APPENDIX

SYSTEMS CHANGE AND MARXISM: AN INTERVIEW WITH DAVID EASTON

(Following is the text of a recorded interview with Professor David Easton)

Apurba Baruah (A.B.): I am a student of Political Theory. Your work in the field of systems analysis is of great importance for political theory. The conceptual framework that you have developed has sparked off a controversy. Some social scientists have praised it sky high others have called it a futile exercise. In view of this controversy I would like to discuss with you a few points which have been bothering me.

Landon Thorson says that the main problem with your framework is that it can neither explain change nor can it tell us why a particular set of policies are adopted. He then concludes that it is an exercise in futility. What is your reply to him?

David Easton (Easton): He is in error when he says that it does not deal with problems of change. Indeed it does deal with problems of change, in a very important way. In fact this conceptualization makes

* This interview was recorded in New Delhi on 17th of February 1980.
it impossible to deal with political systems except in terms of change. The reason why he mistakenly thinks that it does not deal with change is because he misunderstands one of the central concepts, the concept of system persistence, to mean system maintenance. It does not mean system maintenance. Systems persistence is instead a concept that is designed to raise the following kinds of questions: How does it come about that despite all the conflicts there are in society, every society nonetheless finds it possible to make authoritative allocations i.e. finds it possible to provide for the persistence of one or another kind of political system? It means only that some kind of political system continues to exist in every society. The concept of persistence is intended to draw attention to the problems that need to be addressed if we are to understand the conditions under which authoritative allocations can be provided by a society i.e. under which society can assure the persistence of some kind of political system. That's all the concept of persistence means in my conceptualization. But for a society to provide for
some kind of political system (i.e. for some means of making authoritative allocations), sometimes that society may need to change that element in the political system we call its authorities. Every society changes authorities since human beings are mortal. Totalitarian societies change authorities less frequently than democratic societies. But all societies change authorities from time to time. That is one kind of change. In addition, however, for a society to provide for some means of making authoritative allocations it may also be necessary to change another aspect of the political system, called the regime. So far the French political system has had five republics, which are regime changes. In India during the emergency there was a fear that democracy would be lost and there would be a regime change. So regime change is an important characteristic of a political system if a society is to provide for the persistence of some way of making authoritative allocations.
Finally sometimes for a society to provide for authoritative allocations the political community itself may change. For example as I read in newspapers here, there seems to be some discussion as to whether Assam may not separate. If Assam did separate then the Indian political community would be different after the separation from what it is now. So, separation (or irredentism, the opposite of separation) changes the character of the political community.

That is how systems analysis deals with changes of three sorts—authority change, regime change, and community change. These are simple concepts—the support is directed not to the system as a whole but to the regime, the authorities and the political community. If this support fluctuates for any one or combination of these three objects, it may lead to change in one or more of these objects.

In fact because the input of support is central for the maintenance or change of political systems the conditions of social revolution represent a main focus of interest for systems analysis. Revolutions are mechanisms
through which societies have on occasion in the past provided for some alternative means of making authoritative allocations thereby providing for the persistence (continued existence) of some kind of political system for the given society.

That is why it puzzles me when people who read systems analysis say that it does not deal with change. Change is in fact the central issue. That is the central problem. It is true that sometimes a regime may maintain themselves. Systems analysis, since it tries to be comprehensive, deals with the problems of system maintenance as well as system change. System persistence does not mean system maintenance exclusively nor does it mean system change exclusively. All that the idea of system persistence does is to pose the question: How does it come about that in every society some means are provided for making authoritative allocations. The means that are provided may be through maintenance of a given regime, authorities or political community, or it may be through the change of a given regime, authorities or
political community. Only if a person failed to read my publications carefully could he conclude that my conceptualization has difficulty in dealing with change.

A.B. : I, by and large, agree with what you have to say against Thorson, but what bothers me is the last kind of change, when you talk of the three components of political system - the authorities, the regime and the political community and the possibilities of their undergoing changes — I can visualize the possibilities of change of authorities and the regime, but in the case of political community there are difficulties. As was pointed out in a review of your book *A Systems Analysis of Political Life*, the kind of examples you give refer to situations where a particular part of the political community goes away or somebody comes and joins; but that is not the sense in which you are talking of changes when you refer to authorities and the regime.
Easton: No it is a different kind of change. It is an important different kind of change.

A.B.: Then what is non-persistence?

Easton: Under conditions where the political community has changed, then the society in question has revealed that it could no longer provide for an integral political system. Presumably, the system breaks up into two or more societies which, individually, come to provide separate political systems. Obviously, in not providing for an integral part of a whole political system—the political community—that society has, as an individual entity, ceased to exist. To this extent, the system has undergone both a failure of maintenance and a failure to persist. So, it is indeed a different kind of change from the change of regime and political authorities and it is because of these significant differences that I draw attention to it.

Political scientists historically have dealt with these three kinds of
changes, but have not seen them systematically and tried to group them together to show their place in a theory of politics. So what I have done is sought to focus attention on all aspects of political change rather than on the ones that most political scientists are concerned about, viz: the political authorities and sometimes the regime. Let me direct your attention to a passage in The Political System. I think it appears somewhere around pages 40 or 50 of the book. There I have criticised political scientists—("Political System" was written in 1953 when I was just about your age. I had just finished my graduate course. It was the first systematic thinking I did about political science). There I accused political science of being confined to the study of the status-quo—i.e. status-quo oriented. It devoted itself too ardently to system maintenance analysis. Political science in the United States (and in many other parts of the world) even to this day is largely concerned with the status-quo. Change is a peripheral interest. Now why do I say that? That is because they are interested not in systems—politics but in allocative politics. Are you familiar
with the distinction I make between the two.

A.B.: Yes, I am.

Easton: Allocative politics takes a regime as given. We have a regime in the United States—a bourgeois democratic regime—a constitutional order and constitution etc. What are most American political scientists interested in? They are more interested in the way in which policies are made, how the authorities change, how support of various political parties varies, how pressure groups modify policies, how different parts of the electorate are able to convince the authorities to modify their policies, how parties are formed, how administrative services are organised to implement policies, how elections for authorities are organized and won, and so on. These are all problems regarding the status-quo. The maintenance of American political institutions is taken for granted as a good with the needs seen for only minor modifications. There are few American political scientists who are interested in the conditions under which people are dissatisfied with the regime try to change the regime and in what direction
the regime may change. Systems analysis says that these are important areas of research. As a result of the counter-culture movement—you know about the students revolution in 1960's and 70's—Vietnam and Watergate, among other things, a lot of American people became disillusioned with the political authorities. They have lost some of their confidence in political authorities. The authorities have lost some of their legitimacy—their belief in their right to rule has diminished. I do not think we have seen the end of this yet. This decline in the support for the authorities may spill over to the regime—we cannot be sure but if it does it could make it easy for some political leader, who wants to move in an authoritarian direction, to change the regime.

In relationship to my work in this area a committee was set up that met for about two years in a number of conferences to study changes in alienation and support in the U.S. Some important ideas have emerged out of that. I mention this to indicate that what has happened in the U.S. in the area of increasing alienation has led some people to turn to
systems analysis to find a set of categories that might shed some light on this new and unexpected phenomenon called political alienation. Some of them have found assistance in the concept of input of support. In this way systems analysis has provided already-made conceptualization of how to understand and interpret theoretically some new and simple facts in the political life of the U.S.

What this change in level of support raises, from a systems point of view, is whether the alienation (declining input of support) from the authorities if it continues long enough, could not spill over into loss of trust and confidence in the regime, or even the political community. At least one study of migration out of the U.S. is under way which may shed some light on whether there has been some spillover to the political community. At any rate these would represent three different kinds of changes. If the political community was not able to retain the support of the American people, clearly the change this would bring about would be very different from change in the authorities
and regime. But because of this very fact I have found it not only useful but necessary to build the idea into my conceptualization.

A.B.: It is clear that you distinguish between maintenance and persistence. You have explained that systems analysis is not maintenance oriented; but do you think that in your 1957 essay, your first attempt at developing a framework for systems analysis, there was an emphasis on maintenance?

Easton: I have not read that article for a long time. So I am not very certain whether there is or is not an emphasis on maintenance. I will have to re-read it. It is quite possible that in that article there is some such emphasis. It has been re-printed in perhaps close to a hundred different publications. So if you are right I will be glad that you are bringing it to my notice because it mis-represents my point of view.

A.B.: I have read it very carefully and I have found that at that particular stage you were perhaps not very careful about the idea of maintenance.
What has happened is that when you talk of political socialization (you call it politicization) in that article and when you discuss support there is a lot of emphasis on maintenance in that article. You define political system as a process which converts inputs into outputs. Then you say that the particular research task in that particular area is to see how these processes are maintained. Now, if the process means political system and if research task is identified as inquiry into maintenance of such process then there is a clear emphasis on maintenance of the system.

Yes, that is quite possible. Perhaps, I had at that stage, not yet selected the concept of persistence. That was a deliberate choice at one point in order to discriminate between maintenance and change and finally to develop what I thought was a neutral concept that is capable of dealing with the following problem: how does it happen that a society is able to provide some means of making authoritative allocations. That is what persistence means. I regret that I chose the concept persistence because it is so easily confused with maintenance. And yet in the English language there is
little other choice. However, the important thing is not to concentrate too much on the words. What is important is the meaning.

A.B.: Immediately after 1957 there appeared a lot of literature which attacked the status-quo bias of systems analysis. In sociology this attack was directed against Talcott Parsons, Barrington Moore and C. Wright Mills published two important books. Did you come across these books and see that unless you were very careful about the concept of maintenance it might have a status-quo bias?

Easton: Now, I was of course, familiar with Talcott Parsons' work and also with the criticism of Parsons; but these did not influence my thinking of systems analysis because Talcott Parsons' conception of system is quite different from mine. Unless one bears that difference in mind one would very easily misinterpret my work as having the same system maintenance bias as that of Talcott Parsons. I think many of the people who have criticised systems analysis for having a system maintenance disposition are really transposing their
perception of Parsons to my work. So, there-
fore, the important thing is to see the
difference between Parsons and Easton, and in
fact if I had talked here today as I had
planned, a part of my talk would have gone
into an analysis of Parsons' work and its
difference from mine. This would help solve
the problem of misconception.

There are three stages in Parson thinking.
There is his action theory stage where he deals
atomistically with the individual with a cer-
taxin voluntarism that lies in the situation in
which the individual acts. He tries to define
what the situation is—what conditions consti-
tutes constraints of action such as the well-
known five, then four pattern variables.

At a later stage he seems not to abandon
this action-oriented analysis but to move
toward a new and different form of analysis
and still later he puts these two forms of
analysis together. The second stage is where
he moves explicitly to a systems orientation.
He moves to that stage after systems analysis
became a more prominent way of thinking in
the whole intellectual world. So he was
influenced by this trend. But his systems thinking from the very beginning was dictated largely by his experience as an economist. He was trained initially as an economist. Like most economists he looks at economic life as a system. Like most economists he concerns himself with the problem of equilibrium, how a system moves to and away from an equilibrium. Therefore, when he thought of the society in this particular framework, he decomposed society into four systems, represented by the acronym AGIL. There are four systems, they interact with each other and there are various forms of interaction. Therefore they are an interactive system, and through this interaction they function so as to meet the major needs for the maintenance of the social system called society. That is the basis of his status-quo orientation. He wants to know what the conditions are for the interactions among these four subsystems of society. What does this or that subsystem have to do to perform their function for the maintenance of a society. Systems analysis does not look at systems as interactive sub-systems. It looks at systems dynamically a special kind of
dynamics. It sees a system, such as a political system, as a set of behaviours that is doing something, that produces something, that produces outputs. It produces these outputs not out of nothing but out of something, inputs. Therefore, the inputs are very important for understanding outputs. The processes— the internal processes of the system, the black box, is very important, because that is what grinds out these processes. So therefore, we look at a political system as a process, through which something is put into the system and that changes what comes into the system to something else. It is a productive system. It is not a system that is just composed of sub-systems that act and react with each other. They do of course. But they do more. They transform what goes in into something new. They are transformational systems.

We have to look at politics as a set of internal processes that does something for us. What does it produce? How does it produce? What effect must support have? What effect must outputs have? Systems analysis has quite a different orientation from the way in which
Parsons uses the idea of change, as I have already suggested. Change is central to the problems with which systems analysis deals. Although Parsons tries to show in his later works that change is a problem that he is able to handle, his conceptualization makes it more than a little difficult to deal with. But even if he does handle the problem of change, systems analysis deals with it in a very different way as I have already explained.

A.B.: Now since you have mentioned equilibrium—I thought I would ask this question at a later stage but now since you have referred to it I will ask it now. When you criticise the equilibrium concept you point out the difficulties involved in quantification ....

Easton: You have read my article on equilibrium?

A.B.: Yes, I did. You referred to the difficulties which are involved and also, though you do not discuss it in details, you definitely referred to the kind of bias that this kind of analysis may betray. Now you are saying Parsons' idea of a social system also has the bias and therefore it becomes maintenance oriented. But there
is at least one point where your model also makes use of the equilibrium concept. When you talk of the critical range within which the two essential variables must be kept, if the system has to persist, you are maintaining that if the essential variables are pushed beyond the critical range the system gets disturbed. I feel that the idea of the critical range is reminiscent of the equilibrium model.

Easton: There you need to recall what the critical variables refer to. The critical variables do not refer to the regime or the authorities or the political community. That is to say, they do not refer to the political system and therefore they could have little relevance to the equilibrium of this system. The critical variables refer to what? They refer not to the political system but to society— they refer to the capacity of the society to provide (1) for the making of decisions and (2) for getting them accepted as binding. So they are really the sociological basis of the political system. What we are saying there is that if a society cannot provide for the making of decisions or
for having them accepted as binding then that society will not be able to provide for any kind of political system—whether it is a self-maintaining system or rapidly changing system, a system in or out of equilibrium if we were to even consider using such a term. Therefore if it cannot provide for any political system the society itself will collapse. So it raises a different order of problems from problems of system maintenance or equilibrium of a political system itself.

The problem it raises is a historical one which unfortunately political scientists have seldom dealt with and the historians have dealt with only partially and not consistently. The problem it raises is: To what extent does the survival of a society or the change of a society depend upon the capacity of that society to provide for some kind of political system? For example did the Holy Roman Empire or did the old Greek city states disappear because of the failure of their economy? Did they disappear because of the failure of their culture? Or did they disappear because of what the historians call the failure of leadership, perhaps of the political leadership? If they
disappeared because of the failure of the political leadership, then we have to ask: What aspect of leadership? The failure to make decisions? Sometimes the society may be paralysed—it cannot make decisions. Or having made the decisions could it disappear because the leadership, which is to say, the authorities, were incapable of getting the members to accept the decisions as binding. Consequently, chaos, disorder, or whatever you like to call it sets in.

That is the problem that is raised by that level of conceptualization. It is a problem different from the ones encountered in those instances in which the fundamental capability of a society to provide for a political system is not in question. In these latter instances, we might ask: Is this regime showing a capacity to maintain itself amid change? Is that regime disposed to change rapidly as a consequence of some structural features? And so on, covering all the relevant issues.
The point I am trying to make is that my critics fail to discriminate between the sociological problem of how a society provides for its own continuation and the role the political system plays in that, and the political problems with which we as political scientists are concerned, namely, how does a political system manage to change or maintain itself?

A.B.: If I understand you properly, you are not talking of any particular political system like the Indian or the American political system. You are talking of the capacity of a society to authoritatively allocate values. Therefore your reference point is any and all societies. You are talking in terms of a universal category. You are thinking of politics in general and not of politics of a particular political system. Therefore, even if you talk of maintenance— you do not talk of maintenance, you talk of persistence— but even if you talk of maintenance it would not be the same kind of maintenance as that of Talcott Parsons. You seem to be talking of the maintenance or persistence of a process of politics.
Easton: I would avoid the word maintenance. I want to use the word persistence technically for the political processes of society, and would reserve the word maintenance to mean the continuity of the regime or authorities or the political community.

A.B.: I can see that persistence is a broader category. With this category you are referring to a different level. You are arguing that because of this difference in the level of reference the ideas of critical range and persistence become general in nature. In fact as I pointed out earlier your idea of the political system refers to the political processes itself.

Easton: Within society. So it is a sociological level that is being dealt with. That is the assumption, the basis upon which one builds a theory of politics. You cannot think of politics in a social vacuum.

A.B.: That is very important and that is where I disagree with Thorson and also Meehan to same extent. But Meehan has pointed out something
more interesting. He says that though you are dealing with politics in general, though you are trying to build a theory - a general theory of politics - what you have in your mind is probably a nation-state, a national political system. I know that you would say that you do not have the national political system in your mind when you talk of the political system. Meehan has not shown how his contention could be justified; but when I read Meehan and referred to your A Framework of Political Analysis and A Systems Analysis of Political Life, I found that at least at one point the idea of the national political system came into picture as the basis of your framework. That was the only point where it happened in these two works. That particular point was when you discussed boundaries and environment. I understand that when you write a voluminous book like the SAPL some points may not receive sufficient amount of care. Maybe you consider these points minor; but later on these may become very important sources of criticism. To come back to the point, you wrote that there were two environments— intra-societal and extra-societal.
Systems which are not political but within the same social system are in the intra-societal environment and the systems which are outside the social system are in the extra-societal environment of the political system under study. You have referred to the international society as being in the extra-societal environment of the political system. In that case you are equating the political system with the national political system. Meehan probably had this in mind when he criticised you in these lines. Do you have something to say about this?

Easton: What you say is perfectly correct .... when you write a large volume it is possible sometimes for a certain phrase or paragraph to slip in with potential interpretations of which you may not be totally aware. So I again will have to re-read this in order to clarify for myself as to whether indeed I have misrepresented my own position, accidentally. However, without having re-read that particular passage, I would say that that passage would be equally applicable to a society that had no geographic boundaries.
Let us take a Bedouin tribe in Arabia somewhere before the present nation-state Saudi Arabia took shape. It would be a tribal group that would have a political system and since it was nomadic and traveled from place to place it had no geographic boundaries. Such a system has an internal environment. This internal environment would certainly include a primitive form of economy, for every society includes processes of material production and acquisition. It would also include a system of meanings-symbolic meanings-which we would call a cultural system, and which anthropologists would insist on distinguishing from the political system. So it had at least three internal systems, each of which interacted with and influenced the others. It had an external environment too, other nomadic tribes which also perhaps had no geographic boundaries. If you are not to use that term-external systems-you would need some other term to refer to them. They are part of the international environment of other nomadic tribes, if you wish. The point is that even systems that have no geographic boundaries, such as nomadic systems, do have an interna-
tional environment, by which they may be influenced. I presume so, at least. Therefore the vocabulary I use is not only applicable to the nation-state but also to political systems that cannot be called nation states.

A.B.: I would like to direct your attention to the distinction that you have drawn between the constructive and the natural system. You point out the difficulties of using the natural system concept and then argue that the constructive system concept avoids certain very unnecessary disputes like deciding whether a particular system is really a system or not. This dispute, according to you, may become interminable. Therefore, to avoid this you use the concept of constructive system. In this approach the only thing that engages our attention is whether a system is interesting in the sense that it enables us to understand something theoretically relevant. Do you not think that even a dispute over theoretical relevance of a system may also become interminable?
Easton: It might; but I think in practice that it does not. If I say that I am going to be interested in the following kinds of political system—a system that comprises the people of the city of Moscow, the people of Quebec and the people of the Louisiana. If I pick up the problems of these three political units and say that they are a system, a constructive system, and I am interested in their political interactions, I think most people would agree that it is an uninteresting combination of people—an uninteresting political combination. It is true that in some very remote sense they may have some influence on each other, so remote that it may well be impossible to really detect it. Obviously at the extreme we will have no difficulty in excluding those arbitrarily selected systems that are of little interest and therefore, are trivial from the point of view of political theory. The fact is that if we come down to-day-to-day occurrences most political scientists would agree that India is an interesting political system, that Pakistan is an interesting political system, that Bangladesh is an interesting
political system and so on. In the abstract one could think that one could get into an interminable dispute, and perhaps there are some very special cases where indeed one could dispute the matter. But in most cases it is not difficult for political scientists to decide what constitutes an interesting political system and what constitutes a trivial one.

A.B.: Here may I direct your attention to the responsive nature of the political system? I have a quotation from *A Framework of Political Analysis* where you say that the political system is a goal-setting, self-transforming and creatively adaptive system. It consists of human beings who are capable of anticipating, evaluating and acting constructively to prevent disturbances in the system. It is very interesting way of putting it. Do you think that you are giving a free hand to the members of the system to decide the fate of the system? Do you not visualize situations in which the members may know that they need to take certain decisions to prevent disturbances but they find it impossible to
do so. In this sense a political system cannot be a self-regulating, adaptive system.

But if you read me carefully—I hope I am sufficiently precise to say what I mean—you will understand that, when I argue that a political system is capable of orienting itself, the question of whether, as an empirical fact, a particular system does so operate, is an open one. Sometimes the feedback may be completely cut-off, for example in certain periods in the history of Germany there is very little feedback. That is the problem. A dictatorial system cuts off feedback so it becomes increasingly unstable and pressure builds up underneath. In Stalin's Soviet Union, the terror led to the near-failure of the regime. So the mere fact that a political system is capable of goal-setting, self-regulating etc. does not mean that it would in fact engage in such behaviour. That is a different question. Furthermore the fact that a system responds or seeks to regulate itself is no evidence that it will do so successfully in terms of an observer's criteria or that, given the circumstances, (such
as the dropping of powerful atom bombs) it can ever do so.

A.B.: But in spite of your careful explanation that the political system may have these capacities it may not be possible for it to utilize them — that the feedback may fail — the implications remain the same. If in a particular political system the feedback operates properly it would be possible for the members to take steps to enable the system to continue. The system would not fail.

Easton: No, that is not what I intended. We have to distinguish between two things. One is the maintenance of the system, of the regime, of the authorities ...

A.B.: I am not talking of the regime and the authorities at the moment I am talking of the system ...

Easton: No, there is no such implication in at least what I intend to say. Because even though there is feedback, and even though the goals may be changed, societies can make mistakes and the
feedback may be misunderstood and the decision makers may choose improper goals. They may not have the resources—there are many things that could happen that could lead to the collapse of the system and the collapse of the society. So they may make a decision to use nuclear energy and ultimately destroy themselves—all kinds of bad decisions can be made.

A.B.: You are attributing it to human error ...

Easton: It may be human error; but it could be other things as well. In addition to human error it could be the exhaustion of one's resources or it could be failure to reproduce themselves. So there may not be human error. It may be the incapacity to deal with certain problems; for example, a society may through its decisions, create a situation in which there are so many crises that it can no longer deal with these crises and the society just blows up. Well you can all that human error. Or it could be inability to cope with certain kinds of issues such as air pollution that ultimately suffocates us all!
A.B.: Thank you Professor Easton. May I now draw your attention to the debate that is going on for sometime in many branches of social sciences, especially in social analysis, about two different models of society? One is called the consensus model and the other is known as the conflict model. In view of this controversy do you think that your framework might be put into either the conflict or the consensus model?

Easton: People who read my work....

A.B.: Dahrendorff, for instance.

Easton: Yes; people who read my work without care sometimes contend that I have adopted a consensus model because they see my work as moving towards system maintenance. They misconstrue system persistence to mean system maintenance. However, a careful reader would see that my work shares the same premises as those of Hobbes and Karl Marx. Both of them use a conflict basis for their work. Mine shares deliberately and explicitly the same premises that Hobbes and Marx employ. Why do
I say that? Hobbes starts off with the assumption that the state of nature is a war of all against all. That men value safety and, therefore, that they are willing to do whatever is necessary to survive—even to support a dictator. He sees the world as based on conflict—and that is precisely why you need to think of some kind of social order. Marx starts by seeing historical social organizations—primitive slavery, feudalism, capitalism, so on—as based upon exploitation—conflict among social classes. I see the basis of society as based on the existence of scarcity, of some of our valued things, whether it be fresh air, clean water, money, property, material gain, prestige, or whatever you consider valuable. There is scarcity in most areas. Therefore, there is conflict over that scarcity. The conflict may be individual, may be class based, may be ethnic in character, or it may be linguistically based, and so on. Therefore the fundamental premise of my work includes the notion of conflict. If you had total cooperation total consensus, it would mean there would be no need for politics, no need for authoritative allocation
Politics would have no meaning. If everything took care of itself automatically the world would be what philosophical anarchists view as the ultimate millenium. You know philosophical anarchism says, following Rousseau and Proudhon, that if you educate people well enough everybody will do what is good for himself and herself and that will also be good for the society. It is the ideal that lies behind the freemarket economy of Adam Smith's invisible hand. That is the ideal also behind philosophical communism. That is not my image of the world. Maybe some day, a hundred thousand years from today, human beings will be of that sort. It is a nice image to have; but in fact realities must be based on the continuation of conflict. So how can any one say that I have a consensus model? It is a conflict model.

A.B.: Since you have brought in Marx—there is a very interesting development taking place among the Soviet social scientists. You must have seen the book The Systems Theory. The authors of this book say that Marxism is the best systems model. I personally feel that
there is a difficulty in making such a claim. Do you think that the general systems theory (they are talking of the GST not of your kind of systems analysis) could be fitted into the Marxist framework?

Easton: Well, they are also talking of my systems analysis. Because, although I have not read that book, some of the Marxists in Calcutta showed me a copy of it. They also showed me a criticism that some of the writers in the U.S.S.R. have made of my work especially about the concept of authoritative allocation of values, without citing me but using my ideas... I have travelled in the Soviet Union and the socialist block countries such as Czechoslovakia, Poland, Hungary etc. So I am familiar with their thinking. Many are very favourably disposed towards my thinking. In Rumania they have (or had) a systems institute, for instance. As I understand it they are bringing out, or have brought out a book, under the name something like Great Political Thinkers of our Day, in which they have one book which is a collection of my works. I mention it, immodestly, only to show
that there is some sympathy for the systems point of view. In Czechoslovakia and Poland they are familiar with my work also. I myself have always taken the position that Marxism is a subset of systems thinking. It is one form of systems thinking. But systems analysis is more comprehensive than Marxism. Why do I say that? I say that because Marxism sees a political system as being determined by the mode of production. To use Althusser's phrase, Marxism sees the political system as being determined by the mode of production which in turn is by the economy in the determined last instance.

A.B.: In the ultimate analysis.

Easton: Yes, in the ultimate analysis, therefore, it has a view that the economic system is the final determinant of the political system. That kind of perspective in Marxism I say makes it a subset of systems analysis. Because within the framework of systems analysis it would be perfectly acceptable, if one were so inclined, to conclude that the political system is, perhaps, under some circumstances, determined by the economy.
But in other circumstances it would be equally understandable to conclude, on the basis of evidence, that the political system is largely determined by the cultural system, by the personality system or by the religious system. Which is the determinant in the last instance? I really do not understand that phrase. Perhaps no one understands it. I do not think even Althusser really understands it. But the economy need not always be the major determinant, if that is what the phrase means. I do not think even Marx believed it—but that is subject to discussion and dispute. In so far as one decides that the economy is really the determinant in the last instance, that is one possible conclusion consistent with a systems perspective. It would, therefore, make it plausible to see that kind of Marxism as a subset of systems analysis. I have Marxist friends with whom I have discussed this question as well as with Marxists in India and elsewhere. They are somewhat shocked to hear that Marxism can be viewed as a subset of systems theory. In fact, however, I think it should not come as a shock to some one who reads Marx. Because
Marx—in this I agree with Althusser, Poulantzas and with structural Marxists in general—does indeed think in systems terms. Marx was to my mind one of the great social geniuses of all time. He organized his thinking so that he saw other aspects of society in the same way in which he saw the economy. So he was already thinking in system terms. But he did not have the vocabulary or the benefit of a great deal of additional thinking that has gone on in the hundred and so years since he died. Therefore, even though systems thinking is implicit in the way in which he organized his work, nevertheless it is just a beginning. Since Althusser and Poulantzas are products themselves of the systems revolution of our own day, in effect they interpret Marx to accommodate him to our time—to bring his thinking into a line with Twentieth-Century systems analysis and hence to make Marx a little bit more modern than Marx himself could possibly have been. He was after all thinking in the nineteenth century.

Althusser’s three levels or instances of modes of productions—the economic, political and ideological (cultural)—are simply three
major subsystems of social systems. For the Althusserians, mode of production is equivalent to social system, instance or level, to subsystem, and social formation, to a concrete society. The parallel in terminology is just too close to be called accidental. And if you read Poulantzas carefully—he translates Althusser's philosophy into political sociology—you will see that in each succeeding book, he, Poulantzas, increasingly uses the concept of political system itself. So in that sense they update Marx and therefore reformulate Marx's ideas in systems terms. That is the historic role of structural Marxism

A.B. : As I was saying I find it rather difficult to accept the kind of claims that are being made by the Soviet social scientists regarding the relationship of the Marxist mode of social analysis and the General Systems Theory and systems analysis. My difficulty is this—one of the basic things in Marxism is dialectics. Dialectics has to be understood in terms of a continuous process. A continuity which pervades the reality. You
cannot isolate the economic reality, or political reality from the whole social reality. Dialectical Materialism takes the whole reality into consideration. But as V.L. Allen has pointed out, in the systems approach you try to abstract parts of social reality into small sub-systems. When one system is under study the rest of the systems form the environment. In the process, at least at the conceptual level, you break the reality into systems, sub-systems etc. Allen points out that in dialectical Materialism you can not do that. You can not divide society into sub-systems. If you do that you are going against Marxism.

Easton:

There are two problems here. One is that—if that is his position—he has misconstrued the nature of general systems theory. What differentiates systems analysis from General Systems Theory (G.S.T.) is that General Systems Theory does not decompose reality into a series of sub-systems, looking at each sub-system in isolation as it were, as they interact with other sub-systems. Rather General Systems Theory takes as its objective the under-
standing of the laws that govern the operation of all systems. Therefore, it says that you have to look at the world as composed of increasingly broader systems. So you start with the sub-atomic system. You go to the atomic systems. You rise up to another level, to the molecular system, to the cellular system, to the organic system, the social system, ultimately to the galactic system perhaps. Then you look at each system and you see whether there are laws or generalizations that apply at each level and that are equally true across all levels. You are looking for the laws of all system, that is, G.S.T. There is no question that that is General Systems Theory. The minute you talk of decomposing systems and seeing the ways one subsystem interacts with other sub-systems you are moving either to the Parsonian model, a non-dynamic, non-feedback analysis, or you are moving to a dynamic systems analysis. Allen does not seem to be dealing with G.S.T. He is dealing either with the Parsonian model
Secondly, it is perfectly true that Marxism deals with, to use the nineteenth century term, social formations. In our terms today a social formation would be called a particular society at a given time and place, conceived as a unit. One of the problems that Marxism faces today is the difficulty of creating a Marxist social science different from normal or conventional, what they would call positivistic bourgeois, social science. As some Marxists themselves say, they are in a state of crisis in this area. They have not been very successful in developing a Marxist social science. To be a social science it is not sufficient to be able to have this generalized conception of the social formation in which all parts are dialectically interconnected, in which the internal contradictions of the whole system lead to the generation of a whole new social formation. That is a theoretical formulation; but one cannot do research on that basis alone to discover what part the political system plays in this.
transformation. If the political system
does have some degree of autonomy, as the
Althusserians argue, what part does ideology
play? Marx saw that the ideology may have
some degree of autonomy too. Gramsci of
course made a big issue of that and of other
aspects of that assertion, in order to be
able to show that each of the parts of the
social formation leads to the grand contra-
dictions which transform the whole society.
You have got to be able to work out the
details. Marx spent twenty years, in the
British Museum for the most part, working
out the details of the economy. He dealt
with the other parts of the "social formation"
but only in bits and pieces as for example,
in connection with social classes, in a few
pages at the end of the last volume of
Capital. Contemporary serious Marxist social
scientists say we have got to show what part
the political system plays. Poulantzas was
a serious Marxist social scientist. He was
trying to work out what he called 'A Theory
of the State', that is, a political theory.
He was having considerable difficulties. He
was accused by Miliband of structural super-
determinism. But you know, all social scientists have problems. So he had his own problems too. But, the important issue is that the minute you begin to develop a Marxist social science you have to decompose the social formation into its elements. For Poulantzas and Althusser these elements or "instances" were the ideological system, the economic system, and the political system i.e. the state. The minute you begin to think about the social formation in serious terms, to see the relationship among the parts today, you are likely to turn to a systems mode of analysis. Why? Because social scientists, today, when they begin to think in general theoretical terms, are highly likely to be affected by the systems revolution of our age. In the nineteenth century, when Marx thought about society, he was influenced by the Darwinian revolution, and social change, in Darwinian terms, is a conflictual process. In the seventeenth century when Hobbes and Locke talked about society they talked about it as though it were some giant mechanism, a clockwork. Their interpretation was shaped by the Newtonian mechanics, the revolution
in thought of that century. As I have suggested not even the Marxists have been able to escape the pervasive influence of the idea of system which is so prevalent in all areas of thought in our own day. Poulantzas and Althusser have accommodated themselves to that mode of thinking. Whether they recognize it or not does not matter.

A.B.: I have forgotten to ask you another question about this holistic idea—your view of the society and of the universe is not exactly like the holistic view. Do you think that this difference has any consequence for the results of your analysis or to put it in other words will the results of analysis vary in case of application of the holistic G.S.T. to political science and system analysis?

Easton: I am not sure of the difference you are referring to.

A.B.: The G.S.T. believes in holism. Yo do not. There is a difference of premises. Holistic approach tries to build a total view. It does not isolate one social phenomenon or
or one system from the zest. Your writing in *The Political System* makes it clear that you wanted to isolate the political system and the political phenomena for the purposes of study. Hilism does not permit this. Yours is a different approach.

Easton: I am sympathetic to G.S.T. Perhaps some day we may be able to discover a way of understanding politics as part of a General Systems Theory. Today, it seems to be very premature. They have my blessings. It is not something I think I can comfortably spend my time on. It boggles the mind to think of a theory that would be equally valid for all systems, from the smallest sub-atomic particle, up through the atom as a system, molecules, cells, organisms, groups, societies, the world society and even intergalactic systems! I find it difficult enough to try to encompass the political system within one conceptual schema, let alone trying to add to my troubles by including all other systems physical and biological as well as social.

A.B.: The interview ended abruptly because Professor Easton had lost his voice because of laryngitis. It was indeed very kind of Professor Easton that he talked to me though his voice was giving out.