

Can genetics shed light on history?

When it comes to questions of demographic change genetic insights are key, and present data in a way that allows for more rigorous analysis. I must give a nod here to [L. L. Cavalli-Sforza](#) and [The History and Geography of Human Genes](#). Cavalli-Sforza's magnum opus reopened the book in attempting to understand history through demographics.

As is the nature of science there was much that Cavalli-Sforza got wrong in [The History and Geography of Human Genes](#). But there was much that he got right, because the results were so clear and strong on particular points of contention. In short, very broad patterns on the continental level jumped out when analyzing even hundreds of neutral (that is, not subject to natural selection) markers. For example, the data confirm a gradient of genetic diversity which implies human origins from an African locus, as well as the relative homogeneity of Europe (aside from Finns, European populations have a surprisingly low between-population pairwise genetic distance in most cases). But, more subtle counterintuitive relationships were often not robust (e.g., North and South Chinese do not bifurcate in the manner that he reported in the 1990s). And, most critically for the purposes of this post inferring past demography from current phylogeographic patterns had serious limitations.

The GLP aggregated and excerpted this blog/article to reflect the diversity of news, opinion and analysis. Read full, original post: [Genetics Allows the Dead to Speak from the Grave](#)