

The Ancestral Americans

Introduction

Discussions of identity in the United States tend to be pulled into either of two ontological orbits, or else swing erratically between them.

The more ancient pattern is the undeniably straightforward notion that identities are fixed, objective categories, beyond the control or definition of the person they apply to and, frequently, controlling and defining that person in significant ways. In this orbit we find traditional notions of race, sex/gender, caste, religion, vocation in the religious sense, and if we go back far enough, vocation in the occupational sense as well. Until the modern era, class was also firmly in this category. One of the signature narratives of modern capitalism—especially in the United States—was that “rich” and “poor” were not fixed categories, but were available to self-definition either through accomplishment or failure. It has often been observed—though rarely in the language of identity politics—that the concept of religious affiliation and its analog, political affiliation, became similarly malleable at around the same time and, in some sense, jointly. In this ontological mode, if there is a discrepancy between etic and emic identities, the emic or self-proclaimed identity is treated as incorrect, or even delusional.

The more modern ontological mode suggests that identities are subjective and self-defined, either through Herculean labors (say, making a fortune in the steel industry, or getting sex reassignment surgery) or through mere discursive fiat (announcing that one is a “farmer-labor democrat” or a “political lesbian”). The examples of this run quickly from the absurdist (“*I am a Hufflepuff and reincarnation of Cleopatra because I say so, and no else can challenge that identification or its importance*”) to what is universally accepted as normal today (“*I am a Methodist and a Republican because I say so, and no one else can challenge that identification or its importance*”).

What interests me is the erratic space between these two ontologies. I think we are seeing a growing number of identity discussions that invoke the formal mechanisms of objective ontology, while simultaneously making claims to subjectivity and self-definition. This raises an suite of questions that are both fascinating and often difficult to discuss.

As an entry point to these questions, I want to look at some examples drawn from the US Census data on ancestry. From 1980 to 2000, ancestry was a write-in question on the general census; for 2010 it was moved to the American Community Survey, so we have less detailed information. Ancestry, conceptually, would seem to fall squarely in the fixed-objective realm of identity. In a sense, it is an even more rigid mode of identity than race or biological sex, since it does not even reference the individual, but their forebearers. While there is a long history of ancestry being redacted in various ways (e.g. crypto-Jewish populations), we are accustomed to think of this as deception rather than self-definition. There is, arguably, no self-definitional concept of ancestry in our culture along the lines of religion or even gender. No one says: “My grandparents were all Polish, but fundamentally my ancestry is Ghanian.”

And yet there is still room for subjectivity.

West Indians

The first of these examples seems rather minor, though it is conceptually illustrative. There are relatively large concentrations of people who identify as having West Indian ancestry in Oklahoma and northwestern Texas, far from the obvious centers in Florida and the major cities of the eastern seaboard. Rodger Doyle (editing a private-sector atlas based on the 1990 census) wrote: “Most of these are probably Native American Indians who choose to call themselves ‘West Indians’”. That seems almost

certainly correct, though it is worth noting the mildly controversial play of etic and emic labels. We are asked to accept, if only for the sake of clarification, that a Caddo living in Lawton, Oklahoma is “not really” West Indian, even though they identify themselves as such.

I think that there is an important and common-sense litmus test here, which the Census questionnaire does not permit, but we can imagine as a thought experiment. Suppose the enumerator were to ask our Caddo subject a second question, along the lines of: “OK, your ancestors were West Indians, I understand. But most people who say that are talking about Trinidad or Haiti or someplace, and I don't think that's what you mean. Could you be more specific?” More than likely, our subject would then cooperate with the etic understanding, and assert that indeed, she meant she is an American Indian from the West, not from the Caribbean. The limits of this sort of emic-to-etic cooperation mark key boundary lines in ontological conflicts. If someone is happy to agree to an etic rephrasing of their emic identifier, then the issue at hand is a merely semantic one: the choice of words rather than the mapping of concepts.

Recalcitrant Answers

Once emic-to-etic cooperation breaks down, things get more complex. Write-in answers on surveys are a primary arena for those complications. The write-in answer format is generally treated as a space-saving measure, especially in a case like ancestry where there are an unwieldy number of expected answers. But write-in questions also free the respondent from preconceived restrictions (e.g. gender binaries), and simultaneously minimize their knowledge of the survey-giver's ontological framework, which is potentially biasing information. For example, including a “third option” checkbox for gender (let alone fourth and fifth and ninth options) is apt to drastically change people's assumptions about the social views of the researcher, which may very well change their answers to other questions.

Yet write-in answer questions create a new problem: a certain percentage of the public see them as a glittering soapbox for their own politics, humor, and/or confusion. These are the people who write when given the blank “SEX: _____”, write in “awesome!”; when given “RACE: _____”, write in human. As the Census report for 1980 notes, 1% of the population “provided a religious or unclassifiable response” to the ancestry question. Recalcitrant answers of this sort provide a continual minor friction for people coding social surveys, as they ruin all the adjacent data. They also provide a sort of temptation to assumptions. For instance, if someone has put down “Martian” as their ancestry, we might be tempted to make one of several assumptions:

1. “Martian” might be a way for them to say: *“my identity is complex and marginalized and I am sick of being put in a box and quantified by people like you, who have not earned my trust anyhow.”*
2. “Martian” might be a way of saying: *“my identity is very commonplace and privileged, but I feel insecure about this, so I'd like to avoid stating it. Moreover, since I have never felt that my identity was underrepresented or erased, I don't feel any urgency to call attention to it in the context of social research.”*
3. “Martian” might be a way of saying *“golly gee, aren't we having fun here writing crazy things on this form”* without any deeper intent.
4. “Martian” might be a straightforward declaration by someone who believes that they are descended from the residents of Mars.

Note that in the second case, the researcher may feel a further temptation to assume that the recalcitrant respondent etically belongs to the majority group (in this case, white Europeans). In the

third and fourth case, it is also statistically likely that this is true. When data is scarce and the etic assignment to a majority group seems likely, it can be very frustrating to discard data as “unclassifiable”, but it is the safest option. When data is plentiful—as is the case with the census—another option emerges. Arguably recalcitrant responses may be repeated so frequently that they need to be considered as identity groups in their own right. This seems to be the case with the people who list their ancestry simply as “American”.

The Ancestral Americans

The instructions for question 14 on the 1980 census defined ancestry as “*the lineage, or the country in which the person or the person's parents or ancestors were born before their arrival in the United States. Persons who are of more than one origin and who cannot identify with a single group should print their multiple ancestry (for example, German-Irish).*” Despite that wording, 13.3 million people reported their ancestry simply as “American”. The 1980 report notes that this is mainly a Southern phenomenon, and disaggregated data from 1990 show that it is concentrated in southern Appalachia. Ancestral Americans, at least in round numbers, are all white people. And unlike our imagined example with the Caddo who identifies as having West Indian ancestry, the ancestral Americans are generally not cooperative with etic rephrasings of their identity.

Still, they are not merely being recalcitrant. Since at least the days of Theodore Roosevelt (“there is no room in this country for hyphenated Americanism”) the construction of whiteness in America has involved a complicated disavowal of any specific European heritage in favor of a generic *American* identity. This argument has been politicized in various ways over times, but it is not solely the province of any one political group. Whenever I've heard it expounded, it has been largely an ontological claim: that European ancestry is not a useful way of thinking about (white) Americans. The political valence of this idea over US history is quite fascinating, but for our purposes the main point of interest is that ancestral Americans *value* that identity, in preference to, say, Dutch-British ancestry.

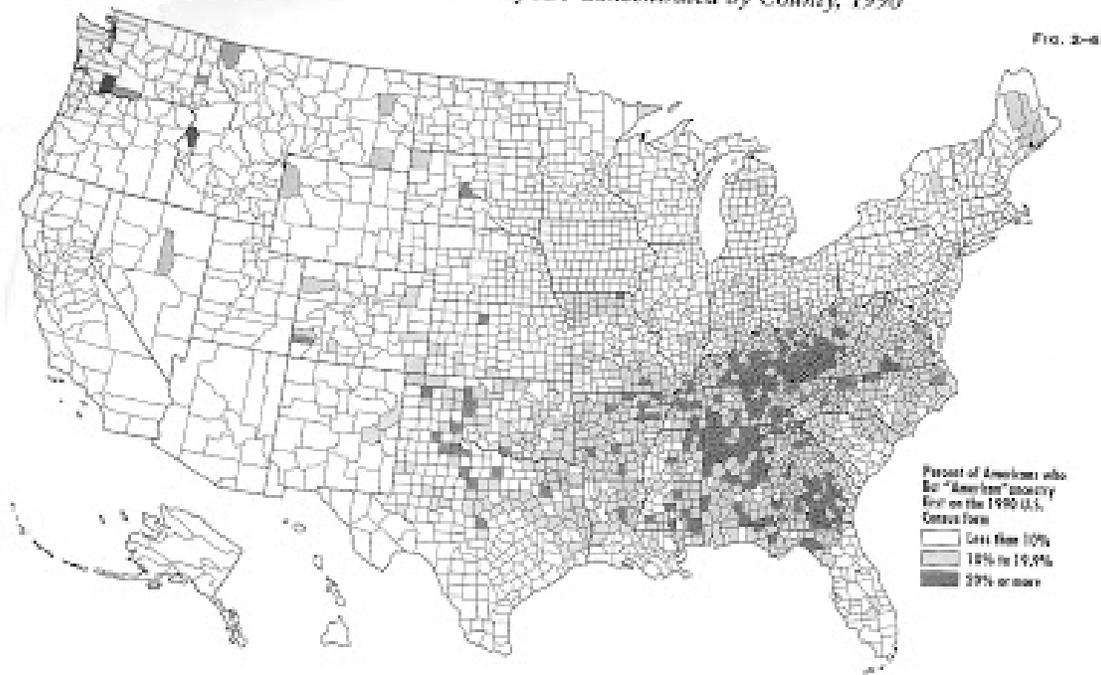
Yet we are used to thinking of ancestry as a fixed category, immune to redefinition. Within that framework, it is clear (though rarely mentioned in popular discussion) that the only people with a strong claim to “American ancestry” are American Indians, many of whom have made exactly that point on various occasions. It even seems likely that some of the people who identify as having American ancestry *are* American Indians. For instance, the Quallah Boundary in North Carolina falls within a region where people heavily identify as having American ancestry; presumably some of those are Cherokee—a point we will return to in a moment.

These avenues for etic skepticism of American ancestry are hard to ignore. Doyle is clearly suspicious of “Americans” in 1980. Even in the map heading, shown on the next page, he phrases the group as people who *claim to have* American ancestry, a label which he puts in quotation marks. Both of those editorial distancing choices are departures from his usual pattern; he does not even resort to them in discussing the West Indian ancestry group. The Census Bureau is similarly diffident: “American was considered a valid ancestry response when it was the only ancestry provided by a respondent.”

As a writer, I would point out that we cannot even discuss the validity of American as an ancestral identity category without mechanically taking sides in the conflict. Should the word be in quotation marks, as Doyle uses it, while the Census does not? Should the surrounding verbs imply that the self-identification makes etic sense, or not?

Doyle, as I've suggested, takes the skeptical position. He goes somewhat further, suggesting that the “American” ancestry group was in fact “primarily of British origin”, and notes that at 12.4 million people in 1990, this relabeling was large enough to substantially distort the surrounding data. It is important, I think, not to be coy about what this means: Doyle thinks Americans are *incorrectly* self-identifying their ancestry, in ways that impact larger-level questions about demographics.

Where Those Who Claim "American" Ancestry Are Concentrated by County, 1990

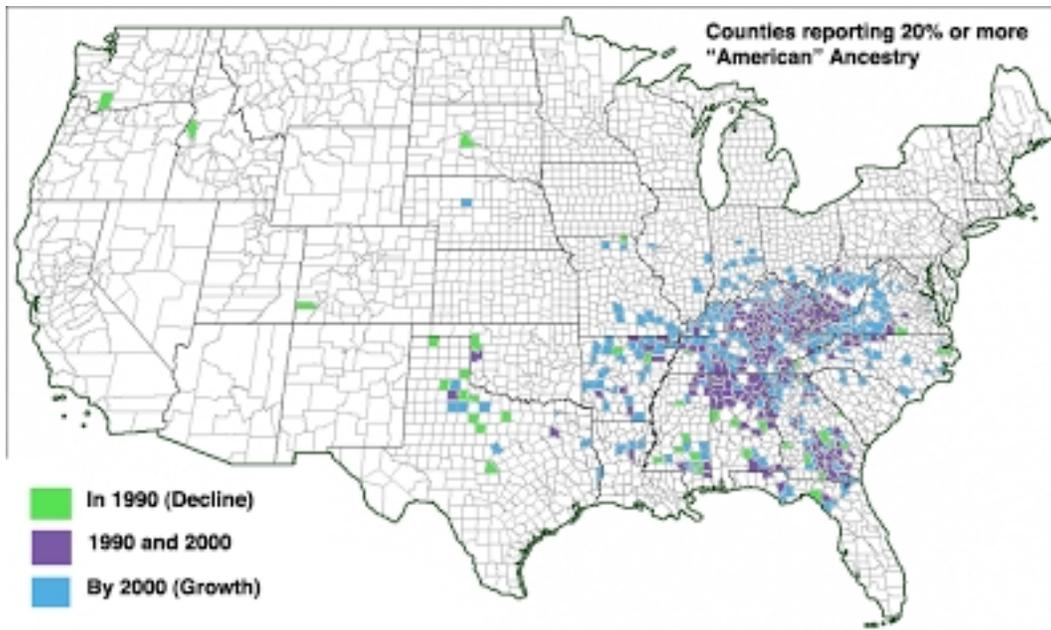


One of these potential impacts illustrates a more general concept about identity shifts. If we return to the likelihood that some of the Cherokee identify their ancestry as “American”, it should be immediately evident that they are statistically drowned out in doing so. There are 500 white people in North Carolina for every Cherokee. If a mere 10% of those white people identify as ancestral Americans, and every single Cherokee does the same, the self-identifying pool of ancestral Americans in North Carolina will still be 98% white. This suggests a generalization of the earlier assumption that “Martians” are apt to be white. When there are reasons for members of any (etic) majority group to self-identify as belonging to an (etic) minority group, they tend to overwhelm the original minority identity by sheer force of numbers, and often also by legacies of power differential.

To use a rather different population as an example, there are a range of studies suggesting that self-identified and parentally-identified food allergies outnumber clinically-identified food allergies by large multiples. For instance, in Venter and colleague's study, about 90% of the total number of “babies with food hypersensitivities” had no clinically reproducible symptoms. There is a popular reference to this issue in the claim that “*people with fake allergies are making it impossible for anyone with real allergies to get taken seriously.*” More generally, we can argue that it is difficult for any etic minority group to autonomously communicate, deliberate, self-govern, or signal, when they are greatly outnumbered by others contending for the same identity status.

The Growth of Ancestral Americans

There were 13.3 million ancestral Americans in 1980, and that number declined slightly by 1990. But between 1990 and 2000, the population of ancestral Americans increased by 63%, from 12.4 to 20.2 million people. This growth rate was the highest of any such demographic, and almost five times more rapid than the overall population. Ancestral Americans expanded in range to become the predominant ancestry group across most of the South. Notably, ancestral Americans largely displaced other whites (especially people of British or German ancestry) across the South. Indeed, the 2000 census recorded significant nationwide drop-offs in virtually all European ancestry groups—ironically, this fact was noted with some alarm by white supremacist organizations.



Inarguably, though, this enormous demographic transition was occurring only on paper, and in people's minds. There is no reason to think that ancestral Americans were any more fertile than other groups—the balance of the evidence points in the other direction. And the population of ancestral Americans cannot, *ipso facto*, be increased through immigration. Moreover, the spatial pattern shows a distinct fade-out in the periphery coupled with an increasing spread and concentration in the core (the Kentucky-to-Alabama belt), which reaches 52.3% of respondents in some counties. But this does not correspond to actual movements of people. Pointedly, the regions in the South that experienced rapid population growth during the 1990s had low concentrations of ancestral Americans, and most American-dense regions, such as the Cumberland mountains, were experiencing overall population declines.

We can only conclude that between 1990 and 2000, close to 8 million people redefined their ancestors as Americans. This trend then appears to have leveled off. Based on the 2010 American Communities Survey, which is not broken out by county, there were 20.6 million people with American ancestry, essentially the same figure as in 2000.

Rivalrous Redefinition?

Despite this large shift in identities, affecting at one point 7.2% of the country, there has been no corresponding shift in our mechanical concept of ancestry. We continue to think of ancestry as, on the whole, an objective and fixed identity category. In fact, in the middle of the period we are discussing, Murray and (posthumously) Hernstein published *The Bell Curve*, setting off a large and long dialogue about heredity in the US. This controversy centered largely on the meaning and relevance of ancestry, in terms of genetics, culture, and socioeconomics. Many ideas got thrown around in the press, some of them quite extreme, yet I cannot recall anyone suggesting that ancestry was a malleable category, available to retroactive redefinition—even though eight million people were engaged in that process at the time.

And after all, in a paradoxical fashion, the major value of changing one's ancestry is that ancestry is a fixed category associated with a particular set of mechanics. If ancestry were understood to be completely malleable and subjective, it would probably become irrelevant. In that case, I doubt

there would be a geographically specific movement of 20 million people flaunting the instructions on the census questionnaire to make a point about ancestry. A similar tension exists with the parents who identify their children as having food allergies despite clinical contradiction. In at least a good many cases, these parents are clearly invested in the mechanism (a medical narrative about immune disorder) and the epistemic authority (medical diagnosis) offered by doctors—it is not enough for them to say “*Jimmy doesn't seem to do well with tomatoes*”, just as it is not enough for ancestral Americans to say “*my people were Scotch-Irish and German, but they've been in the Carolinas for a hell of a long time.*”

These examples imply a dynamic in which redefinition acts as a rivalrous good. If *everyone* gets to redefine their ancestry, the concept of ancestry loses meaning (and thus value). On the other hand, if one group is able to change their identity while the identity category remains otherwise fixed, they may be able to benefit substantially. Clearly, though, this dynamic is rather at odds with the notion of self-definition as an individual right.

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