BOOK REVIEWS

KENNETH PREWITT
What Is Your *Race? The Census and Our Flawed Efforts to Classify Americans*
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For much of American history, the measurement of race in population censuses and in other administrative statistics was straightforward. Race was assumed to be an "objective" characteristic that was readily observable and fixed at birth by biological inheritance. This is no longer the case. Most contemporary scholars claim that racial identities are influenced by socialization and context, in addition to ancestral origins and phenotype. Observed race (as seen through the eyes of others) is an even more problematic concept—with physical appearance, names, and ancestry providing only partial cues that may not be predictive of subjective identities.

Amidst the growing uncertainty, and often confusion, about the conceptualization and measurement of race (and ethnicity) in government statistics, in the 1970s the Office of Management and Budget attempted to clarify the situation with guidelines and procedures for collecting and tabulating race and ethnic data, only to issue a major revision with a different list of racial categories in the 1990s. A variety of "fixes"—including allowing persons to "mark 2 or more races" and adding an "other race" (none of the above) category—has only increased the problems of gathering and tabulating reliable and valid statistical data on a subjective trait that is still treated as an objective characteristic in the census, in most surveys, and in administrative records.

There is hardly any scholar or public figure better prepared to explain how we got into this conceptual morass than Kenneth Prewitt—the author of *What Is* Your *Race? The Census and Our Flawed Efforts to Classify Americans*. Prewitt is a wide-ranging political scientist who, in addition to writing influential books, has administered many large organizations, including the US Census Bureau from 1998 to 2001. Prewitt has written an ambitious book that includes an historical survey of the problems of measuring race and ethnicity in government statistics, the impact of "statistical races" (his term) on American society, and a detailed proposal for reforming the system.

Prewitt begins with a review of the evolution of the measurement of race in censuses from 1790 to the present and its relationship to political struggles over slavery, Jim Crow ("a term summarizing how the southern states, beginning in the 1880s, used law … to subordinate the black population"), mass immigration, the Civil Rights movement, and multiculturalism. The Constitutional compromise to count slaves as three-fifths of a person for purposes of representation and taxation was more than just a means to bring the Southern states into the Union (and assure Southern dominance of the federal government for many decades). The 1790 census question on civil status—slave versus free—soon evolved into an "official" classification of the American population by race. Defenders of slavery, and later of Jim Crow, added new questions and racial categories to nineteenth-century censuses to advance their political agenda. Asian national-origin populations were added as census racial categories late in that century.

Prewitt's historical survey becomes more complex in the Civil Rights era when race and ethnic data become deeply intertwined with policy deliberations to redress historical patterns of government-sanctioned segregation and discrimination. Prewitt identifies two "new" problems: the focus on "statistical proportionality" (by race/ethnicity) as the policy objective to eliminate the effects of discrimination; and the proliferation of race and ethnic categories. Historically, civil rights groups had sought to eliminate overt discrimination by advocating color-blind programs that allow minorities to be judged solely by their merit. Color blindness, however, was not effective in confronting "institutional discrimination" that had the effect, if not the intent, of minimizing (or eliminating) the presence of minorities in schools, workplaces, and neighborhoods. In the late 1960s and 1970s, many government agencies, universities, and businesses developed programs of affirmative action to address institutional discrimination. Prewitt characterizes affirmative action programs that use race and ethnic data as calls for "statistical proportionality"—specifically, that each group should be represented in proportion to their numbers in the overall population. He notes the widening inclusion of many minority groups, especially new immigrants and their children, as affirmative action programs were defined and implemented in the 1970s.

In subsequent chapters, Prewitt describes additional problems created by the proliferation and increasing prominence of race and ethnic data in American public life. For example, a technical issue about adjustments for the census undercount led to political polarization focused on the Census Bureau because of the potential implications for congressional representation by race and ethnic groups. He also cites the efforts of pharmaceutical companies, based on dubious biological differences between races, to market drugs for particular race and ethnic groups. The underlying problem, according to Prewitt, is that modest variations by phenotype and ancestry become hardened into races (and quasi-racial groups) by the official measurement and recognition in government statistics. Although most immigrant groups do not arrive with an American racial identity, their national origins have been added as quasi-racial groupings to census classification.

Finally, in the last chapters of the book, Prewitt offers a policy brief on how the United States might extricate itself from the untoward influences of race and ethnic data. His first recommendation is to delete the race and Hispanic-origin questions from the 2020 census (which will only include the traditional short-form census items). His principal argument is that race and ethnic data have become too intertwined with politics, and that the deletion of "statistical races" from the universal census would be an important symbolic step to depoliticize the statistical system. Moreover, Prewitt argues that race and ethic data without detailed socioeconomic data (which the census will no longer collect) do not offer a meaningful guide to public policy.

Prewitt recommends that race and ethnic data be included in the continuous American Community Survey, which has replaced the long-form census, but only for another 30 or 50 years. By the middle of the twenty-first century, Prewitt predicts, contemporary racial categories will no longer offer a useful description of an increasingly multiethnic mixed-race American population. In the interim, Prewitt recommends a single combined major race/Hispanic-origin question with a follow-up question that allows respondents to write in a specific race or origin. These are useful suggestions (which I have previously advocated) that should be considered independently of his overall recommendations to eventually eliminate the collection of race and ethnic data.

Prewitt deserves considerable credit for a thorough and thoughtful account of the many problems created by government collection of race and ethnic data. He makes a critical point that is sometimes lost in policy and academic discussions—that the official recognition of race and ethnicity by government agencies has sometimes reinforced beliefs that assume mutually exclusive divisions between groups. Moreover, he has offered an informed alternative to the present system that would be evolutionary rather than revolutionary.

I have some minor quibbles and a few serious concerns about Prewitt's analysis. The quibbles are about minor errors that detract from his overall thesis. For example, Emanuel Celler is reported to be Immanuel Cellar. Parental birthplace was first included in the 1870 census, not the 1890 census as Prewitt writes. Nor is his claim that Asians were prohibited from becoming citizens for much of American history completely accurate. Foreign-born Asians were indeed ineligible for naturalization, but Asians born in the United States were citizens (following adoption of the 14th Amendment in 1868).

My more serious reservation is about Prewitt's persistent claim that census data on race are a primary contributor to troubled race and ethnic relations, past and present. Throughout the book, the government is reified as a malevolent actor, whose construction of "statistical races" led to their misuse in politics and government policy. I would tend to put the shoe on the other foot: political actors often manipulate the collection, tabulation, and interpretation of census data on race to reinforce their self-interests and ideology. But I do agree with one of his basic points: namely that statistics, which have the aura of objectivity and science, can shape popular (mis)understanding, including how people see each other and how they choose to identify themselves.

I also believe Prewitt exaggerates the impact of affirmative action with his claims that civil rights groups have advocated for statistical proportionality and that all minority groups have become eligible for compensatory treatment. Of course, there are examples (and much political rhetoric) consistent with his interpretation, but the results of most affirmative action programs have only modestly increased the representation of qualified minorities, which has not had major adverse consequences for the educational and employment opportunities of whites. As Prewitt notes, courts, legislatures, and electorates have limited the impact of affirmative action. In the meantime, many African Americans and American Indians are being left behind as a result of institutional discrimination in dysfunctional schools, geographic and social barriers, and a punitive criminal justice system. Although most of the political actors who created slavery, Jim Crow, ghettos, and Indian reservations are gone, the impact of their actions has not disappeared. Collecting fewer data on race and ethnicity will not address these problems and could reduce the visibility of groups left behind.

Kenneth Prewitt presents a learned and serious case about how America's system of measuring race and ethnicity has been derailed and offers suggestions for what to do about it. In spite of my disagreements, I highly recommend *What Is* Your *Race?* The first test for all critics of race and ethnic measurement in American censuses is whether their analysis and recommendations improve upon Prewitt's. This will be a high bar to pass.

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