SOME COMMENTS ON THE CONCEPT OF THE POLITICAL SYSTEM

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Perhaps no single term is more characteristic of political science literature in the last decades than *the political system*. It is used by most of the leading authors, by their followers and in a majority of textbooks. What does it mean?

Clearly, in many cases its meaning is rather vague. Sometimes it even seems to be a mere synonym for the traditional word *state* which during the same period has been largely banned from scientific jargon. Vagueness is often the price of becoming fashionable. A similar example is what has happened to "the decision-making process".

However, the term originated from endeavours to express a new point of view, a specific approach to political phenomena, different from the traditional institutional approach. As such, it may be said to cover those aspects of acts which are considered politically relevant (whatever that may mean), irrespective of the institutional setting in which the acts are performed, the same acts being relevant also with respect to other social systems. This is still the core of its meaning in rigorous, scientific language. It is subservient to what may be termed the aspect point of view, and not to any other.

Consequently, any use of the term "political system" hinges on what is meant by *political*. Some definition of what is considered politically relevant is required.

One of the most widely accepted definitions is that of David Easton: "[A] *political* system can be designated as those interactions through which values are authoritatively allocated for a society."[1] What is to be discussed here is not the term or the concept of *values*, though it is not quite obvious what it is intended to designate; its meaning certainly differs from what is meant when Easton speaks of *value theory*. Nor is it the phrasing "for a society"; Easton's distinction between political and parapolitical systems[2] is both clear and useful. What I shall concentrate on is the relation between the concepts *authoritative* and *society*. That means that my comments may apply to other definitions of politics as well, because most of them tackle the same problem in one way or another.

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"A policy is 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." That is

the famous wording chosen by David Easton in *The Political System.*[3] He adds that this is a psychological rather than a moral explanation. Acceptance may flow from a number of sources: moral, traditional, or customary, or purely from fear of the consequences. That means that what is intended by the definition is not any classification of reasons why policies are accepted. Easton is concerned simply with the fact of their being accepted as binding. Whenever that is the case, policies — whether formal or effective — are authoritative.

Clearly, not every authoritative policy, or allocation of values, is relevant for a whole society. Political science is not concerned — at least not directly — with the internal allocation of values for, say, a family or an association, i.e. for groups within society; that is what is meant by designating them parapolitical, as opposed to political, systems.

So far, that is a clear distinction. But obviously it does not solve the very pertinent question of how to evaluate in terms of the allocation of values for a society the external activities of associations and like groups, i.e. their endeavours to participate in that very allocation. Are these activities to be considered part and parcel of the political system, or are they simply relevant because they influence some higher order of activities, for instance those of state officials, which so to speak constitute the core of a political system? Evidently the answer to these questions will have far-reaching consequences for what is to be understood by politics, or in Eastonian language: by the authoritative allocation of values for a society.

Before discussing the question myself, I shall try to find out what the answers given or indicated by Easton and other contemporary political theorists are.

As for Easton himself, it is no simple task. His answers leave room for more than one interpretation and are formulated differently in his various books.

The Political System may be searched in vain for a real answer. Certainly, by way of summarizing his considerations, Easton does not hesitate to conclude[4] that "the property of a social act that informs it with a political aspect is the act's relation to the authoritative allocation of values for a society". But this is no definite answer to the question of whether an act by an organization or an individual is political solely because the act is related to or has some bearing on some authoritative allocation, or whether the act may sometimes in itself be an authoritative allocation for a society.

Turning to *A Systems Analysis of Political Life* we encounter answers which seem to exclude the second possibility. Easton states that the outputs of interest to his analysis are produced by or closely associated with those who hold the positions of authority in the system, and adds: "This is why I have called them authoritative allocations of values."[5] Those who hold the positions of authority, also called the authorities, must, we are told,[6] engage in the daily affairs of a political system, being recognized by most members of the system as having the responsibility for these matters, and their actions must be accepted as binding most of the time by most of the members as long as they act within the limits of their roles. "Specifically, we refer to such occupants of authority roles as

elders, paramount chiefs, executives, legislators, judges, administrators, councilors, monarchs, and the like." Even if the use of the word "specifically" may leave some doubt, this phrasing certainly indicates that the term authorities in modern systems exclusively denotes state and other public officials, and that the more vague term is only being used with the intention of also dealing with less specialized types of systems. Furthermore, speaking of the roles of opinion leaders, interest groups, and influentials of all sorts, Easton declares:[7] "They are not part of the structure of authority even though at times some of these roles may be so incorporated; and usually they are all of some political significance to the extent that they are ultimately able to influence the authorities." The necessary conclusion seems to be that, in modern systems, authoritative allocations of values are made only by state authorities; all other allocations are made authoritative only by their being accepted or acquiesced in by those authorities.

Some other modern theorists are more definite than David Easton. Gabriel Almond proposes[8] that "the political system is that system of interactions to be found in all independent systems which performs the functions of integration and adaptation (both internally and vis-à-vis other societies) by means of the employment, or threat of employment, of more or less legitimate physical compulsion". As the qualification "more or less legitimate" is declared not to apply to modern Western societies no doubt remains that, at least with respect to these, Almond uses the term political system as a functional equivalent of the traditional term state. Translated into Eastonian language his definition would run: A political system is that system of interactions through which values are allocated for a society by the state and other public authorities.

Another influential theorist, Karl W. Deutsch,[9] does not simply identify the political system with government, but his interest clearly concentrates on the latter, and, like Almond, he stresses the importance of the disposal by governments of physical force.

Decision-making analysts tend to concentrate on the decisions of state and other public authorities, not, according to Richard C. Snyder,[10] with the intention of a new narrowing of the field of political science, but because it seems a convenient research strategy. That is certainly a valid reason in so far as the strategy proves efficient, as undoubtedly in many respects it will, and adequate. It implies that activities other than those of state authorities are taken into consideration to the degree in which they are supposed to influence the activities of such state authorities, and not otherwise. It seems to me questionable whether this strategy is in itself sufficient to cover all phenomena of prominent relevance to political science.

Of late, some impatience can be observed at the predominance of theorizing in the political science of the last two decades. What are the results of all that jargon-producing? Why not, once more, get down to facts? Such irritation is understandable, especially since the theorizing has not resulted in any commonly or even widely accepted theory of politics which might serve as useful common

ground for further studies in the foreseeable future. In one's more pessimistic intervals the situation of the discipline may seem to be a Babel of tongues.

On the other hand, the fact that the theorizing has fallen short of the expectations of its most optimistic spokesmen does not necessarily mean that it has been a failure. However, at an IPSA round table conference in Turin in September, 1969, some critics were arguing that we had better give up all that jumble and realize that the pertinent questions of our discipline will be better answered in terms of the state and its institutions. Such a proposal has at any rate the merit of prompting us to reconsider once more the possible advantages and disadvantages of our conceptual frameworks and, especially, of that most fashionable concept of political system.

If what was previously designated the aspect point of view is conceded to be a major gain, it means that the subject matter of political science must be defined not by institutions, but by activities. Consequently, the state or any state institutions are ruled out as criteria of definition (though not as criteria of characterization).

What seems to me to be the great advantage of the aspect point of view is its ability to pinpoint simultaneously the unity and the variety of the social sciences. The subject matter of political science is identified with all those aspects of acts and interactions which are politically relevant, and so on. That means, of course, that no specific act or interaction is *a priori* considered as belonging exclusively within the domain of any single social science.

The political system is a shorthand term for the total of politically relevant aspects of acts and interactions. Like the economic and other social systems it is considered a subsystem of society. The term system indicates interdependence of the relevant aspects as components of the system and interaction between the system and its environment. That is the core of its meaning as used by Easton and the majority of modern theorists. Its more specific use in so-called general systems theory may cause some confusion and perhaps some day result in a change of vocabulary. But that is not a question to be discussed here. My concern is with the aspect point of view as such, not with any of its possible refinements.

The aspect point of view precludes any definition of the political system by way of institutions. But it does not imply that institutions are not to be considered important components of the system. On the contrary, institutionalized patterns of behaviour such as government, parliament, and other state authorities, parties, interest groups, etc., must still be analysed, both internally and as components of the system. Their way of functioning yields a basic contribution to the description and understanding of any political system. Institutional analysis is a precondition of any functional or interaction analysis.

If an allocation of values for a society is judged to be authoritative for a society to the degree in which the members of that society consider that they must or ought to obey it, the question of which allocations are authoritative, i.e. politically relevant, is an open one, not decided *a priori* by confining it to any

institutional setting, but left to empirical investigations to decide. The proper question will be: Whatever their motives, do people in fact behave in such a way that they must be assumed to consider the allocation binding? If the answer is yes, then the allocation is authoritative, irrespective of how it came about, or who were the decision-makers. They may be state officials, as certainly in a great many cases they will, but they may also be other persons or bodies, the effect being the only relevant criterion.

This definition of the political system — or any substantially identical definition couched in other than Eastonian language — is widely superior to any definition based on the idea of the state, state authorities, or — what is essentially the same — the employment of legitimate physical compulsion. This is made particularly obvious whenever a definition is to be used as a point of departure for spatio-temporal comparisons. A few examples[11] will serve to illustrate and underline this superiority.

During the Middle Ages of Europe, the king may be said to have been the forerunner of the modern state. He laid its foundations, and he certainly strived to acquire a monopoly of legitimate use of physical compulsion. Yet no one intending to describe the political life of that period would ever dream of omitting the church or allotting to it only a minor role. It is clearly evident that mediaeval man considered the decisions of the church binding. That indicates that *regnum* and *sacerdotium*, as integral parts of the mediaeval political system, are both indispensable for any comparison with modern systems. The obvious importance of the mediaeval church is a concrete measure of the difference between two ages with respect to the political relevance of spiritual matters.

The example points to the fact that the content of politics, of what is considered politically relevant, differs considerably from one case to another. For centuries after, the Middle Ages questions of faith and church affairs were still major political issues in North-Western Europe and North America. Today they are generally looked upon as belonging to a private, non-political sphere.

Having already demonstrated that it is impossible to define politics by institutions, we now have to concede that it is no more satisfactory to delineate it by its substance. Politicization and depoliticization of subjects are constantly taking place. Political systems differ from each other both with regard to their institutions and to their perception of what is political. Put in another way: the objective of a comparative political science is to be able to characterize political systems in both respects.

How, then, is it possible to define any concept which may serve as a starting point and a guide for comparative research? The solution must be sought not in any sort of lowest common denominator, but in a definition which allows for differences by concentrating on the very conception of what is political. One reason for the wide acceptance of Easton's definition may be its suitability especially for this purpose. By designating the political system as the total of those activities by which values are authoritatively allocated for a society, the definition manages to take account of what is characteristic of any system,

leaving open the question of what is considered to be authoritatively allocated in any specific society.

This may be illustrated by another example. The latter half of the eighteenth and the first half of the nineteenth century simultaneously witnessed a strengthening of the state and a narrowing of its sphere. The strengthening consisted first and foremost in the establishment and intensification of direct connection between the state and its inhabitants, pushing aside such intermediate corporations as the churches, the guilds, and so on. The two most prominent features of the narrowing were the rather complete depoliticization of matters of faith and church and the certainly never consistent, but rather far-going withdrawal of the state from the regulation of economic life, accompanied by a decomposition of existing corporations in the economic field. In principle, the endeavour was to separate economics from politics.

In both respects that period contrasts with earlier centuries, especially with regard to matters of faith and church. The contrast with modern times exclusively regards economics, but is perhaps even sharper. In all modern societies, economics is a central and often the most conspicuous subject of politics in Western as well as in socialist and developing countries. The last hundred years might adequately be termed the repoliticization period of economics.

Talking Eastonian language, repoliticization means that in modern times political values undoubtedly include economic values, i.e. questions of monetary policy, employment, prices and wages, production planning, etc. What is not obvious is in which cases the allocations of those values are authoritative for the society, and in which other cases they belong to some purely economic or even private sphere. That depends upon how the terms *authoritative* and *for a society* are to be interpreted.

Marginal cases are easily dealt with. A devaluation is clearly a political decision (as well as an economic), my borrowing my brother's book is clearly not (though it may be of some economic consequence). The difficult thing is that rather few instances are in every respect marginal. Even book-lending is in some instances regulated by law, i.e. subject to some authoritative allocation. The bulk of economic acts or interactions may be said to have at any rate a certain political aspect. How, then, is the political system to be demarcated?

These difficulties seem to have prompted Almond and, apparently, Easton himself to search for some suitable criterion which they believed they found in the shape of legitimate use of physical power or state authorities. The consequences of the choice of such a criterion are, however, unsatisfactory.

Another example will serve as an illustration. In the Soviet Union and other socialist countries, pretty well all decisions concerning the authoritative allocation of values for the society may be said to be made by public officials, even if they originate in and are made in advance by the Communist party, often by the same persons who later, in their capacity as state officials, reiterate them. These systems may be characterized as monistic to a high degree. No other institution — say, church, banks, trade unions, or the like — seems to be able to

influence allocations otherwise than through the party (or state) officials. It appears perfectly possible — even if it is not the sole, and perhaps not the most convenient, possibility — to describe rather adequately a socialist political system by describing the decisions made by its state authorities.

Turning to Western systems, a similar procedure appears less adequate. Certainly a great many authoritative allocations, also in the economic field, are made by state authorities. But if an authoritative allocation for a society is defined, as originally it was by Easton, as a decision which those to whom it applies consider that they must or ought to obey, obviously decisions or allocations for the society are sometimes made by e.g. central banks, trade unions, and corporations of several kinds, so that we must acknowledge that there is no state monopoly. As to the effect, there is no difference whether, as is ordinarily the case, wages are fixed by bargaining and agreement between representatives of employers and workers or, as sometimes happens, by law or by some state initiated arbitration. If corporations, singly or jointly, ordinarily do what state authorities on occasion do, corporations must be considered components of the political system in their own right. Western systems are pluralistic, not monistic. It is not true that allocations cannot be influenced, or even made, otherwise than through state officials. So any attempt to describe Western systems solely in terms of state decisions must remain incomplete and inadequate.

Someone might concede that this is undeniable, but argue that even in the West it is possible for the state, as is sometimes done, to decide also in cases which are normally left to others, so that what is done by corporations may be looked upon as sanctioned by the acquiescence of the state authorities; every decision, it is said, is directly or indirectly made or made possible by the state authorities and, consequently, research may be concentrated on them, it being of secondary importance whether the influence of corporations of any kind is obtained through them or by their acquiescence.

Such an argument seems to me artificial and even artful. It construes the less ordinary into a theory of what is ordinarily the case, explaining the latter by the former. If such devices are needed in order to save the identification of authoritative allocation with decisions by state authorities, it seems to me to indicate the advisability of acknowledging that it is impossible to find some simple criterion by which to distinguish between allocations which are authoritative for a society, and others which are not. Probably, such a neat distinction is impossible, most differences being more conveniently described as differences of degree rather than of kind.

After all, the concept of the political system is useful just because it is neither identical nor identifiable with that of the state. Historically, as was shown above, the strengthening of the state coincided with a narrowing of its sphere of action. Political science started off as, first and foremost, a science of the state. That was why, for a long time, it ignored the fact that others stepped in where the state had withdrawn, allocating values more or less on their own. Later on when the state, once again, enlarged its field, these activities were dealt with in their

connection with the state, e.g. by Bentley in his *The Process of Government*, but not often as what they also are: an independent allocation, which is especially characteristic of Western, as opposed to Socialist, countries. Not till the rise of the behavioralist tide was a phrase coined that provided a more adequate description, namely *the political system*, the core of which is the authoritative allocation for a society, whoever be the authorities. This conception thus makes possible a fruitful comparison of societies which differ, as do for instance Western and socialist ones, primarily with regard to the localization of authority rather than to activities performed. In both cases the basic question is: Do the people consider themselves bound to obey? Whenever the answer is in the affirmative, the decision is politically relevant in so far as it is valid for a society.

That this conception of what ought to be understood by the political system in a modern society is after all in consonance with some fundamental idea of Easton's, is proved by the following passage from *A Systems Analysis of Political Life*. He writes:[12] "If information about demands and supports were to begin to flow toward other members in the system in a consistent and persistent pattern, this would be evidence that an unstable structure of dual power would be taking shape. We would be driven to suspect that the authorities in the system would soon find themselves displaced by a new set of individuals or that civil conflict was about to break out." This assertion, which is supported by a reference to Trotsky's *History of the Russian Revolution*, clearly deals with a breakdown of the regime or even the system. Now, it is obvious that in a great many Western regimes, a considerable amount of information about demands and support flows to, for instance, trade unions and employers' associations and is handled and brought to a decision by them, not by state authorities, without causing any displacement of authorities or breakdown of the regime. On the contrary, when sometimes — as in France in May, 1968 or in Italy in the autumn of 1969 — the leaders of trade unions are on the point of not being able to manage what they ordinarily do, the regime is up against a serious crisis. That proves the pluralistic character of the ordinary Western type of system. It proves also that we need the concept of the political system not only as a functional concept suited to comparisons with non-state societies, but just as much because we are in need of some term to enhance our understanding of the politics of our own societies.

One more comment may be added. The Eastonian model is sometimes criticized for its alleged underestimation of the active role of components of the political system, i.e., for being too much or even exclusively concerned with input from the environment and its transformation into output. The Soviet Union and several developing countries are the obvious instances to which such criticism may refer, and the conclusion is that the model is only, if at all, suitable for analysis of Western societies.

It is doubtful whether this criticism is justified. First, David Easton's theory is meant to be a systems persistence theory, not a general theory of politics, even

if it is often used for such purposes; consequently, its major concern is with the minimum preconditions of any political system. In the second place, it is not unthinkable that the theory may become a convenient starting point for the development of more specialized theories for different kinds of systems, even of those mentioned above, because it is not inherently an equilibrium theory. If it were, it should not fit even analysis of Western systems. The critics are justified, it seems to me, only in so far as they point to a risk, but not in regarding it as unavoidable.

In that case, it is even more important to recognize that the authoritative allocation may be performed not only by state authorities but also by other components of the political system, which may consequently, in their own right, play an active part in transforming society. The political life of modern Western societies bears ample evidence of this.

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NOTES

[1] Easton, *Systems Analysis,* 1965, p. 21; cf. Easton, 1953, pp. 123—48.
[2] Easton, *Framework,* 1965, p. 52.
[3] Easton, 1953, p. 132; cf. *Framework,* p. 50.
[4] Easton, 1953, p. 134.
[5] Easton, *Systems Analysis,* 1965, p. 350.
[6] *Ibid.,* p. 212.
[7] *Ibid.,* p. 210.
[8] Almond and Coleman, p. 7.
[9] Deutsch, pp. 119, 122, 222.
[10] Snyder, pp. 13—14.
[11] For further examples, especially Danish, see Rasmussen, I, pp. 133—136, *et al.*
[12] Easton, *Systems Analysis,* 1965, p. 350.

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