ON THE PROFESSION

Race Counts

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Should LASA gather data on the ethnic and racial composition of its membership? And if it does gather such data, what racial and ethnic categories should it use?

The main argument against gathering such data is that all racial identities, and many (perhaps most) ethnic identities, are the creation of post-1500 Western imperialism. Nowhere in the world is that unhappy past more visible than in Latin America, where present-day black, brown, indigenous, mestizo/mestiço, ladino, white, and other racial and color labels have deep historical roots in the experience of Spanish and Portuguese rule. (Wade 1997) By asking its members to apply those labels to themselves, will LASA be working to further reinforce and cement in place a colonial inheritance that most of us would prefer to leave behind?

Our preferences are one thing, however, and the social realities with which we live are quite another. Racial identities, practices, structures, and prejudices are as deeply embedded in societies today as they were one, two, or three centuries ago. While having little or no basis in biology, they have very strong foundations in historical and cultural memory and present-day social practice. Racial identities and hierarchies will not disappear during our lifetimes. We therefore need to pay close attention to them, to study them, and to ask questions about them.

Statistical data on race and ethnicity are a principal tool for such study and analysis. Societies that gather census or survey data on race are in a far better position to identify, and try to remedy, patterns of inequality than societies that do not. Racial data are also powerful weapons in the hands of groups and social movements seeking to combat racial inequality. Census data demonstrating the extent and consequences

of racial inequalities in education played a central role in the 1954 Supreme Court decision overturning segregation in the United States. Data on racial inequality in education, earnings, employment, life expectancy, and other social indicators have proven equally valuable to activists pushing for racial remedies in Brazil.

For all these reasons, the UN, World Bank, Inter-American Development Bank, and other international organizations have called on Latin American governments to add racial data to their censuses and household surveys, and in recent years some governments have responded. The resulting data are an indispensable resource to scholars, activists, and policy makers seeking to understand and remedy patterns of inequality in their countries. (Ferreira 2002; Putnam 2004; DANE 2005)

Does it make sense for an academic association to gather racial data on its members? My own disciplinary association, the American Historical Association, believes that it does. In addition to gathering data on its members, the AHA also tracks the racial composition of students earning Ph.D.'s in history at U.S. universities each year. Those data show some interesting changes over time. Minority representation (African Americans, Hispanics, Asian-Americans, and Native Americans) among new history Ph.D.'s (those earning Ph.D.'s in a given year) was at its highest in the late 1970s, peaking in 1979 at 16 percent. Minority representation among new Ph.D.'s then declined in the first half of the 1980s to 10 percent, rebounded in the second half of that decade (to 14 percent in 1987), fell again in the early 1990s and has been on the increase since 1993. In 2004, the most recent year for which published data are available, 15 percent of new Ph.D.'s in history were earned by members of racial and ethnic minorities—a level slightly lower

than 25 years earlier, but considerably higher than the early 1980s. (Townsend 2002; Hoffer 2005: 49)

AHA gathers such data as part of its general mission of tracking trends in the historical profession. That mission, however, is somewhat different from LASA's. Though it seeks actively to promote international exchange and collaboration among historians around the world, AHA's primary role is to represent the interests of the national historical community in the United States. LASA was founded in the 1960s with a similar goal: to represent the field of Latin American Studies in the United States. But it has evolved greatly over time and now aspires to serve a genuinely global community of scholars who study Latin America.

LASA's increasingly international character greatly complicates the issue of gathering racial and ethnic data. As much distinguished scholarship by LASA members has shown, ethnic and racial labels are a vast conundrum. A baffling mixture of vague indeterminacy and rock-hard specificity, their use is dependent on innumerable social and cultural cues and contexts; as a result, they prove to be highly variable by time and place, so that the same word can have quite different meanings and applications in different moments and settings.

This is even more the case when one crosses national boundaries. Latin American members' primary ethnic identification when they are in the United States—Hispanic— does not exist in their home countries. Conversely, my own ethnic identification in Latin America, as explained to me jokingly by an Uruguayan friend—"más gringo no puede ser"—disappears when I return to the United States and am surrounded by people who are, in fact, even more gringo (less

familiar with Latin America and less tuned into local usage there) than I am.

What racial and ethnic identifiers would LASA ask its members about: the ones applied to us when we go abroad, or the ones we use in our home countries? Probably the latter. But in either case, how helpful will it be to know the racial and ethnic composition of this highly diverse, multinational community of scholars? What use will we make of the findings? How will we even evaluate the findings? What if, for example, we find that members of LASA who identify themselves as white outnumber members who identify themselves as non-white by a factor of X? Against what standard do we measure X? Against the racial and ethnic composition of the countries from which LASA members come (most of which lack census data on race)? Against the ethnic and racial composition of other academic associations (most of which, again, probably lack such data)? If against countries, do we add those countries together to produce a hemispheric total? Do we trace national groups of members back to their countries of origin? Or do we look somewhere else entirely?

Meanwhile, to what government or institution do we take our findings? Toward what purpose, and with what policy recommendations? After the last 20-30 years of agitation by indigenous and black movements, what Latin American governments are unaware that nonwhites are under-represented in higher education in their countries? How much substance would data on LASA members really add to those debates?

But still, one is curious: what ethnic and racial terms *would* LASA members use to describe themselves? How many such terms would they use, and what kinds of terms? And how would those terms correlate, if at all, to other social markers (national origin, gender, income, etc.) recorded on the membership form? One wonders what such data would show, just as one wonders what racial census data would look like in countries that do not currently gather them.

If LASA were to gather such data, what racial and ethnic terms would we ask members to use? Even within national communities, which have at least some basic shared understandings of racial labels and their meanings, the politics of racial labeling and categorizing can be highly contentious. (Nobles 2000) In a cross-national, cross-cultural organization like LASA, this will be even more the case, with high potential for miscommunication and misunderstanding. Nevertheless, there is sufficient convergence among racial categories used in American (in the hemispheric sense) censuses to suggest the following categories as a starting point for discussion:

Afrodescendiente/afrodescendente/ African-American

Asiático/asiático/Asian

Blanco/branco/white

Indígena/indígena/Native American

Mestizo/mestiço (or moreno)/racially mixed

Otro (especificar)/outro (especificar)/ other (specify)

Another option would be to use a completely open-ended format, with no pre-established categories. Rather, members would be asked to enter whatever racial/ethnic term or terms that, in their minds, most accurately describe them. The advantage of this procedure is that it provides maximum freedom to respondents and more accurate information on how they see themselves; the potential drawback is that the resulting diversity of responses might be so great as to make analysis of the data very difficult. When an open-ended approach of this kind has been used in Brazilian surveys and censuses, respondents have replied with over 100 racial and color labels. However, three-quarters of respondents assign themselves to one of two categories (white or *moreno*), and another 22 percent to five other categories. (Telles 2004: 82-83) One wonders whether LASA members would display a similar tendency to cluster in a few common categories.

LASA members would also be free, of course, not to respond to this question, and some would doubtless take that option. Members from Brazil, Canada, the United States, and other countries that routinely gather data on race or color are accustomed to selecting racial labels for themselves; but members from countries that do not gather racial data may bridle at such a request. Which brings me to a final suggestion: before deciding whether to gather racial and ethnic data, LASA needs to consult its members. This proposal cannot be imposed from above; rather, it needs to be put to a vote and decided democratically. I am a firm believer in the value and importance of racial data; but like racial labels themselves, that value varies in different settings. Governments and official agencies badly need racial data, since they can't keep make informed decisions on social and economic policy without them. International professional associations' need for such data is less pressing. With the *Otros Saberes* initiative, and its various Sections and Congress tracks devoted to research on racial and ethnic issues, LASA is already hard at work in this area. If its members want to supplement those initiatives by gathering racial data on themselves, then fine, let's do it. And if they don't want to gather such data, then fine, let's not.

Having attended many Congresses over the years, and not a few *Grandes Bailes*, I

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cannot resist closing with some hypotheses to be tested against the data that LASA may someday gather.

(1)For reasons given above, I suspect that non-responses will be significant, perhaps as high as 20-25 percent.

(2)Among those who do respond, how many will opt for "white"? I would guess 70-80 percent. Two factors might hold that number down: first, some respondents might decide to enter their nationality (e.g., Argentine, or Brazilian) rather than a color or racial term. This would correspond to a tradition in much of Latin America of conceptualizing nationality in terms of a national "race." Second, some respondents may want to signal their support for Latin American ideals of race mixture (see below, point 4).

(3)Afro-descendent (or variants thereof) and indigenous (or variants thereof, including specific indigenous ethnic groups) combined will be 5-10 percent, probably closer to 5.

(4)In addition to "no response," the other wild card in this exercise will be terms denoting race mixture: *mestizo*, *moreno* (in Brazil), and others. Some members may opt for these terms for reasons suggested in point 2 above. Others, however, will find it difficult to turn their backs on whiteness.

The more I think about it, the more I would like to see these data. I hope we get the chance to.

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