AUTUMN BOOKS

GENETICS

Under the skin

Nathaniel Comfort wonders at the enduring trend of misrepresenting race.

Is race biologically real? A clutch of books published this year argue the question. All miss the point.

Michael Yudell's *Race Unmasked* and Robert Sussman's *The Myth of Race* can be read as inadvertent retorts to former *New York Times* journalist Nicholas Wade's *A Troublesome Inheritance*, published while the former were in the press. Wade's book is by far the most insidious, but all three are polemics that become mired in proving (in Wade's case) or disproving (in the others') whether race is biological and therefore 'real'. This question is a dead end, a distraction from what is really

A Troublesome Inheritance: Genes, Race and Human History

NICHOLAS WADE
Penguin: 2014.

Race Unmasked: Biology and Race in the 20th Century

MICHAEL YUDELL
Columbia University Press: 2014.

The Myth of Race: The Troubling Persistence of an Unscientific Idea

ROBERT WALD SUSSMAN
Harvard University Press: 2014.

at stake in this debate: human social equality.

Race is certainly real — ask any African American. It originated long before the science of genetics, as sets of phenotypes and stereotypes. These correlate with haplotypes, clusters of genetic variation. In this sense, race is genetically 'real'. But those correlations depend on judgement calls. Wade cites population-genetics studies that identify three principal races: caucasian, African and East Asian. Elsewhere he cites five, adding Australasian and Native American; or seven, splitting caucasians into people from Europe, the Middle East and the Indian subcontinent.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY DARREN HOPES

A study in *Scientific Reports* this year identified 19 “ancestral components”, including Mozabites, Kalash and Uyghurs (D. Shriner *et al. Sci. Rep.* 4, 6055; 2014). Palaeogeneticist Svante Pääbo and others have revealed the underlying human genetic variation to be a series of gradients. Whether and how one parses that variation depends on one’s training, inclination and acculturation. So: race is real and race is genetic, but that does not mean that race is ‘really’ genetic.

The completion of the draft human-genome sequence in 2000 led some optimists to forecast the end of race (one of them, Craig Venter, wrote the foreword to Yudell’s book), but use of the term in the biomedical literature has actually increased since then. For clinicians, race is a matter of pragmatism. Although each of us is genetically and epigenetically unique, our ancestry leaves footprints in our genomes. Consequently, clinicians use familiar racial categories such as ‘black’ or ‘Ashkenazi Jewish’ as crude markers of genotypes, in a step towards individualized medicine. For them, the reality of race is immaterial; diagnosis and treatment are what count (see page 301).

Debates over the genetic reality of race, then, are not mainly scientific, but social. They deploy the cultural authority of science — considered society’s most objective way of understanding the world — as a fig leaf for positions motivated explicitly or implicitly by ideology. All three of these books argue that if the proof or disproof of race is scientific, it must be true. The author must be right. More importantly, his opponents must be wrong.

For Wade, science proves that race is genetic. Much like Richard Herrnstein and Charles Murray’s *The Bell Curve* (Free Press, 1994), his book moves smoothly through seemingly reasonable arguments that humans are still evolving, to end up at the retrograde conclusion that Europeans have become the world’s richest and most powerful people mainly because they are genetically the most open, curious, innovative and hard-working. Also like *The Bell Curve*, Wade’s book draws heavily on a long tradition of what historians refer to as scientific racism, particularly research connected to the Pioneer Fund, chartered in 1937 in part to “support study and research into the problems of heredity and eugenics” and, as Sussman shows, still deeply involved in eugenic and racial research. Despite such transparently political sources, Wade insists that his argument is based on ideology-free science. On 8 August, 139 population geneticists — including several on whose work Wade based his arguments — signed a letter to *The New York Times* declaiming his use of their results. Now that those whose work he once categorized as “scientific” instead of “ideological” have come out against the book, Wade has denounced them, too, as being motivated by politics.

By contrast, the ‘race realist’ and ‘human biodiversity’ (HBD) groups are delighted with Wade’s book. For example, Jared Taylor, editor of the HBD magazine *American Renaissance*, applauds Wade’s argument that (in Taylor’s paraphrase), “foreign aid is probably wasted because poor countries are not genetically prepared for the institutions necessary for wealth”. Other pillars of the race-realist movement, such as the website

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Stormfront and the writer John Derbyshire, gave Wade’s book glowing reviews.

For both Yudell, a historian of public health, and Sussman, a cultural anthropologist, science proves that race is cultural. In making this case, both devote considerable space to eugenics, the science and social movement concerned with human hereditary improvement. The eugenics movement — particularly in the United States in the early twentieth century and in Nazi Germany — offers a cornucopia of evidence of scientific racism. But, in focusing on the US movement’s most egregious leaders, such as Charles Davenport, Madison Grant and Henry Fairfield Osborn, both Yudell and Sussman over-simplify. Eugenics was about much more than just race. Recent scholarship has documented the pervasiveness and adaptability of the US and UK eugenic creed and the complicated ways it mingled with race, public health and feminism. Sussman and Yudell both, for example, discuss the efforts of the distinguished black leader W. E. B. Du Bois against white-supremacist eugenics in the early twentieth century. But both fail to mention his concern over black “dysgenics” and his eugenically

inflected “talented tenth” campaign, which sought to identify the “best of this [black] race”. Not all eugenics is racist, and most racism is not — or not principally — eugenic.

For both Yudell and Sussman, the antidote to eugenic hereditarianism was cultural anthropology, developed by Franz Boas and his students in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Boas coined the word culture in its modern sense, and became perhaps the greatest opponent of the biological concept of race. He and his students studied human societies through an entirely cultural definition of human difference. Boas found, for example, that cranial characteristics that had been claimed to be innately racial were the result of differences in nutrition and overall health. Sussman and Yudell insist that Boasian anthropology scientifically proved that race is not genetic.

Their arguments then diverge. Sussman becomes, if possible, more polemical, whereas Yudell grows slowly less so. The former returns to the history of scientific racism, providing a passionate account of the continuing influence of the Pioneer Fund. Yudell’s late chapters, by contrast, trace the struggle to strip racism from race science.

Yudell offers a rich analysis of the statements on race by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) — a string of contentious multi-disciplinary reports that sought to document scientific knowledge on race while denouncing racism, starting in 1950. The project’s myriad authors split into two factions. One, led by Boas’s student Ashley Montagu, wanted to call race a fiction, a product of culture. The other insisted that genetics showed that race was real. Theodosius Dobzhansky, a brilliant population geneticist, was intellectually invested in the genetic concept of race, yet morally invested in anti-racism. “Dobzhansky’s paradox”, in Yudell’s phrase, was how to save biological race theory without sounding racist. He never did — and nor have we, Yudell concludes poignantly.

A full-throated, intellectually rigorous anti-racism must critically assess both biological and cultural evidence about race. It must acknowledge that no work on race science can be free of ideology — and, precisely for that reason, it must not place historical actors before a moral green screen showing an image of contemporary values. Rather, it must set the stage for each scene with meticulous, empathetic historical detail. Such work would allow the scientific study of ‘racial superiority’ — inherently grounded in subjectivity and bias — to fall on its own sword. ■

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