CHAPTER VI

STUDY OF POLITICAL SOCIALIZATION:
QUESTIONABLE ASSUMPTIONS AND DOUBTFUL CONCLUSIONS.

In the preceding chapters we have noted that Easton's search for reliable political knowledge has led him to an area of political theory which he calls systems analysis. He repeatedly states that the central question that concerns this analysis is how political systems manage to persist in a world of stability or of change? He maintains that unless political systems can muster support for their authorities, regimes and political communities, they can not persist. The question of persistence is thus related closely to the question of support for these political objects. Easton views the political system as capable of taking necessary steps to build up such support. In his writings on political socialization he systematically examines the processes through which such support is built.

As early as 1957, in his first attempt to develop a framework for political analysis, he argues that politicization is a "mechanism of support." He says:

It is essential for the validity of an orderly political system that the members of the system have some common basic expectations with regard to the standards that have to be used in making political evaluations to the way people will feel about various political matters, and to the way members of the system will perceive and interpret political phenomena. The mechanism through which this learning takes place is of
considerable significance in understanding how a political system generates and accumulates strong reserve of support.1

By politicization, he means political socialization only. The point becomes clear when he says:

If we use the concept socialization to describe the process through which the individual passes as he becomes a full-fledged member of a society, we can identify that aspect of the process particularly relevant to the acquisition of roles as political socialization or 'politicization' (emphasis added).

Here Easton seems to have used the terms 'politicization' and 'political socialization' interchangeably. But these two terms do not mean the same thing. It will become clear during the course of our discussion that Easton himself does not always use these two terms interchangeably. He uses the term 'politicalization' to refer to the process through which the child becomes aware of the political authorities and begins to distinguish them from other authorities. He refers to political socialization as a means available to the political system for building up necessary support.

The idea of political socialization, thus occupies an important place in Easton's political science. He has written a large number of articles jointly with Robert Hess and Jack Dennis. These articles aim at empirical investigations and theoretical formulations. The investigations conducted with Jack Dennis are incorporated in a book.\(^3\) While stating the purpose of this book the authors argue that if a political system is to persist it must be able to muster diffuse support. They then go on to say, "Our central purpose will be to investigate how this support is marshalled through the early socialization of those new to the system by virtue of their birth in it."\(^4\) It is, therefore, clear that Easton views political socialization as a process through which the political system can build support vital for its own persistence.

The most important finding of the Easton and Dennis study is that in the American political system the children learn to support the structures of authorities. "Our data suggest that in the United States a positively supportive image of the general structures of authority, is being widely and regularly reproduced for young new members."\(^5\) The American

child, according to them, begins as a 'political primitive' with a vision of government as the embodiment of a man or a small set of men who constitute a dimly recognized form of external authority. While he grows he becomes familiar with popular institutions. He begins to learn what is outside and what is inside the realm of government. In other words, he becomes 'politicized'. This information in itself is not of much importance; but what the authors claim on the basis of this is of great consequences for students of political systems in general.

The authors argue that this process of politicization finally adds up to a picture supportive of the American regime.

The Child is initiated into a supportive stance by what is probably high exposure to cues and messages about government, even while he is essentially unconcerned with such matters and too young to do much about them even if he wished.6

Easton and Dennis maintain that the child learns to like the government before he really knows what it is, and that as he learns what it is he finds that it involves popular participation, which is a valuable part of its countenance. It, they hold, is further reason for liking it and the child continues to like it. They conclude, "The child has somehow formed a deep sympathy for government even before he knows that he is in some way potentially part of it." The authors

7. Loc cit.
seem to have drawn a very one sided picture of the process of socialization of the American child. There is nothing in their argument to suggest that some children, even in America, may develop apathy toward the government. We will discuss this issue in details at a later stage. Here it is sufficient to note that they draw this conclusion.

Haston and Dennis examine the obvious question connected with this conclusion: How does the child come to acquire such knowledge and develop such sympathies? They find that there are some authority figures which are more visible and, therefore, salient to the child. In the United States the President and the policeman are found to be two such figures. The authors hold that the child feels vulnerable to the world outside the family and these authority figures serve his immediate psychic needs. On the basis of this argument they infer:

For the political systems, however, the feelings of vulnerability that might have led him (the child) to elevate two authority figures to positions of considerable prominence have important consequences. They may help to lock the child in the political system and to provide the system with a mechanism for accompanying those kinds of sentiments without which, we have hypothesized, no system could hope to persist, whether in constant or changed form.

The survey conducted by the authors show that the child ascribes to woring status and authority, and places the care of the country in the hands of the president. The authors

8. Ibid., p. 161
9. Ibid., p. 162
interpret this as the latent approval of the president.\textsuperscript{10} They find that most of these children think that the president is inherently likeable and benevolent, since he would help and protect them more often than not.\textsuperscript{11} They, further, find that the child views the president as the living symbol of the political system. Easton and Dennis argue,

\begin{quote}
If the president is indeed the living symbol of the political system — 'our government' — for the young child, the main conduit through which a child moves into the fuller stream of political life in the United States, we may suspect that support for the regime arises easily and naturally.\textsuperscript{12}
\end{quote}

One may argue that the child's approval may be based on his information about a particular president and, therefore, there is no scope for generalization about the American System. But the authors point out that it is unlikely that the child has enough information about the personal qualities of a given individual to be able to make judgements about him. The children must, therefore, be making assumptions about the characteristics of all presidents as persons who hold office.\textsuperscript{13}

Easton and Dennis call this process personalization. They maintain that personalization facilitates the development of elemental feelings like love and hate. It also incorporates

\textsuperscript{10} Ibid., p. 177  
\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., p. 139  
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., p. 191  
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., p. 197
a host of other attributes that children are accustomed to associating with ordinary people, such as leadership, power and benevolence. One may still doubt if this process amounts to support for a particular president. The authors dispel this doubt by stating that their "data suggest that in the United States personalization is not the same as acceptance of the legitimacy of a figure of authority on purely personal ground." In personalization they claim to have tapped a major source of legitimacy for a regime. Their interpretation of the possible system-effect of personalization carries them to believe that this is a central mechanism available to many political systems for building up diffuse support in each wave of children. They, however, note that if personalization of authority for the child is viewed as a phenomenon that is universal in character then explanation of input of support in the systems with no central personal figure in the authority structure will be problematic. They duck the issue and go on to say,

Whatever the way in which other systems might handle the socialization of support, in the United States the president as a personalized figure is a towering glittering mountain-peak for the younger child, easy to single out from the whole range of authority.

14. Ibid., p. 201
15. Ibid., p. 202
16. Ibid., p. 205
17. Ibid., p. 206
They argue that even though the older child may see authority in more critical and less enthusiastic terms, early idealization may create latent feelings that are hard to undo or shake-off. This is seen as the major significance of the first bond to the system through the presidency. "The positive feelings for political authority generated there can be expected to have lasting consequences."\(^{18}\)

The other authority figure which the authors find, serving a similar purpose, is the policeman. They inquire into the functions of the policeman as a central connecting point between maturing members of a system and the structure of political authority. They find that the child sees the policeman as a power over and beyond that of father or mother and one that even parents can not escape. Easton and Dennis argue that through the policeman the child is encouraged in the belief that "external authority should and must be accepted."\(^{19}\) Here we must take note of the fact that socialization as a step to muster support must aim at creating a sense of legitimacy. Legitimacy can't be based on the belief that external authority should and must be accepted. Only if a sense of "ought" is cultivated can a sense of legitimacy arise.

Easton and Dennis do not use the term 'ought'. May be they actually mean ought when they say "should and must be

\(^{18}\) Ibid., p. 207

\(^{19}\) Ibid., pp. 221-227
accepted. However their data show that in the socialization process, as for the president, the child acquires feelings for the policeman that are very significant for the growth of an attachment to the structure of political authority.\textsuperscript{20}

The authors hypothesise that if children in a particular political system confuse political and familial authority, there would be little opportunity to begin the acquisition of supportive sentiments about specific political objects.\textsuperscript{21} Enquiring into this aspect of the question they find that the child distinguishes between these two kinds of authorities. Moreover, he gradually becomes aware of the existence of differences among political authorities.\textsuperscript{22} They point out that the child does not consider all political authorities endowed with similar degrees of role competence. "He develops a finer level of discrimination, one that is of considerable consequences for the extension of support for these authorities."\textsuperscript{23}

This analysis leads Easton and Dennis to the conclusion that children clearly consider the existence of sharp differences, on effective and performance characteristics, between father as an authority and that kind of authority outside the family which is designated as political. Secondly, that the

\begin{itemize}
\item 20. Ibid., p. 229
\item 21. Ibid., p. 253
\item 22. Ibid., p. 254
\item 23. Loc cit.
\end{itemize}
children differentiate among political authorities themselves. The authors find that the initial attachment of children to personal objects in the political sphere wanes across the grades and they begin to recognize political institutions.24

Easton and Dennis, then, link these findings to the question of system persistence. They maintain that as the child becomes aware of the structure of political authority and becomes able to relate to it in role specific terms, conditions in the system make it possible to begin to evoke diffuse support from him. At the same time as the child begins to perceive authorities beyond the small circle of family, as he becomes "politicized", he develops positive sentiments about them.25 On the basis of this Easton and Dennis observe about the American system:

The overwhelming thrust of primary socialization in this system must, therefore, be toward political stability. Early orientations provide a solid supportive base for the regime as the member grows older.26

This process through which diffuse support is stated to be built, is summarized by the authors in the concepts of personalization, institutionalization, politicization and idealization. This view holds that the child reaches out to the political system through the structures of authority and

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24 Ibid., p. 276
25 Ibid., p. 276
26 Ibid., p. 287
at the beginning finds palpable human objects such as the
president and the policeman, and government interpreted in a
personal way. His contact points are "personalized". Their
data shows that the child views the president and the policeman
as benevolent. Thus the personalized authority figures are also
"idealized". The child gradually begins to distinguish between
the internal authority of the family and the external authority
and thus become "politicized". The politicized child is capable
of extending the idealized image of the personalized figures
of authority to the institutions and this is designated as
"institutionalization". Easton and Dennis view these processes
as contributory to the process of mobilization of diffuse
support for political authority. They write:

Socialization during childhood is characterized
by processes that we have labelled politicization,
personalization, institutionalization, and
idealization. All these processes seem to interlock in such a way as to contribute to a relatively high level of diffuse support for political authority. 27

The authors find that these processes do not vary with
variation in sex, social status and regions. They point out
that they have not been able to find large, consistent differences in their data among various salient sub-categories of respondents. The differences they observe are scattered,
unsystematic and more impressive for their absence than for

27. Ibid., pp. 313-319
their presence. They claim to have shown that children are politically not irrelevant. They suggest that through personalization, idealization, politicization and institutionalization the child becomes a member of the political system and in becoming simply a member one of the first things he learns to do is to extend support to (or reject in varying degrees) whatever he considers to represent the political authorities. The authors identify this process as a condition for the persistence of any and all political systems. They argue,

> The burden of our analysis presses us toward the conclusion that without some means for politicizing children and for coupling them through personalization to the structure of authority, it would be difficult to bring maturing members in most systems to accept the legitimacy of the regime.

Contrary to these findings a number of studies show that all American children do not idealise authority structures. Easton and Dennis are aware of this possibility. They in fact refer to one such study conducted before their own study. But they maintain that even such findings do not affect their inferences about political socialization and its system effect.

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28. Ibid., p. 378
29. Ibid., p. 399
30. Ibid., p. 408
They argue:

for the children to develop hostility toward the authorities, it is also necessary that they became politicized enough to differentiate parental from political authority, that they make personalized contact with figures of authority so as to learn whom to hate (rather than idealize) and that they may transfer their negative effect to institutions.

They have thus, broadened the meaning of politicization even to include a situation where the maturing members, instead of idealizing reject the authority figures. Here they are emphasizing the personalized contact that is established, in the act of either idealization or rejection of authority figures.

Thus, the major claim of Easton and Dennis is that they have established the relevance of children for political science. They make this claim very clear when they say that far from simply searching for the roots of adult behaviour intuitively selected as interesting, they have laid down some theoretical criteria to guide research of primary socialization. They then ask "where have these theoretical guidelines now led us? They have brought us to recognize the political void, in which past research has unwillingly placed children." This inference, as is evident from our discussion above, is based on their finding that the child does personalize political

32. Easton and Dennis, op. cit., p. 417
33. Ibid., p. 338
authorities which in turn leads to his politicization. However, a number of studies conducted in other nations have shown that children do not always personalize political authorities of their own system. K.W. Conwell finds that in Australia such personalization is not present.\(^\text{34}\) Jon H. Pammet has found that the American president is more familiar to Canadian children. He, further, finds that in Canada children know more about parliament than about their prime minister.\(^\text{35}\) In the face of this evidence it is difficult to accept the conclusion of Easton and Dennis that children do personalize political authority of their own system. The question that arises is: how do Easton and Dennis arrive at this conclusion? May be the very administration of their questionnaire has in some way stimulated such responses which show that the child personalize authority. We do not have conclusive evidence on this; but as Vaillancourt says, "it is possible that the political socialization researcher, himself, creates attitudes instead of measuring existing ones"\(^\text{36}\) (emphasis added). It is possible to argue that attitudes can not be created in this manner.

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However, the possibility of stimulation of a particular kind of responses can not be ruled out. Specially in a highly competitive society like America no child would like to be known as 'not knowing' and therefore would try to respond in a manner that conforms to the 'in' ideas about authority figures.

Even if we concede that children do personalize political authorities, this personalization becomes significant only if we assume that it shapes the adult behaviour. Because the persistence of a political system is dependent on the behaviour of the adult members and not of children. It is the support of the adults which determines the persistence of a system. Support, indeed, is a political behaviour. Unless we assume that this political behaviour somehow shaped by attitudes learnt during childhood, the child loses its political relevance. This assumption is inherent in the political socialization research of Easton and Dennis.

While stating the purpose of their study the authors describe the political system as an open system and then go on to say,

One of the conditions that makes it possible for an open system of this kind to persist even in face of stress is the level of commitment or support that members are prepared and able to extend to it. Our central purpose will be to investigate how this kind of support is marshaled through the early socialization of those new to the system by virtue of their birth in it. 37

37. Easton & Dennis, op. cit., p. 4
They make this assumption explicit when they say that in many areas of enquiry they may nevertheless hold to the theory that "that is learnt early in life tends to be retained and to shape later attitudes and behaviour." 33

Haston and Dennis, however, are not the only ones to assume this. There are a host of other authors who do this, Mess and Torney, for instance, say, "the argument for the importance of childhood learning for the political behaviour of adults appears to have considerable validity." 39 Siegal also supports this assumption when he writes, "Having once internalized the society's norms it will presumably not be difficult for the individual to act in congruence with them." 40

This assumption is, of course, only a part of a much more important assumption, which, David Marsh shows to be present in all socialization research. To quote Marsh,

It is claimed that political socialization is an important factor, a key variable in understanding the operation of the political system. This is because political attitudes shape political behaviour and this behaviour provides the stimulus for change and the underpinning of stability. If this is the case then studying the development of political attitudes should help to explain systematic

33. Ibid., p. 9
The primary aim of Haston and Dennis is to study system persistence in a world of 'stability and change' they hope to do it (at least partially) by studying the development of basic political orientations in children. They say,

This single study about children and their basic political orientations should help to extend our knowledge about the conditions surrounding the persistence of political systems as a class of phenomena.42

They cannot expect to do this unless they assume that an understanding of change and stability of political attitudes will facilitate an understanding of stability and change within the political system.

This assumption is founded on three other assumptions of which the assumption that "adult behaviour is shaped in part by attitudes learnt during childhood socialization" is one. The two other assumptions are: (1) Adult opinions are in a large part the end product of political socialization, (2) Individual political opinions (and the resulting behaviour) have an impact on the operation of a nation's government and

42. Haston & Dennis, op. cit., p. 6
The validity of these assumptions are not beyond reasonable doubt. Before we examine these assumptions individually, we must look into a general problem associated with each one of these assumptions. Findings of any study with such assumptions are based on answers received to questions which are administered in the form of questionnaires. Researchers ask questions which are expected to reveal the attitudes of the respondents. Such studies do not make distinction between express and actual attitudes. It is not necessary that express attitudes should always be actual attitudes. Many situational and personal factors may compel a person to express an attitude which he may not actually hold. It seems the only way to find out whether express attitudes are also real attitudes is to study them in the light of the behaviour of the respondents. Which implies that attitudes will have to be studied with the help of behaviour. But students of socialization turn the process up side down. They want to explain behaviour with the help of what they call attitudes, which are actually express attitudes only. Express attitudes cannot help us to understand behaviour because such attitudes are expressed only to suit the occasion. They can not explain the psychological process that results in a particular behaviour.

43. See Marsh, op. cit., pp. 453-56.
To come back to the three assumptions mentioned above, Kavash shows that there are some doubts as to the stability of personality dimensions, attitudes and behavioural intentions and as to the necessary primacy of early socialization. Human attitudes and behaviour do not always tally. Personal and situational factors may always intervene between attitudes and behaviour. Kavanagh has pointed out that a major task facing researchers in the field of political socialization and culture is that of establishing linkages between attitudes and behaviour and linking these in turn to the performance of the political system. There are other authors who have pointed out that there are lots of situational factors that intervene between attitudes and behaviours. C Wright Mills also pointed out the disparity between attitudes and behaviour and called it the central methodological problem of Social Sciences.

44. Ibid., p. 469


Political Socialization research of Easton and Dennis, Hess and Easton and the likes, where the focus is on the attitudes of children, involves the other question: whether attitudes acquired during child childhood persist into the adulthood? Easton and Dennis do not explicitly say that they do. They ask, "is there any evidence at all that either negative or positive orientations toward a system have their source in childhood experiences?"48 but the fact that they ask this question should not lead us to the belief that they do not subscribe to the view that such orientations originate in childhood experiences. Because if they do not assume that childhood attitudes persist into adulthood there will be hardly any ground to justify their own research. After all with their proclaimed interest in system-persistence why should they study childhood attitudes if they do not believe that these attitudes will effect adulthood attitudes? Infact the subtitle of their book Children in Political System, itself is revealing. They call it 'an inquiry into the origins of legitimacy'. Now, the origins of legitimacy could be found in childhood only if childhood orientations influence adult attitudes. Karanagh has cautioned us against such an assumption. He asserts that there is ample evidence of the non-generalization of childhood political attitudes into adulthood. He asks a pertinent question: "How is one to relate the over-

48. Easton and Dennis, op. cit., p. 5
whelming allegiance and favourable views which the mass of American children have of their political institutions with the wide measures of mistrust and cynicism found among adults?" There is only one reasonable answer to this question — childhood attitudes do not generally influence adult attitude and behaviour. In that sense studying childhood attitudes does not help us to understand adult political behaviour.

Finally, all political socialization research use quantitative material to measure individual attitudes or group attitudes. These are then used to explain the operation of the political system. Easton's work on political socialization also does this. In *The Children in Political System*, the authors deliberately exclude non-English speaking children, non-whites, pupils at private and parochial institutions, and those living outside major metropolitan areas; they study the attitudes of the white urban American children and then try to explain how these attitudes help the system to mobilize diffuse support. 

Hess and Easton also do the same thing when they study the child's image of the president. The assumption in these works

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50. Easton and Dennis, op. cit., p. 422

is that individual political opinions and the resultant behaviour have an impact on the nation's political life. This assumption is present in the works of other scholars also. But as David Marsh has pointed out "an elementary study of any nation will show that not all individuals' political behaviour and attitudes have equal influence." Marsh suggests:

bearing in mind the purpose of political socialization research we should study the behaviour (not the attitudes) of the elite (not the entire population) as their behaviour is likely to have most influence on the operation of the political system.

Marsh has rightly pointed out the weaknesses of such research, but even the studies of elite behaviour do not take us very far in our bid to understand the problem of stability and change in political systems. To understand this problem we must understand what causes political behaviour and how.

It is not sufficient to study political behaviour in general. Only a study of the specific political behaviour of the politically relevant sets of people in a determinate political system can help us to understand the question of stability and change in political systems. We must understand the nature of


53. Marsh, op. cit., p. 456

54. Ibid., p. 464
social and political forces that produce political behaviour. It is not just the behaviour of a certain person or groups that determine the politics of a nation. Such behaviour may give a tilt here or a turn there; but the actual determinants of the politics of any nation must be sought in the prevalent social and political forces. Political behaviour is a social activity, in the sense that it takes place within a society. Such behaviour, therefore, must be studied in the context of the society in which it takes place.

In any historically determined society the material relations represent the real base and the political and the ideological relations represent the superstructure. In any society where there are antagonistic forces at work at the base level will have such forces at the level of superstructure as well. That is why we find the existence of organization and ideologies expressing the interest of different classes and social groups within a society. The process of origin and development of social ideas is a complex one. The ideas do not come into the world as an automatic reflection of the base. Economics does not produce philosophical, religious, moral, aesthetic or political ideas. Ideas, indeed, are created by people. But they do not create them from a vacuum. These ideas are created under existing social conditions. This, however, is not to rule out the independence of the development of social ideas. Only in the final analysis are such ideas determined by the economic
base. Moreover, having once arisen on a certain base, a superstructure reacts upon the base. This reaction may be very great. But the point here is that in all class societies there are antagonistic forces in that base which are also reflected in the superstructure. In other words, there is no homogenous social consciousness. All social consciousness, including those of children, are closely related to the legal and political superstructure which is founded upon the production relations. These relations of production, lead to a division of society into classes. The positions of each class and their consciousness, in the final analysis, are determined by the positions of these classes within the process of production.54

This, of course, is not to mean that each class has its own consciousness and is independent of the influences of the ideas of other classes. The dominant ideas of any society would definitely have a pervasive influence over the whole society. As Marx put it,

The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas; i.e., the class, which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it.55

54. See George Lukacs, History and Class Consciousness, Rodwy Livingstone (Tr.) (Merlin Press, London, 1971) p. 46

55. K. Marx, German Ideology, Lawrence and Wishort, London, 1965, p. 60
These sentences do give the impression that the ruling class has an absolute hegemony over others. But Miliband has pointed out that the ideological predominance of the ruling class may not always be equally effective. The fact, however, remains that the ruling classes do have at their disposal very important means of influencing the other classes. Mass media and schooling for instance are two such means. The conditions arising out of the position of a particular class and the influences of dominant ideas of the society react with each other to form attitudes of people. Thus in any study of attitude formation the question of social conditions cannot be ignored.

Easton and Dennis are apparently aware of this fact. While trying to explain the high degree of consensus about the legitimacy of the authorities among their sample they point out that this may be a product of the special character of their sample which includes children only from "white urban areas not severely depressed economically." It is, of course, clear that what they imply here does not involve any class analysis. They only seem to wonder that economic position of the children under study may have something to do with their attitudes towards political authorities. But it remains only

56. Miliband, op. cit., p. 53
57. Easton and Dennis, op. cit., pp. 373-79
a wondering. Because despite this realization about the limitation of their sample they do go on to generalize about the children's attitude to political authorities in America on the basis of information collected from such a sample. As a result of this they arrive at conclusions which indicate that the American political system has been able to muster sufficient support through early socialization. But in view of our discussion above this conclusion may not hold good. The only legitimate conclusion that such a study may arrive at is that among the particular category of children under study the American political system seems to have been able to muster sufficient support. However, as we have shown above, socialization research of this brand, based, as they always are, on questionable assumptions, fail to fulfil their declared task of explaining how political systems manage to persist in a world of stability or of change.