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**FUTURE OF THE COLOR LINE:  
The Demography of Race in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

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## **FUTURE OF THE COLOR LINE:**

### **The Demography of Race in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

#### **INTRODUCTION**

Racial assimilation and racial stratification are processes that take place when populations are racially defined and come into contact within a particular society. Racial assimilation is a gradual process in which one set of cultural traits and historical genealogy is relinquished, and a new set is acquired through participation in the dominant mainstream culture. Racial stratification is the process of using race as a factor in the allocation of resources and power in a society and is a barrier to full assimilation into the dominant culture.

In this paper I examine the population dynamics of the changing color line in the United States. I begin by briefly outlining the racial dynamics of assimilation and racial stratification. I then turn my attention to describing the color line and its evenness in the United States in the past and future. Finally, I discuss the implications drawing the color line has had on the population of the United States.

#### **RACIAL ASSIMILATION**

The classical model of assimilation is described by a melting pot model.<sup>1</sup> The classical model assumes that immigrants arrive with a relative disadvantage vis-a-vis European America. They are culturally distant and distinct and lack communication and other skills. Thus, immigrants are initially clustered/segregated near the core of the city. However, the passage of time brings a withering of ethnic differences, and socioeconomic advancement translates into residential mobility/assimilation. This model

assumes that the immigrant group will become like the majority population, that is the white population. In the United States, the three principle forms of assimilation are residential integration, intermarriage, and the racial classification of children. Assimilation is race specific.<sup>2</sup>

In the United States, the population of European descent constitutes the majority, and, because they are the majority, researchers have viewed their behavior as the standards by which other groups should judge their own behavior. The development of this idea has occurred within a social context where non-European American behavior is seen as deviant. We would do well to challenge the general application of assimilation to all populations. To comprehend the population dynamics of the color line requires an understanding of racial stratification.

Racial stratification implies that different ethnic groups assimilate into particular races, and ethnic assimilation occurs among groups considered ethnically different. For example, immigrants from Nigeria and Ghana have assimilated into the African American race, and immigrants from Sweden and Ireland have assimilated into the European American race. In the racial assimilation of an ethnic group, physical distinctions are overshadowed by the myth of cultural and historical similarities. Likewise, Asians are not coming to the United States as Asians, they arrive as Chinese, Japanese, and Indian. Migrants from Latin American do not come to the United States as Latinos or Latinas, they come as Mexicans and Cubans. Ethnicity and race are confounded in the United States by history and by the legacy of dichotomous physical distinctions that were necessary to justify racial slavery and colonization. Whiteness, or Europeaness, identifies European origin populations in the United States despite the fact that they come from a variety of nations and cultures. Likewise, the physical distinction of blackness, or Africaness, identifies the African American.

The racial stratification perspective defines race as a socially constructed concept. Racial differences evoke somatic images that are related to social differences. Often these social differences are based on the concepts of ethnocentrism and social intolerance. Ethnocentrism is a social attitude that focuses on the virtue of a group's history and culture. It pits "us" against the "others," and is important for group glorification and solidarity. Social intolerance is social displeasure or resentment against a group that refuses to conform to an established practice and beliefs of a social group. A racially differentiated society characterized by both ethnocentrism and social intolerance is racially stratified.<sup>3</sup> The United States is a racially stratified society.

Racial classification is based on a belief that different racial groups originate in different geographical locations. Geographical origin give each racial group its dominate genetic pool and cultural origins--the source of its ethos. Africans did not come to America as Africans, they came as Akan, Yoruba, Ibo, and Wolof. Europeans did not come as Europeans, they came as English, Scottish, French, and Irish.

In the United States this process has been extremely important in the creation of the "white race." In the racial assimilation of an ethnic group, physical distinctions are overshadowed by the myth of cultural and historical similarities. Assimilation requires that the subordinate group recognize myths of historical similarities and accept the dominate group's culture and historical predisposition. The classic case of this kind of assimilation is the Irish in the United States.<sup>4</sup> A similar form of assimilation occurred among the African immigrants to the United States. Although the African slaves were in no position to perpetuate their own national/tribal identity, they were forced by their social conditions within the Americas to accept their designation as blacks or Africans. However, unlike the Irish, the African population continues to be racially stratified within the United States. In fact, the racial stratification of the African derived population

continues to be a major element of racial classification within American society.

As a concept, race requires that two or more distinct races be in existence. Thus, racial groups are always part of a system of race. "Race relation" refers to the contact between different racial groups. Ethnic relations are governed by processes of assimilation and race relations are governed by processes of racial stratification. Ethnic relations refer to the social interaction of two populations distinguishable on the basis of their culture and historical genealogy, however the importance of physical differences is not insurmountable. In the United States, the contact between two distinct ethnic groups may initially be governed by race relations. However, given *time* and *favorable social conditions* any physical differences are given decreasing significance, a common historical genealogy is adapted, and the subordinate group's culture is assimilated into that of the dominate culture.

## **DESCRIBING THE COLOR LINE**

Changes in the racial composition result from a combination of differential fertility, mortality, net immigration, and rules of racial classification. Differentials in fertility and mortality, or more specifically natural increase, had a significant impact on the early racial composition of the population. However, since the 20<sup>th</sup> century, differentials in the rates of natural increase have had a small impact on the racial distribution of the population. The most significant factor impacting the racial distribution within the United States is racial classification.

In the United States, all births, deaths and migrants are racially classified. Racial classification and immigration have had a particularly direct impact on the social conceptualization of race in the United States.

Figure 1 presents the changing racial composition of the United States from 1900 to 2020.<sup>5</sup>

[Add Figure 1 About Here]

The racial composition of the population of the Americas has been dominated by immigration. In fact, the arrival of migrants created the racial composition, and began the process of racial stratification. Historically, the most distinguishing feature of the racial composition of the Americas has been the growth of the African and European populations and the decline of the American Indian population. Immigration from Europe and Africa initiated the process. European immigrants and their descendants have dominated the racial makeup of the United States population since the eighteenth century. By 1900, the European population accounted for more than 88 percent of the total.

Since 1900, the African origin population has been about 12 per cent of the total population. This has been so even though the African American population has grown at more than twice the rate of the European origin population. This resulted in part from the high rate of immigration from Europe. The growth of the Asian and Latino populations from 1950 onwards has been equally important. The sudden appearance of the Latino population results from a new classification, Hispanic and Latino, being accepted in contemporary debates about race and ethnic difference around 1965. It is difficult to estimate the actual size of the Latino population for the period before 1950.<sup>6</sup> The majority of pre-1950 Latino people have been counted as white. Thus, they are found in the pre-1950 European population in Figure 1.

The Hart-Celler Immigration Act replaced the “race-based” national origins system that restricted migration from everywhere except Northwestern Europe. This Act set quotas of 20,000 per country and supported occupational skill preferences. The number of immigrants from Asia and Latin America increased substantially. Around 1950 the Latino and Asian populations began to substantially increase their relative proportions of the population, with the Latino population experiencing the most proportionate

growth. Following the Great Depression immigration from Europe declined. By 1990 the European origin population accounted for less than 80 percent of the total.

Changes in the racial distribution of the population has been concentrated in the Western and Southern regions. In the future, the Northeast may become as diverse as the South. In 1900, the south was the most diverse region in the nation. The high Racial Index of Diversity (RID) resulted primarily from the concentration of the African origin population in the South. By 1960, diversity had spread as the implications of the Great migration was felt in the Midwest and Northeast. Maps 1 through 7 present the RID of the population by region and year. The West and South are the most racially diverse regions of the United States. The Midwest is the least diverse area in the United States. The concentration of Asians and Latinos in the West and of Africans in the South has resulted in less diversity in the Midwest and Northeast. The concentration in the West and South are a result of the historical experience of racial dynamics in the United States, and the ports-of-entry for the recent waves of Asian and Latino immigrants. African Americans continue to be concentrated in the South. Latinos, Asians, and Native Americans tend to be concentrated in the West. The future of America is increased racial diversity.<sup>7</sup>

[Add Maps 1-7 About Here]

The past racial composition of the United States has important implications for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Figure 1 also presents the population percentages by race for the projected future. The proportion of the population which is descendent from Europe has been declining since the 1930s. In fact, the European American population is projected to experience a population decline after 2030. During the next 60 years the U.S. population is projected to grow more slowly than ever before, yet the racial distribution of the

population is projected to change more dramatically. The non-European origin populations are projected to dominate future population growth.<sup>8</sup>

## THE EVENNESS OF THE COLOR LINE

Routine racial classification started at the same time as the national census, which categorized the population by occupation, religion, place of birth, citizenship, and race, among other characteristics. Today, the public is served a steady diet of statistics and demographic analysis—often differentiated by race. These findings are accepted as the result of scientific methods of data collection and believed to be politically neutral. Racial classification is not benign. <sup>The social meaning of race affects</sup> *how* we interpret quantitative representations of racial reality. In measuring the color line I assume that race is not benign, but an indicator of racial stratification. Fluctuations in the color line indicate the persistence, not the degree, of racial stratification.

The magnitude of the color line can be seen as the amount of racial diversity. Population diversity is the distribution of persons along a continuum of homogeneity to heterogeneity with respect to a defining characteristic or variable. This basic idea has many applications in demography. Within this context a better way of seeing the color line is by the use of an index to suggest the magnitude of possible interracial contact. The Racial Index of Diversity (RID) measures the probability that two individuals chosen independently and at random from the population will belong to the same racial population.

Racial diversity is a function of *racial abundance* (the number of races in the population) and *racial evenness* (the evenness with which the individuals in the population are distributed among these racial categories).<sup>9</sup> My estimate of RID is constrained between 0.0 and 1.0, and describes the actual level of

diversity as a proportion of the maximum level possible with the specified number of races. Thus, for a population with an even racial distribution in the population, RID would equal 1.00. This measure like most diversity measures is an abstraction of reality because in human society both spatial distributions and interindividual encounters are often nonrandom events. However, within the limits of the assumptions, diversity measures do measure socially significant processes. Figure 2 presents the RID from 1900 to 2030 for the United States.

[Add Figure 2 About Here]

The Racial Index of Diversity provides an unbiased estimator of the probability that two individuals chosen at random and independently from the population will be found to belong to the different racial groups.<sup>10</sup> Most demographic research has focused on racial evenness. Racial diversity does not exist as an intrinsic characteristic of a population. Population diversity is a result of both social and biological processes. The social definition of racial diversity depends on the nature of racial classification and racial stratification. The estimation of RID answers questions about the probability of interracial contact. The RID increases as smaller populations increase in size, and it decreases as the largest population increases its size.

The RID summarizes the trends of racial diversity in the population. In the last fifty years we have witnessed a massive new transfer of populations to North America, particularly the United States, from Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean. These new streams of immigrants have resulted in increasing diversity. If current trends continue, the United States population will be more diverse than ever before.

## **THE RACIAL INDEX OF DIVERSITY BY REGION AND STATE**

A small number of states within these regions have populations with all the four largest racial groups (namely Asians, Africans, Europeans, and Latinos) represented in large numbers: California, New York, Texas, and Illinois. Maps 8 through 11 present the RID by state for the period 1990 to 2020.

[Add Maps 8 - 11 About Here]

The impact of the African American population on the Index of Racial Diversity is felt in the Southern regions of the United States. This is reflected in the presence of three Southern states among the more diverse states.

Ports of entry have served as gateways to racial diversity in recent times and suggest the patterns of diversity in the future. Florida, California, and New York have been the most common ports of entry for immigrants to the United States. Other non port states have also been large recipients of immigrants—such as: the District of Columbia, Texas, Illinois, Nevada and Washington. These states have attracted large numbers of Asians and Latinos by immigration and domestic migration. In addition to these changes, both New York and California experienced loses in the European origin population recently.

## **RECENT IMMIGRATION AND THE RACIAL INDEX OF DIVERSITY**

The United States is often thought of as a refuge for immigrants, and the criteria by which immigrants are absorbed into United States society embody some of the society's essential values. Immigrants arrive in the United States and are subjected to the system of racial stratification within the United States. This process has had a tremendous impact on the immigration policies within the United States and on the racial classification of individuals within the population.

The United States has consistently attempted to regulate the racial and ethnic composition of the immigrant population as part of its national immigration policy.<sup>11</sup> Race, national origin, and ethnicity have always been fundamental aspects of the selection of immigrants permitted to enter and settle in the United States. The major policy seems to have been to maintain the racial composition of the national population or to maintain the white population's majority. This policy found its fullest expression in the national-origin system for the allocation of immigration quotas. This policy excluded certain populations on the basis of region of origin. For example, the Asiatic Barred Zone Act of 1917 excluded various national populations from Asia. This exclusion did not end until 1952 when quotas for Asians were established on the basis of race or ancestry rather than birthplace. Another less drastic example was the more selective policy instruments used to curb southern and eastern European immigration. The Immigration Act of 1952 also introduced the occupational skills preferences.

The Hart-Celler Immigration Act attempted to eliminate the racially preferential nature of immigration legislation before 1965. The stated purpose of the bill was "the elimination of the national-origins system as the basis for the selection of immigrants to the United States."<sup>12</sup>

Before the Hart-Celler Immigration Act of 1965, the vast majority, over 80 percent, of legal immigrants to the United States were from Europe. Since 1965, the proportion of immigrants from Europe has substantially declined, while the proportions from the Americas and Asia have substantially increased. Asians dominate the legal-immigrant population; however, the magnitude of undocumented immigration is substantial, and most illegal immigrants come to the United States primarily from Latin America.

Immigrants from Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean have a conceptualization of racial identity that is different from the bipolar racial categories of the United States.<sup>13</sup> For example, Mexicans have a

racial continuum that runs from white to red, not from white to black as in Puerto Rico. Furthermore, the Puerto Rican continuum from white to black is different from the bipolar conceptualization in the United States. The Puerto Rican continuum may have more to do with culture than skin color.<sup>14</sup> Racial identification for Asians may not be based on a color continuum and may have more to do with social and political exigencies than with color.<sup>15</sup> For immigrants from the non-Hispanic Caribbean, Africa, and Europe, racial identification within the United States is clearly rooted in the history of the United States and these other geographical areas. Black immigrants from the Caribbean and Africa enter the United States as African Americans and experience the United States as other African Americans. Immigrants from Europe entered the United States as European Americans. It is a social transformation for their children and grandchildren to become white.

When people immigrate to the United States they are confronted with a system of racial stratification different from the systems they left behind. The racial stratification in the United States in many cases differs substantially from that in Asia, Latin America, Africa and the Caribbean. European immigrants at the turn of the century experienced a similar transformation in racial conceptualization. European ethnic groups were integrated into the European-derived white population of the United States and employ their ethnic identity as an option rather than an ascribed status, as it is for Africans, Asians, American Indians, and, to a lesser degree, for Latinos.<sup>16</sup> Immigrants must modify their actions to coincide with their host society's concept of racial stratification or face social isolation and dislocation. In the United States, racial groups are power groups, which stand culturally or racially as potential or actual antagonists.

Racial polarization is accepted by the native-born population regardless of race and has been important in the identification of the new wave of immigrants. Immigrants from the Caribbean and Latin

America have had to conform their notions of who is black and white to the racial conceptualizations prevalent in the United States.<sup>17</sup> Immigrants from the Asian and Latin American countries have been lumped together by the larger society as Asians and Latinos, regardless of national origin, and they have used this social ascription as a basis for the formation of a community of interest.<sup>18</sup> This identity formation is part of the dynamics of racial classification in the United States. In the 1940s, the League of United Latin American Citizens fought against Mexicans in Texas being classified as “colored”.<sup>19</sup> The League pressured politicians and government enumerators to classify Mexicans as white. As recently as 1980, the majority of Latinos racially classified themselves as white.<sup>20</sup>

The majority of Asians and a large percentage of Latinos are foreign-born. And the racial taxonomy of the United States differs from that of other nations. In the United States race is legally defined, however in reality race is a dynamic concept. Racially, each person is located on a continuum between white and black. The new wave of Asian and Latin American immigrants are challenging this definition. For example, in the 1990 Census, the majority of the 10 million people that chose the "Other, Not Specified" race category rather than one of the specified categories were Latino. Over 50 per cent of the Latino population answered other on the race question.<sup>21</sup> However, this 50 per cent represents a decline from previous censuses and may reflect confusion in 1990 census categories. This makes racial classification of the population difficult and projections by race suspect. Indeed the Latino population may be a sign of the future. The dynamic character of the racial classification of immigrants from Latin America have implications for our measurement of RID. Figure 3 graphically presents these implications. If we consider the Latino population as a single race then the diversity within the United States will reach the highest levels ever. However, if we consider the Latino population as part of the existing system of racial classification (white,

black, etc...) then racial diversity will increase but more modestly than generally anticipated.

[Add Figure 3 About Here]

The diversity within the so-called minority population is complicated by the problems of racial classification. How racial groups are socially classified has a tremendous impact on the racial composition observed by any scholar. The two principal problems in racially classifying Latinos arise from the large percentage of the Latino population that are immigrants and the different racial classifications within their country of origin. Many Latinos coming to the United States would be classified as whites in their country of origin. In fact, most Latino immigrants classified themselves as racially white within the United States prior to 1980.<sup>22</sup> In 1960 and 1970, over 95 per cent of the immigrants from Latin America were classified as white. In 1980, the census bureau broadened its racial classifications to allow the Latino population to indicate their "Spanish" origin. In 1990, the Census Bureau eliminated the "Spanish" origin category, however the immigrants from Latin America continued to classify themselves as other than black or white.

## **A FINAL WORD**

Oddly enough, racial isolation and antagonism have stimulated complacency and acceptance of racial competition and conflict. Often we associate individual and group physical differences with beauty, culture, and intellectual ability.<sup>23</sup> These associations are the hallmark of racial intolerance and conflict. Individual opportunities are limited by inequality of group opportunities, and African Americans continue to

be on the bottom.

For example, African Americans suffer from being among the most disadvantaged populations in American society. This disadvantage is a result of racial stratification. In *Black Wealth\White Wealth* Melvin Oliver and Thomas Shapiro,, We underscores the legacy of barriers to African American wealth accumulation at the individual and family level.<sup>24</sup> Likewise, the research of Brimmer suggests that the same obstacles limit the formation of African American businesses.<sup>25</sup> This research documents how racial stratification has been part of the economic system of perpetuating racial differences in economic well being. Often when we think of racial stratification we envision the difficulties encountered by the marginalized race. In the United States this means that when we think of a racial problems we imagine how racism has limited the opportunities of African Americans and Latinos. Racial stratification has not only limited the opportunities for Native Americans and Latinos, but racial stratification has increased the opportunities for European Americans. Brimmer estimates the current cost of discrimination against African Americans to be about 3.8 per cent of the GDP (or a whopping \$204 billion).

The focus on inequality and poverty without discussing the distribution of wealth, or the discussions of race without an appreciation of the lasting impact of race specific policies (such as enslavement or Jim Crow) distort the discussion. Likewise, a discussion of race without an appreciation of the impact of class differences within the African American, Latino American, Asian American and European American populations mistakenly presents race as a homogenizing phenomena. Future research might extend the discussion by examining the relationship between the Index of Racial Differences and other social and economic processes. At the community level these processes would include educational achievement of children, public finance (i.e. educational expenditures), and zoning policies. This research will help us

connect the issue of race with structural processes of exclusion and domination.

Much of current social policy (i.e. propositions 157 and 209) is moving in a direction inconsistent with the future diversity of the population. America suffers from being divided by race, divided by culture, divided by class, and divided by its own efforts to be different. If America does not embrace its diversity it will continue to be divided. Embracing this diversity requires that we rewrite the myths of the great democratic past and deal with some of the tragic hypocrisy of race then and now. The United States started with the racial conflict among European immigrants, enslaved Africans, and the colonially displaced American Indians. While we ignore this fact, the tradition of conflict continues to live among the descendants of these and newer racial groups from Asia and Latin America. Diversity could be a strength if we seize the opportunity and accept the challenge to provide every person an equal opportunity and equal benefit from their labor and participation in society.

## NOTES

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5. The source of data for the various Figures are as described below:

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6. The common ancestral ties to Spain and Latin America do not imply an underlying cultural unity among peoples of Hispanic origin (See Frank D. Bean and Marta Tienda *The Hispanic Population of the United*

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*States*. (New York: Russell Sage Foundation), Chapters 1 and 2 for an excellent discussion and summary of the issues surrounding the historical and contemporary problems of classifying the Latino population). Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, Cubans, etc.. are distinct populations with discernable characteristics. Also see JoAnne Willette et al 1982, "The demographic and Socioeconomic characteristics of the Latino Population in the United States: 1950-1980," Report to the Department of Health and Human Services by Development Associates, Inc. and Population Reference Bureau.

7. However, the projections presented in this paper may not be exact. Many members of the Latino population feel that they are members of the White race, and a smaller number feel they are members of the Black race. If these attitudes are built into our projections than what the future might look like becomes very different. Thus, if members of the Latino population are accepted as being members of the White race, than the future population would continue to be predominately European based. However, this scenario is blurred by the tendency for racial classifications to change and the inability of population projections to hold-up after five or ten years. It is rare for population projections for long periods of time to anticipate actual demographic processes. See Samuel H. Preston (1993) "Demographic Change in the United States, 1970-2050." In Kenneth G. Manton, Burton H. Singer, and Richard M. Suzman, (eds.), *Forecasting the Health of Elderly Populations*, (New York: Springer-Verlag), pp. 51-77.

8. Future population depends on many factors which are not necessarily taken into account in population projections. The actual future population is never identical to the projected population. For a discussion of these projections and their limitations see Dennis A. Ahlburg. 1993. "The Census Bureau's New Projections of the U.S. Population." *Population and Development Review*. vol 19(1):159-174.

9. Racial abundance and evenness are not necessarily positively correlated. It is possible for increases in racial evenness to accompany decreases in racial abundance. Racial diversity is an aspect of community structure not the importance of various groups to the community. A measure of community importance is better measured by group productivity. This could be measured by the changes in productivity which would occur after the removal of the particular racial category from the community. Productivity could be measured in cultural as well as economic terms.

10. If we consider a population in which each individual belongs to one racial group, and let  $n_1 \dots n_i$  be the number of individuals in the various groups (so that,  $\sum n_i = N$ ). The RID can be defined as a measure of the concentration of racial classification within the population. I define RID as

This equation works because  $.5N(N-1)$  is the number of pairs in the population and  $.5\sum n_i(n_i-1)$  is the number of pairs drawn from the same racial group in the population. If all of the individuals are concentrated in one population the measure would be 0.0. The basic measure of RID cannot equal 1 because the maximum possible value is a function of the number of subclasses included in the enumeration.

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11. Edward P Hutchinson (1981), *Legislative History of American Immigration Policy 1798-1965*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press), Pp. 478-491.

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