

# NOT BY GENES ALONE: HOW CULTURE TRANSFORMED HUMAN EVOLUTION BY PETER J. RICHERSON, ROBERT BOYD



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## Review

"Not by Genes Alone is a valuable and very readable synthesis of a still embryonic but very important subject straddling the sciences and humanities." - E. O. Wilson, Harvard University "I continue to be surprised by the number of educated people (many of them biologists) who think that offering explanations for human behavior in terms of culture somehow disproves the suggestion that human behavior can be explained in Darwinian evolutionary terms. Fortunately, we now have a book to which they may be directed for enlightenment.... It is a book full of good sense and the kinds of intellectual rigor and clarity of writing that we have come to expect from the Boyd/Richerson stable." - Robin Dunbar, Nature"

## About the Author

Peter J. Richerson is professor of environmental science at the University of California, Davis. Robert Boyd is professor of anthropology at the University of California, Los Angeles. Prolific authors and editors, they coauthored Culture and the Evolutionary Process, published by the University of Chicago Press.

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Humans are a striking anomaly in the natural world. While we are similar to other mammals in many ways, our behavior sets us apart. Our unparalleled ability to adapt has allowed us to occupy virtually every habitat on earth using an incredible variety of tools and subsistence techniques. Our societies are larger, more complex, and more cooperative than any other mammal's. In this stunning exploration of human adaptation, Peter J. Richerson and Robert Boyd argue that only a Darwinian theory of cultural evolution can explain these unique characteristics.

*Not by Genes Alone* offers a radical interpretation of human evolution, arguing that our ecological dominance and our singular social systems stem from a psychology uniquely adapted to create complex culture. Richerson and Boyd illustrate here that culture is neither superorganic nor the handmaiden of the genes. Rather, it is essential to human adaptation, as much a part of human biology as bipedal locomotion. Drawing on work in the fields of anthropology, political science, sociology, and economics—and building their case with such fascinating examples as kayaks, corporations, clever knots, and yams that require twelve men to carry them—Richerson and Boyd convincingly demonstrate that culture and biology are inextricably linked, and they show us how to think about their interaction in a way that yields a richer understanding of human nature.

In abandoning the nature-versus-nurture debate as fundamentally misconceived, *Not by Genes Alone* is a truly original and groundbreaking theory of the role of culture in evolution and a book to be reckoned with for generations to come.

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Homo Sapiens 101

By R. Stone

In the concluding pages of this book, Richerson and Boyd observe that universities have introductory courses in psychology, sociology, economics and political science in which students "are encouraged to think that the study of humans can be divided into isolated chunks corresponding to these historical fields." There is, however, no *Homo Sapiens 1 or 101*, "a complete introduction to the whole problem of understanding human behavior." The authors note that the chief reason no such course exists is "that the key integrative fields have not yet developed in the social sciences" and that "a proper evolutionary theory of culture should make a major contribution to the unification of the social sciences. Not only does it allow a smooth integration of the human sciences with the rest of biology, it also provides a framework for linking the human sciences to one another." I believe that such an evolutionary theory can and should integrate the social sciences with each other and biology and that this book could and should serve as the foundational text for *Homo Sapiens 101*.

There are dozens of books available employing evolutionary thinking to humans, the large majority of which do not offer a "proper evolutionary theory" because they neglect the most obvious and unique feature of our species--our culture, information affecting behavior acquired from other humans through social transmission. This failure results from a steadfast dedication to accounting for human behavior in terms of principles applicable to the prosocial behavior of other species-- kin selection and reciprocity. In an attempt to not stray from "orthodox" neo-Darwinism, neo-Darwinians have failed to fully acknowledge, let alone explain, the most salient feature of our species--a fact that "social constructivists" use to dismiss evolutionary theory. Richerson and Boyd recognize the "ancient social instincts" of kin altruism and reciprocity but they also acknowledge and give appropriate attention to what they call the "tribal social instincts." These instincts, which probably emerged during the dramatic climate variations of the late Pleistocene, allow members of our species to identify with, dedicate themselves to, and take normative direction from, groups of people that include hundreds to thousands of people beyond kin and friends. These tribal instincts are accommodated in complex societies such as our own through "work-arounds," institutions such as religious organizations, political parties, voluntary associations and other symbolically marked groups that exploit our inclination toward particularistic community attachment. Originally, though, these instincts coevolved in a ratcheting

process with our language, capacity for perspective taking, morality, religion and "culture" broadly conceived. We are a thoroughly unique groupish species and the only species on which group selection of cultural variants has played a role. As Richerson and Boyd argue, genes and culture have coevolved within our species. Culture has been primary in the environment selecting features of our genotype. Those humans incapable of cooperating in tribal settings were ostracized and were unlikely to find mates. They were less likely than cooperators to survive and reproduce. Culture has molded our genetic make-up just as our genes have directed the development of our culture.

I do not have space here to outline Richerson and Boyd's theory of cultural evolution beyond noting that population thinking plays as prominent a role as it did in Darwin's thought. I can say that unlike their landmark book, *Culture and the Evolutionary Process* (1985), this book is accessible to any adult with a three digit IQ. I can also note that the authors are both modest and civil toward those with whom they disagree--characteristics that portray their training in the natural sciences instead of the social sciences. They are quick to acknowledge when empirical evidence is currently lacking to substantiate claims they are making, and they are always generous to their intellectual opponents. For example, they acknowledge Richard Dawkins' contributions to evolutionary theory, while demonstrating the deficiencies of his "meme" theory of culture; they faithfully reproduce the arguments of evolutionary psychologists concerning domain-specific mental modules, while showing the dangers of overly-adaptationist accounts of our mental mechanisms; and in their discussions of various religious groups--Mormons, Catholics, the Amish, Hutterites, and the earliest Christians--Richerson and Boyd are deeply respectful of religious believers, something utterly missing in the writings of non-believers such as Richard Dawkins. This respectful attitude issues not from an impulse to pander but, rather, from an appreciation for our species-wide groupish tendencies and the accomplishments of symbolically marked groups, religious and otherwise.

Perhaps the largest contribution this book will make if it attains the number of readers it deserves is that it provides Darwinians and social constructivists in the social sciences and the humanities grounds for common discussion and possible agreement. This is no small feat given the tendency of these symbolically marked groups to deem their in-group members angelic and those in the out-group moronic, if not demonic.

Brad Lowell Stone

30 of 33 people found the following review helpful.

Genes and Culture working together.

By Michael Valdivielso

Not By Genes Alone by Peter J. Richerson and Robert Boyd explains something that should seem simple. Genes made us, we made culture, so genes shaped culture. Yet culture also helped shape us, so genes and culture interact together and work together to make us. But HOW do you do research on culture and link it to genes? Well, if culture also acts like genes, then what you want to do it treat it like genes.

And that is what the book does. It studies culture from an evolutionary point of view, breaking it down to traditions and values, making these the genes of culture. Cultures evolves, adapts and sometimes even cause problems, bringing about the extinction of the culture. One culture might work better than another and overwhelm the weaker, less fit culture.

By using the ideas and knowledge that Darwin has passed down to us the authors were able to understand how genes and culture worked together to shape US. LOTS and lots of detailed, data rich, chapters. Take your time and enjoy.

15 of 15 people found the following review helpful.

Difficult but rewarding treatment of culture

By Jen Badham

Richerson and Boyd present the same argument in (at least) two books. *Culture and the Evolutionary Process* is the earlier mathematical treatment. *Not By Genes Alone* is the later nonmathematical version, though it is informed by the same mathematical models as the earlier work. I am reviewing them together because the key concepts are the same, I read them almost together, and which version you prefer will probably depend on your background.

The core argument has several elements. First, culture constrains and shapes human behaviour (social scientists may be surprised that this is not immediately evident to all). Second, that the way that culture spreads can be understood using mathematical models based on evolutionary principles: competition between different ideas and behaviours (social norms) spread through inheritance from cultural parents (parents, teachers, social leaders). Importantly, this means that culture can evolve relatively quickly, allowing populations to adapt, but can also persist within a population even where the particular idea is no longer appropriate. Finally, the authors argue that the importance of culture for humans has led to greater fitness of genetics that favour culture (eg language facilitation), which has in turn supported a greater role for culture and further genetic pressure and so on.

In many ways, *Culture and Evolutionary Process* is the easier book, particularly if you are comfortable with mathematics. The mathematics is not hard, just very long and extremely tedious, particularly as the authors have attempted to make it accessible to nonmathematicians. Each section is well organised with an introduction that explains what the mathematics is going to demonstrate, and a conclusion about the implications of the mathematical results. *Not By Genes Alone* dispenses with the mathematics and makes the same arguments with examples and text. However, there is a sense throughout that the authors are responding to some unseen critics of their theory and there are many very detailed arguments about issues that don't appear to be important to the main thrust of the argument. This is probably also because *Not By Genes Alone* was written much later and the authors' thinking has evolved. All this detail interferes with readability and makes it unclear for whom the book is intended. However, the later book has the advantage of more thoroughly discussing the implications of the theory.

I enjoyed both books, though I found them both hard work and heavy going (for different reasons). I also think that the main argument is important and has deep implications for how we understand the role of culture and social sciences. While I would normally subtract a star due to the difficult reading, I am adding one for the importance of the ideas. This means 4 stars for *Culture and Evolutionary Process*, and 5 stars for *Not By Genes Alone*. The difference is because the earlier work does not sufficiently flesh out the implications.

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Yeah, reading a publication **Not By Genes Alone: How Culture Transformed Human Evolution By Peter J. Richerson, Robert Boyd** can add your friends checklists. This is just one of the solutions for you to be effective. As understood, success does not mean that you have fantastic points. Understanding as well as recognizing even more compared to various other will certainly provide each success. Beside, the notification and also perception of this Not By Genes Alone: How Culture Transformed Human Evolution By Peter J. Richerson, Robert Boyd could be taken as well as picked to act.

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