Census and Identity

The means by which states have attempted to pigeon-hole the people within their boundaries into racial, ethnic, and linguistic categories are examined in this volume by a range of leading scholars. Whether through American efforts to divide the US population into mutually exclusive racial categories, or through the Soviet system of inscribing nationality categories on internal passports, the ways that a state defines its people in national censuses have important implications not only for those people's own identities and life chances, but for national political and social processes as well. The book reviews the history of these categorizing efforts by the state, and provides a theoretical context for examining them. It is illustrated with studies from a range of countries.

DAVID I. KERTZER is the Paul Dupee University Professor of Social Science and Professor of Anthropology and Italian Studies at Brown University. He was National Book Award Finalist in 1997 for *The Kidnapping of Edgardo Mortara*. His publications include *Politics and Symbols* (1996), *Sacrified for Honor* (1993), *Ritual Politics and Power* (1988), *Comrades and Christians* (1980), and several other books. Among his recent edited books are *Anthropological Demography* (with Tom Fricke, 1997) and *Aging the the Past* (with Peter Laslett, 1995).

DOMINIQUE AREL is Assistant Professor at the Watson Institute for International Studies at Brown University. He has published articles in many journals, including *Post-Soviet Affairs*, *Nationalities Papers*, *Harriman Review*, and *Current History*, and has also contributed chapters to edited collections.

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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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Contributors

DAVID ABRAMSON
Office of International Religious Freedom
US Department of State

DOMINIQUE AREL
Watson Institute for International Studies
Brown University

ALAIN BLUM
Institut national d'études démographiques
Paris

CALVIN GOLDSCHEIDER
Program in Judaic Studies and Department of Sociology
Brown University

DAVID KERTZER
Department of Anthropology and Watson Institute for International Studies
Brown University

MELISSA NOBLES
Department of Political Science
Massachusetts Institute of Technology

PETER UVIN
Henry Leir Chair of International Humanitarian Studies
Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy
Tufts University

Preface

A surge of interest in how collective identities are produced and, in particular, in the role of political actors and governments in fostering such identities has been evident for a number of years now. Yet scholarly interest in the intersection of these identities with state-level politics has a long pedigree. In the nineteenth century, scholars were heavily involved in the efforts of various European empires (Habsburg, Russian, and Ottoman) to categorize and hence better control their heterogeneous populations. Later, following World War II, attention shifted to the efforts of new post-colonial states to create national identities amidst a welter of competing "tribal" and racial identities.

Census and Identity arose from an interest in these questions of states and collective identities shared by a group of scholars based at the Watson Institute of International Studies at Brown University, under the aegis of the Institute's Research Program in Politics, Culture, and Identity. We became fascinated by the ways in which states entered into the struggle over collective identity formation, and saw the state-sponsored census as an especially promising vehicle for examining these processes. Academic interest in the role of censuses in the projection of state power is, of course, not new. A large number of country-specific studies of identity categorization in censuses have now been published, some with a historical focus and others with a more contemporary bent. Notable, too, is Benedict Anderson's decision to add a chapter to the second edition of his now classic book, *Imagined Communities*, devoted to the role of censuses (along with maps and museums) in the construction of national identity.

But to date no one has attempted a comparative study of the role of censuses in collective identity formation that has ranged across all types of states. This is what we have set out to do here, by bringing together scholars with diverse geographical specialties – from central Asia to central Africa, from Israel to North and South America – and different disciplinary backgrounds – from anthropology and sociology to political science and demography. Throughout we adopt a broad historical view.

After incubating this project by bringing in a series of distinguished experts in this field to speak with us at Brown in 1996–1998, we organized a conference at which the first version of the chapters in this book were presented. Held at the Watson Institute February 4–6, 1999, and co-sponsored by the Institute and Brown's Population Studies and Training Center, the conference helped the chapter authors tremendously in rethinking their contributions and in crafting a unified volume. Credit must go to the discussants at that conference for the insight they provided. We thank William Beeman, Thomas Biersteker, Virginia Dominguez, Matthew Gutmann, Michael Herzfeld, Francine Hirsch, Dennis Hogan, Michael Omi, Brian Silver, Peter Sinnott, Jacqueline Urla, Aristide Zohlberg, and Alan Zuckerman.

Following that conference, new drafts of the chapters were prepared by the authors, and on June 16–17, 1999, they gathered again at the Watson Institute for an intensive discussion of each chapter. A new series of revisions followed.

Before the first conference, a preliminary draft of what has now evolved into the first chapter of this volume, written by the volume editors, was circulated to all chapter authors to help provide a common theoretical framework for the volume. This chapter represents the editors' own attempt to provide a theoretical synthesis of the role of censuses in collective identity formation. It became clear soon enough, however, that some of the chapter authors had different views on these questions. Clearly not all agreed with all aspects of our own perspective and conclusions. We believe that the result is an especially provocative and lively volume, accomplishing the difficult feat of offering a well-integrated and tightly focused book that offers complementary perspectives on a common set of issues.

The book has a three-part structure. Chapter one offers an overview of the major issues involved, and a general theoretical perspective for understanding them. There then follow three chapters which examine, in turn, three major modes of categorizing citizens: race (chapter two); ethnicity (chapter three); and language (chapter four). Each of these chapters approaches the question comparatively: Melissa Nobles offers a historical analysis of the use of racial categorization in the censuses of the United States and Brazil; Calvin Goldscheider examines ethnic categorization in censuses by comparing Israel, Canada, and the United States; and Dominique Arel focuses primarily (but not exclusively) on the countries of Western, Central and Eastern Europe, again viewed historically.

The final section of the book consists of three chapters that focus on the uses of the census in categorizing citizens in particular parts of the world in which problems of such categorization have been (or are becoming) especially acute. In chapter five, Alain Blum, himself a major participant

in the highly charged current debates in France over the use of ethnic categorization in censuses and other government statistic-gathering, offers a view of the issues at stake there. In chapter six, Peter Uvin addresses the sanguinary example of Burundi and Rwanda, where division of the population into ethnic categories has produced horrific results. Finally, in chapter seven, David Abramson examines the case of the new states of the former Soviet Union (FSU), with a particular focus on Uzbekistan, as, in mounting their first censuses since independence, they confront the legacy of the Soviet policy of dividing all citizens into distinct nationality categories.

Mention of this last chapter brings up the happy fact that this book represents not the end of our efforts to explore these questions, but rather the first milestone on a longer road. The Politics, Culture, and Identity research program at the Watson Institute is now in the midst of a field-based study of the experiences of the FSU states in conducting their first censuses. This project involves an international network of scholars. Over the course of the past two years these colleagues (especially Francine Hirsch, Brian Silver, and Peter Sinnot) have done much to enrich Kertzer and Arel's understanding of census and identity issues, as we believe is reflected in the introductory chapter to this book. We would like to thank the Mellon Foundation for its support of this project, and especially thank program officer Carolyn Makinson. Thanks, too, to the National Council for East European and Eurasian Research, and program officers Morris Jacobs, Jon Mogul, and Kim Righter, for their support. For those readers interested in learning more details of this new phase of our work, please consult the Watson Institute web site (http://www.brown.edu/Departments/Watson_Institute/).

Finally, we are grateful to Jessica Kuper, anthropology editor of Cambridge University Press, for her support and encouragement. We also thank Neil de Cort at the Press for his work with the manuscript, and Kate Bowman, who prepared the index.