

| **Everlasting Countdowns: Race, Ethnicity and National Censuses in Latin American States**, edited by Luis Fernando Angosto-Ferrández and Sabine Kradolfer, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012, 349 pp., ISBN 978-14-4384-149-8

Everlasting Countdowns: Race, Ethnicity and National Censuses in Latin American States, offers an insightful and opportune collection of studies around race and ethnicity within the design and implementation of national censuses in a selection of countries from Central and South America. The book contains ten chapters, three of which are jointly authored, with ample illustrations in figures and tables to illuminate the various authors' respective discussions. Bibliographical references and extensive endnotes further serve to provide additional explanation to the reader.

Editors Luis Fernando Angosto-Ferrández and Sabine Kradolfer set the stage in Chapter One with an introduction to the overarching theme of the book, stressing early in their introduction that although the topic at hand deals with national censuses, it is entirely a political-sociological effort intended to be accessible to a broad readership. This is a collective debate around race, ethnicity, social category identification, representation and creation, and the context of statistical practice employed by actors with a variety of vested interests. They explain that censuses are the tool employed to gauge the diversity of a population, to enable the State in its putting in practice policies aimed at addressing the needs of those diverse groups and/or managing said groups within the national project which may (often) be at times in conflict with those needs. The State's predisposition—whether toward socialist or

liberal (or neoliberal) objectives—determines in no small way the design of the census tool, the population categorizations counted (or predetermined), the methodology of census-taking and the use to which the results are put. In some cases, the census determines policies; in others, the State project determines the census activity and its later interpretation.

The editors note that the use of social categories of ‘race’ and ‘ethnicity’ in national censuses are drawn upon in discussions surrounding social and economic inequality, wealth distribution, economic and social power, citizen rights, and the formation of state policies related to those themes. In these authors’ words, ‘censuses are administrative tasks in which the state is obliged to transform ideology into practice’ (3). In general, they note, ‘there is a predominant concern with improving the quality of censuses by creating mechanisms that portray the population’s cultural diversity with more reliability and contrast it with other social diversities’ (4). Ultimately, they see ideology as a pervasive characteristic of the mechanisms and interpretation of national censuses, combining to influence the image of the population with resultant practical societal impacts.

Before offering a summary of the key points provided in each of the subsequent chapters, the editors provide an overview of the current scholarship on the issue of social category identification in census design, methodological considerations, matters of political and racial distortion of the tool and its implementation. There is discussion on the issue of census results having an unexpected effect of creating new social/ethnic categorizations, shown in the example of the term ‘Hispanic,’ which prior to the 1970s adoption by the U.S. Census Bureau, was uncommon. The authors contend that ‘the only way to avoid lack of legitimacy’ surrounding social categories in censuses is to debate them publicly and transparently.

The editors provide a context for the nine chapters that follow by identifying the countries under study: Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Guatemala, Panama,

Peru and Venezuela. They discern a continuous theme that weaves itself throughout the book, namely, an 'examination of state-fostered constructions of indigeneity as mediated by national censuses' (7), and highlight the comparative perspective employed in two of the nine chapters. With regard to the expertise of the included authors, the editors note the diversity of analytical perspective among them, and the variety of disciplinary backgrounds that inform their essays.

On the issue of 'constructions of indigeneity', the chapter on Colombia by Gloria Lopera Mesa is illustrative, and representative of the companion chapters; for this reason I will focus principally on her chapter in this review. She offers for consideration the idea that censuses can be at odds with race/ethnicity on a conceptual level: How does one numerically or statistically express cultural characteristics and ways of living? Additionally, she notes, in the desire to build a unifying terminology for use in the conversations pertaining to social groups across the region, national/sub-national specificities impede comparative analysis needs. Her approach involves an examination of the who/how/what for categorization of indigenous peoples within a context of differentiated citizenship. Lopera Mesa notes Colombia's current policy of self-identification is the basis for ethnic categorization within the census, while identifying an institutional suspicion from state agencies that have their own methods of classifying by ethnicity.

In her chapter, Lopera Mesa provides a detailed breakdown of the geography since Spanish colonization of indigenous peoples within Colombian territory, noting geographical influences that separated ethnic groups and which limited or enabled inter-group contact. Externally-imposed categories, for example, the *tributario*, a tax-paying system for the Indians, are analyzed as roots of later group identification that had little or nothing to do with their ethnic origins or ways of life. The author provides data from censuses throughout Colombia's history that identify various

indigenous peoples classified in new ways within the context of the current nation-building project, reinforcing the notion of labels or groupings applied to said groups from outside their individual or group self-identities. The highly malleable categorizations employed over centuries show the unreliability of historical censuses, which methodologically were similarly hampered by the uneven categorization of indigenous peoples who were also in central areas that were very inaccessible, or depending on their ability to speak some Spanish, were classified as mestizos and therefore were not counted in the indigenous census. In the modern period, classification of indigenous ancestry has come into play as land claims have been exerted, with state agencies such as the Colombian Institute of Agrarian Reform (INCORA) being tasked with socio-cultural studies to determine which people belonged to which ethnic group.

Lopera Mesa's analysis includes the national-constitutional reform [implemented in 1991](#) and its effect upon the indigenous population, with an ever-increasing number of identified indigenous persons in the country. As the state moved to address historical discrimination against indigenous Colombians, subsequent policies shifted toward providing more self-governance powers to those groups, which the author notes, served the interests of neoliberal logic of the day that prioritizes 'decentralization, privatization and deregulation' (110). The author also explores the concept of indigenous self-identity within a context of a country that has experienced decades of internal armed conflict, in which indigenous rights have fallen behind in the State's desire to maintain authority over territory.

Everlasting Countdowns is a work of considerable value to scholars who appreciate the immense complexity that lies behind the design and application of a national census within culturally/ethnically diverse countries and the region as a

whole. It provides a solid collection of studies and critical content, useful for researchers for those whose own work is reflected in the need to must account for not only contemporary self-identification of identity, but also the historical ramifications of colonization, conflict, trade and the perpetual divisions of unnatural borders. Any state, even one that is highly transparent and representative in its governance, is challenged by these and a multitude of other factors that affect the design needs and implementation challenges of national censuses. The examples provided in this book make a broad and profound contribution to the field and should serve researchers and policymakers alike.

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