

A founder's reflections

Steven A. Peterson
School of Public Affairs
Penn State Harrisburg
777 Harrisburg Pike
Middletown, PA 17057
sap12@psu.edu

This essay reflects on the past, present, and future of biopolitics, starting with the academic interest in the link between biology and politics. Examples of primitive adumbrations of this approach appear throughout academic history; however, the modern roots of biology and politics began in the 1960s. This reflection traces biopolitics from its modern birth through the 1990s, and considers future research endeavors related to biology and politics.

A brief history of biopolitics

Biopolitics defined

Biopolitics is the not altogether felicitous term used to describe an approach to political science that draws on biological concepts. NeoDarwinian evolutionary theory is at the center of this framework. This approach employs biological research techniques to study, explain, predict, and sometimes even prescribe political phenomena.

An informal history

Allusions to biological influences on human politics are as old as the Greek philosophers.¹ Plato's metaphor of bronze, silver, and gold, developed in *The Republic*, is an early analogue to later suggestive work on the genetic bases of human behavior. Here, Plato argued that certain people were born with the capacity to rule; most, however, were born with the more limited capacity to be producers.² Aristotle posited that the inherent qualities of humans shaped their behavior. In his *Politics*, he noted "that some should rule, and others be ruled is a thing not only necessary but

expedient; from the hour of their birth, some are marked out for subjection, others for rule."³

In the 1800s and early 1900s, these arguments controversially reemerged in racial analysis. Sir Francis Galton, cousin of Charles Darwin, attempted empirical analysis of racial differences.⁴ One approach determined the number of famous people or great men within a variety of different cultures; the greater the proportion of great men in a population, the more superior that culture. He concluded that the English "race" was among the most superior of his time. Regrettably, he also argued that the ancient Athenians were as superior over the contemporary English as the English are over Africans.

A number of scholars, such as Charles Louis Secondat, le Baron de Montesquieu, posited a connection between climate and group differences. He noted the following difference between hotter and cooler climes, "The people of hot countries are [timid] as older men are: those of cooler countries are more courageous as are the young people."⁵

Historically, other thinkers used an organismic metaphor to understand the political realm. John of Salisbury, in *Policraticus*, argued that society was like a biological organism.⁶ The commonwealth was the body, with the king its head, the church its soul, and all other members of the body politic performing lesser functions. Thomas Hobbes, of course, put an organismic metaphor front and center in his *Leviathan*.⁷ He referred to the state as an artificial animal. He likened sovereignty to the soul, magistrates to joints, reward and punishment to nerves, wealth, and riches of members of the state to strength, and so on. Herbert Spencer, A. Lawrence Lowell, and Woodrow Wilson used organismic analogies to describe the development

doi: 10.2990/30_1_91

of American political science. In his *Constitutional Government*, for instance, Wilson noted that “government is not a machine but a living thing. It falls, not under the theory of the universe, but under the theory of organic life.” Significantly, he goes on to state that: “It is accountable to Darwin, not to Newton” (p. 56).⁸

Finally, some analysts discerned the public policy implications from racial or evolutionary analyses. John W. Burgess, another key figure in the evolution of American political science, argued that the Teutonic peoples had unique qualifications to produce political societies of eminence. Burgess deduced that the Teutonic societies had to carry their genius to other parts of the world where people are incapable of creating advanced civilization.⁹ Thus, racial analysis justified the argument for colonial expansionism. Madison Grant took this perspective to its starkest conclusion. In the introduction to the fourth edition of his work, *The Passing of the Great Race*, Grant argued for “the decision of Congress of the United States to adopt discriminatory and restrictive measures against the immigration of undesirable races and peoples” (p. xxviii).¹⁰ In short, Grant merged biology with politics to conclude that racial differences translated into differences in the quality of people, and thus argued for official discrimination against the “lower” sort.

A new beginning

Contemporary interest in biopolitics began in the 1960s. Several different events and publications served as the baseline for subsequent developments. In 1963, James C. Davies published *Human Nature in Politics* and suggested that there are biological components to human political behavior.¹¹ In 1964, Lynton Caldwell published a piece in the *Yale Review* on environmental policy.¹² Finally, in 1967, at a meeting of the Southern Political Science Association in New Orleans, Albert Somit¹³ and Robert Pranger¹⁴ presented papers on the biological bases of political behavior. Each of these events coalesced into the beginning of a strand of research merging biology with politics.

A personal view of biopolitics

I would like to make a brief autobiographical statement to indicate the “state of the art” in biopolitical education when I first attended graduate

school. I developed an interest in biology and politics during my undergraduate years at Bradley University. Popular works such as Morris’ *The Naked Ape*,¹⁵ Lorenz’ *On Aggression*,¹⁶ and Ardrey’s *The Territorial Imperative*¹⁷ sparked my research interest in the field. I wrote my senior honors paper in political science on the general subject. I also met one of the participants from the 1967 Southern Political Science Association panel, Robert Pranger.

I accepted an offer from the State University of New York at Buffalo for graduate school. As a part of my application package, I mentioned an interest in developing a specialty in biology and politics. I recall my excitement midway through graduate school when someone mentioned that a political scientist had “scored” on an article in *World Politics* on biopolitics. Of course, that was Peter Corning’s essay.¹⁸ It was exhilarating to get a sense that I was not the only junior scholar “out there” with an interest in the subject.

A couple other lucky breaks happened. I attended Buffalo because of a nice financial offer. Albert Somit, an early pioneer of biopolitics, was on the faculty. He introduced me to an ethologist in the biology department with an interest in biopolitics, and helped organize a special field within my political science program. I ended up taking a mammalian ethology course, a primate behavior class, and a readings course in biological classics. Best of all, no one in the Political Science Department challenged me for developing this subfield!

For my comprehensive exams, I chose between four questions on biology. I still have the original exam and am amazed with my grasp of the key aspects of genetics. My dissertation, on the biological basis of student protest, used a potpourri of biologically oriented questionnaire items to predict student protest behavior and traditional political behaviors. Despite the myriad null findings, I managed to publish a few articles based on my dissertation.

Many would have thought it a less than stellar starting job, but teaching at Alfred University was quite rewarding. First, it was a teaching oriented university. It was *not* a “publish or perish” institution. Indeed, only a few faculty members regularly published. I had the freedom to publish and research in biopolitics without any pressures to shy away. Publishing was enjoyable because I shared ideas within a like-minded network of political scientists. Colleagues expressed

delight with my publication record and I was even rewarded for involvement in the slowly growing biopolitical community. By the late 1970s, other junior political scientists had progressed through graduate school, or were well on their way, with a developed specialty in biopolitics—Joe Losco, Mark Emmert, Gerald Cory, Odelia Funke, Jim Schubert, and John Strate, among others. Thus, a new generation of biopolitical specialists emerged into the field.

Before this new era of biopolitics began, most of those in biopolitics were established scholars who took on this research agenda once they were secure in their careers. There was a remarkable set of role models inspiring the younger generation, including John Wahlke, Glen Schubert, Al Somit, Keith Caldwell, Jim Davies, W. J. M. Mackenzie, and Elliott White. As the 1970s ended, a “new generation” was on an upward career trajectory, with Roger Masters, Fred Willhoite, Tom Weigele, and David Schwartz leading the way. It was heady stuff for a junior political scientist to interact regularly with these more established figures.

The biopolitical community evolves

Biopolitics began quietly as an element in American and western political science in the 1960s. By the 1970s, books began to appear in substantial number. Panels on biopolitics appeared on programs at a variety of conferences including the American Political Science Association, International Society for Political Psychology, and the International Political Science Association. In the early 1970s, the International Political Science Association (IPSA) recognized Research Committee #12, spearheaded by Al Somit, as a legitimate subject for scholarly activity. Biopolitics still has a presence at the international association, and most recently convened two panels at the 2009 meeting in Santiago, Chile.

The Association for Politics and the Life Sciences assumed a tangible form at a meeting of the American Political Science Association in 1980. Tom Weigele, from Northern Illinois University, brought together scholars to serve as a governing group. Tom even secured institutional support for a center devoted to the study of biology and politics at Northern Illinois. The Association for Politics and the Life Sciences organized

its first program at the 1982 American Political Science Association annual meeting. That same year, the first issue of the association's journal, *Politics and the Life Sciences*, premiered. Politics and the Life Sciences became a recognized section of the American Political Science Association and official panels convened at the annual meetings.

Measured by organizational criteria, biopolitics is reasonably successful, but the horizon is not entirely unclouded. In the 1990s, the Association for Politics and the Life Sciences gave up status as an organized section within the American Political Science Association. The break occurred after APSA endorsed a policy mandating a minimum number of 250 members for an organized section to be official. Since 1998, the Association for Politics and the Life Sciences has convened independent annual meetings either at conference hotels or, more recently, on college campuses, and has a limited presence at the political science annual meetings. Al Somit and I summarized the slow but steady incursion of biopolitical research into mainstream political science in an article published in 1998:

We are compelled to a quite different conclusion, however, when we turned to the second criterion—substantive impact on political science. The evidence here was hard to escape: few biopolitical articles appear in the mainstream professional journals; biopolitical books are rarely even briefly noted, let alone given full-scale reviews; physiological measures of attitudes have languished in disuse; and, aside from an occasional glance at illness, there have been few attempts to explore the influence on political behavior of such physiological factors as stress and fatigue.¹⁹

However, things *have* changed in the years since those words appeared. An article by Alford, Funk, and Hibbing²⁰ using twin studies data to assess the influence of genes on political orientations is one of the most downloaded articles from the *American Political Science Review*. Other works using genetics now appear in top journals: Fowler, Baker, and Dawes;²¹ Fowler and Dawes;²² and Hatemi and colleagues.²³ In addition, there has been substantial interest recently in the study of the brain and its implications for political thinking and behavior.^{24,25}

Thus, on substantive grounds, perhaps these developments are indicative of the long-awaited break-

through of biology and politics into mainstream political science.

Final reflections

Biopolitics has come a long way from its infancy in the 1960s. The “new generation” of scholars receiving graduate training in the 1960s and 1970s is now the “older generation.” Emerging is a new group of young faculty and graduate students with an interest in biology and politics. Northern Illinois University has a special area of biopolitics within its doctoral program in Political Science. Research output continues and even makes its way into some of the discipline’s leading journals. Finally, the organizational health of biopolitics continues. Although facing organizational challenges, both Research Committee #12 and the Association for Politics and the Life Sciences continue to move forward.

References

1. Steven A. Peterson, “Biopolitics: Lessons from history,” *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences*, 1976, 12: 354–366.
2. Plato, *The Republic* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006).
3. Aristotle, *Politics* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1998).
4. Sir Francis Galton, *Hereditary Genius, 2nd ed.* (London: MacMillan, 1892).
5. Baron de Montesquieu, *De l’Esprit des Loix* (Paris: Societe des Belles Lettres, 1955).
6. John of Salisbury, *Policraticus* (Turnholti : Brepols, 1993).
7. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, G.A.J. Rogers and Karl Schuhmann, eds. (Bristol: Thoemmes Continuum, 2003).
8. Woodrow Wilson, *Constitutional Government in the United States* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1908).
9. John W. Burgess, *Political Science and Comparative Constitutional Law* (Boston: Ginn, 1890).
10. Madison Grant, *The Passing of the Great Race* (New York: Scribner’s, 1923).
11. James C. Davies, *Human Nature in Politics* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1963).
12. Lynton K. Caldwell, “Biopolitics: Science, ethics, and public policy,” *The Yale Review*, 1964, 54: 1–16.
13. Albert Somit, “Toward a more biologically oriented political science: Ethology and psychopharmacology,” *Midwest Journal of Political Science*, 1968, 12: 550–567.
14. Robert Pranger, “Ethology and politics,” Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Southern Political Science Association, New Orleans, November 1967.
15. Desmond Morris, *The Naked Ape* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967).
16. Konrad Lorenz, *On Aggression* (New York: Bantam Books, 1967).
17. Robert Ardrey, *The Territorial Imperative: A Personal Inquiry into the Animal Origins of Property and Nations* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1966).
18. Peter Corning, “The biological bases of behavior and some implications for political science,” *World Politics*, 1971, 23: 312–370.
19. Albert Somit and Steven A. Peterson, “Rational choice and biopolitics: A (Darwinian) tale of two theories,” *PS: Political Science & Politics*, 1999, 32: 39–44.
20. John R. Alford, Carolyn L. Funk, and John R. Hibbing, “Are political orientations genetically transmitted?” *American Political Science Review*, 2005, 99: 153–168.
21. James Fowler, Laura A. Baker, and Christopher T. Dawes, “Genetic variation in political participation,” *American Political Science Review*, 2008, 102: 233–248.
22. James Fowler and Christopher T. Dawes, “Two genes predict voter turnout,” *Journal of Politics*, 2008, 70: 579–594.
23. Peter K. Hatemi, Carolyn Funk, Herman Maes, Judy Silberg, Sarah E. Medlund, Nicholas G. Martin, and Lindon Eaves, “Genetic influences on political attitudes over the life course,” *Journal of Politics*, 2009, 71: 1141–1156.
24. Robert Blank, “The brain sciences and politics: Some linkages,” in *Biology and Politics: The Cutting Edge*, Albert Somit and Steven A. Peterson, eds. (Bingley, UK: Emerald Group Publishing, 2011), pp. 205–229.
25. John M. Friend and Bradley A. Thayer, “Neuropolitics and political science,” in *Biology and Politics: The Cutting Edge*, Albert Somit and Steven A. Peterson, eds. (Bingley, UK: Emerald Group Publishing, 2011), pp. 231–255.