

Biopolitics today

The term “biopolitics” has taken on expansive meaning in recent years. When the Association for Politics and the Life Sciences was founded in 1980, its mandate was to “establish biopolitics as a recognized field within political science” and integrate biologically based theories and research methods into the mainstream of the discipline. Today, that mission continues, and it has broadened. And so has use of the term. So expansively has the term been applied by postmodern and feminist authors that some within APLS have contemplated abandoning the phrase entirely.

Although the issues surrounding the current meaning of *biopolitics* are worthy of detailed consideration, suffice it to say for now that the journal will continue to use the term in the same sense we always have. Look for an in-depth review by contributing editor Laurie Liesen of the appropriation of biopolitics in a future issue of the journal, a topic that seems germane as *Politics and the Life Sciences* approaches its 30th anniversary.

In this issue the future of biopolitics is considered from a variety of perspectives. The lead article on synthetic biology and biosecurity by Gautum Makunda and colleagues at MIT maps the state of the art in this rapidly growing field, with an eye towards the security implications that might suggest a need for a comprehensive policy review in this exciting new area.

On the cover is an image of the H1N1 or swine flu virus, which surfaced as a deadly agent in 2009. As Makunda and colleagues observe, viruses are considerably easier to synthesize than bacteria due to their smaller genomes and simpler molecular structure. Advances in DNA synthesis technology make the acquisition and magnification of potentially harmful biological agents through synthetic means increasingly likely. But there are many positive applications of synthetic biology as well, including accelerated production of vaccines, improving the development of antibiotics, and as-yet undiscovered techniques for fighting pathogenic organisms with defensive synthetic agents.

Further engaging the theme of the future of biopolitics is an ethical interrogation by Mark Walker on the idea of genetic virtue. Walker proposes an interdisciplinary effort between philosophers, psychologists, and geneticists called the Genetic Virtue Project, using biotechnology to identify genetic correlates of “virtuous” behavior. The empirical plausibility that virtues have biological correlates is based on the proposition that virtue can be defined as an aspect of personality (specifically, traits conceptualized as enduring behaviors), as a growing body of evidence shows that

personality traits have some genetic basis. We knew this proposal would be controversial going in, so keep on the lookout for a set of commentaries in response to Walker’s provocative idea in a future issue of the journal.

Following Walker are two research articles that also demonstrate innovative applications of the biopolitics perspective, including an experimental study of online deliberation and political emotion by Colleen McClain. As with the experimental study by Hutchinson and Bradley on television and the “war on terror” in the previous issue of the journal, McClain’s piece illustrates the relevance of communication research to the study of biopolitical topics, such as stem cell research. In a creative yet rigorous act of scholarship, Kristen Urban in her article employs a biological model to examine the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, focusing on the principle of competitive exclusion.

More on the future of biopolitical research can be found in an invited forum titled Biopolitics and the Road Ahead, which appears later in this issue.

Finally, a few organizational notes. The APLS annual meeting will be returning to the picturesque campus of Indiana University, Bloomington, October 14–16, 2010. The theme of this year’s meeting is: “Towards Consilience: Thirty Years of the Association for Politics and the Life Sciences” (for more information, see <http://www.aplsnet.org>). We are delighted to announce that Elinor Ostrom, co-recipient of the 2009 Nobel Prize in Economics and Arthur F. Bentley Professor of Political Science at Bloomington, will be our keynote speaker. Lin has been a longtime friend of the association and her work on managing the commons has, at different times and in different ways, directly influenced the content of the journal.

Current editorial board member Brad Thayer of Baylor University also assumes an additional role with this issue as Contributing Editor for Book Reviews. Brad takes over for Richard Sherlock, who performed admirable service as book review editor from 2003 to 2009. Suggestions for book reviews, or review essays comparing two or more related books—as with Lauren Hall’s interesting essay on impassioned politics in this issue—can be sent to Brad at Bradley_Thayer@baylor.edu.

As always, we welcome submissions of any kind, particularly original research articles that engage with biopolitical topics in a systematic and defensible fashion.

Erik P. Bucy, *Editor-in-Chief*
Bloomington, Indiana

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