Official decennial censuses of the population have been anything but satisfactory. Not only has there been undercounting of the national population, but the counting of Blacks has left a lot to be desired.¹

During the period of slavery there was little or no real incentive to keep track of the so-called free Blacks. In contrast, individual slave owners kept exact records of their slaves. However, it might be argued that this knowledge was not generally made available for public scrutiny; slaves, after all, were the material basis of wealth of the slave owners. And the magnitude of that wealth was probably concealed for a number of private reasons.

Problems of counting Blacks have been compounded by a number of factors since the ending of slavery. Migrations from the land to the cities of the South right after the war; later migrations from the land to the cities of the North, West, and South since War I; unsteady employment in the cities; unstable and invisible housing bases for their families; reticence in the disclosure of self-incriminating information because of fear of the unequal application of the law—all of these and many more made it almost impossible to count this rather volatile population. When we add to these the ordinary errors of counting, we are left with a statistical monster.²

Our major concern, therefore, is to generate an independent estimate of the black population of the United States. If the methodology yields up reliable results we may be able to develop benchmarks against which to check future census counts.

This paper is an exercise in empirical description. It does not attempt to make use of theory to derive any of its results. It attempts to write down in
as precise terms as possible the pattern of population change in the United States from 1609 to the present.

The paper starts with some observations about existing population theory. It is designed to raise questions about the notions which have come down through the ages and which seem to be the acceptable modes of thought among academicians, laymen, and practitioners alike. The Club of Rome, the family planning groups, the modern-day Malthusians, and the sophisticated partygoers have been telling us with certainty that a population doom is about to befall the earth. These notions must be expunged from our minds if we are to better understand the dynamics of population growth and change.

Another section of the paper makes some empirical determinations of the trend and cycles in live births in the United States. It then derives the population trend from a manipulation of these data and compares the results with actual population over the period 1790–2000.

Another section of the paper interprets some of the parameters of United States population in terms of black population change. The results are compared with actual black population.

Finally, the paper draws some of the implications for modern-day census taking. It also tries to indicate the ways in which the empirical findings may be married to a theory of population growth.

SOME THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The human population serves at one and the same time as source, sink, and result of economic activity. Indeed, the activities that govern the reproduction of the human population provide the defining characteristics of economic systems in general. And the special way in which the reproduction is accomplished identifies a specific economic system. In a slave society, for example, the laboring population is reproduced as slaves; in a capitalist society the laboring population is reproduced as free wage laborers; in a feudal society the laboring population is reproduced as landless peasants. This cycle of reproduction of the laboring population in the same genre from which it sprang is the key to understanding the nature of specific economic systems.

All human beings as well as the various types of nonhuman resources used and usable by them are forged out of the same material substratum. "Mother Earth" is the common primordial matter which forms the physical basis of people, of their food supply, and of all the other resources used and usable by them. On this view, the earth is the material synthesis