STATISTICS, FRENCH SOCIAL SCIENCES AND ETHNIC AND RACIAL SOCIAL RELATIONS

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Statistics, French Social Sciences and Ethnic and Racial Social Relations

It has become difficult to ignore the salience of ethnicity and "race" in social relations and institutional practices in France. Everyday press and television news relate situations and experiences for which the ethnic or racial repertoire is used. Confronted with this "return of race" (Balibar, 2007), it may seem wise to take refuge in firm condemnation and keep one's distance from research programs on experiences of everyday racism. Undertaking to describe racialization and ethnicization processes exposes the researcher to numerous difficulties, the first of which lies in the impossibility of developing an independent vocabulary, one that would be distinct from vocabulary generated by stereotypes and prejudices (Fassin and Fassin, 2006). A researcher who becomes too implicated in studying a "disqualified" topic is in danger of contamination. Writing of immigration studies in a none-too-distant context, Sayad (1991) coined the term "*sociologie du petit*"; *i.e.*, "subjects situated near the bottom of the social hierarchy of research 'objects'", thereby exposing the circular process through which the illegitimacy of the research topic comes to affect those seeking to handle it.

French social sciences have a particular, longstanding reason for being uncomfortable about categories that refer to ethnicity or "race" (Poutignat and Streiff-Fenart, 1995; Rea and Tripier, 2003). The discomfort has its source in a long history that it would be hazardous to try to summarize here. The feeling has as much to do with national and political idiosyncrasies (Hargreaves, 1995) as with the particular place that immigration and ethnic and racial division occupy in French sociological tradition (Beaud and Noiriel, 1989; Bastenier and Dassetto, 1993; Schnapper, 1998; Vaillant, 2006; Reynaud Paligot, 2006). Whereas the conceptual and theoretical apparatus of ethnic and racial studies has been central to social science research in the United States since the early twentieth century and in Great Britain since the early 1950s (to mention only these two countries), it was long ignored in France, despite relatively similar "multicultural" experiences grounded in a combined history of slavery, immigration and colonization. The reluctance in French social sciences to use the semantic field of ethnicity and race has to be understood in connection with the French republican credo of "indifference to

differences" and the strategy to downplay the salience of cultural disparities in order to unify the nation (Simon, 2003a; Amiraux and Simon, 2006).

How to study the effects of racialization and ethnicization of social life? The debate on the relevance or usefulness of taking ethnicity or "race" into account in social science analysis assumes critical proportions when it comes to the production of statistics. We know that statistical categories are first and foremost conventions that both designate objects of knowledge and target groups for action and policy. In this sense, those categories do not claim to reflect any objective *reality*, but rather to shape a legitimate representation of the historically situated social worlds of the societies that use such statistics and make them possible (Desrosières, 1993). French "immigration" statistics were conceived in the framework of the French model of integration. They are consistent with specific institutional management proceedings; more generally, they reproduce a political framing arrangement that they also work to shape. The reason the French census only collects information on individuals' nationality and country of birth is that the model was not designed to track the pathways of immigrants from one generation to another, and it was not so designed because the understanding in France is that the integration process normatively culminates in the acquisition of citizenship (Simon, 2003b). Consistent with the French model, then, immigrants' descendants are made invisible for quantitative investigation, though they do appear as key actors in the daily chronicle of French society.

While statistics are a reflection of state thinking, they are also the source of objectification in the social sciences; they help organize the social world in such a way as to make it intelligible (Héran, 1984). Used to conceive, categorize and analyze as much as to administrate, statistics have invaded many areas of public debate; they are no longer a domain reserved for specialists and technicians. Social scientists in France –who have often been passive statistics-users dependent on official statistical institutes– thus reproduced the French preference for nationality as the paramount criterion for categorizing otherness. *Foreigners* have long been the main subjects in French research studies on immigration. This choice was seldom explained by academics –it seemed self-evident.

The rapid change in French political paradigms that occurred between the late 1970s and the early 2000s –from the value of assimilation through the value of integration to the combat against racial and ethnic discrimination– have considerably changed the way the country's public policies are conceived and formulated. Statistics, then, have been at the center of a combined reconfiguration of scientific problematics and public policy approaches –it is in this context that they have been called into question. The debate on revising statistical categories pertaining to immigration, a debate that used to be confidential, confined to demographer and statistician circles, was first brought into the French public arena in 1998-1999. There it turned into a violent polemic. The "demographers' controversy" that flared up at the time (Stavo-Debauge, 2003; Spire and Merllié, 1999) set off a first round of

public emotion about statistics. The media began denouncing alleged plans to "ethnicize statistics"; this in turn elicited a great deal of press editorializing and academic publications. The winner of this first round was the *status quo*.

The revised debate that has been underway since 2004 reproduces the terms of the 1998-1999 debate, but the fact that in the meantime the fight against discrimination was put on the policy agenda has entirely changed the political and policy context.(1) Whether and how statistics can provide the information required for describing and analyzing discrimination is no longer a question for research and researchers alone; in France it has become a major political issue. Whereas the first controversy focused on ethnicity and called into play the categories of foreigner, immigrant and "ethnic belonging", the terminology used in the antidiscrimination framework is more explicitly racial. Public discourse now readily includes references to "visible minorities", a Canadian expression recently imported into France, and skin color. The first recommendations of the CNIL [Commission Nationale de l'Informatique et des Libertés: data protection commission] on "measuring origin diversity in companies" (recommendations released July 9, 2005) mentioned "a national standard for 'ethno-racial' classification". And the emergence and dissemination of new categories became intense when business managers chimed in to demand tools for "promoting diversity" and the CRAN, an association "representing black populations", began militating in favor of "statistics on diversity".(2) Clearly the debate had spread to all spheres of society.

In his introduction, Georges Felouzis gives an overview of the arguments that have been advanced in this debate. Here I turn to more detailed consideration of two aspects of the controversy: 1) In what way can "ethnic and racial statistics" be legitimate? 2) What methods are currently in use in France and how do they affect meaning and usage?

Using racialized representations or choosing ignorance?

The questions on "race" and Hispanic origin in the 2000 United States census sparked an intense debate in political and academic circles (Perlmann and Waters, 2002). The issue was not so much whether to maintain existing racial categories as how to anticipate the effects of the new option to "mark one or more box(es)" instead of the traditional "one choice only" question. This innovation set off a debate on the meaning of the categories and their relevance –at precisely the time affirmative action was being called into question as a policy strategy for combating racial discrimination. In this context,

(1) On how discrimination has been constructed as a public issue, see the special issue of *Sociétés Contemporaines* (2004, 53) and Fassin (2002).

(2) The CRAN mandated the SOFRES survey institute to conduct the first survey of France's black populations (including in the French West Indies); this poll re-launched the polemic (January 31, 2007).

the American Sociological Association, in an unprecedented declaration, came out in favor of keeping the existing racial categories for statistical purposes and use in critical social science analysis (ASA, 2003). In its written opinion, straightforwardly entitled "The importance of collecting data and doing social scientific research on race", the ASA recalled that invalidating popular belief in the existence of "biological races" implied studying the social effects of operative racial categories and prejudices. The ASA argued that giving up race classifications would make it impossible to apprehend one of the fundamental principles of American social stratification, and would therefore render analysis of social inequalities unintelligible.

In what way is the ASA's plea, ratified by the entire Association board, representing a considerable range of sociological and ideological sensibilities, relevant to the French debate and French sociologists? After all, the history of the United States and its political creed differ from the situation of European countries, especially France. Moreover, given how commonplace it has become in the French debate to cite the United States and use it as a kind of foil for all issues pertaining to multiculturalism and "racial" social relations, it seems awkward to turn to that experience for guidance in our own thinking.

The ASA position is relevant to the French debate in two ways: 1) epistemologically, the value of that position is not strictly contingent on the American context; indeed, it applies to all knowledge-based activities; 2) French experience shares some of the determinants understood in the United States to justify taking "race" and ethnicity into account; *e.g.*, large-scale slave-trading and slavery (outside mainland France), colonial domination, the experience of mass immigration from the mid-nineteenth century on. French society is as thoroughly structured by ethnic and "race"-based social relations as American society. The "French exception" among multicultural societies is founded on radical obfuscation of ethnic and racial divisions; a move that helps sustain the performative fiction of "indifference to differences". Should we continue what I would call "choosing ignorance" for the purpose of maintaining a colorblind society, when by doing so we run the risk of failing to understand racism and indeed letting it prosper? This is the French dilemma.

There are many good arguments against implementing ethnic and racial categories in statistics, but none of them includes a convincing alternative. And what kind of research agenda for studying ethnic and "racial" social relations could be developed that would not require social statistics of the kind we do not yet have? This is not in any way to dismiss the qualitative research studies being done in France on integration and racial discrimination –there are many fine ones. I am simply observing that in the specific field of ethnic and "racial" social relations, French research has been amputated of some of its instruments. Given the rise of quantitative methodologies in international-level social science research, we have to question the soundness of allowing quantitative sociological research on immigration, integration and discrimination to atrophy in France. A theoretical preference can hardly serve to counter a simple practical contingency: without statistics, there can be no quantitative analysis.

New legitimacy in the context of antidiscrimination policies

In his introduction to a special issue of *Population* entitled "La variable 'ethnie' comme catégorie statistique" ["Ethnicity as a statistical category"], Leridon put the issue thus: "Whether it is possible, useful and legitimate to characterize individuals (in scientific studies) by membership in groups defined on a racial or ethnic basis." (Leridon, 1998, p. 537). The legitimacy of this kind of categorization can be debated on both scientific and political grounds. And as we have seen, science and politics interpenetrate. The first argument justifying collection and use of such statistics emphasizes their role in performing the French model of social integration. Differentiating on ethnic and racial grounds would seem to go against the aims of the French egalitarian, universalist model. But taking such differences into account could actually facilitate the struggle against inequalities, and it might be a prerequisite to achieving universality. It may seem paradoxical to adopt the strategy of mobilizing –with great care, and only temporarily– categories that break up universality. And in doing so we would indeed be running the risk of making the ethnicization dynamics that the strategy is intended to circumvent *more* visible. However, we already have ample evidence of how the opposite option, advocated by supporters of a certain integration model tradition that consists in promoting universalism by rendering ethnic and racial labels invisible, actually conceals discrimination (Simon and Stavo-Debauge, 2001).

As far as I know, there are no studies that have explicitly sought to assess the "costs and benefits" of using ethnic and racial categories and making that use routine. Many studies have touched on the question of social scientists' responsibility for propagating stereotypes forged by popular thinking or reifying labile identities by way of categories. But there are not many studies stressing the responsibility of social scientists in making or keeping a social issue invisible.(3) Noiriel (2006), De Rudder (1997), and Brubaker (2001) have all insisted on the role of social sciences' analytic categories in institutionalizing identities. But they do not suggest any functional alternative to the categorization dilemma. The fact is that ethnic and racial labels represent "active, everyday" concepts "used by ordinary people for the important and indeed fundamental task of communicating their feelings of identification with a community and their social consciousness", as Douglass and Lyman noted (1976, p. 198). Above all, they constitute a repertoire for categorizing and organizing social relations. Without relevant categories that are consistent with the research problematics under investigation, how can we analyze people's positions and trajectories in social space or the reproduction of social inequalities? If we want to bring to light gaps or disparities before seeking what explains them, we cannot elude the labor of delimiting, if only temporarily, groups of individuals whose social properties can be compared. This

(3) For a recent approach to this question that covers a large range of fields, see Beaud, Confraveux and Lingaard (2006).

operation requires validating *what appear relevant social boundaries at a given moment in the structure of the given society.*

Statistics at the heart of subjectivity

Is it possible to construct "ethnic statistics"? What should they look like? Can the same categories be used both to analyze discrimination and to provide a representation of diversity? In the absence of official or even commonplace definitions of ethnicity and "race", how can we approach what is a matter of pure subjectivity? Up against the methodological and practical ordeal of categorizing people, the questions multiply and there are no clear answers.

Despite the conceptualization difficulties, many official statistics include information that explicitly refers to ethnicity and (less often) to "race" or color. In an analysis of censuses conducted around the year 2000, Morning (2005) found that no fewer than 87 out of 138 countries collect "ethnic" data. The most widespread method in census-taking is self-identification. This consists either in providing respondents with a list of pre-established categories that they then select from or an open question that they themselves answer. The latter approach presupposes that the question itself has been formulated in terms that are unequivocal for respondents; sets of examples are sometimes added to specify the general type of response expected. Analysis of censuses in the 42 Council of Europe countries (Simon, 2007) shows that 22 of them collect data referring to ethnicity (generally termed "nationality" in eastern European countries). Of these countries, half (11) collect information by means of an open question, the other half with a pre-established list of categories. The categories usually refer to national minorities inscribed in the tormented history of nation-state building. Great Britain is the only European country to have set up an ethnic-racial categorization system in response to post-colonial migration.(4)

Great Britain's experience is actually more instructive for the French debate than the United States'. A first attempt in the late 1970s to collect ethnic data in the British census provoked a lively debate among researchers and in civil society. Ultimately, the government of the newly elected Margaret Thatcher decided to withdraw the "ethnic question" for the 1981 census. However, repeated demands from the Commission for Racial Equality, combined with the increasing visibility of discrimination and the development of state multiculturalism, led to putting the ethnic question on the 1991 census. Used to monitor discrimination, the ethnic-racial nomenclature was later introduced into many administrative files. The critics became less vocal, and the question, repeated in the 2001 census (which included a "mixed" category), has not been a serious issue since then and will be used again in 2011. The strategy in Great Britain for handling the aftermath of the country's

(4) Ireland recently adopted a similar position, despite its very different history.

colonial history and taking on the challenge of combating the racism rooted in the deep structure of British society, appears strikingly different from the French method. There is indeed divergence between the two countries' policy –and research– approaches to comparable situations (Bleich, 2003).

Undeniably, self-identification is more respectful of freedom of choice and best adapted to statistical ethics principles.(5) However, it has several limitations that significantly impact on potential use of data thus collected. It is sensitive to variations in self-identification statements over time and among sources. It has been shown that the volume of individuals stating a given ethnicity tends to fluctuate with media attention to that ethnicity, whether it is socially favored or stigmatized, how the question is designed (*i.e.*, whether or not the given ethnicity is included in the suggested answers or examples, its position in the list of examples).(6) Suggested categories have to be meaningful to respondents; that is, they have to reproduce existing social labels and be well adjusted to reference identifications. This means that convergence of ascribed and subscribed-to categories depends on the circulation of what come to be considered ordinary ethnic and racial labels in the societies concerned. For individuals to be able to situate themselves in relation to nomenclatures that refer to ethnic or racial origin, the terms chosen have to be widely accepted and correspond to recognized labels.(7) "Self-identification" is by no means independent of collective frames and legitimate ways of presenting oneself. The census form, then, becomes the vector of those identification frames.

The fact is that the ethnic and "race" nomenclatures used in censuses often seem to reflect stereotypes. By their very construction, they reproduce popular labels and incorporate vestiges of categories that were used during periods of colonization and institutionalized racism. They have been strongly criticized for just these reasons,(8) critics stressing the strategic role that official statistics play in determining and stiffening collective identities. But these criticisms fail to take into account an innovative aspect of the ethnic and "racial" categories now in use: they are formulated in such a way as to refer explicitly to the subjective nature of the response. This in turn legitimates a constructivist approach to statistics (Petersen, 1997). And in this sense we can say that the use of "ethnic" categories in statistics prefigures a new "generation" of data collection, more reflexive, informed by sociological studies of the performative effects of categorization processes –processes that themselves reflect awareness of the artificial character of recording identity. The categorizations are not determined in conjunction with any quest for the

(5) This method has been recommended by the United Nations for the upcoming 2010 census wave, and by various international human rights organizations.

(6) In the mass of literature on variability in ethnicity and "race" self-identifications, see Petersen (1997), Lopez (2003), Simpson and Akinwale (2007).

(7) On the problem of acceptability of terms for categorizing origin, see the results of the Institut National d'Études Démographiques survey in Simon and Clément (2006a, 2006b).

(8) See among others Kertzer and Arel (2002).

"authenticity" of ethnicity or "race" as if that were the individual's deepest, most private truth. Rather, they construct a sort of precipitate of personal identity mediated by the public image of that identity, how it is received in society.

Most of the many ways these categorizations are used serve two related but distinct purposes: either to strengthen equality policies or to recognize the ethnic and "racial" diversity of the population. These purposes in turn involve relatively different types of categorization and collection practices: combating discrimination requires collecting information on a limited number of stereotypical categories, whereas apprehending diversity is likely to involve adjusting to the complex world of identities created by the mixing that is characteristic of multicultural societies; it is therefore likely to generate *more* categories.

Alternative strategies

The lack of "ethnic statistics" has not prevented research on integration or discrimination from developing in France. Populations are simply approached and described differently.(9) Faced with gaps in statistical information and the restrictive framework imposed by the French data protection law,(10) social scientists have developed alternative strategies that involve finding more or less roundabout proxies for "ethnic and racial" categories. In a way, "choosing ignorance" has simply fueled tailor-made solutions and stimulated methodological creativity. On the other hand, the proxies bring to light all that is equivocal in statistical invisibility: some solutions turn out to be even more "culturalist" than the type of categorization they claim to circumvent. In many cases, they have not proved any more reliable.

The main strategy used to compensate for the absence of established categories is to work from information whose meaning is equivalent or close to ethnic origin or "race": surname and/or first name; country of birth and individual's nationality, nationality/ies of his/her parents and possibly his/her grandparents; mothertongue or language spoken at home. Taken separately or in combination, these variables allow for constructing categories that are really not very remote from "ethnic" ones, except that they are reconstituted *a posteriori*. Many French public statistics surveys have been collecting parents' nationality and country/ies of birth –a move consistent with the importance currently attributed to the "second generation" (or that has helped

(9) For a review of available data, the different approaches to doing research without formal statistics, and the questions in debate, see the report published by the Centre d'Analyse Stratégique (2006).

(10) This point deserves an entire article. The CNIL's position has changed considerably in recent years. Nonetheless, the special regime in place for production of "sensitive data" accounts for much of the self-censorship practiced by state statistics offices and more generally by researchers in charge of quantitative surveys.

make that generation important). The information collected in the *Étude de l'histoire familiale* survey of 1999, the *Formation-qualification professionnelle* surveys of 1993 and 2003, the *Labor Force* survey from 2005 on, and the *Housing* survey of 2006 allows for analyzing the situation of immigrants' descendants. This approach has also been selected by Eurostat, which began collecting this information for the European Union *Labor Force* survey in 2008. While the "second generation" has become a fundamental focus of studies purporting to analyze the integration process, "descendant of immigrants" may not be the most relevant category for studying ethnic and "racial" social relations. It offers a pragmatic short-term compromise, since the information is easy to collect and relatively usable in the French context, but it suffers from built-in obsolescence due to the simple fact of generational succession (Simon and Clément, 2006a, 2006b).

Social scientists doing empirical studies of segregation and discrimination have found first names and last names to be of genuine assistance, and this solution has therefore been turned to repeatedly. Because it involves such commonly collected, ordinary information –though that same information is heavily protected by the data protection laws– allocation of first and last names (usually only first names) to generate ethno-cultural categories is a means of reconstituting "origin" variables in files that contain no such indications. When applied to administrative files in education (Felouzis, 2003, 2005; ORES, 2007), private company files (Cédiey and Foroni, 2005) and judiciary cases (Jobard and Névanen, 2007, 2009), the first name method has produced significant results. However, we have no precise estimate of observation bias due to first name choice variability. If we hypothesize that first names (necessarily given by parents) refer to a relatively circumscribed cultural world, we can assume they operate as "cultural origin" markers (Felouzis, 2003, p. 420, 2005, p. 9) and can therefore be used to identify segregation or discrimination that persons with those first names are subjected to.

There are major methodological differences implied in using first name, last name, or both. Though a person can always change his/her surname, either through marriage or a specific administrative procedure, surname is still much more stable than first name (Lapierre, 1995). First name, on the other hand, is a remarkable sociological analyzer, allowing as it does to spot the influence of cultural and social norms on individuals' choices, particularly in the case of immigrant families juggling the contradictory processes of acculturation and preservation of marks of attachment to the culture of origin. The first-name marker is thus not independent of the purpose for which it was recorded; *i.e.*, whether it is being used to observe integration paths or exposure to discriminatory dynamics grounded in ethnicity or "race". A family's choice to give a culturally distinctive first name cannot be dissociated from its social mobility strategies or the "invisibilizing" process as a whole –this has been observed in studies of Hispanics in the United States (Sue and Telles, 2007) and confirmed by one of the rare French quantitative studies of immigrants' children's first names (Valetas and Bringé, 2005). Using data from the

1992 *MGIS* [*Mobilité géographique et insertion sociale*] survey, Valetas and Bringé show that while three-quarters of Algerian immigrant parents choose "traditional" first names for their children, these children themselves, born in France to Algerian parents, prefer "international" first names (38%) or French first names (22%) to "traditional" North African first names (20%) or "modern" North African first names (20%). But after these children-who-have-become-parents have scrambled the signal delivered by a "typical" first name, are their descendants protected from being identified by other signs?

An increasing number of social scientists are changing their attitude toward the "choice of ignorance" that has thus far governed the statistical approach to ethnic and "racial" social relations in France.(11) According to Dominique Schnapper, it has become politically and morally "untenable to refuse to participate in the undertaking whereby a democratic society recognizes itself in elaborating the most objective knowledge it can have of itself". She prophetizes that "ethnic categories will gradually be taken into account in France as they are in northern European democracies" (Schnapper, 2007, p. 99). The rise of minority group demands increases researchers' responsibility: the social sciences are accountable to "social demand". As Singly so effectively synthesizes: "When groups start denouncing what they consider discrimination, then the social sciences are duty bound to measure those groups, to 'objectify' them." (2007, p. 61). The need for data in France cannot be denied, but the range of possibilities seems limited by both the norms conditioning statistics production and the pejorative connotation attaching to information pertaining to ethnic and "racial" social relations.

Statistics have the fundamental property of making phenomena and populations *visible* through the representations of the social world that they produce. This explains why they occupy such an important place in controversies around integration and anti-discrimination studies and policies. By codifying groups *a priori*, statistics simultaneously provide means for carrying out quantitative scientific analysis *and* the labels that will be used –possibly pejoratively– to describe the groups those statistics give an image of. Because statistics harden labile self- or collective identifications and materialize active divisions in multicultural societies (Alba, 2005), they are at the core both of identity production processes *and* policies designed to combat inequalities. It follows from this that statistics act more as a symptom of the overall state of a given society than the *modus operandi* for an ethnicization or racialization process that was "only waiting" for statistics to enable it to operate at full force. We need to find a way of getting beyond the aporias of wanting to know without looking, assessing without counting, deciphering ethnic and "racial" social relations without entering into the mechanics of stigmata and

(11) There is not enough space here to cite all the press editorials on the issue. Let the titles of the two most recent "manifestos" suffice to indicate the range of positions: "Engagement républicain contre les discriminations" (*Libération*, Feb. 23, 2007) and "Des statistiques contre les discriminations" (*Le Monde*, Mar. 13, 2007).

self- or collective identification. There is no ready-made solution. And in France we are only just beginning to explore this research field.

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