

New Asian Races, New Mixtures, and the “Mexican” Race

Interest in “Minor Races”

Whenever there was a question of racial classification of new populations, whether in the continental United States or in the territories acquired since 1867, the census always relied on the principles and techniques developed since 1850 to distinguish blacks from whites. Chief among these was the principle of hypodescent, in more or less rigid forms. The early twentieth century saw change occurring in two directions: on the one hand, the racialization of a growing number of non-European immigrants and their descendants; on the other, the weakening of the distinctions between the descendants of European immigrants.

Accompanying the 1900 census, the Census Bureau published, for the first time, a detailed commentary on definitions and usage of terms used to distinguish the population by race. In so doing, it differentiated its own practices from those of European countries, and also distinguished its use of terms from other, current or specialized uses. Lamenting the loose use of the word “race” in popular speech, the Bureau in a 1906 volume spoke of the conceptual fluidity that affected even the most recent census:

In the third volume of the Twelfth Census “race” is thus used to include “nationality as indicated by country of birth” [*Twelfth Census*, vol. 3, p. lxix, col. 1].¹

For the first time, the Bureau contrasted physical and linguistic criteria, skin color and ethnic group (“ethnic stock”). In so doing, it established the basis for a distinction that would actually emphasize the differential treatment of whites and other groups. It presented the problem as a practical one, skin color being the easiest criterion for agents to observe, provided these physical features were sufficiently obvious:

The oldest and most familiar physical test by which races are distinguished is that of skin color. Whether or not it is the most important to the ethnologist, it is certainly the one which the enumerator finds easiest to apply. This test in a country like the United States, which contains many members of the white race, the black race, the red race, and the yellow race, with obvious race characteristics not effaced or completely obscured by race intermixtures, gives fairly accurate results even in the hands of more than 50,000 untrained enumerators.

In the absence of a definition of racial terms in the instructions for the 1900 census, census workers were left to their own interpretation and physical features were interpreted in various ways according to region and social context:

Their answers reflect local opinion, and that opinion probably is based more upon social position and manner of life than upon the relative amounts of blood. In the application of race terms local usage and judgment vary, and accordingly there is no definition applicable throughout the United States of the words employed by enumerators. Perhaps "negro" may be interpreted in the light of statutes against miscegenation in many Southern states whereby intermarriage is prohibited between white persons and persons having one-eighth or more of negro blood. At least this seems the only available means of interpreting the word precisely.²

To alleviate the vagueness of these terms, the report proposed a summary guide for future censuses, defining as white "a person at least seven-eighths of white or Caucasian blood and regarded in the community as belonging to the white race." Conversely, black was defined as "a person at least one-eighth of negro, or African, blood, more negro than Indian or Mongolian and regarded in the community as a negro." The same rule was applied to Indian and Mongolian³ races. In none of these three latter definitions was the "white race" mentioned. We might see this as one of the last attempts to establish a priori definitions of racial categories. But this urge to codify by fractions, inspired by the unfortunate experience of 1890, had no future.

By 1930, after the "mulatto" category had been abandoned for the continental United States, the issue of persons of mixed black and white descent no longer mattered to the census. However, since the beginning of the century, the treatment of responses had become more and more complex, by reason of the multiplication of racial categories and the possibilities for racial mixing. Another factor was the rapid progress being made in the electronic processing of data, thanks to ongoing improvements in the Hollerith machines.⁴

The instructions for 1930 thus set out new rules, which organized racial categories by a double, but asymmetric, "one drop rule," according to whether the mixture involved black and white or other races:

151. Negroes.—A person of mixed white and Negro blood should be returned as a Negro, no matter how small the percentage of Negro blood. Both black and mulatto persons are to be returned as Negroes without distinction. A person of mixed Indian and Negro blood should be returned as Negro, unless the Indian blood predominates and the status as Indian is generally accepted in the community.

152. Indians.—A person of mixed white and Indian blood should be returned as Indian, except where the percentage of Indian blood is very small, or where he is regarded as a white person by those in the community where he lives. (See par. 151 for mixed Indian and Negro.)

153. For a person reported as Indian in column 12, report is to be made in column 19 as to whether "full blood" or "mixed blood," and in column 20 the name of the tribe is to be reported. For Indians, columns 19 and 20 are thus to be used to indicate the degree of Indian blood and the tribe, instead of the birthplace of father and mother.

154. Mexicans.—Practically all Mexican laborers are of a racial mixture difficult to classify, though usually well recognized in the localities where they are found. In order to obtain separated figures for this racial group, it has been decided that 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 ("Mex").

155. Other mixed races.—Any mixture of white and nonwhite should be reported according to the nonwhite parent. Mixtures of colored races should be reported according to the race of the father, except Negro-Indian (see par. 151).⁵

The instructions to regional census officials drew their attention to the difficulty of determining race in certain cases, and reminded them to alert their agents on this point. This was something new, since race or color had never been presented as something difficult to record in the continental United States. Acknowledging the difficulty "in some districts," the instructions also noted that the census did not establish the legal status of an individual with regard to color. "That is not the purpose of the census." They made the same recommendation that Du Bois had done at the beginning of the century: in cases of uncertainty over those of mixed race, a determination could generally be made by the way the person was perceived in the community where he or she lived.⁶

The 1930 census brings us to the end of a long evolution, which saw the triumph of the “one drop rule” in the classification of persons of black and white ancestry. This rule was less strict in other instances, the white and black races remaining special cases. Absolute hypodescent characterized mixtures between blacks and whites, and all mixtures between whites and non-whites, with the exception of mixed-blood Indians, when they were accepted socially as whites.⁷ For other races and more recent mixtures, census workers were to use the father’s race, following the rule that had long been in use in the case of two parents of different foreign birth. In fact, attributing a racial category to children whose parents were of different races could pose difficulties for census workers, since these cases were so far out of the norm. For the 1930 census, the instructions for coding individual cards stated that, within a single family, the races had to be consistent; this did not mean that the race had to be the same, but rather that the rules had to be strictly applied. Thanks to the permanent status of the Census Bureau since 1900, for this period we have available rules for the treatment and correction of data, which allows us to paint a more detailed picture than was possible when limited to schedules and census publications. The coding instructions placed each individual in his or her household, making parents and children consistent whenever there was what the Census Bureau called an absolute inconsistency.⁸

Coding punched cards was the first stage of correcting handwritten data. Since 1890, the census no longer simply compiled responses, but corrected inconsistencies according to precise rules. These rules often went further than the instructions for agents in the field. Thus, the rules for 1920 stated that children of a black parent and a mulatto parent were to be listed as “Mu,” something that did not appear in the instructions given to the census workers who recorded responses in 1920.⁹ This confirms the intent of census officials of the day to maximize the chances of black individuals being classified as mulatto—though this did not prevent their numbers from decreasing, as we have seen. The next step was programming the machines and verifying the cards that were rejected by the machines for inconsistency. The cards made a first run through the machine so they could be verified, before proceeding to further treatment. Cards were rejected either because of a faulty perforation or because of suspect values. Rejected cards were then verified manually. In the case of race, the machines were programmed to reject cards punched as W (white) if in the column for place of birth there occurred “Chi” or “Jp” and “F” (Foreign-Birth); cards where the race was “Chi” or “Jp” and the place of birth was not in agreement; cards for nonimmigrant populations of color (B, Mu, and In) if the place of birth was foreign (F); and finally, all cards punched for “minor races,” “Fil” (Filipino), “Hin” (Hindu), “Kor” (Korean), and “Ot” (Other). For “Other,” the race had to be spelled out on the card as given on the schedule.¹⁰

Although not every verification entailed changes, they are still of interest, as is the order of passage through the machine, to which we shall return shortly. In each census, there were a few cases of whites born in Asia, but since Asian origins meant not only country of birth but also race, the rule was that persons of Asian origin should be of the corresponding race. The coding instructions for mortality statistics for the 1940 census showed the same tendency, the selected examples all featuring people classified as white by mistake. In doubtful cases, employees were to refer to all the indicators on the card, in order to establish a race consistent with the other available information.

If White, Negro (or Black), Indian, Chinese or Japanese is clearly stated, this item is not coded unless the racial designation is inconsistent with other facts on the transcript. For example, if the name is given as "Charley Sing" with the race as "White", and if the country of birth of the decedent or his parents is given as "China", the nativity determines the code. In such cases, "Ch" is written over "White" in item 4. If the race is stated as "Colored," "Malay," "Brown," "Yellow" etc., the nativity determines the code.¹¹

These internal rules for coding and correction were generally more restrictive than the instructions to agents, applying the "one drop rule" more strictly. Still, there was a growing proportion of persons of Asian race born in the United States, since the prohibition of Chinese immigration in 1882 and the restriction of Japanese immigration in 1907; these cases also had to be verified, with the rule—implicit at the time of census-taking and explicit at the point when the punched cards were coded—being that persons of Chinese race should be born in China, unless there was clear evidence of the opposite.

Following the tradition established by the consolidation of Chinese national origin into a race, three new Asiatic races appeared on the schedules for the 1920 census: Filipino, Korean, and Hindu.

In fact, these categories were already in existence at the time of a special census conducted in Oklahoma in 1918, which tends to show that this was not a decision by Congress but an adaptation of the schedules to the presence of these groups, similar to the cases of the Chinese in 1870 and the Japanese in 1890.¹² The "Hindu" category (that is, Indians from India) is especially interesting, since according to the racial theories of the day, Indians could be Caucasian or Aryan, but they were not white. This was established by the Supreme Court in the well-known ruling *United States v. Thind* (1923), recognizing the legal authority of popular beliefs in matters of race.¹³ The census followed along by making "Hindu" a race or color, according to the beliefs of the man in the street. After this ruling, and especially at the time of the

1930 census, the “Hindu” category followed the path taken by the law, but we have seen repeatedly that when the law did not explicitly call for terms to be used rigorously, the census tended to veer toward the popular meaning of categories. According to census officials, this was a way of ensuring equivalence between the questions and people’s answers. The census welcomed confirmation through law, but did not seek it; and recourse to poorly defined racial categories offered advantages as well as disadvantages. Since the end of the nineteenth century, the census had given up invoking scientific or legal authority, preferring to follow its own practices. When its racial definitions might lead to confusion, the census consistently had recourse to the same phrase, whether in the instructions to agents or in census reports: “for census purposes.” This was considered sufficient justification.

The numbers of Koreans, Indians from India, and Filipinos were quite small in the 1920s, to the point that in the 1920 census report they were relegated to the category “All other,” which in that year totaled only 9,488 persons, less than 0.01 percent of the total population, divided into 5,603 Filipinos, 2,507 “Hindus,” 1,224 Koreans, 110 Hawaiians, 19 Malays, 17 Thai (Siamese), 6 Samoans, and 2 Maori.¹⁴ In contrast to what we shall see in the case of Mexicans, numbers were not the justification for a separate racial class. Rather, we see here the continuation of the tradition begun in 1860, according to which each Asian country of origin had a corresponding race—a tradition that continued all the way through the 2010 census, regardless of the small number of persons enumerated in each.¹⁵ All other Asian immigrants became subject to the same procedures that had been developed in the nineteenth century to radically separate the Chinese and Japanese from the rest of the population. After 1924, the census would be reinforced in this path by the prohibition on immigration and naturalization of persons originating from Asia.¹⁶

During this period, Native Americans continued to be a separate case. They were divided into two groups: reservation Indians, for whom the Bureau of Indian Affairs provided statistics; and Indians, or those considered to be such, living among the rest of the population, who were enumerated by the Census Bureau. One last separate census of Indian tribes took place along with the 1910 general census; the instructions announced that there was no longer a need for a separate census, so this would be the last one, and hence it would involve extra investigative effort, going further than the questions for the general census.¹⁷

In fact, although the 1910 special census of Indians was indeed the last, detailed information on Native Americans would continue to be collected, within the scope of the general census. For the 1920 census, on the grounds that few Indians were of immigrant origin, the columns for father’s and mother’s place of birth were to be used respectively to record the father’s and mother’s tribe, when the race of the individual was “Indian.”¹⁸ This practice of recording

Indian tribes in place of nationality of origin continued throughout the twentieth century.

With the abandonment of the mulatto category after 1920, the Census Bureau developed a renewed system of racial classification, in which the black race was to some extent neutralized, as autonomous and separate from other less numerous racial minorities. With the bureaucratization that characterized the history of the Census Bureau between the two world wars, procedures were formalized and the training of field workers was improved, especially by written tests. The reports for the 1910 and 1920 censuses had already appended filled-out fictional schedules for the use of readers. In these we can glimpse rules that were not always explicit in the instructions, such as the fact that the children of a black ("B") man and a mulatto ("Mu") woman were "Mu," visible in certain coding instructions. In order to illustrate the maximum number of examples, the same sheet contained individuals of all races and many origins, a diversity that was more than unlikely in a real neighborhood but served a pedagogical purpose.¹⁹

The tests for recruiting census agents that were used systematically from 1930 on were narratives of family histories that candidates for such posts had to transcribe correctly on the schedules. The cases were deliberately selected to be complex, involving atypical families. A 1940 test gave the case of a family made up of John, a Mexican; his wife Ruth, half Indian and half Mexican; their daughter Marion, who is married to a man, George, whose father is mulatto (although in 1940 mulatto was no longer a census category) and whose mother was born in Mexico and spoke an Indian language as a child.²⁰ This fictitious example is interesting because it tests the limits of the hypodescent rules and also mixes racial categories that were in use in 1940 and others that had been dropped (mulatto and Mexican, as we shall see). The applicants had to choose between the following choices: Mexican, Indian, White, Negro, Other. The answers were to be drawn from the instructions for 1940, which agents had to study carefully in order to make determinations in ambiguous cases.²¹

In spite of this trend toward greater complexity, the system of racial categories, so important in American public statistics, still relied on the primordial opposition between whites and blacks. In fact, the relationship by this time had been solidified by locking the definition of the black population, so that it was finally stable, while the definition and limits of the "white race" were called into question by the importance of the immigration issue, which was also a racial issue even if not a question of color, and by the creation, with the 1930 census, of a Mexican race. The classification of blacks, though acknowledged as somewhat arbitrary by the head of the population division, was justified henceforth as a way of measuring the economic spread between whites and blacks, especially in the South, while skin color came to serve as a marker of a difference that

was increasingly viewed as social (as a Census Bureau statistician noted at the time).²²

The Strange Career of the “Mexican Race”

The 1930 census introduced a new race, the Mexican race, which was the first to mark a distinction within the white population. Though it appeared simple, this category was actually complex, since, while it was a race just like white, black, Indian, or the various Asiatic races, it was tied to Mexican national origin.²³

There were early indications of the Census Bureau’s desire to racially distinguish Mexicans, especially because in the early years of the century the Bureau considered Mexicans to be a hybrid racial group. An analysis of the 1900 census reveals people of mixed race who did not fit into census categories (for the first time since 1850 the Census Office had not enumerated mulattoes).²⁴ The paragraph on “half-breeds” (a generic term here including mulattoes and mixed-race Indians) shows the statistical invisibility of Mexicans, despite their different “blood”:

Many persons living along the Mexican boundary, speaking the Spanish language and wearing European clothes, but largely, perhaps predominantly, of Indian blood, have probably been returned by the enumerators as whites, the word Indian being reserved by local usage for descendants of the wild hunting and nomadic Indians.²⁵

The plan to create a racial category specifically for this poorly defined population did not appear so early, and the problem was later reformulated. Still, the idea of a localized population that was of part-Indian origin and was Spanish-speaking, and the difficulty in identifying them for the census, was already present. For the census, these people were not only on the frontier of the nation but also on the frontier of existing categories. In fact, until the 1920s the census recognized “Mexican blood” only in connection with Indians. The 1910 special volume on the Indian population made a distinction within “half-breeds” according to whether the responses had indicated a mixture with white or Mexican blood. The authors of the report had decided to retain the distinction, as shown in table 16.1.

The report also admitted that “while a ‘Mexican’ is presumably white, or a mixture of white and Indian, there is no way of telling what proportion, if any, of his blood, is Indian.”²⁶

The concerns aroused by the lack of a way to get a grip on Mexicans changed after 1910, when Mexicans were no longer viewed as a small part of the Indian

Table 16.1. Degree of Mixture within the Indian Population of the United States (1910)

<i>Degree of mixture</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>Proportion</i>
Total	88,030	100.0
Less than half white	18,169	20.6
Half white, half Indian	24,353	27.7
More than half white	43,937	49.9
Unknown proportions	1,571	1.8
Part Mexican	1,072	1.2
Other unknown	499	0.6

Source: Census, *Indian Population in the United States and Alaska, 1910*.

population but rather as new arrivals and laborers. The transformation of the public image of "Mexicans," from a small regional group that aroused curiosity to a significant number of immigrant workers, is probably what prompted the Census Bureau to make them a race in the 1930 census.²⁷

The justification after the fact was the growth of this population, which had mostly been counted as white previously.

The instructions given to enumerators for making this classification were to the effect that "all persons born in Mexico, who are not definitely white, Negro, Indian, Chinese or Japanese, should be returned as *Mexican*." Under these instructions 1,422,533 persons were returned as Mexican in 1930, and 65,958 persons of Mexican birth or parentage were returned as white.²⁸

Historical studies based on the manuscript responses to the 1920 census in the Southwest show that in these states, a very large number of people who were classified as mulatto had Spanish surnames and did not live among the black population.²⁹ In the 1910 census, a large number of persons of Mexican origin were classified as "M" or "Mx" by census agents.³⁰ Since the instructions stated that "mulatto" was to be noted as "Mu," it is likely that this category was corrected when the punched cards were coded. Thus, for the census, there were two motivations for the 1930 racialization: on one hand, following the model of the racial classification imposed on Asian immigrants, it offered a mechanism for demarcating this immigrant population concentrated within a specific region; on the other, it responded to a practice of differentiation by race or color, which was already current locally and was apparent in the responses, whether on the initiative of census workers or of certain inhabitants.³¹

As a result of the new race category, the census was able to produce two sets of figures in 1930: on the one hand, the 641,462 immigrants who had been born in Mexico; on the other, the 1,422,533 inhabitants belonging to the Mexican race.³² The new category was unique in being based on national origin yet conditional upon color and appearance. The instructions aimed to distinguish—exclusively among first- and second-generation Mexican immigrants—those who were neither white nor members of other racial categories used by the census; these persons would constitute the Mexican race. The problem for the census was more complex than in the case of Asian immigrants, because it was understood that some persons of Mexican origin were white, and it was necessary to remove them from the Mexican racial category. The descendants of Mexicans annexed in 1848 were all white, by the terms of the treaty, even if they were the target of racially based segregation and discrimination.³³

The application of this category, though in principle limited to only two generations, actually overflowed these bounds: among the persons of Mexican race were 264,338 “Mexicans” whose parents were born in the United States—that is, persons who did not fit into the definition but whom the Census Bureau had not reclassified as white, limiting itself to stating this fact in its report. That the Census Bureau should publish data that contradicted its own definitions gives a sense of this plan for racial classification of Mexicans: to respond to current immigration but at the same time to incorporate all those of “Mexican race.” This is why, although the instructions at first made it an ethnic category, tied to foreign birth, it was actually a racial category. Unlike categories of origin of that era, it was not conceived of as limited to the two first generations. Applying the “Mexican” category was a very clear case of racialization of a minority group.

This plan unambiguously showed the extent to which this “race” had been defined by social status, as the instructions stated clearly that the object was to capture laborers—a highly unusual qualification for a racial category:

Practically all Mexican laborers are of a racial mixture difficult to classify, though usually well recognized in the localities where they are found.³⁴

Clearly, census officials viewed the persons who were the object of this category as passive subjects, to whom they applied a statistical method of separation. This fact can be linked to the parallel development that made Mexicans into people whose presence on American soil was increasingly seen as illegitimate. The census was a participant in this attempt to delegitimize Mexican immigration, which had deportation as a consequence.³⁵ The reports as well as press releases on the 1930 census simply stated that this new category appeared on the population schedule, without further explanation except for mention of the new numerical

importance of this population.³⁶ At first, neither the announcement of this classification nor the publication of the results seemed to arouse any reaction. Not until 1935 did a broader movement put pressure simultaneously on the Census Bureau, the Department of Commerce, the State Department, and the White House. Supported by the Mexican government, the Mexican ambassador to Washington, and the Mexican consul general in New York, the campaign to reclassify Mexicans as whites was driven by organizations of Mexican-Americans in the southwestern states, who emphasized the fact that they were US citizens. These organizations, federated within the League of United Latin-American Citizens (LULAC, founded in 1929), were generally made up of members of the middle class who were rather ambivalent about their connection with Mexican immigrants. The LULAC manifesto spoke of their attachment to the United States and to the "racial origin" of Mexican-Americans. The organization did not accept Mexican nationals as members, but rather saw itself as an instrument for the integration of American citizens wishing to maintain their culture.³⁷ The reason for their individual and collective opposition to the classification of Mexicans as a race or color was an analysis of the risks that loss of the quality of whiteness would pose for their status in southwestern society. The problem was not seeing their origin distinguished, even in terms of race, which they themselves did in their newspapers and their organizations. Rather, it was the risk of being treated as "colored" and, especially in Texas, seeing their children assigned to segregated schools.

To fully understand the timing of the campaign for reclassification, we need to recognize that the problem was not the census classification per se, but the authority it gave courts and other administrative entities to view Mexicans as non-white and hence to discriminate against them, not just in fact (as was already the case), but in law, which was intolerable. In fact, the movement leaders intervened when various courts in Texas and New Mexico considered persons of Mexican origin as non-white—a position also held by a number of state and federal social service agencies.

Several events in 1935 marked the development of this trend, notably the decision of the newly established Social Security Administration to classify Mexicans as non-white, and the ruling by federal judge John Knight in Buffalo, New York (First Federal Circuit Court, 12 December 1935), denying a request for naturalization made by Timoteo Andrade, on the basis of his Indian ancestry. These and other similar events sparked the mobilization of Mexican-American organizations with support from the Mexican embassy. The Social Security Administration, as a federal agency, and Alex Powell, head of the (state level) Texas civil service in El Paso, had done no more than follow the census. But the historian F. Arturo Rosales, who has studied this episode in the greatest depth, notes that when city officials in El Paso excluded Mexicans from the white

population, they were also motivated by the desire to lower the figures on infant mortality among whites.³⁸

The Census Bureau had hoped to make use of Mexicans' feelings of ethnic pride to convince them to participate enthusiastically in the 1930 census. This is apparent from a letter of Acting Director Hill to Alonso Perales, a Texas lawyer who later represented LULAC in the 1940 reclassification of Mexicans as whites. In his letter, Hill asked Perales to write positive pieces about the census for 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 United States. This is the first census in which Mexicans will be given a separate classification.³⁹

Prominent people of Mexican origin had cooperated with the Bureau in this process. However, as we shall see for other groups, acts of cooperation with the census, such as publishing census announcements in the ethnic press, did not necessarily mean the persons involved shared the goals of the Census Bureau. The bureau's correspondence shows no trace of comment or protest on the part of Mexicans at this time. In March 1931, as proposed by census director Steuart, the Census Advisory Committee recommended a study on Mexicans as a race, either as a single publication or to be accompanied by similar studies on other "minor races"—that is, in the language of the census at that time, all those races that were neither black nor white.⁴⁰

In April 1934 the Census Bureau decided that Mexicans should be classed as non-white in its reports on vital statistics (based on data provided by state agencies), to avoid using different classifications in different reports. If those at the top were still in favor of this classification, they had nonetheless begun to take account of objections from some Mexicans, supporting the view the Bureau had expressed about Mexican workers. This comes out of the minutes of a meeting of the Census Advisory Committee, which Leon Truesdell, chief statistician for population, attended in order to assist Joseph A. Hill on the subject of the classification of Mexicans. This was an important topic on the agenda—even though the introduction of the category had left no trace of discussion. It is the most extensive justification of the "Mexican" race found in the census archives.

Dr. Hill explained that at the 1930 Census for the first time Mexicans were classified separately from the white population because of the feeling that they were not strictly white. . . . Dr. Truesdell said the

term "colored" is ambiguous, in the South, the term being synonymous with Negro, and in other sections of the country, it is a hodgepodge of Chinese, Japanese and Negroes in varying portions. He said in the case of Vital Statistics, it is not easy to segregate Mexicans as the Mexicans have a prejudice against returning themselves as other than white, and seventy-five percent of the local registrars in New Mexico and lower California are Mexicans who credit themselves with being white. Mr. Austin [director] saw the same objection in the case of the population census, as in the same sections a large percentage of enumerators and supervisors are Mexicans. He was of the opinion that the wealthy class of Mexicans called themselves white, while the peon class will return itself as Mexican. Dr. Truesdell suggested including on the death certificate an inquiry in regard to national origin.⁴¹

In the case of death certificates, it was generally family members who stated the race of the person, in effect a form of self-assignment. But it appears from the discussion at this meeting that even assignment by observation, as practiced by the census, was problematic—an issue, as in Puerto Rico, involving disagreement between the perception of field workers and that of census officials in Washington. The traditional policy of local recruitment was intended to ensure better cooperation of populations, but it came with this cost. Moreover—and this could come as much from later protests as from census experience in the field—the Census Bureau placed responsibility for this rejection on a minority of prominent, "wealthy," Mexicans, who wanted to be white, while the majority "peons" would not object to their racial classification as Mexican. This conversation is remarkable for the clarity with which the Census director articulates race and class, opposing the "wealthy class of Mexicans" and the "peon class" as to the different racial self-identification he believes them to practice.

Already at this date, the Census Bureau seems to have taken the claim seriously: Truesdell had already estimated the cost (two to three thousand dollars) of a recount of Mexicans as white between 1930 and 1940, assuming that the punched cards would be available for comparison with the 1940 figures, if the Mexican racial classification was not continued. Truesdell estimated that the Bureau would be tasked with undertaking a new enumeration in this case. As we have seen, the Census Bureau had already, in 1931, performed the reverse, and more uncertain, procedure of reclassifying as Mexican a portion of people classified as white in 1920.

Another argument was invoked to justify a separate racial category for Mexicans, which recalls that of the insurance companies on the subject of the vital statistics of blacks at the end of the nineteenth century: that of the value of government statistics for actuarial tables and insurance companies.⁴²

At the same time, the Census Bureau's efforts to get the states to use a "Mexican race" in their birth and death certificates brought uneven results, once again attributed to resistance on the part of agents of Mexican origin. Commenting on the progress made in this direction by California and Colorado, the head of vital statistics regretted the failure of these efforts in New Mexico:

New Mexico, however, still continues to report all Mexicans as white on the birth and death certificates, undoubtedly for the reason originally assigned by the state registrar, namely that most of her local registrars are themselves Mexican and can not be expected to classify their own people as Mexican knowing that they will be shown in our reports in the column for colored.⁴³

Mobilization against this classification was crowned with success when the Census Bureau was ordered not to pursue it in 1940, and it reluctantly admitted that the decision had come from the State Department. Some branches of the Bureau continued to have recourse to the classification, while others were tempted, but the internal memos of the director contained sharp reminders that Mexicans were white, at the same time forbidding use of the contested term "colored" for all populations of the continental United States and the territories. The tone of these documents testifies to the Bureau's awareness that it was under political surveillance, as shown in a memorandum from the director to the chief of the statistical division, 15 October 1936:

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:

(1) No classification is to be made in your tabulations, general or otherwise, which contains the word "Colored." The word "colored" must be eliminated both in text and tables in referring to classifications by race or color.

(2) The classifications by color or race must be as follows:

White
 Negro
 All other

Mexicans are Whites and must be classified as "White."

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

Please acknowledge in writing receipt of the memorandum.⁴⁴

A second memorandum, on 3 December 1936, extended these instructions to the entirety of the Bureau's work:

In further reference to my order of October 15, 1936, concerning the Census classifications by color or race, please note definitely the following instructions:

(1) Mexicans are to be classified as "white" and are to be included with the white population.

(2) The term "colored" used by the Bureau must hereafter be eliminated entirely from all Census classification and publication.

There must be no deviation from these instructions.

Please acknowledge in writing receipt of the memorandum.⁴⁵

These two documents are unusual for two reasons: first, they show the director of the census shifting the responsibility for the Bureau's political problems onto one of its division heads and clearly angry with his subordinates; second, they show, for the first time, that the classification by color or by race fell into the political domain. The victory of the movement against the racial classification of Mexicans was thus complete, especially because over the course of 1936, by virtue of the change imposed on the Census Bureau, other federal agencies also had to cease distinguishing Mexicans as a race.

One important consequence of this decision was that the federal immigration service likewise had to accept that Mexicans were white—this, at a time when the law restricted immigration and naturalization to whites.

A letter from the *chargé d'affaires* of the Mexican embassy to the US secretary of state, dated 29 July 1937, shows the real stakes of this classification. At this time, the federal government required all agencies to use the same definitions, which had not been the case for the Census Bureau and the Immigration and Naturalization Service earlier in the century. The letter invoked the authority of the new census policy, calling for it to be imposed on the immigration services of the port of San Francisco, which had continued to classify Mexican nationals as being of the Mexican race.⁴⁶

The precedent established by the reversal of the Census Bureau's decision made it possible to demand the application of the same rule to other federal agencies. However, the rule about systematically classifying Mexicans as white, though confirmed by agency heads, was not always consistently

applied at the local level. This is the gist of a memorandum of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, dated 18 May 1937, which emphasized the concern for uniformity. What the memorandum did not say was that the decision made for the Census Bureau was political, and that the Immigration and Naturalization Service could scarcely implement a policy contrary to that which had been openly adopted by the federal government.⁴⁷ This decision made people of Mexican origin eligible for naturalization, with the exception of those who remained “racially ineligible,” meaning not white.⁴⁸ The archives of the Immigration and Naturalization Service show that, although the agency repeatedly confirmed that Mexicans were white, up to the early 1940s it continued to receive letters of complaint from Mexicans informing the agency that the rule had been broken.⁴⁹ Nonetheless, organizations that knew how to mobilize significant resources, had a good understanding of the political world and the judicial system, and perhaps also had support from the diplomatic service of a foreign state, had been able to compel the Census Bureau, in its racial classifications, to take into account the feelings of the populations being enumerated.

Advocates of the suppression of the Mexican racial category were able to efficiently mobilize diverse resources toward its reversal. Their tactics included individual refusals to apply the rule, press campaigns, lawsuits, and appeals to elected officials and to the government. The movement made savvy use of the administrative rules concerning uniformity, at the very moment when the Central Statistical Board was established and tasked with reconciling the statistics of the various federal agencies.⁵⁰ Still, it seems that the most important factor was the influence of the Mexican government. This becomes apparent through the regrets of census officials, who in 1940 attempted to reestablish this classification in a different form.

The summary of a meeting of the Census Advisory Committee of 5 January 1940 indicates that the Census Bureau tried unsuccessfully to win reestablishment of the Mexican racial category through the State Department.⁵¹ This shows the nature of the decision to abolish the category, since the Bureau came under the Department of Commerce and ordinarily had very little contact with the State Department. Truesdell regretted the decision of the State Department, and emphasized the Bureau’s hope that the question on maternal language, which was to be posed to a sample of 5 percent of the population, would furnish a substitute for the abandoned racial category.⁵² This was the position followed by the Bureau, which tried to link the Mexican race of 1930 with the Spanish-speakers of 1940, then with persons having a Spanish surname, with all the limitations this entailed.⁵³

The Central Statistical Board also issued a recommendation in 1939 requesting that information on Mexicans be preserved, in one form or another, and noting the value of the 1930 data:

It is urged, therefore, that steps be taken in some way to meet this need, perhaps by two subheads under the category "white" in column 13, namely "white except Mexican" and "Mexican."⁵⁴

This 1939 proposal is extremely interesting, even though it was without result, because it anticipated the configuration adopted in 1980 with the creation of the Hispanic "ethnic group," which was not a race but a way to divide the white population into "non Hispanic white" and "Hispanic white."⁵⁵ This proposal would have made it possible to maintain the distinction of 1930, without the stigma of race and color, and while attempting to protect the census from having its classifications linked with discrimination. In the end, the question posed by this proposal is twofold: Why, in the 1930s, did Mexican-American associations successfully mobilize against a separate classification of Mexicans in the census and other government agencies? And why, in the 1970s, did Hispanic associations join together, with equal success, in favor of a separate classification of Hispanics or Latinos?⁵⁶

The disappearance of the "mulatto" category, followed by the introduction and forcible elimination of the "Mexican" category, shows that over the first decades of the twentieth century, the system of racial classification was modified, primarily to take into account the cooperation, or lack thereof, of the population. Although gradual, this development was significant, and it moved more rapidly in the last decade of the period.⁵⁷ In the nineteenth century statistics on national origin began gradually to take into account the perceptions of inhabitants. The first three decades of the twentieth century were a time when immigration was a national obsession and the Census Bureau was central to immigration regulation.