

labor market and yet too small to boost productivity? Ironically, over the past five years we are getting the “progress,” i.e., faster productivity growth, without the relative wage changes.

Finally, credit for the differences in behavior should also be given to policy—on the macroeconomic front to both fiscal and monetary policy. The monetary authorities have been vigilant in avoiding inflation and yet willing and able to provide sufficient liquidity to finance non-inflationary growth and deal with financial crisis. Fiscal policy has been prudent with a long-run trend towards surplus, while at the same time resources devoted to education, training, and civilian technological development have been increased. As National Economic Council chief Gene Sperling has recently pointed out, strong deficit reduction has not hurt poverty reduction. Increased funding for the earned-income tax credit and for other education, training, and research has played a role. Important, too, have been increases in the minimum wage. Certainly this has raised wages at the bottom and it does not appear to have had a noticeably negative impact on the employment of the least well paid workers.

To conclude: We should not be complacent. We have not reversed the previous shifts towards greater inequality. Ideally we would like to see sustained gains for all and particularly large gains at the bottom. But we have made progress in arresting trends that were disturbing; overall these data suggest we have been doing the right things. In addition, it provides an optimistic message. We remain masters of our fate and are not, as some suggest, condemned to be buffeted by negative global or technological forces in the face of which we are helpless.

A New American Race?

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The 2000 census serves as a reminder that the time has come to drop the idea that Americans can be neatly divided into racial categories. In 1990 there were already nearly 10 million Americans who considered their racial identity as neither white nor black nor brown

nor yellow, but as “other.” The number of interracial children has quadrupled since 1970, reaching the two million mark. Given that the number of intermarriages is six times higher than it was in 1960, the number of interracial Americans is sure to rise sharply in the future. Indeed, sociologists predict that America will look more and more like Hawaii’s blended racial mix within a generation. A major step towards recognizing this development, and towards allowing its full sociological importance to unfold, requires that the U.S. census allow Americans to classify themselves as “multiracial.”

“Doctoring” the Count

The ways this matter has been mishandled so far deserve some attention. In the 1990 census, the government required Americans to box themselves into one of 16 racial categories. The main groupings were white and black, which accounted in 1990 for 92 percent of all Americans. (The remaining racially defined categories were Native American, Aleut or Eskimo, and several variations of Asian or Pacific Islanders.) The census did recognize in 1990 that a growing number of Americans are of mixed racial backgrounds, and that millions of other Americans who might be viewed as members of one race wish to be categorized as members of another—or even change their minds over the course of their life as to which race they belong. (There are very considerable differences in color and all other racial features within all racial groups, which makes the question of who is in versus who is not much more open-ended than is often assumed. For instance, many Hispanics who have dark skin do not see themselves as black, and many light-skinned African Americans do not wish to pass as white.)

The 1990 census allowed all these Americans, or for that matter anyone who wished, to use the label of “other.” It is hardly an attractive label; it suggests that those who do classify themselves in this manner are outsiders, people who do not belong. Despite the unattractiveness of this label, about 9.8 million Americans, 4 percent of the total population, chose this designation rather than be defined according to the established mono-racial categories. When the Census Bureau released the data for use by the government, it modified—some say cooked—the figures. It did so by eliminating the “other” category and reclassifying its members according to the mono-racial categories, as if the Census Bureau were saying what some rather

racist regimes have said: We will tell you what your race is. The motives for this troubling move are unclear. The Census Bureau argues that the modification allows for better comparisons with past data, when the category of “other” did not exist. But this does not explain why government agencies that deal with current distributions of funds by racial categories use the modified data. More about this soon.

Enter Politics

The question that we face now is if future censuses should prevent people from buying out of all racial categories and, if the answer is in the affirmative, what they may be called. Suggestions to include the multiracial category makes some African-American leaders furious. Abraham K. Sundiata, chairman of the Afro-American studies department at Brandeis University, sees here a drive to undermine black solidarity. He fears that in cities where blacks now hold majorities the new category will divide them and undermine their dominance. All of this will happen, he implies, because some African-Americans will somehow be forced into the new multiracial category. He disregards the fact that people will still be free to check the box of their choice, even if the new category is added.

Another reason several African-American leaders object to a multiracial category is that race data is used for the enforcement of civil rights legislation in employment, voting rights, housing and mortgage lending, health care services, and educational opportunities. They fear that the category could decrease the number of blacks in the nation’s official statistics, and thus undermine the efforts to enforce these antidiscrimination statutes, as well as undercut numerous social programs based on racial quotas. Indeed, if many members of various minorities choose to classify themselves out of these specially “protected” groups, the flow of public funds, set-asides in federal contracts, and affirmative action jobs would all diminish.

This fear was rather explicitly stated by Representative Carrie Meek during 1997 congressional hearings:

I understand how Tiger Woods and the rest of them feel. But no matter how they feel from a personal standpoint, we’re thinking about the census and reporting accuracy. . . . The multiracial category would cloud the count of [the] discrete minorities who are assigned to a lower track in public schools,

. . . kept out of certain occupations, and whose progress toward seniority or promotion has been skewered. . . . Lastly, Mr. Chairman, multiracial categories will reduce the level of political representation for minorities.

Meek is probably correct in predicting that if numerous Americans remove themselves from the black category, that some loss of funds will follow. But the social costs of the political gimmick of assigning people to a racial category that they seek to avoid are considerable.

Less Divisive

Even if the most far-reaching arguments against affirmative action and for a “color-blind” society carry the day, the option of dropping the whole social construction of race is simply not at issue now. However, there are strong sociological reasons to favor the inclusion of a multiracial category in the census (perhaps simply “multiracial,” or better yet, “non-racial”). We should also abandon the practice of “modifying” the racial numbers, and keep Americans in the categories they themselves choose.

Introducing a multiracial category has the potential to soften the racial lines that now divide America by rendering them more like economic differences and less like harsh, almost immutable, caste lines of racial categories. Sociologists have long observed that a major reason America experiences relatively few confrontations along lines of class is that people in this country believe they can move from one economic strata to another. (For instance, workers become foremen, and foremen become small businessmen.) Moreover, there are no sharp class demarcation lines as there are in Britain, where you often can tell a person’s class by the way they speak. In America many workers consider themselves middle class, dress up to go to work, and hide their tools and lunches in briefcases, while middle-class super-liberal professors join labor unions. That is, people “pass” class lines relatively easily. A major reason confrontations in America occur much more often along racial than class lines is that color lines currently seem rigidly unchangeable.

If the new category is adopted and if more and more Americans choose this category in future decades—as there is every reason to expect, given the high rates of interracial marriage and a desire by millions of Americans to avoid being racially boxed in—the new

census category may go a long way towards softening the sharply delineated lines among the races (especially black and white), and bring about a society in which differences are blurred. It will make it much more likely that the United States by the census of, say, 2030 will be more like Hawaii, where races mix rather freely, and less like India, with its castes. Racial lines will start to blur, and societal cohesion will be the beneficiary.

Skeptics may suggest that how one marks a tiny box on the census form is between one's self and the keepers of statistics. But, as this sociologist sees it, if the multiracial concept is allowed into national statistics, it will break out and enter the social vocabulary. It will make American society less stratified along racial lines, less rigidly divided, and thus more like one community.

The best indication that changes in the census may lead to much more encompassing changes in our social categories and social thinking is supported by the fact that these processes have already begun to unfold. In California, where our future is often previewed, there is already an Association for Multi-Ethnic Americans, and in several states legislation has been introduced to allow the multiracial category on school forms. At least two states, Georgia and Indiana, have required the multiracial category to be used by all their government agencies.

Unfortunately, the 2000 Census may be moving us in the opposite direction. It has abolished the category of "other" and instead offers Americans the opportunity to mark as many races as they wish. If the Bureau were to release the information referring to blended Americans as "multiracial" or "non-racial," it would encourage the nation to view itself as less divided. But if it rules in favor of those groups that seek to box people back into mono-racial categories, the Bureau will harden the social divisions that trouble America.

The Ultimate Question

At stake is the question of what kind of America we envision for the long run. Some see a complete blur of racial lines with Americans constituting some kind of new hybrid race. *Time* magazine ran a cover story on the subject, led by a computer composite of a future American with some features of each race—almond shaped eyes, straight but dark hair, milk chocolate skin. This new rather handsome breed

would take much more than a change in racial nomenclature, but such a change could serve as a step in that direction. Others are keen to maintain strict racial lines and oppose intermarriage; these same people often seek to maintain the races as separate “nations.” (The term nation is significant because it indicates a high degree of tribalism.) In a world full of interracial strife, this attitude—however understandable its defensive nature in response to racial prejudice and discrimination—leaves at least this communitarian greatly troubled. The more communitarian view seems to me to be one in which those who seek to uphold their separate group identities will do so (hopefully viewing themselves and being viewed as subgroups of a more encompassing community rather than as separate nations), but those who seek to redefine themselves will be enabled to do so, leading to an ever larger group that is free from racial categorization.

If a multiracial category is included in the next census, further down the road we may wish to add one more category, that of “multiethnic,” one which most Americans might wish to check. Then we would live to recognize the full importance of my favorite African-American saying: We came in many ships, but we now ride in the same boat.

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