

Diversity's Blind Spot or the Data's Blind Spot?

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Postprint / Postprint

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

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Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Massey, D. S. (2006). Diversity's Blind Spot or the Data's Blind Spot? *Ethnicities*, 6(4), 546-550. <https://doi.org/10.1177/146879680600600407>

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European ethnic groups, and as they increase between European and Asians groups and to a lesser extent Hispanic groups, that it is impossible to chart the trajectory of different ethnic groups. It has always been debatable that intermarriage has led to assimilation rather than to new hybridities. Nonetheless, it seems valuable to readdress religion and ethnicity per se, and for the historical European immigrant groups in particular, because at the very least it is a reminder of two things. First that entry to the middle class is not the sole determinant of acceptability and integration. Second, that the US national identity based on a liberal, secularized Protestantism was forged in part by its centuries-long encounter with Catholicism, combined with a powerful anti-Semitism, and now asserts itself against an Islam that it similarly demonizes.

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Diversity's blind spot or the data's blind spot?

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In 'Diversity's Blind Spot', my good friend Richard Alba argues that one subgroup of Americans has consistently been overlooked in assessing the nation's progress in achieving broader inclusion and representation in

higher education: members of the Roman Catholic Church. The article draws on past research to recap succinctly the Protestant origins of many leading private colleges and universities in the United States and then goes on to discuss the content and prevalence of anti-Catholic stereotypes at various historical junctures. This review of historical evidence leaves little doubt that Catholics were systematically excluded from elite institutions of higher education in the past and were notably underrepresented on the faculties of the best schools.

I do not have any quarrel with this historical evidence. Indeed, I find it quite compelling. Nonetheless, when I was originally sent this article for a blind review I did not recommend its publication – not because I doubted the powerful effect of the Protestant establishment’s anti-Catholic legacy in American higher education, but because I was not convinced by the evidence marshaled in the article to support the continued underrepresentation of Catholics at elite colleges and universities today.

As the present publication indicates, however, my views as a reviewer did not prevail. The journal editors wrote that while they ‘understood [my] argument that the paper lacks data and no model of causal mechanism and so is inconclusive’, they countered that ‘if we always took such a strict view, many topics would remain closed’. They therefore elected to accept the article for publication, but invited me to participate in a symposium in which, for the purposes of discussion and debate, I would lay out my reservations about the analysis. I now do so in what I hope is viewed as a collegial and friendly spirit.

Although the continued exclusion of Catholics is certainly a plausible argument, given the historical evidence, and while the present underrepresentation of Catholics in faculty ranks is entirely possible, I do not believe these outcomes are at all demonstrated by the data presented in Richard Alba’s article. The crux of the problem is the scarcity of data on religion. Owing to the constitutional separation between church and state in the United States, no question on religious affiliation is asked on the US census or any government survey. All religious data in the US come from privately sponsored surveys, which generally yield sample sizes that are insufficient for the kind of fine-grained analysis required to assess the religious composition of small occupational groups such as college professors.

To get around this fundamental data limitation, Alba uses the 2000 US census to assess the representation of persons with Italian ancestry among academics with doctoral degrees and then seeks to determine the relative number of persons of Italian origin on arts and sciences faculties at 10 elite institutions, including my own, Princeton University (readers should thus consider themselves fairly warned about any potential biases on my part). This analytic approach may be all that can be done given current data limitations, but as a social demographer I find the resulting findings to be unsatisfying and unconvincing.

First, even if one were to uncover data indicating a clear underrepresentation of Italians among college professors, Italian ancestry represents a proxy indicator for Catholicism that is imperfect, at best, and perhaps highly inaccurate. Even among Catholics descended from the great waves of European immigration in the past, Italians are simply a subset of a much larger population that includes the descendants of Poles, Irish, Germans, Czechs, Hungarians and many others. In an age of mass immigration from Latin America, moreover, the share of Italians among all Catholics is rapidly declining. There are presently more than twice as many Hispanics as Italians in the US.

Whatever the imperfections of Italian ancestry as a proxy for Catholicism in terms of numbers, it is even more problematic in terms of substance, as it completely confounds religion and national origin, making it impossible to distinguish between anti-Catholic and anti-Italian bias. It is at least a plausible alternate hypothesis that any apparent shortfall in the representation of Italians among college professors reflects exclusion on the basis of national origin rather than religion. Hostility toward ethnic Italians cannot simply be equated, *a priori*, with hostility toward Catholics in general.

Even if one were to document an underrepresentation of Italians within the professorate, moreover, and grant this result as empirical fact, it still leaves open the question of mechanism. A shortfall of Italians compared to their share in the general population might stem from exclusion on the basis of ethnicity or religion; but it could also reflect the selective movement of Italians toward other, more attractive occupations. After all, when adjusted for years of schooling the income of college professors does not compare that favorably with other professions, such as business, law, or medicine.

A documented underrepresentation of Italians among college professors might be considered a civil rights issue if it were involuntary, but if it stems from voluntary choices made by individuals maximizing their own welfare, then it would not really constitute 'diversity's blind spot'. Without specifying and estimating competing models of exclusion and selection, it is impossible to eliminate the hypothesis that departures from proportional representation stem from voluntary occupational mobility rather than discrimination.

The foregoing criticisms are moot, however, if Italians are represented among the ranks of college professors roughly in proportion to their share in the population. It is very difficult to sustain an argument of prejudicial exclusion on the basis of either religion or ethnicity if the percentage of Italians in the professorate roughly equals their share in the US population. Surprisingly, given the tone of the article, this is precisely what data from the 2000 census reveal. Whereas persons of Italian origin constitute between 5 and 6 percent of the population, they now represent between 4 and 5 percent among doctorate holders who teach at American colleges

or universities. Quoting from the article itself, 'the census data reveal the quiet intellectual ascent of Italian Americans who, though they have not yet reached parity among college and university professors, are not much below it'.

In other words, the latest census data do not provide much *prima facie* evidence in support of the argument that the relatively small numbers of either Catholics or Italians stem from discriminatory processes. The analysis therefore turns to Italian representation among professors at the nation's top colleges and universities, as identified by the well-known ranking done annually via the *US News and World Report*. Unfortunately, in doing so, the data problems become even more intractable, for not only do we lack data on the religious affiliations of professors, we do not even have information on their ethnic ancestry beyond broad categories defined by the intersection of race and Hispanic origin, and certainly nothing on Italian origins.

Analysts seeking to assess the representation of Italians on elite faculties thus reduced to counting people of 'Italian surname' is a very slippery exercise because Italians share many last names with people of Spanish, Portuguese and Latin American origin and because intermarriage and name changes tend to obscure national origins over the generations. Based on a crude count of surnames among professors at 10 elite institutions, the article estimates that Italian Americans constitute 1.9 percent of full professors, 2.1 percent of associate professors and 2.3 percent of assistant professors, figures that in each case lie below the percentage observed among college and university professors holding doctorates generally.

There is not much that can be done about the problem of overlapping surnames among different national origin groups, but the problem of name change through intermarriage is partially overcome by restricting attention to males, who are still unlikely to change their last name upon marriage. Focusing on males indeed moves the figures on Italians toward greater representativeness in junior ranks, as one might expect. The percentage of Italians among associate professors rises from 2.1 percent in general to 2.6 percent when men alone are considered, and the shift is from 2.3 percent to 2.5 percent among assistant professors.

Focusing on men, however, only solves the problem of lost Italian surnames in the generation undergoing intermarriage. Any offspring of a union between an Italian surnamed woman and a non-Italian man would still likely be lost to observation, and given rates of intermarriage between Italians and non-Italians that Richard Alba himself has been instrumental in documenting, this number is probably substantial. It is thus likely that many faculty at elite institutions who are not counted as being of Italian origin based on their surname, nonetheless have an Italian parent or grandparent on their maternal side.

Given these data limitations, I remain skeptical of the empirical

relevance marshaled here to argue for the continuation of exclusionary mechanisms directed against Catholics in general or Italians in particular. Although a legacy of anti-Catholic bias and negative stereotyping of Italian Americans is clear, and a hypothesis of continued exclusion from university faculties is justified historically, the outcome has not been convincingly demonstrated for the year 2000. The evidence adduced here does not show that Catholics are underrepresented either among professors in general or among faculty at elite institutions, nor does it sustain the argument that ethnic Italians are underrepresented among college professors generally.

The most we can say based on Alba's analysis is that persons of Italian origin may be underrepresented on the faculties of very elite institutions, but even here the evidence is equivocal owing to the likely loss of large numbers of second- and third-generation Italian Americans who trace their Italian roots through maternal lines. While Richard Alba's arguments about 'diversity's blind spot' may be provocatively plausible given the historical record, my bottom line is that the hypothesis of underrepresentation is not close to being proved scientifically in the contemporary era.

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Beyond race: Recognizing minority status in elite contexts

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I am grateful for the opportunity that the editors of *Ethnicities* have provided by soliciting commentaries on my article and allowing me to respond to them. I am grateful also for the willingness of Mary Hickman, Douglas Massey and Stephen Steinberg to give their views, which in the cases of Massey and Steinberg come from friends of long standing, who are nevertheless willing to commit their disagreements with my argument to print.

I find it significant that the divergence in these commentaries coincides with the position of the writers as insiders or outsiders. The sympathetic