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The Legacy of Wilson's *Sociobiology* for the Human Evolutionary Behavioral Sciences, Fifty Years On

When Wilson's 1975 book *Sociobiology* was published it ignited a media firestorm. His bombastic style and speculations on the role of biological explanations for human behavior attracted considerable attention—and criticism. His critics raised both scientific concerns and fears that overly simplistic arguments about the genetic underpinnings of human behavior could be misused for political purposes, feeding a resurgence of eugenic ideology.¹ The latter fears were well founded. Scientific racism, classism, and sexism—defined here as the misuse of science to claim evidence that hierarchies of race, class, and sex are “natural” and inevitable—are alive and well in the scientific literature today,² bolstered by genetic-determinist arguments³ and used to influence social policies.⁴ An evolutionary perspective on human

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1. Elizabeth Allen et al., “Against Sociobiology,” *New York Review of Books*, 13 Nov 1975.

2. Kevin A. Bird, John P. Jackson Jr, and Andrew S. Winston, “Confronting Scientific Racism in Psychology: Lessons from Evolutionary Biology and Genetics,” *American Psychologist* 79, no. 4 (2024): 497–508; Angela Saini, *Superior: The Return of Race Science* (London: Fourth Estate, 2019); Rebecca Sear, “Demography and the Rise, Apparent Fall, and Resurgence of Eugenics,” *Population Studies* 75, suppl. (2021): 201–20; report from the UCL Investigation into London Conference on Intelligence. www.ucl.ac.uk/provost/sites/provost/files/ucl_history_of_eugenics_inquiry_report.pdf

3. Aaron Panofsky, Kushan Dasgupta, and Nicole Iturriaga, “How White Nationalists Mobilize Genetics: From Genetic Ancestry and Human Biodiversity to Counterscience and Metapolitics,” *American Journal of Physical Anthropology* 175, no. 2 (2021): 387–98.

4. David Gillborn, Ian McGimpsey, and Paul Warmington, “The Fringe is the Centre: Racism, Pseudoscience and Authoritarianism in the Dominant English Education Policy Network,” *International Journal of Educational Research* 115 (2022): 102056; Quinn Slobodian, “The Unequal Mind: How Charles Murray and Neoliberal Think Tanks Revived IQ,”

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behavior ought to enrich the human sciences, given humans have evolved through the same evolutionary processes as other species. How is it that this perspective is still being misused for political gain despite the warnings of Wilson's critics?

Wilson effectively synthesized several lines of thought that were coalescing in the fields of animal behavior, biology, and psychology during the post-World War II period. But similar, less high-profile, initiatives were also happening around the same time. Biologists Richard Alexander⁵ and Mary Jane West Eberhard⁶ published journal articles on the evolution of social behavior, including that of humans, before or alongside Wilson. At the same time, behavioral ecology—another approach that highlighted the importance of natural selection in shaping behavior, though not restricted to social behavior—was emerging in biology⁷. Anthropologists William Irons and Napoleon Chagnon organized symposia on the use of behavioral ecology in anthropology in 1976 at the American Anthropological Association.⁸ Since the 1970s, disciplines drawing on these evolutionary, adaptationist explanations for human behavior have grown considerably (referred to collectively as the human evolutionary behavioral sciences).⁹ While some histories of this field suggest Wilson's efforts may have been key to stimulating its development,¹⁰ other accounts give him little prominence.¹¹ In all likelihood, these disciplines would still exist if *Sociobiology* had never been published. But *Sociobiology*

Capitalism: A Journal of History and Economics 4, no. 1 (2023): 73–108; William H. Tucker, “The Bell Curve” in *Perspective* (London: Fourth Estate, 2024).

5. Richard D. Alexander, “The Search for an Evolutionary Philosophy of Man,” *Proceedings of the Royal Society of Victoria* 84 (1971): 99–120; Richard D. Alexander, “The Evolution of Social Behaviour,” *Annual Review of Ecology, Evolution, and Systematics* 5, no. 5 (1974): 325–83.

6. Mary Jane West Eberhard, “The Evolution of Social Behavior by Kin Selection,” *The Quarterly Review of Biology* 50, no. 1 (1975): 1–33.

7. Cora Stuhmann, “‘It Felt More Like a Revolution.’ How Behavioral Ecology Succeeded Ethology, 1970–1990,” *Berichte Zur Wissenschaftsgeschichte* 45, no. 1–2 (2022): 135–63; Tim Birkhead and Patricia Monaghan, “Ingenious Ideas: The History of Behavioural Ecology,” in *Evolutionary Behavioural Ecology*, ed. David E. Westneat and Charles W. Fox (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 3–15.

8. Napoleon A. Chagnon and William Irons, *Evolutionary Biology and Human Social Behaviour: An Anthropological Perspective* (North Scituate, MA: Duxbury Press, 1979).

9. See Gillian R. Brown and Kevin N. Lala, *Sense and Nonsense: Evolutionary Perspectives on Human Behaviour* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024) for an overview.

10. See Brown and Lala, *Sense and Nonsense* (n.9).

11. Laura Betzig, *Human Nature: A Critical Reader* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); Ullica C. O. Segerstråle, *Nature's Oracle: The Life and Work of W. D. Hamilton* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

might nevertheless have been influential in *how* this field developed because of the high-profile controversy it attracted.

All applications of biological thinking to human behavior attracted controversy, given the long history of the misuse of these ideas for political purposes. The combination of Wilson's ability to attract attention outside of academia and his "naïve insensitivity" to his work's political connotations¹² led to a particularly heated debate. The scars left by this sociobiology debate may have shaped the social norms that developed in the human evolutionary behavioral sciences.¹³ When the first society in the United States to focus on this field—the Human Behavior and Evolution Society (HBES)—was established in 1988, its bylaws included the statement that "Neither the Society, nor its Council, committees or officers acting in their capacity as such, shall take positions on social or political issues and controversies."¹⁴ The inaugural address of its first president, W. D. Hamilton, was concerned about the "clash between our truth and current myths and religions," suggesting that "the truth" might fall victim to political or moral concerns.¹⁵ When a controversy erupted over the scientific antisemitism of Kevin McDonald around 2000, a journalist noted that the evolutionary behavioral scientists who spoke to her only rejected his research as forming part of their field—although he was an Officer of HBES at the time—without engaging with the political implications of his work.¹⁶ These examples suggest a social norm emerged in which scientific "truth" should be considered separate from, and prioritized over, moral or political concerns.

In reality, scientific "truth" is always interpreted by humans, with all our perceptual and ideological biases.¹⁷ Rigorous science depends on recognizing this rather than pretending wholly objective research is achievable.¹⁸ A notable

12. Brown and Lala, *Sense and Nonsense* (n.9).

13. This suggestion draws on Panofsky's work that proposed that a media controversy (adversely) affected the direction of travel of the related discipline of behavior genetics: Aaron Panofsky, *Misbehaving Science: Controversy and the Development of Behavior Genetics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014).

14. See Article I, Section 3 on the HBES website: www.hbes.com/about/#toggle-id-1-closed

15. Segerstråle, *Nature's Oracle*, 306.

16. Judith Shulevitz, "Evolutionary Psychology's Anti-Semite." *Slate*, Jan 2000.

17. A. F. Chalmers, *What Is This Thing Called Science?* 3rd ed. (Maidenhead: Open University Press, 1978).

18. The idea that science can be conducted without consideration of moral or political concerns is sometimes referred to as the Value-Free Ideal. See Heather E. Douglas's critique of this ideal in her book *Science, Policy and the Value-Free Ideal* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2009).

problem with arguments that insist on the separation of science and politics is that politics that maintain the status quo are invisible. Within the evolutionary behavioral sciences, critiques of *Sociobiology* such as those by Lewontin and Gould are rarely mentioned without noting that these critics were politically leftwing. Wilson's politics are typically absent from such narratives.¹⁹ But Wilson was not apolitical. No scientist is. Wilson was recently revealed to be a covert supporter of the scientific racist J. Philippe Rushton.²⁰

Newer societies in the field, such as the European Human Behavior and Evolution Association (EHBEA) and the Cultural Evolution Society were founded (in 2008 and 2015) on different principles to HBES, prioritizing methodological rigor, and paying attention to issues such as diversity among committee members. EHBEA has made an explicit statement about the importance of acknowledging the history of racism in the discipline.²¹ HBES itself is now paying attention to diversity with its ADAPT program, which aims to support scholars from backgrounds not typically represented within the society.²² Researchers in the field are increasingly willing to tackle head on the political implications of their work, through academic²³ or media²⁴ publications, and conference symposia.²⁵

Nevertheless, naïve beliefs that politics and science can and should be separated are still being promoted by some in the human evolutionary behavioral sciences. Such narratives are eagerly exploited by those who wish to misuse science for political purposes. A social norm that discourages discussion

19. I've previously promoted this narrative myself, in *The International Encyclopedia of Human Sexuality*, s.v. "Sociobiology," by Rebecca Sear: III5.

20. Mark Borello and David Sepkoski, "Ideology as Biology," *The New York Review of Books*, 5 Feb 2022; Stacey Farina and Matthew Gibbons, "'The Last Refuge of Scoundrels': New Evidence of E. O. Wilson's Intimacy with Scientific Racism," *Science for the People*, 1 Feb 2022. Similarly, W. D. Hamilton's last academic publication was a positive ("brave and fertile book": 373) review of a book by another scientific racist, Richard Lynn: William D. Hamilton, "A Review of Dysgenics: Genetic Deterioration in Modern Populations," *Annals of Human Genetics* 64, no.4 (2000): 363–74.

21. Statement available on the EHBEA website: www.cambridge.org/core/membership/ehbea/principals-and-ethics.

22. Information about the ADAPT program is available on the HBES website: www.hbes.com/the-adapt-mission.

23. Louis Bachaud and Sarah E. Johns, "The Use and Misuse of Evolutionary Psychology in Online Manosphere Communities: The Case of Female Mating Strategies," *Evolutionary Human Sciences* 5 (2023), 28.

24. Daniel Conroy-Beam, "How the Incels Warped My Research," *Boston Globe*, May 2024.

25. Michael Price, "Anthropologists Take Up Arms against 'Race Science,'" *Science* 23, March 2024.

of politics means that critics who raise concerns about politically controversial research—such as on race, sex, or class differences—can be dismissed as ideological “censors,” regardless of whether their critiques focus on scientific methodology, political implications, or both. Those who wish to pass off sub-par work on controversial topics as science then merely need to claim to be doing “objective” science to avoid criticism, because any critique of their work is frowned on. Ironically, social norms that developed likely as an attempt to ensure science is protected from political controversy—by insisting that science and politics must remain separate—may have facilitated a situation in which the field provides a comfortable home for scientific racism, sexism, and classism. Fifty years later, there is still some reckoning to be done with the fallout from the sociobiology debate.