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).1

— Lewis Carroll
Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland

It is wonderfully apt that the academic subfield of “biopolitics” emerged in 1967,2 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 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).2 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).3

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 Shapiro4 expertly analyzed in The Pathologies of Rational Choice Theory (1996) and Jonathan Cohn5 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.6 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...