



Miscounting Americans Correctly: Post-Truth as a Guide to Race and the US Census

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Reviewed: Paul Schor, *Counting Americans: How the US Census Classified the Nation*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2017, 280 pp. (originally published in French as: *Compter et classer. Histoire des recensements américains*, Paris, Éditions de l'EHESS, "En temps et lieux" series, 2009, 383 pp.)

Paul Schor's book Counting Americans demonstrates that, in the hands of the US Census Bureau, the concept of race has consistently been both tenacious and malleable. In this review, Greg Smithsimon explores the census as the "hidden abattoir" of a deeply racialized American society, a renderer of categories that, while seeming clear and self-evident in daylight, are the contingent product of brutality.

As the best available portrait of an increasingly diverse and multiracial country, the US census has to constantly adapt. The census acknowledged multiracial identities in 2000 and Hispanic ethnicity in 1970. More recently, the Bureau moved towards counting Arab Americans (a move supported by Arab American organizations, squashed by Trump funding cuts,¹ but still possible in a discreet way because the 2020 census will ask everyone their ethnic origin). This year, the Trump administration took the inflammatory step of insisting the census ask people whether they are US citizens, with the ultimate goal of reducing participation by immigrants. On the horizon, the Census Bureau predicts a majority nonwhite nation by 2044, although others argue that claim ignores the fluidity of racial and ethnic identities,² particularly as generations of Hispanics, Asians, and other groups intermarry and redefine themselves.

At this moment of racial and ethnic flux arrives Paul Schor's invaluable history of the Census's efforts to racially and ethnically categorize Americans. Brilliant for its demonstration that the history of the census lays out the history of race in the US, *Counting Americans* shows beyond debate that race has always been (paradoxically) both tenacious and malleable. Recent debates are hardly out of character.

In this project, Schor makes two clear points about race. First, if races are socially constructed, someone has to go about not just constructing but reconstructing them. Congressional directives regarding the census have always reflected the fact that racial categories are contested ground in American society.

Second, although the Census Bureau sought to develop precise definitions so that their enumerators in the field could categorize people consistently, the census has never actually defined

¹ See: www.motherjones.com/politics/2018/03/trump-is-reshaping-the-census-to-reflect-his-vision-of-america.

² See: www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2018/02/06/theres-a-big-problem-with-how-the-census-measures-race.

racial categories except in self-referential circumlocution. In the end, the census makes little effort to specify racial categories with reference to anything external to the labels themselves. Even before 1970, when field agents assigned people a race rather than respondents doing so, Census Bureau employees relied on families' own assessments and "local opinion" about what race someone was. Black is ultimately defined as "Black," white as "White". The race question can only be answered by the initiated; if you don't understand, the census can't explain it.

Why measure race at all? The US Constitution requires a census to apportion members of the House of Representatives. The Constitution required, obliquely, that the census measure race when it ordered a count of "the whole Number of free Persons, including those bound to Service for a Term of Years, and excluding Indians not taxed, three fifths of all other Persons." Those "other persons" were Black slaves, counted for the purposes of representation in the three-fifths compromise that added their numbers towards the tally of representatives for the white slave masters that insisted slavery not be challenged in Congress. The "Indians not taxed" were the diminishing number not killed or displaced by Manifest Destiny. The rest were white.

From that starting point, Schor shows, the census has always been concerned about race—even preeminently about race. Schor does a thorough job of chronicling the shifting racial categories that each decennial census used, and he demonstrates what those changes said about shifts in the understanding of race and ethnicity. The census is the hidden abattoir of our racist society, where the rendering of racial categories that appear clean cut in daylight are messy and brutal up close.

Schor's investigation brings us close enough to see the illogic of racial categories, but they are revealing, not merely absurdities. Census enumerators' default was, surprisingly, often to categorize groups newly entering US borders as white: Asians in many California counties in 1860 were classified as white, as were many American Indians who crossed from territories and reservations into the States. (The alternatives were not necessarily better; rather than white, the census then wanted people from all across Asia to be labeled "Chinese.") Mexicans were long counted as white as well. In fact, in 1930 the census tried to count Mexicans as "Mexican." The Mexican embassy, Mexican American organizations, and Mexican elites strongly objected. While people called themselves Mexican, for the government to do so in 1930 would have meant their children could have been sent to segregated "colored" schools (and Mexicans could have been prohibited from becoming naturalized citizens, which federal law permitted only for white and Black immigrants). By 1936, the Census Bureau conceded, writing unambiguously, "Mexicans are Whites and must be classified as 'White.' This order does not admit any further discussion, and must be followed to the letter." (p. 317). From 1936 until 1970, Mexicans were white, until they became ethnically "Hispanic" and racially indeterminate.

The pattern of categorizing a diversity of people inside the US as white reflects the original language in the Constitution: potential citizens were implicitly white, and Indians were excluded only if "untaxed"—that is, outside the boundaries of civilian governance. Once they entered the civilian Nation (as opposed to the territory, colony, or reservation), the "other" could be stripped of his or her outsider identity and rendered a (white) citizen. The implications of this elision for Americans who today identify as Black are indeed grim.

Schor presents a fascinating history of the short-lived appearance of the mixed-race categories of mulatto, quadroon, and octoroon (one half, one quarter, and one eighth Black, respectively) in the late-1800s censuses. Those categories reflect much more than a US obsession over racial purity or miscegenation. In the increasingly pitched political battles in the years before the Civil War, it was anti-slave northern senators who wanted to count mixed-race Blacks, because their existence was living proof that slaveholders like their Southern colleagues were raping enslaved women. Southerners adamantly opposed the proposal. They assented to the count only once convinced that a measure of mulattos might show they had shorter lifespans, bearing out whites' junk race-science notion that mixed-race people were weaker than pure members of either race. In 1900, the census dropped the mixed-race categories for the same reason they didn't follow the one-drop rule: the law

may have believed it was real, but the Census Bureau had to admit that census workers in the field just couldn't tell.

Schor's book unintentionally functions as a complement to a book written just a few years ago by a former director of the US Census Bureau, Kenneth Prewitt. Schor's book is the more thorough and academic history; Prewitt's, titled *What Is Your Race? The Census and Our Flawed Efforts to Classify Americans*, is a work by an insider that ends with a detailed policy proposal. (It also includes a useful appendix with brief discussions of the structures, blind spots, and conflicts over history represented in censuses in Brazil, France, and Israel.)

At first blush, Prewitt's proposal seems radical, calling for the census to transition away from the race question over the next few censuses. What he proposes, on closer inspection, is to introduce a broader question about race or origins (to which one could answer African American, Mexican, Mexican American, German, and so on). For a time, Prewitt would have the census ask a classic race question with white, Black, Hispanic, Asian, and indigenous categories, and a second, more open-ended fill-in-the-blank question asking what someone's race, origin, or tribe was. The benefit, Prewitt argues, is that while both questions existed, it would allow someone to be any race and recognize any ancestry—white and Mexican, Black and Chinese, Trinidadian and Asian. Researchers could construct not just the racial categories used now but statistically identify subtle variants of groups which they cannot now: people of Middle Eastern and North African heritage, or from Muslim-majority nations, or ethnic Chinese from Latin America.

Prewitt's proposal clearly comes from his own direct experiences dealing with the unsatisfactory race and ethnicity concepts used in the census today. He saw that the categories are hopelessly illogical and convoluted. He hopes that the generation of his grandchildren, growing up today in multiracial America, will have integrated-enough lives that they no longer need counts of the five blunt races used in the Census, and that their own identifications will be too complex for those historic categories. "It is possible that the color line will have disappeared," and that "cumulative disadvantages [facing racial groups] will have been erased— [and] will no longer require race statistics" (p. 207).

I don't share Prewitt's cautious optimism. There is little evidence of meaningful decreases in the types of racialized disadvantage the census is used to measure, like residential³ and school segregation,⁴ compliance with the Voting Rights Act,⁵ and income inequality.⁶

Prewitt is not wrong to say that the categories are illogical. Schor's book makes that point incontrovertibly. Prewitt's suggestion parallels proposals from within the Census Bureau today to ask everyone their "origins." (Asians and Hispanics already are asked; the Census proposal gives origin examples for whites including Irish, English, Lebanese, and Egyptian; examples for Blacks include African American, Jamaican, and Haitian, but in both cases people write in whatever origin they choose.) The proposal by Prewitt and the Census would indeed allow much more varied categories of race, origin and nationality. Researchers might initially stick to the traditional racial categories but, Prewitt predicts, develop new categories as they find them useful to better measure discrimination or other outcomes.

But it is likely that a question about origins would lose still-needed data about race. (What would we know about everyone who found it logical to write in their origin as "American"?) On the second-to-last page of his book, Prewitt suggests that separate questions asking people if they are Black or Native American could be retained, "if analysis of racial disparities seems to require that" (p. 207). His book was written during the Obama years; and Prewitt acknowledges today that the resurfacing of white nationalism makes clear that racial identities remain of grave importance. If his

³ See: www.brookings.edu/blog/the-avenue/2017/12/08/metro-areas-are-still-racially-segregated.

⁴ See: <https://civilrightsproject.ucla.edu/research/k-12-education/integration-and-diversity/brown-at-60-great-progress-a-long-retreat-and-an-uncertain-future/Brown-at-60-051814.pdf>.

⁵ See: www.brennancenter.org/publication/extreme-gerrymandering-2018-midterm.

⁶ See: www.equality-of-opportunity.org.

proposal is read in its entirety as retaining a recognition of race's importance (rather than shunting it to the end trailed by a conditional clause) his proposal could succeed in making people more satisfied with the ways they can identify themselves, in preserving the measurement of US racism, and in allowing statisticians to see the role of other, more "granular" identities in social inequality.

There is a telling irony in the proposal, which reconnects Prewitt's and Schor's books. Prewitt proposed revising the census to get away from a century of racial essentialism and coarse categories. But intriguingly, after 250 years of censuses, a former director of the Census Bureau suggests that, when all is said and done, in addition to whatever other categories we might be able to measure with better question wording, the three categories of racial discrimination we most need to track are the same ones set down at the founding of the nation: Blacks, Indians, and an unarticulated white category. Census takers struggle with the meaning of these categories, but cannot escape them.

No, the categories don't make any sense. Yes, we must measure them. Like much that passes for political discourse today, races are not true, but they are real. As such, we must take them seriously.

In the gap between Schor's and Prewitt's books is the sense that while the census originally marked racial difference to enable government to mistreat nonwhite citizens, census counts of race today are more often used by activists fighting discrimination who can use the data as statistical proof of inequality. Prewitt suggests, as others have, that racial questions reinforce racial categories, but that overstates the importance of the census when racial inequality is generated in the criminal-justice system, electoral gerrymandering, labor markets, and everyday life. This polygenesis of racism itself is part of what makes it so defiant.

Prewitt is correct that racial categories are a mess, and that they will embarrass future generations just as earlier centuries' categories embarrass us. And that's the unenviable job we have needed the Census director for. Schor's chronicling of Prewitt's predecessors at the Census Bureau makes clear that officials' most serious attempts to be scientific, accurate, and rational did not redefine the work from prejudice to science, whether officials were defining the racial percentage range of quadroons, predicting the "natural" disappearance of Blacks after the Civil War, trying to apply the mainland's binary racial categories to polyracial Puerto Rico and Hawaii, or repeatedly turning nationalities (like Japanese or Filipino) into races. We must have sympathy for Prewitt and others who have been in his position: we need the work they do dividing and redividing imaginary, senseless and divisive racial categories. The emperor has no clothes, yet we still can't see his skin for what it is.

The job is a vital insanity. To measure race in America is to measure a national shame and embarrassment, but that is hardly justification not to do so; to the contrary. The tailors at the Census Bureau discard old races and craft new ones—out with mulatto and Mexican, in with Hispanic and Arab American. The very fact that we argue over these categories every 10 years is evidence that they still matter in our lives.

Bibliography

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