And Just Who Do You Think You Aren’t?

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Asked what sex they are, Americans give consistent answers. They are the same sex one year that they were the year before. This consistency carries over to age, which reliably increases by one every year. However, Americans do not demonstrate the same consistency in the ethnic or racial identity they report to census takers. Shown a list of ethnic labels like French, Mexican, English, or Russian and asked to indicate which they are, 80 percent of respondents will select at least one, but of those who did, 40 percent will not select the same ethno-racial identity a year later. Moreover, if the list changes and new ethno-racial categories are added, many people who effortlessly accommodated the old list now change their identification to one of the new categories, suggesting that they were not really what they previously said they were. Finally, if we take time in a friendly conversation, we can induce acquaintances to expand their genealogical histories far beyond what we initially learned from them. People who casually said they were “Irish” turn out, when they expand their discussion, to be French, Scots, and Portuguese as well.

What to make of this inconsistency? One possibility is uninterest. Possibly some people casually change their ethno-racial identities because, unlike gender or age, ethno-racial identity is of no interest to them. If a lady does not follow baseball, but a coworker asks her favorite team, her stated preference is likely to depend on other cues and her desire to please. Today she supports the Dodgers; tomorrow, the Yankees. The baseball-loving coworker perceives as her inconsistency what is really her uninterest. Similarly, if a lady is indifferent to her cultural heritage or genealogy, she will tick sometimes one box and sometimes another box from the census questionnaire. As W. A. Mozart long ago observed, she is fickle because she does not really care.

Another possibility is ignorance. Possibly some white people, among whom inconsistency is greatest, just do not know their ethnic identity. Such ignorance could arise if no parent bothered to tell them, whether from ignorance, uninterest, desertion, or death, or if, as adults, they disbelieve whatever they were told as children. Such cases are not unusual. We need not presume total ignorance from vacillating respondents. Having a vague idea of one’s genealogy means that one is aware of the limitations of one’s knowledge. In such cases, therefore, when the census taker asks their ethno-racial identity, individuals accept from her list that commodious identity within which, they suppose, their own seems most comfortably to reside. When the list changes, their selection may change too because their choice was never more than an approximation anyway.

A final possibility is the public mood at the moment the census is taken. Like popular singers or clothing styles, ethno-racial identities come in and out of fashion. Some census respondents identify with whatever ethno-racial identity is currently the most fashionable or advantageous. The recent, rapid growth of American Indian populations testifies to the increased
status of this label: “Indian” is now advantageous and trendy. There are not more Indians; there are just more people willing to call themselves Indians. Later, perceiving a change in public mood, the same respondents adopt another ethno-racial identity that suits them better at the time. Preposterous though it initially seems, this possibility has evidence to support it. Mulattoes disappeared from the U.S. census after 1890. How many census respondents became un-Japanese in 1940? Where now are the Negroes and Orientals of 1970? Why did the Iranian population decline in 1980? Of course, these are sensational illustrations, backed by major political events, but a subtle change in the connotation of words caused millions of former Latinos to become Hispanics.

Someone who thinks these uncomfortable thoughts is not alone. Confronting the inconsistent and apparently erroneous ethnic identifications of white respondents in the 1980 census, Stanley Lieberson and Mary Waters decided that the census respondents’ apparent mistakes and inconsistencies were the real story, not, as they had initially supposed, a methodological problem. In a stunning blow at naïve positivism, shared alike by the founders of the United States and the founders of American sociology, their empirically grounded reflection turned the decennial U.S. census into a decennial dialogue about American history. That is, whether confused or confident, all census respondents emerge from a historical process clutching ethno-racial identities that are themselves historical products still in historical evolution. The decennial census exposes the current state of that self-defining process, which then moves on again. Taken together, all the censuses since 1790 expose what people thought they were and what the census makers thought were the realistic ways of defining race and ethnicity. Therefore, to write a history of the U.S. census is, as Margo Anderson discovered, to write a history as much of what Americans thought important as of how many Americans there were.

Reviewing this evidence, one concludes that indifference, ignorance, perceived self-interest, and fashion massively affect Americans’ ethno-racial identities. Apparently, racial and ethnic identities are not so self-evident as people think. This conclusion is surprising. In view of the current centrality of race, ethnicity, and nation in the United States, Chechnya, Bosnia, Sri Lanka, Quebec, Israel, Ireland, South Africa, India, Zaire, and elsewhere in the world, this conclusion seems astonishing. In view of all these world trouble spots, where races, nations, and tribes fight, how can so many census respondents not know their own ethno-racial identity? This ignorance is like living in Sarajevo without knowing whether one is Moslem or Serb. Admittedly, intergroup relations in the United States are much better than in Yugoslavia, but they have, for all that, been sufficiently troubled for sufficiently long that one would expect everyone to have taken a side by now.

After all, in the United States, decades of contention over minority rights have vested in the Bureau of the Census the responsibility for keeping track of population numbers in the interest of fairness to minorities. This obligation poses no trouble in the case of women, who know reliably their own gender. But because ethno-racial identities are mutable, affirmative action for minorities of color poses a troubling problem. The methodology of affirmative action absolutely requires that the census know how many whites, American Indians, Asians, blacks, and Hispanics exist so that politicians can establish the minority categories’ fair share of jobs, state procurement, and educational opportunities. Since 1977 this information has been firmly in place thanks to Office of Management and Budget Directive No. 15, which created and required the big five categories. If now, some ex-Indians, ex-Asians, ex-blacks, ex-whites, and ex-Hispanics declare themselves of mixed race, as may happen in the census of 2000, existing ethno-racial categories will be depopulated and a bewildering variety (black/Hispanic, black/Asian, black/white, etc.) of new ones created. Such changes will complicate the enforcement of existing civil rights legislation, and representatives of recognized minority groups oppose the innovation for this reason. With the rights of multiracial people on one side and those of affirmative action on the other, the issue of multiracial identities threatens to turn into another litmus test of political correctness.

To avoid this sterile outcome, an ideological equivalent of trench warfare, Americans need to take seriously the ignorance, indifference, self-interest, and fashion that affect ethno-racial identities in the real world as well as in the census. These facts remind us that ethnic identities are constructed, that they do not reflect a biological reality. Constructed identities are selected from available options. Constructed identities succeed when adherents convince others that it is advantageous to embrace this or that identity. In principle, the game of ethno-racial identity is the same as the game of religious or political affiliation. All involve proselytizing. In the game of ethno-racial identity, adherents wish to convince nonadherents that they are of this or that race or nation, that race or nation are master identities, and that they should embrace