

# Forum

## Competing meanings of “biopolitics”

### In praise of a modest postmodernism

#### Comment in response to Liesen and Walsh

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If any one of them can explain it, said Alice (she had grown so large in the last few minutes that she wasn't a bit afraid of interrupting him), I'll give him sixpence. I don't believe there's an atom of meaning in it (p. 120).<sup>1</sup>

— Lewis Carroll  
*Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*

It is wonderfully apt that the academic subfield of “biopolitics” emerged in 1967,<sup>2</sup> that magical mystery year when listening to The Beatles' album *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* (Capitol Records) could launch even non-users of LSD into a psychedelic dreamscape. That year is also the midpoint of a decade in science that included the award of a Nobel Prize to James Watson, Francis Crick and Maurice Wilkins for elucidation of the DNA double helix structure (1962), publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962), early research demonstrating successful production and intracellular replication of recombinant DNA, the first Earth Day (April 22, 1970), and significant challenges—neurological, pharmaceutical and therapeutic—to the then-dominant Freudian/psychoanalytic paradigm of mental illness.

This vibrant scientific and cultural milieu provided a perfect context for a new generation of ambitious scholars to seek to unite political science and the life sciences into a research program that could address many of the most pressing questions of the era. In

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1979, Steve Peterson and Al Somit confidently predicted that within 10 to 15 years, scholars of biopolitics would “provide convincing evidence that biological concepts and techniques can help political scientists to explain, and perhaps even predict, political behavior” (p. 337).<sup>2</sup> Yet twenty years later, these same co-authors concluded that “biopolitics' manifest failure to make an impact on the discipline to date contrasts sharply with the profession's strikingly swift acceptance of the ‘rational choice’ approach” (p. 40).<sup>3</sup>

What happened in those intervening decades? Part of the answer, as noted above, has to do with the imperial rise of rational choice, a fascinating chapter in the story of political science that Donald Green and Ian Shapiro<sup>4</sup> expertly analyzed in *The Pathologies of Rational Choice Theory* (1996) and Jonathan Cohn<sup>5</sup> explained to a popular audience in *The New Republic* (1999). Liesen and Walsh make another important contribution to the history and practice of political science in delineating the struggle between what they label “scientific biopolitics” and “Foucauldian biopolitics”—a struggle, they conclude, won by the latter. I agree with Liesen and Walsh's conclusion that a new descriptor is needed for scholarship done at the intersection of political behavior and the life sciences.<sup>6</sup> The term *biopolitics* is now essentially synonymous with the linguistic, sociological and critical approaches that are commonly and loosely grouped together as postmodernism. Finding a more appropriate name for work that focuses specifically on biological and neurological factors influencing political behavior and

attitudes would allow those political scientists well-versed in the natural sciences to advance a coherent, distinct and socially relevant subfield.

Nevertheless, framing this issue as science versus Foucault (where Foucault is a metonym for postmodernism) raises an important question: What might we lose if we cast Foucauldian biopolitics into the outer darkness of non-science? In this essay, I argue in favor of a judicious and inclusive interest in Michel Foucault's ideas and some of the research influenced by his major works. Conflating Foucault with postmodernism, and the Association for Politics and Life Sciences (APLS) with scientific biopolitics, will unnecessarily circumscribe the growth and relevance of the organization and its journal.

## A defense of Michel Foucault

To clarify at the outset, I am a member of APLS and firmly believe that if I throw myself off of a building I will fall to the ground, regardless of the cultural standpoint I adopt before taking to the ledge. As I often warn students, a lot of dangerous nonsense has been committed by academics working in the shadow of Michel Foucault. Moreover, pace George Orwell, no reasonable person should tolerate postmodern prattle such as, "It is already getting around—at what rate? in what contexts? in spite of what resistances?—that women diffuse themselves according to modalities scarcely compatible with the framework of the ruling symbolics" (p. 106),<sup>7</sup> even when that prattle is translated from French.

Yet if one is willing at least to consider Zygmunt Bauman's controversial thesis that "every ingredient of the Holocaust—all those many things that rendered it possible—was fully in keeping with everything we know about our civilization, its guiding spirit, its priorities, its immanent vision of the world" (p. 8),<sup>8</sup> then work like Foucault's begins to make more sense as a serious intellectual project. A European intellectual like Michel Foucault (1926–1984) would have witnessed, in a severely compressed amount of time, Vichy collaboration with the Nazi regime, stark confrontation with the documented reality of the Holocaust, the nauseous bad faith of many intellectuals-turned-*de facto* prosecutors (like Jean-Paul Sartre) during the *Épuration légale*,<sup>9</sup> Khrushchev's repudiation of Stalin

in 1956 (an event that generated a profound crisis of the Left in both the United States and Europe), French colonialism in Algeria and Vietnam, and the move into a Cold War world of nuclear standoff and paranoia. Every "grand narrative" presented to this generation of Western Europeans foundered, often tragically, and modern science proved no guaranteed route to truth or justice or even reliable knowledge.

As Steven Marcus recognized in a 1966 review of *Madness: The Invention of an Idea*, "in his despair of the transcendent powers of the rational intellect Foucault embodies one abiding truth of our time—the failure of the nineteenth century to make good on its promises."<sup>10</sup> Consequently, as an intellectual reaction to the catastrophes that followed the Progressive Era's faith in science as a handmaiden to inexorable medical and social progress, Foucault's decision to foreground the way in which power produces knowledge, rather than vice versa, seems quite legitimate. In the hands of many who followed in Foucault's wake—including, arguably, Foucault himself, whose late work often suffers in comparison with early masterpieces such as *Madness: The Invention of an Idea* (1954/1962)—deep skepticism about political positions masquerading as "universal" or scientific truths mutates into radical relativism, leading to moral cul-de-sacs (and some very bad writing). This is not just an academic matter, but one with potential consequences for society, given that radical postmodernism—with its attendant cynicism—deprives us of grounds upon which to reject "standpoints" such as creationism or Holocaust revisionism.

Yet Foucault's ideas do not have to equate with simplistic relativism. To get closer to Foucault's intent, "it helps if one is willing to question the ingrained social order, give up all truths firmly fixed in stone, *whilst holding on to a fragile commitment to freedom*" (emphasis mine).<sup>11</sup> This insight reminds us that anything in the realm of human behavior most certainly does *not* go, particularly when that anything leads to casual acceptance of totalitarianism

With respect to the related question of postmodernism's hostility towards science, Patrick Stewart, in his response to Liesen and Walsh, is right to remind us of the Sokal hoax, which involved the unwitting publication in the journal *Social Text* of a parody entitled "Transgressing the Boundaries: Towards a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity."<sup>12</sup> Yet even

if we accept quantum gravity as a fact—and that the journal *Social Text* made a fool of itself—we can still productively contemplate how quantum gravity reflects a specific society in a specific historical moment. Quantum gravity, regardless of its factual basis, did not drop fully formed from the sky into Western consciousness. Instead, its elucidation follows centuries of progress in physics, a particular orientation towards and system of knowledge production, the development of the modern university, careful delineation and prestige ranking of disciplines, the acceptance of norms such as peer review, and large amounts of public and private funding given to this research program. No other previous culture or intellectual tradition that we know of led to a concern with or theorization of quantum gravity. It is in this more modest and restricted sense that quantum gravity can be considered socially constructed or relative and analyzed through a Foucauldian lens. To concur with Barry Allen, “one theme in the social construction literature is the contingency of important scientific discoveries, such as quarks or microbes. The claim is not that the results are untrue or ill-founded, but only that a perfectly good science might have done without them” (p. 205).<sup>13</sup> Or, as quantum physicist Steven Weinberg notes, while “the pull of reality is what makes us go the way we go,” the “social constructivists . . . recognize that we reach a consensus about scientific discoveries through a social process” (p. 60).<sup>14</sup>

It is also important to realize that Foucault focused on the human sciences related to biology and medicine. He wisely did not spar with physics, chemistry, or mathematics, unlike many of his acolytes, but instead prioritized issues such as mental illness, sexuality and criminality in which the demarcation between science and society can easily blur. As Johanna Oksala notes, “the way botanists classify plants has no effect on how plants ‘behave,’ but in the case of human beings as scientists devise new objects, classifications and categories they generate types of people, and also types of actions and sensations” (p. 13).<sup>11</sup>

To reject Foucault entirely thus seems to me as unnecessary and unsporting as rejecting Darwin and Mendel because of the eugenics period or everything Freud wrote because we can’t locate the Id, Ego and Superego on an fMRI scan. In the book Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont wrote after their famous hoax, three prominent members of what Clive James once referred

to as the “flouncing kick-line of the postmodern intellectual cabaret”<sup>15</sup>—Jacques Lacan, Julia Kristeva, and Jean Baudrillard—get entire chapters to themselves, and the book provides a painstaking and often funny account of their numerous trespasses against syntax, physics, and common sense. Yet Michel Foucault, who famously rejected the postmodernist label, is cited only briefly. I expect that this is because early Foucault matters and cannot be rejected quite so easily even in a polemical book. His insights into the way in which classifications such as “sane” and “insane” emerge and solidify were brilliant and necessary because, to paraphrase Thomas Huxley’s reaction when he first read Darwin’s ideas about natural selection, it is the sort of thing that everyone should have noticed before but didn’t.

Edifices of relativistic nonsense were built upon Foucault’s original observations, and Foucault himself evinced in later life a dangerous tendency to conflate the personal and the political. In the mid-1980s, for unfathomable reasons, he willfully ignored the escalating HIV/AIDS crisis, leading critic Mark Lilla to wonder if “his suspicion of the ‘discourses’ of disease and the medical ‘regard’ had finally rendered him insensible to any distinction between a biological factum and its social interpretation” (p. 157).<sup>16</sup> Yet we only have to look at the construction of homosexuality from 1973 (when the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* classified it as a serious mental disorder) to 1987 (when references to it as a mental illness were removed altogether) to realize that the ways in which we categorize individuals and groups vary across time and cultures. The neural, genetic and environmental determinants of sexual orientation, for example, could be couched as scientific questions, presumably amenable to empirical investigation and to the generation of hypotheses that could be confirmed or disconfirmed. However, a Foucauldian approach points us in a different direction, towards investigating how and why categories such as homosexual (or sane or mad or deviant) emerge in the first place. Indeed, per the example above, we could productively step further back to consider what type of society constructs a *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* and what purpose is served by such fine-grained categories of human behavior and identity.

So, in summary, what can Foucault bring to the study of politics and the life sciences? It certainly is not

ease of reading or even conceptual consistency. Steven Marcus incisively described Foucault's prose as dense and impenetrable and the author as arrogant, careless, and imprecise.<sup>10</sup> Yet in that same review of *Madness: The Invention of an Idea*, Marcus concludes that "such charges would be grave indeed if they were brought to bear upon another book. In Foucault's work they seem in the end hardly to matter. In spite of all the defects I have listed, it seems to me that Foucault has written a work of unquestionable originality and importance."<sup>10</sup> Indeed he had—and a key aspect of that book's enduring significance with respect to many of the issues relevant to APLS lies in its analytical approach. For example, genetics likely will prove important in explaining and predicting political behavior.<sup>17</sup> Robust social scientific analysis of the linkages between politics and the life sciences deserves concerted attention and funding.

Yet biology has long since left the cozy dens of the gentlemen scientists who abounded in the late nineteenth century and has become an industrial and political entity whose practices impact all of us. International security and global competitiveness, we are now told, depend upon an ever-escalating financial and educational investment in molecular biology, among other privileged sciences. Even if this is true, and it may be, Foucault encourages us to consider how this came to pass, whether things could or should have gone differently, and wonder what might have happened if they had. He also prods us to think deeply about the real people and the deep history behind the categories we use in both scientific analysis and public policy. When Foucault asked, "How did our culture come to give mental illness the meaning of deviancy and to the patient a status that excludes him" (p. 105),<sup>18</sup> he did no lasting damage to science but instead made possible a research agenda that operates alongside it, much as the Renaissance court jester provoked, mocked, and contradicted the king in an attempt to keep him honest.

The king, of course, always had the upper hand, just as science continues to today, despite all of the postmodern nonsense rightfully criticized by Clive James, Alan Sokal and others. This is why I think Liesen and Walsh's article is such an important contribution, and why I hope this discussion about scientific biopolitics versus Foucauldian biopolitics, which is implicitly a discussion about the future of

APLS, continues. Liesen and Walsh's overall exegesis of biopolitics is superb. Yet I believe that rejecting Foucault's ideas in favor of a strictly defined focus on genetic and neurological determinants of political behavior would impoverish APLS. The organization and its community of scholars may ultimately decide to dispense with Foucauldian biopolitics altogether, since "if there's no meaning in it, that saves a world of trouble, you know, as we needn't try to find any." And yet, as Lewis Carroll's king concluded, "I don't know... I seem to see some meaning after all" (p. 120).<sup>1</sup>

## Note

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