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Review of *A Troublesome Inheritance* by Nicholas Wade

Jonathan Marks¹

A Troublesome Inheritance: Genes, Race and Human History, by Nicholas Wade. New York: Penguin Press, 2014. x + 278 pp. 978-1-5942-0446-3 (hardcover). US \$27.95.

Racism is a political act, which today we recognize as morally evil.¹ It makes us angry to encounter it as citizens. Scientific racism is the appropriation of the authority of science for racism's evil ends. It makes us angry as scientists because it makes our enterprise look bad: morally corrupt science incurs torches and pitchforks.

Anti-intellectualism, however, never goes out of fashion. Telling the public that the experts have been misleading you—especially about who we are and where we came from—has cash value. After all, the claim that biological anthropologists have been leading the public astray is the first principle of creationism. Less famously, it is also a first principle of scientific racism. And that is where Nicholas Wade's *Our Troublesome Inheritance* picks up.

Nicholas Wade is one of the premier science journalists in America and an avid promoter of molecular genetics, particularly as applied to anthropological questions. But his professional idiosyncrasies are well known; the *Anthropology News* did a story on him a few years ago, and he told them, "Anyone who's interested in cultural anthropology should escape as quickly as they can from their cultural anthropology department and go and learn some genetics, which will be the foundation of cultural anthropology in the future" (Dvoskin 2007). A discussion of his new book about genetics and anthropology, then, should probably begin with a recollection of his last book on the subject, *Before the Dawn*. It was reviewed

in the journal *Science* by Rebecca Cann (2007), who did not exactly gush. "As a graduate student, I was amazed by the number of books popularizing human paleontology that ignored human genetics, and I often wished that there were science writers energized to follow the new insights from geneticists as closely and rapidly as others reported interpretations of fragmentary fossils. Well, be careful what you wish for." It was also prominently reviewed in *Nature*, where Nicholas Wade was deemed to be "in step with a long march of social darwinists" (Weiss and Buchanan 2007). And to gauge from the new book, he still is.

The theme of *A Troublesome Inheritance* is an unusual one for a science journalist, namely, that the scientists themselves are all wrong about the things that they are experts in and that it will take a naïf like the author, unprejudiced by experience, judgment, or actual knowledge, to straighten them out. If this sounds like a template for a debate with a creationist, well, yes, I suppose it does. That is because the nature of the intellectual terrain—the authoritative story of where we came from and who we are—lies on the contested turf of human kinship, and everybody thinks they own a piece of it.

According to Wade, the human species is naturally divisible into a fairly small number of fairly discrete groups, each of which has distinctive innate intellectual and behavioral propensities. And the people who teach otherwise—anthropologists—are deliberately miseducating the public

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on account of their Marxist and politically correct inclinations.

To be sure, that argument has made the rounds. The segregationists used to say it in the early 1960s (Putnam 1961). It resurfaced at the millennium in a book called *Taboo: Why Black Athletes Dominate Sports and Why We're Afraid to Talk about It* (Entine 2000), whose author subsequently went to work for the American Enterprise Institute, a conservative think-tank. The study of human variation is never just biology; it is, and has always been, biopolitics.

Lest you think Wade is an exponent of racism or social Darwinism, he is quick to tell you that he isn't. His book is apolitical, after all. He doesn't think he is a racist because a racist believes that natural groups of people are universally or transcendently rankable, whereas he only believes they are rankable intellectually. And he doesn't think he is a social Darwinist because that was an ideologically driven "perversion of science" (16) to be laid at the feet of Herbert Spencer, and he is quite certain that he is not an ideologue. He is simply exploring a few propositions, such as "the possibility that human behavior has a genetic basis that varies from one race to another" (184), "trust has a genetic basis" (185), and "national disparities in wealth arise from differences in intelligence" (189). Eventually he even comes around to "the adaptation of Jews to capitalism" (214).

One difficulty for Wade's racial theory, presented at the end of chapter 4, is that he seems to be oblivious to its origins and antecedents. Wade claims to speak on behalf of Darwinism to legitimize his ideas, like many of the discarded ideologies he discusses early in the book. But when he tells us that there are three great races associated with the continents of the Old World, and intermediate hybrid races at their zones of overlap, he is merely repackaging the pre-Darwinian Biblical myth of Ham, Shem, and Japheth, the sons of Noah, who went forth, became fruitful, and multiplied. The people Wade thinks are the least pure live precisely where the oldest fossil representatives of our species are known—East Africa and West Asia. The idea that the human populations of Lagos, Oslo, and Seoul are primordial and pure is wrong (and creationist); those are simply the farthest, most extreme, and most different from one another.

Wade's reification of race seems to emerge from (1) his failure to acknowledge any work done on

human variation prior to Lewontin's famous 1972 "Apportionment of Human Diversity" paper and (2) a gross misrepresentation of the work that has proceeded lately in genomics. In fact, the prominence of phenotypic polymorphic variation had been noted in a crude, qualitative way long before 1972, and biological anthropologists had been critiquing the theory of race for decades (Thieme 1952; Weiner 1957; Hulse 1962; Johnston 1966). Further, to make his argument, Wade perpetuates a falsehood, that modern statistical analyses of human genetic variation reveal fundamental natural subdivisions of our gene pool (Bolnick 2008).

Wade's misrepresentation of the genetics is significant in that he strives to make his reader believe that genetics and anthropology are antithetical to one another. Wade, however, fundamentally confuses the scientific study of heredity with the ideology that holds genetics to be very important in human social, political, and economic affairs. Consequently, the anti-anthropological reification of race, I think, is a bit of a red herring in this book, for the author has bigger anti-intellectual fish to fry. Wade's ambition is to reject contemporary explanations for class differences and for human history and to replace them with theories of genetics. In times past—and not too far past, if you remember Murray and Herrnstein's *The Bell Curve* (1994)—the argument went that social stratification in America was caused by innate intellectual differences and, consequently, that government programs designed to assist the socially disadvantaged and to ameliorate economic inequality were useless and doomed to failure.

It's an old theme: Why aren't you the Pharaoh? Because the Pharaoh is a better kind of being than you, with better ancestors and better innards—today we would say better genes. The point is that Wade's book is of a piece with a long tradition of disreputable attempts to rationalize visible class distinctions by recourse to invisible natural properties. At the heart of *A Troublesome Inheritance* is a simple dissimulation. Wade repeatedly asserts that his interlocutors are mixing their politics with their science but that he isn't, for he is just promoting value-neutral, ideology-free science. And yet the primary sources for Wade's discussion of the history of human society are the conservative political scientists Francis Fukuyama and Samuel Huntington. One gets the impression that either Wade is lying

or he wouldn't be able to recognize ideology if it looked him dead in the eye and slapped him silly.

Unlike *The Bell Curve*, however, which at least tried to disguise itself as a work of science, *A Troublesome Inheritance* has no such pretensions. It is entirely derivative, an argument made from selective citations, misrepresentations, and speculative pseudoscience. But it will receive attention, and we need to pay attention to it, because of *The Bell Curve*, which reintroduced scientific racism to a new generation in the guise of a statistical analysis of IQ scores. Twenty years and many critical tomes later, we know that just about every aspect of it was baloney (Jacoby and Glauber 1995; Fischer et al. 1996; Devlin et al. 1997; Kincheloe et al. 1997; Fish 2002). But the lesson is that when scholarship has to deal reactively with highly publicized and politicized pseudoscience, that's trouble.

Almost comically, for all of Wade's rhetorical interest in races as natural biogeographic categories, somehow the only group that merits their own chapter is . . . the Jews! Actually, the Jews are of some legitimate scholarly interest today in what we might call the "anthropology of genetics"—for example, in the recent excellent work of anthropologist Nadia Abu El-Haj (2012) and historian Veronika Lipphardt (2008). But that is far too subtle for Wade, who is interested in Jews simply as a natural kind, as he thinks Africans are. However, they are two very different kinds of kinds: Jews and Africans can both be races only if race means any group of people with a shared identity (adopted or imposed)—that is to say, a population. But that is, of course, how they are indeed regarded in modern science, without the suggestion that they constitute fundamental natural subdivisions of the human species, which is what races are supposed to be.

And lest you imagine that this is about those darn Jews "adapting" with high rates of literacy after exclusion from land ownership and guilds, it isn't. It is about having the right package of innate propensities. Wade explains, "The words adapt and adaptation are always used here in the biological sense of a genetically based evolutionary response to circumstances" (58). But that defines most human adaptation (which really refers to the fit between an organism and its surroundings, of which a small subset is actually genetic) out of existence. There is no adaptability (much less

epigenetics) here. Flexibility and reactivity are not in Wade's evolutionary arsenal. To acknowledge the plasticity of the human organism—which has framed most scientific work in human biology over the last century—would be to undermine Wade's theme of the independent, unforgiving external world exacting its selective toll on the human gene pool. His presentation of biology and genetics is pretty bad.

On page 58, Wade names his adversaries for the first time: "Marxist academics." On page 68, he goes after Ashley Montagu, attributing his antiracist writings significantly to his Jewish origins. (And for what it's worth, Montagu fit nobody's definition of a Marxist.) On page 119, Wade tells us that Montagu's book *Man's Most Dangerous Myth* relied heavily on Richard Lewontin's 1972 genetic work. Perhaps the edition Wade skimmed indeed cited Lewontin's work, but the first edition of *Man's Most Dangerous Myth* was published in 1942, so I suspect that it was based on other data and arguments. It's also too bad that, for a book about the engagement of race and genetics, Wade's chapters seem to be oblivious to all work in the area prior to Lewontin's.

Wade relies on other inaccurate invocations of genetics that are even more radical and, more important, political. He cherry-picks the literature and cites work that overstates the isolation and violence of ancient societies. More important, what scholars think were changes in ways of life, Wade thinks were changes in genes and brains that led to changes in ways of life. Thus, "a deep genetic change in social behavior underlay . . . the transition from an agrarian to a modern society. . . . Most likely a shift in social behavior was required, a genetic change that reduced the level of aggressivity common in hunter-gatherer groups" (82).

Wade's presentation of modern human behavior is similarly dubious. He places a lot of emphasis on "in-groups" and "out-groups," repeatedly asserting that we have an innate desire to support the ins and to distrust, despise, or harm the outs. Some data on domestic violence might disabuse naive readers about the validity of such a facile generalization. So might some data on the flexibility of group membership, not to mention the constructed nature of the groups themselves. Here's a glib thought from page 50: "An inbuilt sense of morality evolved, one that gave people an instinctive aversion to murder and other crimes, at

least against members of their own group.” But if you think there’s an instinctive aversion to “murder and other crimes,” you need to watch *The Godfather* again. (Sure, that was fiction, but then so is *A Troublesome Inheritance*, although less honestly labeled.) If you try to weasel through with the phrase “your own group,” then you need to think about the formlessness, situation dependence, and segmentary nature of the “group”: What is Michael Corleone’s group? The Corleone family, the New York mob, Sicilian-Americans, urban immigrants, Americans, or Earthlings? Group membership is actually quite flexible and, as we now say, constructed. And there certainly doesn’t appear to be any inborn aversion to lying, embezzling, insider trading, fraud, graft, or usury—so on what basis can we reliably assert anything inborn about other particular crimes?

Perhaps the most appalling feature of Wade’s book is that he hasn’t even got the guts to own his thoughts, sprinkling the prose with disclaimers like “given the vast power of culture to shape human social behavior” (41), “a society’s achievements . . . are largely cultural in essence” (250), and “culture is a mighty force, and people are not slaves to innate propensities” (245). If the influence of culture has been so mighty and vast, then it stands to reason that that is what you should be reading books about, not this one. At best, Wade’s labor has effectively been to fabricate a small tail to wag a mighty big dog.

And eventually we arrive at Wade’s view of the origin of the Industrial Revolution in England—which involved mutations in the upper economic classes for “nonviolence, literacy, thrift and patience” (160) and their diffusion by gene flow into the lower classes in Late Medieval times. Honestly, I wish I were kidding. This is a slightly new spin on a set of old prejudices, but hardly science, much less modern or value-free science. Wade doubles down on this a few pages later, too: “The burden of proof is surely shifted to those who might wish to assert that the English population was miraculously exempt from the very forces of natural selection whose existence it had suggested to Darwin” (164).

Afraid not. The burden of proof still lies with the disseminator of outmoded, racist ideologies masquerading as science. Wade simply believes he can construct his own reality by selective reading, misrepresentation, and continuous repetition.

This is a golem of science journalism, a powerful monster running amok under its own impetus, burdened by neither responsibility nor wisdom.

Finally, we write books for a reason. So, given the abysmal quality of the historical, social, and biological scholarship this book, the misrepresentation and dismissal of the most relevant science, and the enthusiastic embrace of the work by the most repellent political elements in contemporary society (Phillips 2014), what do you suppose was Nicholas Wade’s motivation for writing *A Troublesome Inheritance*? Can a book possibly be so ingenuous about the science of human biology and its implications, and so wrong, across such a wide swath of scholarship, purely by accident?

NOTE

1. This review incorporates material that has previously appeared in *In These Times* (http://inthesetimes.com/article/16674/the_genes_made_us_do_it) and the *Huffington Post* (www.huffingtonpost.com/american-anthropological-association/review-of-a-troublesome-i_b_5316217.html).

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