

Changing Race By David Berreby

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Review of: CHANGING RACE: Latinos, the Census, and the History of Ethnicity in the United States. By Clara E. Rodríguez. New York University Press.

They were waiting for the ``walk'' signal, two ladies in sundresses talking about their weekends, and one asked how it went on Saturday.

``Oh, well, you know,'' said the other. ``She's Irish, so the food wasn't so good.''

Her friend nodded, because she did know, and so did I. We were in Brooklyn, and if you're seeking gastronomical pleasures among the hyphenated Americans of that borough, you will think of Chinese food and Italian food and foods Polish and Greek, before you think ``Irish,'' and, generally speaking, you will be right. As a matter of pure logic, this makes no sense, for Irish identity is not a brake on the mental and bodily skills of cooking. And even if it were, a tendency among the Irish to go easy on kitchen skills is no predictor that any particular Mrs. Ryan will be a lousy cook. Generally speaking is not precisely speaking. Groups don't

cook. Individuals cook, and individuals vary.

No matter. Any American reader, knowing our current classification system for subsets of white people, can grasp why the first half of the woman's sentence was relevant to the second. Yet it's a guilty grasp, because we know that group traits are probabilities, not certainties (somewhere, no doubt, there's a colleen who's the best cook on her multi-ethnic block). We can't talk of racial and ethnic and cultural and geographic and religious categories without a lot of exception carving -- as in "Yes, their name is Peterson, but they're a Puerto Rican family" or "yes, he's from New York, but he's really polite" or "yes, she's Irish, but she's a fabulous cook." That inescapable yes-buttering means we don't know for sure that any given Irish woman is a bad cook or a good Catholic or anything else. And if we can't be certain that a given Irish person has any particular trait, we can't be certain that she even has all the traits that we use to define people as Irish. Human social groups are inherently elusive.

For certain narrowly defined situations (passport, pension), we have the artificial clarity of the law. Yet even paperwork has its limits. As Clara E. Rodríguez notes in this rich trove lore on how Americans classify Americans, the United Nations has a hard time comparing census data from different countries because each country's pigeonholes for people are often neither compatible nor comparable with other nations'. One study of censuses in 51 New World nations over the last 40 years found they had no shared definition of ethnicity (16 countries asked no questions about it; moreover, in many countries, people skipped the ethnicity questions or complained that they could not answer). Within the U.S., Hispanics are a race to federal agencies tracking civil rights enforcement, but they are not a race to the bureau of the census.

Even in the realm of written, official definitions, racial answers depend on what question is asked, who asks it, and why.

When we try to examine these overwhelmingly important entities of which we are a part, then, they dissolve into exceptions, qualifications, coded speech, navel-gazing. Each is like a portrait that, held up too close, turns into flecks and dabs of paint. And we who use them anyway are like the family in the old joke that won't cure the cousin who thinks he's a chicken, because they need the eggs. We live in a world of beliefs we know to be imperfect, on which we confidently rely.

And now we are forced by globalization to rub elbows with people who seem somehow all wrong. The questions of what makes them seem that way, and of what marks our common humanity, are more urgent to more people than they ever were. We want to talk, coherently, about race, ethnicity, class, nation, religion and ``culture.'' We do not know how. Because we don't know, when we try, what we're talking *ITALICS about* . UN-ITALICS

Fine for the ordinary citizen, whose folk physics and folk biology are probably no more coherent than his folk sociology. But social science is supposed to be to folk theories what physics is to folk physics, and so in academia the fuzziness of group concepts is a problem, if not a crisis. Many scholars work on it but without a consensus on fundamentals, they are free to say whatever suits their purposes. In 1997, for example, a trio of anthropologists, writing in the journal *Evolution and Human Behavior*, proposed throwing the baby out with the bathwater. They declared tribes, clans, villages, societies and cultures to be the inventions of intellectuals, unworthy of serious attention from evolutionary theorists. (The mass market version of this idea

is Margaret Thatcher's line, "there is no such thing as society; there are only individuals and families.") Conversely, in 1996, the historian Daniel Jonah Goldhagen argued for a historiography that pays attention to bathwater only, never mind the individuals in it. In *Hitler's Willing Executioners*, he wrote: "[d]uring the Nazi period, and even long before, most Germans could no more emerge with cognitive models foreign to their society ... than they could speak fluent Romanian without ever having been exposed to it."

Early in her book, Rodríguez mildly observes that most scholarly writing on ethnicity isn't particularly rigorous. In fact, a recent study of nearly 200 that social scientists published from 1974 to 1992 found more than 80 percent didn't adhere to a coherent theory of the subject. (R, ix) Slightly less than a quarter even acknowledged the central problem: people and the groups to which they belong are separate.

By definition, the *group* "African-Americans" is all African-American and nothing but. Any individual African-American, though, is also the holder of many other identities (man, father, veteran, lawyer, resident of the East Side, and so on). In other words, ethnicity (and, I think, any other group identity) is not like height, which, measured according to some shared system of quantification, will be the same any place. Rather, identity depends on who is asking, and for what purpose. This process of asking the questions and getting the answers is what isn't understood: What is it about a trait that makes someone decide all who have it form a group? How do we decide to place a stranger into one group instead of another? How much of that decision is even accessible to the conscious mind? How do we reconcile the exceptions with the rules? And how does this process of group making change with a person's -- or a region's or a

society's -- circumstances?

Rodriguez writes that her position on these questions is "postmodernist," but it's held by many more scholars than the ones who explicate Lyotard and Foucault. Many a psychologist, sociologist and even some cognitive scientists and neurobiologists would readily agree with her that "many people have a core of identity, or a self, that is made up of multiple identities . . ."

(R. xii) She herself, Rodriguez explains, is "a light-skinned Latina with European features and hair texture ... born and raised in New York City" and her first language was Spanish. In her South Bronx neighborhood her "natural tan" was attractive, while "downtown it was 'otherizing.'" " (R 3) "In the United States today," she points out, "a person may be Puerto Rican or Mexican on a personal level, Latino on an instrumental level, and Hispanic to the government. Some people may classify this person as black, white or Asian." R. x)

It is not, of course, merely interesting that we don't grasp the relationship of group to member. The consequences in law enforcement have become well known, thanks to the current campaign against the "police profiling" -- the practice of viewing members of one ethnic group under extra suspicion. The flaws in our groupthink are also becoming better known in medicine. In a paper in the *Annals of Internal Medicine* in 1996, for example, Richie Witzig, a physician and epidemiologist, cited two case histories: an eight-year-old boy scheduled for surgery because no one associated his stomach pains with their true cause, sickle-cell anemia (he wasn't black); and a 24-year-old black man treated for sickle cell anemia (which he didn't have), who died of a bleeding peptic ulcer.

Rodriguez' sprawling yet intriguing book makes the case that there is a third arena where

a flawed understanding of groupthink affects contemporary Americans: the United States' decennial census. Much more than a mere head count, each census since 1790 has been a taxonomy of the American people, with serious, practical effects on their lives -- their taxes, their freedom of movement, even their ability to stay in the country. As she puts it, the census categories ``reflect a political consensus on who is to be counted, how, and how often. ''(x) The Census is explicit social construction, debated, decided and recorded. Because the government came early in the country's history to believe in an absolute division of human beings into white and black, Rodriguez points out, the arbitrariness of classifications has been most apparent in the case of people who are neither.

So, for instance, the Croatians of North Carolina were white in the 1890 census and Indians in 1900. 80 Mexicans were a race in one Census, that of 1930. Armenians were ``Asiatics'' until a court decision in 1909 promoted them to ``white.'' And the explicit construction of categories goes on: Before the 2000 census, Congress held hearings on a proposal to create a Middle Eastern/Arab group. The government decided against, because this rather remarkable category (it would lump Arabs, Turks and Iranians into one unit) is still under social construction. In its final recommendations, the federal Office of Management and Budget reported that the category would need require a ``consensus building effort to arrive at appropriate terminology and a definition.''

To say race is a construction is not to say it doesn't matter, of course, any more than the observation that we're all made of atoms would exempt the observer from having to eat. Race is a fact of people's lives (most Hispanics feel discriminated against in American society,

Rodriguez reports, sometimes in a stingingly clear way, when they're treated as "white" until a last name or accent causes someone to reclassify them). Race is a fact; it is just not the kind of fact -- biological, inevitable, unchanging -- that Americans think it is. What kind of a fact it actually is (how it's made, maintained and fought over by people who share the universal human trait of thinking in groups) is the unanswered question.

Rodriguez, a professor of sociology at Fordham, has used several disparate methods in the social-science toolkit to get at the mystery: a historical analysis of the census, surveys of Hispanics, in-depth case studies of individual Latinos who chose the "other race" box, detailed analysis of the politics of hearings on the 2000 census. It can feel a bit scattered, but the accumulation of interesting evidence from so many different perspectives is, ultimately, a strength. The variety of approaches demonstrates an often-ignored fact that a good theory of race and ethnicity must account for: On most any time scale you care to choose, be it the day, the week, the decade or the century, ethnic identity varies with circumstances.

This is, of course, much easier to see in identities that are new, unconventional or simply not part of what people have learned. American officialdom divides people into color-based races -- black, white and red -- and have from the first census in 1790. Much of the rest of the world does not.

In the 1980 and 1990 censuses, some 40 percent of Hispanics in the U.S. checked the "other race" category on their census forms, causing a consternation among the tabulators. That category had been intended to catch a few oddballs, not 7.5 million people. The Census changed its language for 1990, dropping an open ended question with a list of choices ("is this person . . .

“) in favor of one that explicitly mentioned race. Yet in 1990 even more of the country’s Hispanic population -- 43 percent, by then 9 million people -- again chose the “other race” box. The jump in the nonwhite numbers caught the imagination of the media. Time magazine published a story on “the browning of America,” and American capitalism adjusted to the new kind of consumer it was told to expect. Companies changed marketing plans and the era of corporate-sponsored celebrations to “diversity” began.

This was all, Rodriguez shows, overblown. A good part of the browning of America was due to a shift, after the 1970 Census, from racial classification by census-takers to self-reporting. Americans are now **so used to** defining themselves -- in conversation, on official forms, in Web-based “user profiles” -- that it may come as a shock to learn that until the 1980 census your race was not up to you. It was decided by a census taker. **Under that system, in 1970 93.3 percent of** Hispanics were white. In 1980, when people first self-categorized, only 57.7 percent of Hispanics were white. **Self-classification had unveiled their** reluctance to use American racial taxonomy. They flocked to the “other” designation. And often they added explanatory notes, writing “Dominican” or “Honduran” or “Puerto Rican” in the box.

The trouble, she argues, is that race in Latin tradition is a matter of culture, national origin and upbringing. North Americans tend to think in terms of biology. This is not to say that Latin countries don’t have hierarchies with whites at the top. Latinos who classify themselves as white fare better in the U.S., and often they come from countries where white skin and traits are valued more highly than non-white. One of the case studies recounted in the book, a Chicana, recalled that the lightest-skinned of her sisters was always given the easier chores. At family

gatherings today, the darker sisters cook for hours, while *la blanca* brings the paper goods. Rodriguez herself remembers hearing neighborhood talk of “pelo malo,” bad (i.e. African-looking) hair.

But the “pigmentocracies” of Latin America and the Caribbean were societies that recognized many gradations of racial category. They use terms like *moreno*, *indio*, *jabao*, *trigueno* to signify people between the two ends of a racial continuum. Rodriguez cites a study in Latin America that found 82 racial terms in use, with 240 well understood definitions circulating. Many Hispanics, she reports, react with puzzlement to America’s few, immutable categories: black or white, for the most part, with a few Indians and Asian/Pacific Islanders in the margins. One of the people interviewed in Rodriguez’ surveys said “I do not consider myself white, but this is what the government says I am.”

How did Americans get this way about black and white? Rodriguez delved into the history of the census, and her account is fascinating. The history of the censuses before the great waves of immigration doesn’t describe a melting pot but, rather, a social group quite consciously worried about keeping its advantage over those that were not in the “governing race.” The 1870, 1880 and 1890 census results included maps showing the density of the “colored” populations of the states, and their proportion to the total. A report on blacks in Maryland from the 1850 census stated that with black growth rates during the first 20 years of the nation’s existence, “there was in 1810, reason for apprehension that, in another half century, the blacks would become the preponderating race.” What “rescued the whites from the peril . . . of the loss of their numerical preponderance,” the report said, was the industrial revolution,

which provided work so that white residents would not leave, and attracted European immigrants.

An interesting table charts the categories for nonwhite people. One was "All other free persons" (used in 1790, 1800, and 1810); "free colored," used in 1820-1840; "color," used in 1850-1880; "color or race, whether white, black, mulatto, quadroon, octoroon, Chinese, Japanese, or Indian," used in 1890; and "race," used in 1900 and forward through 1950. After 1950, the chart's three straight lines give way to scattered dots of irresolution. 1960 census takers asked "Is this person . . . ?" with a checklist. 1970 asked for "color or race." 1980 did as 1960 did. 1990 asked for race. And the 2000 census asked "what is this person's race?" For the first time, it permitted more than one answer. So the contention continues. The reason seems clear: There can be no final answer to the problem of human classification, because the answer you get depends on the question you ask. And the questions keep changing.

It has always been so, in American history as in the history of any other nation. So, for instance, Hispanics have been defined by language in 1940 census, surname in 1950 and 1960, and origin-country in 1970. In the mid-19th century, "half-breed" offspring of whites and American Indians were tabulated with the whites in Wisconsin and New Mexico Territory, but counted separately, with the Chinese, in California. When it came time to tally, the national census chose the "most logical and least cumbersome" method of classification -- it counted the "half-breeds" as whites if they lived among whites and as Indians if they lived among Indians.

Courts have done this work, too. A 1923 Supreme Court decision conceded that Asian Indians should be considered Caucasian on scientific and linguistic evidence, but held that the

understanding of the people of the United States was that Caucasian meant ``European.'' In another reminder that these taxonomies are not merely logical or cultural games, Rodriguez notes that because of this decision, at least 65 naturalized Indians lost their citizenship.

So what happens next? Proposals to count Hispanics as a race in the 2000 Census were dropped after detailed studies suggested that such a question would result in lower numbers in both the Hispanic and white categories. Instead, the race question was changed in a different way. This year, for the first time, people were allowed to give more than one answer to the query about their race. The Office of Management and Budget estimates that less than 2 percent of the answers will pick multiracial categories. Outside researchers believe it could be much higher. The consequences -- for federal statistics, civil rights programs, and politics -- could be interesting.

This book presents the central problem of groupthink in all its contradictions. It makes an excellent case that categories for people depend on context, and that that context includes the category-maker -- in other words, that ethnic answers make no sense unless we know the ethnic question that prompted them. This suggests much of our accumulated so-called wisdom about identity presents only half the picture, by giving us categories like ``African-American'' or ``gay person'' or ``soccer mom'' without asking: Who made this category? What purpose of theirs does it serve? As Rodriguez shows, the decennial deliberations over the Census are unusual in that they reveal the whole picture. In its records we see not only the categorized, but also the categorizers, doing in public what most of us usually do unconsciously and in private.

Here comes the contradiction, though: Rodriguez, being a social scientist, is doing

precisely the same thing the government documents do. Having laid out her categories, she discusses the people in them as if the labels were ITALICS not UN-ITALICS contingent. When she speaks of how Hispanics view race, or the way American culture sees the world in black and white, she's engaging in the process that she wants to examine. Because, of course, not every single Hispanic sees race as a continuum (there were those 60 percent of Hispanics who did ITALICS not UN-ITALICS choose "other race" in 1980 and 1990); and not every single American sees a world divided into only black, white, yellow and red human colors. People who study human beings, being human themselves, cannot step outside the systems they study. Those who study generalizations about people have to make generalizations about people, and thus claim implicitly that their categories are better than the ones that they are anatomizing.

I see no way out of this, though the history of the last two centuries makes many people nervous about the categories intellectuals invent for human beings. Those categories have included such entities as "the proletariat" and "the Aryans," in whose name a great many innocent people have been killed. In reaction to that history, our intellectual life now is, I think properly, oriented against the making of vast all-explaining categories for people. The problem, though, is that we lack any other language for the generalizations we need to say anything about any aspect of human behavior. In place of the great master category, we need something else -- the self-aware, locally useful, answers-one-well-defined-question category. But the language hasn't been worked out. We tend to slip into stereotypes ("Americans are . . ."). Or, when we don't, to slip in so many qualifiers and refusals and exceptions that we sound, to any sensible person, as if we're simply muttering, quietly but uselessly, that life is complicated and full of

exceptions and it's hard to be sure of anything. Rodriguez does a bit of both; so have I, in this review. It's hard to see both the portrait and the flecks of paint. As I've said, we lack the language we need.

In any event, the value of contemplating the abandoned pigeonholes of the past is not the cheap pleasure of tsk-tsking over the folly of long-dead people. Rather than shoring up contemporary smugness, Rodriguez' book teaches two useful lessons. First, what is important to understand is not the ``objective'' value of this or that category of person but rather how the process of category-forming works. We need to understand pigeonhole-making, not any particular pigeonhole. Second, we ought to be humble about our own certainties, which are as much a product of ill-understood processes as were those of 1850 or 1910. Our descendants will find our categories for people quaint and silly. That is their birthright. But if we can decipher how we -- and they -- work the category-making system, then we will have earned the kind of respect that we now, and they will, accord to Newton and to Darwin. The great social problem of the 21st century is waiting, in plain sight, to be solved.

END