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Jon Michael Spencer. *The New Colored People: The Mixed-Race Movement in America.* New York: New York University Press, 1997. xvi + 214 pp. $24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8147-8071-8.

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The Census, Race, and

Amid a racial climate which includes a presidential advisory board on race and a discussion of slavery within the popular media, there lies an increasingly prominent dialogue on race in American culture. As the United States nears its next federal census in the year 2000, many Americans have expressed dissatisfaction with the accuracy of the current four categories of white, black, Asian and Pacific Islander, and American Indian or Alaskan Native. Some observers have supported the addition of a "multiracial" category where others, such as historian Orlando Patterson, have criticized the continued existence of racial categories on the census as a "scientifically meaningless" and "politically dangerous" "Race Trap."[1]

One of the reasons why this debate resonates with so many Americans is that the discussion of race and public policy includes both the persistent belief that race is a fixed biological factor and the emerging notion of many scholars and policymakers that race is a fluid historical and sociopolitical construct. Acknowledging both perspectives, Jon Michael Spencer's *The New Colored People: The Mixed-Race Movement in America* is the latest scholarly contribution to this ongoing debate concerning the census and the possible use of the category "multiracial." Borrowing both the title and analytical framework from Joel Williamson's *New People: Miscegenation and Mulattoes in the United States* (1980), which focused on the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, Spencer offers a cautionary tale about a "multiracial" category in the contemporary United States.[2] He contends that without a "frank assessment of race" and the end of racism, such a category would be "politically naive" and even "suicidal" to black Americans (pp. 148,155).

While Spencer shares Williamson's astute perspective that the status of "mulattoes" or, to use Spencer's term, "multiracial" Americans, is an instructive index for race relations, his argument about the dangers of a new government-sanctioned racial category centers on a "cross-cultural analysis" of multiracial Americans and the coloured people of South Africa (p. 11). Building on the comparative work of historian George Fredrickson, the writings of coloured intellectuals such as Richard Van der Ross and Allan Boesak, and interviews with other "coloured nationalists," Spencer concludes that the creation of a coloured "middle status" under apartheid served to divide and oppress nonwhites by creating a buffer zone between white elites and the black masses (pp. xiii, 91).[3] The result was the continued oppression of South African blacks and a marginal status for coloured South Africans. Cognizant of the centrality of issues of personal identity in the current American debate, Spencer adds that the middle status robbed coloureds of the identity, esteem, and culture only possible through a unified black consciousness movement in more recent South Africa. Spencer's valuable contribution lies in his comparative analysis in which the tragedy of South African apartheid underscores the possible dangers in careless additions to America's racial landscape.

Of course, Spencer's concern is race relations in the United States, and he uses the poignant testimonies of multiracialists in recent years to trace the major arguments in favor of reclassification. From the Manassa Society which involved interracial marriages in the 1870's to more recent organizations such as the American Association of Multi-Ethnic Americans and Project RACE (Reclassify All Children Equally) in the 1990's, these and many other organizations challenged the persistence of the "one-drop" rule of racial classification and demanded, often in Congressional hearings, a new "multiracial" category. *The New Coloured People's* treatment of such perspectives reveals the complexity of racial identity and public policy in the United States as well as a host of related historical factors. Thus Spencer not only places the current debate within the historical context of the one-drop rule; he also suggests that the "narrow black nation-

alism" and "Afrocentrism" of more recent decades have contributed to many blacks with mixed ancestry perceiving themselves as less than black and in need of a multiracial category (pp. 28, 33).

While Spencer is sympathetic to calls for "more racial tolerance of those who wish to embrace multiple ethnicities," *The New Coloured People* argues that the one-drop rule of racial classification represented not just a familiar tool for racial oppression by the dominant white society, but also the core of a liberating and empowering black consciousness throughout much of American history (p. 92).

In a mostly speculative chapter which may leave many historians uncomfortable, Spencer suggests that a "multiracial" category in American society would be "retrogressive" and result in increased "racial polarization" (pp. 93, 102). Spencer's claims are less constrained by the historical realities of either the United States or South Africa when suggesting the future of American society with a multiracial category. Thus, he offers such provocative possibilities as whites appropriating black elites from the black community and borrowing aspects of black culture such as music and black religion to construct an "American apartheid" (p. 99). Reminding us of the failure of whites in South Africa and Brazil to alter the racial hierarchy in the face of efforts to improve civil rights, Spencer is as suspicious of the motives of American multiracialists as he is the dominant white culture's often fragile commitment to racial equality and justice. As a result, he offers a passionate plea for a one-drop black consciousness and racial solidarity until dramatic improvements in civil rights offer a less risky opportunity for racial justice (p. 165).

As provocative as Spencer's comparative analysis is, one wonders how useful the experience of South Africa is for historians or current policymakers grappling with the history and future of American race relations. Although the parallels are instructive and Spencer concedes important differences between the two societies, the author's use of South Africa and the experiences of coloured South Africans also perpetuates the misperceptions of many Americans that race is simply a matter of black and white. This misperception is even more troubling when one considers that regardless of past trends, immigration from Europe and Africa now pales compared to the substantial numbers of American immigrants from Latin America and Asia. Published in 1981, George Fredrickson's comparative history, which stressed the contribution of U.S. race relations after the Civil Rights Movement to South Africa under apartheid, prompted the question by one reviewer, "can the American experience offer to South Africa anything very much more than tactical suggestions?"[4] As the Los Angeles airport replaces Ellis Island as the center of immigration and American society increasingly challenges our binary notion of race, Spencer's analysis begs the question, how much will the experiences of South Africa be able to offer the United States's public policy in the twenty-first century?

The New Colored People also appears outdated in its adherence to a largely essentialist notion of race. In attempting to answer Joel Williamson's question in 1980 about the future role of "mulattoes" in American society, Spencer accepts Williamson's idea that multiracialists are indeed a "New People" occupying an unprecedented biological and cultural position between supposedly pure white and black races. Although Spencer concedes early in the book that race is a social construct, the remainder of his work includes numerous statements that suggest otherwise. For example, the author claims that "at least 75% of the black population" in the United States is multiracial and that some multiracialists (the category itself is problematic) are troubled by their inability to claim a "pure" race (p. xii). This implies that many Americans, indeed all Americans except for the children of "interracial" couples, are racially pure. Hence, Spencer appears to support Williamson's view of mulitracialists as indeed a "New People" because of their unique "culture that is both African and European, each transformed in America and married to one another."[5] The same could be said of the majority of Americans, regardless of census data.

Spencer's analysis reinforces what historian Orlando Patterson has called "our biggest myth"–the notion that race is an objective and "valid classification."[6] In quoting American policymakers and South Africans troubled with the current status of the census, Spencer suggests the census has somehow become "artificial," arbitrary, and in the words of Thomas Sawyer, a U.S. Congressmen, "an illusion of specificity" (pp. 92, 140).

>From this perspective, the census, which has always been an imperfect and arbitrary attempt to measure a vastly more complex American society, only becomes inaccurate due to recent miscegenation. Furthermore, most of *The New Colored People* suggests that only blacks have mixed ancestry and that the classification "white" remains pure with the few notable exceptions of Arabs and Jews. Indeed, his references to whites sharing a multiethnic ancestry come only in the last thirteen pages. Thus his claims that "Americans of interracial parentage are people of multiple ethnicities" and the

"identities may fluctuate for mixed-race people" ignore the history of how many diverse groups in American history such as Irish and Italian-Americans became "white" despite facing tremendous hostility and discrimination (pp. 28, 133). His conclusion that blacks and multiracialists should maintain racial solidarity until the dominant white culture is more receptive to racial equality and the ideal of "nonracialism" requires an appreciation for how whiteness has been and continues to be constructed in American society. Recognizing that race is a process rather than a given does not diminish its importance, but instead illuminates how power has and continues to be created and sustained in American culture.

Finally, *The New Colored People* also suffers from a reliance of elite sources, such as multiracial organizations and individuals testifying before Congress. Therefore, Spencer's use of such terms as "multiracialist camp" and "white groups" and his reference to arguments that there is "no broad based movement consisting of biracial/multiracial people" raise serious questions about the extent of this multiracial movement (pp. 82, 6, 88). One is left wondering about the perspectives of millions of Americans–precisely the groups and individuals who will comprise the majority of census respondents–concerning this elite debate waged in the halls of Congress. Of course, Spencer shares the contention that the movement represents a dangerous effort of elites. Regardless, his arguments as to the future peril to blacks and the nation if a new category is added demands an exploration of the relationship between the perspectives of elites and non-elites. After all, Spencer's arguments are all the more compelling if one can no longer dismiss the issue as a trivial bureaucratic debate that emerges and fades every ten years.

Perhaps one of the reasons Spencer fails to widen his analysis beyond elites is his appeal for black unity and racial consciousness. As a result, he presents black Americans as a monolithic entity with few significant differences in class, region, religion, age, gender, and skin color. His overstatement of a single, unified black community leads to apparent contradictions, such as his claim that interracial couples have often been welcomed by the black community while referring later to blacks' "rather tight-fisted position on interracial marriage" (p. 160). Furthermore, his discussion of race in Brazil and South Africa stresses the "color hierarchy" and the hegemony of lighter skin as possible problems in the United States (p. 125). Unfortunately, these and other divisive tendencies have been alive and well among twentieth-century blacks, with or without the one-drop rule and an imperfect census. In an attempt to emphasize the need for racial solidarity, Spencer risks reducing the complexity of American culture to simplistic census categories.

These criticisms aside, *The New Colored People* remains a valuable and provocative contribution to the discussion of race, identity, and public policy in the United States. Spencer's comparative analysis of race relations in South Africa and the United States, although imperfect, encourages a much needed global perspective. Moreover, Spencer's survey of multiple perspectives on race and his argument against a new "multiracial" category should eclipse the immediate issue of the census and inform future discussions of race in American society.

Notes

[1]. Orlando Patterson, "Race Trap," *New York Times*, July 11, 1997, 27.

[2]. Joel Williamson, *New People: Miscegenation and Mulattoes in the United States* (New York: Free Press, 1980).

[3]. George Fredrickson,*White Supremacy: A Comparative Study in American and South African History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981) and *Black Liberation: Comparative History of Black Ideologies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

[4]. Robert I. Rotberg, "Two Societies: Both Unfree," in *Reviews in American History*, March 1982, 1-6.

[5]. Williamson, xi.

[6]. Patterson.

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