

Two Concerns about Ten Misconceptions

Kay Lehman Schlozman

In a careful paper, John R. Hibbing makes a strong case that political scientists—who have learned lessons from many other disciplines—need to make room for biology. While his paper is reassuring on many counts, two matters cause concern. First, Hibbing argues that the open acknowledgment of the biological basis of group differences would lead to greater tolerance. It is easy to adduce examples to suggest that it is unrealistic to expect that people, especially people with political concerns and objectives, will begin to focus on the diversity within groups rather than the differences between groups. Second, it is not clear the extent to which investigations into the biological basis of politics would illumine the great questions of political analysis.

Political science is a pluralistic discipline that takes its lessons from multiple paradigms and methodologies and borrows freely from other disciplines. It is a richer field of inquiry for doing so. John R. Hibbing makes a strong case that political scientists—who have learned lessons from, among others, anthropology, economics, game theory, history, philosophy, psychology, sociology, and statistics—need to make room for biology. Admirably, he eschews the kind of hegemonic thinking that sometimes accompanies the discovery of a new analytic perspective. He claims neither that biology explains everything nor that we need to forget everything we have ever learned as political scientists in a mad rush into the biology lab. Moreover, he clarifies many of the important distinctions that may be lost when the relevance of this approach for political science is discussed and, sometimes, dismissed. While his paper is reassuring on many counts, I remain concerned about two matters: Hibbing's argument that the open acknowledgment of the biological basis of group differences would lead to greater tolerance; and the extent to which investigations into the biological basis of politics would illumine the great questions of political analysis.

Hibbing's contention that "ironically, if the role of biology were openly acknowledged, the biggest increase in tolerance could come in the area of differences across groups" (p. 481) is not fully convincing. He points out

the well-known regularity that, even when it comes to attributes with clear biological roots, individual differences among group members are much more substantial than aggregate differences between groups and holds out hope that "if people can get past their knee-jerk reaction to the existence of behaviorally-relevant biological differences, they would soon see that the existence of these individual-level differences actually makes it more difficult to emphasize the difference between one group and another" (pp. 481–482). This expectation seems naïve. Much mischief has been done in the name of biological differences. Across the centuries and around the world, biological arguments have been adduced to describe group differences and to justify treatment that has ranged from barbarous to discriminatory to merely patronizing. It is despairingly easy to proliferate examples: not just by Nazis in Germany, slaveholders in the American South, and apartheid supporters in South Africa, but by Belgian colonials in Congo, Spanish settlers in Mexico, Americans of European descent in the American West, and by apologists for differential treatment of boys and girls, and men and women, everywhere.

Whether the unequal treatment is genocidal or "only" entails *de jure* segregation of schools or neighborhoods or proscriptions on women pursuing particular occupations or, even, operating an automobile, when groups are defined in terms of biological difference, policies often apply without exception to all group members regardless of their individual characteristics and aptitudes. Thus, the expectation that people, especially people with political concerns and objectives, will begin to focus on the diversity within groups rather than the differences between them seems unrealistic. Will the sequel to the best-selling book be entitled *Men Are More Likely to Be from Mars, Women Are More Likely to Be from Venus*? Or, more accurately,

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Men Are More Likely to Be from Mars, but Some of Them Are from Venus; Women Are More Likely to Be from Venus, but Some of Them Are from Mars? I am not placing a pre-publication order.

My second concern relates to the uneven attention in studies that root politics in biology to the matter of why we as political scientists should pay attention to the results. I once heard Robert Putnam say that he always asks Ph.D. students two questions as they refine their dissertation topics: “Why?” and “What difference does it make?” The first addresses the matter of causal analysis and the aspiration to be scientific. On this dimension, work incorporating concepts and techniques from biology clears the bar with ease. Putnam’s second question reminds us of the need to consider whether we really care about the results of even the most rigorously scientific empirical investigation. The best work in political science addresses very significant questions. Examples of a few such questions might include:

What are the causes of war, and how can war be prevented?

What explains the absence of conflict among democracies?

How can international cooperation take place when there is no government to enforce commitments?

What are the conditions conducive to the development of democracy?

To what extent do political arrangements and conditions contribute to fostering or inhibiting economic development and growth?

Why are some multi-ethnic societies able to create a stable political order when others dissolve or degenerate into violence?

Or, to cite the titles of two old, and perhaps forgotten, books in American politics: *Who Governs?* and *Politics: Who Gets What, When, How*.

It is the rare investigation in political science that truly pushes the envelope of our capacity to answer any such question. Still, it is appropriate for even modest inquiries

in political science to seek to aim a flashlight, if not a searchlight, on the meaning of the results for public life.

Surely, any factor that helps us to obtain a more nearly complete explanation of political behaviors and outcomes—even variables that are fixed, that are not proximate to politics, and that are seemingly unrelated to the kinds of conflicts that become fodder for political contestation—is fair game for political science. Still, it seems germane to inquire whether the results of research using genetic, biological, or neurobiological concepts and techniques stretch our understanding of politics and governance. For example, Hibbing cites a widely noted finding by Yoel Inbar, David A. Pizarro, and Paul Bloom that individuals with a high disgust sensitivity are more conservative on political issues—especially such social issues as abortion and gay marriage. As a political junkie, I find it an absolutely fascinating factoid that the “ick factor” and conservative ideology are associated with one another. But, as a political scientist, I need a fuller explanation as to what difference it makes for public life that being inclined to cringe from the slimy and the germy is associated with being ideologically conservative. In fairness, it should be noted that Inbar, Pizarro, and Bloom are not political scientists and that they make no claims about the meaning for politics of what they have found. Besides, the accusation that empirical studies sometimes bring rigor and precision to questions that are inconsequential can justifiably be leveled at various corners of the discipline—including my own. Nevertheless, the emerging field of biology and politics is vulnerable to this charge. I am reminded of a conversation a few years ago at a search committee meeting for a junior position in American politics. A colleague complained that the candidates whose files we were reading were so well trained and methodologically sophisticated but that their studies seemed so narrow and intellectually trivial. “Oh,” replied another colleague at the table, “you mean they know how to get answers, but they don’t know what questions to ask.” As political scientists we should strive both to get better answers and to pose questions worth asking.