

Book Reviews

The American Census: A Social History, by Margo J. Anderson. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988. xiii, 251 pp. Notes, appendixes, bibliography, index. \$30.00 cloth.

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Most people might think of the U.S. Census as primarily a source of statistical data and hence view a book about it as potentially dull. Margo Anderson, however, has given her account remarkable meaning and significance—more than its subtitle implies—by placing it in the context of social and political history. Because census data is vital for political representation and policy making, the book is as much a political as a social history. In fact, Anderson details an exceedingly useful strategy for linking social and political history—a task that is much needed these days.

She traces the evolution of the census from the “enumeration” provision in the Constitution down to and including the 1980 count. She does so within the context of the innumerable debates over the elaboration of the census effort, its coverage, and its technology, and, more importantly, over the search for new data and the meaning of the resulting information as a catalyst for public debate. She emphasizes the benchmark censuses of 1850, 1880, 1940, and 1980; the establishment of the Census Office as a permanent agency in 1902; the gradual development of special censuses between the decennial counts; and the census’s emerging role in the 1930s and beyond as a source of focused population research. Anderson also works out the maneuverings of different directors of the census in their relationships with Congress and rival federal agencies.

As the subtitle implies, Anderson places the census within the larger context of American institutions from which an interest in national statistical information arose. From the earliest days of the American Statistical Association to the present, professionals in the field developed a close connection with the census agency in shaping its professional skills and administrative organization as well as the census’s content and statistical strategies, such as the emergence of sampling in the 1930s. By the twentieth century the statistical community was developing rapidly as an integral part of the nation’s

more complex society, economy, and government. National crises, such as World War I, the depression, and World War II, dramatically enhanced both the scope of the agency's work and its fundamental importance for modern government. Despite the emergence of other statistics-gathering bodies, such as those in the Department of Commerce and the National Bureau of Economic Research, the Census Office continued to evolve as the nation's premier statistical agency.

Especially significant in Anderson's account is the role of census information in public thought and public policy. Each census gave Americans an enhanced perception of what the nation's people were like, how they had changed, and what the future might bring. On many occasions the data fueled intense debate over such issues as slavery, immigration, urbanization, unemployment, civil rights, and federal grants-in-aid to the states as well as over the initial purpose of the census—reapportionment of legislative representation. Each decade that task of reapportionment prompted a renewed debate about America's meaning. By charting population and economic growth in the nineteenth century, the census sustained satisfaction. But as time passed, the decennial portraits became more associated with problems and fears about the future course of affairs.

The census of 1920 was especially dramatic. It brought to the wider public the full force of the meaning of changes in American society and politics since the mid-nineteenth century: urban growth and rural decline, the changing ethnocultural character of the population, and the dominance in the work force of blue-collar factory workers. This dramatic self-portrait played a major role in the response of the old to the new. Two intense debates ensued. One involved the successful attempt to restrict immigration. That story has been told often, but Anderson's account adds new insights because the census was so closely involved with the question of the population's "national origins." The Census Office had tried to tackle that question earlier through its analysis of the first census of 1790, but in 1920 the task became more poignant. To sustain America's "original" ethnic character, it was necessary to determine the precise composition of those origins. Hence throughout the 1920s, as the Johnson Act was shaped and its provisions implemented, census results played a vital role in the debate.

The less often told but closely related story was the struggle over reapportionment during the 1920s. In earlier decades, areas of relative population decline had been protected from losing representation by simply increasing the size of the lower house. But after the 1910 census Congress had fixed the House's size permanently at 435 seats. Thereafter reapportionment was a zero sum game: while some areas

would gain, others would lose. The impact of that realization in shaping the relative balance of rural and urban areas engulfed Congress in continual debate and stalled reapportionment throughout the 1920s. Not until 1929 was a solution worked out that accepted the changing balance between states but permitted each state legislature to allocate federal representatives within that state according to its own formula. For almost four decades state legislatures gave rural areas disproportionate representation.

Equally significant, but in a quite different way, were the impact of the depression of 1929, the ferment of the 1930s, and new ideas about national policy. Beginning with an intense debate over the level of unemployment in 1929, the Census Office rapidly became involved in gathering statistical data to underpin social and economic policy. That task led to continuous sample studies and research programs, thus extending census activities far beyond the initial task of decennial population enumeration.

The wider public's interest in the census grew in the years after World War II and especially in the 1960s. New groups became politically active in the age of information politics and sought to shape the census to provide them with useful information. Representatives of minority groups, for example, regularly sought to correct what they felt were minority "undercounts." Their efforts brought about a far more elaborate description of the nation's ethnic diversity in the 1980 census.

Each decade the U.S. Census brought to American public life a host of new realities about slavery, differential birth rates, urbanization, manufacturing, immigration, ethnicity, unemployment, housing, and minorities. Its role was to fashion public meaning, to crystallize in capsule form a larger understanding of what many Americans knew from personal experience, and to shape public perception and public debate.

Much of the wider contours of social and political history could be built around this book in an introductory course in American history. It offers equal possibilities for thinking through the knotty problem of how to bring social and political history together. Those who think of this book as simply a history of statistics will be mistaken. On the contrary, it is a major contribution to the history of national self-perception and its role in shaping public debate and public policy.

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