

Introduction

When people think of the census, they tend to imagine endless tables, line after line of numbers, and dull technical and repetitive operations, detached from their lives and from the larger history of the country. This is not what this book is about.

It is about the invention and the building of a nation, and the census, as a representation of the nation and as a policy tool, has played a crucial, if too often obscure, role in that history. This is particularly true in the case of the United States, where questions of population have been from the beginning the object of policy and debate, be it slavery, immigration, or the unequal distribution of the population and resources across the states.

This book studies the population categories constructed and utilized every ten years by the US Census, which is a political, administrative, and scientific instrument. Approaching these categories from a historical perspective rather than a strictly sociological or political one permits their analysis as sites of internal and external mobilization. It also brings to light the hidden evolutions by which the contents of seemingly stable categories change while the definitions remain the same. Categories that have long been in use, such as white or black, have varied dramatically across periods and regions, to the point that the same individual would be classified differently depending on the year and location of the census. Based on the distinctions of origin and status operating at the heart of the American population—between free and slave, white and non-white, native-born Americans and immigrants or children of immigrants—over a period of a century and a half, from the creation of the federal census in 1790 to the 1940s, this study retraces the genealogy and evolution of these categories.

In the American context, the focus on race and, secondarily, on ethnicity since the second half of the twentieth century has produced research and analyses that highlight the porosity of these categories, but that often seem to indicate that this porosity is a recent phenomenon. Thus, since the 2000 census, US residents can choose to identify themselves with more than one race at a time, something that was not possible before. The novelty lies in offering the choice of

multiple affiliation, but it must not obscure the fact that these categories in the past were the object of negotiation, as much by those who designed the census as by the actual investigators and the population itself. This is what this book highlights by examining the fieldwork of the investigators and the difficulties they encountered, both in contacting the population and in codifying and collating the findings.

In both the United States and Europe, recent decades have seen the mushrooming of studies on the history of statistics¹ and of works on the history of “race” as a social construction—two very different areas of historiography. The effort to reintegrate the history of statistics into a larger social and political context has been characterized by greater attention paid to different actors, situating the history of statistics at the intersection of the history of the social sciences and the history of the tools of governance or the management of society.² The census forms only a part of social statistics, often the oldest part, and it holds only slight interest for scientific innovation. In contrast, the census plays a central role in the diffusion of quantification and statistical reasoning, being both exhaustive and conducted by nation-states. In this respect, it is indeed a mirror in which nations see themselves. This function can be clearly seen in the United States in the first half of the nineteenth century, when the results of each census were awaited as confirmation of the exceptional destiny of the nation, signaled by its demographic vitality. But if the census participated in this process of construction of the United States, by dividing up the population according to categories, it contributed equally to the ordering and hierarchizing of the social world, or at least, to codifying the existing hierarchies.

Studying the history of the population categories utilized by the US census also means analyzing the actual process by which the American population was defined by the state. American history presents the distinctive trait, often put forward, that the nation was formed not from a territory or a people, but from principles expressed in legal and political documents. The US census was created by the American Constitution to divide up taxes and congressional seats among the federated states, and for that reason it was organized around a fundamental division of Americans into three groups: free residents, counted in full; slaves, whose numbers were adjusted by a coefficient that reduced their numerical importance; and Indians, who were excluded from the count. As a result, the administrative categories of the census, though they lack the force of legal norms, nonetheless had a leading role in the measurement and definition of the American population and its composition.

This work is guided by the idea that the population does not preexist the census, that the census participates in the production of the national community defined by the inclusion of some and the exclusion of others.³ Following in the footsteps of other works on the construction of the nation, it highlights the

processes and negotiations that mobilized very diverse actors, whether institutions such as Congress, which regulated the US census through legislation, the directors and agents of the census, the spokespeople of groups or collectives, or the residents themselves.⁴

Even though socioprofessional categories and statistics concerning professions deserve attention, this book focuses only on the categories that distinguish human groups by their race or origin.⁵ By concentrating on racial and ethnic categories, this study aims also to reunite two historiographical fields that in the United States are seen as separate: studies on race and studies on immigration and ethnicity.

Examining the history of population categories in the US census serves a dual purpose, both investigating the importance of the census in the production of social categories, especially as a norm for other actors, and looking at the importance of racial and ethnic categories in American society. The fact that American ethnic and racial statistics have been used as a reference in other countries adds to the value of a research project based on the idea that these categories can only be understood in their historical context.⁶ Race has long been a category of analysis in American social sciences, even if it has become a truism to call it a socially constructed category freed from its origins in biology. A detailed examination of the social and scientific usages of racial categories, as they have been produced and mobilized by public statistics in the American context over the past two centuries, allows for some discussion of the relevance of the comparison and of the importation of categories in a different national context. The history of the categories of the US census here comes down to a history of the construction of the American nation and of the division of the national community into different populations, as well as to a history of the intellectual, technical, administrative, and social practices involved.

The study of statistics leads almost naturally to the study of the processes by which elites objectify other classes of the population, as the historian Theodore Porter noted in connection with the development of social statistics in the nineteenth century, whether in the United States or in Europe, with numbers becoming the privileged means of study of the lower classes.⁷

The US census fits well in this process of constituting groups of individuals as social problems—especially from 1840 on, when it aimed to find answers to the big political questions about the population, such as slavery and the harmfulness of freedom for blacks, the inassimilability of new immigrants and the “racial suicide” of Anglo-Saxons, racial mixing, hybridization, and the degeneracy of blacks. This is revealed in the multiplication of racial categories to distinguish groups that sometimes were numerically insignificant; thus the 2,039 Japanese enumerated in 1890 contrasts with the treatment of the white race, which was never defined during the entirety of the period under study. The most blatant illustration of this

absence of investigation of the white race occurs in the census of 1850, the first to separately identify each individual: color only needed to be noted by the name of each resident if he was not white; when the space was left blank, it meant that the person was white. This, at a time when legislators regularly expressed their concern over the fact that the appropriate instruments to identify all the members of other groups were not available. Pushing this line of reasoning further, one might almost say that the whites distinguish themselves precisely by the fact that they are not racial subjects and that the aim of the census is not to identify all residents, but only those who differ from the implicit norm.

Historians have shown the extent to which the definition of whites was negative, how they were defined by what they were not, and above all by the fact of not being black. Recently, whiteness has become an important topic of historical study, permitting the class and ethnicity of new immigrants to be linked with race.⁸ What characterizes the long period studied here is the absence of explicit reflection and of efforts to define whiteness. White identity was constructed as constantly threatened with corruption by non-whiteness, and the statistical apparatus was an apparatus for the protection of the purity of the white race. As such, the category of the white race escaped all reflexive investigation on the part of the census, expressing the gaze of white Americans on other inhabitants. The constancy with which mulattoes (those of mixed white and black blood) were defined by the census without explicit reference to their white heritage is only the most successful case of this denial.

The census indeed objectifies individuals who only “count” to the extent that they are a social problem. Its history is characterized by the development of ever greater numbers of categories investigating the specifics of those who maintained the greatest social distance from the milieu that gave rise to the census officials. Studying the categories of the population census, once they went beyond description, amounts to discerning the way one part of the population was constituted as an object of knowledge. This had different impacts and different consequences, depending on whether the otherness in question was racial or ethnic.⁹ For the census, division by color or by race preceded by sixty years accounting for the country of birth, and it remains the fundamental distinction throughout the history of the US census. But recording the country of birth of residents (1850), that of their parents (1880), and then their native language (1910) share equally in this enterprise of distancing from the other by means of objectification through categories and numbers. This is even more the case because the desire for knowledge is driven by a political aim that is, in the final analysis, simple: to identify and count those who are surplus. This is why this study can only be a study of categories of difference, which blends social, political, cultural, anthropological, and biological dimensions. On this level, it aspires to be a contribution to the history of race, of racism, and of whiteness.

Studies on the construction of race in the United States often mention census categories, either as an indication of the stages of its evolution or to emphasize the federal government's participation in the process. But the racial categories of the census are most often perceived as a sign of racism at work in society, rather than the subject of a more in-depth investigation. More specifically, most of the studies that refer to the racial categories of the census are limited to picking up the taxonomies that appear in the published volumes, without examining the rules and practices of the census. One question has been explored in greater depth—that of racial mixing since the census created national norms, while the racial laws on which it was based were adopted at the state level. A number of works have reconstructed the procedures of attribution of racial categories in the case of “mulattoes.” Three studies have contributed to showing how the racial categories of the census were applied and how they were the product of numerous, often contradictory, factors.¹⁰ But their chief limitation comes from the fact that they are essentially concerned with categories of race and color, and especially the opposition between white and black, and that they ignored ethnic categories or treated them in passing. This separation between the field of racial studies, which has as its object racial minorities and the history of their identification for purposes of their exclusion, and that of ethnic studies, which originated in the history of European immigrants and their descendants, prevents us from seeing how, for the US census, population categories constituted a system whose foundation was the distinction between blacks and whites, but whose classifications were profoundly influenced by the existence of this fundamental difference. One of the aims of this book is to show that dissociating categories of color or race from categories of national origin and ethnicity is an arbitrary choice, imposed by the division of research into distinct fields, which obscures the borrowings of method and reasoning that, for the Census Bureau, characterized the elaboration of these two sets of categories.¹¹

This distinction between racial minorities and ethnic groups, which Hannah Arendt formulated as an opposition between “visible minorities” and “audible minorities,” is found just as much in historical research as in the history of the treatment of these groups by American society, as well as in the practices of the census.¹² *Counting Americans* hopes to show that, even if these two things were distinct for the census, they were not necessarily independent of each other. To take just one example, the procedure for attributing the national origin of the parents to a child born in the United States of immigrant parents flows directly from the rules for attributing the racial categories of the parents to their children, even if the categories of origin lack the characteristic of permanence without limit by generation. The child of an immigrant parent and a native-born parent would be classified as belonging to the population of foreign parentage, a procedure reminiscent of the practice of including mixed-race children in the black

population and not allowing space for an in-between group. By analyzing the procedures, working methods, argumentation, and critiques of the workings of the census, one can document the link that exists between accounting for race and accounting for ethnicity and thus transcend this artificial divide.

Racial categories were indeed more important in census-taking than categories of origin. This is why nearly all social statistics in the census publications of the second half of the nineteenth century are presented by race—that is to say, in the vast majority of cases, with whites on one side and blacks on the other, while the categories of national origin play a much more limited role, which varies according to the importance of the immigration question in political debates. But the study of the two types of categories, which correspond in principle to two different methods—visual observation for race, and the response to a question for national origin—have enough shared features for them to be analyzed together.

Studies devoted to the history of the Census Bureau have addressed the question of categories of race or color, and that of slavery, as well as the role played by the census in taking account of immigration, in light of the considerable importance of public debates about the census.¹³ But these studies did not take as their central subject the study of population categories, and they only addressed the question when these categories came to the fore in public debates over the census.

This study proceeds by more or less faithful borrowings from different methodologies—the history of race, the history of immigration and ethnicity, and the history of statistics. But since this kind of methodological *bricolage* is characteristic of the census itself, this approach seems the one best suited to the subject. Thus, the analysis of the place of black slaves in census statistics inevitably leads to the evoking of both the hierarchy of racial categories and the epistemological and general anthropological issues that it raises. Knowing whether the name of each slave should or should not be picked up by the census, as it was for other Americans, or whether a number would suffice, leads to the consideration of the role of census data in the creation of social facts—a question that can be extended to other categories.

Since these terms are critical to the study, it is important to clarify exactly how “race” and “ethnicity” are used in this book. The term *race* is used only in reference to census practice and to the content given by the collection and treatment of personal data. For this purpose, *race* has no meaning until the perforated card on which it was written had been processed by the tabulating machine. It is understood that race is a category, the product of a social convention, whose importance comes uniquely from the importance that it is accorded by the society studied. The refutation of the biological or anthropometric bases for racial distinctions has not led to the demise of the use of race as a social category. While

the census may have helped give race a social and historical depth that allowed the category to survive the disappearance of its theoretical foundation, *ethnicity* is a term that does not appear in the censuses of the period. The expression “ethnic groups,” used to designate the populations issuing from recent immigration, appears only at the end of the period under consideration, notably after the system of national origins was instituted in 1928. On an analytical level, the notion of ethnic groups explains the shift from the collection of biographical facts, linked to country of origin (place of birth, mother tongue), to the production of social characteristics that permit individuals to be inscribed in the social fabric of the welcoming society, while the notion of national origins does not effectively account for this displacement. The precise content of the concept will be specified in different stages of the analysis. While the census considers the national origins of certain categories of immigrants, it produces through the taking of the census an ethnicity that did not previously exist. No identity, whether racial or ethnic, exists outside of a social interaction, and it follows as a matter of course that one of the purposes of this study, in recontextualizing the categories used by the census, is to contribute to the weakening of the essentialist interpretations of racial categories, for which the census was able to supply content.

This study involves paying attention to the empirical practices of classification rather than to taxonomies alone and, as much as possible, refraining from introducing an ideological coherence that was lacking at the time for the categories and statistical procedures that followed the collection of the data. The fact that the meaning of the terms of “race,” “nationality,” “people” were never stable or coherent presents no obstacle to research but is precisely its point. The goal here is not to study a discourse, still less an ideology, but rather to examine the practices in which ideology and vocabulary are two factors among others. For this reason the study is attentive not only to the terms and the variations in their interpretation, but also to the rules of consolidation or invalidation of responses, and to the procedures used for assignment of unclear cases. In many cases, technical imperatives, such as cost or space limitations on one sheet or card, influenced how responses were treated.

To the extent that the sources permit, analysis follows the categories, from the discussions that accompanied their introduction or modification, to the interpretations of findings published in the reports of the census, while noting anything knowable about the moment of the interaction between the census agent and the population and about the procedures of correction and arrangement of the data. Examining the rules for correction of individual data points before their statistical processing shows how certain responses from residents were invalidated by the staff charged with the mechanical processing of the data. These norms are often more precise than the instructions given to agents in the

field, and in certain cases they serve to bring individual data points into line with the expected patterns.

Intervention of the public was diverse, rare, and above all the act of experts during the first part of the nineteenth century; they were later more numerous, and were organized into effective pressure groups from the early years of the twentieth century on. The stakes of classification or of reclassification also vary, from the mobilization of pure prestige, as in the recognition of national minorities of the Austro-Hungarian Empire by language, to the mobilization of American citizens of Mexican origin for the suppression of the “Mexican” race in the census, which risked furnishing legal arguments for the segregation of their children in Texas schools. It will become apparent that the Census Bureau tried to follow a consensual path, demonstrating its concern with obtaining cooperation from all residents, but was often constrained by Congress to respond to specific demands, as in the case of the introduction in 1890 of subcategories for blacks (*black, mulatto, quadroon, octoroon*), against the wishes of the directors of the census. The weakness of the Census Bureau in the federal bureaucracy, as an administrative agency subjected to numerous political demands, also made it a sounding board for certain claims, which have to be interpreted cautiously because the success or failure of the demands depended on multiple factors. The hazards of classification express a climate more than a political will. Finally, individual cases of resistance, unexplained variations, the spontaneous creation of categories by agents, and failures in the field furnish rich materials which allow for interpretive hypotheses where certainty is lacking.

The available sources are very unequally distributed over the period of study. Archives are rare for the period before 1900, while the belated creation in 1902 of a permanent Census Bureau produced sources for the period from 1900 to 1940. The main source—and, for the early period, practically the only source—consists of laws passed by Congress and the debates in the House of Representatives and the Senate. In some cases, it is possible to reconstitute some of the legislators’ intentions. In contrast, before 1850, the published volumes of the census provide little information, since they do not include any explanatory text and consist of a simple compilation of the data from the questionnaires. From 1849 onward, the sources are more numerous and more fruitful, especially the reports of the census directors, the numerous official statistical publications with lengthy introductions, and the archives of the congressional committees that prepared the censuses. The archives of the Department of Interior have preserved a portion of the archives of the Census Office beginning in 1870. They consist largely of the superintendents’ correspondence, but the documents rarely address questions of method. The administrative archives of the Bureau of the Census, beginning in the late nineteenth century, are quite rich in this

respect and furnish the key information for the sources used for the first half of the twentieth century.

The stages of development of the census translate into the creation of more abundant and better quality archives. Over a period as long as that studied here, the changes in the census are significant. Thus it was essential to organize this work in chronological parts, especially since the formation of categories was a cumulative process through which the existing categories were constantly redefined by new contexts and practices. The first part of this book, covering the period from 1790 to 1840, addresses the foundation of the census as a political instrument and the dominance of the slavery issue. This first period, marked by significant natural increase in the population, is distinguished by the summary character of the census and of debates over population questions. Despite the paucity of sources, the period deserves discussion because the categories put in place at that time formed the basis of later censuses. The first census divided the population into three types of inhabitants: free whites, distinguished by gender and by age; slaves and free blacks, placed in a single group without regard to age or sex; and Indians, who were excluded from the count. The political division foreseen by the Constitution (free, slaves, and Indians) was from the start cross-cut by a distinction of color—although the Constitution carefully avoids the issue and is a “color blind” document—whites were called free, while the freedom of blacks who were not slaves was passed over in silence.

The year 1850 marked the beginning of the second stage of the census, when residents were all counted individually. The use of no fewer than six questionnaires facilitated collection of a mass of statistics completely disproportionate to those collected for previously published volumes. The importance of the slavery question, the most burning political issue of the day, led to the creation of a special questionnaire devoted to slaves in 1850 and 1860. Taking slaves into account as persons was extremely problematic, and the solution adopted, which consisted of attributing numbers to slaves rather than naming them, highlights the anthropological dimension of the population census. By returning to the debates in Congress and the rules of attribution of the categories “black” and “mulatto,” this part aims both to contribute to the history of racism in American social sciences, and to analyze the production of the data that provides the only population-level statistics historians have on the extent of mixing between whites and blacks in the context of slavery. This part helps clarify the matrix of the system for taking account of racial mixing in American public statistics, or rather of its persistent denial, by assigning children of mixed couples only to the subordinate group.

The third part covers the period opened up by the reorganization of the census in 1850 and goes up to the establishment of the permanent Census Bureau at the turn of the century. This period was marked by the importance of statistics

on immigration, a development that is connected to racial statistics. The 1850 census was the first to register the birthplace of free inhabitants, which was further extended by the question on the birthplace of the parents (1870 and 1880), and also by counting as nationalities birth in states that were defunct but seemed pertinent to characterize the immigrants from those places then living in the United States. This lack of interest in the situation of the country of departure, which was also manifested by the absence of any reference to the citizenship of origin, can be understood as the beginning of the long transition from geographical statistics to ethnic statistics. This section also shows how the census, in spite of its connections to the international statistical community, remained dependent on US debates over population.

The next period, 1900–1940, is divided into two parts: the fourth section of the book focuses on the rise and fall of ethnic statistics and the fifth and last on the modernization of the census and its relation to various segments of the population that became associated to the operation of the census. The US Census remained a political instrument and continued to have as its goal the establishment of the “constitutional” population of the United States, that is to say, the figure that enters into the calculus of the division of congressional seats in the House of Representatives. But it is in this period, when the Census Bureau was asked to produce immigration quotas, that the political dimension of its activity came to the fore. During this period certain categories appeared to be maladjusted or rejected by those to whom they were applied, whether it was a question of racial classifications that tried to measure racial mixing or of the ephemeral “Mexican race.”

This book does not cover local censuses, those of cities, of territories, or of special populations, whether they were taken under the authority of the federal Census Bureau or, a fortiori, of other institutions. It focuses on the federal census, at once a political instrument, a means of demographic inquiry, and a locus for assigning collective identities to individuals in a national context. It is in no way a history of demographic or administrative inquiries in the United States. However, the censuses of outlying territories that remained American during the entire period concerned are included.¹⁴ Although they did not form part of the “constitutional” population, they shed light on the difficulties of exporting the categories forged on the continent. These categories were revealed as poorly adapted to populations that did not have the same history of racial or ethnic relations, and the fact that these censuses were not strictly limited by the terms of the legislation voted by Congress permitted important adaptations opening a more flexible way than on the US mainland. The attention brought to bear on colonial censuses of the United States, which have been little studied, allows for the American census to be shown in a larger context, to underscore the national history of the census, and to compensate for the exceptionalist bias that

characterizes some of the American studies on the history of the social construction of race.¹⁵

The transformation of the temporary bureau into a permanent institution, called for by the census leaders since 1850, gave it an institutional existence that made it the unmediated partner of all those who took an interest in the census of the population. Thanks to the bureau's archives, it is possible to show the different stages of decision-making of an organization subject to multiple pressures, whether the traditional ones of Congress or those of other government agencies: pressure groups that wanted to influence the classification of those whom they represented, such as the representatives of Central European immigrants who in 1910 imposed the practice of taking account of mother tongue, or groups that expected the census to furnish data that would feed their campaigns in favor of the exclusion of certain categories of inhabitants. This period is marked by the central role played by the census in the conception and production of means of restricting immigration starting in 1921, but it is also distinguished by the efforts made by the bureau to identify and ensure the cooperation of populations that it considered the most resistant to census-taking, which posed once again the question of the political uses of population statistics. The increasing connection between the population and the "users of statistics," to use an expression of the census director of the day, in the conception and progress of the census furnishes sources for a social history of the census that would make it a site for mobilization as much as a locus for decision.

The book's end date of 1940 is justified by the general context of racial and ethnic relations and by the evolution of the Census Bureau. The American racial system had come under serious attacks since the beginning of the twentieth century, whether on the theoretical level with the critique of the scientific foundations of racism led by Franz Boas and his disciples, or on the legal level with the NAACP's struggle for desegregation, to cite only the most obvious aspects. But the comparison with Nazism and later the imperatives of the Cold War led larger and larger sectors of American society to reject the very foundations of distinction by race, to identify distinction by race with racism. Before World War II, the fact that the census classified inhabitants by race had never provoked direct criticism on American soil. From 1965 on, census data would serve as a framework for the politics of affirmative action, while from 1970 onward, the symbolic stakes themselves would be transformed by self-identification and the context of the "ethnic revival."¹⁶ Finally, the inversion of the politics of immigration in 1965 reinvigorated interest in statistics on national origin that had been lost since the 1930s. These changes explain why the racial and ethnic classifications of the postwar censuses have been the object of numerous investigations on the part of historians, sociologists, political scientists, and legal scholars, while the history

of the formation of these categories up to 1940 has not received even a fraction of this attention.

After the war, the Census Bureau acquired a historical service, which produced what in the bureau's terms is called a "procedural history," taking minute account of the planning, the progress, and the cost of each census since 1950. This internal history differs in its goals and means from the type of history practiced by academic historians, but it assumes part of the work that only the latter have done for the earlier period. On the other hand, within the bureau, the 1940s saw a process that began in the 1920s come to fruition, but it only showed its effects in the second half of the following decade: the replacement of the older generation of statisticians, trained for the task and for whom the census was limited to gathering administrative statistics to which they applied simple treatments, by a generation of university-trained statisticians who transformed the bureau's working methods. One consequence was the growth of internal discussions devoted to the improvement of statistical methods and the corresponding decrease of the place of political stakes in the census. Along with the strict limitation on immigration, the disappearance of the "mulatto" category, and the growing importance of economic statistics since the Great Depression, the declining importance of population questions likewise justifies the chronological limit of this study.

To understand the current and future stakes of census-taking in the United States as well as the specific role population questions have played in the building of this nation, the past needs to be explained, and this is what this book intends to do.