 2 deals with (P3) and sentence 2 does not follow from sentence 1. From the fact that a political system breaks down it does not follow that the social order breaks down.

ET does not contain one theory, but two theories:

T1. The theory of all political systems in the structural sense of »political system»

T2. The theory of social order, i.e. the functional sense of »political system»

The argument leading to the mistake may be reconstructed from FPA:¹² According to the structural interpretation of DF there exists a set of political systems: the present Spanish political system, the French one, that of the Soviet Union etc. These political systems can be classified as traditional, democratic, totalitarian etc. Such classifications are based on type concepts and Easton calls the content of such a concept »the essential variables». Since there are different kinds of type concepts there are correspondingly different essential variables. At the lowest level of generalization the essential variables contain a complete description of a political system, at the next level a less complete description, etc. At every higher *lever of generalization* the number of essential variables

becomes smaller. The fact that a political system persists implies that its essential variables exist over a period of time; whether a political system persists or not, depends on the level of generalization chosen. Now ET is a theory of all political systems — no matter what kind they are. At the most general level of generalization the essential variables can contain only the criteria of identity of a political system of any kind; these are the definition properties:

- a. The allocation of values for a society, and
- b. The acceptance of the allocation as binding by the members of the society.

Consequently, a political system of any kind persists in a society *s*, if and only if these two functions, *G*, exist in *s*.

The argument can be stated exactly in the following way:

- (1) A political system persists, if and only if it has certain essential variables.
- (2) At different levels of generalization there are different essential variables.
- (3) At higher levels of generalization there are fewer essential variables than at lower ones.
- (4) At the highest level of generalization there are two essential variables, namely *G*.
- (5) A political system persists in relation to different levels of generalization.
- (6) At the highest level of generalization a political system persists, if and only if *G* exists.

The argument confuses persistence and classification of political systems. Political systems which persist for some time may fall under various type concepts of different levels of generalization. However, the movement up and down the ladder of abstraction does not change the status of political systems in relation to persistence. Whether a political system persists or not depends on the maintenance of its criteria of identity and not on the classification it may be included in. The fallacy arises from a confusion of two different meanings of the phrase »essential variables«:

- (a) criteria of identity
- (b) type concept

The error of taking the type concepts at each level of generalization as a criterion for the identity of a unit can be called »*the fallacy of misplaced abstraction*«:

»The point being made here is that whether or not we consider a political system as persisting will depend upon the level at which we examine it.«¹³

Easton is not the only one to make this mistake. In his structural-functional analysis of any society Marion Levy commits the same error:

»For example, one may speak of the functional requisites of any society, but one may also speak of the functional requisites of Chinese society. In the former

case, failure to fulfill a functional requisite leaves no society at all; in the latter case, failure to fulfill a functional requisite may leave no society at all or, perhaps, merely a different type of society.»¹⁴

A general proposition about the necessary conditions for the persistence of a society of any kind may explain the fall of a society s_1 ; from the fact that s_1 does not »fulfil a functional requisite« it does not follow that there is »no society at all«.

Easton's mistake leads to a situation in which the investigation into the persistence of political systems — democratic, authoritarian, traditional ones — somehow becomes an inquiry into how societies manage to maintain social order:

(Q5) »... our primary focus is not on the persistence of such types. Rather, it concerns any and all systems, regardless of type. How shall we establish when the capacity of a political system to continue as such a system is being put under stress, regardless of the capacity of the society to sustain any particular kind of political system? That is to say, 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.»¹⁵

B. The structure of ET

1. The Key Words

Political System

DF1. »x is a political =_{def.} »x is a set of interactions through which values are system« authoritatively allocated for a society»¹⁶

What cognitive status has this definition? As Easton himself points out in *The Political System (TPS)* (1953), DF1 can hardly be said to be a descriptive definition. The phrase »political system« was not used in this sense when DF1 was first presented (1953); DF1 is neither true nor false, but a stipulative definition. Easton considers that DF1 expresses what is similar in and common to all political systems and that it clarifies what is meant by »from a political point of view«, »the political aspect«. DF1 is an example of explication.

Easton points out that the acceptance of DF1 depends on its usefulness; its usefulness depends in the first instance on whether the definiens words are unambiguous. In DF1 there are two key words, »authoritative« and »society«, and the meaning of these two words is not intersubjectively clear in linguistic usage. Only the word »authoritative« is defined explicitly.

On the Word »Authoritative«

DFA1. »x is authoritative for y« =_{def.} »x is considered binding by y«¹⁷

Different formulations of DFA1 occur in *TPS*, *FPA* and *SAPL*; A decision is authoritative, if and only if it is considered binding by some actor A.¹⁸ The proposition »the decision D₁ is authoritative for A« states something about the attitudes of A; it does not say whether D₁ is actually obeyed.

The word »authoritative« is important in ET:

(Q6) »... it is the fact of considering the allocations as binding that distinguishes political from other types of allocations...«¹⁹

However, when the concept of authority is delimited from the concept of legitimacy the word »authoritative« takes on another meaning.

DFA2. »x is authoritative for y« =_{def.} »x is obeyed by y«²⁰

In DFA2 authoritative« signifies what is usually meant by »obedience«, namely

(Q7) »But as long as the probability is high that, under the circumstances B will comply, he is subject to the authority of another«.²¹

The word does not stand for an attitude any longer but refers to an action relation. The proposition »D₁ is authoritative for A« now means that D₁ is obeyed by A — irrespective of whether it is also considered binding. As Easton points out in a note, the word now denotes »... all command-obedience relationships...«²² If these two definitions are combined, the word takes on yet another meaning.

DFA3. »x is authoritative =_{def.} »x is obeyed and considered binding by y«
for y«

The obscurity in ET with regard to the meaning of the word is due to the fact that certain properties of social relations are not kept separate. Words for these properties can be introduced in the following way:

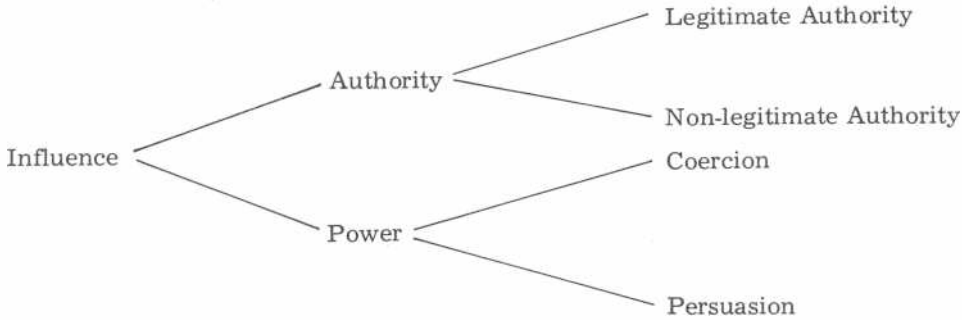
DFi. »X has influence over Y =_{def.} »X causes Y to do Z«
over Y with regard to Z.

DFii. »X has power over Y with =_{def.} »X has influence over Y with regard
regard to Z« to Z and X enforces his will against
the will of Y with regard to Z«

DFiii. »X has authority over Y =_{def.} »Y obeys X with regard to Z«
with regard to Z«

DFiv. »X has legitimate autho- =_{def.} »X has authority over Y with regard
rity over Y with regard to Z and Y considers the authority
to Z« binding«²³

The relationships between these concepts can be illustrated in the following diagram:



In ET the word »authority» sometimes means authority (DFA2), sometimes legitimacy (DFA1) and sometimes also legitimate authority (DFA3). In his definition of basic sociological concepts and in his theory of authority Max Weber distinguished clearly between the following facts:²⁴

- (i) The fact that Y obeys a command by X with regard to Z.
 »Herrschaft» =_{def.} »die Chance ... für einen *Befehl* Fügsamheit zu finden».
- (ii) The reasons for which Y obeys X: a. custom
 b. expediency
 c. belief in legitimacy
- (iii) The reasons for belief in legitimacy:
 a. tradition: »traditionale Herrschaft»
 b. charisma: »charismatische Herrschaft»
 c. law: »legale Herrschaft»

These facts are confused in ET. According to (Q6) an allocation is political if it is authoritative. In whatever way »authoritative» is defined, the word »political» is given a greater content than is common in linguistic usage. Obviously wage settlements at local plants can fulfil the criteria in the definitions. The condition in (Q6) is only a necessary conditions; the fact that an allocation is *authoritative for a society* is a sufficient condition. The exact formulation in *FPA* is:

(Q8) Furthermore, what distinguishes political interactions from all other kinds of social interactions is that they are predominantly oriented toward the authoritative allocation of values for a society».²⁵

But this definition:

»x is political» =_{def.} »x is oriented toward the authoritative allocation of values for a society»,
 excludes interactions that result in authoritative allocations of values for social

systems smaller than a society. In order to separate political allocations for a society from political allocations for a social system less inclusive than a society, Easton introduces the distinction between a political system and a parapolitical system by means of the following definition:

»x is parapolitical» =_{def.} »x is oriented toward the authoritative allocation of values for a social system less inclusive than a society»²⁶

However, in this definition there are units which the first definition was supposed to eliminate — also certain economic interactions at local plants.

A political system is a set of interactions through which values are allocated authoritatively for a society: what does the word »society» mean in the expression »for a society»?

On the Word »Society»

In *SAPL* and *FPA* the word »society» is not defined explicitly. In *FPA* it is stated that »Society as the most inclusive social system, is the only one that encompasses all the social interactions of the biological persons involved»;²⁷ and in *SAPL* and *FPA* the word refers to two kinds of entities, the society as a whole²⁸ and the international society.²⁹ By virtue of DF1 the phrase »political system» is defined by means of the word »society», i.e. the concept of a political system is specified through the concept of society and not vice versa. It is not sufficient only to identify a society as a set of actors between whom there is interaction or as the most inclusive social system, since no distinct units are specified. Different sets of actors can be specified and social systems can be put together in different ways.

In *TPS*, however, the word is defined explicitly and the following criteria of identity are given:

- (i). It is a social system, and
- (ii). »... it seeks to solve all the problems usually associated with the survival and perpetuation of a group of people».³⁰

(ii) is particularly important whereas (i) is trivial. The criterion refers to »the minimum prerequisites of group life»;³¹ however, it is not stated what these are. Only after these have been established empirically, can a concept of society be introduced.

In his *The Structure of Society* (1952) *M. Levy* presents a theory about the minimum prerequisites of group life (ii). Since Easton's concept of society follows Levy's investigation in substance, Levy's study can be used to specify the concept of society more exactly. Levy presents the following definition:

»A society is a system of action in operation that

- (1) involves a plurality of interacting individuals of a given species (or group of

species) whose actions are primarily oriented to the system concerned and who are recruited at least in part by the sexual reproduction of members of the plurality involved,

(2) is at least in theory self-sufficient for the actions of this plurality, and

(3) is capable of existing longer than the life span of an individual of the type (or types) involved.»³²

The key word in the definition is »self-sufficient»; it is defined as

»A system of action in operation is in theory self-sufficient only if it is in theory capable of furnishing structures covering all of the functional requisites of the system.»³³

One of the structures that must occur, if a social system is to be self-sufficient, is a structure for political allocation,³⁴ i.e. the following sentence is true definition:

(S) A society *s* exists only if *s* has political allocation.

It follows from (S) that DF1 is a circular definition. The phrase »political system» is defined by means of the word »society», which in its turn is defined through the term »political system» (political allocation). It is difficult to see how an adequate definition of »society» could avoid containing the word »political». How can one society be distinguished from another, if a criterion of a political system is not applied? The phrase »political system» is necessary for the definition of »society», not vice versa.

If the criteria (i)—(ii) are applied, »society» refers to nations, to complex systems of actions within geographical boundaries. The reference of the word can be given through enumeration: Sweden, the USA, China, etc. But if this definition of »society» is accepted, the phrase »international society» refers to an empty set. Hence it follows that the phrase »international political system» has no reference. The UN, Nato and Seato are mentioned by Easton as examples of such systems.

The definition DF1 is not always maintained in ET; if DF1 is accepted, it is impossible to state that

(Q9) »... political systems may be identified at different levels of inclusiveness, from the parapolitical system of a voluntary organization to a municipality, province or state, national unit, and various kinds of international systems.»³⁵

According to DF1 parapolitical systems or international systems cannot be political systems. Whereas a totalitarian state without autonomous subsystems could constitute a political system, municipalities and provinces can only be subsystems in a political system. The term »political system» cannot be used about units like parties, trade-unions and municipalities taken separately, if DF1 accepted.

Input

DF2. »*x* is an input» =_{def.} »*x* is an effect on a system from another system»³⁶

As Easton points out, an investigation as to the range of values for »x» in DF2 would be practically impossible. He continues:

(Q10) »The value of inputs as a concept is that through their use we shall find it possible to capture the effect of the vast variety of events and conditions in the environment as they pertain to the persistence of a political system... Inputs will serve as *summary variables* that concentrate and mirror everything in the environment that is relevant to political stress.»³⁷

In (Q10) the word »input» is used in a different sense from the one that is introduced in DF2. Where as the concept in DF2 refers to the effects on a system, in (Q10) it is employed as a conceptual tool in the analysis of causal relations. If »input» is defined as in DF2, the concept input cannot be used as a summary variable.

An alternative to the difficulties of analyzing every input is to find some main types of effects. ET classifies the set of effects in the following way:

(Q11) »... we can greatly simplify the task of analyzing the impact of the environment if we restrict our attention to certain kinds of inputs that can be used as indicators to sum up the most important effects, in terms of their contributions to stress, that cross the boundary from the parametric to the political systems.»³⁸

The procedure suggested in (Q11) implies that certain kinds of effects (»certain kinds of inputs») are used as indicators of certain effects (»the most important effects»)!? The definition implied

DF. »x is an input» =_{def.} »x is an indicator of certain effects»³⁹

cannot be combined with DF2. In ET the concept input has two components, demand and support. None of these two entities are indicators in the ordinary sense of the word. »Demand» and »support» are theoretical terms and they require empirical indicators for their application. The only adequate definition of »input» seems to be

DF. »x is an input in a political system» =_{def.} »x is a demand on or a support for a political system»

The concepts demand and support are not

- (i) summary variables (»intervening variables») — concepts summarizing a number of facts;
 - (ii) indicators of the effects of the environment on a political system. If that were the case, then if the values of the indicators are known, the values of the environment and the effect states in a political system are also known. That is not the case. They are
 - (iii) »hypothetical constructs», i.e. concepts for non-observable entities, which are independent causal links between the environment and a political system:
- (Q12) »it is through fluctuations in the inputs of demands and support that we shall find the effects of the environmental systems transmitted to the political system.»⁴⁰

In (Q12) the words are used as hypothetical constructs and ET contains a hypothesis about the relation between demand and the political system (the demand-function) and a hypothesis about the relation between support and the political system (the support-function).

Output

DF3. »x is an output» =_{def.} »x is a decision or an action by the authorities»⁴¹

DF3 is not the only definition of »output» in ET. On the one hand the word recurs in the sense of summary variable and in the sense of indicator. In one passage it is stated that

»... the idea of outputs helps us to organize the consequences flowing from the behavior of the members of the system...»⁴²

but in another passage it is pointed out that

»The concept outputs does not suggest that the authoritative allocation must be related to something outside the system...»⁴³

On the other hand the word is given a different meaning in the following quotation:

(Q13) »Here I am only seeking economical ways of summarizing the outcomes of these internal political processes... and I am suggesting that they can be usefully conceptualized as the outputs of the authorities».⁴⁴

In (Q13) the following definition would be implicit:

DF. »x is an output» =_{def.} »x is an outcome of internal political processes»

But is really the set of outcomes identical with the set of outputs? According to other parts of ET that is not the case. DF4 seems to be the definition applied in ET. To apply DF4 it must be clear what the meaning of the key word »authorities» is.

Authorities

DF4. »x is an authority» =_{def.} »x takes part in the making of decisions and carries out actions both of which are considered binding»⁴⁵

It appears that »output» means the same as »authoritative decision», yet so-called »non-authoritative outputs» are spoken of in ET. From DF3 and DF4 it follows that a number of propositions in ET about the relation between outputs and authorities in a political system are devoid of empirical content. The following propositions are true by definition.

- (i) »By virtue of their status in all systems, authorities have special responsibilities for converting demands into outputs.»⁴⁶
- (ii) »For at least two reasons it is necessary to emphasize the exclusive role of authorities in producing outputs.»⁴⁷
- (iii) »But if no authorities are seen as being equal to the tasks of managing the affairs of state and confidence in any set of authorities or any government is completely undermined... the result is that no set of persons will be able to mobilize enough support behind them to make and put into effect the necessary day-to-day decisions. Clearly, the system would become paralyzed; it would lose its capacity to act as a collectivity.»⁴⁸

Persistence

DF5. »a political system x persists« =_{def.} »x is a political system and x allocates values for a society and these allocations are considered binding«⁴⁹

The definition of the key word »persistence« does not contain more information than DF1; it only implies the trivial proposition

(P) A political system persists only if it is a political system.

A condition of adequacy on ET is that as a theory of the persistence of political system it contains theoretical criteria for how the word »persist« and »disappear« are to be applied. ET must be capable of answering the questions:

1. When does a political system cease to exist?
2. What political system/s existed during the sequence T_0 — T_n ?
3. When is there one and the same political system?
4. What does change of a political system imply?

ET contains such a conceptual qualification:

(Q14) »Change of a system will turn out to mean change of one or another of these objects (authorities, regime, political community) and only where all objects change simultaneously can we consider that the former system has totally disappeared.«⁵⁰

However, this qualification is not applied consistently in ET:

(Q15) »Similarly in Germany, 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, some form of political system persisted. Change does not seem to be incompatible with continuity. It seems possible and necessary to say that a system endures if, at the same time, it undergoes substantial and significant alterations.«⁵¹

According to the conditions in (Q14), a political system disappeared in Germany in the years 1918—1919 and in 1945, but not in 1933.

2. The propositions of ET

In ET no attempt is made to arrange the most important propositions in a deductive structure, nor is there any indication as to which propositions are fundamental for the theory. An attempt will be made here to bring out some basic propositions in ET. The following four functions are basic:

- a. The persistence-function
- b. The demand-function
- c. The support-function
- d. The feedback-function

These four functions contain the core of the theory and each forms the basis of a main section in *SAPL*. Other propositions are introduced as explanations and modifications of these functions and they are used as starting-points for various analyses.

a. The persistence-function

Let PS_p = persistence of a political system, R_D = regulation of the inflow of demands and S_M = minimum level of support for each of the three identified political objects (community regime and authorities).

The persistence-function then reads:

$$(PF) F(R_D, S_M) = PS_p^{52}$$

The propositions in ET are attempts to define the function (PF). As ET does not contain any attempts to make demand or support quantitative concepts, the definition of (PF) involves propositions with expressions like »minimum support», »adequate level of demands», »not too many demands» etc. (PF) can be used only in ex post explanations and hardly in predictions.

b. The demand-function

Let D = demand, V = volume, C = content, R = response and s = stress.

The demand-function can then be rendered as

$$(DF) F(D_{V\&C}, R) = s^{53}$$

As is the case with (PF), (DF) is given so little exact content that the proposition can be used only in ex post explanations. The same applies to the functions introduced about demands, e.g.

$$(i) F(W_N) = D \text{ (Demand is a function of the number of wants).}^{54}$$

$$(ii) F(G_N) = D_N \text{ (The number of demands is a function of the number of gatekeepers).}^{55}$$

$$(iii) F(c) = D_N \text{ (The number of demands is a function of cultural norms).}^{56}$$

How important it is that the function (DF) is specified can be seen from the fact that ET supposes that stress arises not only at very high values of $D_{V\&C}$ but also at very low ones.

c. The Support-function

This function, which can be rendered by

$$(SF) F(S) = s^{57}$$

is very complex and can be divided into a number of different functions, as a distinction is made in ET between two types of support as well as between different objects of support.

Both functions b and c identify conditions for stress. However, it is not clear at all that these functions are independent of each other. ET states that demands can cause stress in two different ways, on the one hand indirectly via output failure and decline in support, on the other hand directly:

(Q16) »When a system is confronted with a situation in which the input of information conveying demands becomes too great for the responsible members of the system to process for possible conversion to decisions, the system cannot help but operate under the danger of collapse». ⁵⁸

In ET this state of affairs is called »demand input overload». But ET states that also with regard to direct demand stress it is a matter of output failure:

(Q17) »To explain the stress caused by excessive volume and the time-consuming sub-

stance of demands, it is not enough to say that they would prevent the authorities from producing outputs... The reason is... that what I shall designate as output failure, will occur.»⁵⁹

There is, then, no direct demand stress and (DF) is inadequate. Instead ET seems to imply a compound function consisting of

(DF'') $F(D, R) = OF$ (Output failure is a function of demand and response) and

(DF''') $F(OF) = S$ & (DF''') $F(S) = s$.

If this criticism is correct, the argument in ET about the relationship between demand and stress is based on incorrect premises.

d. The feedback-function

It contains several arguments and can be rendered as (FF) $F(r, T, ER, IR) =$ specific support,⁶⁰

where r = responsiveness, T = time lag, ER = external resources and IR = internal resources.

The definition of (FF) takes up more than 100 pages in *SAPL* and cannot be reproduced here. It should be pointed out that (FF) does not differ from the other functions with regard to general properties.

Conclusion

The theory of the political system that Easton put forward in the mid-sixties has been criticized from a number of different points of view. My criticism of *A Systems Analysis of Political Life* and *a Framework for Political Analysis* is not intended as the mere addition of some critical observations. It attempts a refutation of the theory while focusing on the basic problems that a systems analysis of the political system faces and the various difficulties such an approach runs into. A systems analysis of politics has to solve some fundamental theoretical problems:

- (a) the identification of the unit: what is a political system?
- (b) the definition of the homeostasis: what does persistence imply?
- (c) the statement of the variables of the system which maintain the homeostasis: what is the relation between demand, support, decision and action on the one hand and persistence on the other?

Easton fails to solve these vital theoretical problems. The theory is bad not because it fails to define some words in a proper way, or because some propositions are not true, or because it has a status quo bias. Easton's theory is bad because it fails to solve some problems that are at the very core of what a systems analysis implies. Its weakness lies not so much in its general vagueness, its general ambiguity and in the complete absence of an attempt

to sort out the basic propositions from those that are unimportant. The weakness is systematic and lies at the very heart of the systems approach.

Some scientific problems are highly suitable for a systems approach. A systems analysis of political life could increase our knowledge considerably if it was built up according to some simple criteria of adequacy.

NOTES:

¹ Easton, D., *A Systems Analysis of Political Life*, 1965, and Easton, D., *A Framework for Political Analysis*, 1965. Other studies by Easton such as *The Political System* (1953), «Limits of the Equilibrium Model in Social Research», *Behavioral Science* 1, 1956, pp. 96—104, «An Approach to the Analysis of Political Systems, *World Politics* vol. IX: 1956—1957, pp. 383—400, «Political Anthropology», *Biennial Review of Anthropology*, 1959, pp. 216—269 and *Children in the Political System* (co-author J. Dennis), 1959, are not dealt with extensively here, as my aim is not a study of the genesis or the development of the theory. *SAPL* and *FPA* are connected with each other both logically — *FPA* contains a commentary on the problems and terminology in *SAPL* — and in time.

² *SAPL*, p. 17, ³ *SAPL*, p. 13, ⁴ *SAPL*, p. 24, ⁵ *SAPL*, p. 21, ⁶ *SAPL*, p. 22—24, ⁷ *FPA*, p. 85, ⁸ *FPA*, p. 85 (my underlining), ⁹ *SAPL*, pp. 171—72, and chapters 11—13, ¹⁰ *SAPL*, p. 37, ¹¹ *SAPL*, p. 220 (my insertions), ¹² *FPA*, chapter 6, ¹³ *FPA*, p. 86, ¹⁴ Levy, M., *The Structure of Society*, 1952, p. 63, ¹⁵ *FPA*, p. 95, ¹⁶ *SAPL*, p. 21, *FPA*, p. 57 and *TPS*, p. 128, ¹⁷ *SAPL*, pp. 22—24, *FPA*, p. 50 and *TPS* pp. 132—33, ¹⁸ *TPS*, p. 132, ¹⁹ *FPA*, p. 50, ²⁰ *SAPL*, p. 207 and p. 292, ²¹ *SAPL*, p. 207, ²² *SAPL*, p. 208, ²³ Weber, M., *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* 1964, p. 23, ²⁴ *ibid.*, pp. 22—24, chapter 3 and chapters 8—9, ²⁵ *FPA*, p. 50, ²⁶ *FPA*, pp. 50—56, ²⁷ *FPA*, p. 47, ²⁸ *FPA*, p. 56. Cf. *TPS*, p. 134: «the whole society», ²⁹ *SAPL*, p. 23, ³⁰ *TPS*, p. 135, ³¹ *TPS*, p. 135. Easton uses the word «prerequisites» in the sense of the word «requisite» in Levy, *op. cit.*, ³² Levy, *op. cit.*, p. 113, ³³ *ibid.*, p. 130.

³⁴ *ibid.*, pp. 468—504. The definition of the word reads: «*Political allocation*... may be defined as the distribution of power over and responsibility for the actions of the various members of the concrete structure concerned, involving on the one hand the use of coercive sanctions, of which force is the extreme form in one direction, and on the other accountability to the members and in terms of the structure concerned, or to the members of other concrete structures» — (pp. 332—33).

³⁵ *SAPL*, p. 181, ³⁶ *SAPL*, p. 26, ³⁷ *SAPL*, p. 26, ³⁸ *SAPL*, p. 27, ³⁹ *FPA*, p. 113, ⁴⁰ *SAPL*, p. 27, ⁴¹ *SAPL*, p. 28, ⁴² *SAPL*, p. 27, ⁴³ *SAPL*, p. 347, ⁴⁴ *SAPL*, p. 28, ⁴⁵ *SAPL*, p. 212, ⁴⁶ *SAPL*, p. 31, ⁴⁷ *SAPL*, p. 349, ⁴⁸ *SAPL*, p. 216, ⁴⁹ *SAPL*, pp. 22—24, ⁵⁰ *SAPL*, p. 172 (my insertion), ⁵¹ *FPA*, pp. 84—85, ⁵² *SAPL*, p. 220, ⁵³ *SAPL*, p. 70, ⁵⁴ *SAPL*, p. 81, ⁵⁵ *SAPL*, pp. 85—99, ⁵⁶ *SAPL*, p. 100, ⁵⁷ *SAPL*, pp. 220—21, ⁵⁸ *SAPL*, p. 58, ⁵⁹ *SAPL*, p. 59, ⁶⁰ *SAPL*, p. 448.