

Skin Deep, Journey in the Divisive Science of Race, by Gavin Evans

Philip Guelpa

9 December 2019

Skin Deep, Journey in the Divisive Science of Race, by Gavin Evans (Oneworld, 2019), is a timely and welcome review of the substantial body of work demonstrating the complete lack of a biological basis for the category of “race,” as well as the historical falsifications and scientific distortions that have been used to promote racism. It is well written and accessible to the non-specialist.

The book’s biographical sketch of Evans states that he was “born in London and grew up in Cape Town, where he became intensely involved in the anti-apartheid struggle. He studied economic history and law before completing a PhD in political studies, writing extensively on race and racism. He lectures in the Culture and Media department at Birkbeck College, London.” His strong antipathy toward racism is clear throughout.

Evans presents a review of relevant research and examines the results with a scientifically based and critical eye, identifying weaknesses in studies that purport to identify racial differences in physical and intellectual capabilities. These weaknesses are due to such limitations as small sample sizes, unwarranted extrapolations from weak statistical correlations, and the assumption that correlation necessarily denotes causation. He also examines exaggerations or misinterpretations presented in the popular press as well as by individuals or groups who distort the science to support predetermined conclusions.

It is impossible in this brief review to effectively summarize all of the topics examined in *Skin Deep*. We will highlight a few.

Evans provides a good, up-to-date summary of the evidence and interpretations regarding the genetic, paleontological, and archaeological data on human evolution. There is still much to learn. A number of recent fossil discoveries indicate the existence of a greater variety of early hominins than previously known (e.g., *Homo floresiensis*, aka the “Hobbit,” *Homo luzonensis*, and *Homo naledi*), suggesting local adaptation of populations in relatively isolated environments.

However, the one central fact is the overwhelming genetic similarity of all modern humans (*Homo sapiens*, as opposed to other members of the genus)—a much greater uniformity (99.9 percent) than is the case for most other mammals. This indicates that modern humans either replaced earlier forms and/or genetically subsumed them, when they moved out of Africa, with the latter making only minimal genetic contributions, except for Neanderthals and, perhaps Denisovans.

The bottom line is that all living humans are much more alike than they are different. Within population variation is greater than that between populations. Indeed, those differences are, metaphorically speaking, not even “skin deep.”

Archaeological evidence indicates that sophisticated tool manufacture and other evidence of abstract, symbolic thought (e.g., various forms of art), almost certainly associated with fully developed language, are nearly as old as the appearance of anatomically modern humans (*Homo sapiens*), about 200,000 years ago, before dispersal out of Africa. Consequently, early, anatomically modern humans were already equipped with sophisticated mental capabilities that allowed them to adapt primarily

through the use of culture to the new environments into which they migrated—Europe, Asia, Oceania, and the Americas, rather than by physical adaptation.

This runs counter to claims by “hereditarianists” (those who claim that human behavior is largely determined by genetics) that it was the challenge of adapting to new environments encountered in the move out of Africa that prompted biological selection for increased intelligence. This latter contention bears the stated or implicit conclusion that those who remained in Africa were not so challenged and, therefore, did not develop the more advanced intelligence acquired by the emigrants.

Of particular value is Evans’ debunking of the conception that there can be individual genes that control either intelligence in general or categories of behaviors such as “criminality.”

Research has shown that hundreds of genes may have some influence in any particular aspect of intelligence, each one contributing only a tiny amount to the observed variation. Even then, the interactions between them are complex and difficult to isolate. In short, the quest to identify one or a few genes that have a major determinative effect on intelligence has found no scientific validation.

An example of the extremely dangerous and reactionary implications of pseudo-scientific, genetically based interpretations of human behavior is illustrated by Evans. Steve Bannon, shortly before becoming the chief of Donald Trump’s presidential campaign, wrote a piece for the fascist publication Breitbart.com promoting the belief that black males have a disproportionately high frequency of an “extreme warrior gene” that leads them to an increased rate of violence. Thus, according to Bannon, “Here’s a thought: What if the people getting shot by the cops did things to deserve it? There are, after all, in this world, some people who are naturally aggressive and violent.”

The gene allegedly identified as promoting extreme warrior behavior, the MAOA-2R allele, is cited by such hack writers as Richard Lynn and Nicholas Wade, to “explain” the supposed overly aggressive behavior of black males. Evans provides an extensive review of research regarding this gene. The bottom line is that there is absolutely no scientific justification for such a claim. Nevertheless, this and similar pseudo-science is employed by Bannon and others to provide an ideological justification for racism to their fascistic base.

Another important aspect of the concept of race examined by Evans is the mistaken idea that, until recently races corresponded to broad geographic units—Europe, Asia, Africa, etc. And that these populations were cohesive wholes, genetically distinct, and historically stable. In fact, nothing could be farther from the truth. Human populations have been on the move for hundreds of thousands of years, mixing and remixing genetically, culturally, and linguistically, with the rate of movement accelerating significantly following the development of agriculture, beginning roughly 10-12 thousand years ago.

While biological adaptation did occur, these are minor and superficial. Current configurations of physical characteristics simplistically described

as races are simply a snapshot in time, reflecting a single moment in an ever-changing landscape. Evans cites dozens of examples of such migrations, including the movement of early agriculturalists from the Middle East into Europe and the southward migration of Bantu-speaking farmers in Africa. Many are only recently being identified through genetic research, such as the discovery of a significant admixture of Eurasian DNA into East Africa dating to about 3,000 years ago.

Evans summarizes the historical data that exposes the promotion of racism by Europeans as an ideological justification for colonialism, that Africans, due to supposed inferior intelligence, were incapable of developing advanced civilizations. Examples cited include ancient Nubia and the Great Zimbabwe.

The bulk of *Skin Deep* presents an extensive review and critique of the claims by some scientists (very few in number) and others that significant differences in intelligence between races can be identified by IQ tests or other means, championed by the likes of Nicholas Wade and Richard Lynn. Such claims, based on simplistic and unfounded characterizations of what constitutes intelligence and how it can be measured, have been refuted time and again. Evans' critique is interlaced and supported by countless examples of historical distortions, pseudo-scientific fabrications, religious dogma, and outright lies that have been employed over the last few centuries to justify the characterization of one population or another as inherently inferior and others as superior.

Evans takes particular aim at *The Bell Curve*, by Herrnstein and Murray. This work of pseudo-science, which purports to document genetically determined differences in intelligence between races, is based on selective, manipulated, and fabricated data and interpretations. It has been repeatedly critiqued by a variety of researchers and demonstrated to have no validity. Nevertheless, its use by those with a racist agenda persists. Evans brings together numerous lines of research that conclusively demonstrate not only the scientific worthlessness of *The Bell Curve*, but that of others who have followed in this line of "research."

Time and again, claims of racial differences in intelligence, often based on culturally biased IQ tests, are in fact attributable to historical, social, and economic factors, which have nothing to do with intelligence. An extreme example Evans cites is the conclusion by one researcher that San peoples of the Kalahari Desert have an IQ equivalent to that of an eight-year-old European child. Aside from the fact that the test is based on a cultural context with which the San had little or no experience, Evans observes:

I presume Lynn [the researcher in question] has never met a San person, but my experience suggests the notion that their average intelligence is that of a European eight-year-old is absurd. And the idea that a European child could survive alone in the Kalahari is laughable; the kind of statement that could only be made by someone who'd never set foot in a desert.

And further, regarding San whom Evans has met, "They were all fluent in at least two languages, some in four or more."

In a critique of one of the most recent examples of "scientific racism," Nicholas Wade's *A Troublesome Inheritance*, Evans states, "No one disputes that human populations evolved for skin color, lactose tolerance, altitude tolerance, defenses against malaria and the rest, but no scientist has provided evidence of population-specific evolution for wealth-making, authoritarianism, tribal loyalty or, indeed, intelligence."

This is the crux of the matter. Pseudo-scientific works such as Wade's conflate clearly biological phenomena with historical/cultural behaviors, and claim, without evidence, that the latter evolve in the same manner as the former, in the tradition of Social Darwinism, sociobiology, and the like

The fundamental question one is left with is: Why in the face of overwhelming scientific evidence that, while humans exhibit only a limited range of variation in a few, superficial genetic characteristics, does

the concept that races exist as some sort of overriding, bounded phenomena, demarking distinct entities, nevertheless persist?

For all of the valuable information provided by Evans, the book has one significant weakness. His contention that racism is a "belief" rather than an expression of "power" (since "a powerless person can be a racist") is fundamentally idealist, in the philosophical sense, and leaves the reader with no satisfying explanation as to why such a mistaken and pernicious belief should persist and at times become a justification for vicious behavior and mass murder, even in the face of overwhelming scientific evidence otherwise.

Evans suggests that race science, apparently as an expression of underlying racism, is a constant phenomenon that occasionally bubbles to the surface under certain conditions. In the section "What Motivates Race Science?," Evans cites Stephen Jay Gould's observation that each resurgence of race science coincides with waves of political attacks against the poor, which are promoted by the far right. Evans observes, "The process is influenced by the political climate, as illustrated by the proliferation of race science on social media in the wake of Trump's election campaign and since."

He attributes the latest resurgence to "the combination of the economic fallout from the 2008 banking crash, the decline of manufacturing and mining jobs in the West, the recalibration of the world economy as information technology changes the world, and to the wars in Syria and elsewhere in years to come."

And further, "The current wave [of race science] is particularly strong and persistent for reasons ... that relate to the rise of ethnic nationalism, which in turn is partly prompted by the existential insecurity, particularly of young white men, in response to a rapidly changing social and economic milieu."

"With the rise of the alt-right, fascists taking to the streets all over Europe, populist, nativist right-wingers winning power in several parts of the world; far-right terrorism on the increase; it is clear that racism, and the ideas that feed it, are more resilient than we hoped. The twentieth century showed us where bad ideas about race can lead. If we don't want the twenty-first to echo those themes, bad ideas need to be countered whenever and wherever they appear."

In a number of instances throughout the book, Evans points to the use of racism, including purported differences in intelligence, as ideological justification for oppression, such as colonialism. However, he does not go deeper and make a class analysis. Throughout history, racism and other forms of discrimination (e.g., xenophobia, religious bias) have been used by ruling classes as a weapon of domination—to "divide and conquer" the lower classes. This is nakedly obvious in recent centuries under capitalism—the Nazis' anti-Semitism and anti-black racism in the US, for example.

Therefore, one must conclude that the driving force behind racism and the like is not simply the result of wrong ideas or bad science, whatever any individual's subjective motivations for adopting such views may be, and regardless of the "scientific" justifications that may be concocted in their support. Rather, such ideas are promoted and sustained as tools of class rule, as the overt promotion of racism currently undertaken by both the right and "left" wings of the American bourgeoisie (e.g., Trump's drive to build a fascist movement, on the one hand, and the *New York Times* ' 1619 Project, on the other) clearly demonstrates.

Now, as world capitalism plunges into extreme crisis, the bourgeoisie feels seriously threatened by the resurgence of the working class. It, therefore, reaches for one of its deadliest weapons—racism and similar forms of ethnic and religious bigotry—to keep it divided. While detailed critiques of pseudo-science and historical falsification, such as *Skin Deep*, are important and indeed vital resources in the struggle against such biases, these will never be overcome until the root cause, namely class society, is eliminated.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact