What hath biopolitics wrought?

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Although there may be some disagreement about the exact date, I think it safe to say that the biopolitics movement was launched in the 1960s. Now, a half century later, it may be appropriate to pose the rather obvious, if somewhat delicate, question: What has biopolitics contributed to political science? Here, I will try to persuade you that a biopolitical approach may have yielded answers to a couple of the most debated issues in political philosophy—one, the granddady of them all, is "What is the nature of political man?" The other, much more recent, but steadily increasing in importance, is "Why are democracies so rare and so fragile?"

Granted, I am not altogether a disinterested party on either of these questions—but I will do my best to be reasonably objective.

What has biopolitics contributed to political science?

As you know, the nature of political man has been a matter of controversy from Greek classical political thought to the present. How philosophers see political man profoundly influences their other conclusions. If you view mankind as inherently and fixedly self-centered, as do Machiavelli, Hobbes, and Burke, you draw one set of conclusions as to the proper role of government. If, on the other hand, you see mankind as good, or at least capable of being made good, a la Locke, Rousseau, Mill, Paine, and most of the utopians, you arrive at quite different positions.

The nature of political man has been the major point of contention between the aforementioned two great traditions in political philosophy—and, though often obscured in the fire and smoke of debate, remains the key difference between contemporary conservatives and those whom we now call liberals. Needless to say, this is much more than just a theoretical dispute—it has a direct bearing on how, in actual politics and government, the contestants identify those problems which they believe call for governmental action, the rival solutions they propose, and the price they are prepared to pay for those solutions.

How, then, to resolve this ancient controversy? The proverbial woman from mars would tartly say, "That's easy. Let's look at several thousand years of human history and let the record speak for itself."

That's exactly what the great historian, Edward Gibbon did—and, as you recall, his verdict was less than flattering. "History," he wrote, "is indeed little more than the register of the crimes, follies, and misfortunes of mankind."[1] To be sure, that was quite a while ago, but not many would argue that much happened in the intervening centuries to seriously challenge that judgment.

To which there is the counter-argument: How can we rule out the possibility that, this dismal record aside, humans are inherently good but that, as Rousseau argued, they are corrupted by society?

This led, in turn, to the search for man in "the state of nature"—that is, humans before they have been molded by society. Eager to see if that made a difference, anthropologists fanned out in search of "primitive" societies that might give some clue as to the nature of life in the state of nature.

The quest was not very rewarding. Primitive societies have long histories—they are primitive only in terms of their material culture. Furthermore, the anthropologists tended to see what they wanted to see, often

doi: 10.2990/30_1_95

https://doi.org/10.2990/30_1_95 Published online by Cambridge University Press

leading to angry disagreements between those who had studied the same primitive people.

By the late decades of the twentieth century, however, there emerged a broad consensus among anthropologists (and human ethologists) that, with rare exceptions, human social and political behavior in these societies had an uncomfortable resemblance to that of more "advanced" peoples.

A new approach

What next? The well-publicized work of the ethologists and primatologists who viewed animal behavior in evolutionary, NeoDarwinian terms, suggested that it might be fruitful to compare human social and political behavior with that of the social primates generally, and especially that of the species closest to us—the chimpanzees.

You know what happened, namely, the battle over "good chimp, bad chimp." First, the good chimp (Goodall); then, alas, the bad chimp—Goodall's second book described a clear-cut social heirarchy, vicious and constant battles for status, warfare between competing chimpanzee "tribes," and cannibalism within the same tribe.

Next, to the rescue, came the "good" bonobo chimps—peaceful, egalitarian, and deeply committed to making love rather than war. Unfortunately, this entrancing depiction soon faded as more data became available. Yes, the bonobos in zoos spend an inordinate amount of time and effort in making love—but, as one perhaps envious observer asked, "What else do they have to do?" That aside, sad to say, the bonobos, although smaller in size than their fellow chimps, evinced much the same habits as their fellow great apes.

Granting that all the evidence may not yet be in, what are the behavioral tendencies of our species as they emerge from the reports of ethologists, primatologists, and anthropologists? Some traits seem to be unique to *Homo sapiens*: language, of course; the capacity to create a complex culture; and, the ability to develop beliefs often running counter to some of our most powerful innate tendencies—and even to sacrifice ourselves in behalf of these ideas. As those who follow the literature are aware, there is now a growing debate as to whether we have an absolute or a relative monopoly on language and culture.

There are, however, many other less praiseworthy behavioral proclivities that we share with our fellow primates. Among these are hierarchical social structures, endless status seeking, aggression, selfishness, an aversion to celibacy, an often reluctant and unreliable commitment to monogamy, xenophobia, ethnocentrism and nepotistic favoritism.[2,3] These behaviors have become part of our genetic legacy because they have served, on balance, to maximize the inclusive fitness of our ancestral fellow speciates, and the fellow speciates from which they, in even earlier times, evolved.

This strongly suggests that, on the nature of political man, the evidence favors the skeptic—surely something to be taken into consideration in determining public policy. As Edmund Burke reminded his fellow members of Parliament, "we cannot change the nature of things and of man, but must act upon them as best we can."

(For an excellent treatment of the reluctant realization in the other social and behavioral sciences that biological factors might possibly influence human behavior, see Carl Degler's *In Search of Human Nature*.[4] For a more detailed description of that development in political science, see Steve Peterson's paper in this issue.)

Democracy—rare and fragile

Now for the other, more recent but increasingly vexing question: "Why are democracies so rare and so fragile?"

With regard to rarity, there can be little argument. There was Athens, briefly, and then, for a century or two, the Roman Republic. After that, an almost 2,000-year gap until the middle of the nineteenth century. Even today, in the so-called "age of democracy," democracies are still very much a minority mode of government.

Why so rare? There is general agreement among those who have studied the matter that democracies require a unique combination of social, political and economic prerequisites or "enabling conditions." When these conditions come together, democracy is at least possible; when they are absent, a viable democracy is very, very unlikely.

Most political scientists are familiar with these essential preconditions: reasonably equitable distribu-

https://doi.org/10.2990/30_1_95 Published online by Cambridge University Press

tion of wealth, education, urbanization, communication networks, ethnic-linguistic-religious unity, a striving "out elite," flexibility of the existing regime, previous experience with democracy, and a predisposing civic culture.

But why should democracy, alone of possible governmental forms, have such difficult requirements? (A cautionary note here: folk wisdom warns that, if you might not like the answer, don't ask the question. I say this because a not very welcome answer has been foreshadowed by our discussion of "the nature of political man.")

From a NeoDarwinian perspective, these special enabling conditions are required because democracy runs counter to a powerful human behavioral tendency. Biologically speaking, humans are social primates (embarrassingly akin genetically to the chimpanzees) and, over several million years, evolution has endowed the social primates with an innate predisposition for hierarchical social and political structures. That is, social primates almost invariably form groups, troops, tribes, and societies characterized by marked individual differences in terms of status, dominance and submission, command and obedience, and by unequal access to many of the good things of life. Sad to say, the primary reason for the prevalence of authoritarian governments, for the rarity of democracy, and for why democracy demands such special enabling conditions is to be found not in our stars but in our genes.

I would be remiss if I did not at least mention two policy implications of the complex of conditions required for a successful democracy. With regard to foreign policy, it is sheer folly to attempt what is euphemistically called "nation building," i.e, to export democracy to nations where these conditions are largely absent. With regard to domestic policy, we should remember that the requisite conditions are not immortal. If they are not carefully cherished and protected—and the track record in the U.S. has not been so good of late—our own democracy may be gravely endangered.

In closing, I must surely note that over the course of the years, many of the founders who should be contributing to this discussion have been called to positions in a much higher university. Although I'm not sure exactly where that institution is located, it is no doubt a place where everyone effortlessly makes full professor; where all faculty have at least seven highly competent research assistants; where there are no departmental committees or chores—and where there is always ample travel money. Among the founders whom we have lost to this higher calling are Fred Kort, Bill MacKenzie, Glen Schubert, Jim Schubert, David Singer, Joe Tanenhaus, John Wahlke, Tom Wiegle, and Rudolf Wildenmann.

We truly miss them as colleagues and as close friends.

References

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