History Counts: A Comparative Analysis of Racial/Color Categorization in US and Brazilian Censuses

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ABSTRACT

Categories of race (ethnicity, color, or both) have appeared and continue to appear in the demographic censuses of numerous countries, including the United States and Brazil. Until recently, such categorization had largely escaped critical scrutiny, being viewed and treated as a technical procedure requiring little conceptual clarity or historical explanation. Recent political developments and methodological changes, in US censuses especially, have engendered a critical reexamination of both the comparative and the historical dimensions of categorization.

The author presents a comparative analysis of the histories of racial/color categorization in American and Brazilian censuses and shows that racial (and color) categories have appeared in these censuses because of shifting ideas about race and the enduring power of these ideas as organizers of political, economic, and social life in both countries. These categories have not appeared simply as demographic markers. The author demonstrates that censuses are instruments at a state's disposal and are not simply detached registers of population and performance. (*Am J Public Health.* 2000;90:1738–1745)

State officials, international organizations, and the general public today consider census-taking an indispensable component of modern governance. Most national census bureaus employ similar statistical methods and administrative procedures, and international guidelines have advanced this uniformity. Since 1946, for example, the United Nations has sponsored 4 world population programs whose express purpose was to improve and standardize national censuses.[1]

An unavoidable consequence of this apparent uniformity and universality has been the obfuscation of the very particular dimensions of census-taking within and between countries. That is, while census bureaus may use the same statistical methods to produce numerical data, they often do not employ the same categories (e.g., race, language, ethnicity) to generate these data. Moreover, even if the same categories are used, they usually do not bear the same meanings. Indeed, the basic inconsistency of official categories and their meanings can even be observed within the census history of one country. In American censuses, for example, census and other state officials have changed racial categories and their definitions several times since the first census in 1790 and on nearly every census since 1890.

In short, the political impulses behind census categories vary across national settings and within national settings across time. Whether the terms used are "race," "ethnicity," "color," or some combination of these depends largely on historical circumstance. What these terms mean, to whom they apply, and how they are employed in public policies are most intelligible in terms of specific national experiences.

In this article I provide a succinct history and analysis of racial and color categorization in American and Brazilian demographic censuses.[2] This history clearly illustrates the fundamental political and historical contingency of such categorization. It also shows that the production of racial/ethnic data has served shifting political and social purposes. Knowledge of this history is absolutely essential to assessing the contemporary production and uses of racial data and, in particular, the recent decision by the US Office of Management and Budget (OMB) to allow Americans to check more than one racial category.

American Censuses: Race is Fundamental

The race question and racial categories have appeared in every US decennial census, from the Republic's first in 1790 to the 2000 census. Although the term "color" actually appeared on 19th-century census schedules, it was synonymous with "race" in meaning. The history of racial categorization can be divided into 4 periods (see Table 1).

The first period is 1790 through 1840, when categorization was shaped by representational apportionment, slavery, and racial ideas. The second period is 1850 through 1920, when categorization was used expressly to advance the racial theories of scientists. The third period is 1930 through 1960, when census definitions of racial categories were identical to those of Southern race laws. The fourth period is 1970 to the present, during which categorization has been shaped most profoundly by civil rights legislation, the implementation of OMB Statistical Directive No. 15, and the lobbying efforts of organized groups. Before the introduction of self-identification on the 1960 census, enumerators determined the person's race by observation on the basis of the definitions provided in official instructions.

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TABLE 1—US Census Race Categories, 1790–2000

Year	Categories
1790	Free White Males; Free White Females; All Other Free Persons; Slaves
1800	Free White Males; Free White Females; All Other Free Persons, except Indians Not Taxed; Slaves
1810	Free White Males; Free White Females; All Other Free Persons; except Indians Not Taxed; Slaves
1820	Free White Males; Free White Females; Free Colored Persons, All other persons, except Indians Not Taxed; Slaves
1830	Free White Persons; Free Colored Persons; Slaves
1840	Free White Persons; Free Colored Persons; Slaves
1850	Black; Mulatto[a]
1860	Black; Mulatto; (Indian)[b]
1880	White; Black; Mulatto; Chinese; Indian
1890	White; Black; Mulatto; Quadroon; Octoroon; Chinese; Japanese; Indian
1900	White: Black; Chinese; Japanese; Indian
1910	White; Black; Mulatto; Chinese; Japanese; Indian; Other (+ write in)
1920	White; Black; Mulatto; Indian; Chinese; Japanese; Filipino; Hindu; Korean; Other (+ write in)
1930	White; Negro; Mexican; Indian; Chinese; Japanese; Filipino; Hindu; Korean; (Other races, spell out in full)
1940	White; Negro; Indian; Chinese; Japanese; Filipino; Hindu; Korean; (Other races, spell out in full)
1950	White; Negro; Indian; Japanese; Chinese; Filipino; (Other race—spell out)
1960	White; Negro; American Indian; Japanese; Chinese; Filipino; Hawaiian; Part-Hawaiian; Aleut Eskimo, etc.
1970	White; Negro or Black; American Indian; Japanese; Chinese; Filipino; Hawaiian; Korean; Other (print race)
1980	White; Negro or Black; Japanese; Chinese; Filipino; Korean; Vietnamese; American Indian; Asian Indian; Hawaiian; Guamanian; Samoan; Eskimo; Aleut; Other (specify)
1990	White; Black or Negro; American Indian; Eskimo; Aleut; Chinese; Filipino; Hawaiian; Korean; Vietnamese; Japanese; Asian Indian; Samoan; Guamanian; Other API (Asian or Pacific Islander); Other race
2000	White; Black, African American, or Negro; American Indian or Alaska Native; Asian Indian; Chinese; Filipino; Japanese; Korean; Vietnamese; Native Hawaiian; Guamanian or Chamorro; Samoan; Other Asian (Print Race); Other Pacific Islander (Print Race); Some other race (Print Race)

Note. Categories are presented in the order in which they appeared on schedules.
Source. US Bureau of the Census.
[a]In 1850 and 1860, free persons were enumerated on schedules for "free inhabitants"; slaves were enumerated on schedules designated for "slave inhabitants." On the free-inhabitants schedule, instructions to enumerators read, in part: "In all cases where the person is white leave the space blank in the column marked 'Color.' "
[b]Although "Indian" was not listed on the census schedule, the instructions read: " 'Indians'—Indians not taxed are not to be enumerated. The families of Indians who have renounced tribal rule, and who under State or Territorial laws exercise the rights of citizens, are to be enumerated. In all such cases write 'Ind.' opposite their names, in column 6, under heading 'Color.' "

1790–1840 Censuses

The initial reasons race appeared at all are not transparently connected to demographic concerns, because the principal impetus for US census-taking was political. The Constitution of the United States mandated that "an actual enumeration" be conducted every 10 years for the purposes of representational apportionment. How slaves would be counted was especially contentious. Delegates to the Constitutional Convention eventually agreed on the three-fifths compromise, meaning that for apportionment purposes, a slave would count as three fifths of a person.

The question remains, then: Why did the census count by race? After all, representation depended on civil status—whether one was free or slave and whether one was taxed or not. The race question was included because race was a salient social and political category. Eighteenth-century political elites regarded race as a natural and self-evident component of human identity, in keeping with European Enlightenment thought. Observed differences in physical appearance and cultural practices were the result of differences in natural environment.[3]

These ideas, most robust in the years immediately preceding and following the American Revolution, were gradually subordinated to theories of polygenesis and the widespread belief in the existence of innately and permanently superior and inferior races. It is important to emphasize, however, that the egalitarian ideas emerging from the Enlightenment and the American Revolution competed, at the time, with other ideas that claimed natural hierarchies and limitations. Further, the deepening entrenchment of slavery in economic and political life rendered moot abstract commitments to universal equality and liberty.

To be free and White and to be free and Black were distinctly different political experiences. Whites were presumptively citizens. Although free Blacks were also citizens by birthright, they did not enjoy the same rights and entitlements as Whites, precisely because Blacks were deemed inferior and unfit for republican life on the grounds of race.[4,5] The citizenship status of Native Americans was determined by the particular status of tribes as spelled out in law and treaties. The federal government considered most tribes "quasi-sovereign nations," thereby disqualifying their members from American citizenship.[6] The census schedules of 1800 through 1820 explicitly reflected these arrangements in their category "all other free persons, except Indians Not Taxed."

The censuses from the years 1790 through 1840 asked few questions beyond those related to population. They counted free White males and free White females, subdivided into age groups; free colored persons (in some years, all other free persons, except Indians not taxed); and slaves. The earliest censuses registered race, as it was then understood. Race was considered a natural fact, though its political and social significance was still being sorted out. To be sure, colonial racial discourse had long regarded Africans as different from and inferior to the English, whatever their common humanity.[6] Yet political elites did not regard these differences as permanent. By the 1850s, in this respect, racial discourse had changed markedly. So too would the role of census-taking.

1850–1920 Censuses

The 1850 census marked a watershed in census-taking in several ways. For our purposes, a large part of its significance rests in the introduction of the "mulatto" category and the reasons for its introduction. This category was added not because of demographic shifts, but because of the lobbying efforts of race scientists and the willingness of certain senators to do their bidding. More generally, the mulatto category signaled the ascendance of scientific authority within racial discourse.

By the 1850s, polygenist thought was winning a battle that it had lost in Europe. The "American school of ethnology" distinguished itself from prevailing European racial thought through its insistence that human races were distinct and unequal species.[7,8] That polygenism endured at all was a victory, since the very existence of racially mixed persons had led

European theorists to abandon it. Moreover, there was considerable resistance to it in the United States. Although most American monogenists were not racial egalitarians, they were initially unwilling to accept claims of separate origins, permanent racial differences, and the infertility of racial mixture. Polygenists deliberately sought hard statistical data to prove that mulattoes, as hybrids of different racial species, were less fertile than their pure-race parents and lived shorter lives.

Racial theorist, medical doctor, scientist, and slaveholder Josiah Nott lobbied certain senators for the inclusion in the census of several inquiries designed to prove his theory of mulatto hybridity and separate origins.[9,10] In the end, the senators voted to include only the category "mulatto," although they hotly debated the inclusion of another inquiry—"[d]egree of removal from pure white and black races"—as well. Instructions to enumerators for the slave population read, "Under heading 5 entitled 'Color,' insert in all cases, when the slave is black, the letter B; when he or she is a mulatto, insert M. The color of all slaves should be noted." For the free population, enumerators were instructed as follows: "in all cases where the person is black, insert the letter B; if mulatto, insert M. It is very desirable that these particulars be carefully regarded."[11(p23)]

The 1850 census introduced a pattern, especially in regard to the mulatto category, that lasted until 1930: the census was deliberately used to advance race science. Such science was fundamental to, though not the only basis of, racial discourse—that is, the discourse that explained what race was. Far from merely counting race, the census was helping to *create* race by assisting scientists in their endeavors. Although scientific ideas about race changed over those 80 years, the role of the census in advancing such thought did not.

The abolition of slavery and the reconstitution of White racial domination in the South were accompanied by an enduring interest in race. Predictably, the ideas that race scientists and proslavery advocates had marshaled to defend slavery were used to oppose the recognition of Black political rights. Blacks were naturally inferior to Whites, whether as slaves or as free people, and should therefore be disqualified from full participation in American economic, political, and social life. Although scientists, along with nearly all Whites, were convinced of the inequality of races, they continued in their basic task of investigating racial origins. Darwinism presented a challenge to the still dominant polygenism, but the mulatto category retained its significance within polygenist theories. Data were needed to prove that mulattoes lived shorter lives, thus proving that Blacks and Whites were different racial species.

Both the 1870 and 1880 censuses were designed to amass statistical proof for this theory, as enumerator instructions reveal. Enumerators were expected to determine, through visual inspection, the traces of African blood in persons counted. The 1870 instructions read:

> It must be assumed that, where nothing is written in this column, 'White' is to be understood. The column is always to be filled. Be particularly careful in reporting the class *Mulatto.* The word here is generic, and includes quadroons, octoroons, and all persons having any perceptible trace of African blood. Important scientific results depend upon the correct determination of this class in schedules 1 and 2 [italics in original].[11(p26)]

Schedule 1 was for population, and Schedule 2 was for mortality. The 1880 instructions for "color" were nearly identical.

How was polygenism able to withstand Darwinism's claim that all humankind had descended from a common evolutionary ancestor? Polygenists profited from the fact that Darwin's main claim left unaddressed 2 of polygenism's central concerns: the effects of racial mixture and the capacities of races.[12,13] As polygenists saw it, common ancestry did not erase the evident fact of human diversity, nor did it explain the content of those differences or the effects of racial intermixture. That Whites and Blacks could mate did not mean that they should. More information was needed about the physical and psychological effects of racial mixture on Whites, Blacks, and their mulatto offspring. Moreover, if humankind had evolved from common ancestors, that did not mean that the races had followed similar or even comparable evolutionary processes. Indeed, polygenists argued that Whites and Blacks had evolved so differently that it rendered their common ancestry practically meaningless.

By the 1890 census, polygenism and Darwinism came to coexist. Darwinism had not replaced polygenist thought but rather had combined with it. Race scientists and social theorists were convinced, according to their interpretation of Darwin, that all races were engaged in a struggle for survival. They translated Darwin's biological idea of natural selection into a social theory of racial struggle. Yet, in keeping with their polygenist preoccupation with "mulattoes," the same scientists and social theorists considered mulattoes to be at a distinct disadvantage and thought they would die off. Mulatto frailty would prove that racial mixture engendered racial disadvantage and would result in eventual disappearance or reversion to the "dominant type." The "dominant type" was, of course, presumed to be Black; at no point before or after 1890 were mulattoes considered "mixed Whites." Blacks and other non-Whites were mixed; Whites were not. These ideas emerged powerfully in the 1890 census, and certain of them persist today.

Congressional documents and enumerator instructions for the 1890 census again reveal scientific interest in the census. Bureau officials and social scientists wanted to know "[w]hether the mulattoes, quadroons, and octoroons are disappearing and the race becoming more purely negro."[14] Therefore, "quadroon" and "octoroon" were added to the categories "White," "Black," "Mulatto," "Chinese," "Japanese," and "Indian." The instructions read:

> Write *white, black, mulatto, quadroon, octoroon, Chinese, Japanese, or Indian,* according to the color or race of the person enumerated. Be particularly careful to distinguish between blacks, mulattoes, quadroons, and octoroons. The word 'black' should be used to describe those persons who have three-fourths or more black blood; 'mulatto,' those persons who have from three-eighths to five-eighths black blood; 'quadroon,' those persons who have one-fourth black blood; and 'octoroons,' those persons who have one-eighth or any trace of black blood [italics in original].[11(p36)]

For 50 years, from 1850 to 1900, the census contributed directly to the formation of scientific ideas of race. These ideas were the backbone of a racial discourse that justified and sustained slavery and then de jure and de facto racial segregation. At the same time, social scientists studied race because of their scientific interest in it, for reasons distinct but not disconnected from larger political, social, and economic developments.

However, in the 20th century there was a marked change. Twentieth-century censuses ceased to play such a prominent role in the formation of racial theory; instead, for the most part they simply counted by race, presuming race to be a basic fact. Theorizing about race continued in social science circles, but scientists and theorists did not deliberately enlist the census in their theorizing, as they had in the past. Census categorization continued to sustain racial discourse inasmuch as categorizing and counting by race gave race an official existence. The use of the "mulatto" category in racial theorizing until the 1930 census was an important exception to this overall trend. By 1930, the definitions of "non-White" categories became consistent with legal definitions of non-White racial membership.

Since 1970, the census has once again emerged as a venue for directly enabling public policies and for shaping debate about the concept of race itself. The census now supports civil rights legislation, and racial discourse once again turns on the same basic question that 19th-century social scientists were driven to answer: What is race? As in the past, the census is being used to answer that question. However, there is now a much wider circle of participants, including census bureau officials, politicians, social scientists, civil rights advocates, policymakers, and organized groups within civil society who are seeking recognition.

Three interrelated fundamental shifts in American intellectual, institutional, and political life account for the more constrained influence of the census. First, race science settled into a set of ideas that would dominate for nearly 40 years and would then be challenged for decades thereafter: that discrete races existed; that these races possessed distinctive intellectual, cultural, and moral capacities; and that these capacities were unequally distributed within and between racial groups. Social scientists no longer used the census to sort out the basic questions of race science. Instead, the census registered the evident existence of race.

Second, the Census Bureau's gradual institutionalization changed perceptions about the purposes and limits of racial enumeration. The bureau would eventually become a full-fledged bureaucracy, its methods soundly grounded in statistical science. Its mission was to provide racial data, without explicitly advancing racial thought and without being beholden to political interests. Counting by race would come to be widely viewed as an administrative task and technical procedure, not a tool of scientific investigation. Moreover, decision making about racial categorization became an even less public process and purportedly a less political one, as Congress deferred to the internal decision-making processes of the Census Bureau.

In 1902, the bureau became a permanent federal agency under the Department of Commerce and Labor.[15] In 1918, an advisory committee was formed to assist in the development of schedules and inquiries, including the race question. This committee advised the bureau until the mid-1940s. In 1954, all census legislation became Title 13 of the United States Code.

Third, the hardening of racial segregation and subordination, both de jure and de facto, paralleled the hardening of scientific thought. Southern law had largely settled on the "one drop of non-White blood" rule of racial membership by 1930. The definitions of non-White categories as spelled out in census enumerator instructions were identical to those of Southern race laws. It is important to emphasize, however, that the definitions of White and non-White racial membership were not limited to the South or its legal regime. They were imposed and assumed nationwide, thereby explaining their appearance on the federal census. But census categories did not simply reflect race laws, scientific thought, and social customs. The "mulatto" enumeration shows that census-taking followed its own path to the same destination of the "one-drop" rule.

The mulatto category remained on the 1910 and 1920 censuses for the same reason that it had been introduced in 1850: to build racial theories. (Census officials removed the category from the 1900 census because they were dissatisfied with the quality of 1890 mulatto, octoroon, and quadroon data.) The basic idea that distinct races existed and were enduringly unequal remained firmly in place. What happens when superior and inferior races mate? Social and natural scientists still wanted to know. But the advisory committee to the Census Bureau decided in 1928 to terminate use of the mulatto category on censuses.

The stated reasons for removal rested on accuracy. Had the advisory committee possessed confidence in the data's accuracy or the Census Bureau's ability to secure accuracy, "mulatto" might well have remained on the census. The committee did not refer to the evident inability of the mulatto category to settle the central, if shifting, questions of race science: first, whether "mulatto-ness" proved that Whites and Blacks were different species of humans, and then, whether mulattoes were weaker than members of the so-called pure races. The exit of the mulatto category from the census was markedly understated, especially when compared with its entrance in 1850 and its enduring significance on 19th-century censuses.

Beginning with the 1890 census, all Native Americans, whether taxed or not, were counted on general population schedules.[16] Much as racial theorists believed that enumerating mulattoes would prove their frailty, they thought that Native Americans were a defeated and vanishing race. Given the weight of these expectations in the late 19th century, it is not surprising that census methods and data reflected them. As the historian Brian Dippie observed, "the expansion and shrinkage of Indian population estimates correlate with changing attitudes about the Native American's rights and prospects."[17] The idea of the vanishing Indian was so pervasive that the censuses of 1910 and 1930 applied a broad definition of "Indian" because officials believed that each of these censuses would be the last chance for an accurate count.[18]

1930–1960 Censuses

With removal of the mulatto category, categories and instructions for the 1930 census mirrored the racial status quo in law, society, and science. Southern statutes that had defined Negroes and other non-Whites by referring to a specific blood quantum now defined them broadly. Any person with any trace of "Black blood" was legally Black and subject to all the disabilities the designation conferred. Census definitions followed suit, and enumerator instructions in 1930 read, in part: "A person of mixed white and Negro blood should be returned as a Negro, no matter how small the percentage of Negro blood. Both black and mulatto persons are to be returned as Negroes, without distinction."[19] The category "Other Mixed Races" meant that any mixture of White and non-White should be reported according to the non-White parent. Similarly detailed instructions, of paragraph length, were provided for "Mexicans" and "Indians."

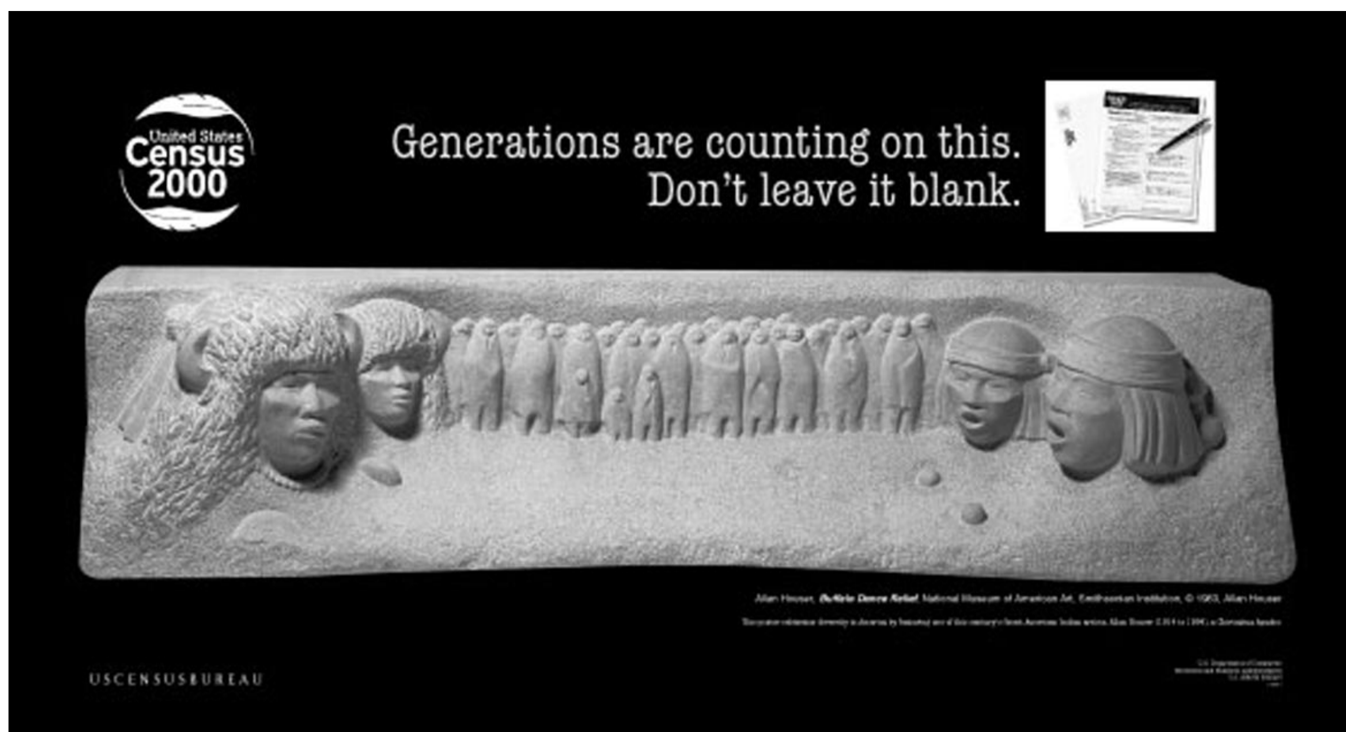
In contrast, legal definitions of "White" did not change, when they existed at all. In general, Southern laws conceived of White as the complete absence of any "Negro or nonwhite blood," down to the last drop and as far back generationally as one could go.[20] Again, the census reflected legal practices by never providing a definition of White.

The state of racial discourse was more unstable than the 1930–1960 census instructions would lead us to believe. By the 1940s, the scientific foundations of the discourse had shifted noticeably. Cultural anthropologists, under the guidance of Franz Boas, compellingly challenged the basic tenets of race science. Nazism forced social scientists worldwide to reexamine their thinking on race. However, a change in the thinking of social scientists did not alone account for changes in racial discourse. The decline of the South's economy, the massive migration of Southern blacks to Northern and Midwestern cities, an increase in political participation and agitation, successful legal challenges to segregation, and the onset of the Cold War transformed the political landscape. This new landscape was far less nourishing to the prevailing variants of racial discourse. The acceptance of race did not mean that American social, political, and economic life would or should continue to be organized around race in the ways it had been. Ideas of race, the census, and the attendant (and proper) public policies had long been inseparable; they were no longer.

At the same time, it became increasingly difficult to discuss what race was in a coherent way, other than to state that it did not exist, biologically. Civil rights discourse has focused exclusively on racism, discrimination, and equality, leaving aside the question of race itself. Census-taking in the post–civil rights period has reflected this tension: census data are used to remedy racial discrimination, while census categories are themselves supported by a decentered, conflicting, and, in certain ways, anachronistic racial discourse.

1970–2000 Censuses

The civil rights movement and resulting civil rights legislation of the 1960s dramatically changed the political context and purposes of racial categorization. Federal civil rights legislation—most notably the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Civil Rights Act of 1968, and the Voting Rights Act of 1965—dismantled the most egregious discriminatory mechanisms, namely, Black disenfranchise-



Source. US Census Bureau. (Available at: http://www.census.gov/dmd/www/houser.htm. Accessed September 6, 2000.)

Promotional poster depicting a sculpture by Allan Houser and encouraging Native American cooperation with the 2000 census.

ment in the South, rigid residential segregation, and wholesale exclusion of Blacks from certain occupations and American institutions. These new laws and programs required racial and ethnic data for monitoring legislative compliance and the delivery of new social services and programs. For example, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and their subsequent amendments, extensions, and court interpretations require population tabulations by race at the level of city blocks for the purposes of redistricting and the possible creation of minority and majority congressional electoral districts.[21]

The now positive benefits of racial categorization and racial data have stimulated and sustained organized attempts to have categories protected, changed, and added. The Hispanic-origins question, for example, was added to the 1980 census in response to lobbying by Mexican American organizations,[22] and several Asian categories were added to the 1980 and 1990 censuses in response to lobbying by Asian American organizations.[23] Civil rights advocates took racial categories (legal and census) as they were, arguing that such categories had been the basis of discrimination and should thus serve as the basis of remedy.

Perhaps most politically consequential for census-taking in the post–civil rights era has been the issuance of Statistical Directive No. 15 by the OMB. Since 1977, the directive has mandated the standards that govern all statistical reporting by all federal agencies, including the Census Bureau. The directive defines Hispanic as an ethnic category, meaning that there are, for example, White Hispanics and Black Hispanics. As for persons of mixed racial or ethnic origins, the directive instructs that such persons be classified according to the category that "most closely reflects the individual's recognition in his community." According to the directive's preamble, these categories were devised to standardize "record keeping, collection, and presentation of data on race and ethnicity in Federal program administrative reporting and statistical activities." The definitions, the directive cautions, "should not be interpreted as being scientific or anthropological in nature"; they were developed to meet congressional and executive branch needs for "compatible, nonduplicated, exchangeable racial and ethnic data."[24] Thus, these categories are both statistical markers and political instruments.

In 1993, the OMB began a comprehensive review of the directive. According to OMB officials, this review was prompted by growing public criticism that the directive was incapable of accurately measuring new immigrants or offspring of interracial marriages. In its review, the OMB actively sought public comment through congressional subcommittee hearings in 1993 and 1997 and notices posted in the *Federal Register*. Not surprisingly, well-established civil rights organizations lobbied against major changes in the directive, while newly formed organizations of multiracial Americans lobbied for the addition of a sixth official racial category, "multiracial." They argued that the "one-drop rule" of non-White racial membership was no longer valid and that census categorization should reflect new understandings of race.

Numerous other groups presented the OMB with their own suggestions, each designed to enhance the recognition of a particular group. For example, the Celtic Coalition, the National European American Society, and the Society for German-American Studies all called for the disaggregation of the White category. The Arab American Institute lobbied for the reclassification of persons of Middle Eastern origin from White to a new Middle Eastern category.

At the OMB's request, the National Academy of Sciences Committee on National Statistics conducted a 1994 workshop that included federal officials, academics, public policy analysts, corporate representatives, and

TABLE 2—Brazilian Color Questions and Categories, 1872–2000

1872—White (*branco*), Black (*preto*), Mixed (*pardo*), *Caboclo* (Mestizo Indian)
1880—No census
1890—White (*branco*), Black (*preto*), *Caboclo* (Mestizo Indian), *Mestiço*
1900—No color question
1910—No census
1920—No color question, but extended discussion about "whitening"
1930—No census (Revolution of 1930)
1940—White (*branco*), Black (*preto*), Yellow (*amarelo*)[a]
1950—White (*branco*), Black (*preto*), Mixed (*pardo*), Yellow (*amarelo*)
1960—White (*branco*), Black (*preto*), Mixed (*pardo*), Yellow (*amarelo*), *Índio* (Indian)
1970—No color question
1980—White (*branco*), Black (*preto*), Mixed (*pardo*), Yellow (*amarelo*)
1991—White (*branco*), Black (*preto*), Brown (*pardo*), Yellow (*amarelo*), *Indígena* (indigenous)
2000—White (*branco*), Black (*preto*), Brown (*pardo*), Yellow (*amarelo*), *Indígena* (indigenous)

Source. Instituto Brasileiro de Geográfia e Estatística.
[a]If the respondent did not fit into one of these 3 categories, the enumerator was instructed to place a horizontal line on the census schedule. These horizontal lines were then tabulated under the category *pardo*.

secondary-school educators. In March 1994, the OMB established the Interagency Committee for the Review of Racial and Ethnic Standards. This committee included representatives from 30 federal agencies, including the Census Bureau, the Department of Justice, and the Department of Education.

In the end, the committee's recommendations to the OMB ruled the day. In October 1997, the OMB announced its final changes to the directive and to census methods. Most significantly, the OMB decided for the first time in the history of American census-taking to allow respondents to choose more than one race on their census schedules. It therefore decided against the adoption of a single "multiracial" category. It also made slight alterations in the wording of existing categories. The issue of racial categorization is temporarily settled, until preparations for the 2010 census begin.

The Brazilian Census: White Is Better

Compared with the American experience of census-taking, that of Brazil seems relatively simple, if erratic. The color question has appeared inconsistently on Brazilian censuses from the first modern census in 1872 up to the 2000 census (see Table 2). The two 19th-century censuses, in 1872 and 1890, included a color question. Of 20th-century censuses, the 1940, 1950, 1960, 1980, and 1991 censuses asked a color question, although the 1960 color data were never fully released. The 1900, 1920, and 1970 censuses did not contain a color question. No census was taken in 1910 or 1930.

Categorization has been more consistent, with the 3 color categories of White (*branco*), brown or mixed (*pardo*), and Black (*preto*) used in nearly every census. The history of color categorization can be divided into 3 periods. The first is from 1872 through 1910, when categorization largely reflected elite and popular conceptions of Brazil's racial composition. The second is from 1920 through 1950, when census texts actively promoted and reported the whitening of Brazil's population. The third is from 1960 to the present, when categorization methods have been questioned and contested by statisticians within the Census Bureau and by organized groups within civil society.

Brazilian censuses have included a color question for the same basic reason that American censuses have included a race question. Brazilian elites viewed race as a natural component of human identity and as an independent factor in human affairs. Brazilian censuses have not counted by race as such, but by color. Color has referred to physical appearance, not racial origins. Racial origins, however, are not disconnected from color, because color is derived from the mixture of Brazil's 3 "original" races: European, African, and Indian. Color and race are conceptually distinguished, but related: color refers to appearance, race refers to origin.[25] While this distinction is hardly unambiguous, it lies at the heart of Brazilian racial discourse and the support of a census that counts color.

The thinking has gone as follows: Brazilians are racially mixed, of different colors. This racial mixture has made counting by race exceedingly imprecise. However, the census question and categories have themselves organized the fluid boundaries of the racial mixture presumed to exist. Brazil's intelligentsia, political elite, and census officials have emphasized racial mixture with the same vigilance that their American counterparts have exercised in emphasizing racial purity and exclusivity. Brazilian social scientists largely accepted the scientific truth of races and their inequality, though not with the same intensity as Americans and Europeans. Like American elites, Brazil's elites were obsessed with racial mixture, but they concluded that Brazilians were becoming a whiter race, not a racially degraded and disadvantaged one.

1872–1910 Censuses

Although the 1872 Brazilian census was conducted 1 year after the passage of major abolitionist legislation, neither census inquiries nor census data were used in slavery debates. Likewise, although Brazilian intellectual and political elites were preoccupied with the perceived calamity of racial mixture, they did not use the census to examine the problem, unlike their American counterparts. The categories on both 19th-century Brazilian censuses were nearly identical: white (*branco*), black (*preto*), brown or mixed (*pardo*), *caboclo* (mestizo Indian). The 1890 census added to these 4 categories the category of *mestiço* (racially mixed).

Paradoxically, the census was one of the few late-19th-century undertakings that was not preoccupied with or used to discern the national disaster that Brazilian elites were convinced would accompany racial mixture. As the Brazilian historian Lilia Moritz Schwarcz has richly documented, museums, historical societies, law schools, medical schools, and scientists all focused on racial mixture because it was the key to understanding Brazil and its national possibilities.[26] The silence of the census was likely due to the modest state of the statistical institute and the underdevelopment of statistical methods. The establishment of the General Directory of Statistics accompanied the abolition of slavery in 1888 and the establishment of the Old Republic in 1890. Historians consider all 3 of the censuses conducted by the General Directory of Statistics (1890, 1900, and 1920) unreliable.[1] Brazil's modern federal census bureau, the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (Instituto Brasileiro de Geográfia e Estatística [IBGE]), was established in 1938.

1920–1950 Censuses

In the 20th century the role of the census changed dramatically, as did the Brazilian elites' ideas about racial mixture. In a sharp reversal, intellectuals posited that the disastrous consequences of racial mixture would be averted because Brazilians would become whiter over time. Racial mixture was not degenerative but fortifying for whites and cleans-

ing for nonwhites.[27] Whitening would also be achieved through European immigration.

It is hard to overemphasize the centrality of census data to 20th-century claims of a racially mixed Brazilian people and the political and social arguments that have flowed from such claims. In the first half of the century, census texts reported, as a positive development, that Brazilians were becoming whiter. The 1920 census included an extended discussion of the whitening of Brazil's population. In a section of the census titled "Evolution of the Race" (which was later published separately as a book), the social theorist Oliviera Vianna explained that the "aryanization" of Brazilians was under way.[28] Within *mestiço* groups the "quanta of barbaric bloods" were decreasing, while the quantum of "white blood" was increasing, each time refining the Brazilian race.

Given the pervasiveness of the elites' belief in whitening, it is not surprising that this belief was communicated in the census text. But the text is surprising, because the 1920 census did not include a color question. Therefore, its predictions of whitening were not based on data collected contemporaneously, however unreliable and ambiguous such data certainly would have been. Vianna most likely wrote her text to assure elites that Brazil's future as a white country was certain, thereby making the continued recruitment of European workers unnecessary. By 1920, industrialists and politicians were fed up with the militancy of immigrant workers.[29]

The 1940 census was the first 20th-century census to ask a color question. Census enumerators were to check white, black, or yellow for each respondent. If the respondent did not fit into one of these 3 categories, the enumerator was to place a horizontal line on the census schedule. These lines were later tabulated under the category *pardo*. Indigenous persons were counted as *pardo* as well. The IBGE eliminated the category *pardo* in response to the rise of European fascism. According to IBGE documents, the category's elimination would assure Brazilians that census data would not be used for discriminatory purposes.[30]

It is important to note also that the meaning of *pardo* was then, and remains, ambiguous. Portuguese-language dictionaries define it as both "gray" and "brown." Its connotations are equally ambiguous, because Brazilians use the word infrequently in common parlance. Its most significant use is as a census term. Although controversy did not then surround the category *preto* (black), it has also been a peculiar term for the IBGE to use. Brazilians usually use the term in the third person, not the first person, as the census requires. Even more illuminating, Brazilians use it most commonly to describe objects, not human beings. Black activists raised the issue of terminology most forcefully as the IBGE prepared for the 1991 and 2000 censuses.

The 1940 census also celebrated whitening. The author and esteemed educator Fernando de Azevedo wrote the census text, which was also published separately as a book and (this time) translated into English.[31] Azevedo concluded the chapter "Land and Race" (race, like land, was assigned a natural and fundamental status) with the observation, "If we admit that Negroes and Indians are continuing to disappear, both in the successive dilutions of white blood and in the constant progress of biological and social selection," Brazil would soon be white.[31(p41)] The *pardo* category was reinstated in the 1950 census schedule, making the 4 choices white (*branco*), black (*preto*), brown or mixed (*pardo*), and yellow (*amarelo*). Self-identification replaced enumerator determination in 1950 as well.

1960–2000 Censuses

From the 1950s onward, Brazilian census texts spoke little about whitening. The profound shifts in scientific racial thought after World War II largely account for this change. Census texts spoke less aggressively and less frequently of both whitening and the regenerative and redemptive powers of racial mixture. Instead, racial mixture was reported in a matter-of-fact way and was not equated automatically with whitening. However, Brazilians still believed in distinct races, if not in their inherent superiority or inferiority, and in racial mixture. Moreover, Brazilian elites have used color data to promote the image of Brazil as a racial democracy. According to this view, Brazilian citizenship has been neither enhanced, diminished, nor stratified because of race. Presumed racial differences are not a way of distinguishing among Brazilians, because Brazilians are racially mixed. They are simply Brazilians, with their different colors.

The census, in counting by color rather than race, has thus been instrumental to the discourse of racial democracy. Moreover, the IBGE has been reluctant to cross-tabulate color categories with socioeconomic variables or to release color data in a timely fashion. Until the early 1980s, the lack of such socioeconomic data made it impossible to test the claim that color was economically and socially inconsequential in Brazil. It also stymied the advocacy efforts of scholars, policymakers, and activists for remedial and positive public policies. It was not until the 1976 Household Survey that the IBGE produced data that correlated color with income, health, education, and housing. Since then, there has a been a veritable boom in quantitative research, all of which has clearly shown that color is a significant variable in determining levels of educational attainment, employment prospects, and income.[32,33]

The National Census Commission, which was appointed by the military government, removed the color question from the 1970 census—against the recommendations of 2 experts the military itself had consulted. In the late 1970s, scholars and black activists lobbied to have the question restored to the 1980 census. It was restored, although the statistical institute's president remained opposed to it and called the question "unconstitutional."

Since Brazil's redemocratization in the mid-1980s (after 21 years of military rule), activists and scholars have aggressively challenged the discourse of racial democracy. They have also, necessarily, challenged census methods and terminology. Their efforts have prompted reexamination within the IBGE. In the early 1980s, for example, a group of statisticians and analysts within the IBGE's Department of Social Studies and Indicators decided to pool *pardo* and *preto* data under the term *negro* (black) in socioeconomic analyses and tables. They decided that this action was appropriate because the 2 groups had similar socioeconomic profiles and because *negro* is the preferred term of black activists and certain academics.[34]

Activists and academics again raised the issue of terminology through a grassroots campaign surrounding the 1991 census. The campaign "Náo deixe sua cor passar em branco: Responda con bom C/senso" ("Don't Let Your Color Pass in White: Respond With Good Sense") urged Brazilians to check a darker color on their census schedules. It publicly raised 2 fundamental issues. First, the campaign confronted the IBGE by asking why the term "color" was used and not the term "race," and why the terms *preto* and *pardo* were used and the term *negro* was not. Second, the campaign questioned the preference of most Brazilians to choose a lighter color, especially their decision not to select black (*preto*) to describe themselves on census schedules.

The 1991 color question was like previous questions, with one important exception: the terms *raça* (race) and *indígena* (indigenous) were added. The question was rephrased to ask, "What is your color or race?" and "indigenous" was added to the colors white, black, brown, and yellow. (Since 1940, indigenous persons had been classified as *pardo*s.) These 2 new terms were linked: race applied only to the indigenous population. Indigenous persons belong to one race, Brazilians to another race, with its many colors. The IBGE's decision to include "indigenous" was reportedly made after consultations with anthropologists and representatives of the Federal Indian Affairs Bureau. Campaign organizers speculated, however, that the term was included at the request of the

World Bank, which wanted demographic information for World Bank initiatives on the protection of indigenous territories.

In the midst of preparations for the 2000 census, there was growing public and scholarly debate about IBGE methods and terms. In these debates the IBGE had to explain and often defend its past and current methods. The sources of pressure on the IBGE include demographers, black activists, academics, and politicians. With the unraveling of racial democracy, the question of who Brazilians "really" are, racially, has reemerged powerfully. There is a clear reason for this connection. The image of a racially democratic and nondiscriminatory society has hinged on the idea of racial mixture. In fact, a causal link was drawn that was often presented tautologically: Brazilians are racially mixed and therefore there can be no discrimination, or there can be no racial discrimination because Brazilians are racially mixed. The acceptance of the existence of discrimination—an existence substantiated by census data—has led unavoidably to the abandonment of the idea of racial democracy and to a rethinking of census terms and methods.

The discourses of whitening and racial democracy have resided in census methods and texts as much as they have existed in the real world. As Brazilians now consider whether their society is composed of distinct racial groups rather than one racially mixed people, the census will undoubtedly be involved in advancing a new racial discourse. However, the terminology on the 2000 census was the same as in past censuses: color was used, not race; *pardo* and *preto* were used, not *negro*.

Conclusions

What are the larger lessons of the American and Brazilian experiences? As I see it, the lessons are several. First, these experiences reveal the sinuous relationship between racial ideas, census taking, and public policy. They teach us that racial categories on censuses do not merely capture demographic realities, but rather reflect and help to create political realities and ways of thinking and seeing. The categories are themselves intellectual products, social markers, and policy tools.

They also teach us that census bureaus must be viewed as the political insiders that they are, not the detached recorders they purport to be. The recent efforts of Americans and Brazilians to have categories changed, added, or maintained have had the happy effect of forcing census bureaus to account publicly for their methods and rationales. There are no simple, obviously right or obviously wrong answers to the question of whether American or Brazilian censuses should continue to count by race or color. However, we are better equipped to think about such questions once we understand the complex relationship between race and censuses. □

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