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0521808235 - Census and Identity: The Politics of Race, Ethnicity, and Language in National Censuses - Edited by David I. Kertzer and Dominique Arel

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1 Censuses, identity formation, and the struggle for political power

David I. Kertzer and Dominique Arel

The past decade has seen a great outpouring of interest in the nature of collective identities of various kinds. Within the United States, both popular and academic interest in identities that divide the population have not only spawned heated debates but have also had substantial social consequences and public policy implications. Fueled in part by the legacy of racism and the still daunting problems of racial division, and nurtured as well by recent and ongoing waves of immigration, the issue is frequently framed in terms of “multiculturalism.” In this version, the American population is presumably divided into a fixed number of different “cultures,” each deserving of equal respect and some, perhaps, deserving of special aid.

Beyond the American shores, interest in issues of collective identities, their nature, and their consequences, is scarcely less acute. Nineteenth-century theorists of nationalism – riding the Europe-wide wave of state-creation according to principles of national identity – gave way in the twentieth century to theorists who predicted that such national identity would soon be supplanted by supranational allegiances. The European Union was, for some, viewed as the very embodiment of these processes. Yet events of the recent past have sent these evolutionary internationalists into retreat and ushered in a new concern for the continuing – some would say growing – strength of national and ethnic loyalties. Moreover, from the Balkans to central Africa, ethnic conflict and violence have been interpreted as evidence that people’s collective identities do not necessarily match national borders. Accordingly, states that are ethnically heterogeneous – the great majority of states in the contemporary world – are under pressure to take measures to prevent the escalation of ethnic tensions and the development of internal lines of social division.

These tensions are all the more on people’s minds as a result of the huge movements of peoples that characterize the world today, movements that are likely to continue to reshuffle the human population in the decades to come. Huge differentials in wealth are drawing people from the poorer to the richer countries, just as low fertility means that, in many cases, the

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wealthier countries cannot maintain their population without such immigration. The many other well-known sources of instability in much of the world – wars, famines, political fragility, environmental degradation – mean that even within what used to be known as the Third World people are continually in motion, producing a new mix of peoples lacking any common sense of identity.

All of this may be granted, yet what does it have to do with national censuses? Censuses are, after all, generally viewed as matters of bureaucratic routine, somewhat unpleasant necessities of the modern age, a kind of national accounting. Yet it is our argument that the census does much more than simply reflect social reality; rather, it plays a key role in the construction of that reality. In no sector is this more importantly the case than in the ways in which the census is used to divide national populations into separate identity categories: racial, ethnic, linguistic, or religious. It is our hope that the chapters in this book will establish this point and show how collective identities are molded through censuses.

State modernity and the impetus to categorize

The significance of official state certification of collective identities through a variety of official registration procedures can be gleaned by contrasting these government efforts with the situation that existed before such bureaucratic categorization began. Collective identities are, of course, far from a recent innovation in human history. However, before the emergence of modern states, such identities had great fluidity and implied no necessary exclusivity. The very notion that the cultural identities of populations mattered in public life was utterly alien to the pre-modern state (Gellner 1983). That state periodically required some assessment of its population for purposes of taxation and conscription, yet remained largely indifferent to recording the myriad cultural identities of its subjects. As a result, there was little social pressure on people to rank-order their localized and overlapping identities. People often had the sense of simply being “from here.”

The development of the modern state, however, increasingly instilled a resolve among its elites to categorize populations, setting boundaries, so to speak, across pre-existing shifting identities. James Scott refers to this process as the “state’s attempt to make a society legible,” which he regards as a “central problem of statecraft.” In order to grasp the complex social reality of the society over which they rule, leaders must devise a means of radically simplifying that reality through what Scott refers to as a “series of typifications.” Once these are made, it is in the interest of state authorities that people be understandable through the categories in which they fall.

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“The builders of the modern nation-state,” Scott writes, “do not merely describe, observe, and map; they strive to shape a people and landscape that will fit these techniques of observation” (1998:2–3, 76–77, 81).

The emergence of nationalism as a new narrative of political legitimacy required the identification of the sovereign “nation” along either legal or cultural criteria, or a combination of both. The rise of colonialism, based on the denial that the colonized had political rights, required a clear demarcation between the settlers and the indigenes. The “Others” had to be collectively identified. In the United States, the refusal to enfranchise Blacks and native Americans led to the development of racial categories. The categorization of identities became part and parcel of the legitimating narratives of the national, colonial, and “New World” state.

States thus became interested in representing their population, at the aggregate level, along identity criteria. The census, in this respect, emerged as the most visible, and arguably the most politically important, means by which states statistically depict collective identities. It is by no means the sole categorizing tool at the state’s disposal, however. Birth certificates are often used by states to compile statistics on the basis of identity categories. These include ethnic nationality (a widespread practice in Eastern Europe); mother tongue, as in Finland and Quebec (Courbage 1998: 49); and race, in the United States (Snipp 1989: 33). Migration documents have also, in some cases, recorded cultural identities. The Soviet Union, for instance, generated statistics on migration across Soviet republics according to ethnicity. The US Immigration Service, from 1899 to 1920, classified newly arrived immigrants at Ellis Island according to a list of forty-eight “races or peoples,” generally determined by language rather than physical traits (Brown 1996).

Parallel to the need for statistical representation was the need for control. In order to establish a “monopoly of the legitimate means of movement” (Torpey 2000: 1), states imposed the use of personal identity documents to distinguish the citizen from the foreigner (Noiriél 1996) and, in some cases, attempted to control the internal migration of their population through residency permits and internal passports (Matthews 1993). In a number of cases, such identification documents contained an identity category beyond the civic or legal status of the individual: for example, the Soviet Union, where citizens had their “nationality” (in the ethnic sense) indicated on their internal passports (Zaslavsky and Luryi 1979); Rwanda, with Hutu or Tutsi ethnicity (actually called “race”) appearing in identity cards (Uvin, this volume); Greece, Turkey, and Israel, with religion recorded in identity cards (Courbage 1997: 114; Goldscheider, this volume)¹; and apartheid South Africa, with racial categories inscribed on identification papers (Petersen 1997: 97).

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The categorization of identities, along culturally constructed criteria, on *individual* documents can serve nefarious or well-meaning purposes. In the United States, a racial category in birth certificates was long used to discriminate against Blacks and Indians. Following the rigid principle of the “one-drop rule,” according to which a single Black ancestor, however remote, made one Black, birth certificates were often used in Southern states to bar individuals of racially-mixed ancestry from marrying Whites (Davis 1991: 157). The rise of affirmative action, based on the notion that achieving true equality required special consideration to be given to historically disadvantaged minorities in access to jobs and education, implied the bureaucratic categorization of “minorities.” As a consequence, particularly in the case of Blacks and Indians, it has meant continuing commitment to the determination of race according to “objective” ancestry, as opposed to simple self-definition. Thus, the Indian Health Service of the Bureau of Indian Affairs continues to hold that eligible patients must have a minimum of one-fourth “blood quantum,” which in practice entails that they must prove that at least one of their grandparents appeared on tribal enrollments (tribal rolls) of recognized tribes (Snipp 1989: 34).

A similar policy was employed by Nazi Germany to identify both Jews and Germans. In spite of the shrill propaganda on the physical alienness of Jews, the criterion actually chosen to separate the Jews eventually targeted for destruction was a mixture of religion and descent, and not anthropometric measurement. Those with at least three Jewish grandparents were categorized as Jews. Ancestry, in turn, was determined by birth certificates issued by religious institutions (Hilberg 1985). At the outset of World War II, when the Nazi government sought to transfer German-speaking populations from the East (Baltics, Ukraine, Romania) to newly annexed territories from Poland, the question of defining German identity arose. In this case, religion was not deemed determinative and ethnicity did not appear on birth certificates. In Estonia, where a liberal minority law in 1925 had established officially recognized ethnic associations, claimants had to show a certificate, delivered either by their German association or by the Estonian Ministry of the Interior, attesting to their German ancestry (Institut national de la statistique 1946: 80).² Interestingly, since post-war Germany has adopted a kind of Law of Return, granting automatic citizenship to ethnic Germans from abroad, the issue of legally documenting one’s ethnic German affiliation remains germane today. After apparently relying on the self-declaration of applicants during the Cold War, the German state devised a complex questionnaire in the early 1990s to determine who can be deemed “German” (Brubaker 1996).

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The practice of inscribing cultural categories on personal identification documents can clearly affect an individual's own sense of identity. In the Soviet Union, the ethnic nationality in one's internal passport was also determined by descent (i.e., one's parents' nationality), as with the cases of the Jews, Germans, Blacks, and Indians cited above. In such a context, it seems likely that people whose passport certified them to be of "Ukrainian" ethnic nationality, yet spoke Russian as their first language, would nevertheless associate "Ukrainian" with their ethnic identity, at least by force of habit. However, a literature is lacking on the relationship between state-enshrined identities on personal documents and collective identity formation or, for that matter, between categories used on the census and in private documents. Clearly, comparative research on the politics and bureaucratic implementation of identity categorization practices in state documents is needed. Yet, while cognizant that the census belongs to a larger family of state categorizing practices, the current volume focuses its gaze on the census and its relationship to identity formation. Our goal in doing so is both to reconcile various strands of emerging literatures, which to date have often been regionally segmented (New World, colonial experience, France, East-Central Europe), and to help provide a theoretical framework for further comparative research. The universality and political salience of the census dictated our selection of the census as a fruitful point of departure.

The rise of population statistics and the construction of identities

Much of the most influential literature on the role of statistics gathering in extending state control has focused on the colonial state. Anderson, in his influential book *Imagined Communities*, pointed to the census as one of the primary devices employed by the colonial state to impose a "totalizing, classificatory grid" on its territory, and hence make all inside it its own. For Anderson, the key was the ability to make distinctions, to draw borders, to allow governments to distinguish among "peoples, regions, religions, languages." The very boundedness of the state meant that its component objects were countable, and hence able to be incorporated into the state organization (Anderson 1991: 184). The state's goal here, as Scott (1998:65) put it, is to "create a legible people."

In short, the use of identity categories in censuses – as in other mechanisms of state administration – creates a particular vision of social reality. All people are assigned to a single category, and hence are conceptualized as sharing, with a certain number of others, a common collective identity. This, in turn, encourages people to view the world as composed of distinct

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groups of people and may focus attention on whatever criteria are utilized to distinguish among these categories (Urla 1993). Rather than view social links as complex and social groupings situational, the view promoted by the census is one in which populations are divided into neat categories. Appadurai's (1993: 334) comment is apropos here: "statistics are to bodies and social types what maps are to territories: they flatten and enclose."

In Europe, national statistics-gathering was developing in the nineteenth century as a major means of modernizing the state. International congresses were held where the latest statistical and census developments were hawked to government representatives from across the continent. Knowledge was power, and the knowledge of the population produced by the census gave those in power insight into social conditions, allowing them to know the population and devise appropriate plans for dealing with them. As Urla (1993: 819) put it, "With the professionalization and regularization of statistics-gathering in the nineteenth century, social statistics, once primarily an instrument of the state, became a uniquely privileged way of 'knowing' the social body and a central technology in diagnosing its ills and managing its welfare."

Such language, not coincidentally, brings to mind Foucault, and his view of the emergence of a modern state that progressively manages its population by extending greater surveillance over it. In examining state action in the construction of collective identities, we enter into the complex debates over what is meant by "the state." The state itself is, of course, an abstraction, not something one can touch. Such a perspective impels us to examine the multiplicity of actors who together represent state power, and discourages us from the view that "the state" necessarily acts with a single motive or a single design. An inquiry into censuses and identity formation, then, requires examination of just which individuals and groups representing state power are involved, and how they interrelate with one another as well as with the general population. Pioneering research of this sort has been done on the impact of various advocacy groups. Especially valuable work has been done on the Census Advisory Committee on Spanish Origin Population in formulating the "Hispanic" category in the 1980 US census (Choldin 1986). Similarly important work has been done on the role of ethnographers, geographers, and party activists in devising an official list of ethnic "nationalities" for the first Soviet census of 1926 (Hirsch 1997). Sorely needed are more ethnographic efforts at examining the workings of state agencies of various kinds – from legislatures to census-takers – in their interactions with each other and with the people under their surveillance.³

That the kind of counting and categorizing that goes on in censuses is an imposition of central state authorities, and thereby a means of extending

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central control, has long been recognized. Indeed, ever since the first census-takers ventured into the field, struggles between local people and state authorities over attempts to collect such information were common. Such was the case in mid-eighteenth-century France, when various attempts to collect population data by the central government had to be abandoned. Opposition came not only from a suspicious populace but also from local governments. Each feared that the information was being gathered to facilitate new state taxes (Starr 1987: 12–13). These first population enumerations were typically identified with attempts to tax (often newly acquired) populations, as well as to conscript them for labor or military service.

Given such purposes, those undertaking these early censuses sought not to achieve a complete enumeration of the population, but only to register the part of most direct interest to state authorities. That segment generally was a taxable unit, such as the household, and not the individual *per se*. Moreover, since several social groups were exempted from taxation – in the case of the first enumerations of the Ottoman Empire in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries these included religious orders, the military, and judges (Behar 1998: 137) – pre-modern censuses were neither comprehensive nor standardized. Regional implementation tended to vary enormously, both in time and form.

Churches, too, have long been involved in this process, indeed in parts of Europe long predating the state in attempting comprehensive population enumerations. For example, the Lutheran Church in Sweden began a full registration of its population in the 1600s (Willigan and Lynch 1982: 123). Similarly, one product of the Roman Catholic Church's counter-Reformation efforts to solidify its control over its far-flung population was to order parish priests to take an annual census of their parishioners. This practice, begun in the sixteenth century, continues in many areas to this day.

Full, regular, periodic state-sponsored enumerations of individuals apparently date to 1790, when the United States began its decennial censuses. Within a century, they would become a defining feature of the modern state, with most European/New World states and colonial possessions having experienced their first modern census by the latter part of the nineteenth century. The decision to enumerate individuals, however, brought up the question of *which* individuals to include. Should the enumeration be limited to citizens, or should it encompass all individuals residing within the boundaries of a given state at the time of the census, irrespective of civic status? The United States, for example, did not count Indians remaining in reservations, who were not considered citizens and therefore subject to taxation, until the 1820 census

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(Nobles, this volume). The question of whom to count was debated several times by the International Statistical Congress, a body that met every three years or so in Europe between the 1850s and the 1880s, and its recommendation to count the *resident* population became standard practice.

States thus sought to count everyone on their soil, and among the first categorizations introduced on the modern census was the division between citizens and non-citizens or the related – but distinct – division between those born within the state and those born abroad. The French case, in this respect, is of particular interest. The French republican state had an organic conception of “la nation,” a civic body regarded as indivisible. French discourse became philosophically opposed to any subcategorization of the nation in the census or other state-sponsored practices. This conception, however, called for a strict separation between those who were part of the *nation* and the others. As a result, “the citizen and the foreigner became the two principal categories of analysis” (Blum, this volume). “Foreigners” were categorized according to their country of origin, a criterion eventually extended, from 1962 on, to the “naturalized French.”

British, American, and Australian census-designers have also long been interested in ascertaining the country of origin of their residents. A census question on birthplace has appeared on the censuses of these countries from the beginning in the United States, since the middle of the nineteenth century in Britain, and since 1911 in Australia. In Britain, a question on nationality (citizenship) was likewise included from 1851 to 1961 (Booth 1985: 256). The German census had questions on both place of birth and citizenship, while Austria and Hungary – which administered separate censuses – were only interested in ascertaining citizenship (Tebarth 1991). The information on the foreign-born was sometimes used to calibrate immigration policy. When legislation was passed after World War I to restrict immigration to the United States, an annual quota (2 percent) was established for each country of origin according to the census figures of foreign-born for 1880 (Simon 1997b: 16).⁴ This remained in force until the 1965 immigration law abolished country-specific quotas.

The development of cultural categories

While the practice of distinguishing the enumerated by civic status or place of birth became generalized, no such consensus emerged over the merits of using *cultural* categories in the census. With the rise of the “nationality question” in Europe – i.e., the legitimization of political

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demands based on the cultural markers of territorially concentrated groups – two representations of the “nation” came into conflict. On the one hand there was the French model of a political nation that was coterminous with the boundaries of the citizenry (the “nation-state”). On the other there was the German model of a cultural nation (in practice defined by language) not necessarily corresponding to state boundaries. States of Western Europe (France, Britain, Spain) professed the ideology of the “nation-state,” while to the east (Germany, Austria-Hungary, Imperial Russia and the Ottoman Empire) leaders embraced a model of the multinational state (with religion serving as a marker of identity in the Ottoman lands).

At the sessions of the International Statistical Congress, statisticians from the Western “nation-states” argued that the concept of cultural nationality, as developed in Eastern Europe, did not apply to them. Their Eastern counterparts argued that the concept was not geographically restricted, and they held extensive discussions on which particular categories would best represent people’s cultural “nationality.” A consensus emerged among Eastern census-makers that the question of cultural nationality should not be asked directly, but rather be derived from a question on language. With a few minor exceptions to the rule, this became the practice in the first wave of periodic censuses in Eastern Europe before World War I. The main objection to directly asking individuals about their cultural nationality was that, at a time of low national consciousness, many would have been confused about what to answer (Kleeberg 1915: 42; Roth 1991). In other words, while certain nationalist elites were arguing that national groups existed and needed to be statistically represented, many of the putative members of these groupings were unaware that they had such an affiliation.

Meanwhile, as new colonial territories were conquered, or modern administrative practices brought to old ones, censuses were introduced to the colonies as well. One of the major elements of this attempt by colonial state authorities to make populations knowable, to link them to the state and thereby make them governable, was the Herculean effort to divide the people into mutually exclusive and exhaustive identity categories. This represented a decisive break from precolonial enumerative practices. Appadurai contrasts the European practice with that of the earlier conquerors of South Asia, the Mughals, who did much to map and measure the land they controlled, as part of their efforts to tax it, yet showed no interest in enumerating the whole population. “Enumeration of various things,” he writes, “was certainly part of the Mughal state *imaginaire* as was the acknowledgment of group identities, *but not the enumeration of group identities*” (1993: 329).

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The European colonial powers (France, Britain, Belgium), who rejected cultural categorizations in their metropolitan censuses as incompatible with their imagined “nation-states,” had no such qualms when faced with the daunting task of counting their colonial subjects (Kateb 1998: 105; Appadurai 1993: 317–18). There is little doubt that racial ideologies, popular in Europe in late nineteenth century, influenced the thinking of colonial census-makers regarding the enumeration of Asian and African communities (Hirschman 1987). Yet another important factor was the absence of any idea of common citizenship uniting the colonial settlers with the locals. Since the “nation-state” construct was restricted to the relatively tiny number of colonial settlers, other categories had to be devised for the vast majority of the population (Anderson 1997: 58).

Censuses and the construction of race

As a product of the ideology of colonial and modern states, the project of dividing populations into separable categories of collective identity inevitably intersected with the division of populations into racial categories. The two efforts share a common logic, a kind of categorical imperative, in which people must be assigned to a category and to one category alone. The history of racial thinking is a history of cultural categorization, of seizing on certain physical characteristics and inventing a biological category for those people who manifest them.

In devising “racial” categories, imperial census-makers used names from the existing repertoire of cultural and geographical markers, but the categories themselves reflected the perception of the European rulers rather than that of the natives. Anderson (1991: 165–6) writes that few recognized themselves under the early “racial” labels of “Malay,” “Javanese,” “Sakai,” “Banjarese,” etc. in the 1911 Indonesian census. In the same vein, Hirschman (1987: 567) argues that the “Malay,” “Chinese,” and “Indian” categories in the Malaysian census were much broader than socially understood. That these categories reflected subjective values is hardly distinctive. Identities being by definition subjectively determined, their conceptual representation in *any* census can only reflect subjective processes. What distinguished colonial from non-colonial censuses, however, was that the formulation of categories in the colonies was unilaterally done by the ruling officials, while European categories of cultural nationality and language were already being negotiated, to some extent, with social groups.

Even more significant was the belief, fundamental to a racist conception of the world, that racial categories were rank ordered according to aptitude. Imperial races, unlike colonial ones, were fit to rule, while