

# Mobilising for pure prestige? Challenging Federal census ethnic categories in the USA (1850–1940)

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The US census is characterised, among other features, by the importance it gives, to this day, to race. While the continuing presence of racial categories in the census is a matter of current debate, the issue is narrowly linked to the existence of policies to target specific groups identified at least in part by census data (Nobles 2002, Perlman & Waters 2002, Skerry 2000).<sup>1</sup> For participants in the controversy, the question is rather the use of racial categories to underpin affirmative action policies than the census itself. This tends either to mask the functions of racial and ethnic categories in the pre-civil rights era or to lead to consideration of such categories as a mere residue of historical discrimination. Undoubt-

edly, the origin of the racial categories used in the US census is oppression of slaves and later of emancipated African Americans, whereas the origin of ethnic categories is to be found in the 'Nativist' movement which, from the mid nineteenth century, sought to exclude immigrants and their children from the national community. Generally speaking, racism has played a key role in Federal statistics, as shown by, for instance, debates in Congress on the Census Act of 1850, which split the African population – whether

slave or free – between 'Negroes' and 'Mulattoes' (Anderson 2003, Schor 2005). However, it would be unfortunate to write a history of such census categories that reduces them to these two functions: to identify, first, groups of non-European origin and then 'new immigrants'

subject to official discrimination, and later their supposed descendents in order to include them within the scope of compensatory policies. Such an approach would elide the more complex and still largely neglected history of the social construction of ethnic and racial categories. This article examines several cases in which groups mobilised to demand that government agencies should take account of their existence

in a different way, in a context where no material advantage was at stake. In so doing, it historicises the statistical categories of race and ethnicity, which cannot be understood solely by reference to their current usage (for a more detailed history of census practices including full reference to sources, see Schor forthcoming).

Whether the groups in question related to nationalities (stateless Poles in 1860, denizens of the German, Austrian, and Russian empires in 1910), ethno-religious communities (Jews in

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1910), categories defined by social status (persons of mixed race in the US West Indies in 1930) or to a 'nationality' racialised against its will (the 'Mexican race' in 1930), we shall see that the century from 1850 to 1950 – a somewhat dark age in terms of the history of census categories – involved a series of purely prestige-oriented mobilisations, some of which achieved satisfaction. By recovering such challenges – and the way in which they were taken into account, when the resources mobilised were sufficiently large –, it is possible to break with a rather simplistic view contrasting a period of state-imposed categories, which reflected the ideologies of politicians and administrative officials, with a later period – since the 1960s – during which the content of such categories has been negotiated with the relevant populations in the framework of a large-scale resource-allocation system channelling, in particular, social benefits in the broad sense and political influence. The scale of such mobilisation should not be overstated, nor should the capacity of the organisations involved to exert pressure or the (fairly limited) significance of the decennial census in American life. Nonetheless, the analysis will show how, in a very different historical context, certain questions were approached in a way that resembles the negotiation more generally observed in the period during which anti-discrimination policies were established and institutionalised.

### **Race and national origin: two different ways to record different populations**

During the period covered by this article, the census identified and counted the origins of US inhabitants in two ways: using racial categories to which, from 1790, persons were assigned by the enumerator, and national origin categories based on birthplace (from 1850) or parents' birthplace (from 1870).

The criterion of race was introduced in the very first Federal census, in addition to the distinction between slaves and free persons required to count the civic population on which apportionment of Congressional seats was based, in so far as the 1787 Constitution (Article I, section 2) had counted slaves as three-fifths of free persons for these purposes and thus compelled their separate enumeration.<sup>2</sup> Beyond this consti-

tutional obligation, the 1790 First Census Act stipulated that the free coloured persons should be separately counted. Subsequently, from the 1850 census, the population was surveyed individually and not by household, which led each individual to be classified according to several criteria. This was when the distinction hardened between racial and 'ethnic' – i.e., derived from national origin – categories, in particular by differentiation of the procedures established to collect and process responses. Colour – or race – as assigned by the census were characteristics that every individual was supposed to have, like age and sex, whereas questions on birthplace, parents' origin or mother tongue were directed only at persons of foreign ancestry.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, while the list of colours or races did change over time – the number of categories increased from 3 to 9 between 1850 and 1920, including by then five Asian 'races' –, it was both more restricted and more rigid that the list of national origins. Finally, the very purpose of the categories were quite different. The system of racial classification was designed above all to distinguish Whites from other Americans. More refined categories thus served to reduce the uncertainty and potential errors that might lead individuals differing too sharply from the (largely implicit) ideal type to be classified as white (Haney Lopez 1996). For instance the explicit purpose of the subdivision of the black population into two groups, black and mulatto, along with its variants between 1850 and 1920, was to confine the descendents of unions between Blacks and Whites within the black population, according to the principle of 'hypodescent' (Harris 1964), which gave absolute priority to the socially unfavoured component of ancestry, thus making legally and socially black any person with a 'single drop' of 'black blood'. It is striking that, throughout the whole period, neither the imposition of these categories nor that of 'Asian races' was challenged. On the other hand, questions on national origin, while they also applied to non-European immigrants, were primarily designed to determine the ethnic composition of the population of European origin. This difference – and the unequal resources of the respective groups – explain why ethnic categories were more often challenged than racial categories, with the noteworthy exception of the 'Mexican race' episode in 1930, which will be discussed in more detail below.

## From spontaneous innovation to political mobilisation

Two cases may be distinguished that reflect more or less direct participation of groups in the development of the categories that purport to describe them: on the one hand *ex post* adjustment by the Bureau of the Census of categories of procedures to take account of responses in the field, and on the other hand direct pressure for change exerted on the Bureau and on the Congress, which, until and including the 1920 census, voted on the text of the census questions.

In the first case, there were a fairly large number of unexpected answers. With respect to the nineteenth century, it is often difficult, because of the paucity of sources, to determine if this was due to the enumerators or to respondents themselves. Such answers relate to country of birth as well as to race, and reflect a form of hijacking of existing categories that might, over time, lead to the establishment of a new category. For instance, before 1850, it appears that Indians, even though they were legally excluded from the census, were counted as ‘Other persons’, a category designed for free Negroes (Rodriguez 2000). Similarly, in the 1880 census, there were abnormally high numbers of ‘Mulattoes’ in some districts of Western or South-Western states with large Mexican or Hispanic populations but few Blacks, even though the category had been introduced in 1850 exclusively to cover a *subgroup* of Blacks, viz. those of mixed racial ancestry. In Colorado in particular, as shown by Gratton & Gutman (2000), persons identified on the form as ‘Mu’ (for ‘Mulatto’) had Spanish-sounding family names. This supports the hypothesis that social actors (enumerators or respondents) were engaging in uncontrolled appropriation of a category transferred to a group for which the choices available (Black, White, or Indian) seemed inadequate. The same phenomenon was again visible in the region in 1910 and in 1920.<sup>4</sup> This practice remained invisible and escaped the attention of census managers, but it is interesting in foreshadowing the ‘Mexican race’ established by the Bureau in 1930, as did the fact that, in 1910, many persons of Mexican origin were classified on hand-filled forms as ‘M’ or ‘Mx’, despite the fact that such codes did not exist (Gutman *et al.* 1999).

There were similar uncertainties in recording ‘true’ ‘Mulattoes’, whose number varied considerably in some counties between 1910 and 1920. For the first time since the introduction of the category in 1850, the proportion of ‘Mulattoes’ declined nationally in 1920, from 20% of Blacks in 1910 to 15.9%. After investigating, the Bureau of the Census attributed the variations in the respective proportions of Blacks and Mulattoes to the fact that some of relevant counties were surveyed by black officials in 1910 and by white officials in 1920: the former apparently tended to assign more people to the ‘Mulatto’ category than the latter. In conjunction with the changes in the census definition of ‘Blacks’ and ‘Mulattoes’ between 1890 and 1910,<sup>5</sup> these results convinced the Bureau that, in 1920, the distinction between the two groups had become more difficult to make and was largely context-dependent, a point that had already been made in the report on the black population published in 1918:

The perceptibility of a trace of Negro or of white blood probably does not correspond uniformly to the physiological proportion of Negro and white blood in the individuals enumerated. Moreover, perceptibility is dependent upon the ability of the enumerator to perceive, and this ability varies from enumerator to enumerator. (...) The census classification is necessarily based upon perceptibility. (US Bureau of the Census 1918)

On the basis that the distinction between ‘Blacks’ and ‘Mulattoes’ had become too uncertain, the Bureau of the Census removed the ‘Mulatto’ category after 1920 from all its questionnaires, with one exception. In the US Virgin Islands, protests from some sections of the population led it to reconsider its decision and to reinstate the ‘mixed race’ category which, in this context, apparently covered a status that the individuals involved were anxious not to lose. However, the Bureau’s willingness to make a local exception in this case derived from the fact that inhabitants of the Virgin Islands were not part of the ‘constitutional population’ – of which counting was mandatory for the purpose of apportionment of congressional seats – and could therefore be partly exempted from the census legislation passed by Congress. The 1930 census report therefore maintained the distinction for the Virgin Islands only, ‘mixed race’ respondents being combined in this case with

'other races' rather than with Blacks. However, the numbers were very small and this had no impact on the rules applied on the continent (US Bureau of the Census, 1932). This exception, while obviously of limited weight both quantitatively and politically, is nonetheless of interest in so far as it underlines, by contrast, the lack of challenges to the categories applied to persons of African descent in the USA themselves (Schor 2005).

Furthermore, the creation in 1930 of a new 'Mexican' race should be set within the context of the removal of the 'Mulatto' category – which, as we have seen, had been used to classify persons of Mexican descent, without the Bureau of the Census – and of increased Mexican immigration, particularly in response to restrictions on European immigration from 1921.

## The 'Mexican race', or the rejection of assigned identity

Since 1859 when the population was split a priori into three colours – white, black and 'Mulatto' – the census had introduced new categories to take account, gradually, of racial diversity as new groups arrived in the USA. With the exception of American Indians, the additional colours or races were all applied to non-European immigrants and their descendents, meaning in practice persons of Asian origin. As a result of the common sense of the enumerators, the 1850 census had recorded the West Coast Chinese population as being Chinese not simply by nationality but also by race: a consequence was the peculiar feature that the US census created not *one* Asian race, but as many races as Asian national origins. The fundamental difference between a racial classification, such as the one identifying the Chinese or Japanese 'race', and the corresponding national origin was that national origin was derived for census purposes from the respondent's birthplace or, from 1870, from the respondent's parents' birthplace, and therefore lapsed from the third generation, whereas race was then thought of as an indelible physical attribute. This is why in 1942, for example, with a view to planning the arrest and deportation of residents of Japanese origin, whether American or Japanese by nationality, the Army received help from the Bureau of the

Census and used the criterion of Japanese race – stated in the census since 1860 – to identify suspect populations, rather than Japanese nationality or national origin, which would have been narrower in scope. Since the new 'races' introduced between 1850 and 1920 – first in results and reports, later in the printed forms – were Chinese (mentioned on the forms from 1870) and Japanese (from 1890), then 'Filipino', 'Hindu' and 'Korean' in 1920, 'Asian races' accounted by then for five of the nine possible choices. Indeed, the Bureau's interest in such 'minor races' was out of all proportion to their numbers: Koreans, 'Hindus' and Filipinos represented only 9,334 people in 1920, i.e., fewer than 0.01% of the population surveyed.

The introduction of a 'Mexican race' in 1930 was therefore an innovation in several respects. It was the first racial category created for a non-Asian population since 1850, with a fairly numerous population fed by dynamic immigration, and, finally, it was the first racial category to apply to potentially white people with a view to confining them to a permanent, exclusive, and subordinate *status*. This is what led to mobilisation by US citizens of Mexican descent who did not wish to lose the benefits of membership of the white race.

In the new climate of the 1920s, Mexicans had ceased to be perceived as a small fraction of the Indian population concentrated along the country's South-West border and were perceived rather as increasingly numerous migrant workers. The 1930 census thus counted 1,422,533 persons of Mexican race, while 65,968 persons born in Mexico, or whose parents had been born in Mexico, were counted as white. At the time, the 'Mexican race' included many people counted as white or even as Indian in previous censuses, following the definition provided to census field operatives: 'All persons born in Mexico, or having parents born in Mexico, who are *definitely* not white, Negro, Indian, Chinese, or Japanese, should be returned as Mexican' (US Bureau of the Census 1930, *my italics*).

According to the Bureau of the Census, the new classification should not be detrimental to the Mexican community, and its officials had undertaken to persuade prominent figures of Mexican descent of this when contacting them in the hope that would act as intermediaries in the

run up to the 1930 census.<sup>6</sup> The main idea was that ‘Practically all Mexican laborers are of a racial mixture difficult to classify, though usually well recognised in the localities where they are found’.<sup>7</sup> However, controversy was fuelled, to the point that the category was eventually withdrawn, precisely by this idea that, regardless of definitional issues, there was a form of widely shared and intuitive ‘racial knowledge’ that made it possible to recognise a Mexican easily enough when one saw one – as well as, more generally, by the emphasis on the empirical, local and contextual dimensions of racial classification. In context, census racialisation of Mexicans was an aspect of an exercise in symbolic exclusion that Mae N. Ngai has documented and of which another component were growing numbers of deportations of Mexican immigrants (Ngai 2004).

Nonetheless, at the time, there seems to have been little reaction to the announcement of the new category or to the publication of the 1930 census results. It was only from 1935 that a large-scale and well-organised movement put pressure simultaneously on the Bureau of the Census, the Department of Commerce (of which the Bureau is administratively part), the State Department, and the White House, to demand the withdrawal of the ‘Mexican race’ and retroactive and prospective classification of Mexicans as white. The mobilisation, which was supported by the Mexican Consul General in New York, the Ambassador in Washington, and by the Mexican government itself, was without precedent in the history of the census. It was led by various Mexican-American organisations in the South-Western USA, the members of which emphasised their US citizenship. Federated in the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC), these organisations mainly represented the middle classes, i.e., precisely the prominent citizens the census had hoped to rely on to promote its action, as in all other communities.

For such citizens, especially in Texas, to accept Mexicans as a race apart in the census, was to agree no longer to be considered as white and therefore to run the very real risk of being subjected to legal segregation in force in the school system in particular. This would have effectively relegated their children to ‘coloured’ schools. In trying to convince prominent Mexican Americans to participate, the Bureau had

argued that greater visibility, via the census, would be a source of pride. In the event, this argument proved weaker than the likely consequences of classification beyond the census itself. Opponents of Mexican ‘racialisation’ did not object to statistics as such, but to the authority that local governments would probably claim on that basis to discriminate against the individuals so classified. This was the basis of the mobilisation, which also operated at the local level, and offers a rare example of a successful challenge to federally defined racial categories, addressed in this case particularly to the census and to social security.<sup>8</sup> Regrettably, the Bureau of the Census instructed all staff to reclassify Mexicans as white from 15 October 1936, clearly indicating that the decision was political in origin.<sup>9</sup>

Nonetheless, this case was unusual for two reasons. On the one hand, the successful movement aimed not at creating or modifying a racial category but at scrapping one. On the other hand, it clearly located census activity in a political-legal context in which the articulation of Federal and local power was easily perceptible. Such was not the case of mobilisation for census recognition by certain European immigrant groups, which were driven primarily by symbolic considerations.

### **Ethnic groups pining for recognition: immigrants with no state of origin**

From 1850, the Bureau of the Census had recorded the birthplace of all free inhabitants of the USA, and had thus been able to publish the first overview data on immigrants. In 1870, the foreign birth of one or both parents was recorded for all respondents. In 1880, the country of birth of all respondents’ parents was recorded, making it possible to define statistically the population group with foreign ancestry or ‘second generation immigrants’. In 1910, under pressure from organisations representing immigrants from Central and Eastern Europe – circumstances that will be discussed further below – a census question on the mother tongue of persons born abroad was introduced, in order to provide a more accurate picture of the various communities as they perceived

themselves or were perceived in the USA. More generally, measurement of immigration and ethnicity was the subject of vigorous debate between 1870 and 1920, in particular in the context of the census where such issues were increasingly prominent. However, while the negative side of identification is familiar (as a factor in stigmatisation or as an instrument of official discrimination), there were also demands for identification on the part of certain ethnic groups. The demands were often met, with the risk the groups might subsequently be victims of the greater visibility they had initially claimed.

From the very first records of countries of birth, the census in fact combined geography and a proxy for ethno-cultural ancestry. For instance, Italy was divided into regions, as was the Austro-Hungarian Empire. In the case of Italy, this reflected the then common perception that Northern and Southern Italians belonged to different ethnic or racial groups. In the case of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the US census recorded 'nationalities', a term that, at the time, referred to 'peoples', since such nationalities were not necessarily attached to a nation-state or even to a region. The most noteworthy case was that of persons 'born in the former Kingdom of Poland', who made their appearance in census reports in 1860: their Polish ancestry was recognised in the list of categories even though Poland as a state did not exist at the time. The census thus moved away from a restrictive conception of nationality as membership of a nation-state, focusing rather on spatial and temporal fragmentation and distinguishing, as a result, several populations within one territory. Indeed, changes over time in the definition of Polish origin are particularly instructive. Instructions for the 1900 census specified that persons should be counted as of Polish birth only if they were born in Poland – i.e., within the former borders of Poland – and of Polish mother tongue. 'Geographical' origin was thus co-determined by a language criterion, which in turn reflected an ethnic criterion, since minorities – especially Jews – did not belong to the population as thus constituted and were therefore distributed across the 'origins' defined by the new borders: Russian, Austro-Hungarian, or German. The inadequacies of the archives make it impossible to know whether the opportunity to declare Polish birth in the absence of a

corresponding state was granted in response to demands from persons of Polish origin living in the USA. It is unclear whether, in 1860, their numbers or influence would have sufficed. On the other hand, whatever the reasons, the result reflects a tendency that was subsequently to be reinforced: use of the census to represent communities as they existed on American soil rather than focusing on the recognised borders of European states. This government objective was all the more shared by the communities themselves that it enabled them to quench a thirst for recognition that was unsatisfied in their home country. In this respect, as early as the second half of the nineteenth century, the census helped to make visible groups that were then observably clustering in American cities, thereby contributing to what has been called 'the invention of ethnicity' (Conzen *et al.* 1992).

Spectacular progress in this tendency to ethnicise national origins – with the encouragement of Bureau officials – came in the 1910 census when, at the request of associations of Slav nationals of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, a question on the mother tongue of all immigrants was introduced.

Generally speaking, the strong interest of the Bureau of the Census in (in the language of the time) the 'racial' diversity of the new European immigration produced contrasting reactions. A section of the Jewish community expressed opposition to plans in the census to distinguish Jews from other immigrants from Central and Eastern Europe not on a religious basis, which would have violated the First Amendment, but ethnically. Census officials argued that they were interested in 'Hebrews' not as a religious groups, but as a 'race'. However, spokespersons for the Jews of longest standing in the USA, who were often of German origin and liberal inclinations, strongly opposed any form of recording, as in the case of Colorado Senator Simon Guggenheim. On the other hand, the Zionist minority wished Jews to be recorded as belonging to a nation or race.<sup>10</sup> Resistance from prominent members of the Jewish community proved effective. In the event, the great majority of American Jews became statistically visible only as Yiddish speakers, as an indirect consequence of the demands for recognition from Austro-Hungarian minorities which led to the introduction of a mother tongue question in

the 1910 census. In so far as immigrant native Yiddish speakers were then estimated to be around 90% of American Jews, language could serve as a census proxy for ethnicity, as indicated by the instructions for encoding of handwritten answers on perforated cards, which gave the same code to Yiddish and to Hebrew.

## **Slav minorities and mother tongue assessment**

In the run-up to the 1910 census, at a time when the 'nationalities question' was causing growing agitation in Europe and among the various US diasporas, a number of organisations representing immigrants from national minorities within the Austro-Hungarian Empire mobilised to demand change in the basis on which they were included in the census. They claimed, successfully, that birthplace should be, if not replaced, at least supplemented by mother tongue, following on from the logic of recognition of Polish origin half a century earlier.

The innovation, which was introduced by a last-minute amendment to the Census Act passed by Congress, after forms and enumerators' instructions has already been printed, was the result of a lobbying campaign by several organisations of immigrants or children of immigrants from Central Europe. The lobbying was directed at Senators and Representatives because, at that time, the Committees on the Census of the two Houses of Congress set both the budget for the census and the questions asked. Czech organisations from the major industrial cities in the Northern US were particularly active. Their declared objective was to distinguish on the basis of mother tongue between Slavs and German speakers – Germans or Austrians – among the first and second generation immigrants from the Central European Empires. This objective was put forward in Congressional speeches,<sup>11</sup> in the ethnic press and in petitions to the legislative assemblies, such as this one, which was presented by '2735 Slovak citizens of the City of Cleveland':

We, the undersigned citizens and representatives of the City of Cleveland, Ohio, do hereby protest against the Slovaks being classified as Hungarians or otherwise than Slovaks, in the 1910 Federal Census and we do hereby petition the

Congress of the United States of America to require that the Slovaks of the United States be properly classified as Slovaks instead of Hungarians as now proposed.

Mobilisation was not restricted to Slovaks from Cleveland, as shown by the minutes of a meeting in Pittsburgh on 7 March 1910 'called by the Slovak League of the United States of America, representatives from the Educational, Beneficial and other Societies and Organisations of the several peoples of the Slavic race following, to wit: Slovaks, Croatians, Russians, Ruthenians (Little Russians), Serbians and representatives of all the newspapers published in the USA in the respective languages of said several peoples'.<sup>12</sup>

The proposal was approved by the Director of the Bureau of the Census and by the two Congressional committees, which regarded it as a way to obtain better knowledge of the population of foreign origin. Again, political and scientific interests converged. After the amendment had been passed, the ethnic press helped to publicise it, inviting its readers to use the census to increase their registered numbers. By virtue of a kind of ethnic patriotism, community representatives encouraged their constituents to participate fully in the census in order to provide evidence of their numbers. The feeling was understood and used by census officials, who had long feared that the official nature of the census might scare people unsure of their status and, by assumption, wary of anything relating to government. The Bureau therefore drew up a list of the main ethnic community leaders in the country, and the Director wrote to each of them asking them to support the efforts of the administration.<sup>13</sup> The letters obviously called upon their addressees' public-spiritedness, but the echo given in the ethnic press rather emphasised considerations of group self-interest. As an example, here is a very free 'translation' of an excerpt from the Director's letter by a Chicago lawyer of Norwegian ancestry:

Our people should at this time be particularly anxious that they give the fullest information, as the next decennium or ten year period will cover the date when they can celebrate the one hundredth anniversary of the beginning of systematic and continuing Norse immigration, which has contributed as much if not more to the development of our common country.

The circumstances that possibly there may be many who do not agree with the policy of the political party that



Inspecting immigrants at their arrival in the United States, Ellis Island, New York. US National Archives/Roger-Viollet

elected the present administration or with the personal policy of its head, should not stand in the way of aiding it to secure for all the people as great success if not greater in taking this census than any of the 13 preceding ones.

The Director of the Bureau thanked him for his help and indicated that he would forward the text to Norwegian language newspapers. In parallel, from 1920, the Bureau arranged for translation and printing in foreign languages of the Presidential proclamations of the forthcoming census, which were distributed to officials in neighbourhoods where the 1920 census had shown concentrations of speakers of the language in question. The administration thus stuck to its traditional line: to take no overt position in political controversy, but to call on good will, regardless of its motives or reservations, to maximise the effectiveness of the census. Generally speaking, there was never any reluctance to let the census be instrumenta-

lised, so long as it gained the support of a fraction of the population and entailed no extra administrative costs. The Bureau consistently sought the cooperation of the widest possible range of actors, without unduly concerning itself with their contradictory objectives, in order to reinforce its institutional legitimacy. As an agency subject to Congressional oversight, it had a vested interest in raising as little opposition as possible.

As for citizens' reactions, a study of the Chicago ethnic press shows competition between groups engaged in quantitative battles once the figures had been published by the Bureau of the Census. For instance, groups would challenge the inclusion of thousands of people on the grounds that mother tongue would have been a more reliable criterion than country of birth. Thus a Czech language newspaper attacked not only the methods of the Bureau, which presented totals by country of

birth, but also the local German language newspaper, the *Abendpost*, which counted most Austrian-born immigrants as German because of their German culture, which could lead them to be regarded in the USA as ethnically German or of German ‘origin’. This shows the opposition between two conceptions of community, as based on language or on geography. However, the clear instrumentalisation of theories in this case does not mean that the figures produced were valueless. Indeed, it is precisely because such figures on the population of immigrant origin were produced in response to social demands that they were valuable. This is not so much a matter of rigorous collection methods (though they are undoubtedly relevant) as of the meanings with which they were endowed by a range of actors with often conflicting interests. Rather than sticking to a reductionist form of positivism that merely distinguishes true figures from false, analysis should focus first and foremost on the historical context in which the figures were produced.

In the case at hand, reform was made possible, as noted earlier, by the adventitious convergence of the interests of the ethnic communities on the one hand, and of the Bureau of the Census on the other. The Bureau could hardly fail to be satisfied with a call such as the one published on 8 April 1910, one week before the census, in the Chicago Yiddish language *Courier* – such was its constant concern that wary inhabitants should slip through the net:

They will also ask you of your nationality and your mother tongue. Our plea is, do not deny that you are Jews. This information goes only to the government and cannot be used against you by any anti-Semitic groups. Denying your Jewish heritage would, in this instance, be a cowardly act. A census is taken only once every ten years, and this is one opportunity for Jews to be proud of themselves. The insertion of this question into the census was a victory for the recognition of the existence of national minority groups.<sup>14</sup>

In this case as in the ‘competition’ case discussed earlier, ‘ethnic pride’ thus seems to be a powerful mover. Furthermore, while there are examples where the local political background played a role – the representatives of the most numerous communities could then accept heightened influence within the city power structure – most interventions seem to have stopped short of such

calculations. They more closely resemble mobilisation for pure prestige.

However, the success of the 1910 mobilisations – to the point that the amendment moved by a member of Czech origin obtained a majority in the House of Representatives – also derived from the fact that ethnic claims coincided with the desire of the government and proponents of immigration restrictions to separate Slavs from German speakers in as statistically a detailed fashion as possible. Furthermore, the mobilisations chimed with the racist conception of political community that was then preponderant. When Czech residents of Paris formulated a very similar claim in a 1896 petition to the Ministry of the Interior to protest at their classification as Austrians in the French census, they received a negative answer, in full agreement with the Foreign Ministry. While the demands were identical and driven by the same nationalist sentiment, the effectiveness of mobilisation was then determined by the political context and prevailing administrative practice (Schor & Spire 2005).

Census coverage of mother tongues in the USA was in particular a response to a demand from the legislature for information on Central European immigrants. By one of the ironies of history that statistical objects tend to favour, mother tongue data were used to set immigration quotas in the Acts of 1921 and 1924, which sharply reduced immigration from Central Europe. No doubt the only criterion used was country of birth, if only because quotas were necessarily implemented in the form of visas for persons of specific nationalities rather than ethnic groups. Nonetheless, in the background, the data initially demanded and obtained by Slav minorities served to support the calculations of the officials responsible for implementing the legal and administrative apparatus designed to limit their presence.

Subsequently, mother tongue retained its function as an indicator of the ‘ethnic’ segmentation of the US population, but not without opposition. As soon as immigration quotas had been adopted, census officials estimated that the composition of the population was, henceforth, stabilised: from 1928, the quotas were designed precisely to maintain the demographic rati-  
on between Anglo-Saxons and other Europeans as

it had been in 1920. The Bureau of the Census thus sought to drop the mother tongue question as early as the 1930 census, among other reasons in order to make room on the forms for questions to quantify unemployment. This was part of a general tendency for the Bureau to concentrate its most detailed surveys on economic statistics, but was also based on the argument that the minorities that had demanded the addition of the question in 1910 were now citizens of independent states corresponding to their regions of origin. The Scientific Committee of the Bureau also recommended removal of the question on date of naturalisation, and in this respect was followed by the legislature.<sup>15</sup> As far as language was concerned, however, mobilisation by minority representatives – drawing on not inconsiderable electoral strength – showed their blocking power. The question, now worded by reference to the ‘language spoken in home before coming to the USA’, was retained in 1930, but only for foreign-born respondents.

Ten years later, the question was still there, though only among the supplementary questions put to a 5% sample of the population. On the other hand, instead of being put only to immigrants, it was now asked regardless of place of birth. This marked a further stage in the separation of ‘ethnicity’ from immigrant origin, since it implied that, in theory, one could be from a family of several generations standing in the USA and nonetheless be a member of a linguistic minority. While introduced and retained at the request of ethnic minority representatives, mother tongue questions undoubtedly prepared the ground for the open ethnic origin question, unrelated to the birthplace question, asked for the first time in the 1980 census: ‘What is this person’s ancestry?’.

These examples of negotiation about the categories used to define and count immigrants

and their descendents show clearly that, even within the parameters of factual questions, the US census has been the instrument of identity building strategies on the part of the leaders of certain minorities. However, the census did lose legitimacy on these grounds – quite the opposite. Such developments were certainly not planned by the drafters of the Constitution, nor perhaps could they even have conceived of them. They were not however, a perversion of the original project, in which the census was a key constitutional instrument for the preservation of democratic balance. Population statistics have always been at the heart of Federal governance and their function has always been recognised to be highly political. In this respect, appropriation of statistical representation by the various ethnic groups is, if anything, an index of Americanisation – an adaptation to the dominant rhetoric of representative democracy and, in particular, to the primacy of the majority principle.

Finally, until the implementation of affirmative action policy in the second half of the 1960s, the stakes in statistical formalisation of ethno-racial identities were primarily symbolic, or were material only in an indirect way, as in the case of Mexicans. Yet mobilisation strategies, at the rhetorical and organisational level in particular, remain remarkably stable regardless of the tangible benefits at stake for the individuals involved. This might suggest a reappraisal of the intangible dimension of current clashes over statistics. Today, as a century ago, it is important to distinguish the individual psychological dynamics that community spokespersons seek to use from the tangible benefits that organisations can derive from mobilisation on that basis.

*Translated from French*

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## Notes

1. These are just a few references from the numerous interventions in response to the new

opportunity to declare several races offered by the 2000 census. Press reports widely echoed these

debates and the concern in some Black or Hispanic organisations that the change might lead to the

complete disappearance of racial classification, which by preventing official measurement of racial inequality would effectively make it less visible. Data from the 2000 census along with a selection of earlier data are available on the website of the Bureau of the Census (<http://www.census.gov>).

2. According to the article, the census is thus less a tool of knowledge than an instrument to administer power: its principal *raison d'être* was apportionment of contributions and representation between states. The 1790 census, which was very crude, faithfully rendered the political structure of the American population, distinguishing between free white men over 16 (old enough to serve in the militia), free white men under 16, free white women, other free persons (i.e., free Negroes, regardless of age or sex) and slaves. Indians were explicitly excluded from the census by the Constitution since they were not part of the taxable population. Nonetheless, from 1850, data on Indians living among the white population were published by the census; some enumerators used for the purpose the category 'colour' – designed to distinguish Blacks from Whites – by introducing an 'Indian' option that the instructions did not mention.

3. From 1790 to 1880, only the word 'colour' appears on the forms and the associated instructions. The 1900 instructions use the phrase 'colour or race', which appears on the forms from 1900 to 1940. In 1950, the word 'race' alone figured on the form. In 1960 and 1980, the question was 'Is this person – White, Negro, American Indian, etc.?'. In 1970, 'colour or race' again appeared on the form. In 1990, the question was 'What is ... 's race?', whereas in 2000 'race' was again the only word used.

4. Enumerators indicated a person's race on the basis of visual observation, without any obligation to ask. In practice, in doubtful cases, they could nonetheless ask the respondent, or trust to their general impression of the social environment to assign a person to the racial group corresponding overall to family, immediate neighbours, local residents, or profession.

5. For the 1890 census, the Bureau of the Census was required by Congress to split the 'Negro' population into 'black', 'mulatto', 'quadroon', and 'octoroon'. Noting the limited value of such distinctions and the associated data, the census report did include a table showing these categories at national level, as required by law, but grouped all 'Negroes' in a single category for all other 1890 data. In 1900, presumably because of this unfortunate attempt to impose on the census the categories of thoroughgoing 'scientific' racism, no attempt was made to make distinctions within the Black population, and the category 'mulatto' was dropped for the first time since 1850. It was re-established in 1910, retained in 1920, and definitively scrapped thereafter.

6. See, for instance, the letter dated 4 February 1930 from Joseph A. Hill, Deputy Director of the bureau of the Census, to Alonso S. Perales (Publicity material of the statistical research division, RG 29, Administrative Files of the Bureau of the Census, National Archives). Hill asked Perales, a Texas lawyer, to publish pro-census articles in the Spanish language press: 'If the Mexicans in this country could be convinced of the value of the census work and of the impossibility of the information they give being used against them, I believe we could secure their hearty cooperation. the census will furnish most

valuable material regarding the number, growth, and economic advancement of the Mexican population in the USA. This is the first census in which Mexicans will be given a separate classification.' Ironically, Perales, acting against the government on behalf of the LULAC, was one of the main contributors to reclassification of Mexicans as white in subsequent censuses.

7. Form 15–100. Instructions to enumerators. Population and agriculture. Revised [1930] Dossier 738, file 212, Forms and Schedules. Collections of the Statistical Research Division. Instructions to assistant marshals and enumerators etc., 1850 to 1939, RG 29. Administrative Files of the Bureau of the Census, National Archives.

8. More generally, as shown by F. Arturo Rosales in the case of the city of El Paso, social services could have had an interest in classifying Mexicans as a separate race, as a device to show an apparent decrease in infant mortality among the white population (Rosales 1985).

9. The very unusually worded internal memorandum of 15 October 1936 is unequivocal in this respect:

One of the most serious situations the Bureau has had to face recently was your classification of Mexicans as 'Colored'. The classification by race or color of individuals, or even entire populations, is not only very difficult, but is a very delicate matter to the United States Government, and our classification must always be in accordance with the policy of the Federal Government. Please observe to the letter the following instructions, which cannot be disregarded, changed, or modified at any time except upon the written order of the Director of the Census: (...) The text and the tables (...)

must state definitely that the classification 'White' includes Mexicans. (3) Mexicans are Whites and must be classified as 'White'.

This order does not admit of any further discussion, and must be followed to the letter.

Please acknowledge in writing receipt of this memorandum.

Director of the Census to Dr. Halbert L. Dunn. Dossier 321 (17:12), File 149, Miscellaneous Records, 1900–1953. Office of the Chief Clerk. Administrative Service Division. RG 29, Administrative Files of the Bureau of the Census, National Archives.

10. In the early years of the twentieth century, the terms 'race' and 'people' were almost interchangeable. Both experts and members of Congress used the language of race to refer in particular to differences between

the components of the European-origin population, whereas 'colour' was used by preference to refer to differences between Blacks and Whites.

11. Congressman Sabath, a Chicago representative of Czech origin, was very active in ensuring that the amendment passed. He clearly acted as the leader of an 'ethnic' group defending the interests of his constituents. For a more detailed study, see Schor (forthcoming).

12. Records of the United States House of Representatives. Congress. Committee on the Census, House of Representatives. HR 61A-H4.1. Record Group 233, National Archives.

13. The list of prominent 'ethnic' persons drawn up for the 1920 census is in Folder 66, Foreign

Language Appeals Letters Census of 1920, File 198, General Subject File of the Statistical Division, Record Group 29, Administrative Records of the Bureau of the Census, National Archives.

14. Like the Czech newspaper mentioned earlier – *Denni Hlasatel*, May 4 1912 – the *Courier* is in the selection of articles in the Chicago Foreign Language Press Survey, Special Collections, Joseph Regenstein Library, University of Chicago.

15. Dossier 321 #3, 17–14. Advisory Committee on Census of Population. File 149, Miscellaneous Records 1900–1953. Assistant Director for Operations. Office of the Chief Clerk, (ca. 1899–1941) Administrative Service Division. Record Group 29, Administrative Records of the Bureau of the Census, National Archives.

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