

Embracing intellectual humility

A response to the biopolitics forum

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The study of politics depends upon a variety of perspectives and approaches. The political informs all aspects of our private and public lives. Understanding power, hierarchy and government requires not only an examination of biological, evolutionary processes but also an examination of cultural norms and power dynamics. In our paper, “The competing meanings of ‘biopolitics’ in political science: Biological and postmodern approaches to politics,”¹ we distinguished between two different uses of the term *biopolitics*. We pointed to the different meanings and provenances of the term for those political scientists indebted to the life sciences and for those indebted to Foucauldian postmodern hermeneutics. We argued that the scientific biopolitical tradition loses little or nothing in relinquishing the use of the term to postmodernists. In this paper, we begin not by distinguishing the two traditions, as we did in the earlier paper, but rather by recognizing the importance of both approaches to a rich, complex, multifaceted investigation of the political.

Both scientific and postmodern biopolitics continue to thrive within the study of politics. As Rebecca Hannagan demonstrates in her response to our piece on biopolitics, scholars adopting a scientific biopolitical

approach abound, impacting the discipline of political science. She notes, “Political psychology has been expanding to encompass biological approaches for some time . . . The logical progression of the subfield is to incorporate the theoretical and methodological advances made in biology, neurobiology and psychology to the study of political attitudes and behaviors.”² Articles examining the relationship between politics and biology, evolution, genetics, and neuroscience continue to increase their numbers in mainstream political science journals. For example, Peter Hatemi and colleagues recently published a paper in the *Journal of Politics* that examined the impact of both genetic and environmental variables on political attitudes,³ and Kevin Smith and colleagues last year published “Biology, Ideology, and Epistemology: How Do We Know Political Attitudes are Inherited and Why Should We Care?” in the *American Journal of Political Science*.⁴

At the same time, the study of politics is incomplete without postmodern approaches to power, context and language. As Amy Fletcher explains in her commentary on our paper, postmodernism teaches us to realize that the meanings we attribute to facts can and do vary according to ideology, culture, standpoint and historical context.⁵ We share with Fletcher the conviction that if we throw ourselves off the roof of a building, we

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will fall to the ground. We also share with both Foucault and Fletcher a deep concern for context. We recognize that gravity operates within specific contexts which parachuters, bungee jumpers, and those who contemplate suicide understand and manipulate. The meaning of gravity results from context and power. The meaning of gravity differs between those who jump off a building and those who are pushed off that same building. Power determines the context within which gravity exists, determines who is equipped, and how they will land.

Political science benefits from the postmodern call to examine the origins, meaning, and implications of power. And, as we pointed out in our article, the study of postmodern biopolitics was thriving throughout many disciplines and scholarly journals. In contrast to Patrick Stewart's conclusions in "The two cultures of 'biopolitics,'"⁶ we do not expect the demise of postmodernism in political science. While Stewart is correct to applaud the integration of life sciences approaches into the study of politics, we fear that in dismissing Foucauldian insights he misses necessary and profound opportunities for understanding the complex political world. In sum, both scientific and postmodern approaches to politics have unique and important contributions to bring to political science. We anticipate a robust and necessary future for both approaches in political science.

Despite their differences, these contrasting approaches to political phenomena share important underpinnings. As Stewart points out, a scientific approach to politics begins in a recognition of ignorance. A scientific approach relies on skepticism, observation, replication, and evolving hypotheses. "Here, the pursuit of knowledge is egalitarian and its possession humbling. It is egalitarian in the sense that it ought to be accessible to anyone with a modicum of education. It is humbling due to scientists starting with a question—they know they do not know—and ending with even more questions: they know more about what they do not know" (p. 96).⁶ Stewart applauds a scientific approach to politics for adopting this method. What he fails to acknowledge is that postmodern approaches to politics also begin in ignorance, in a recognition of all we do not and cannot know. For postmodern political scientists, meaning is fluid, transitory and contextual. Words cannot capture truth and therefore the pursuit of meaning demands an

overriding dose of skepticism. Both scientific and postmodern approaches to politics are concerned about bias and identifying the impact of bias on power and the conclusions we draw.

Learning for both approaches begins in openness to the unknown. Both approaches embrace intellectual humility. Intellectual humility calls for the courage to look into the abyss of the unknown, and to forge ahead. It demands the humility to recognize one's own ignorance and the audacity to assert that what one has discovered is important anyway. Discovery combines a belief that while we may be able to assert some things, we cannot, or do not, know everything. There are always more questions. Discovery requires that we account for our sources, root out bias, and scrutinize our own motives. This critical perspective, which Stewart applauds for its "scientific" merit, is actually a perspective that both approaches share.

Distracted by the "literary onanistic orgies" of the postmodern students of politics, Stewart neglects to recognize that for both approaches an understanding of language is pivotal for discovery. As Stewart points out, the scientific student of politics must "be able to communicate this process of exploration in such a manner to allow for replication and extension by other scientists. As such, clear communication becomes a hallmark of good science" (p. 96).⁶ Stewart contrasts this with what he regards as "the tactics of obfuscation" of postmodernists. But it is the postmodernists who elucidate the immense power of language. Foucault's regimes of veridiction capture the power of language in creating truth (with a small "t").

For example, an understanding of reproductive technologies requires an exploration of both science and the impact of language and power. While a scientific biopolitical approach to reproductive technologies provides the technical and policy foundations for understanding its development and growth in the 21st century, a postmodern biopolitical approach provides insight into how language and power give that technical knowledge and its associated policy outcomes meaning. Modern reproductive technologies result not only from the scientific manipulation of natural processes, but also from the commodification of eggs, sperm, and embryos. Capitalist markets now determine the meaning of the process and product of human reproduction. Individuals today can easily shop for sperm, eggs, and gestational carriers based on

quality, characteristics, and price. Babies now are mastered and produced rather than merely delivered as an accident of fate or a “gift from God.”

This example of both science and power at the root of the analysis of reproductive technologies clarifies the inextricability of the personal and political. What masquerades as personal choice is actually the result of processes beyond individual control. The postponement of childbearing by one individual woman cannot be explained without reference to the economic, cultural, technical, biological forces determining her choices and decision. Fletcher discerns “a dangerous tendency” in Foucault “to conflate the personal and the political.” Unfortunately, this danger is real and not merely a matter of postmodern semantics. To be sure, Fletcher does not discard a Foucauldian approach to politics as an esoteric distraction as Stewart does. While a proponent of scientific biopolitics, Fletcher retains a “sympathetic, albeit incredulous” appreciation of Foucault’s insights, which we share.

For both approaches language is important. For scientific biopolitics, a new nomenclature other than “biopolitics” would be helpful to identify the constellation of ideas and approaches which can further our understanding of political behavior, structures, and policies without confusing scientific and postmodern insights. Hannagan asserts that, “it may be neither possible nor necessary to rebrand” this intersection between politics and the life sciences. On one hand, Hannagan argues that the use of one over-arching term is perhaps not necessary. On the other hand, she suggests political psychology as just such a term. While we share with Hannagan the call for interdisciplinary collaboration, we maintain that political psychology is too narrow a subfield to capture the constellation of approaches that make up “scientific biopolitics.” While political psychology has embraced the research and methods of genetics and neuroscience, it does not include evolutionary or biopolitical perspectives. This subfield typically examines political behavior and attitudes, but not the evolutionary theoretical founda-

tions of human behavior or the public policy implications of scientific research and technology.

In conclusion, political scientists lose an opportunity for diverse insights if they dismiss either approach to political phenomena too readily. Stewart refers to two cultures of biopolitics which understand the world around them differently. We argue that both of these cultures are necessary to understanding the complex, messy political world in which we live. In rejecting the term *biopolitics* for scientific students of politics and pointing to its derogatory connotations for Foucauldian students of politics, we in no way meant to diminish the import and necessity of both approaches to politics. Indeed, we celebrate the possibilities inherent to the frequently contrary conclusions of either approach while remaining vigilant to the possibility of bias and humble in the face of the unknown.

References

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