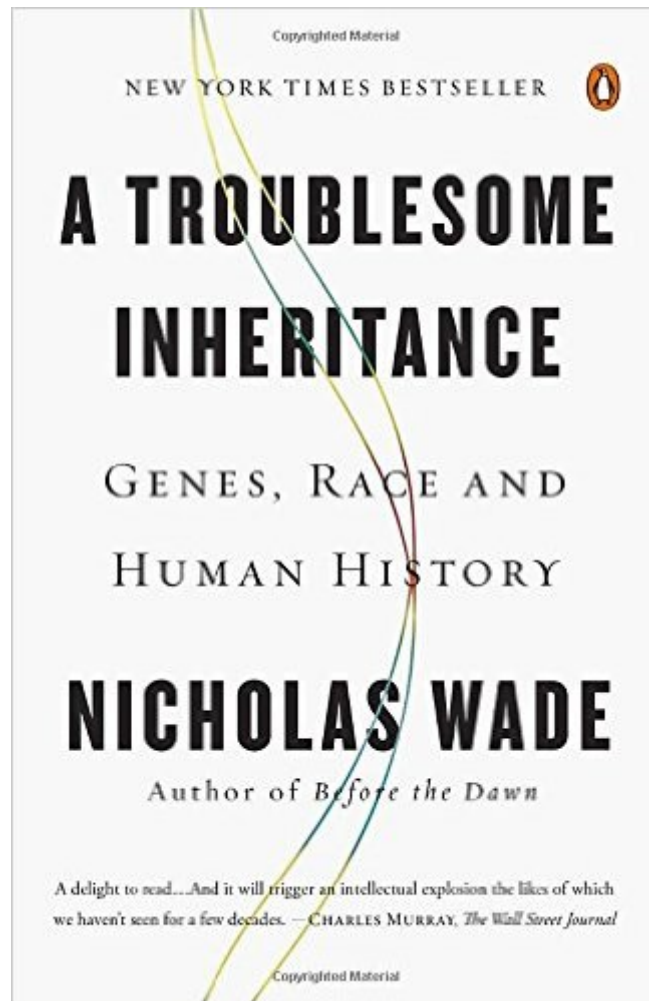


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A Troublesome Inheritance: Genes, Race And Human History



Synopsis

Drawing on startling new evidence from the mapping of the genome, an explosive new account of the genetic basis of race and its role in the human story. Fewer ideas have been more toxic or harmful than the idea of the biological reality of race, and with it the idea that humans of different races are biologically different from one another. For this understandable reason, the idea has been banished from polite academic conversation. Arguing that race is more than just a social construct can get a scholar run out of town, or at least off campus, on a rail. Human evolution, the consensus view insists, ended in prehistory. Inconveniently, as Nicholas Wade argues in *A Troublesome Inheritance*, the consensus view cannot be right. And in fact, we know that populations have changed in the past few thousand years to be lactose tolerant, for example, and to survive at high altitudes. Race is not a bright-line distinction; by definition it means that the more human populations are kept apart, the more they evolve their own distinct traits under the selective pressure known as Darwinian evolution. For many thousands of years, most human populations stayed where they were and grew distinct, not just in outward appearance but in deeper senses as well. Wade, the longtime journalist covering genetic advances for *The New York Times*, draws widely on the work of scientists who have made crucial breakthroughs in establishing the reality of recent human evolution. The most provocative claims in this book involve the genetic basis of human social habits. What we might call middle-class social traits—thrift, docility, nonviolence—have been slowly but surely inculcated genetically within agrarian societies, Wade argues. These values obviously had a strong cultural component, but Wade points to evidence that agrarian societies evolved away from hunter-gatherer societies in some crucial respects. Also controversial are his findings regarding the genetic basis of traits we associate with intelligence, such as literacy and numeracy, in certain ethnic populations, including the Chinese and Ashkenazi Jews. Wade believes deeply in the fundamental equality of all human peoples. He also believes that science is best served by pursuing the truth without fear, and if his mission to arrive at a coherent summa of what the new genetic science does and does not tell us about race and human history leads straight into a minefield, then so be it. This will not be the last word on the subject, but it will begin a powerful and overdue conversation.

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Customer Reviews

In this book Nicholas Wade advances two simple premises: firstly, that we should stop looking only toward culture as a determinant of differences between populations and individuals, and secondly, that those who claim that any biological basis for race is fiction are ignoring increasingly important findings from modern genetics and science. The guiding thread throughout the book is that "human evolution is recent, copious and regional" and that this has led to the genesis of distinct differences and classifications between human groups. What we do with this evidence should always be up for social debate, but the evidence itself cannot be ignored. That is basically the gist of the book. It's worth noting at the outset that at no point does Wade downplay the effects of culture and environment in dictating social, cognitive or behavioral differences - in fact he mentions culture as an important factor at least ten times by my count - but all he is saying is that, based on a variety of scientific studies enabled by the explosive recent growth of genomics and sequencing, we need to now recognize a strong genetic component to these differences. The book can be roughly divided into three parts. The first part details the many horrific and unseemly uses that the concept of race has been put to by loathsome racists and elitists ranging from Social Darwinists to National Socialists. Wade reminds us that while these perpetrators had a fundamentally misguided, crackpot definition of race, that does not mean race does not exist in a modern incarnation.

A Troublesome Inheritance, by Nicholas Wade, should be read by anyone interested in race and recent human evolution. Wade deserves credit for challenging the popular dogma that biological differences between groups either don't exist or cannot explain the relative success of different groups at different tasks. Wade's work should be read alongside another recent book, The 10,000

Year Explosion: How Civilization Accelerated Human Evolution, by Gregory Cochran and Henry Harpending. Together these books represent a major turning point in the public debate about the speed with which relatively isolated groups can evolve: both books suggest that small genetic differences between members of different groups can have large impacts on their abilities and propensities, which in turn affect the outcomes of the societies in which they live. Ever since the 1950s, Wade argues, many academics have denied the biological reality of race, and some have suggested that merely believing in racial differences constitutes a kind of racism (p. 69). But the rejection of race as a useful concept is often more of a political pose than a serious scientific claim, and it became especially popular among academics after the Second World War, during which Nazi pseudo-scientists used claims of racial superiority to justify mass murder. As it turns out, Ashkenazi Jews - those from Russia, Poland, and Germany, who were nearly exterminated in the Holocaust - have been consistently found by intelligence researchers to have the highest IQ in the world.

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