

# Biopolicy after three decades

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Thirty years ago there were at most only a handful of political scientists who were interested in or publishing about policy issues in the life sciences, concentrated primarily in the health or environmental policy areas. As a result, political science was notably absent as a discipline either in the literature, at conferences, or as members of state or national commissions, advisory bodies, or institutional review boards involving the life sciences.

Although most of the early activity in biopolitics understandably was focused on the evolutionary and behavioral aspects, from the beginning Thomas Wiegeler and others believed it was vital to ensure that biopolitics coverage was inclusive and that the policy dimension be a critical component.<sup>1,2</sup> For that reason, when building the graduate program in biopolitics at Northern Illinois University, Wiegeler's first faculty hire was a policy person. This is also why one of the two articles in the premier issue of the journal was "Biopolicy: A Restatement of Its Role in Politics and the Life Sciences."<sup>3</sup>

In that article, I argued that scholars in all areas of politics and the life sciences had significant contributions to make to biopolicy because they possessed an awareness and appreciation of biological fact and a grasp of the relevant biological issues. Until that time, the enunciation and shaping of issues in the life sciences had come from biological scientists themselves and from the then-emerging bioethics movement. I outlined a range of biopolicy issues at the individual, societal and global levels (see Table 1) and stated that these areas represented but the surface of an extensive array of biopolicy concerns that should be of interest to

scholars in biopolitics. In each case, the political ramifications were widespread and complicated and I asserted that a biopolitical perspective would be helpful.

I contended then that if we as political scientists were to transcend disciplinary boundaries, it was imperative that our discipline be able to offer life scientists, policy makers, and the interested broader public tangible guidance regarding the policy ramifications of the rapid advances across the life sciences. I also argued that political scientists had a useful perspective as well as substantive knowledge about the political process to offer those in the life sciences.

More importantly, fundamental policy questions needed to be addressed on the basis of the unfolding knowledge of the evolutionary foundations of political systems and political behavior, such as whether the current political institutions were capable of dealing with new issues produced by biology. To that end, I argued that we must make clear the policy implications of knowledge gained through biobehavioral research, including a need for expanded time frames for public policy and for more comprehensive, anticipatory assessment of a policy on future generations. Thus, we needed to influence the very framework of policy decision making by infusing biobehavioral knowledge into research on the policy process itself. For good examples of potentially valuable contributions to this new policy framework, see Corning on synergism,<sup>4</sup> Somit and Peterson on democracy,<sup>5</sup> Caldwell on biocracy,<sup>6</sup> and Masters,<sup>7</sup> Flohr,<sup>8</sup> and Losco<sup>9</sup> on bureaucracy, just to cite a few.

In summary, I argued for the need for a systematic effort to coordinate and integrate the then-divergent areas of biopolicy research if we were to have any input

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**Table 1. Areas of biopolicy.**

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*Individual issues*

Human genetic intervention:

Genetic counseling, carrier screening, genetic therapy

Prenatal issues:

Abortion, prenatal diagnosis, reproductive technologies, fetal research, sterilization, sex predetermination

Issues within the lifecycle:

Nutrition and behavior, organ transplantation, psychosurgery and electrical brain stimulation, drug therapy and usage, human experimentation, environmental mutations

Death-related issues:

Aging process, irreversible coma, terminal patients, terminal pediatric patients, suicide intervention, extraordinary care, definitions of death

*Societal-oriented issues*

Genetic diversity and human equality, population control, sex differences, race differences, aging populations, sedentary lifestyle, crowding, genetic determinants of behavior, biohazards, nature/nurture debate

*Global-oriented issues*

Environment, contamination of biosphere, climate change and manipulation, toxic biological/chemical substances, biological terrorism, radiation pollution, conflict/global stress

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Source: Robert H. Blank, "Biopolicy: A restatement of its role in politics and the life sciences," *Politics and the Life Sciences*, 1982, 1(1):38–51.

to the direction of policy in complex and politically sensitive life science-based issues. In turn, this required devising a mechanism to bring together those individuals who, despite coming from disparate formal backgrounds extending from political philosophy to international relations, had a shared interest in biological developments, thus providing a community of scholars engaged in a dialogue about biopolicy issues, much as bioethics had done for philosophy.

The written responses to my article varied considerably. David Beam curtly dismissed it as merely a call to add biopolicy to the "catalogue of policy specializations," and that it was bound to fail.<sup>10</sup> Odelia Funke was more measured in her skepticism but raised important clarifications that I tried to address in my author's response, particularly regarding any public advocacy role such an endeavor might produce.<sup>11</sup> In contrast, Jim Schubert<sup>12</sup> and Keith Caldwell<sup>13</sup> were enthusiastic in their support of my suggestions and reiterated that biopolicy offers a means to challenge and possibly restructure the basic premises of the policy making process as well as our fundamental values regarding human nature. Caldwell emphasized that the structures and procedures of politics were poorly adapted to deal with biopolicy issues and that

scholars in biopolitics had a valuable role to play in working to change this situation.

In essence I advocated for the following in my article:

1. More active research and publications in mainstream journals with a focus on both substantive and procedural biopolicy issues;
2. Increased linkages with those in life sciences to open and interdisciplinary biopolicy dialogue;
3. Expanded coverage of biopolicy in the journal;
4. Increased involvement/visibility of scholars knowledgeable of biopolitics on national commissions, and advisory bodies.

In looking back over the past three decades, to what extent have we succeeded or failed to meet these objectives?

Evidence suggests that we have made some progress in item 4 as demonstrated by an increasing number of members active on key advisory bodies in life science-based areas. However, as a whole, political scientists remain underrepresented as compared to other disciplines. Prior to the formation of the Association for Politics and the Life Sciences, Keith Caldwell served as an advisor or consultant to Congress, the Departments of Commerce, Energy, Defense, and Interior, and the NIH among scores of other scientific policy bodies, and is best known as one of the principal architects of the National Environmental Policy Act and designer of the environmental impact statement. Since the formation of APLS, activity has widened. Ira Carmen, for instance, was the first political scientist to be a member of the Human Genome Organisation (HUGO), the international organization of genome scientists. Similarly, Andrea Bonnicksen served as a core participant in projects sponsored by the Hastings Center and American Association for the Advancement of Science and was a long-time member and co-chair of the Ethics Committee of the American Society for Reproductive Medicine.

Roger Masters has consulted for the Department of Defense and has been active in local and national bodies on lead poisoning and water fluoridation. Robert Blank served as a member of the advisory panels on Neuroscience and Infertility for the Office of Technology Assessment (OTA) and was the only political scientist among the 100 participants at the

**Table 2. Biopolicy coverage in *Politics and the Life Sciences*, 1982–2010.**

<i>Topics published</i>
Abortion policy
Acid rain
Agricultural policy
Assisted suicide, advance directives
Biological weapons, BWC verification, toxins, BW and terrorism, poison weapons taboo
Biopolicy and democracy
Biotechnology
Cancer policy
Chemical weapons
Ecology
Embryonic stem cell research, fetal transplantation, embryo disposal practices
Environmental policy
Fetal protection policies, parental-fetal conflict, mandated treatment for pregnant substance abusers
Germ line gene therapy, human embryos and genetic testing, genetics in the workplace
HIV/AIDS policy
Human cloning, cloning laws, Dolly, human genetic engineering, human tissue banking, FDA/gene therapy
Human reproduction, ARTS, IVF, donor insemination, donor gametes and embryos
Marine biotechnology
Neuroscience policy
Organ transplantation, organ trading
Prenatal diagnosis
Technology policy
Transgenesis in farm animals, xeno-transplantation, animal biotechnology
Vaccine policy, physician reimbursement, barriers to SCHIP enrollment
Wetlands policy, natural ecosystems
Wildlife conservation, Sierra Club/immigration policy
Workplace hazards
Yellow rain

2003 Asilomar for Neuroscience meeting in San Francisco that formalized the field of neuroethics. In addition, Raymond Zilinskas was active at OTA, the Industrial Development Organization of the United Nations and the U.S. Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, where he worked on biological and toxin warfare issues. He was also a member of the U.N. Special Commission where he participated in two biological warfare-related inspections and developed a protocol to guide its monitoring and verification program as well as being a consultant to the Departments of State and Defense. Certainly there have been other APLS members on local, state, national and international bodies.

Items 2 and 3 ask whether APLS has contributed to the dialogue in biopolicy. Here the answer is an unquestionable “yes.” APLS panels at APSA, IPSA, and

other societies, as well as at its autonomous conferences in recent years, have included numerous panels on biopolicy. Moreover, in my review of the contents for all volumes of the journal (volumes 1 to 29), I found that about 35 to 40 percent of the articles were in the policy area, largely substantive. Many of these articles, especially during the editorial era of Tom Wiegeler, had multiple commentaries (averaging 5 to 7) drawn from many disciplines. Table 2 lists the substantive topics addressing biopolicy covered in *Politics and the Life Sciences*, in alphabetical order.

More importantly from the standpoint of contributing to an interdisciplinary dialogue, the journal, especially during Gary Johnson’s editorship, featured symposia or special issues on a wide range of policy areas that sometimes included up to 20 commentaries written by an array of top experts from many disciplines, including both academics and practitioners (see Table 3).

Thus, it is clear that the association, both through its conferences and its journal, has played a valuable role in defining the issues and providing a forum for discussion of a broad range of biopolicy issues.

Regarding item 1 above, there appears to have been increased publication and citation of our work in mainstream journals, although it has been a very sluggish and disjointed process. Even the more policy oriented journals have been remiss in publishing substantive biological-based policy articles. Moreover, although some APLS members have published in health

**Table 3. Biopolicy symposia in *Politics and the Life Sciences*, 1982–2010.**

<i>Symposium topic</i>	<i>Number of articles/commentaries</i>
Adolescent sexuality and public policy	20
Chemical/biological terrorism	20
Human genetic diversity project	20
Pregnancy and substance abuse	13
Regulating germ line therapy	13
Bioethics and public policy	12
Genetics and crime	12
Germ line genetics	12
Challenges of biological warfare	10
Biological weapons	9
Symposium on the Earth Summit	9
Biotechnology and international conflict	8
Parental-fetal conflict	5
World Commission on Dams	5
Surrogate motherhood	4

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policy journals, there has been at best limited exposure of political scientists in life science or medical journals.

On the broader point I raised 30 years ago, has biopolicy become a distinct area of study like bioethics? Unfortunately, the answer must be a definite “no.” Although political scientists have become more active in researching and publishing on life science-related topics, the work continues to be fragmented with little coordination. From my review of articles appearing in the journal, it is evident that many scholars have published one or more articles in an area and then disappeared from the radarscope. Perhaps this is understandable given the broad range of interrelated biopolicy issues but it also might reflect a continuing need to publish in more traditional political science areas in order to secure tenure and promotion.

In turn, this unfortunately reflects a reality that, despite making some inroads over the last three decades, biopolicy still has not become a fully legitimate area of study for mainstream political science. This is reinforced by the fact that, as compared to the plentiful positions in bioethics, there has yet to be an advertised academic position in political science exclusively in *biopolicy*. The bottom line is that, in spite of its impressive success in furthering the dialogue over biopolicy, the skepticism expressed by Beam and Funke regarding the organizational aspects of my 1982 article appears to have been justified. Hopefully, the encouraging infusion of young scholars with an interest in substantive biopolicy issues and the policy process in general, driven by remarkable developments in genetics, neuroscience and other areas of the life sciences, will add momentum toward building on the foundation that APLS has provided over these first three decades.

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