Revisiting BioPolitics: concept, past history and current reality, future developments

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Abstract

Confusingly, the term biopolitics is used to describe two quite different bodies of thought – the Neo-Darwinian biopolitics developed by American political scientists in the mid-1960s and the ideas proposed by Foucault about a decade later. Two questions arise: “How do the two differ?” and “What, if anything, can they contribute to the quest for a biologically based ethics?”

Several factors led to the birth of the Neo-Darwinian version. The most important was dissatisfaction with the mainstream political sciences’ dictum that “social behavior is socially determined” i.e., learned, and its corollary that any biological influence could – and should – be ignored. (Not surprisingly that dissatisfaction was heightened by the well-publicized post-World War II advances in ethology and primatology.) The net result was the rejection of the “learning is all” dogma in favor of a paradigm which views behavior as shaped by the inter-play between cultural and biological influences – and especially by our social primate genetic legacy.

From the perspective of evolutionary theory, humans (Homo sapiens) are great apes, the most “advanced” of the social primates, and share many behavioral tendencies with our fellow social primates. Over myriad millennia, natural selection and “inclusive fitness” (the ability of a species to reproduce its genes, given the challenges posed by its environment) have inclined the social primates to hierarchical social and political structures characterized by marked differences of status, power and access to both the necessities and luxuries of life. Predictably, we have evolved the behavioral correlates of hierarchy – insatiable status seeking, dominance where possible and obedience when not, a readiness to resort to deception and violence, nepotism and xenophobia, to mention only the most familiar.

All in all, not a very attractive legacy. Nonetheless, it served our species well, as evidenced by its swift spread around the globe. But inclusive fitness is relative to environment – and as the world has become increasingly complex over the past 15,000 years, behaviors evolved millions of years ago now threaten the welfare of our species, possibly its very existence.
Differences? Whereas Neo-Darwinian biopolitics has its roots in political science and biology, Foucault's version had its origins (circa 1975-78) in philosophy. Another difference is that Neo-Darwinism focuses on individual behavior: Foucault is primarily concerned with the state, arguing that, since the 16th century, “political power” has sought to extend its dominion over every aspect of human life and, when enabled by technology, the mind and body. A third is that while Neo-Darwinian biopolitics draws from ethology and primatology, as well as evolutionary theory, Foucault relies more heavily on his interpretations of history.

Despite these differences, both versions of “biopolitics” can contribute to the quest for a biologically based ethics. Neo-Darwinism offers a better understanding of the behavior of the species for whom the ethical system is intended and stresses the importance of relating the ethical system to the environmental challenges with which the species must cope. Above all, it emphasizes the need for an informed concern with the possible negative effects that system might have on the inclusive fitness of the species. From Foucault, we get the desirability of scanning history for possible guidance, of imaginative thinking, and of seeking a viable balance between the aspirations of “political power” and the inherent rights of the “population.”