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Intro to Ethnic Studies

Concept Analysis Paper

Independence, Integration, and Identity: Jewish Racial and Ethnic Labelling in the US Census

Following the American Revolution, the first census in the newly-formed United States was taken in 1790, under Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson. In that earliest census, there were a mere three categories into which the population was divided: white males and females, all other free persons, and slaves. Over the course of the twenty-two censuses since then, the list of ethnic categories that are included or excluded from this relatively banal governmental procedure has evolved into a heated battleground for the discussion around racial and ethnic identity in the United States. As of the most current census in 2010, there are nineteen racial categories from which participants can choose in order to label themselves, and they need not limit themselves to a single option. While this is unquestionably a massive improvement from that inaugural census, the list currently provided still remains woefully incomplete. Where some of the available options are given multiple sub-groups in order to ensure the accuracy and specificity of identification, others do not even appear on the list. What makes that absence all the more distressing is that some of the absent labels include entire ethnicities and communities that have been actively present in this country since before its inception. One such example that sits as one

of the more complicated unanswered questions around ethnic labelling in the United States that of the Jewish ethnicity.

One of the greatest problems in understanding Jewish identity for both statistical and educational purposes is the common assumption that Judaism is a one-dimensional monolith: that is to say, that Judaism only belongs to one form of identity and that all those who identify themselves as Jewish must necessarily be referring to the same classification when using that label. This is a grave mistake, as Jewishness can be manifest in far more complex and multifaceted combinations. Rather than unilaterally being a religion, a culture, or an ethnicity, Jewish identity is comprised of some combination of the three. According to an article from *Haaretz* from September 2018, the number of Jewish people in the world has just passed 14.7 million, making up a mere 0.19% of the current world population. According to *Haaretz*, “[t]he figures were calculated by Professor Sergio Della Pergola, Israel’s leading expert on Jewish demography. They refer to what is defined as the ‘core Jewish population’ of the world – all individuals who identify in surveys as Jewish and do not have another religion. It also includes individuals with a Jewish parent who claim no religious or ethnic identity.” Thus, it is apparent that calculating these numbers necessarily had to involve the understanding that there is more than one uniform way in which people both label their own Jewish identity and are labelled by others, and that this must be taken into account when trying to categorize Jewish people in any larger context.

The 2005 documentary *The Tribe* also examines this phenomenon on a more personal and direct level. Over the course of some eighteen minutes, *The Tribe* provides an overview of some of the most pressing and enduring questions that challenge the contemporary Jewish person's sense of self and identity. Aside from the more visibly distinguishable Jewish communities based on culture, geography, and nationality, the film also addresses the wide spectrum of religious denominations that stand as both independent entities and also members of the same larger sociocultural unit. It is thus made apparent that, despite having shared origins, heritage, and traditions, the Jewish nation as a whole spans a variety of more traditional demographic categories. Towards the end of the film, the documentary focuses on the widely varying terms that Jews may use to self-identify; it is pointed out that for many people the term "Jewish" itself may be less important, and they may focus on labels such as American, feminist, or agnostic. One aspect of the conversation which must also be considered but is difficult to account for is those people who may be of Jewish ancestry or descent, but have lost a connection to that lineage and heritage as a side effect of forced assimilation. This diversity in taxonomy only serves to further complicate the discussion when Jewish people of all kinds attempt to explain their identities to the outside world in more formalized contexts, such as that created by the census.

In contrast with these multifaceted internal nuances, the relatively uniform external perception of Jews has undergone a bizarre transition over the course of roughly a century and a half. While Jewish people had been living in the United States since before its inception, those who came to America in the relatively early waves of Ashkenazi Jewish immigration from

Eastern Europe in the mid to late nineteenth century were understood by white Americans to be of a uniform and distinctly inferior race. Rising concerns over the threat that incoming immigrants posed to the racial purity of the dominant WASP society in America led to an increasing social interest among U.S.-born Protestant elites in race theories and eugenics, both of which were seen as a way to separate the wheat from the chaff and thus save white America from contamination by inferior races. The sentiments of this time are perhaps best summarized in Madison Grant's *The Passing of the Great Race*, which focused on Grant's fears of mixing among different European ethnicities-- in his eyes, a matter not only of race but of class. In her essay *How Did Jews Become White Folks?*, Karen Brodtkin notes that Grant claimed to have discovered "three or four major European races ranging from the superior Nordics of northwestern Europe to the inferior southern and eastern races of Alpines, Mediterraneans, and, worst of all, Jews" (Brodtkin 275). Brodtkin further quotes Grant as viewing the corruption of Jewish blood to be an essentially parasitic threat to all other racial groups, having written that "the cross between any of the three European races and a Jew is a Jew" (Brodtkin 275). This anti-Semitism, however, was hardly a unique phenomenon. Rather, it is apparent that it stood as one component in the larger anti-immigrant sentiment that targeted all newcomers from Europe and Asia whose mere presence in the United States and capacity to establish themselves in its socioeconomic landscape put the very definitions of whiteness and the middle-class status into question.

Following the two world wars in the first half of the twentieth century, the same anti-Semitic rhetoric used to alienate Jews was turned on its head. The events of the Holocaust

and the resounding defeat of fascism, in turn, caused anti-Semitism and anti-European racism to fall out of vogue in the United States. This set of circumstances would eventually combine to create an opening for Euroethnic groups to then shift their racial and ethnic status in the eyes of American society at large. Riding on the coattails of post-war economic prosperity and the opportunities afforded under the auspices of the GI Bill, many Jewish American veterans were able to enter the spaces of privilege previously closed to their parents and grandparents, namely academia and white-collar occupations. According to Brodtkin, “The 1940 census no longer distinguished native whites of native parentage from those... of immigrant parentage, so that Euroimmigrants and their children were more securely white by submersion in an expanded notion of whiteness. (This census also changed the race of Mexicans to white [U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1940:4])” (Brodtkin 278). Suddenly, European ethnic minorities were being utilized as the poster children of the American Dream: with time and hard work, it would be possible for all ethnic groups to access middle-class prosperity.

However, it is equally important to note that this paradigm shift did not come as a result of some heartfelt altruistic epiphany. At the very same time as Jewish Americans were beginning to first access the trappings of white and middle-class privilege, the GI Bill’s benefits were being actively and systematically denied to African American and women veterans by delegitimizing their service. Women’s units were not being recognized as not being actual parts of the military, while African Americans experienced a disproportionately high rate of dishonorable discharges-- both of these being bureaucratic ways of justifying denying these veterans their GI Bill benefits. Brodtkin does not mince words when explaining the reasoning behind these governmental

actions, stating that “[t]he record is very clear that instead of seizing the opportunity to end institutionalized racism, the federal government did its best to shut and double seal the postwar window of opportunity in African Americans’ faces... [federal GI Bill] programs reinforced white/nonwhite racial distinctions even as intrawhite racialization was falling out of fashion” (Brodkin 281).

This sequence of events has created a puzzle of intermingled privilege and oppression that forms the crux of the Jewish ethnic experience in the United States. On one hand, Jews in the United States have been afforded access to social mobility and white privilege through assimilation and affirmative action; on the other hand, systematic and social anti-Semitism has not disappeared from the American landscape, only gone underground and hidden itself in the coded language and arbitrary definitions associated with artificial, conditional whiteness. In Brodkin’s words, “The myth that Jews pulled themselves up by their own bootstraps ignores the fact that it took federal programs to create the conditions whereby the abilities of Jews and other European immigrants could be recognized and rewarded rather than denigrated and denied” (Brodkin 281-282). It is that sequence of events that oftentimes leads to the more contemporary assumption of all light-skinned ethnic Jews being essentially white for the purposes of legal or social categorization. Oftentimes, that relatively recent social mobility ends up being weaponized in order to delegitimize or dismiss discussions around anti-Semitism, both implicit and explicit, from the public sphere under the assumption that ethnically-fuelled violence and discrimination cannot happen to those who are perceived as white. Rather than simply claiming that Jews are or aren’t white on the basis of privilege or phenotype, it is crucial to understand that the Jewish

association with whiteness in the United States is almost entirely externally constructed. To this day, the attempts to categorize or define Jewish ethnicity within the confines of American conceptions of race for the purposes of a census remain clumsy at best and harmful at worst, ignoring or even erasing the complex and ongoing histories that surround the question of Jewish identity in the United States.

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