OBITUARY

david easton (1917–2014)

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David Easton has left us at the age of 97. With David, the profession has lost a master of political thought. The absorbing preoccupation throughout his life was the attempt to conceive the universe of political facts in such a manner as to make possible testable propositions and general explanation. The coming of the discipline into scientific maturity after 1945 owes much to David's contribution to this task.

Born in Toronto, Canada, Easton earned his undergraduate degree at the University of Toronto in 1939 and his M.A. and Ph.D. from Harvard University in 1947. He spent most of his academic life at the University of Chicago where he became assistant professor in 1947, associate professor in 1953 and professor in 1955; he was appointed Andrew McLeish Distinguished Service Professor in Social Thought in 1984. He then moved to the University of California, Irvine, where he held the title of Distinguished Research Professor in the Department of Political Science.

In addition to his university career, David Easton held a number of professional assignments. He was a member of the Executive Committee of the inter-University Consortium for Political Research (1962–1964), Chairman of the Committee on Information and Behavioral Sciences Division at the National Academy of Sciences-National Research Council (1968–1970) and a Fellow at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences, Stanford University (1957–1958). He served as a consultant to the Brooking Institution (1955), the Mental Health Research Institute of the University of Michigan (1955–1956) and as a member of the Canadian Royal Commission on Bilinguism and Biculturalism (1964–1965). He was also President of the American Political Science Association in the crucial years 1968–1969, President of the International Committee on Social Science Documentation (1969–1971), Vice-president of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and a member of the Committee on Higher Education of the Royal Society of Canada.

One more assignment, in addition to the posts just mentioned, is of particular significance to this writer. In recent decades, political science has experienced a process of geographic expansion, well beyond its original core, mainly England and the United States, a process to which Easton lent increasing attention as chair of the IPSA Subcommittee for the Study of the Development of Political Science. It was in such a capacity that I came to know Easton personally, especially in the context of a

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conference we jointly organised in 1987 in Cortona, Italy, on the development of the discipline across nations (Easton *et al*, 1991).

As noted, David's main aim has been to reconceptualise the political universe in such a manner as to make a science of politics possible. For this to happen, the field of politics had to be re-thought as a system both distinct from other social facts and internally coherent – a conceptual status that the discipline was sorely lacking when Easton began his career in the 1940s. It has been the fate of Easton's long professional life to witness both the partial fulfilment of the task in the triumphant years of behaviouralism and the breakdown of such an effort under the dual impact of new approaches, especially rational choice and the fragmentation of the discipline induced by the proliferation of policy studies.

More specifically, Easton's universally recognised major achievement was his redefinition of political science as 'the study of the way in which decisions for society are made and considered binding most of the time by most of the people' (Easton, 1985: 133). The two seminal works in this respect are *The Political System* (1953) and *A Framework for Political Analysis* (1965). Although occasionally too vague as an operating tool, this notion of the political system is at the origin of much empirical research in the 1950s and 1960s. It has been, and to some extent it continues to be, the main organising concept for the discipline and the range of social phenomena it purports to investigate. The enormous mass of electoral analyses, studies on political culture, research on governmental processes, community studies, etc., which constitute the bulk of behavioural research, largely stem from Easton's reconceptualisation of politics.

The intellectual flexibility of David Easton best emerges in the context of the crisis of the scientific universe he helped to build. By the end of the 1960s, under the impact of disruptive social conflict, especially the civil rights movement in the USA, and social discontent, the smooth world of behaviouralism had lost much of its appeal, a fact that Easton was quick to recognise in his 1969 presidential address at the APSA 'The New Revolution in Political Science' (Easton, 1969). Spurred by the emergence of acute conflict and the moral dilemmas of the 1960s, research was in fact moving in the direction of the output side, or policy side, of the political cycle, issuing in a flurry of policy studies covering a wide range of diversified areas. The ambition to build one grand theory capable of covering the whole political process in a unified manner, one of the main aspirations of behaviouralism, had to come to terms with the increasing fragmentation of policy studies.

'… David's main aim has been to reconceptualise the political universe in such a manner as to make a science of politics possible …'.

Even more critical has been the challenge posed by the rising school of rational choice theorists, soon to become the dominant sect in academia, in the USA and elsewhere. Behaviouralism focussed primarily on mass phenomena and conceived political equilibrium as the result of social forces. The rational choice paradigm, instead, is premised on individual preferences as a real or inputed guide to political conduct, with the aim to arrive at an 'axiomatized and mathematized set of propositions' (Easton, 1985: 149).

Vis-à-vis the rational choice persuasion, Easton was not unreservedly critical. His position may best be characterised as one of epistemological pluralism. What he mostly criticised was a conception that seems to restrict science to 'a body of knowledge based on axioms with

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statements of relationships that could be ultimately formalised, especially through the use of mathematics' (Easton, 1985: 148). But this is not always possible: 'There are vast fields in political science … ', Easton notes, 'indeed most of political science at this point, that have not yielded this kind of intellectual product' (Easton, 1985: 149). We cannot plausibly expunge from the scientific method, he adds, 'systems of classification, taxonomies, conceptual frameworks, and qualitative generalizations' only because they 'have little to do with formal models or mathematized propositions' (Easton, 1985: 150).

Having mainly dwelt on Easton as a scholar, one word, *in fine*, on the man.

' … what struck in David Easton was the simplicity of manners and the readiness to hear different views'.

Despite the assertiveness associated with a vivid mind and temper, what struck in David Easton was the simplicity of manners and the readiness to hear different views, resulting in a conversation to which he brought the sharpness of his mind, his analytical insights and the experience of a long and illustrious professional life.

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Luigi Graziano is Professor of Political Science at the University of Turin from which he has recently retired. He has written extensively on comparative politics, lobbying and pluralism. He has been Visiting Professor in a number of institutions including New York University and Université Libre de Bruxelles. He has also served as a Member of the ECPR Executive Committee (1985–1991) and as Vice-Chair of the International Political Science Association. (1994–1997).

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