THE POLITICAL SYSTEM: AN INQUIRY INTO THE STATE OF POLITICAL SCIENCE. By David Easton. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1953. Pp. 320. $5.00.

No matter how much one might disagree with its general thesis, or dislike its design, or find fault with its particulars, Professor Easton's book is a sophisticated analysis of American political science as an academic discipline. Research in political science, he points out, does not measure up to those standards of valid thinking, observation and description usually called "scientific method." It has failed to clarify the relationship between theory and fact, and has remained "fragmentary and heterogeneous, unable to fulfill the promise in its designation as a political *science*."[1]

One cannot but acknowledge Easton's candor. He excoriates his profession in a spirit that is genuine but not rancorous. He has written a critique of political science that is more searching, more radical, and more self-conscious of weakness and failure than any other of recent vintage. Moreover, he looks at the problem not only from within this field, but also from without, drawing on anthropology, sociology and social psychology for a rich armory of concepts and observational standpoints which he applies to the particular difficulties of political science with much shrewdness and skill.

It is for this reason, however, that one may well wonder why Easton attributes the reluctance of political scientists to adopt scientific methods to a general mood now prevalent in Western civilization—a mood which exalts emotion, faith, and tradition at the expense of scientific reason. For there is little evidence of such a mood in precisely those social sciences from which Easton derives so much of his own frame of reference. Not only have these disciplines recently made great strides in the application of scientific method and perfected their techniques, but systematic theory building has become an important preoccupation of otherwise empirically oriented social scientists,

Instead of developing verifiable theory, political science, in Easton's view, has been satisfied with accumlating facts and applying this information prematurely to practical affairs. As a result, it has failed to identify the major variables affecting power relations in society; it has assumed the stability of the basic pattern within which these relations take place; and it has neglected the problem of political change. Part of the problem, as Easton sees it, is the ambiguity of the traditional vocabulary of political science. Concepts like "sovereignty" or "responsibility" convey such broad meanings that their empirical referents are most difficult to come by operationally; while other concepts, *e.g.*, "freedom" or "equality," are trenched in emotional connotations which cannot easily be resolved by factual inquiry. Political science has offered many penetrating insights and produced some important knowledge, but "most works on politics do not pass beyond the comprehension of the ordinary, well-educated person, untutored in political science."[2]

1. P. 5.
2. Pp. 46-7.

Easton maintains that political scientists should concern themselves with systematic theory. There are dangers, of course. The systematized model may become a substitute for reality in the minds of men; or it may serve to exclude from consideration other, competing models. Unfortunately, Easton does not come to grips with the problem of theory construction at the level where it seems most feasible—the middle range between simple generalization and general theory. This is probably due to Easton's coming perilously close at times to a methodologically untenable separation of theory and empirical research. Taking issue with those who insist that theory must not be so abstract as to prevent empirical testing, Easton argues that if abstraction were not taking place, "theory would not be offering itself enough latitude for development."[3] He concludes that "all that we need demand of theoretical research is that in *principle* we are able to test it by reference to sensory data."[4] But how does the theorist know that in principle his theoretical propositions are testable by reference to empirical data unless he tests them as he builds his theory? It is doubtful, indeed, that, in the present stage of its development, political science can afford causal theory which is not constantly tested in terms of operationally possible hypotheses, just as there can be little doubt as to the desirability of suspending a theory-poor kind of brute empirical research.

American political philosophy, according to Easton, has failed to examine the moral premises of political science, or the consequences of these premises. In the last fifty years, political theorists have studied the social context in which values appear, or they have described the historical process of their emergence, or they have analyzed the internal consistency of value schemes; but they have not used the history of values "as a device to stimulate thought on a possible constructive re-definition of political goals. Their fundamental outlook prevents this."[5] In accounting for the decline of modern political theory, Easton finds it in the tendency of political scientists to conform to the moral presumptions of their own age, in the general misconstruction of a relativistic interpretation of values, and in the conditions of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when, prior to the appearance of fascism and communism, deep cleavages in ethical premises did not force antagonistic groups to choose among fundamentally irreconcilable and competing values.

If there is one political scientist in the United States of undoubted professional pedigree who does not swim in the mainstream of traditional political science, it is Professor Harold D. Lasswell. Indeed, the body of Professor Lasswell's work, whatever its idiosyncrasies and scandalizing insights, constitutes the one continued single act of cerebration in contemporary political science. In view of Easton's manifest indebtedness to Lasswell's work, his treatment of this eminent political scientist is quite unsatisfactory. Lasswell's

3. P. 315.
4. *Ibid.*
5. P. 253.

Power and Society is not to Easton's critical liking. He feels that in dealing with the relationship between power and other values, Lasswell "describes all social science rather than political science alone."[6] This point is ill-taken, precisely because in *Power and Society* Lasswell is not concerned with defining political science, but with the urgent matter of codifying significant hypotheses of the kind that can be tested empirically. Strangely, Easton subsequently comes to Lasswell's defense when he points out that the goal of political science is not the discovery of a general theory of power "as Lasswell has often been misconstrued to mean."[7] Easton's own definition of politics, "authoritative allocation of values for a society," sounds more earnest and less vulgar than Lasswell's original "who gets what, when, how"; but they have the same empirical referents.

On the other hand, Easton's sensitivity to paradox stands him in good stead when he discusses the specialization-integration dichotomy which bothers many social scientists. If there is a discipline called political science, we need a framework to determine the significant variables which can be subsumed under "political." But one encounters the difficulty that "the trend today is to search for the unity among the social sciences, not their elements of differentiation."[8] However, Easton feels that cross-fertilization and cooperation among the social sciences need not involve the ultimate fusion and disappearance of all specialties into a single body of knowledge, though he suggests, correctly I think, that "all the social sciences may well have a common body of theory. . . ."[9] Easton does not follow up this thought by indicating just what concepts or theoretical models the social sciences may have in common today. But, then, his primary task was a critique of American political science, not the construction of an integrated social theory.

Easton must be congratulated on his success in re-conceptualizing many of the traditional concerns of political scientists in terms of the newer social science terminology. There will undoubtedly be those who will regard this as mere playing with and juggling of words. They will really miss the point. For what is involved here is not terminological obfuscation. Rather it is an attempt to translate hitherto empirically remote concepts into a language which is operationally more relevant for research, as well as conceptually more useful in theory building. Reconceptualization opens up not only new research areas, but if it is undertaken with concepts from other disciplines, it makes possible the widening of disciplinary boundaries. And it is precisely here, in the interdisciplinary twilight zone, where the most remarkable scientific progress is usually made.

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6. P. 122.
7. P. 144.
8. P. 95.
9. P. 105.

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