

Rodríguez Ch. 4 “Whites and Other Social Races”

Main Point: Rodríguez uses the evolution of racial terms in the census over the last two hundred years to explore how the dichotomy of “whiteness” and “otherness” has been established in the United States. In the Constitution, the decennial census was created to provide appropriate representation and taxation. For counting purposes, three categories were established, “the free, slave, and Indian population” (67). These categories carried an explicit overtone of which “groups were considered to be part of the constituent population, and which were not” was created (67). She charts how the census focuses on color, how it reinforces the notion of the “one drop rule”, or how certain peoples, like Mexicans, become placed in the category of “other.” Through this discussion, Rodríguez establishes that because the census places such an emphasis on classifying race, it promotes the notion that race is objective and biological instead of subjective and social.

Central Issues and Concepts:

-Early Censuses: In 1790, the term “white” was included in the census. On the census, the category of white was further categorized by age and sex, whereas “slaves” were lumped in one category. Anyone who was not white, but was free was placed in the category “all other free persons” (69).

-The Evolving Bipolar Structure: By 1840, the third category was replaced by “Free colored persons” and “Foreigners not naturalized”, which further colorized the census. (70). While “other races” had previously been put in the not-white category, by 1850 Asians and Indians were given a specific classification. Mulattos were also given a separate category, but this caused confusion because there was no way to determine who was black, who was white, and who was mulatto. In the 1870 census, anyone who had a drop of African blood would be considered a mulatto. Also at this time, the census began to gather more detailed information about non-white groups.

-The Growth of a Racist Ideology: The continuing color classification of the mid to late nineteenth century in the census reflected the idea that race is biological. This notion was used to try to prove that certain races, like blacks and Indians, were inferior to whites. There was also a fear that if colored populations increased, they would “retaliate against what one census publication referred to as the “governing race”” (76). This fear caused free people of color to be given special attention on the census. By the end of the century, birthplace played a large role in the census because of the influx of immigrants. This demonstrated the desire to maintain the definition of whiteness and northern European identity (79).

-The Second Century: In the 1900 census, blacks and mulattoes were still separate categories. The category of “colored” became more extensive to highlight the idea that Asians, Indians, and blacks were separate from whites. Also, the 1900 census was the first time the term “race” appeared. By 1920, anyone with “mixed blood” would be placed in the color category as a way to further purify the category of “white” and solidify the dichotomy between white and non-whites. By 1950, the term “color” was replaced by “race.” Since 1970, the census has relied on the self-classification of race (85).

-*The Long Road Today*: The term “color” was used on the census for 150 years. By forcing people to just choose one race on the census, the government promoted the idea that race is pure and biological. The category of race is continuously being challenged because of globalization.

Key Quotes:

“These categories describe the population(s) from the perspective of those who have the power to select them, and in turn, they influence the way that populations see themselves” (65).

“The concepts of color and race were officially joined in the twentieth century and are the foundations of the bipolar structure that evolved” (66).

“But not being counted meant that a person had no official place in society and being calculated as a fraction of a free person meant that one was regarded as a different or lesser kind of person” (67).

“Having named the central category ‘white’ gave a centrality and power to color that has continued throughout the history of the census” (69).

“After 1820 and the shift to color categories, the elements of culture, language, religion, and mixture were compacted into a choice between whites and colored” (70).

“It is widely believed today that in the nineteenth century, a racist ideology (based on color differences) developed that served the purpose of rationalizing expansion, slavery, and class differences” (74).

“Thus, it appeared that the earlier ‘white’ and ‘colored’ dichotomy had begun evolving into a ‘white’ and ‘other than white’ dichotomy, with many more categories in the ‘other than white’ group” (78).

“Thus, ‘blood’ (and its effect on color) still seemed to be important, if not the principal, basis for establishing a person’s color, which in turn determined his or her ‘race’” (80).

“Paradoxically, the awareness that racial classification was socially constructed, that is, influenced by personal and social factors, led to a more rigid adherence to genetic ancestry, which further reinforced the hypodescent rule” (82).

“Thus, race was the primary means of identification, and ethnicity was subordinated, obscured, or combined with race” (82).

Questions:

1. Considering the modern purposes of the census, do you think race should even be included? Does including race in the census still promote the notion that race is biological?

2. Part of Rodríguez's thesis in this chapter is that the census mirrors how race is viewed at a certain time. What do the new developments in the census (i.e. self-classification, choosing more than one race) say about views on race at the present?
3. What is the difference between "color" and "race"? Why do you think this change in rhetoric happened? Does a change in rhetoric mean anything?
4. On 2/16, Whitney discussed how some people are trying to claim that Hispanics are white so white will continue to be the majority. How does this relate to Rodríguez's chapter? How does the idea that races are "pure" play out in today's society?