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The Great Demographic Illusion: Majority, Minority, and the Expanding American Mainstream

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The Great Demographic Illusion: Majority, Minority, and the Expanding American Mainstream, by **Richard Alba**. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020. 336 pp. $22.95 paper. ISBN: 9780691201634.

The Great Demographic Illusion: Majority, Minority, and the Expanding American Mainstream is a must-read for everyone. The "demographic illusion" that Richard Alba alludes to in the title is the now well-known assumption that the United States is on the verge of becoming a majority-minority nation. In other words, the days of there being more "whites" than any other ethnic/racial group in the country are coming to an end. This widely accepted demographic assessment has incited outcries among white supremacists and has been used by Donald Trump and others to inject ever more overtly racist points of view into the election process. But what is the basis of this assessment of what the future will look like, and is it true?

Answering these questions is what Alba's book is all about, and the story is complex. In this review I will mainly be summarizing his research and conclusions because I do not have a single criticism of his work, only applause for what he has accomplished and support for his ideas about how society—not just social scientists—should move forward.

The origins of the demographic illusion are population estimates and projections undertaken by the U.S. Census Bureau, which are based on the ethnic-racial categories used in the decennial censuses and in other surveys undertaken by the Census Bureau and other government agencies. The problem is that those categories do not always accurately reflect how people perceive themselves, nor how they are perceived by others. Put another way, the racial-ethnic structure of the United States is not accurately represented by the Census Bureau. The resulting estimates and population projections paint a picture of an increasingly smaller white majority being "replaced" by minority group members. Alba argues, as have I (Weeks 2021) and as have Myers and Levy (2018), that this is illusory—it does not match what is happening in the real world.

Alba reminds us that every decennial census in the United States (which is mandated by the Constitution as a means of apportioning seats in Congress) since 1790 has asked about race, although the categories have changed considerably over time as the demography of the country has been altered, especially by immigration. Indeed, the biggest changes in the census questions have occurred since the 1965 changes in immigration laws that opened doors that had been largely shut for several decades. Also, prior to the 1960 census, race was determined by the census enumerator, rather than by self-response. The latter method began in 1960, when the Census Bureau for the first time relied heavily on mail-out census questionnaires, rather than hiring enumerators to collect all the data in person.

In 1970, under the Nixon administration, the term "Hispanic" was created to reflect

people especially of Mexican, Cuban, or Puerto Rican origin. That was also the first year that the decennial census included both a short form, which asked the basic questions about population and housing characteristics, and a long form, which asked a more detailed set of questions. Everyone got the short form, but only a sample received the long form. Included on that 1970 long form was a question about a person's Hispanic origins that was separate from the race question. Every subsequent census has had the Hispanic question and the race question included on the short form to be asked of everyone. Note that in 2005 the American Community Survey was implemented to take the place of the census long form, and, of course, it includes the Hispanic question and the race question.

The Hispanic question asks you to respond *yes* or *no* to whether you are of "Hispanic/Latino/Spanish origin." In case a respondent is not sure, several examples are given, including Mexican, Mexican American, Chicano, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Salvadoran, Dominican, Colombian, Guatemalan, Spaniard, or Ecuadorian. Notice that an immigrant or descendant of immigrants from Spain is clearly identified as "Hispanic" and will be labeled as a "minority," as I note below. If Mexico's verifiably richest person, Carlos Slim, were to migrate to the United States, he too would be a member of the Hispanic minority group, even though he is a descendant of migrants from Lebanon to Mexico.

The Hispanic question is followed by the race question, where you are asked to check one or more boxes. The broad categories include White, Black or African American, American Indian or Alaska Native, Chinese, Filipino, Asian Indian, Vietnamese, Korean, Japanese, Other Asian, Native Hawaiian, Samoan, Chamorro, Other Pacific Islander, and, finally, Some Other Race.

The use of two separate questions, with multiple ways to identify people, has created a lot of confusion both in the collection and in the interpretation of the data, and of course that is what Alba is digging into. The Census Bureau responded to these concerns in 2015 by testing a new single question that included both ethnicity and race, while still allowing people to check more than one box to indicate various degrees of identity. The Bureau judged the results to be a success and planned to use it in the 2020 census, but the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) declined to let them. The argument, pushed forward by civil rights activists, was that the multiple classifications people were allowed to choose for themselves might dilute the ability to fight discrimination in employment, housing, voting rights, and other aspects of American society.

In 2020, the OMB made it clear that the two-question format would remain throughout the collection of data by the U.S. government and that Hispanics (regardless of their response to the race question) and non-Hispanics who chose any racial category other than "White" were to be considered members of the "minority." Thus, not only would a person who indicated they were "Black or African American" be considered a minority, so would a person who checked more than one race category, no matter what those categories might be. Thus, all mixed-race persons were to be considered as "minority." This has obviously contributed to the idea of a society split between "majority" (non-Hispanic Whites) and "minority" (everyone else). As a result of the 1965 Immigration Law, the geographic origins of people living in the United States have changed a lot. And when OMB pushes the Census Bureau to fit people into a single race/ethnic category, even when they may not see themselves in that way, it creates a problem.

Much of the complexity of identity is a result of increasing levels of ethnic-racial mixing in children being born in the United States. An important aspect of Alba's book is his own analysis of birth records that demonstrates intermixing of couples and thus of their children. He is instrumental in uncovering this major demographic shift that has not been well captured by the population estimates and projection methods of the Census Bureau because they continue to assign people to a single category, such as "Hispanic," even if they also check that they are white. If they check that they are not Hispanic, and also check that their race is white—and they don't check any other boxes—they are categorized as

''non-Hispanic White.'' It is this group, in particular, that is typically thought of as representing the mainstream. People who check that they are Hispanic are excluded from the mainstream, even when they also check that they are ''White.'' We can look at the example of Puerto Rico and Loveman and Muniz's (2007) famous study showing how Puerto Rico ''became white.'' Data from the 2020 census show that though 99 percent of Puerto Ricans indicate that they are Hispanic, 60 percent indicate that they are ''White alone'' (meaning that they checked ''White'' and did not check any other race category), and 69 percent are either ''White alone'' or ''White in combination with another race.'' The same is true on the mainland, where 19 percent of the population in 2020 considered itself to be Hispanic, but 65 percent of these respondents considered themselves to be ''White alone.''

Alba spells out the confusion about identity throughout the book, but let me quote from pages 58 and 59, where he discusses

> rapidly increasing mixing in families across major ethno-racial boundaries and the resulting surge of young Americans who come from mixed family backgrounds. Of course, ethno-racial mixing is nothing new in the United States and was observed as early as the colonial era. In the post-World War II period, the rise of marriage on a large scale across ethnic and religious lines among whites played a leading role in the story of mass assimilation, which forged a white mainstream that included the descendants of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century immigrants from Ireland and southern and eastern Europe. Throughout America, moreover, whites' dominant status has been expressed in sexual encounters across racial lines that have produced children, particularly between white men and minority women. When these children were mixed white and black, they were consigned to the African American population by virtue of the ''one-drop rule.'' When the children were mixed white and American Indian, they had a greater chance of being absorbed into the white mainstream. . . . [D]emographic data in their current state fail to adequately grapple with mixing and, as a result, seriously distort contemporary and near-future ethno-racial realities.

Alba's research shows that 14 percent of births in the United States in 2017 (the most recent year available to him as he was writing the book) were to mixed ethno-racial couples, and three-fourths of those involved a white-minority parent composition. He notes that this is a higher fraction of births than Asian-only births and nearly as high a fraction as Black-only births.

Here in the twenty-first century, racial and ethnic changes have become so substantial that Anthony Perez and Charles Hirschman (2009) refer to the phenomenon of ''emerging American identities,'' while William Frey (2018) labels it a "diversity explosion." The "diversity explosion" has also created what we might call "diversity confusion," because the data collected by the government can be organized in several different ways, each of which tells a somewhat different story (Prewitt 2018), and because diversity is not just a function of "race" or "ethnicity" but also one's social and geographic background. This is a point made very strongly and persuasively by Alba throughout his book.

The mainstream is being remade especially by the current younger population—Alba singles out Generation Z (people born since 1996)—which is composed of an ever-larger proportion of people who are mixed in their ethno-racial background. The evidence that Alba marshals for this idea comes especially from survey data showing that individuals with minority-white family backgrounds are becoming part of the mainstream. They resemble their white-only peers in terms of education, income, friendship networks, and places of residence. This is most likely to be seen among families composed of Hispanic and non-Hispanic Whites, and Asians and Whites. Yet, even while this process of assimilation is occurring (as I discuss below), there is still discrimination against individuals of mixed Black-White heritage, and the strongest levels of discrimination continue to exist against Blacks and against

Native Americans who live on or near reservations. The point that Alba is trying to drive home is that ''minority'' is not a simple category, just as ''majority'' is not a simple category. The world is increasingly more complicated than that, not just in the United States, but in all countries experiencing immigration.

Alba's discussion of race theory compared to assimilation theory as explanations for what is happening with respect to race relations in the United States and elsewhere is his most important theoretical/conceptual contribution. He notes that ''[R]ace theory (or critical race theory) posits that the cardinal features of race as a social characteristic arise from the positioning of groups within a hierarchical power structure involving white domination of minorities'' (p. 139). He goes on to point out that a critical weakness of race theory is that it ''has been elaborated mostly in terms of the African American experience. Its fit there unfortunately is all too obvious, but its application to some other nonwhite minorities is more questionable'' (p. 142). There is a tendency to think of anyone who is other than non-Hispanic White as a ''person of color'' subject to racial subjugation. Alba's argument is that this is not necessarily the case—the situation is more complex (and yes, I keep repeating that word for emphasis!).

Alba feels that many scholars are prone to view assimilation theory as being in opposition to race theory. The basic idea of assimilation theory is that people who are not non-Hispanic Whites need to change their behaviors and attitudes in order to be more White, so to speak. This applies especially to immigrants, but the idea extends as well to African Americans and Native Americans who were forced into subjugation, rather than voluntarily entering a new country. Alba then reminds us of the newer version of assimilation theory—''neo-assimilation theory''—that he and Victor Nee have developed (Alba and Nee 2003). This views assimilation as:

> the decline of an ethnic [or racial] distinction and its corollary cultural and social differences. ''Decline'' means in this context that a distinction attenuates in salience, that the occurrences for which it is relevant diminish in number and contract to fewer and fewer domains of social life. Individuals' ethnic origins become less and less relevant in relation to the members of another ethnic group (typically, but not necessarily, the ethnic majority group): individuals from both sides of the boundary see themselves more and more as alike, assuming they are similar in terms of some other critical factors such as social class; in other words, they mutually perceive themselves with less and less frequency in terms of ethnic categories and increasingly only under specific circumstances. (pp. 145–46)

The key here is that everyone changes over time—members of the ''majority'' along with members of the ''minority''—and in that process the majority-minority difference is attenuated. We see each other as people, not just as categories. In this process, the definition of who is in the mainstream broadens and becomes more inclusive. This is where the neo-assimilation theory helps explain what is going on, while at the same time the race theory reminds us why Blacks and Native Americans continue to face discrimination and are more likely than others to be excluded from the mainstream.

Alba is not content just to explain how the mainstream is expanding in ways that are different from the Census Bureau's misleading demographic estimates and projections. He also steps into the policy arena to discuss the key role played by increasing income/wealth inequality in keeping people out of the mainstream. This is an issue that has long been on the radar of social scientists, and it is getting worse, not better. It feeds into the concept of zero-sum mobility, where one person's success comes at someone else's expense. This generates the idea that life is a contest between majority and minority, where the latter's success can only be had at the former's expense. Helping to increase the size of the economic pie and then spreading those resources around, as happened in post-World War II America, attenuates the sense of competition and allows the mainstream to expand in size, thus creating an atmosphere of cooperation and overall improved well-being. And, of

course, Alba strongly recommends that the Census Bureau revise its race-ethnic classification system and then redo its set of population estimates and projections accordingly. That will help convince people that the mainstream really is increasing, rather than the other way around.

Let me end this review of Alba's terrific book with the reminder that we humans are animals, and other animal species cope with some of the same issues of who should associate with and/or dominate whom. As I was writing this review, I ran across an article in the New York Times by Asher Elbein, about "Why Chimps and Gorillas Form Rainforest Friendships." The story draws on recently published research by Crickette Sanz and her colleagues (Sanz 2022):

> "They're not spending all of their time together, but they're definitely coming together more consistently and regularly than we'd anticipated," Dr. Sanz said. "These social ties are not what we'd have been expecting if these were just chance interactions in a foraging landscape . . . . The presence of peaceable interactions between two species of great ape has intriguing implications for our own evolutionary history. Anthropologists have often assumed that various species of hominin actively competed with one another," Dr. Sanz said. But if chimps and gorillas are any indication, humanity's ancestors may also have come together to share resources on the landscape—a possibility hinted at by the amount of interbreeding between different hominin species (Elbein 2022).

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