

Paul Schor. *Counting Americans: How the US Census Classified the Nation.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017. 376 pp. \$74.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-991785-3.

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Census Classifications

According to recent press reports, chronic underfunding and unfilled top administrative posts at the US Census Bureau have experts worried the bureau may not be adequately prepared for the 2020 census, the first to be conducted largely online rather than by post or in person. In addition, civil libertarians worry the Trump administration's heated rhetoric on immigrants and border security will make it harder to count certain minorities and undocumented immigrants. This strange interplay of technologically-driven statistical innovation, partisan politics, and the Constitutional mandate to count the US population every ten years (for purposes of taxation and representation) is nothing new to students of the US Census. After reading French historian Paul Schor's new book, *Counting Americans*, one might even be tempted to say, "plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose."

Schor's book, previously published as *Compter et Classer: Histoire des Recensements* in France in 2009, has been revised by the author and expertly translated into English by Lys Ann Weiss for this Oxford University Press 2017 edition. The French edition was the 2011 winner of the Willi Paul Adams Award from the Organization of American Historians. Schor's stated purpose is to study in

depth some of the population categories constructed by the US Census from its beginning in 1790 through 1940 by tracing the evolution of certain racial and ethnic categories over time. By far the greatest attention is paid to how the Census Bureau counted and classified Americans of African descent through the years. He also pays close attention to how other minority immigrant groups were classified and incorporated into the census of population over time.

As might be expected, *Counting Americans* is organized chronologically by census year. The census of 1790 consisted of just five questions, ascertaining the number of free white males age sixteen and over (those eligible to serve in state militia), those white males under that age, all free white females regardless of age, all other free persons, and the number of slaves (counted three-fifths for purposes of representation and taxation). By 1840 the census questionnaire, now under the supervision of a full-time director, had grown to seventy-four questions, and would continue to expand in size and scope from there. Schor divides his historical survey into four sub-periods: the foundation and early years from 1790 to 1840; the period 1850-60 when the issue of race predominates and a special questionnaire is added for

slaves; the years 1870-90 in which immigration and territorial expansion lead to the creation of new racial categories, while the classification of non-white native-born Americans continues to evolve; and finally 1900-40 as the Census Bureau gains greater autonomy, modernizes in methods and employee diversity, and is buffeted political and community pressures regarding ethnic identity.

One way to read Shor's new book is as a standard history of the decennial census of population in the United States, and there is plenty of meat there to satisfy the most voracious "clio-vore." This reading will appeal especially to social scientists, who, like this reviewer, have made use of postwar census data in their own work, but are likely to know little of the fascinating history and evolution of the Census Bureau's own development and its ever-changing questionnaires and published reports from earlier times. A number of years ago, this reviewer grappled with the impact of changes in how the Census Bureau counted and classified same-sex couples between its 1990 and 2000 counts, due to prohibitions stemming from the 1996 Defense of Marriage Act. The historical parallel to how the Census Bureau constantly redefined its own classification and count of African Americans is quite striking. Other readers will see parallels to the bureau's changing treatment of gender, a topic Shor might have been expected to focus on in far greater depth; instead, the book devotes just one short chapter to women as Census Bureau employees in the first half of the twentieth century.

Although the topic of gender is largely absent from the book, race takes center stage. As Shor observes in his concluding chapter, race may well be a social construct, but "it seemed that there was a need for a close examination of [its] construction" (p. 174). Ironically, neither slavery nor skin color is mentioned explicitly in the US Constitution's mandate for a decennial enumeration of the population (article 1, section 2, paragraph 3), instead referring to black slaves as "all other Persons" who are neither free persons nor Indians. Despite this,

the 1790 census questionnaire does ask enumerators for an explicit count of "free white persons" and of "slaves," but makes no other explicit mention of color. The 1820 census was the first to use the term "black" on its questionnaire, separating free blacks from slaves, a classification that would continue through 1840. Shor devotes considerable attention to the census of 1840, whose results were immediately controversial. At issue was the count of "insane persons or idiots by color." Initial results showed a much higher incidence of insanity for free blacks in the North than for slaves in the South, a result quickly embraced by slavery's advocates who argued that freedom was not a healthy lifestyle for former slaves. Within two years, scholars from the newly emerging field of statistics were able to demonstrate that reporting errors in the North accounted for these discrepancies, although slavery's staunchest supporters were never fully satisfied nor silenced.

The census of 1850 introduced separate questionnaires for free persons and for slaves; while free persons were listed by name, slaves were identified only by number, following a lengthy, heated, and demeaning debate in Congress. For the first time, there were two possible color responses for slaves—"black" and "mulatto." Mulatto was not defined explicitly in any Census Bureau documentation until 1870; prior to that, its classification was decided by observation and at the discretion of individual census takers, and as might be expected, its prevalence varied widely by region and by enumerator. As of the 1870 census, mulatto "is here generic, and includes quadroons and octoroons, and all persons having any perceptible trace of African blood" (p. 103). Shor claims that this marks the Census Bureau's first use of the "one drop rule," a designation common in the South. Census documents went on to instruct enumerators that "important scientific results depend upon the correct determination of this class" (p. 103). Behind this ominous warning, according to Shor, lurked the shadows of "polygenism" (the belief that black and white races were fundamentally differ-

ent species), which had begun to transform itself into a uniquely American form of Darwinism known as “scientific racism” (blacks and whites may be the same species, but at different stages of development). Ironically, ten years later, the 1880 census report (unlike its questionnaire) did not distinguish mulattos from other blacks in its published tables but combined the two into the “colored population.”

Scientific racism reached its peak in the infamous census of 1890 which, mandated by congressional legislation of May 1889 pushed by southern Democrats, instructed enumerators to divide the black (but not the white) population into four subgroups: blacks (persons who have three-fourths or more black blood); mulattos (three-eighths to five-eighths black blood); quadroons (one-fourth black blood); and octoroons (one-eighth or any trace of black blood). Shor argues that the fundamental principle behind this racial classification and manifested in southern miscegenation laws, was that of “hypodescent,” the belief that there is only one pure race, the white race, and that all persons who were the product of racial mixing could never be attached to that superior race. Despite congressional mandate, the Census Bureau would publish only two tables dividing the black population into these four subgroups and took every opportunity to stress that “these figures are of little value ... [and] as an indication of the extent to which the races have mingled, they are misleading” (p. 110). Shor claims that the Census Bureau was “motivated by practical considerations rather than ideological concerns” (p. 112), but nevertheless its reservations were sufficiently strong that it completely dropped any subdivision of blacks, even the category mulatto, from the census of 1900. The term “mulatto” reappeared in 1910 (again mandated by Congress) and took its final bow in the 1920 questionnaire.

The twentieth century brought changes and modernization to the Census Bureau. In 1902 the bureau became part of the Department of Com-

merce and added its first permanent employees. Two years later it would issue its first major publication exclusively devoted to the study of the economic progress of the black population entitled *Negroes in the United States*, conceived and authored by white economist Walter Willcox and black sociologist W. E. B. Du Bois. Subsequent volumes followed, many under the direction of Charles E. Hall, a long-serving black Census Bureau employee, who was tapped to head the bureau’s new section on Negro statistics. Under Hall, the Bureau hired additional black census takers, albeit assigned to predominantly black or immigrant neighborhoods, and employed black female clerks who were relegated to segregated office toilets at the request of their white female counterparts. Shor argues the increasing use over this period of the term “Negro,” explicitly defined in a 1932 report as “all persons having any proportion of Negro blood” was the ultimate affirmation of the “one drop rule,” and an acknowledgement by the bureau that its racial categories were as much cultural and social as biological (p. 167). And finally, he opines, the “one drop rule” had certain merits in its simplicity, was ironically compatible with the most racist legislation of the period, and had even been “internalized by American blacks, by endogamy and by identification with the group” (p. 168).

Schor devotes almost as much ink to tracing the historical evolution of the Census Bureau’s classification of ethnicity/nationality as he does to race, but to this reader, this part of his story appears less focused or coherent. The 1830 census was the first to distinguish “non-naturalized” foreigners among the white population. American Indians remained uncoun-
 ted (as they were untaxed) until 1850, when “Indian” becomes a color choice to identify those Native Americans who exercised the right of citizenship by renouncing tribal rule. Chinese was added as a racial category in 1870 and Japanese in 1890, thereby confounding nationality with race. Three more nationalities posing as races would be added in 1920: “Filipino,” “Hindu,” and

“Korean.” The 1850 census was the first to ask an individual’s place of birth. Birthplaces of parents were added by degree in 1870 and 1880. The census of 1910 was the first to inquire about “mother tongue.” As might be expected, many of these new census questions were motivated by the politics of immigration, especially from advocates of immigration restriction who feared the white race was in danger of becoming a minority. Equally strong in this push for the greater emphasis and finer classification of ethnic origin were many immigrant groups themselves, particularly eastern Europeans, interested in forming stronger community identities in their new home.

In studying the evolution of the statistical treatment of immigration and ethnic origin, Schor strives to integrate this story with how the Census Bureau treated race. As he states: “the ‘one drop rule’ not only determined the operation of the categories of white and black, but also affected other racial categories (those the census called ‘minor races’) and even, in a weaker form, the treatment of foreign origin” (p. 276). This reviewer remains largely unconvinced by this particular argument, finding nothing as poignant in the Census Bureau’s ethnic classification to compare with its sad and shameful treatment of African Americans. Where Schor may be on strongest footing with this thesis is in his description of the statistical challenges encountered with the strong degree of racial mixing found in the US territories of the Virgin Islands, Puerto Rico, and Hawaii following their acquisition in 1898. In the Virgin Islands, the local population strongly rejected the “one drop rule” in favor of a new racial category, “Mixed,” for persons of “mixed white and Negro blood.” Given prevailing attitudes in Puerto Rico, persons of mixed race were usually classified as white. And in Hawaii, with a long history of racial mixing and the absence of any majority group, race was said to be a foreign concept.

The most surprising choice Schor makes, in the eyes of this reviewer, is his decision to stop his sto-

ry after 1940. The author’s stated justification for this is that social scientists now routinely study racial and ethnic classifications using data from postwar censuses “while the history of the formation of these categories up to 1940 has not received even a fraction of this attention” (pp. 11-12). However, as even the author himself acknowledges, these racial and ethnic categories did not stop evolving after 1940. In 1970 the Census Bureau introduced self-identification of race; prior to that, racial categorization was left up to the discretion of the census taker. And in 2000, for the first time, the Census Bureau allowed multiple racial boxes to be checked. In terms of ethnicity, immigration reform in 1965 brought renewed interest and emphasis on questions of nativity, ethnic identity, language, and assimilation. Even a single chapter devoted to the story of the causes and effects of these changes in identity categorization would have been a welcome addition to what is an otherwise extremely useful and fascinating book.

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