BOOKS OF THE TIMES

Charging Into the Minefield of Genes and Racial Difference

By Arthur Allen
May 15, 2014

Few areas of science have contributed more to human misery than the study of racial difference. In the 1920s, eugenicists from top American universities promoted the sterilization of the unfit and later praised Hitler's racial codes while advocating laws that would exclude thousands of Jews from our shores.

Contemporary researchers have found it useful to examine genetic variations that affect traits like diabetes in Native Americans or high blood pressure in African-Americans. But in the shadow of the Holocaust, scientists in the United States have largely avoided the classification of races as a "futile exercise," in the words of the population geneticist Luigi Luca Cavalli-Sforza; the very concept of race is a matter of scientific debate.

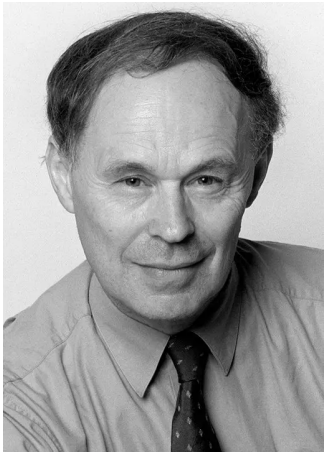
In "A Troublesome Inheritance: Genes, Race and Human History," however, Nicholas Wade argues that scientists need to get over their hang-ups and jump into studies of racial difference. "The intellectual barriers erected many years ago to combat racism now stand in the way of studying the recent evolutionary past," he writes.

Mr. Wade, a longtime science writer for The New York Times, draws on the wealth of evolutionary data that has emerged from the decoding of human genomes. This research has enabled scientists to imagine our prehistory with more precision, and the picture is one of unexpectedly significant genetic change since many of our ancestors left Africa. Since this evolution affected traits such as skin color, body hair and the tolerance of alcohol, milk and high altitude, why not intelligence and social behavior as well? Mr. Wade asks.

The central problem here is that if significant genetic-controlled behavioral differences exist among races, with scant (at most) exception they haven't been discovered yet. To build a case with the evidence at hand requires a great deal of speculation, with the inevitable protrusion of the nonscientific worldview.

Mr. Wade presents a few scattered genetic studies and attempts to weld them into a grand theory of global history for the past 50,000 years. Where Jared Diamond argued in "Guns, Germs and Steel" that environment and geography enabled Europe to develop a highly successful civilization, Mr. Wade says environmental pressures led to genetic differences that account for much of that advantage. "The rise of the West," he writes, "is an event not just in history but also in human evolution."

Conservative scholars like the political scientist Francis Fukuyama have long argued that social institutions and culture explain why Europe beat Asia to prosperity, and why parts of the Mideast and Africa continue to suffer destabilizing violence and misery.



Nicholas Wade
The New York Times

Mr. Wade takes this already controversial argument a step further, contending that "slight evolutionary differences in social behavior" underlie social and cultural differences. A small but consistent divergence in a racial group's tendency to trust outsiders — and therefore to accept central rather than tribal authority — could explain "much of the difference between tribal and modern societies," he writes.

This is where Mr. Wade's argument starts to go off the rails.

At times, his theorizing is merely puzzling, as when he notes that the gene variant that gives East Asians dry earwax also produces less body odor, which would have been attractive "among people spending many months in confined spaces to escape the cold." No explanation of why ancient Europeans, presumably cooped up just as much, didn't also develop this trait. Later, he speculates that thick hair and small

breasts evolved in Asian women because they may have been “much admired by Asian men.” And why, you might ask, did Asian men alone prefer these traits?

Mr. Wade occasionally drops in broad, at times insulting assumptions about the behavior of particular groups without substantiating the existence of such behaviors, let alone their genetic basis. Writing about Africans’ economic condition, for example, Mr. Wade wonders whether “variations in their nature, such as their time preference, work ethic and propensity to violence, have some bearing on the economic decisions they make.”

For Mr. Wade, genetic differences help explain the failure of the United States occupations in places like Iraq and Afghanistan. “If institutions were purely cultural,” he writes, “it should be easy to transfer an institution from one society to another.” It’s hard to know how to begin to address such a puzzling statement.

Mr. Wade acknowledges that specific evidence for the influence of “social behavior” genes is quite limited. The one example he presents repeatedly is the MAOA 2R variant, the so-called warrior gene that has been linked to violent behavior in men abused as children and is more common in blacks than whites or Asians. Mr. Wade admits that such genes at most create a tendency to violence, and adds that there may be other, yet undiscovered violence-susceptibility genes that could skew the racial picture.

Mr. Wade’s distinctive focus is on how evolution, in his view, shaped different races’ “radius of trust,” or ability to assume loyalty to, say, a nation rather than a tribe, and to punish those who violate social rules. Modern civilizations select out violent individuals and their genes, which might be more valuable in tribal societies, he argues.

When it comes to his leitmotif — the need for scientists to drop “politically correct” attitudes toward race — Mr. Wade displays surprisingly sanguine assumptions about the ability of science to generate facts free from the cultural mesh of its times. He argues that because the word “racism” did not appear in the Oxford English Dictionary until 1910, racism is a “modern concept, and that pre-eugenics studies of race were “reasonably scientific.” This would surely surprise any historian of European colonies in Africa or the Americas.

“Science is about what is, not what ought to be,” Mr. Wade writes. “Its shifting sands do not support values, so it is foolish to place them there.” Yet he acknowledges that views of scientific truth are highly contextual. The philosopher Herbert Spencer “was one of the most prominent intellectuals of the second half of the 19th century, and his ideas, however harsh they may seem today, were widely discussed,” Mr. Wade writes. Why does he suppose that Spencer was so popular? Was it science’s “shifting sands” that gave his ideas credibility, or their tendency to support what powerful people wanted to believe?

The philosopher Ludwik Fleck once wrote, “ ‘To see’ means to recreate, at a suitable moment, a picture created by the mental collective to which one belongs.” While there is much of interest in Mr. Wade’s book, readers will probably see what they are predisposed to see: a confirmation of prejudices, or a rather unconvincing attempt to promote the science of racial difference.