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Census as Self-Definition in America *

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After an introductory look back at the Roman census of Biblical fame, the special and unique position of the Census in the United States is emphasized. The paper then offers a view of American censuses, beginning with 1790, not as mere administrative devices but as specific manifestations of what may be termed national self-definition and redefinition. This is illustrated by the censuses offering significant insights into a number of major parameters of sociocultural change in America. These include the westward march of the Center of Population and the resulting redistribution of the population in the four present principal regions, as well as socioculturally significant shifts in employment patterns. They also make it possible for us to correlate ethnic affiliation with the level of education and family income. Naturally, the original constitutional (and ultimately political) purpose of the Census has been preserved in periodical reapportionment of House seats based on, and necessitated by, the population distribution figures provided by each new census. To the degree that House seat reapportionment reflects societal change, the Census can be said to participate significantly in the process of self-definition and redefinition of the United States as a nation.

"In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be enrolled. This was the first enrollment, when Quirinus was governor of Syria. And all went to be enrolled, each to his own city. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be enrolled with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. And while they were there, the time came for her to be delivered. And she gave birth to her first-born son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn".

The quote is from the Gospel according to Luke, chapter 2, verses 1—7, and it refers, of course, to the census of Caesar Augustus. It evidently reflects simpler times when individuals were seen as belonging to clearly defined lineages traceable to precise localities. So when the mighty state declared its intention to "enroll" its subjects, it did not come to them, but they were commanded to retrace their steps to their genealogical homes. Though most people in those days spent their lives at or near their birthplaces, the census proclamation must have clogged the roads with weary travelers cursing, below their breath, the whims of the distant Roman Caesar and his watchdog, the governor of Syria. Crammed inns and a number of roadside births were among the more obvious discomforts and hazards created by the census. We can almost imagine Joseph, covered with road dust at the end of a long day of travel, imploring the innkeeper to put him and his visibly pregnant young wife up for the night. And the innkeeper, sizing up the modest carpenter from Nazareth and telling him "Now I have this quiet and clean stable right in the back..." The upshot: Jospeh becomes father that very night, technically that is because theology intervenes and Mary has given virgin birth; the innkeeper is furious because of the commotion and the complaints over disturbed sleep by some of his best guests; and the Christ Child in the Manger is launched as a major iconographical item in Western Art, though few admirers of the scene are aware of its causal links with such a prosaic and highly secular event as a population census.

The census of Caesar Augustus was not the earliest on record in Palestine. The Old Testament tells us of two earlier, limited-scope censuses there (only of men able to fight), the first undertaken at Moses' bidding, the second at King David's command. Naturally, in either case the Bible dutifully mentions God as the real instigator of the effort.

So the first count, described in ch. 26 of the First Book of Moses (commonly and aptly called Numbers), has the Lord commanding Moses (26.2): "Take a census of all the congregation of the people of Israel, from twenty years old and upward, by their fathers' houses, all in Israel who are able to go forth to war". A little later in the chapter (26.51), we are informed: "This was the number of the people of Israel, six hundred and one thousand seven hundred and thirty". One is impressed by the precision implied, though the figure has to be seen as far too high for the time and conditions — a reflection probably of the official mythology, not to be excluded even at such an early stage in history. The second count (in 2 Sam. 24. 1—9), carried out some three centuries later, claimed with less precision that "in Israel there were eight hundred thousand valiant men who drew the sword, and the men of Judah were five hundred thousand" (for another impressive total, now of 1,300,000, if it is to be believed).

All these Biblical passages must have been read repeatedly by hundreds of thousands of members of a modern tribe who had all experienced individual exodus, looking for a new Promised Land across a formidable ocean whose waters never divided to let them pass and folded over Pharaoh's host — by the 17th or 18th century Americans. Aware of the unique position of the Good Book as a font of knowledge and an all-purpose moral authority among them, one might, indeed

should, wonder whether the Bible was an influence for or against a census among the settlers in the New World. King David's count would have certainly advised against any enumeration, for the Bible tells us that this royal enterprise incurred the wrath of Heaven that sent down a pestilence upon Israel. In the 17th and 18th centuries, such warnings were apt to be taken quite literally by what would now be termed fundamentalists, a definitely large portion of population then and increasingly significant nowadays. One can claim with reasonable certainty that hundreds of modern lunatic-fringe fundamentalists in the United States still make a determined effort to avoid census takers, any time the census comes around.

Also, the early American, like taxpayers from times immemorial (especially farmers), could be counted upon to nurture a healthy suspicion of any governmental snooping, colonial or federal.

Nevertheless, as the first full national censuses of modern times are viewed, one notices that the earliest such census in a modern nation was that of the United States (in 1790), followed by France and Great Britain (both in 1801), Prussia (1810) and Austria (1818), themselves trailed by Italy (1861) and Russia (1897).

The reasons for the United States having been the first among modern nations to conduct a national census are closely linked with the fierce debates during the Federal Constitutional Convention of 1787. Congress at that time consisted of a single house with every state having one vote. The one-state, one-vote principle was fine with the small states. The big states, naturally, wanted this principle replaced by representation in Congress to be determined by the size of population of each state.The Southern states further complicated the issue of representation by expecting the federation to accommodate those of their interests that they regarded as fundamental to their socioeconomic system. Southerners, in short, wanted their slaves to be treated as people, i.e. counted individually, for purposes of Congressional representation, but preferred to view them as property when apportionment for taxes was involved. Northerners, of course, had directly opposite ideas: they wanted slaves counted individually for purposes of taxation. This would have resulted in the Southern states paying a larger share of any federal taxes imposed according to population. Unfortunately, Northerners too had a limited vision of black slaves as people. They were not ready, in their turn, to count them individually for purposes of representation as that would have increased the number of representatives from the South in the Congress.

In the end, the federation was saved by the Great Compromise which found room in the resulting Constitution for all these clashing interests. The familiar solution, of course, was the Congress as a bicameral legislature, with a House of Representatives where representation was based on each state's population, and a Senate where each state had two senators irrespective of its population.

The issue of how to count black slaves was solved by another compromise acceptable to both sides. A concession was made to the Southern states whereby they could, for representation in the House, add to the number of free persons "three fifths of all other Persons" (read: three fifths of their slave population).

Though this formula is bound to strike many, on first reading, as callous, repulsive, or at least peculiar, it is, at the same time, an admirable instance of American pragmatism. Best summed up by the expression "if it works it must be good", this attitude so impressed Tocqueville that he elevated it (in *Democracy in America*) to "the philosophical method of the Americans".

Finally, the entire problem of balancing the opposing interests of individual states in representation and taxation was indeed ingeniously solved by making them both subject to apportionment as practiced in the House of Representatives. This neutralized the very human temptation by states' leaders to misrepresent population totals (inflating them for representation, under-reporting them for taxation). Or, as James Maddison wrote in *The Federalist*, through this provision "...the states will have opposite interests, which will control and balance each other; and produce the requisite impartiality".

A true impartiality, an effectively neutralizing apportionment, itself depends upon an objective instrument to measure a substance as elusive in parts as the American population of the time was. A population census was the obvious answer. As a consequence, the census won from the first the status of a constitutional device, indeed an institution, and was incorporated in the text of the Constitution of the United States (Article I, Section 2c):

> "Representatives and direct taxes shall be apportioned among the several States which may be included within this Union, according to their respective numbers, which shall be determined by adding to the whole number of free persons, including those bound to service for a term of years, and excluding Indians not taxed, three-fifths of all other persons. *The actual enumeration shall be made within three years after the first meeting of the Congress of the United States, and within every subsequent term of ten years, in such manner as they shall by law direct...*"

The very location of the word "enumeration", at the beginning of Article I in a seven-article constitution, amply indicates its constitutional standing and importance. No other major modern nation has accorded its census the honor of a mention, let alone stipulation, in the text of its constitution, though all of them, naturally, use population census findings for representational apportionment. Casting a pragmatic American eye upon the census as a quantifying device, but giving this device a constitutional dimension, the fathers of American Constitution lent it a binding force, a moral weight unique in modern constitutional history.

The stipulation that "the actual enumeration shall be made within three years after the first meeting of the Congress of the United States" was observed, and the first simple "enumeration" (only six questions were asked) was carried through. Its results are well known: the young United States was discovered to have a population just short of four million (3,929,214 to be precise, of which 697,681 were slaves). This was received with general disappointment, but President Washington reassured the nation by stating that "our *real* numbers will exceed, greatly, the official returns". The undercount, both as a social phenomenon and political category was thus promptly born.

The first census showed the 18 states, already expanded from the original Thirteen Colonies, as ranging from Virginia (with just under 700,000 people) down

to Tennessee with only 36,000 inhabitants. Rankings of states in those days were, naturally, different; so Maryland (with 320,000 people) and Connecticut (with 238,000) were among the large states (third-largest and fifth-largest). Today we think of them as small states and their rankings now are 19th and 27th respectively.

The census of 1790 also provides us with the first reliable figures of the ethnic and racial breakdown of American population:

English	49.2%	French	1.4%
Scottish	6.7%	Swedish	0.6%
Irish	7.8%	Negro	19.6%
German	7.0%	Other	5.3%
Dutch	2.7%		

The present ethnic and racial composition of American population is, of course, significantly different — with the share of blacks down to 11.7%, with important new categories such as Hispanics unknown in 1790, and with a significantly homogenized (read: de-Anglo-Saxonized) white population. But more of this later on.

And so, since 1790, every ten years, inexorably and with increasing complexity, the Census has come around for a total of twenty times now, both recording changes as completed processes and pointing them out as trends for the future.

Nothing illustrates this dual function better than the almost two-century-long march of the Center of Population of the United States, that imaginary point of balance among all Americans in their individual locations on the day of the Census. In 1790, with well over 120,000 Americans already beyond the great barrier of the Appalachians, and with the bulk of the nation spread between Maine in the North and Georgia in the South, the center of population was 23 miles *east* of Baltimore, Maryland, still in the Chesapeake Bay where Jamestown, the first permanent settlement in America had been established almost two centuries before. Following the westward expansion of the United States, the center of population moved steadily but slowly (20—60 miles with each census) almost straight due west. It was, however, a sluggish westward progress, indicating that the young nation had only thinly populated its new western territories, with the bulk of Americans still living in the East, the cradle of the nation. In 1810, with American territory reaching the Rockies and the United States being already two-thirds of its present size, the center of population was only 50 miles west of Baltimore (and still on this side of the Appalachians). In 1880, it had reached Indiana stateline just beyond Cincinnati and started moving across the southern portion of that state, taking sixty years (six censuses) to traverse the state. In the process, and after falling plum in the city of Bloomington in 1910, it veered slightly southwest, retaining this direction ever since and crossing the Mississippi in 1980. However slight, this change of direction can mean only one thing: there has been an internal shift of population southward,

beginning with the decade of the First World War and continuing ever since. Indicated by the Census as early as 1920, and confirmed by all following censuses, it seems to have been popularly perceived only in the sixties. It was then that an increased currency of the expressions "snow belt" and "sun belt" signalized, in my view, a raised consciousness about one's environment, the first stirrings of the new hedonism which, nibbling at the Portestant work ethic, was very probably part of the undoubtedly complex motivations for the said southward shift.

This shift was further confirmed by the findings of the 1980 census about the shares of population of the major regions of the United States. It was then that the combined populations of South (33.3%) and West (19.1%) — now 52.4% — for the first time exceeded those of Northeast (21.7%) and Midwest (26.0%). Although the fact of residence does not automatically make all of the 52.4% authentic Southerners or Westerners, especially the 5.2% who moved to the South or the West after 1970, they do give an immediate slant to our statistical, if not psychological, perception of the geographical makeup of American population. Of course, one should remember that the share of Southerners has been a steady 30—33% throughout this century, and that the present preponderance of the South and West is due to a rapid and now steady growth of the western population, from a mere 0.8% in 1850 and a still low 5.7% in 1900 to 13.3% in 1950, 17.1% in 1970 and 19.1% in 1980. With this trend continuing, it has probably exceeded 20% by now. One could, therefore, speak of a process of westernization of Americans as a people. Westward expansion of the past century has stopped only as a phenomenon of political history. Demographically, however, through internal migration, Americans are still on their westward march, though now listening to different drummers, urged on no longer by Manifest Destiny and plain land hunger or lust for that California gold, but looking for sunny skies, a more laid-back lifestyle and high-tech jobs (or rather any jobs).

Regional migrations can be quite dramatic, so over one million New Yorkers left Empire City for the Sunbelt between 1975 and 1980. But a steady internal migration of a different kind goes on simultaneously, along shorter geographical paths of the farm-to-town migration, or following the longer social routes of the city-to-suburb movement. As recorded by Census, the farm exodus has continued and the number of Americans who live on farms was cut in half: from 10.6 million in 1970 to just 5.5 million (2.4% of population) in 1980. However, the wider rural exodus, from "rural nonfarm" areas (the small-town America), seems to have been stopped, even slightly reversed. A total of 53.4 million Americans (or 23.6%) lived in these areas in 1980, a rise of 2.3% over 1970. Of course, this still makes 74% of all Americans urban dwellers, though over one-half of them live in suburbs.

We mentioned jobs as an important motivation in internal migrations. The Bureau of the Census, keeps constant track of shifts in employment patterns as important indicators of social change and trends. So, for the period of 1982—1985, the following highly indicative observations have been reported. Employment (read: demand) was growing for the jobs of: registered nurses (up 49%), cashiers (47%), elementary school teachers (37%), nurse's aids and orderlies (35%), waiters and waitresses (34%), general office clerks (30%), secretaries (30%), building

custodians (28%), truck drivers (27%) and sales clerks (24%) — to list ten jobs in top demand. What all this tells us is simply that America is in clear need of more service jobs over any other. The business of America today is not business, or manufacture, it is service. Two thirds of all employed Americans hold jobs in government, health care, communications, catering and trade.

Jobs mean income, and the Census Bureau findings provide a variety of income-based insights into American socioeconomic structure. A vertical breakdown of annual family income reveals as largest (35.1%) a middle-middle economic class, earning between $25,000 and $50,000. A lower-middle class, with an annual income of between $15,000 and $25,000, is next in size (25.2%). Together, they account for 60.3% of all American families. With families topping $50,000 per year added, we are dealing with two-thirds of the nation's families, best described as the great American Middle Class. The remaining 30.8% with incomes under $15,000, further reduced by 14.0% of the families below the official poverty line, leaves a meager 16.8% to fill the slot of the classical working class.

A horizontal (geographical) distribution can be as revealing. The mean annual household income, as established by the 1980 Census, showed Northeast and Midwest to be roughly equal ($21,449 respectively $21,261), but the South perceptibly lower ($19,703) and the West significantly higher ($22,667). So, we are still dealing with a basically agrarian South with lower earnings, and the West still holds palpable attraction. An anticipated relative lack of wealth in the South is confirmed through contrasting the highest and the lowest income-per-person areas. Six out of ten of census districts with the lowest income per person ($3,567—$4,986) are in the South (two in Texas and Mississippi and one each in Kentucky and Arkansas). But four of them are in the Northeast, more precisely in New York City: two in Brooklyn and one each in Harlem and South Bronx. South Bronx, a typical black ghetto district, holds an absolute record with the Nation's lowest income-per-person figure of $3,567. The highest income per person nationally, of $15,687, is literally only a couple of miles away, in Manhattan's 15th congressional district, including the affluent Upper East Side.

This is how census findings can help create perceptions, both true and vivid, about social phenomena. Te be sure, describing a society through census data ordered as extremes has its limitations. What, for instance, is one to make of a Newsweek magazine survey (January 17, 1983) of the 1980 census findings, informing the reader that Illinois has the most, and Hawaii the fewest, elected officials? That Illinois is the most and Hawaii the least civic-minded state? If New Jersey has the lowest and Nevada the highest auto-fatality rate, is Reno to blame? And what factor comes in for praise in New Jersey? Only Trivial Pursuit addicts could see the immediate usefulness of such intra-state information as the fact that Florida has the most lightning and the most inmates on Death Row. It is also exceedingly hard to see any correlation between the two facts, except for the inescapable statistical probability that a Death Row inmate in Florida is likeliest to be hit by lightning of all his colleagues in any other state (presumably while taking his constitutional in the jailyard, Nature's electricity thus beating man-supplied current to the punch). On the other hand, Nevada's highest alcohol

consumption — it *must* be Reno after all — and the already mentioned highest auto-fatality rate very probably correlate. But are we to conclude the same of New Mexico's highest proportion of both women drivers and speeding motorists? Finally, will the highest incidence of syphilis, reported by the 1980 Census to be in Louisiana, trigger off the catty remark: well, it's the *French* disease after all, isn't it?

There is almost no limit to the quantity and scope of socioculturally relevant numerical data produced by each decennial American census. We now know, after the latest census, that one-half of all American households had at least two cars (query: will the almost indecently low-priced Yugo nudge this figure perceptibly closer to three?). We further know, for instance, that adults with four years of college included 33% of Asians, 17% of whites, 8% of blacks. That one of every 12 households relied on welfare. That there was a growing female majority in the population (from 50.3% in 1950 to 51.4% in 1980). Et cetera, et cetera.

However fascinating all these data, whatever their entertainment value, we must never lose sight of the original, constitutional purpose of the Census. This was, quite specifically, the apportionment of seats in the House. Once this purpose was served by the first census of 1790, each subsequent census provided population figures for a reapportionment of those seats, so that they may accurately reflect the distribution of the people, and ensure equitable representation in keeping with the growth and spatial shifts of the population. The latest census (of 1980) filled that purpose by causing 17 Congressional seats to move to the South and the West. Though the total of seats in the House, fixed after the census of 1910, is 435 — which means that 418 seats were undisturbed by census findings — the loss of 17 seats to states in the South and, especially, the West had clear political implications, favoring Republicans at the expense of Democrats. The gain by states was: Florida 4 seats, Texas 3, California 2 and one seat each for Arizona, Colorado, Nevada, New Mexico, Oregon, Tennessee, Utah and Washington. The heaviest losses were sustained by New York state (5 seats), followed by Illinois, Ohio and Pennsylvania (2 seats each), and Indiana, Michigan, Missouri, New Jersey, South Dakota and Massachusetts (one seat each). The roll call of states is a telling illustration of how population loss instantly translates into a loss of political clout. The highest loss and gain, those of New York (down 5 seats) and of Florida (up 4) tie in directly: remember the information about one million New Yorkers leaving their hometown for Florida between 1975 and 1980?

In addition to this direct constitutional function, census data have been used by the United States government in a uniquely American manner. In a typically morally activist (read: ethically pragmatic) fashion, natural in a society with a fundamentally Protestant and populist heritage, census findings have been employed in recent years to establish affirmative-action qotas designed to rectify demographically detectable societal imperfections.

Let us illustrate this with a straightforward example, from E. J. Kahn's book *The American People* (Weybright & Talley, New York, 1973, p. 9):

> It is probably safe to assume that Alabama was not enchanted by a federal judge's ruling, in 1971, that its Department of Public Safety should start to recruit blacks and

> continue until they constituted 25 percent of this police force. The judge took that proportion because, according to the 1970 population breakdown by states, there were 903,467 blacks in Alabama — 26.2 percent of the population. By a bit more than one percent, the judge was giving the white supremacists a break.

However, hilarity, so often insufficiently removed from Man's best intentions, is a distinct possibility here too. Quoting again from the same source (p. 10), we learn that in 1972:

> The headquarters of the National Guard, in Washington, advised its offshoot in North Dakota that, because the 1970 Census had fixed the black population of that state at 2,494, the Guard there, in the interests of racial balance, should recruit twenty black members. This proved to be a problem. On examining the state's black population, the Adjutant General of North Dakota ascertained that 2,350 of the blacks already had military connections; they and their dependents were attached to an Air Force base. Of the remaining 144, more than sixty were women, who couldn't be of much help inasmuch as there were no WAC detachments in the guard out there. Among the fifty-odd black males of military age — over 18 and under 45 — more than thirty appeared to have been already recruited: They were black athletes in predominantly white colleges. That left only some twenty black males in the state who could even be approached to join up. Eventually, Washington relented and trimmed North Dakota's quota to a still-hard-to-fill ten.

This presentation opened on a Biblical note, so, observing the rules of graceful composition, let me attempt to conclude it using some relevant Biblical event. I want to refer again to King David's count. Unlike the earlier count ordered by Moses, when the Hebrews were still a wandering people in the wilderness of Sinai — so the arms-bearing men could readily be assembled and counted company by company and tribe by tribe — David's count involved a settled population. Census takers therefore went from home to home, from one end of Palestine to the other, and the counting took "nine months and twenty days". What makes this Biblical census relevant to our present concern is an intriguing modern aspect to it. The Bible, you see, indicates a degree of palace opposition to the census. Joab, David's commander-in-chief, is told by David (24.2: 2 Sam.): "Go through all the tribes of Israel, from Dan to Beersheba, and number the people, that I may know the number of the people". David's wish and his motivation seem perfectly reasonable for a warrior-ruler who had established a minor empire. Aware of the magnitude of the task, and probably thinking it not worth the effort, Joab tries to beg off by flattery, ending on a disrespectful note still startingly alive after 3,000 years: "May the Lord your God add to the people a hundred times as many as they are, while the eyes of my lord the king still see it; but why does my lord the king delight in this thing?"

The Bible does not elaborate upon the outcome, simply informing us (24.4: 2 Sam.): "But the king's word prevailed against Joab and the commanders of the army". A bit flat if you ask me, definitely lacking a punchline, for I can picture King David, leaning toward his disrespectful commander-in-chief eyeball to eyeball and telling him: "Why do I delight in this thing? Because, Joab, there is sweetness, nay sweet madness, in figures that *you* could never understand". This, of course, would have established King David, instantly and forever, as the original numbers freak. As to Joab, his Biblically recorded opposition to the noble effort of census-taking has already ranked him with the contemptible modern

vulgarian capable of asking: "But why go to all that trouble, why spend so much money when you could have gotten all the figures from the latest World Almanac for free!?"

POPIS STANOVNIŠTVA KAO SAMODEFINIRANJE U AMERICI

Poslije uvodnog osvrta unatrag na rimski popis stanovništva poznat iz Sv. Pisma, u radu se naglašava poseban i jedinstven položaj popisa stanovništva u SAD. Slijedi razmatranje tih popisa, počevši s prvim od njih iz 1790, ne kao običnih administrativnih postupaka nego viđenih kao specifične manifestacije nečega što bismo mogli nazvati nacionalnim samodefiniranjem i redefiniranjem. To proizlazi iz činjenice što popisi stanovništva omogućuju značajne uvide u razne osnovne parametre sociokulturnog razvoja u Americi. Među njima je trajno pomicanje tzv. populacijskog središta na Zapad, što uzrokuje stalnu preraspodjelu stanovništva između temeljnih regija SAD, kao i sociokulturno značajne pomake u raspodjeli zaposlenja. Popisi stanovništva omogućuju dovođenje u suodnos etničke pripadnosti sa stupnjem obrazovanosti i prihodom po obitelji. Naravno, izvorna ustavna (i u konačnoj liniji politička) svrha popisa stanovništva sačuvana je u periodičnoj preraspodjeli mjesta u Zastupničkom domu SAD, na osnovi (i pod prinudom) podataka o razmještaju stanovništva što ih pruža svaki novi popis. U onoj mjeri koliko ta preraspodjela odražava društvene promjene, može se reći za popis stanovništva da značajno sudjeluje u postupku samodefiniranja i redefiniranja SAD kao nacije.