

## The Invention of Minorities

As I've mentioned in previous posts, during the 1700s, social scientists began classifying humans into races other than "black" and "white." This is around the time that Native Americans acquired the racial characteristic of being "red-skinned"—despite its inaccuracy—and Asian people "yellow-skinned"—despite the jaw-dropping varieties of pigment found on the Asian continent. But it makes sense historically. The reason Columbus was trying to find a route to India was because all European trade was cut off with Asia when Mehmet the Conqueror conquered the Christian city of Constantinople, in what is now Turkey, in 1492. So when Swede Carl Linnaeus first described all Asian people as "sallow" (yellow-skinned) in 1735, the West hadn't been having regular contact with the diversity of people from Asia for nearly 250 years.<sup>1</sup> When the American gov't first put "Chinese" on their census in 1870, it was due to the massive amounts of Chinese people that had come to America to build the transcontinental railroad. Over the years, the nationalities "Japanese," "Filipino," "Hindu," and "Korean" were added to the "Chinese" racial category as those respective populations became more prominent in America. In 1980(!), the U.S. government finally acknowledged the country of India by adding "Asian Indian" to the category that originally had just said "Chinese." Yes, this was the government's first official acknowledgment that, in fact, Columbus had not contacted the Indians who were located in Asia. But as you may know, the subcontinent of India is home to peoples with both skin darker than mine and with skin as light as any Swede. But all of these Asian categories of nationality had been listed on a form that had first included "black" and "white,"—in effect, "racializing" them. So when the overloaded "Chinese" category became "Asian" in 1990, "Asian" officially became a race.

And when "Asian" officially became a race in America, it also officially became a minority, just like blacks and Native Americans and Latinos. Corporate interests have often used these categories to divide their workers during labor strikes. In 1870, Chinese laborers were brought in to replace Irish strikers in New England, and turned against each other. Each group had been educated about each other in America, and both groups fell prey to the thinking of the time that the other was an inferior race and not worthy of working together with. This is one of many reasons the gov't and the business world find taking racial statistics useful. In the past, it helped to know where different racial groups were in case you needed to direct political messages towards them or create a divided labor pool.

The gov't did make one noteworthy attempt to complicate the notion of race in 1850. That year, the census added a "mulatto" category, acknowledging that many Americans were multiracial and did not fit easily into the "white" or "black" boxes. This category was eliminated in 1930, however, as the rising eugenics movement popularized the notion that racial purity was a virtue, which meant that interracial coupling was immoral. As I mentioned in the post "Race and Genetic Diversity," although this movement was popular on every continent, Hitler's extremist views on eugenics went on to terrorize the world and eventually help spark America's 1960s counternarrative of a multicultural society.

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<sup>1</sup> This remained the case until the Allies beat the Ottoman Empire in WWI