

RACIAL CLASSIFICATION IN THE CENSUS

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The racial classification used in the census has, in the main, evolved in response to matters of public policy rather than in response to the deliberations of advisory committees of racial experts. The "three-fifths" compromise which took official form in Article I, Section 2 of the Constitution focused attention on the Negro population, and separate figures for Negroes were obtained in the first census and at each census thereafter. This classification, presumably, was considered satisfactory until 1860.

In 1860, a "Chinese" category was added to the classification, reflecting in all probability, the public interest in the Chinese immigration of the 1850's and the beginning of anti-Chinese agitation which led to the exclusion act of 1882. Also in the publications of the 1860 Census a category of "Indian" appeared for the first time. It is clear that the Indians had been a problem to our forefathers since earliest times, but it is possible that the language of the Constitution, "excluding Indians not taxed", defined Indians as an irrelevant element in the population to be enumerated. The count was confined to Indians existing as a part of the economy (i.e., taxed), and it was not until 1890 that Indians living on reservations or in "tribal relations" were included in the population of the United States. In 1870, the category "Japanese" was added to the classification--certainly not in response to heavy immigration from Japan--47 Japanese were counted in this census. It seems likely that the category Japanese was included merely as a logical extension of the Chinese category in the previous census.

No further expansion of the racial classification was made until the census of 1910, when in addition to White, Negro, Indian, Chinese, and Japanese, Filipino and a residual "other races" category were added. In that year, 3,015 persons were counted in this residual category, 2,545 Hindus, 462 Koreans, and 8 Maoris. This tendency toward the proliferation of what loosely might be described as Oriental categories continued through the censuses of 1920 and 1930.

In 1930, a further category "Mexican" was added to the racial classification, presumably in response to a general concern relating to the heavy immigration from Mexico during the 1920's. In the years immediately following, the Mexican Government took some exception to this classification, immigration from Mexico declined to a low level, and "Mexican" as a racial category disappeared from the census classification.

It would appear then that, in general, the census racial classification developed in response to issues arising largely in the field of immigration policy, in terms which were comprehensible to, on the one hand, enumerators and, on the other, the general public, including members of Congress.

Whether or not it is a racial classification is, of course, an open question. Implicitly, it is, in the sense that the categories are treated as immutable characteristics. That is, persons of Japanese descent are always, according to the classification, Japanese, no matter how many generations in this country; whereas persons born in Germany are identified, and those whose parents were born in Germany are identified, but subsequent generations of German descent are merged in the general population. It is clearly not "scientific" if by scientific we mean conformity to some standard text book classification; and, if such a procedure was desirable, one would be hard put to decide which classification.

Since 1930, public interest involving questions of race has, in the main, shifted from immigration to the field of race relations. There have been Supreme Court decisions, anti-discrimination legislation at both the State and Federal level, and substantial strides in the direction of integration. One phase of this trend has, of course, been the elimination of questions on race on application forms and other records, the discontinuance of the color classification in the compilation of school statistics in many areas, and the elimination of certain types of references to color in the press and in commercial entertainment.

As a part of this general trend, it has been suggested that the item on race be removed from birth and death certificates, and this suggestion has been given serious consideration in a few States. This item was actually removed from these records in the State of New Jersey but has recently been restored. There are, however, some half dozen States in which it has been removed from the face-sheet of the records and buried in the confidential medical part of the record.

There have, likewise, been suggestions that a question on race is inappropriate to the decennial census. This was a matter of some concern to the staff of the Bureau prior to the 1960 Census, since the mailing of the Advance Census Report to every household in the country openly placed the question on race before the public. In previous censuses the enumerator had been instructed to classify the respondent by race without asking the question, except when he was uncertain about the proper classification. With the exception of American Civil Liberties Union, which took occasion to denounce the question on race about a week after the 1960 Census was in the field, there was little opposition to the question. There were no pockets of mass refusals to answer the question, and examination of the Advance Census Reports (filled out by the respondent) showed little, if any, adverse marginal comment. There were several dozen letters of complaint about the question, but the number of such letters was no greater than

those complaining about the income question or housing questions on plumbing as invasions of privacy. In short, the evidence seems to suggest a profound indifference on the part of the general public to the presence of a question on race in the census schedule.

The Bureau's experience with a question on religious preference asked in the Current Population Survey of March 1957 was essentially the same. There were few refusals or complaints from respondents about the question, and, in general, the

respondents were not confused by the many elements of potential ambiguity our learned advisory group found in the question.

It would appear then that the opposition to the question on race is more professional than grass roots and that, in the present climate of opinion, a question on race of the traditional census variety is feasible even on the basis of self-enumeration.

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