

Man Is by Nature a Political Animal

EVOLUTION, BIOLOGY, AND POLITICS

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*Deep friendship
study of individual
dedicate our effort
us with universal
their place in our*

Foreword

James Druckman

There were few aspects of my childhood as predictable as the subject of our dinner conversations. The discussion invariably gravitated to the topic of nature versus nurture, with the point being that all one is springs from his or her environment. As a product of my upbringing, I came to share this belief. Another fundamental lesson from my social psychologist father concerned the importance of rigorous demonstration of evidence that satisfied the highest of scientific standards. For much of my career as a social scientist, these two values rarely, if ever, generated dissonance. But that has changed. The last several years have seen a dramatic rise, across the social sciences, in approaches that ground themselves in the fundamentals of human biology, including physiology and genetics. No social science discipline has been untouched; indeed, one might have imagined that the most resistant would be sociology, yet a 2008 special issue of the *American Journal of Sociology* entitled *Exploring Genetics and Social Structure* suggests otherwise. In some ways, political science has lagged behind. The present volume is an attempt to make up ground and move political science forward in the consideration of these approaches to explain important political phenomena.

The scholars at the forefront of this movement, including all the authors in this book, are careful, thoughtful, and rigorous scientists. It is for this reason that I find myself in a state of conflict: the substance of the argument counters my inclinations but the evidence, while like all research subject to critique, appears beyond reproach when it comes to serious, honest efforts to reveal social and political dynamics. While I am not yet sure where this leaves my thinking (other than uncomfortably conflicted), I am certain that reading this volume would behoove the entire discipline: critics need to assess what the approach offers at this point, supporters will learn of the latest findings and trends, and agnostics will want to know of a movement making its presence felt throughout academia and beyond (e.g., Lynch with Laursen 2009).

When I contemplate the larger research agenda on biology and politics, a number of considerations—some of which I am sure are more thoughtful than others—come to mind. In what follows, I discuss these considerations. These points are not meant as a checklist to be addressed in an individual study

or even an entire volume of studies. Rather, they constitute a nonexhaustive and nonexclusive set of parameters with which one can assess the collective research endeavor. The points discussed also could apply to any emergent approach; for example, they map quite nicely onto the concerns that permeate debates about rational choice. My motivation for presenting them here is to provide a rudimentary framework for readers as they make their way through the volume.

My first point involves the basic questions being addressed: are they *politically interesting*? To many, the question of whether biological processes (e.g., genetics) impact political attitudes and behaviors is of tangential interest. It is akin to asking a question about a possible independent variable, and probabilistically, if one searches long enough, he or she will find significant correlations. A more compelling approach is to identify a topic of interest and develop a theory on why there may be a biological link. While extant work—some of which is discussed in this volume—has done this (e.g., work on the genetics of cooperation), it is critical to clarify the contribution to a general understanding of the phenomenon under study. Is adding a biological component akin to identifying an omitted variable? Is it isolating a more fundamental causal force that is mediated by other, nonbiologically measured variables? Is it reorienting the entire theory by replacing existing explanations? In short, there must be a substantive rationale to stimulate scholars interested in the political variable under study (e.g., cooperation, an attitude) to care about biology. If that involves more than adding another variable to the explanation (without altering what we already know), even better.

Second, virtually all scholars working on biology and politics recognize that interactive relationships between biology and the environment ultimately determine behavior. Exactly how this works lies at the heart of the research program. As prominent sociologist Jeremy Freese (2008, S28–S29) explains, “The years ahead will yield increased understanding of the biological mechanisms of genomic causation, and sociology needs to complement this by articulating the social mechanisms that cause genetic differences to be more or less relevant.” Political scientists have begun to do this (e.g., McDermott et al. 2009), but what is incumbent on political scientists is to isolate not the social mechanisms but rather the *political levers*. Political context unifies the discipline, and incorporating unique political situations—which often involve the distribution of scarce resources—is critical. For example, social scientists have built the field of *social neuroscience*; what political scientists must do is construct *political neuroscience*.

Third, this volume brings together a host of perspectives including evo-

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lutionary biology/psychology, genetics, physiology, and neuroscience. The authors surely understand the relationships between these approaches. It is essential, however, that they clearly communicate how the different biological approaches relate to one another—how do the perspectives cohere with one another in terms of implications and assumptions? Does taking an evolutionary approach necessarily imply genetically driven individual differences? Does using physiological measures entail making assumptions about heredity? It is exactly for this reason—the need to compare and contrast distinct, but related, perspectives—that edited volumes (such as this one) that include multiple views are so essential.

Fourth, I have observed a commonplace phenomenon where individuals in their everyday lives assume that any *unexplained variance implies a biological (genetic) link*. For example, many believe one is born a genius or sports star, yet research suggests both result from fortuitous circumstances and, most important, deliberate practice (e.g., Feltovich, Prietula, and Ericsson 2006, Coyle 2009). The existence of wide variance in an attitude or behavior does not mean that the extremes of the distribution stem from innate skills.

The authors in this volume generally do not fall prey to this logical fallacy. I encourage others to follow suit by being extremely clear as to what can and cannot be explained. Environmental forces are not easily observed and thus failure to pinpoint a situational factor does not mean biology (which is unobservable to most) is at work. Just as scholars demand clear documentation of an exact environmental variable, they should also require identification of precise biological processes (and how the environmental and biological interact). This volume offers a number of examples of how this can be achieved.

My fifth point is a sensitive one, concerning consideration of the *policy implications*. Many perceive a connection between biological approaches and conservative ideologies (e.g., since biological approaches often privilege individual actions and responsibility rather than social situations). It turns out that relationship is more complex and domain specific (e.g., conservatives invoke genetic explanations of socioeconomic topics but liberals do so for other issues such as sexual orientation; see Suhay and Jayaratne 2010). Nonetheless, given what I believe are still common stereotypes, scholars should be cognizant of how their work may be invoked.

Another relevant policy matter concerns the explosion of biological-based research and how that work can be used. The 2008 Genetic Information Non-discrimination Act bars employers and health insurers from discriminating based on genetic information. The politics behind these and other policies are worth study themselves. While this may lie outside the purview of those

employing biology to explain political behaviors, it can be seen as part of the larger agenda.

Finally, as several chapters in the volume make clear, biological approaches introduce a host of methods unfamiliar to most political scientists. It is incumbent on those applying the methods *to make them as transparent as possible and to also follow debates in related fields*. Political scientists have long been importers of new methodologies, and it is clear that one must do more than pick and choose, but rather become fully conversant in the literatures of other fields. Failure to do so can significantly impair progress (see, e.g., Druckman, Kuklinski, and Sigelman 2009). Several chapters in the volume do exemplary jobs at describing the latest approaches in a way that is accessible to those of us who lack any background. There is no doubt that many of the contributors to this volume are thoroughly trained in the methods they employ. Moreover, political scientists have already engaged in serious debate about some of these methodologies (e.g., the equal environment assumption underlying inferences taken from twin studies; see, e.g., Beckwith and Morris 2008, Alford, Funk, and Hibbing 2008, Suhay and Kalmoe 2009).

Having read this volume, I can confidently say that these issues are being considered and addressed by those working on biology and politics. While the volume has not entirely eliminated my aforementioned dissonance about biological approaches and rigorous social science, it has very much shaped my thinking and left me excited about future research and debates.

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