Census and the complex issue of race.

by Ellis Cose

Racial classification have always been a part of the American culture. The country has pursued for the rejection of racial identification but, its laws still adhere to the notion of racial inequality.

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Racial classification has always been a serious - if maddeningly imprecise - business, determining who gets access to which wing of the American dream. Slave or freeman, citizen or alien. "Tell me your color," America proclaimed, "and I’ll tell you your place."

The nation has long outgrown the days when slavery was a color-coded calling and naturalization was restricted to "aliens being free white persons," but the legacy of color consciousness remains. Too often our culture embraces the notion - even as our laws reject it - that all races are not equal. Nowhere is that assumption more apparent than in our accepted definition of race. For whereas one drop of "black blood" is generally considered sufficient to render one black, whiteness is not so easily bestowed.

Many people are now suggesting that the time has come to reject racial definitions rooted in slavery (and in the drive to re-create a sharp black-white divide that miscegenation had, in some respects, erased). Isn’t it time, some critics ask, to rethink, and perhaps dismantle, a racial categorization system whose primary function is to separate and divide? What’s the point, they ask, in forcing people into black, white, yellow, or red boxes that cannot possibly accommodate America’s growing racial diversity, particularly when the black box is fundamentally different from the others, carries the full baggage of slavery, and defies all common sense? Why, they ask in effect, must a person with any degree of black African ancestry be forced to pretend that no other racial heritage counts?

The questions come most insistently and most urgently from those who make up what has been dubbed the "multiracial movement" and who resent being asked to deny a major part of who they are. Though the issue of racial classification is important to multiracial persons of all conceivable backgrounds, it has assumed a particular importance for those whose heritage is, to some degree, black. For unlike Americans of other races, blacks have largely been defined by the so-called one-drop rule: the presumption that a small percentage of black ancestry effectively cancels out any other racial claim.

Sorting out the matter of racial identification is not the only, or even the most important, task facing the U.S. Bureau of the Census as the decennial census approaches. Correcting the chronic undercounting of certain groups is, in some sense, a larger problem. But the issue of racial categorization may well be the most explosive issue on the table. People have strong feelings about how they are grouped, particularly when it comes to race; and often people’s sense of where they belong is very different from the place where others tend to put them.

Race is such a subjective and squishy concept that there is no objective way of determining who is right. Moreover, as philosopher and artist Adrian Piper has observed: "The racial categories that purport to designate any of us are too rigid and oversimplified to fit anyone accurately." At a time when the very idea of racial categories is under assault, the Census Bureau is charged with carrying out what may well be an impossible task.

Piper’s own sense of the absurdity of America’s concepts of distinct racial groups arises from being a "black" person whom many people assume to be "white." She seemed so white to her third-grade private school teacher that the woman wondered whether Piper knew that she was black. Piper, of course, is only one of a long line of people who have found their appearance to be at odds with what America insisted that they were.

In 1983, for instance, an appeals court ruled that a Louisiana woman must accept a legal designation of black, though by all outward appearances she was white. The woman, Susie Guillory Phipps, who was then forty-nine, had lived her entire life as a white person. Upon hearing the court’s decision, she told a Washington Post reporter: "My children are white. My grandchildren are white. Mother and Daddy were buried white. My Social Security card says I’m white. My driver’s license says I’m white. There are no blacks out where I live, except the hired hands." Phipps had discovered that the state considered her black on obtaining a copy of her birth certificate in order to get a passport. Her attempt to change the designation eventually led her to court. A genealogist who testified for the state uncovered ancestors Phipps knew nothing about and calculated that she was 3/32 black. That was sufficient to make her black under a Louisiana law decreeing that a person who was as little as 1/32 black could not be considered white.

That Louisiana law was unique in this modern era in writing racial classifications into law, but the acceptance of the notion that "black" encompasses virtually everyone with black African ancestry is widespread. It is embodied not only in census data but in civil rights law. Consequently, many people who care about such laws find
the matter of re-examining racial categories (especially of who belongs in the "black" category) to be unsettling.

Not that anyone believes that the current categories - spelled out in Office of Management and Budget Directive No. 15 - reflect the true diversity of who Americans are. The population of the United States, as even defenders of the present system will acknowledge, consists of much more than four racial clusters (American Indian or Alaskan native, Asian or Pacific islander, black, white) and one relevant ethnic group (Hispanic). An array of spokespersons for an assortment of ethnically or racially interested organizations have proposed that the current categories be changed, or at least expanded. They have made arguments for Middle Easterners to be seen as something other than white, for Hawaiians to be grouped with Native Americans, and for Hispanics to be made into a separate racial (as opposed to ethnic) group. The most intriguing argument, however, comes from those who insist that the Census Bureau should sanction a multiracial category that would, at a minimum, encompass the children of those who come from different racial groups.

Susan Graham, a white woman married to a black man in Roswell, Georgia, told the U.S. House Sub-committee on Census, Statistics, and Postal Personnel that she was not at all happy with census bureaucrats who had told her that biracial children should be assigned the mother’s race because "in cases like these, we always know who the mother is and not always the father." She apparently was not so much angered at the suggestion of uncertain paternity as at the fact that no present category reflected her biracial children’s full heritage. Instead of making her choose between black and white boxes, she said, the Census Bureau ought to have a category called "multiracial."

As Lawrence Wright reported in the July 25, 1994, New Yorker magazine, the proposal "alarmed representatives of the other racial groups for a number of reasons, not the least of which was that multiracialism threatened to undermine the concept of racial classification altogether."

Without question, the current categories are, in many respects, arbitrary. They reflect the conventions of a slave-holding past and serve the needs of various political agendas, but they have nothing to do with the science of genealogy, or for that matter, with science at all. Nor is their meaning always clear. Directlye No. 15 instructs that "the category which most closely reflects the individual’s recognition in his community should be used for purposes of reporting on persons who are of mixed racial and/or ethnic origin." But what about those people who, like Susan Graham, believe multiracial is the only label that fits? As the incidence of interracial marriage increases, more and more people will no doubt find themselves in Susan Graham’s shoes.

In 1992, in Bethesda, Maryland, several hundred such people came together for the "first national gathering of the multiracial community," as described by Bijan Gilanshah, in the December 1993 Law and Inequality journal. Gilanshah saw the meeting as an important development in the evolution of a growing social movement. Multiracial individuals, he wrote, existed in a "state of flux." The gathering was only one sign of many that they were "demanding clarification of their nebulous social and legal status and seeking official recognition as a distinct, powerful social unit with idiosyncratic cultural, social and legal interests."

Gilanshah pointed to several bits of evidence in support of his conclusion. Nearly 10 million people had elected to place themselves in the "other" category in the 1990 census, he noted, and interracial unions had sharply increased, seemingly tripling between 1970 and 1990, even as a host of self-described multiracial organizations were springing up around the country. Many of the multiracial activists, he noted, had intense feelings on the subject. "For the multiracial movement, failure of the government to include a multiracial category would result in cultural genocide," argued Gilanshah.

Julie C. Lythcott-Haims, writing in the Harvard Civil Rights Civil Liberties Law Review for the summer 1994, made a similar argument. Her primary concern was with adoption policies aimed at ensuring that children are placed with adoptive parents of their own race. She objected to such policies, pointing out that race matching cannot always work "because millions of children are born not merely of one race." Lythcott-Haims went on to make a broader argument whose implications stretched beyond her immediate concern of adopted children. The Census Bureau, she said, should accept a multiracial category "based on the logic that if people must be categorized according to race, these categories should be more accurate."

Lythcott-Haims was especially emphatic in her rejection of the so-called one-drop rule. The assumptions underlying it, she wrote, are "blatantly racist because the central premise is that 'Black blood' is a contaminant while 'White blood' is pure." Moreover, she noted, some multiracial people are uncomfortable declaring one of their racial lines to be better or more worthy of acknowledgment than the other: "The Multiracial person can hardly advocate the superiority or inferiority of one race without touching off a potentially damaging identity struggle within herself."

For Lythcott-Haims, the quest of multiracial individuals for
their own racial designation was anything but a trivial pursuit. "If you identify as Black or Asian and our society officially classified you as White, how would you feel? If you identify as White and society required you to call yourself Latino, how would you feel?...If we send in our forms but the Census chooses not to recognize us for what we are, it is as if we do not officially exist," she wrote.

Without question, Lythcott-Haims and Gilanshah are correct in noting the absurdity of the current classification scheme. It is folly to force people to try to fit into narrow boxes that do not reflect their real complexity or their true sense of identity. But that does not necessarily mean that a multiracial box would make racial categories any less absurd or render them any more accurate.

For one thing, a multiracial designation does not really categorize a person racially. It simply indicates that a person fits into more than one category. Consequently, it could end up being even less precise than the groupings we have now. If the rubric applies to anyone of racially diverse ancestry, it could conceivably apply to most Americans now considered "blacks" as well as to a substantial portion of those who belong to other recognized racial groups.

Even if it is taken (as many proponents would like) to apply only to those with two parents of recognizably different racial stock, it is not a very accurate descriptor. A multiracial box (unless it spelled out what racial heritages were subsumed by the designation) would put the offspring of a white person and a Native American in the same pigeonhole as the offspring of a black person and a Chinese American. While the offspring of both unions would certainly be multiracial, not many Americans would consider them to be of the same race. In all likelihood, society would still consider the black-Asian child to be black (or perhaps mixed) and the white-Native American child to be white. They would probably, in any number of circumstances, be treated quite differently.

A New York Times poll of 1991, for instance, found that 66 percent of whites were opposed to a relative marrying a black person, whereas 45 percent were opposed to a relative marrying a Hispanic or Asian person. Clearly, in the eyes of many of those respondents, all multiracial families are not created equal. If part of the purpose of census classifications is to permit the government to determine how various groups are treated, aggregating groups whose only common denominator is that their parents are racially different would not do much to advance that purpose.

But even assuming one could agree that all people with parents of different racial stock should be considered members of a new race called "multiracial," what about those people who do not really care for that designation? What about the numerous offspring of black and white unions, for instance, who insist on calling themselves black? Providing them with a multiracial box would not guarantee that they would check it. And what about the children of "multiracial" parents? If the designation only applied to the first generation, would children of multiracial people become (like many light-skinned "blacks" who are clearly of mixed ancestry) monoracial by the second generation? Or would those children twenty years from now be fighting for yet another redefinition of race?

And what about Hispanics? Obviously many Latinos find the current categories lacking. They are uncomfortable with a system that insists that they define themselves either as black or white. In the 1990 census, roughly half of the Latinos in California described themselves as neither white, black, American Indian, nor Asian. They were "other." But that does not mean that a "multiracial" grouping is the solution.

Certain Latino leadership organizations, after all, prefer a designation that would set Hispanics apart from other groups racially, not one that would throw them into one huge category that combines all people of mixed racial heritage. Moreover, many Latin American cultures recognize an array of racial delineations much more complex than those acknowledged in the United States. Brazil, for instance, once had more than forty different racial categories. And Latin societies have come up with an array of terms to note the differences in those who are light-skinned and "European looking" and those who are not.

In an essay "Empowering Hispanic Families: A Critical Issue for the '90s," Frank F. Montalvo observed: "At the heart of the Hispanic experience in the United States is a form of racism that both binds light and dark Latinos to each other and divides them into separate groups. Race may prove to be a more pernicious element in their lives than are linguistic, cultural and socioeconomic differences." It is not at all clear that allowing Latinos the option of describing themselves as multiracial would resolve the problems many have with the current categories or would allow Latinos to express the true racial complexity of their cultures.

In an article in Transition entitled "Passing for White, Passing for Black," Adrian Piper tried to explain the phenomenon of people whom the United States had designated as "black" deciding to live their lives as "white": "Once you realize what is denied you as an African-American simply because of your race," wrote Piper, "your sense of the unfairness of it may be so
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Overwhelming that you may simply be incapable of accepting it. And if you are not inclined toward any form of overt political advocacy, passing in order to get the benefits you know you deserve may seem the only way to defy the system.”

The suspicion in some quarters is that the new emphasis on a multiracial category may be motivated by a desire to escape into a more socially congenial category, at least for those who face the alternative of being forced into the black box. The multiracial category, after all, is not really new. The rise of the mulatto category during Colonial times was an acknowledgment that the offspring of black-white unions were not necessarily either black or white. But after emancipation the in-between status of mulattoes threatened the color line,” as Gilanshah, among others, has noted. So the mulattoes were pushed into the black category.

Gilanshah obviously does not equate the new multiracial group with the privileged mulattoes of yesteryear. But in many respects, the language of the multiracial lobby invites such a comparison. Many advocates of the new designation see multiracial individuals as ambassadors between groups. Gilanshah, for instance, argues that society would benefit from having multiracial people who are uniquely positioned to be "sensitive, objective negotiators of inter-group racial conflict." But to assume that only designated multiracial people can be a bridge between races is to assume that others cannot be. It is also to reawaken recollections about the middleman role of American mulattoes and Latin American mestizos, groups who were assigned a status lower than that of whites but higher than that of the groups with whom the whites had mixed. Their purpose, at least in part, was to reduce ethnic tensions and to keep people in their assigned places.

The Reverend Jesse Jackson has looked not to American history but to South Africa and its "colored" class to find an analogue to the multiracial category. Sociologist and anthropologist Pierre L. Van Den Berghe makes the same comparison: "It boggles my mind that the United States, in the late 20th Century, is [considering] reinventing the nonsense that South Africa invented 300 years ago," Van Den Berghe told a reporter for the Los Angeles Times. A separate multiracial category, he argued, would further "the inanity of race classification." Moreover, he saw the category as redundant. African Americans, he asserted, are in fact already "mixed-race."

None of this is to say that there is anything wrong with people defining themselves as multiracial. In many respects, it is certainly a better descriptor than black, white, American Indian, or Asian. And indeed, during the next year, as the Census Bureau tests its various racial indicators, the multiracial category should be given its due. The bureau should evaluate whether a new multiracial category would increase the census's clarity or simply heighten confusion. Certainly, if multiracial persons are allowed to describe themselves as multiracial and then forced to specify how, the quality of the information gathered should not diminish and would perhaps be enhanced.

Still, adoption by the census of a multiracial box is not likely to accomplish much of what its proponents seem to seek. It would not prevent Americans from assuming that people who "look black" are black, whatever their other heritage. It would not provide a reliable anchor in racial identity, since multiracial is not so much an identity as an acknowledgment of multiple heritages. And it would not change current thinking that divides people into often opposing racial and ethnic groups.

It would not, for instance, persuade the members of the National Association of Black Social Workers, who have been outspoken for more than twenty years in advocating that "black" children go only to "black" families, to shift their position suddenly. Nor is it likely to mean a change in the practice of discrimination in employment or elsewhere. It certainly would not help, and might well hurt, enforcement of laws dealing with housing discrimination, employment discrimination, and voting rights.

In the New Yorker magazine, Lawrence Wright observed: "Those who are charged with enforcing civil rights laws see the multiracial box as a wrecking ball aimed at affirmative action, and they hold those in the mixed-race movement responsible." Wright wonders about the practical effect: "Suppose a court orders a city to hire additional black police officers to make up for past discrimination. Will mixed-race officers count? Will they count wholly or partly?"

Proponents of the multiracial classification obviously do not tend to see themselves in such a light. They are not so much making a political protest as a personal statement about identity. And the question they raise is clearly an important one and, in some sense, an inevitable one.

Certainly it is possible to envision a "multiracial" box, perhaps in addition to an "other" box, that would not undermine civil rights laws or launch demands for special status for a multiracial "race." The option would simply allow people to describe themselves as what they perceive themselves to be. And if that box also forced people to designate in what ways they were mixed, the information could eventually be aggregated in whatever way would be useful. In short, the purposes of the data collection process could be served, while people were allowed to...
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make a statement about their personal identity. No census box, however, will solve the larger problems of race in this country. Nor will a census box resolve anyone’s sense of racial alienation or provide a secure racial identity.

Ideally, one day we will get beyond the need to categorize. Certainly, geneticists and other scientists are concluding that racial categories make little sense. But the tendency to categorize is strong and will clearly be with us for a while. For the time being those who are struggling with such issues might be well advised to heed the words of Adrian Piper, who declared, “No matter what I do or do not do about my racial identity, someone is bound to feel uncomfortable. But I have resolved that it is no longer going to be me.”

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