THE POLITICAL SYSTEM REVISITED:

The ironical fate of a legend in political science

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Abstract:
David Easton is considered one of the founding fathers of political science. He has had a tremendous, in particular tacit, influence on the development of modern political analysis. Ironically, however, his concept of political system is generally thought of as a minor offspring of Parsons’s theory of the social system. Nearly all of Easton’s critics presume that his political system is based on an analogy with biology. Like Parsons, they say, Easton considers the political system society’s goal-attaining system, which functions primarily as an instrument for securing economic adaptation and as a medium for sustaining social pattern maintenance and normative integration. The result, they conclude, is a very bad empirical and moral theory which, unlike Parsons’s, is logically flawed, conceptually fuzzy, empirically almost useless, morally shady and highly elitist in nature. However, if one instead begins from carefully listening to what Easton says that political systems persistence is all about, an entirely different story appears. This reminds one much more about how networks, discourses, practices, ideas, contingencies and risks are thought about today in new, anti-essentialist approaches to policy articulation and delivery generated outside the mainstream than about conventional method-driven comparative research in the mainstream. Easton’s story is about the formation of a new approach to fact and values which is targeted to overcome the search in mainstream political science for equilibrium, linear causes, exogenous variables and normally distributed outcomes. Values and facts, are regarded as each other’s preconditions, stability and change are claimed to belong to the same genus, the ‘political’ is identified by what it does, that is its outputs rather than its inputs, and the political world is specified as a network of loosely connected levels and relations ranging from the local to the global. All this points towards a new political science and political theory tied to a critical outlook and attitude, which is intrinsically skeptical towards the status quo and at the same time open to new images and ideas about how values are authoritatively articulated and allocated for people and populations for the sake of making their life better without simultaneously undermining their struggles for free and equal access to and recognition in the political decision-making processes (and vice versa).
INTRODUCTION

Nearly everyone in the social sciences, or at least in political science, knows about David Easton’s systems analysis of political life. They may not be aware that Easton was the person who introduced the concept of political system into political science (1957). But they all seem familiar with his ‘Black Box Model’ with its inputs of demand and support and its outputs of authoritative decisions and actions. As Danieli Carmani note in the introduction to a leading textbook in Comparative Politics (2008: 12):

‘Easton’s work has been a victim of its own success. His concepts have impregnated the minds of political scientists, as well as those of the wider public, so deeply that, in a way, it goes ‘beyond citation.’

Actually, it is difficult to imagine what political science would have looked like had Easton’s political systems approach not occurred. When Easton’s political framework appears as belonging ‘to the category of theories that come into vogue and then just vanish’ (Lane, 1978:161), it is mostly because it has become a part of ‘what everyone knows’ about politics and policy in the discipline. Distinctions like those between wants and demands, demands and issues, issues and decisions, outputs and outcomes, diffuse and specific support and gatekeepers and authorities are so common sense that only few feel the need to know who actually introduced them into political analysis.

It is hard to find a model which has been more heavily criticized than Easton’s. It is predominantly seen as an exemplar of a functionalist and behavioralist approach to modern government. It is accused of silencing ‘the reflective and critical voice of the discipline’ and of undermining its status ‘as the discursive home of political theory’ (Gunnell, 1993:269, cf. Dryzek and Leonard 1995). It has got the reputation of taking a non- and apolitical stance towards its own object of analysis, narrowing down the practical tasks of political theory and science to a technical question of how to enable politicians to make more rational democratic decisions and better control their outcomes. In addition it is considered badly flawed and as commingling rational choice arguments and structural-functionalist arguments (Sorzano, 1975). State theorists conceive of it as influenced by ‘a certain image of British and American social development’ which makes it ‘hard to conceive of the emergence of the state as a phenomenon characteristic of a specific moment in the history of a society’ (Badie and Birnbaum, 1982:26). Those from international relations think that ‘it presupposes the organization of a society under an effective government. It cannot encompass international politics because there is no effective authority at this level’ (Dougherty and Pfaltzgraff, 1971:9). The new institutionalists take it to demonstrate how ‘interest in comprehensive forms of political organization has declined; political events are defined more as epiphenomena than as actions necessary to an understanding of society’ (March-Olsen, 1989:3). Rational choice theorists blame it for being ‘logically suspect, conceptually fuzzy, and empirically almost useless’ (Meehan, 1967:174).

I will in this paper challenge the general view of Easton’s concepts of political systems persistence as modeled after Parsons’s concept of homeostasis or social structure...
maintenance. At the same time I shall show that it is much more consistent in its reasoning than its critics argue. The problem is that both the enemies and friends of political systems analysis take it for granted à priori that Easton’s model (I) ‘clearly entails the notion of homeostasis’ (Evans, 1970:120); (II) is input driven in treating ‘authoritative allocations [as] those that are regularly complied with’ (Green, 1985: 137); and (III) reduces politics to ‘the overall raison d’être of government’ or ‘more specifically the national political system or, in effect, the governmental system’ (Blondel, 1990:7). Easton is thus generally interpreted as Parsons’s offspring, treating ‘the political’ as a goal-attaining action system, the study of which constitutes a ‘synthetic’ field in the social scientific field for meeting society’s ‘needs’ for economic growth, social order and normative integration. I find this understanding of Easton’s political system as similar to Parsons’s a- and non-political social system directly odd. If one listens to what Easton himself says ‘the political’ is all about, it immediately becomes evident that to the extent that the three presumptions about his model above are justifiable at all, it must be due to some unintended consequences:

(i) Easton claims his political system to be special:
The framework elaborated here has not been able to lean on any ready-made model; and no eclectic borrowing from other varying kinds of systems approaches would do. A consistent structure of concepts had to be newly developed that would fit the kind of system that political life constitutes’ (1965a: xii).

(ii) Easton identifies the relevant variables of a political system with what it does, that is, with its outputs:
I have identified a political system as those patterns of interaction through which values are allocated for a society and these allocations are accepted as authoritative by most persons in the society most of the time. It is through the presence of activities that fulfill these two functions that a society can commit the resources and energies of its members in the settlement of differences that cannot be autonomously resolved (1965a: 96).

(iii) Easton defines ‘the political’ as an aspect of society that embodies each and any of us from the local to the global:
Two citizens disputing over the foreign policy of the United States create a political situation’ (1953: 192). [Furthermore,] ‘the international [political] system is comparable in all respects, to any other kind of [political] system, at the theoretical level, although the values for the relevant variables will clearly be different (1965b:487).

It is difficult to see how these statements can in any way ipso facto be taken to reveal Parsons’s normative functionalism? There is no single trace of Parsons’s view of political science as gaining reality and significance only when there is disorder and a conflict of interests that has to be overcome to bring society back to the ‘normal’. Political science is claimed to constitute an analytically distinct field, not an ‘applied’ or ‘synthetic’ science; its necessary functions are not traced to values and norms but to the energies and resources required for ‘making a difference’ to the political constitution of society; and the international political system is argued to rely as much on the transformative capacity of authority and its general acceptance as any national one, although it lacks both sovereignty and legitimacy.

Hence, I will begin from what Easton himself says his political system is all about in order to make a more intelligible interpretation possible. I shall first dig into the empirical and normative critique of Easton’s political system and confront it with his own
specification of systems persistence. My conclusion will here be that one major reason why Easton’s political system is misread is that it was way ahead of its time in the 1960-ies in breaking with mainstream political science’s presumptions that: the political system is usually in equilibrium, is characterized by linear causality; is changing due to exogenous forces; and distribute outcomes in a normal pattern (cf. Blyth 2011: 85). Then I shall proceed by showing how mainstream political science cloned Easton as Parsons, drawing on Gabriel Almond’s fusion of Easton’s political system and his own comparative politics and Parsonian inspired theory of the relation between the civic culture and the democratic regime (Almond, 1989, 1997). I shall conclude that it is about time that we begin taking Easton’s concept of political systems persistence seriously and redesign it to provide us with more reliable and societal relevant knowledge about, how to govern an increasingly globalized and transnational politics and policy. We are facing tremendous problems and challenges in the shape of high consequence risks such as those of global warming, economic meltdowns and the return of authoritarianism, but now with a smiling face (Bang 2010b). The concept of political system provides us with an unique possibility for combining the adjustment of political science to the study of global and transnational governance with the rejuvenation of democratic political theory. It forces us to deal not only with how people acquire access to and recognition in a political system, but also, and in particular, with how authoritative policies are articulated and delivered in ways that can do well for populations at all levels from the local to the global.

On the empirical and normative critique of political systems analysis
Easton’s political system did from the onset get the reputation of mirroring Parsons specification of it. Just to quote a few critics:

‘The primary focus of David Easton’s work is what Talcott Parsons designates as the polity or the goal-attainment subsystem’ (Lewis, 1974:676).


I could pile critic upon critic imposing the biological analogy on Easton’s political system. They have helped to create an image of Easton in critical social studies as a good example of how the pursuit of a technical interest in objective knowledge leads one to reduce all ethical and moral questions to a mere problem of survival:

‘[Is] systems analysis, as a kind of political biology,...concerned with questions that are, properly speaking, political in nature? [No it is not!] Political things must be understood by analogy with ethics rather than biology’ (Miller, 1971: 234).

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’ (Miller, E.F., 1971, p. 233-235).

However, Easton’s method driven critics from the mainstream do not think that he cope well either. They think that Easton’s ‘biological’ approach to homeostasis in an individual organism is seriously flawed:

‘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?’
he 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...[His model’s] weakness is systematic and lies at the very heart of the systems approach’ (Lane, 1978: 178.

‘Non-ethical and entirely inconsistent’ was the stamp that Easton’s systems model got by most of his early critics. Some critics even went so far as accusing Easton of not only being an intellectual dwarf compared to Parsons but also inherently unethical and elitist. As one notes about Easton’s description of the collapse of the Weimar Republic and the construction of the Nazi regime as an example of systems persistence with and through change:

‘[This is] a miserable, indeed almost inhuman, way to describe the most dramatic changes in the composition and substance of Germany’s political order’ (Dahrendorf, 1968: 142-144)

However, another critic adds, this embarrassing affair is not at all surprising, since this is what happens when democratic discussion, interaction and dialogue aimed at reaching common agreement are reduced to a technical interest in systems persistence and thereby to the mere exercise of the kind of strategic action that can do nothing but deceive, distort, manipulate, and repress:

‘Outputs result in certain outcomes, functioning as stimuli resulting in certain responses from the masses. In other words - we are dealing with a society in which the rulers manipulate the ruled and where the ruled react mechanically to their manipulation’ (Anckar, 1973:82-83, my translation from Swedish).

Seen in the light of all this harsh criticism it is a small wonder that Easton’s concept of political system has managed to persist with and through all the regime or paradigmatic changes that the political discipline has experienced since the 1950-ies – from structural functionalism and rational choice to state theory and public choice, and then to rational choice institutionalism, sociological institutionalism and historical institutionalism. Perhaps it is because that Easton’s political systems framework is very easy to adapt to any one of the paradigmatic perspectives mentioned above? At least there is more that meet’s one’s eyes when reading Easton unassumingly. Time and again Easton underscores that his model portrays political life and not biological life or other kinds of non-political and non-societal life. In A Framework for Political Analysis (1965a: 3), he sets out by warning the reader that:

‘We shall find by the end of our examination of it that [our conception of a political system] has gone off in substantially different directions. Biological and natural scientists would no longer feel at home in it, although it might well stir faint and nostalgic memories of a conceptual homeland that they once knew.’

And, in the introduction to his most comprehensive work, A Systems Analysis of Political Life, He opens the discussion once more by dissociating himself from the identification of political life with biological life (1965b: 21):

‘For any social system, including the political, adaptation represents more than simple adjustments to the events in its life. It is made up of efforts, limited only by the variety of human skills, resources, and ingenuity, to control, modify or fundamentally change either the environment or the system itself, or both together.’
An individual organism certainly cannot accomplish such things. It’s only in fairy tales that a frog can turn into a prince. What an individual organism seeks is stability not change; what it tries to reproduce is itself, not some genuine novelties. Furthermore, ethics is as constitutive of the human skills, resources and ingenuity required for transforming the societal world as is ‘technical’ knowledge. Yet Easton is continuously accused of neglecting both change, choice and human values. What is going wrong?

**Political systems persistence vs. biological survival**

Of course, the problem may be that Easton actually does something intrinsically different from what he intends, ending up with producing a model which is not only a bad biological and technical one but also inherently elitist and inhumane. We also do find some critics that wonder how he ends up with a reproduction of Parsons. As one critic phrases it (Evans 1970: 120-121):

‘The place of equilibrium in this framework is a puzzle. for Easton reiterates the disadvantages of equilibrium analysis in many places, citing the possibility of normative bias, the difficulty of operationalising the concept, and especially the need for quantification and the difficulty of this...Yet the 1965 version clearly entails the notion of homeostasis.’

The critic does not examine further what Easton means by speaking about ‘essential variables’ or ‘critical range’. He simply presumes that Easton after all, unknowingly or not, end up with the notion of homeostasis in organisms. But digging one feet deeper down in Easton’s political discourse, it soon becomes evident that what he implies by ‘critical range’ is certainly not within the ‘critical range’ of an individual organism or a modern society based on an institutional separation of state, market and civil society (Easton, 1965a: 99):

‘To keep the vital processes, the essential variables, of a political system alive, as it were, a system may remodel its structures and processes to the point where they are unrecognizable...No human biological system has yet been able to emulate this kind of self-transforming feat; although with modern computer technology and with a growing knowledge of the genetic structure, controlled mutation is well within the realm of probability.’

Actually, I find it quite remarkable that Easton in the early sixties could foresee how late modern information and communication technology as well as late modern genetics and brain theory more than 50 years later would bring us to the point where controlled mutation of human beings is no longer entirely unimaginable as a real organizational possibility (Castells and Cardoso, 2006. Crozier, Blyth, 2011). But apart from this, it is clear that he considers a political system as being of a higher level of relations or order of organization than are mechanical and biological systems (Crozier, 2010). If ‘the political’ is ‘a goal-setting, self-transforming and creatively adaptive system’ (Easton, 1965a: 132), political systems persistence must be very different from homeostasis in organisms, indeed.

Easton does assume that there are limits to both political systems persistence and political structure formation. If not his political system would be left entirely in the hands of anarchism, nihilism and chance. As he writes (Easton, 1965a: 97):

‘A system would be in a state of constant turmoil and confusion and might well be on the threshold of disappearance if there were just an equal probability that the decisions and associated actions of its authorities would be accepted or rejected. The ratio of rejection to acceptance must fall within a limited range well above that of chance.’
Certainly, this assertion about the ‘limited range’ as being around 50% chance of rejection of authority is up for discussion and empirical falsification. Why 50%? Might it not be sufficient, for example, if only the few of the most relevant and powerful members of the going political system accept political authority? But this analytical and empirical weakness, does not mean that the limited range of a political system corresponds to the critical range of an individual organism and therefore does not merit serious and independent attention. First of all, one must appreciate that ‘limited range’ in Easton’s systems framework refers to two different political conditions, since any going political system can, when it meets its critical point of acceptance, respond in two different ways in order to survive: (1) it can try to ward off the strains on its political authorities, political regime and political community by a variety of means ranging from dialogue, interaction and empowerment to downright threats and coercive actions; (2) it can transform itself into an entirely new form of political system with a new kind of authorities, regime and/or community, such as when a totalitarian or authoritarian system become converted into a democratic one (or vice versa). In the biological analogy only (1) is possible, since (2) would signify that the old political system had died and thus had experienced a ‘life failure.’ This is not at all the case in Easton’s political systems logics, since system failure here can mean two different things (Easton, 1965a: 82):

‘[a] that [a political system] has changed but continues to exist in some form; or [b] that it has disappeared entirely.’

It follows that we must distinguish an approach to the formation of a political system from one of persistence or the continued existence of a political system. Both (1) and (2) above must be regarded as taking place under the general conditions of political systems persistence. Persistence failure is only the outcome, if a political system no longer can authoritatively make and implement decisions, whether by piece meal engineering, comprehensive reform or a total revolution. The dissolution of the former Yugoslavia into several new nations was a persistence failure, illustrating the intrinsic difference between biological and political death.

**Easton’s political system ahead of time?**

Easton’s notion of political systems persistence needs a comprehensive update to enhance its relevance and significance for better describing, understanding and explaining the ongoing transition of modern industrialized society into a late modern information, network and risk society. But we can already now conclude that the interpretation of systems persistence as homeostasis or structure maintenance does not hold water. If we begin the interpretation of Easton’s political system by identifying his concept of system with ‘homeostasis’, it is no wonder that one reaches the conclusions that: *‘THERE MUST BE LIMITS TO CONFUSION’* (Lane, 1978: 161). But then it is the critic more than Easton that owes the problem, since his question is not how a certain form of political system is born and maintain itself in homeostasis. It is how a political system as such manages to persist in articulating and allocating values authoritatively for a society, whether the times are pre-modern, modern or late-modern, tranquil or revolutionary, stable or transforming, and whether political structures are characterized by hierarchies or networks, legitimacy or
illegitimacy, order or disorder, antagonism or agonism, conflict or consensus, or whatever.

Thus, it would also be futile to criticize Easton’s analysis of political systems persistence for not ‘[permitting] a reliable answer to the question of the good political order (Miller, 1971: 235). To Easton no such final order can ever be attained in political life, nor should one ever conduct political action in light of such an essentialist conception. Political goals, values, norms and ideas are – and must be - in constant re-articulation and revision if positive and constructive political development shall be possible at all. This is exactly why ongoing critique of the status quo and its values is so important to political life. It is simply necessary for imagining how things could be done not only otherwise but also better in any going system. But there is never just one way of doing good for society in and through policy articulation and delivery, and one should be sceptical towards anyone who imposes such a belief on political systems. Innovation and progress do not come by themselves, but only by accepting and recognizing that there is much more to political life than mere survival and the striving for attaining one or the other ‘formative principle’ (Easton, 1965b: 370):

‘Mere survival needs alone will give a distinct advantage to those systems that are sufficiently dynamic and flexible to modify their own behavior so as to cope with changes in their structure or in the environment. But beyond survival, feedback enables a [political] system to discover new ways for dealing with its problems. On the basis of information about present and past behavior, a system is able to select, reject, and emphasize one pattern in favor of another.’

Actually, it is only very recently that scholars in the mainstream are beginning to recognize how a conception of ‘the political’ as a critically responsive and self-transforming system defies the modern conception of it as a governmental system for maintaining social order, normative integration, equilibrium, stability, of whatever one calls this identification of a persisting political system with its maintenance in, or attainment of, a steady state. As Blyth asks (2011: 87):

‘What if we live in a world that is actually disequilibrail and dynamic, where causes are endogenous and nonlinear, and where outcomes of interests are not normally distributed?’

Yes, what if? Then perhaps we should begin reassessing Easton’s political system from the vantage point of a highly ‘glocalized’ information, network and risk society in which there is no one steady state, but an ensemble of levels and relations all of which are loosely coupled and are characterized by varying degrees of change or transformation (Bang 2009a, 2011). Easton asked himself this question before Blyth was born! Like Blyth, his research took off from the presumption that systematic political science relies as well on notions of uncertainty and probability as an ideational approach to values. He only went farther than Blyth. In Easton’s political system there is:

(1) no specification of stability as normal, and, hence of change as the exceptional thing to be explained:

‘Stability is only a special example of change, not a generically different one. There is never a social situation in which the patterns of interaction are absolutely unchanging’ (Easton 1965a: 106);

(2) no evolutionary traits of modernity that unfold themselves ‘behind our backs’:

‘Even though systems analysis recognizes that the members of political systems have the
capacity to cope with stress and change, this does not mean that all systems must behave adaptively or are equally successful in doing so. There need be no eufunctional or maintenance-satisfying bias to this kind of analysis’ (1965a:88);

(3) no teleology, the attainment of an already existing goal, but instead teleonomy, manifesting the ongoing seeking for goals:

‘What political systems as a type of social system posses uniquely, when compared to both biological and mechanical systems, is the capacity to transform themselves, their goals, practices, and the very structure of their internal organization’ (1965a: 99);

(4) no disciplined cultural ‘dopes’ blindly adapting to changing circumstances:

‘Since it is composed of reflective human beings, it is capable of evaluating what is happening and of taking evasive action’ (1965b: 225);

(5) no ethnocentrism, considering the Western welfare state and Western democracy as manifesting the end of ideology and the highest stage of evolution:

‘Once we affirm that all political life in its varied manifestations may properly become our universe, the substance of 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 the West’ (1965b:14).

When Easton’s critics go wrong in his systems model, it is probably because, it is only recently that we have begun to combine factual analysis and value analysis in a non-essentialist fashion (Bang 2011). Their critiques are all framed by the old opposition between ‘objectivism’ and ‘relativism’, what makes it impossible for them even to consider Easton’s claim that the generality or universality of a political system lies in its transformative capacity which guarantees that politics and policy could always have been done otherwise. If mainstream political scientists should finally begin taking this ontology of political life as an open, communicative, interactive, creative and self-transforming system seriously and at heart, they might be able to get over what Blyth describes as: ‘a century of failed predictions, empirical surprises, and contradictory results’ (2011: 100). But more than that they might also become able to reconnect political theory and political science from Easton’s own vantage point that factual and value analysis, though requiring substantially different methods are intrinsically connected with one another (1953:224):

‘When we talk about justice as a moral problem, we invariably refer to some factual conditions which we consider just or otherwise. And when we describe a factual situation, our propositions invariably flow from some moral purpose that has led us to investigate these facts.’

Therefore, to try to ward off the inescapable influence of values on empirical-analytical science by appealing to value relativism is merely to conceal that:

‘This belief in the ultimate equal worth of all moral views is the product, however, not of logic, but of preference itself’ (Easton 1953: 261).

There would be innovative political science without the creative imagination of how things could be done differently and, hopefully, better in the future. But this kind of problem and possibility oriented value analysis is just as difficult to accomplish as is a method driven and technically competent political science (ibid: 265:).

‘The very needs of work in systematic theory, therefore, demand the rejuvenation of political theory. Without the knowledge of how to go about clarifying their moral premises through a constructive [value] approach, political scientists can scarcely expect to be able to acquire the
What the political discipline missed out on by categorizing Easton as a normative functionalist and value relativist was a unique opportunity to begin discussing how to re-connect values and facts, political theory and theoretical politics, problem driven and method focussed political research. But how did it happen that Easton got the reputation of being Parsons’ offspring? There must be something in the general understanding of his political system in the political discipline that makes his critics go wild in his concept of systems persistence. Well, today we begin to see why. It has become apparent that mainstream political science suffers from ‘ELEN’ – a sickness making one study institutional formation in terms of concepts of: ‘equilibrium, linearity, exogeneity, and normality’ (Blyth, 2011: 99).

How Easton became Parsons
What I will do next is to show how the ELAN sickness was conferred on Easton’s model by in particular Gabriel Almond, one of the founding fathers of comparative politics.

In contrast to Easton, Almond does begin from Parsons’ notion of homeostasis. As he states in his contribution to Easton’s Festschrift (in Monroe (ed.):1997: 224):

‘Talcott Parsons’s formulation, coming out of a mix of sociological, psychological, and anthropological theory, stressed culture and personality, psychological orientation, and socialization. It was very influential in the development of my research designs in political culture theory.’

This describes how the factor of exogeneity in the ELEN model was imposed on Easton’s political system, when ‘adapting’ it to assessing the relation of the civic culture to the democratic regime. Almond begins by asking how ‘the people’s voice’ in the civic culture is represented in the political system – how it manages to convert their competing individual preferences and social interests into political demands that press themselves on the political agenda in search of a collective decision. And he finds the answer outside this system in the ‘beliefs, feelings, and values [that] significantly influence political behaviour, and that……are the product of socialization experiences’ (1989: 29). Good socialization experiences produce a good democratic regime which can contribute to economic adaptation, pattern maintenance, and normative integration. They see to that preference aggregation and interest integration are conducted in a legitimate and effective manner by the regime, and thus are conducive to protect ‘normal’ society against all the ‘deviances’ and ‘anomalies’ that threaten to undermine its harmonious and consensual order. Thus, ‘normality’ is contrasted to ‘deviations’ from the mean, and political transformation reduces to something caused by abnormal, exogenous ‘shocks’.

It follows that Almond’s specification of the relation between the civic culture and democratic regime is modelled after Parsons’s treatment of political science as ‘synthetic’ and as targeted towards helping public authorities and laypeople in the public sphere to agree on how best to structure and perform politics, economy, culture and religion for approaching society to some kind of material and ideal steady-state. The basic presumption is that democratic government requires social and political stability and that such stability can be attained only by using empirical and moral reasoning to turn ‘raw’, coercive political power into a benign form of legitimate domination that can remove all those anomalies,
disorders, dysfunctions and failures that threaten modern society from sustaining itself in equilibrium.

The idea of equilibrium, or homeostasis, or stability, or order, or success, or integration, or whatever this notion of a ‘steady state’ is called was consequently stamped onto Easton’s political system of eternal risky change from the day of its occurrence. Almond and Verba’s otherwise outstanding approach to the civic culture (1963), is a good example of how this turned Easton’s non-linear political model into a linear one. They precisely approach the political system from the ‘outside-in’, identifying ‘the political’ with its conversion of exogenous ‘inputs’ into ‘outputs’ that are implemented legitimately and effectively by a non-political, loyal, technically competent, and democratically controlled bureaucracy. Political power, on this conception, shrinks to a phenomenon that only gains reality and significance in times of deviance from the norm, caused by exogenous shocks and producing a temporary need for combining rationality and coercion to restore society’s internal order, harmony, stability, consensus, and so on. Otherwise, anarchy and disorder will become the rule, the voice of the people will die out, and political power will fall into the hands of a small, homogenous elite, hindering the free play of group interests in the civic culture as well as their access to influencing the democratic regime.

Focusing on riots, revolts, and other ‘shocking experiences’ as deviances from a normal state of affairs, any attempt to articulate political demands that break with formal democratic procedure and the consensual norms of the civic culture is considered the work of hoodlums or an illegitimate outburst of anarchy. This stands out in sharp contrast to Easton’s idea that riots and revolts should primarily be thought of as examples of endogenously operating political reasons and emotions that something drastic must be done right here and now in the current situation in order for the political system to be able to go on articulating and allocating values authoritatively for society. In this sense profound transformations may be regarded as neither normal nor abnormal but simply as necessary for political existence.

Where Easton primarily looks upon political institutions from the ‘inside-out’, identifying them by their transformative capacity to articulate and deliver social policies, Almond and Verba study them from the ‘outside-in’ as instruments and media for securing that people with different interests and identities can acquire free and equal access to, and recognition in, the political system. Beginning from the idea of a well-socialized American people that have been socialized to obey and show reverence to the democratic constitution, build great reservoirs of mutual social trust in each other and commit themselves to a moderate but virtuous exercise of citizenship, in particular when democracy is threatened by exogenous shocks, Almond and Verba do manage to flesh out Parsons’ notions of pattern maintenance and normative integration in the civic culture. They can then go on to specify the whole of the democratic chain of steering, showing how demands are aggregated and integrated into collective decisions by political representatives, in particular by elected politicians in legislative institutions, controlling and often also selecting the government that be. Finally, they can complete their linear causal analysis by showing how governmental policies are best exercised by institutionally separating those who make the ‘inputs’ and convert them into ‘outputs’ from those who
are in charge of the administrative implementation of those ‘outputs.’ As they put it: (1963: 14):

‘Structures, incumbents and decisions may...be classified broadly by whether they are involved either in the political or “input” process or in the administrative or “output” process. By “political” or “input” process we refer to the flow of demands from the society into the polity and the conversion of these demands into authoritative policies. Some structures that are predominantly involved in the input process are political parties, interest groups, and the media of communication. By the administrative or output process we refer to that process by which authoritative policies are applied. Structures predominantly involved in this process would include bureaucracies and courts.’

Thus, policy implementation becomes evidence of what ‘comes after’ the political process as the last causal, and non-political link for securing the democratic chain between ‘the civic culture and the open polity’ (Almond and Verba, 1963: 7).

Indeed, Almond and Verba’s causal model gives a much more precise content to Parsons’ vague structural-functional approach to ‘the political’ as a goal attaining system. But it simultaneously consecrates the general view of Easton’s political system as modeled after the process of homeostasis in individual organisms; as giving priority to the conversion of conflicting demands into consensual decisions and legitimating actions; and, therefore, as reducing the study of the political power of authority to a study of how this power is socially supported and made use of to sustain ‘the political’ in a ‘steady state’ of legitimate domination. It makes one believe that Easton considers politics from the ‘outside-in’, subordinates political power to social values and norms, identifies authorization with legitimate domination, and regards policy delivery as intrinsically non-political and as serving the task of protecting the people against those ‘anomalies’ and ‘deviances’ that hinder them from voicing and articulating their diverse legitimate preferences and interests and from getting them aggregated and integrated by diverse legitimate interest groups and parties.

In his contribution to Easton’s Festschrift (1997: 227), Almond himself describes how he originally combined Parsons and Easton for developing his own causal and input driven distinction between system (or rather structure) and process functions:

‘The system functions of socialization, recruitment, and communication maintain and transform the structure and culture of the political system as a whole. The process functions (or input and conversion activities) of interest articulation, interest aggregation, policy making, and implementation respond to the impulses coming from the surrounding domestic and international environments, and produce the policy outputs. These impacts produce the feedback that combined with other social, economic, and political processes, come full circle and produce Easton’s inputs of demand and support.’

Beginning from exogenous pressures, on can study how one phase follows the next in a process of linear causality. The initial theoretical problem is how society cope with ‘abnormal’ change and finds a new equilibrium, not how members of a political system continuously ‘are able to regulate, control, direct, modify, and innovate with respect to all aspects and parts of the processes involved’ (Easton, 1965a: 133).

It is painful to admit that comparative politics is still predominantly exercised according to this ELEN model. The new institutionalists have done a tremendous job with ‘filling out’ the holes in Almond’s comparative politics in which a variety of new political
institutions and practices beyond those of formal and representative government influence the democratic aggregation and integration interests. But they still stand committed to the very same kind of input driven reasoning that Easton’s systems politics is intended to transcend. Even Blyth still conceives of institutions as ‘the result of agents’ attempts to tame uncertainty and create stability’ (2011: 99), though sometimes institution-building is as much a matter of unleashing uncertainty and live, at least for a while, in a state of disequilibrium.

**Beyond equilibrium**

What Almond’s adaptation of Easton’s system to comparative politics signifies is that Blyth’s ‘ideational claim’ can only be met in and through substantial revisions of comparative politics itself, and not simply by showing ‘repressive tolerance’ towards ‘hostile ideas’ adumbrated by scholars outside the mainstream. All four properties of Blyth’s ELEN problem stem from and relate to Parsons notion of political science. As Almond himself admits (1997: 225), he had a moment of ‘intellectual liberation’ (1997: 225), when reading Easton’s 1957 article on the political system. But not so much because of what Easton said about systems persistence. Rather because it could be used to put together his own conception of the relation between the civic culture and the democratic regime within the Parsonian model with its ‘full notions of multidirectional interaction and of equilibrium and disequilibrium which are implied in the concept of system’ (ibid).

However, although the 1950-ies were indeed different from today, it is nevertheless inexplicable, why it should take nearly 60 years to render it distinct how Easton’s model springs from a rejection of the very same ELEN view that Blyth accuses the mainstream for nourishing today. In *The Political System*, Easton spends a whole chapter on showing the fallacies of thinking either that a political system can actually reach an equilibrium and come to a rest so to speak, or that it will be in perpetual disequilibrium (for instance as a part of the balancing of power in a world of unceasing conflicts between states). A political system in his conception has no ‘natural end state’, (such as a fully developed individual organism). It is no thing but a relationship which unlike an individual body cannot be examined and desiccated after it has ‘died’. But this is the belief that modern social science creates, even when it begins from a notion of systems as being in perpetual disequilibrium. This notion, which still dominates economics and international politics today, (but which they got to abandon, if they shall be able to calculate risks with some minimal degree of correctness), implies the idea that stability is normal whereas change is abnormal (say, Hobbes’ war of all against all), and also that change will always assume a discontinuous function (Easton 1953: 282, cf. Blyth, 2011: 85):

‘To speak of political life as being in a constant process of disequilibrium suggests that we are in fact contrasting it with a hypothetical condition of equilibrium. Disequilibrium therefore suggests more than change or constant flux, as conveyed by the notion of political process. It hints that tendencies towards equilibrium do exist but that changes take place in the basic circumstances...that abort these tendencies. This means that the disequilibrium is quite naturally being contrasted with an equilibrium situation that never materializes, a kind of normal situation which is a pure abstraction.’

The young Easton traces ‘the political’ to ‘the formation and execution of authoritative
policy’ (1953: 144). Beginning from ‘outputs’, he argues that ‘it is a necessary condition for the existence of a viable society [from the local to the global] that some policies appearing in a society be considered authoritative’ (ibid: 133). To him acceptance of political authority is contingent on order and disorder, and political system persistence may actually in some situations call more for the promotion or sustainment disorder or disequilibrium in order to transform a going political regime whether by peaceful or other means (Easton, 1965b: 20):

‘At times members in a system may wish to take positive action to destroy a previous equilibrium or even to achieve some new point of continuing disequilibrium.’

The Young Egyptians’ cry of Kefaya (‘enough’) which was heard for the first time in April 2008 when they helped workers with organizing their strike via Facebook, and which initiated the movement for change that tumbled Mubarak’s old regime, does precisely demonstrate that disorder or revolution is not necessarily the sign of ‘anomaly’ but can in fact be a condition of political and societal persistence. Likewise, might the old Yugoslavia not have persisted today, if its political authorities and laypeople had been prepared to accept that continuing disequilibrium was a presupposition for handling their deep-seated differences with relatively peaceful means and form a new and better way to work together politically based on recognition of their insurmountable cultural and religious differences?

**Political science as the ‘master science’**.

It is puzzling that the dominating new institutionalisms in the mainstream despite all their criticism of normative functionalism still predominantly study politics from the vantage point of ‘inputs’ and in the light of Parsons’s dictum, so succinctly summarized by Alexander (1984: 90):

‘If power has inputs of support without capacity, it will not be effective. If, on the other hand, it has inputs of capacity without [social] support, it will not be authoritative.’

This thesis which tends to derive political outputs and their outcomes from the inputs that the political system derives from the market economy (‘capacity’) and civil society (‘support’) is the one that Easton has vigorously combated his entire life. It stems directly from Parsons (1951:551), who maintained that:

‘It is in fact appropriate to treat political science as the discipline concerned with political power and its use and control, but because of the diffuseness of political power this makes it a synthetic science in the social system field, not one built about a distinctive analytical conceptual scheme’

Already in The Political System (1953: 60-61) Easton shows the fallacy of this claim, and the impossibility of founding political science upon it:

‘If this statement were true, then the development of political science would be so dependent upon the other social science that little blame could attach to it for the level of its insights, the nature of its methods, or its neglect of theory....[However,*] political science does constitute a distinct field of research, not for problems of application alone, but what is more significant, for analytical and conceptual purposes as well.’

Political science on Easton’s view is not just a backup for economics, sociology, psychology and anthropology, as Parsons supposes. Quite to the contrary, really:

‘From the days of Aristotle, political science has been known as the master science...Yet, in the light of what society demands from them and of what is in fact possible for political science,
Like Aristotle, Easton develops his notion of political system from what this system does, and not from some belief, preferences, values, etc that are exogenous to it. ‘The political’ is identified primarily through its outputs of social policies, demonstrating how:

‘The authoritative allocation of values characterizes a function or web of interrelated activity present in every viable society’ (ibid).

Long before the advent of political network or governance analysis (Castells and Cardoso, 2008, Bang 2010b), Easton described ‘the political’ as a web that can be localized at all levels of societal reality from the local to the global. This web may be considered a multi-leveled and loosely coupled policy-politics network of practices or institutions, which does not ‘unfold’ according to a built-in developmental or evolutionary logic, but by the capacity of interrelated and context-bound actors to experience and thereby potentially improve how to make a difference to the constitution of policies that can do well for people and society under given historical circumstances. In this Aristotlean inspired conception, a political system is not an integrative structure or a bundle of aggregated individual behaviors. It is a set of regularized practices for making social policies (ibid: 195):

‘The fact of social life, that people act and react on one another, leads to the establishment of stable, regularized modes of activity in our political life that we call institutional patterns. The very fact of their existence...helps to determine the way in which social policy is made and executed.’

It follows that a political system has to be approached from the ‘inside-out’ rather than from the ‘outside-in’. Focusing on what a political system does means accepting and recognizing that ‘administration’ is political through and through and can in no way be derived from the ‘outside-in’, as confined to function as the last link in a linear causal process beginning from the clashes between economic, social, religious and cultural interests in society. As Easton states (1953: 130):

‘When we act to implement a decision...we enter the second or effective phase of policy. In this phase the decision is expressed or interpreted in a series of actions and narrower decisions which may in effect establish new policy.’

However, to say that administration can construct new decisions and action is not to assume the existence of a bureaucratic power cabal and identify political action with the equation that policy = power = elite = powerful few:

‘Society is not especially concerned with power as a phenomenon in and of itself or with government as such. Its interest is always derived from a prior concern with policy’ (ibid, 147).

‘Once men began to ask questions about the nature of social policy, there was no alternative but to examine the contest over the shaping and execution of social policy’ (ibid).

So inputs ‘come after’ and are ‘the result of’ a prior concern with outputs. ‘The political’ is not to be derived from the ways individuals, groups and classes in society acquire access to and recognition in the political decision-making processes. It is always defined by how social policy is shaped and executed in the contests and struggles between political authorities and laypeople in the political community inside the political system (Bang 2009a, b). This is why I prefer to call Easton’s political system a policy-politics model rather than a politics-policy one: policy is not regarded as an instrument or medium of input...
driven politics of ideas and interests. It is considered a politics of everyday life and networks via which such interests and ideas are authoritatively constructed and structured.

The global and transnational vision of systems politics
Mainstream political science chains us to study a historical conjuncture which is long gone, and it possesses no framework for understanding and explaining how state and government become increasingly transnational and global in character. We go on dividing the political discipline into the fields of national politics, international relations, normative democratic theory, and non-political public administration, as if the key problem still is to assess how far from, or close to, nation states are to the American model of the relation between the civic culture and the open democratic regime. In the meantime the needs for transnational and global governance of politics and policy expand nearly as much as the number of ‘glocal’ (local and global) crises tendencies with regard to such things as economic and atomic meltdowns, terrorist and extremist atrocities, famine and natural disasters, and antagonistic clashes between civilizations and cultures.

Ironically, it was exactly in order to make political science better able to cope with such risks, challenges and rapidly changing and escalating situations that the young Easton in the 1950-ies at the height of McCarthyism turned to Aristotle’s politics for immediate help to overcome status quo biased thinking (1953: 43):

‘The critical inclinations of [fifth-century Greek] stand in marked contrast to the strong predisposition in American political research to view the going political system as though, with all its avowed imperfections, it were the best of all possible practical worlds. For this reason it is in Candide’s tutor, Panglos, not in the hypercritical Greeks, that we see the image in caricature of the modern political scientist.’

The young Easton wanted to combine the critical classical approach to political life and the developmental and scientific framework of positivism and Marxism into a new model of ‘the political’ as a self-transforming system for authoritatively articulating and allocating scarce material, symbolic, virtual and imaginary values for a society. Easton in his showdown with conventional political analysis underscores that (1953: 42):

‘Not only is there a lack of knowledge about the locus of political power, but students of political life have also been prone to forget that the really crucial problems of social research are concerned with the patterns of change. No social institution is stationary: it is in continuous, if at times imperceptible, change.’

The problem standing in the way of renewing the political discipline is twofold. First of all, political science still stands committed to compare political systems in terms of input driven notions of modernization and democratization:

The designation of exotic system as developing or transitional suggests a norm toward which they are moving, and seldom does this standard represent anything other than Western democracies as we know them today. The prevalence of the concept “modernity” further reflects this marked cultural limitation’ (Easton, 1965b: 15).

Secondly, the empirical bias towards stability and order hinders comparison of political systems from the local to the global, because it makes one identify political authority with sovereignty, hierarchy and, thereby, a state of legitimate coercion or domination. The result is that international, transnational and global systems appear as
lacking authority because they lack legitimacy and are better described as anarchic:

‘Although most current theories of international politics systematically take into consideration the presence of national units, regional groups, and functional organizations as subsystems, they tend to ignore the development of new kinds of actors. With the shrinking of the world, individual members of these systems have become increasingly oriented to world affairs; they respond to world events and the nature of their responses helps to condition the way in which they participate in the international system’ (Easton, 1965b: 486).

One should think that with the emergence, consolidation and development of the EU as a transnational type of autonomous political system distinct from the national political system, mainstream political science would have been prompted to reconsider its interpretation of modern government or the state as a system of legitimate domination. But no! It goes on measuring the degree and extent to which the formation of the EU resembles the constitution of a national, sovereign, hierarchical and legitimate state or governmental system in particular the federalist one. As a consequence we miss that:

‘Whether the basis of acceptance is legitimacy, fear of force, habit, or expediency is irrelevant’ (ibid: 285).

The question we should ask today is: how do new forms of policy articulation and delivery below, above or within the nation state challenge and disrupt the ways values are conventionally shaped and allocated especially in democratic political systems? For example, how does the EU or the World Bank typically respond to change as distinct from conventional policy actors in the nation state? The answers are blowing in those winds which with more and more ferocity haunt the entire globe with all likelihood due to manmade global warming.

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