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Multiracialism & the civil rights future

Spurred by a small group of activists in the 1990s, the American system of racial classification changed recently in a conceptually bold way. With moving reference to the self-esteem of their children, along with the moral conviction that multiracial recognition could help the entire nation beyond an impasse, multiracial advocates were astonishingly successful in the 1990s.

Yet at the height of activity, the multiracial movement involved no more than a thousand individuals, mainly living on the East and West Coasts. Only a handful of leaders pushed the multiracial category effort forward, in fits and starts, throughout the decade. Despite its small size, the group that advanced the cause did not agree on much beyond the belief that forcing multiracial Americans into monoracial categories was inaccurate and inappropriate. Still, with only the slightest nudging by this poorly financed and increasingly fractious handful of activists, six states passed legislation between 1992 and 1998 to add a multiracial category to state forms. During the same period, legislators introduced multiracial category bills in five additional states, while two other states added a multiracial designation by administrative mandate.

The multiracialists' best-known campaign would have added a multiracial category to the 2000 census. While the group did not get exactly what it wanted, its efforts led to the creation of an unprecedented "mark one or more" option, allowing individual Americans to identify with as many racial groups as they saw fit. Throughout the prolonged review by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) culminating in this 1997 decision, the priorities of traditional civil rights advocates were twofold. First, they strongly opposed a stand-alone multiracial category, fearing that it would jeopardize civil and voting rights enforcement by diluting the count of minorities. Having successfully averted this outcome, but faced with no alternative to multiple check-offs, civil rights proponents secondly strove to ensure that multiple-race responses would be tabulated to a minority group.

The OMB met both demands. It rejected a stand-alone multiracial category and arrived at a tabulation scheme that

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has actually increased the tally of minority groups in some contexts, since anyone who checks off boxes for both white and a minority race counts as part of the latter for civil rights purposes. From one perspective, the technical fix adopted by the federal government – intended to balance the tension between growing racial fluidity on the one hand, and ongoing racial and ethnic data needs on the other – amounted to symbolic appeasement. Federal-level multiple-race data serve no statutory purpose, and the tabulation guidelines stipulate a systematic process by which to convert multiple-race responses into single-race data. This is necessary because, to enforce civil and voting rights laws, we must be able to distinguish between those who are members of minority groups and those who are not.

Only 2.4 percent of the population, about 6.8 million people, identify with multiple races, as measured in 2000. At first glance, this might seem insignificant. Given that civil rights enforcement depends heavily on patterns, and that 'multiple-race' is not a protected class, the consensus has been that the multiple-race option is probably irrelevant to civil rights claims involving the size and the characteristics of minority groups.[1] But is the "mark one or more" format merely symbolic? Is the symbolism politically irrelevant?

On both counts, I think the answer is no. Consider the circumstances under which a handful of disorganized activists could mount such a successful campaign in the first place.

The Census Bureau's biggest problems since 1970 in one way or another have revolved around race. In an effort to avoid conflicts and lawsuits like those surrounding the prior three censuses (most of which concerned the undercount and its controversial remedy, sampling), the OMB requested that Congress hold hearings on the standards for racial and ethnic classification to be used in 2000.[2]

During the first round of hearings conducted in 1993, the OMB announced plans to begin a comprehensive review of the statistical standards used throughout the federal government for gathering and reporting data on race and ethnicity. Concerns about whether the government was "keep[ing] pace with changes in our nation's population"[3] topped the list of the OMB's stated motives for initiating this review. Another clearly pressing, if less public, incentive involved the hard-to-defend procedures employed by the Bureau to classify people who disregarded the one-race census instructions in 1990. The Bureau received about half a million multiple-race responses that year. In cases where respondents marked two or more boxes, former Census Bureau director Kenneth Prewitt is reported to have heard, the box with the darkest mark was counted. Sharon Lee notes a similarly arbitrary, if systematic, process for write-in responses: "respondents who wrote 'black-white' were

1 But see Roderick J. Harrison, "Inadequacies of Multiple-Response Race Data in the Federal Statistical System," in Joel Perlmann and Mary Waters, eds., *The New Race Question: How the Census Counts Multiracial Individuals* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2002).

2 The director of the Census Bureau is a presidential appointee who reports to the secretary of commerce. The OMB, which reviews and decides upon budget requests from the Bureau, exerts further control.

3 Katherine K. Wallman, Suzann Evinger, and Susan Schechter, "Measuring Our Nation's Diversity: Developing a Common Language for Data on Race/Ethnicity," *American Journal of Public Health* 90 (11) (November 2000): 1704–1708.

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counted as blacks; those who wrote 'white-black' were counted as whites."[4]

Questionable at best, indefensible at worst, these makeshift remedies were not solutions. By the mid-1990s, the controversies that engulfed every census since 1970 (against a backdrop of rapid demographic change over the same period) opened political opportunities for multiracial activists. Although these activists had no control over the outcome, the OMB review itself represented a victory from their perspective, as almost all the major issues identified for exploration related directly to their concerns. Eventually, the multiracial issue became the driving force of the multiyear review. The clear advantage of a prolonged review was prolonged attention.

Meanwhile, a flurry of legislative activity was underway in the states. By 1988, enough multiracial organizations had gradually branched out from California to create the nationwide Association of MultiEthnic Americans (AMEA). Soon after the founding of AMEA, two other multiracial organizations appeared – A Place for Us (APFU) and Project RACE (for "Reclassify All Children Equally") – both claiming national memberships. A linked network of college-based organizations emerged as well, along with a proliferation of periodicals, conferences, summit meetings, and so forth. All these groups operated on shoestring budgets.

At odds with AMEA's Washington-focused strategy from the beginning, Project RACE director Susan Graham believed that "a better way to get to the federal government" would be to go "school to school, state by state."[5]

4 Sharon Lee, "Racial Classifications in the U.S. Census: 1890 – 1990," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 16 (1993): 83.

5 Susan Graham, personal communication with author, April 16, 1998.

School is often the place where parents first face questions from the state about the racial identity of their children. According to a 1997 survey conducted by the Department of Education as part of the broader OMB review, thirty-one states reported receiving requests over the prior five years to add a multiracial category on state forms.[6] Repeatedly confronted with paperwork demanding only one racial designation, parents complained that children from a growing number of interracial unions were being forced to choose one parent and deny the other.

Contrary to the situation at the federal level, neither funding nor the composition of legislative districts was at risk in the states. (Federal and state agencies are not barred from collecting racial and ethnic data in more detail, provided that, when necessary, the data can be reduced to the mutually exclusive categories required by the government.) With little at stake materially, and reallocation again being deployed by government agencies to reconcile multiracial responses with single-race data needs, state-level multiracial category legislation seemed like a symbolic gesture. In eleven states, lawmakers (nine Democrats and two Republicans) sponsored multiracial category legislation, apparently viewing it as a goodwill gesture toward minorities.[7]

6 Nancy Carey, Cassandra Rowand, Elizabeth Farris, and Shelley Burns, project officer, *State Survey on Racial and Ethnic Classifications*, NCES 98-034 (Washington, D.C.: National Center for Education Statistics, 1998), 12, table 8.

7 For the most part, the measures passed with little controversy. For some lawmakers, it seems to have served as a low-cost means to signal their stance on 'new' versus 'traditional' approaches to race and civil rights. Perhaps other state legislators saw it as racial sensitivity on the cheap. Passed: Ohio (1992), Georgia (1994), Indiana (1995), Michigan (1995), Illinois

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This is interesting for at least two reasons. First, the few petitioners in the states were white women! (Note the parent-driven dynamic of the grievance.) In fieldwork, I discovered that most of the people involved in multiracial organizations near the height of the movement's activity did not identify as multiracial. Instead, about 80 percent of the local leaders in the universe of adult-based groups identified as either white or black.[8] Group leaders reported that this pattern extended to their wider memberships. Cumulatively, leaders estimated that 52 percent of their members identified as white, 37 percent as black, 7 percent as multiracial, 2 percent as Latino, and 2 percent as Asian American. Thus, the multiracial movement at the grassroots was comprised almost entirely of black-white couples, who represented about 90 percent of its total adult membership base in 1997 – 1998.

In general, black men are much more likely than black women to marry whites.[9] Multiracial organizations in the 1990s mirrored this gender/race dynamic. These groups consisted predominantly of white women married to black men. Following the gender gap in family-oriented, local support groups, women generally took the lead. Consequently and counterintuitively, most grassroots leaders of the multiracial movement in the 1990s were white women married to middle-class black men. Multiracial category legislation in the states was, in each instance, practically a one-woman crusade headed up by the white mother of a multiracial child. Perhaps it was parents, more than children, who were most uneasy with the preexisting options.

A second point of interest is that the state outcomes stood in sharp contrast to the more partisan situation at the federal level. The pattern of support in Washington was mostly the reverse of the bill sponsorship story in the states: congressional Democrats were opposed to a multiracial category; congressional Republicans favored it. Yet recognition ultimately came from the Clinton administration. Think of it this way: some Democrats wanted multiracial recognition *without* adverse civil rights consequences; some Republicans wanted multiracial recognition *with* adverse civil rights consequences. The appeal within the latter camp was that a multiracial category would have complicated litigation and protection in the civil rights arena. In *Race Counts*, I document a pattern of right-wing interest in multiracial activism as a means of capitalizing on the prevailing confusion about race.

Consider a few of the highlights. As the 1993 round of hearings was ending, Republicans gained control of the House of Representatives for the first time in forty years. Having served as the lone Republican on the subcommittee responsible for conducting the 1993 inquiry, Representative Thomas Petri of Wisconsin was among the first to act upon the possibilities: during the 104th Congress, he introduced H.R. 3920 as an amendment to the Paperwork Reduction

(1996), and Maryland (1998). Implemented by administrative mandate: North Carolina (1994) and Florida (1995). Introduced: California (1996), Minnesota (1997), Oregon (1997), Massachusetts (1997), and Texas (1997).

8 Kim M. Williams, *Race Counts: American Multiracialism and Civil Rights Politics* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006).

9 From 1980 – 1998, 30 percent of all black-white intermarriages involved white males and black females; 70 percent involved black males and white females. U.S. Bureau of the Census, "Marital Status and Living Arrangements," Current Population Reports, Series P-20-514 (March 1998).

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Act. It would have forced the OMB to add a multiracial category on the 2000 census had it not done so on its own volition.[10] He reintroduced the bill in the next session as H.R. 830, calling it the Tiger Woods Bill. Despite repeated attempts to bring him on board, Tiger Woods himself refused to join or endorse the multiracial cause. Nonetheless, mention of golf runs thick in conservative commentary on the subject.

Alongside Petri's efforts, Newt Gingrich, then Speaker of the House, issued a series of statements in support of a multiracial category in the months leading up to the 1997 decision. Gingrich contacted Franklin Raines, head of the OMB, to declare his support of it, submitted favorable testimony in congressional hearings, and announced ten practical steps for building a better America, including "adding a multiracial category to the census" and "doing away with affirmative action."[11] In short, the members of Congress most supportive of a multiracial category were conservative Republicans who saw it as a step toward getting rid of racial categorization and, thus, race-conscious public policy altogether.

Proposition 54, California's so-called Racial Privacy Initiative, took this even further. With a few exceptions, Proposition 54 would have barred the state from collecting racial and ethnic data on grounds that it is illogical and counterproductive to do so, if our collective goal is to diminish racial polarization. Backed by Ward Connerly of Proposition 209 (anti–affirmative action) fame, the new initiative took its rationale for dismantling race-conscious public policy to a different strategic level. In Proposition 209, conservatives attacked race-conscious public policy. In Proposition 54, they attacked the idea of race itself. To drive the point home, proponents of the latter initiative exploited the new census data. "Surely, the government doesn't believe 58 new races have emerged since 1970," chided the official website promoting racial privacy. "The new race classifications were invented by different groups trying to get in on America's racial spoils system."[12]

That Proposition 54 was defeated tells us something about the state of popular thinking about racial categories in America – but given the extraordinary circumstances of that extraordinary vote, it tells us less than we need to know. Had the vote taken place when originally scheduled – in a March 2004 primary instead of alongside the dramatic recall of Democratic Governor Gray Davis – it probably would have been closer than 36–64.[13] In the end, Proposition 54 opponents stressed the deleterious consequences of privatizing health data that incorporates race as a factor in what Butch Wing, California state coordinator for Jesse Jackson's Rainbow Push Coalition, called a "perfect storm."[14] In other words, a convergence of improbable but propitious events contributed to the defeat of the initiative.

10 A Bill to Amend the Paperwork Reduction Act, 104th Congress, 2nd sess., H.R. 3920, *Congressional Record* 142 (114) (July 30, 1996): H8982.

11 Steven A. Holmes, "Gingrich Outlines Plan on Race Relations," *The New York Times*, June 19, 1997, B12.

12 <http://www.racialprivacy.org/facts_myths.htm> (accessed January 23, 2003).

13 Los Angeles Times exit poll, <www.latimes.com/timespoll> (accessed March 25, 2004).

14 Butch Wing, "The Coalition that Kicked Proposition 54 Out of the California Door," John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, March 9, 2004.

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The "mark one or more" format is not merely symbolic. Future census conflict is to be expected, if the past forty years of census taking is any indication. But the David and Goliath story of the multiracial movement will probably give hope to other aspiring racial groups as it leaves its imprint on future successful bids. Against a backdrop of immigrant-driven demographic change, multiracialism now holds an institutional foothold, one that conservatives seek to exploit. Under the circumstances, viewing the symbolism as irrelevant would seem to cede ground to the Right, which has taken the early lead in defining for Americans what multiracial *is*.

With all of this in mind, the prevailing civil rights response to multiracial claims seems out of proportion. According to Jesse Jackson, the multiracial category proposal was "a diversion, designed to undermine affirmative action."[15] It could be a "plot to create a 'Colored' buffer race in America," warned *Ebony* magazine.[16] The implication, reiterated in a range of forms and venues, is that multiracial identification is either frivolous or a right-wing conspiracy, or both.

I believe that it is neither. While modern-day federal racial categories were designed to monitor and act against racism, not to validate identity, multiracial identity claims were not and are not without power. To emphasize the inconsistencies in multiracial thought (and there are many, including how its strongest proponents advanced a working definition of multiraciality largely dependent on the idea of monoracial biological groups) does little to explain the states' favorable response to it. A presumption of frivolity is also impractical, considering that multiracial advocates based their claims, for the most part, on the self-esteem of their children. All the facts suggest that interracial family life is at least as challenging for parents as it is for children. Either way, we should be willing to accept that the multiracial experience takes a toll on both parent and child. Put differently, while the legitimacy of multiracial claims can and should be interrogated, dismissal on grounds of false consciousness or negligible suffering is unhelpful. In any case, the self-esteem claim cannot be dismissed as trivial without also bringing into question other applications of its use. Self-esteem, after all, was a primary rationale of the Supreme Court in *Brown v. Board of Education*.[17]

The more justified criticism is that multiracial advocates developed no antiracist agenda, even as they claimed, in one way or another, that the recognition of racial mixture was the next logical step in civil rights. This ideological *tour de force* is perhaps explained in the fact that many of the local leaders, disproportionately well-educated, affluent white women, reported having paid little to no attention to racial dynamics until they married and had children. Arguably, a midlife realization of racial discrimination is better than none at all; at the same time, the patterns and parameters of multiracial activism should be understood with this grassroots disposition and limitation in mind. Multiracial organizations have been deafeningly silent on inequality, and their leaders only recently inclined to acknowledge (more

15 Jerelyn Eddings and Kenneth T. Walsh, "Counting a 'New' Type of American," *U.S. News and World Report*, June 14, 1997, 22.

16 Lynn Norment, "Am I Black, White, or In Between?" *Ebony*, August 1995, 110.

17 But see Lani Guinier, "From Racial Liberalism to Racial Literacy: *Brown v. Board of Education* and the Interest-Divergence Dilemma," *The Journal of American History* 91 (1) (June 2004): 92–118.

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or less) that their 'right' to self-identification might involve costs.

While civil rights forces united in the fight against creating a multiracial category, black civil rights advocates came to symbolize that opposition. At worst, the message from black advocates and institutions was that people championing multiracialism were racial defectors who wanted to be white, or at the least, to escape blackness. Latino advocates could not plausibly make analogous claims, and indeed, they did not. Latinos, as an ethnic group whose membership spans the racial spectrum, already had much of the latitude newly available to everyone else via the multiple-race option. With this flexibility, almost half the Latino population in 2000 identified racially as white. Latino advocates, with less to lose and little to gain, opposed multiracial recognition nonetheless. Asian groups joined their Latino and black counterparts in opposing the multiracial option.

One senses fragility in Latino and Asian groups' official demeanor toward multiracial recognition, however, considering that intermarriage rates approach 30 percent in these groups. According to Frank Bean and Gillian Stevens's calculations from the Current Population Survey, 27.2 percent of Asians and 28.4 percent of Latinos are intermarried; 86.8 and 90 percent of these intermarriages, respectively, involve a white spouse. In contrast, only 10.2 percent of blacks are intermarried, and within this small population only 69.1 percent are married to whites. Thinking about it the other way around, whites are least likely to marry blacks and most likely to marry Latinos, with Asians at a close second.

At this rate, per Bean and Stevens, the intermarriage patterns of Asians and Latinos "will parallel those of European immigrants and their descendants over the course of the twentieth century."[18] At the other end of the spectrum, what little black-white intermarriage there is they attribute in part to "higher levels of acceptance of foreign-born than native-born blacks by native-born whites."[19] Blacks represent the outlier in intermarriage trends and are the least inclined among minorities to identify with more than one race. If interracial marriage and multiple-race identification are gauges of social distance, then black and, perhaps more specifically, native-born black isolation stands out amidst otherwise generally positive trends. Civil rights opposition to multiracial recognition became principally associated with black institutions, but the action in the multiracial trend is elsewhere.

The "mark one or more" format adopted by the OMB in 1997 has set a precedent whose meaning the government has been unwilling to interpret. There is no legal purpose for the multiracial data collected through the new format, but its very existence naturally leads one to conclude that it must refer to meaningful multiracial populations. (This data shows, for example, some measurable differences in the Asian-white population compared to the white or Asian population alone.) Yet the new OMB protocol offers no interpretive content.

We are partly creating it for ourselves. Civil rights institutions cannot ignore multiraciality and they cannot viably deal with it as they did in the 1990s. Considering the trends in Asian and Latino intermarriage, it is difficult to see

18 Frank Bean and Gillian Stevens, *America's Newcomers and the Dynamics of Diversity* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2003), 195.

19 Ibid., 192.

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what about racial mixture the advocacy organizations representing these groups can continue to oppose. Black advocates, if for different reasons, will probably have to recalibrate their stance as well. The symbolism of civil rights all but demands it. The civil rights movement drew its power from the bedrock principles of goodwill across the races and full citizenship for all Americans. It brilliantly exposed the immorality of segregation and insisted that we were all in this together. That a multiracial movement could materialize at all is a complex testament to civil rights success.

Now recall the estimation of multiracial motives advanced by California's leading advocates of racial privacy: "the new race classifications were invented by different groups trying to get in on America's racial spoils system." By this logic, multiracial groups were not trying to dismantle race-conscious public policy at all; rather, they wanted to be included among its beneficiaries. A partial truth – multiracial advocates wanted many things. There is no coherent multiracial agenda, or closer to the point, the claims of that agenda are conflicted and evolving.

In spite of their many disagreements, the activists who spurred the recent census change shared one fundamental conviction: multiracialism enables individuals to think differently, and more humanely, about racial boundaries. Beyond that, the details were vague. Recall, however, that these same people sought out support groups to cope with racial tension and polarization. Overwhelmingly, members said they joined these multiracial advocacy groups to carve positive space for their families that they could not find elsewhere. If American society were so prepared to move beyond race, then this primarily support-oriented infrastructure would not exist as such. Nor would the groups be so heavily dominated at the grassroots by black-white couples who, nine out of every ten times, explained that such couples predominate in the groups because they experience the most discrimination.

It would seem that color blindness in theory bears little resemblance to multiracialism on the ground. The asymmetry in the multiracial trend is a sign that larger problems of racial alienation persist. Among other things, black isolation may well grow as the color line shifts. The challenge amidst growing racial diversity is to register the reach and durability of the racial divide, while at the same time, to accept that the meanings attached to race itself are changing. As a wedge into a broader debate about what has changed – and what has not – the symbolism of racial mixture is inseparable from the ongoing quest for racial justice.

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