

Geneticists decry book on race and evolution

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Michael Balter, *Science Mag*, August 8, 2014

Genetically incorrect? Nearly 140 experts say Wade's views on race lack scientific support.
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A best-seller by former *New York Times* science writer Nicholas Wade about recent human evolution and its potential effects on human cultures has drawn critical reviews since its spring publication. Now, nearly 140 senior human population geneticists around the world, many of whose work was cited in the book, have signed a letter to *The New York Times Book Review* stating that Wade has misinterpreted their work. The letter criticizes "Wade's misappropriation of research from our field to support arguments about differences among human societies," and is slated to appear in the 10 August issue of the *Book Review*. It's [available online today](#).

The book, *A Troublesome Inheritance: Genes, Race and Human History*, contends that human races are a biological reality and that recent human evolution has led to racial differences in economic and social behavior. In the book, Wade suggests that such genetic differences may help explain why some people live in tribal societies and some in advanced civilizations, why African-Americans are allegedly more violent than whites, and why the Chinese may be good at business.

The book has received some blistering reviews from both scientists and science writers, including one by David Dobbs [in *The New York Times Book Review*](#), and some scientists [weighed in with blogs](#) as well. Now, geneticists have crafted a joint response, concluding that "there is no support from the field of population genetics for Wade's conjectures." The list of signatories [reads like a who's who of researchers in the field](#) and includes such well-known geneticists as Evan Eichler of the University of Washington, Seattle; David Goldstein of Duke University; and Michael Hammer of the University of Arizona.

The letter was spearheaded by five population geneticists who had informally discussed the book at conferences, says co-organizer Rasmus Nielsen of the University of California, Berkeley. "There was a feeling that our research had been hijacked by Wade to promote his ideological agenda," Nielsen says. "The outrage ... was palpable." Molly Przeworski of Columbia University, another organizer, says the group "tried to contact population geneticists whose work had been cited by Wade." They had no trouble getting signatures, racking up 100 within the first week, she says.

The letter organizers and the editors of the *Book Review* kept the letter under embargo until its publication today and declined to make it available to Wade for an immediate response. But in previous ripostes to the book's critics, most notably in a 19 June *Huffington Post* article titled "[Five Critics Say You Shouldn't Read This 'Dangerous' Book](#)," Wade charged that his critics were "indoctrinated in the social-science creed that prohibits any role for evolution in human affairs" and contended that the book's central argument "has not been challenged by any serious scientist."

Letter organizers say they hope to demonstrate that the opposite is true. For example, Sarah Tishkoff of the University of Pennsylvania says she signed the letter because "[m]y own research was used as scientific proof of concepts such as there being between three and five races." Tishkoff says that her work on the genetics of diverse African populations does not support this claim. Adds David Reich of Harvard University: "Our findings do not even provide a hint of support in favor of Wade's guesswork."

***Update, 9 August, 6:05 a.m.:** Nicholas Wade has issued a [statement](#) in response to the letter. He writes:

This letter is driven by politics, not science. I am confident that most of the signatories have not read my book and are responding to a slanted summary devised by the organizers.

As no reader of the letter could possibly guess, "A Troublesome Inheritance" argues that opposition to racism should be based on principle, not on the anti-evolutionary myth that there is no biological basis to race.

Unfortunately many social scientists have long denied that there is a biological basis to race. This creed, prominent throughout the academic world, increasingly impedes research. Biologists risk damaging their careers if they write explicitly about race. Needless to say, this makes it hard to explore the different evolutionary paths that human populations have taken through history since the dispersal from the African homeland 50,000 years ago.

"A Troublesome Inheritance" seeks to explain how race can be understood without racism. ... I hope that readers will see through the lack of specifics in their charges and judge my book for themselves.

Perhaps I could point out an error in one of the few specific statements in their letter. They charge me with saying that "recent natural selection has led to worldwide differences in I.Q. test results." I say no such thing. What I do say (p. 193) is that "It may be hazardous to compare the IQ scores of different races if allowance is not made for differences in wealth, nutrition and other factors that influence IQ." ...

I would urge all the geneticists who signed the letter, several of whom I count as friends, to now read my book and judge to what extent, if any, their condemnation was justified.