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INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

THERE WAS A RACIAL CLASSIFICATION SCHEME IN AMERICA'S FIRST CENSUS (1790), as there was in the next twenty-two censuses, which brings us to the present. Though the classification was altered in response to the political and intellectual fashions of the day, the underlying definition of America's racial hierarchy never escaped its origins in the eighteenth-century. Even the enormous changing of the racial landscape in the civil rights era failed to challenge a dysfunctional classification, though it did bend it to new purposes. Nor has the demographic upheaval of our present time led to much fresh thinking about how to measure America. It is, finally, time to escape that past. Twenty-first-century statistics should not be governed by race thinking that is two and a half centuries out of date. They poorly serve the nation, especially how it understands and manages the color line and the nativity line—what separates us as races and what separates us as native born and foreign born.

WHAT ARE STATISTICAL RACES?

On April 1, 2010, the American population numbered more than 308 million. When the Census Bureau finished with its decade population count it hurried to inform the president and the Congress how many of those 308 million Americans resided in each of our fifty states. The nation requires this basic fact to reapportion congressional seats and electoral college votes, allowing America's representative democracy to work according to its constitutional design (see chapter 2).

Immediately after this most basic population fact was announced, the Census Bureau told us how many of the 308 million Americans

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belonged to one of these five races: White, African American, American Indian, Asian, Native Hawaiian. The bureau reported that a few million Americans belonged to not just one of these five but to two or more. Simultaneously, the bureau reported how many Americans were Hispanics—which, the government insists, is not a race at all but an ethnic group. Incidentally, not all Hispanics got that message, because about half of them filled in a census line allowing Americans to say they belonged to “some other race.” Hispanics, however, are not a race. Hispanics are expected to be Hispanics *and also* to self-identify as one or more of the five major race groups listed above (this is explained in chapter 6).

What perhaps puzzles the reader is why race statistics are so terribly important that they are publicly announced simultaneously with the population figures mandated for reapportionment. You may also be puzzled that the census form (fig. 1) dedicates so much of its space to the race and Hispanic question but has no space for education, health, employment, or marital status questions. Are such matters less important than the country’s racial profile? We will examine such puzzles. It is important that we do so because the race and Hispanic questions used in the census have a very long reach. A version of these questions is used in hundreds of government surveys—federal, state, and local—and in official administrative record keeping that captures traits of Americans from the moment of birth to their death: vital statistics, military records, and education and health data. Further, because the statistics resulting from a voracious appetite for information in our modern nation-state are embedded in law, regulations, and policies, there are thousands of private-sector institutions—universities, hospitals, corporations, voluntary organizations—doing business with the government that collect matching race statistics.

America has *statistical races*. What they are, how we got them, how we use them, and whether today we want or need them are questions that shape this book. America’s statistical races are not accidents of history. They have been deliberately constructed and reconstructed by the government. They are tools of government, with political purposes and policy consequences—more so even than the biological races of the nineteenth century or the socially constructed races from twentieth-century anthropology or what are termed *identity races* in our current times. Whether these biological, socially constructed, or identity races are “real” is a serious matter, but they are of interest in this book only as they condition what the government defines as our statistical races.

What, specifically, are statistical races? Organized counting of any kind—and certainly a census is organized counting—requires counters



→ **NOTE:** Please answer BOTH Question 8 about Hispanic origin and Question 9 about race. For this census, Hispanic origins are not races.

8. Is Person 1 of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin?

- ☐ No, not of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin
- ☐ Yes, Mexican, Mexican Am., Chicano
- ☐ Yes, Puerto Rican
- ☐ Yes, Cuban
- ☐ Yes, another Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin — *Print origin, for example, Argentinean, Colombian, Dominican, Nicaraguan, Salvadoran, Spaniard, and so on.* ↗

9. What is Person 1's race? Mark ☒ one or more boxes.

- ☐ White
- ☐ Black, African Am., or Negro
- ☐ American Indian or Alaska Native — *Print name of enrolled or principal tribe.* ↗

- | | | |
|---|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Asian Indian | <input type="checkbox"/> Japanese | <input type="checkbox"/> Native Hawaiian |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Chinese | <input type="checkbox"/> Korean | <input type="checkbox"/> Guamanian or Chamorro |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Filipino | <input type="checkbox"/> Vietnamese | <input type="checkbox"/> Samoan |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Other Asian — <i>Print race, for example, Hmong, Laotian, Thai, Pakistani, Cambodian, and so on.</i> ↗ | <input type="checkbox"/> Other Pacific Islander — <i>Print race, for example, Fijian, Tongan, and so on.</i> ↗ | |

- ☐ Some other race — *Print race.* ↗

Figure 1. Ethnic and racial categories on the 2010 census form.

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to know what they are counting, which in turn depends on a classification scheme. Statistical races are by-products of the categories used in the government's racial classification. And what do the actual 2010 census categories produce? Though you cannot easily tell by looking at the census form, the categories are designed to produce two statistical ethnicities and five statistical races. The ethnicities are Hispanic and Non Hispanic, though this is not evident from a question in which the term *ethnicity* does not appear. The five statistical races are White, Black, American Indian, Asian, and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, which we will learn in chapter 2 directly derive from a color-based division of the world's population by eighteenth-century natural scientists—white, black, red, yellow, and brown. With these basics established, the census form then unleashes the combinations that result from the “mark one or more” instruction. We will see later how these many combinations *have not*, as yet, been used to make public policy. They became part of the census to fulfill expressive demands for recognition. Then there is whatever appears on the “some other” line, though again these counts do *not* become statistical races. So, whatever you think might be going on in these census questions, the political and policy intent is to count the Hispanics separately from everyone else, and to then sort every American, including Hispanics, into five primary races. When I use the term *statistical races*, it refers to these five groups plus the Hispanic ethnicity.

If you are now confused, you are on your way to understanding why I've written this book. That statistical races are real there is no doubt. Law courts, legislatures, executive agencies, media, election campaigns, advocacy groups, corporate planners, university admission offices, hospitals, employment agencies, and others endlessly talk about “how many” African Americans, Asians, Pacific Islanders, American Indians, Whites, and Hispanics there are—and how fast their numbers are growing, how many have jobs, graduate from high school, are in prison, serve in the military, are obese or smoke, own their homes, or marry each other.

If the statistical races are real and important, why does the census form fail to make that clear? In fact, if you take a closer look at the questions you will be even more confused. You should be perplexed that one census-designated race—White—is simply a color. Nothing else is said. The next race is a color, Black (and Negro, which is another way to say Black), but also a descent group—that is, Americans whose ancestors are from the African continent—and in some respects an “ethnicity” as well. Today's immigrants from Ghana or Ethiopia also go into that category. Then color drops out of the picture altogether. A civil status enters.

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American Indians/Alaska Natives belong to a race by virtue of tribal membership, which has a clear definition in American law; they can also belong to that race by declaring membership in a principal tribe, which is not a legal status but a self-identification. Look at the census question again. With Whites, Blacks, and Native Americans now listed, there follows a long list of nationality groups. If we read the question stem literally, each of these is a race. The Chinese, the Koreans, the Samoans are presented as if they are independent races. We are not, however, supposed to understand the question literally, but to understand that we become part of the Asian race or the Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander race by checking a national origin or writing one in. Oddly, however, the term *Asian* only incidentally appears in the question, defining persons from India in a way that doesn't confuse them with American Indians, and inviting write-in responses, where the examples listed are again nationality groups.

With this nationality nomenclature in mind you might look back at the question on Hispanic/Latino/Spanish origin (terms used interchangeably), where you will see that it is similarly constructed. There is no box indicating Hispanic, but several boxes labeled with nationalities and a write-in space again guided by nationality examples. In a nation famous for its ethnic diversity, you might now be asking, is the census telling us that there are only two ethnic groups that matter (Hispanic and non-Hispanic) while ignoring all white European national origin groups (Swedes, Germans, Italians, Irish, Poles, and Russians, among others)? It seems so.

It's hard to find the underlying rationale for what appears, and what doesn't, in these two ethnoracial questions. We will discuss in detail the absence of a coherent rationale. As an astute scholar has written, the Census Bureau "has no choice but to rely on incoherent categories if it hopes to measure race in the United States" because, he continues, "race arises out of (fundamentally irrational) social practices."¹ A large part of the story told in the chapters to follow explains how "incoherent categories" result in incoherent statistical races, which derive not only from social practices but equally from policy goals.

It matters if America measures races, and then, of course, how the government decides what those races are. It matters because law and policy are not about an abstraction called *race* but are about races *as they are made intelligible* and acquire their numerical size in our statistical system. When we politically ask why black men are jailed at extraordinarily high rates, whether undocumented Mexican laborers are taking jobs away from working-class whites, or whether Asians have become the model minority in America, we start from a count of jailed blacks, the

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comparative employment patterns of Mexicans and whites, and Asian educational achievements. When our political questions are shaped by how many of which races are doing what, and when policies addressing those conditions follow, we should worry about whether the “how many” and the “which races” tell us what we need to know about what is going on in our polity, economy, and society. We should worry about whether we should have *statistical races* at all, and if so, whether we have the right ones. My answer, worked out in chapter 11, argues for incrementally transforming our racial statistics in order to match them with the governing challenges of the twenty-first century. This argument, and the tactical advice offered to realize it, makes sense only in the context of a historical account of statistical races.

Chapter 2 starts with basics that frame this American history. A German doctor in 1776 divided the human species into five races. Today, nearly two and a half centuries later, these are the same five races into which the U.S. Census divides the American population, making America the only country in the world firmly wedded to an eighteenth-century racial taxonomy. Embedded in this science were theories of a racial hierarchy: there were not just different races but superior and inferior races. American politics and policy held onto this assumption for nearly two centuries.

The next section covers the nineteenth century, showing how assumptions of racial superiority and inferiority tightly bound together statistical races, social science, and public policy.

POLICY, STATISTICS, AND SCIENCE JOIN FORCES

The starting point—as is true of many features of American government—takes us to constitutional language (chapter 3). The U.S. Constitution required a census of the white, the black, and the red races.² The founders faced an extraordinary challenge—how to join the original thirteen colonies into a republic of “united states.” They met this challenge with a political compromise that brought slaveholding states into the Union. Without this *statistical* compromise there would not have been a United States as we know it today. In the early censuses slaves were counted as three-fifths of a person, a ratio demanded by slaveholder interests as the price of joining the Union. Holding their noses, the northern states agreed. A deep policy disagreement at the moment of founding the nation was resolved in the deliberate creation of a statistical race. In this case, the policy need shaped the statistical practice.

Later in American history the reverse frequently occurred. Specific policies—affirmative action, for example—took the shape they did *because* the statistical races were already at hand. One of my major arguments,

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especially starting with chapter 8, is that we should learn a lesson from the founding period: start with agreement on public purposes and then design suitable statistics to meet policy challenges. Without clarity on *why* the nation should measure race, clarity on *what* to measure is impossible.

The political understanding in the nineteenth century that counting the population by race could do nationally significant policy work led naturally to a close partnership between race science and census statistics, setting the stage for what 150 years later we call *evidence-based policy*. It's a fascinating if also depressing story, resting as it does on the near universal assumption that there is a biologically determined racial hierarchy: whites at the top, blacks at the bottom, with the yellow, red, and brown races arrayed between. Chapter 4 tells the race science story, giving emphasis to features that mark American history to the present day. Among the more important was the shift from simply counting races, as was needed to make the three-fifths policy work, to investigating characteristics considered unique to different races. The policy goal was to determine who was fit for citizenship responsibilities: whites, certainly; the American Indian, probably not; the African, clearly not. The statistical races helped fix the color line in American politics, essentially drawing policy boundaries that gradually governed all aspects of life: schooling, housing, employment, marriage, travel, and—of course—political participation.

Drawing internal policy boundaries became more pressing when the Civil War ended slavery and presented the specter of four million free blacks in the society. Starting in the 1880s, the Jim Crow racial order sustained the color line initially put in place for slaveholders. Yet more complicated boundaries were drawn with the arrival of Chinese labor to the mines and fields of the western states in the mid-nineteenth century, and later in the century when massive flows of immigrants from southern and central Europe arrived as labor for the eastern states' factories. Chapter 5 covers how America continually readjusted its color line when the economy's need for workers resulted in immigration-driven population growth but the polity required a monopoly of power in the hands of the "right" whites—that is, European Protestants.

In the stressful half century starting with the Civil War, the social sciences entered the scene. Their methods and theories joined with the great resource of national census statistics lent the authority of a new science to the policy choices of the day, a *social* science that gradually displaced the biologically based race science popular earlier in the nineteenth century. In ways familiar to us today, the social sciences embraced the statistical races as a key to informing policy makers across a broad range of issues including, early in the twentieth century, stopping the flow of the

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“wrong” European immigrants—Catholic and Jewish—without interfering with immigration from the ancestral Protestant Europe. Statistical races at the time reflected assumptions of a color line but also of a nativity line, that drawn between the native born and the foreign born.

WHEN YOU HAVE A HAMMER, EVERYTHING LOOKS LIKE A NAIL

The nation’s statistical races were four as the twentieth century arrived: European White, African Black, American Indian Red, and Asian Yellow. They were put to policy work in restricting immigration in the 1920s and for racial segregation more generally until the civil rights challenge dramatically arrived in the 1960s. The simple version of what then happened, recounted in chapter 6, is how a policy instrument used to politically, economically, and socially *exclude* since the nation’s founding made a 180-degree turn and was used to *include* the racial groups historically sent to the back of the bus—both literally and figuratively. It is a story of how proactive policies of racial justice were shaped with racial statistics never intended for the policy uses to which they were put. But the fit made sense. The policy tool—statistical races—could be shaped to match the policy goal of racial justice. It also made sense given the greater effectiveness of the Census Bureau at measuring population characteristics, and the availability of the social sciences to advise policy design at levels of detail previously unimagined.

Chapter 7 uses the metaphor “when you have a hammer...” to underscore that racial statistics can be misused by converting an issue or policy that is not about race into one inappropriately racialized. The first example is a census strategy to improve measurement of hard-to-count population groups. The second example, the case of genetic medicine, is more complicated and substantially more consequential. The statistical races now deeply embedded in American politics and culture are convenient shorthand for asking whether better health might be provided if treatment and medicines are targeted to the government’s official race groups, thereby treating those groups as biological and not just statistical realities. The possible damage from this serious mismatch of the hammer at hand to the nail in view forces us to ask whether that is not reason enough to get rid of the hammer altogether.

THE STATISTICAL RACES UNDER PRESSURE, AND A FRESH RATIONALE

Chapter 8 brings us closer to the present, introducing pressures that challenge the role of statistical races in today’s policy environment. One

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pressure is *multiraciality* as exemplified in the “mark one or more” census option introduced in 2000. This option is a profound criticism of two centuries of American racial counting. There are not three or four or five races, each in its own census box; there are multiple combinations, permutations, mixtures. Millions of young Americans know and accept this, and they are increasingly impatient with a census that isn’t better at recognizing it. A second pressure pulling in a similar direction is *diversity* as a policy goal, now widely embraced from the military to the corporation to the university. The complexities of the diversity agenda destabilize the racial classification. The third pressure is the *color-blind* movement. This is in response to the *dilemma of recognition*, a phrase indicating that making race groups beneficiaries of policy can itself intensify group identities. There is strong political sentiment that this contradicts basic American individualistic values—freedom, choice, mobility, and merit-earned rewards. In dismay over racial group-based policy, opponents are advancing color-blind proposals in law and politics.

These three pressures weaken the hold of statistical races and in so doing open up political space for fresh thinking about racial measurement. The founders confronted a policy issue of great consequence—the scope of the “united states” they were establishing—and then designed a simple statistical tool to ensure that the slaveholding South would join the Republic. Today’s question is not dissimilar: What kind of United States will we become as the population inexorably shifts its racial center of gravity? What statistics are needed to understand and manage this shift?

Chapter 9 argues that the center of gravity is shifting because of an intricate interplay between America’s color line and its nativity line. We use the color line concept to ask whether America has the right policy tools to fully erase the line that separated whites and racial minorities throughout America’s history. We use the nativity line concept to ask whether America has the right policy tools to steer the nation toward the full integration of peoples now arriving from every world region. America’s future is the future of these lines. If they merge—if immigrants are racialized—the future sadly repeats America’s past. If, instead, America’s population becomes so diverse and multiracial that the color line disappears, an altogether different future is in store, perhaps the promised postracial society. It is certain that millions of new Americans and their children will navigate the line between native born and foreign born. Not certain is whether this social process will strengthen or weaken a color line inherited from the eighteenth century, strengthened across the next century and a half, and then challenged but not fully erased by the civil rights movement of the mid-twentieth century.

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The statistics needed to understand the dynamic interplay between the color line and the nativity line are not the ones we have. Chapter 9 offers a rationale for discarding today's statistical races, replacing them with a twenty-first-century architecture for a twenty-first-century challenge.

WHAT WE HAVE IS NOT WHAT WE NEED

At this point in the book I become an advocate for very specific changes in the census race and ethnic questions. The strategy I recommend depends on a close understanding of the political and technical landscape. Important technical details are presented in chapter 10. It is often the fine print that has to be changed to bring about change. In the case of census race questions the fine print is knowing exactly what is being asked by the Census Bureau, when it is asked, and on which of its many different surveys. Ignore this detail and the policy victory fades from view. Grasp it and a winning strategy can be shaped.

I do not underestimate the difficulty. Powerful political constituencies are wedded to the current statistical races, especially the well-organized African Americans and Hispanics. Commercial interests are organized around familiar race data, which they use for product placement and location of retail outlets. These and other sources of resistance contribute to what social science describes as the self-reinforcing tendencies of political and social institutions. Against these obstacles are aligned the pressures for change outlined in chapter 8 and, what I hope is obvious, the inability of today's statistical races to offer knowledge that can guide the nation as it faces the challenges of the color line and the nativity line.

Chapter 11 is about what, specifically, to change and how, specifically, to change it. The argument rests on several premises. Politics and policy don't like abrupt change, therefore introduce incremental modifications. Racial statistics create as well as reflect realities, therefore use the census to shape selected "realities" critical to effective use of racial statistics in the twenty-first century. Every generation opens up fresh possibilities, therefore design a strategy that takes advantage of generational turnover. Immigrants are much more likely to see themselves through a national origin lens than a racial lens, therefore add a fuller national origin dimension into America's statistics. Immigrant assimilation was not a major policy issue a half-century ago (when today's statistical races were firmly put in place), therefore add a second-generation question to the census.

Many of the specifics I recommend will be sharply criticized by friends and colleagues with whom I debated these issues in recent years. My question: Do you want the 2010 census question (see figure 1) to

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remain as it is for the rest of the twenty-first century? If so, defend it. (That won't be easy.) If not, offer a better version than the one I endorse, but it should meet two criteria: It must be technically feasible—that is, it has to work in the census environment. And it must be politically acceptable to the Congress—which, as the Constitution makes clear, controls the content of the census.³ I have kept these criteria in mind. This book is written not as an academic exercise but as a policy brief.