



## Wrong Problem, Wrong Solution

A Review of

*A Troublesome Inheritance: Genes, Race, and Human History*

by Nicholas Wade

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Reviewed by

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Have you spent a lot of time, or really any time, wondering about why Jews in the Middle Ages were “heavily engaged in moneylending” (book under review, p. 202), and indeed, why it was “the principal occupation of Jews in England, France, and Germany” (p. 202)? (Who would have thought that there would be such a huge market for moneylenders?) Of course, in later times, they also were engaged in tax farming, which, if you are unfamiliar with the occupation, occurred “when you give the prince his money up front, then extract the taxes due from his subjects” (p. 203). And the stories you may have heard about Jews being forced into moneylending or being forcibly dispersed by pogroms and raids, forget them: “Jews were not forced into moneylending but rather chose it because it was so profitable, and. . .they generally dispersed not because of persecution but because there were jobs for only so many moneylenders in each town” (p. 210). This interest in money and exploitation is genetic, according to Nicholas Wade in *A Troublesome Inheritance: Genes, Race, and Human History*. Perhaps it’s just me, but this is very weird “science.”

You may have thought that Israel originated in 1948, but if so, you are way off: “The basis of the common resemblance is that Jews originated in Israel and carry shared inheritance from the Semitic population of the region” (p. 199). You also will learn that the amazing and long history of Jewish philosophy and theology is almost beside the point as “Before the rabbinical era, Israelite religion was focused on the temple in Jerusalem and on copious animal sacrifices” (p. 210). This will be news to pretty much all scholars of Jewish history and certainly to anyone except those who share some of the crassest stereotypes about Jewish history.

If this radical rewriting of history takes your breath away—as it did mine—you are getting an idea of what Wade’s book has to offer you. Of course, Wade’s main thrust in his book is about race, not religion.

The reader knows where the author is going on page 1, where Wade refers to the “fact of race.” Although the validity of the concept of biological race is, to say the least, debated, it becomes clear quickly that the author has his mind made up. He then informs us, as well as informing the many scientists studying human evolution, that “anyone interested in recent

human evolution is almost inevitably studying human races, whether they wish to or not" (p. 2). This is a definitely a man whose mind is made up.

Wade is convinced that "there is indeed a biological reality to race, despite official statements to the contrary by leading social science organizations" (p. 4). He then cites statements by the American Anthropological Association and American Sociological Association to document social scientists' lack of understanding of genetics. The problem is that many if not most geneticists do not believe in a biological concept of race either, including ones that Wade cites to support his point of view.

For example, in Chapter 5, Wade cites work of Sarah Tishkoff et al. (2009), but Tishkoff's work does not actually use race either as an explanatory or descriptive variable. He also cites work of Cavalli-Sforza and colleagues in support of his arguments (Bowcock et al., 1994), but Cavalli-Sforza's position is the exact opposite of Wade's. Wade sometimes acknowledges disagreements and seeks psychological explanations for them. For example, the distinguished anthropologist Ashley Montagu, who vigorously opposed a biological concept of race, studied under Franz Boas, "a champion of racial equality" (p. 69) and moreover was "Jewish, [and] grew up in the East End district of London, where he experienced considerable anti-Semitism" (p. 69). The distinguished UCLA geographer Jared Diamond, another opponent of a biological concept of race, is wrong, as is biologist Francis Collins, Director of the Human Genome Project and the National Institutes of Health. He refers to such biologists as guilty of "obfuscations on the subject of race" (p. 68). And Wade dismisses Craig Venter, "the leading decoder of the human genome" (p. 68), who denies the existence of a biological construct of race as having "no known expertise in the relevant discipline of population genetics" (p. 68). This is a rather astonishing statement coming from a reporter writing a book in an area in which he has no known expertise. He prefers to follow Winthrop Jordan, who had no training in genetics but was an historian and professor of Afro-American Studies at the University of Mississippi.

Wade confounds two different ideas, and this confounding is partly responsible for the confusion that underlies this book. The first idea is a biological concept of race, which is not tenable. The confusion first emerges on p. 4, where Wade states that "geneticists now can track along an individual's genome and assign each segment to an African or European ancestor, an exercise that would be impossible if race did not have some basis in biological reality."

The confusion of a need for race with the possibility of assigning genomes to different parts of the world underlies the whole book. It is certainly true that genes can be related to geographic origins. As Wade correctly points out, different populations emerged in different parts of the world with different gene pools. Tishkoff's and Kidd's work, for example, illustrates this fact.

You can pay to have your own ancestry traced via your DNA, and such a trace can distinguish, say, whether your ancestors are more likely to have come from Eastern Europe or perhaps the United Kingdom. But the fact that there are different genetic constellations in different geographic locales says nothing of the need for a biological concept of race. Indeed, Eastern Europeans are typically of the same socially defined race as are English, Scottish, and Irish people. It simply is not true that "so many researchers still cling to the notion that culture alone is the only possible explanation for the differences between human societies" (p. 6). Almost all responsible researchers today would acknowledge that there are

genetic differences among people in different human societies. Where they would disagree is with regard to how important these differences are with regard to predicting human behavior, and in any case, there is no need for a biological concept of race for there to be genetic differences.

Wade has a tendency to exaggerate throughout the book as when he claims "Social scientists often write as if they believe that culture explains everything and race nothing. . . ." (p. 9). I know of no social scientists who believe that culture explains "everything!"

That said, Wade's concept of race seems strangely colonial or neo-colonial. There was a time when colonial societies welcomed the invention of the concept of race because it helped to explain why, they believed, it was fair to exploit members of other races. The concept of race was essential to the continuation of slavery, in our earlier times, and of racism, in later and even current times. But are the important differences among people today racial? I suppose we each have to decide that for ourselves.

There are good reasons to be dubious of a biological concept of race. In an article written with two distinguished geneticists at Yale University, my colleagues and I discussed some of the reasons why a biological concept of race is not tenable (see more details in Sternberg, Grigorenko, & Kidd, 2005).

First, people in different geographical regions have indeed developed different constellations or patterns of genes. These constellations in some cases resemble those of socially constructed races and in other cases do not. For example, skin color tends to vary more closely with our stereotypes about races, whereas the tendency to gain weight does not. As with all adaptations, how well they work varies over time and place. For example, the tendency to gain weight, which is partially genetic, was adaptive for most of us in the distant past, when food was scarce, but no longer is, when food is plentiful. Dark skin tends to be adaptive in places where there is intense sunlight but is not as important where sunlight is less intense. We could decide to call people who tend to gain weight one race and people who do not another, or we could assign races on the bases of patterns in blood groups, skin colors (easy to do, because they are easy to see), or, for that matter, patterns of mental or physical abilities.

Second, we could just as well refer to black moths and white moths as being of different races, but we don't because we have no use for these categories. We could also talk about races of cockroaches or beetles but we don't. Socially defined races are assigned based on sociocultural goals, such as one group dominating another or one group simply wishing to view itself as better than another. Who cares enough about moths, cockroaches, beetles, or even sheep, to assign them different races? Of course, there really are black sheep, and it is hardly a coincidence that some people (especially but not only those whose skin is white) would come to call a person who is undesirable or unwanted a "black sheep." People do not even need the construct of race to achieve this unfortunate sociocultural goal.

Third, there is more difference in genetic makeup among different black-skinned groups in Africa than there is between typically white- and black-skinned people in the United States (see Tishkoff & Kidd, 2004; Tishkoff & Williams, 2002). If one wished truly to designate races on the basis of genetic markers, then the distinction between black and white skin would be a minor basis for making the distinction. The very tall Masai and the very short Pygmies in Africa truly have rather different genetic makeups, but height has not proven popular as a basis for constructing races because it does not achieve the desired

sociocultural separation, at least in the United States. However, during the Rwandan genocide, height was an important marker that helped to distinguish members of the Tutsi tribe designated for slaughter by members of the Hutu tribe who were doing the slaughtering. Again, one does not always need the term “race” to accomplish the slaughter that the Nazis wrought: One can as easily construct other groupings, such as ethnicities.

Fourth, different groupings throughout history have developed different social constructions of race. As we pointed out in Sternberg, Grigorenko, and Kidd (2005), in parts of Brazil, purported races are different from in the United States (Fish, 2002). A *loura* will have straight blond hair, blue or green eyes, light skin color, and a narrow nose and thin lips. A *branca*, in contrast, has light skin color, eyes and hair of any color, a nose that is not broad, and nonthick lips. A *morena* has brown or black hair that is wavy or curly but not tightly curly and has tan skin, a nose that is not narrow, and lips that are not thin. South Africa in Apartheid times had different classifications as well (black, colored, Indian, white). According to Gould (1994), Linnaeus (in 1758) first proposed four races: Americanus, Europaeus, Asiaticus, and Afer, or African. Societies create races to accomplish social, economic, and other goals. Likewise, Wade suggests three “major” races: Africans (south of the Sahara), East Asians, and Caucasians (Europeans, peoples of the Near East and the Indian subcontinent). I’m not sure where we in the United States fit in.

There always has been a yearning on the part of human beings to explain perceived differences. Right now, many people have moved on from Wade’s notion of racial concepts. They are much more concerned with what seem like more societally important differences, like between those terrorists who murder—gruesomely, monstrously, and with impunity—and those people who can neither condone nor really understand the minds of the terrorists. Certainly, such a difference is more important to understand today than the differences with which Wade concerns himself. But this being 2015, we are unlikely to label the terrorists as of another race. Indeed, they vary across Wade’s designated “races.” At times, one wonders (at least, metaphorically) whether the terrorists need to make us question what exactly it means to be human.

This book is both extremely easy and extremely hard to read. It is easy to read because the writing is accessible and flows well, as befits the credentials of the author, who is a journalist. The book is hard to read because scientifically it is so deeply flawed. But mass-market books often sell not because of their science but because they say what people want to hear. And there still are some people who want to hear the message of this book.

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