Tanya Domi:

Hi, this is Tanya Domi. Welcome to The Thought Project recorded at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, fostering groundbreaking research and scholarship in the arts, social sciences, and sciences. In this space, we talk with faculty and doctoral students about the big thinking and big ideas generating cutting edge research, informing New Yorkers and the world.

Tanya Domi:

Richard Alba is a Distinguished Professor in sociology at the Graduate Center, CUNY, a prolific scholar and author. Alba is a public sociologist who wrote in his 2015, New York Times Op-Ed The Myth of a White Minority. In which he explained that while America is becoming a much more diverse society, it is not a post racial one. And that we have not yet developed the vocabulary for these new identities of an increasingly multi-racial society. This editorial marked the beginning of his Seminole research now contained in a new book, The Great Demographic Illusion: Majority, Minority, and the Expanding American Mainstream, Princeton University Press 2020. Welcome back to The Thought Project professor Alba.

Richard Alba:

Thank you very much, it's great to be here again.

Tanya Domi:

Congratulations on this important book. That's going to be released on September 1st, this coming Monday.

Richard Alba:

I'm very proud of it actually. And I think that the message of the book is one that deserves a broad hearing.

Tanya Domi:

Yes. Given the subject matter, the timing, the subject is very, very pivotal. I believe in our country right now. And you're right in the middle of it. As you explained, in a recent NPR interview that the public has been more or less misled about the coming white minority in America. And you talked about how you looked at population and census data in researching this book and what you did discover, enabled you to really push back on this notion of a presumed white minority that is playing, very big in nationalistic politics at this time as we approach this upcoming presidential election. Why don't you explain to our listeners what you found and why you have come to that conclusion?

Richard Alba:

Sure. Okay. The book really begins with sort of so-called majority-minority narrative, which is a way that we currently understand the American future in ethnic and racial terms. And it's based a lot of census data. And the idea is that by the middle of this century, whites will be a minority and the collective of minority groups will make up the majority of the country. And we've been hearing about this for more than a decade now, and it's very widely known, which surveys show. And we also have discovered through social psychological research that it's a very divisive narrative in the sense that it makes whites very uneasy and indeed many whites become more conservative in their attitudes when they're presented with this scenario of the majority-minority narrative. What I've discovered is you could say is

two things. One is that the demographic data on which the narrative has been based are deeply flawed and they're deeply flawed because they fail to account for the report.

Richard Alba:

And second factor, which is the rapid rise of mixing across ethnic racial lines in families and the emergence now of a surge of young people coming from mixed family backgrounds in which one parent is white, and the other parent is a minority, so the census data deal with such individuals who are in between the ethno-racial blocks described by the majority-minority narratives that both have strong kinship ties on the white side and strong kinship ties on the minority side, but the census data basically classified them as minority. And in so doing, they sort of oversimplify, you might say the situation of these young people and therefore they accelerate the apparent decline of the white population while also accelerating the apparent expansion of the minority population. What I found in my research is that these young people they're growing up in more advantaged families than would be the case if they were only of minority background.

Richard Alba:

They're growing up in neighborhoods that also are better in terms of their general characteristics than the neighborhoods in which many minority youths grow up. They are mixing with whites because they're in mixed neighborhoods and they have relatively high education. They are integrating into social environments that contain many whites. They even marry whites at very high levels, so these mixed young people with a huge exception, which I'll get to in a second, are really integrating into what one could call the mainstream American society. It's an assimilation story, which is very different from the vision of America in the future that the majority-minority narrative present. Now, as I said, there is a hugely important exception individuals with a white parent and a black parent have very different experiences from the ones I just described. And they often come to see themselves as minorities rather than members of the mainstream society.

Richard Alba:

And they feel a strong sense of affiliation with African-Americans. I think in understanding this, we should understand that people of African descent in our country feel still the heavyweight of American racism. And so that means that if you are partly black, you have a lot of the experiences of people who are solely black, for example, hostile encounters with the police. But overall, I think the picture that I developed is one where the mainstream American society is becoming more diverse because it's taking in many of these young people who come from mixed backgrounds, as well as other people coming from minority backgrounds.

Tanya Domi:

Yes. And you talk about these categories, the standard categories of classification of racial and ethnic groups. Now you talk about how people can identify in an ethnic group and then later maybe change their ethnic group.

Richard Alba:

Yes.

Tanya Domi:

But this is part of this emerging assimilation, as you've described in the book.

Richard Alba:

Indeed, so the young people from mixed backgrounds have unusually fluid identity. When we think about ethnicity and race, we still tend to think in terms of the characteristics that those concepts had in the 20th century, when America was really a black and white nation. And there was little ambiguity therefore about where most Americans stood in relationship to this basic division. I mean, it's still true that for most Americans, there's little ambiguity about their background, but this new group is different because there is ambiguity and people can think of themselves as for example, if they're Asian and white, they can think of themselves as Asian and white, or think of themselves as Asian or think of themselves as white. And we can see from the analysis of matching census data, that mixed individuals changed their identification on the census with some frequency. And by the way, individuals for Asian or white, maybe surprisingly to your listeners are more likely to describe themselves as white, when they use only one category, then to describe themselves as Asian.

Tanya Domi:

You note that in your book, why don't you talk about the census itself and how the census determined to identify people and how that is not really kept up with this emerging diversity?

Richard Alba:

I think this is maybe for some listeners may be the most surprising part of all. A very strong argument in the book is that census data should not be taken literally, so if the census says, there are 21,850,264 Asians say, you really shouldn't take that as a literal truth. And in particular the census constructs from what people say on their forms, in which the data are presented. And the usual categories, there's a handful of them that are common to our general knowledge about census data, white, black, Hispanic, mixed race, et cetera. In the majority-minority story, the only people counted as whites are people who are non-Hispanic and solely white by race. By that definition of whites who is not white includes any mixed individual. And by the way, most people who have come from a mixed background have a white parent.

Richard Alba:

That means surprisingly that people who say on the census, that they are say white and Asian are going to be called not white when we hear about these census data that by 2045, a minority of Americans will be white. Well, the majority in 2045 includes people who are partly white. Also confusing is the way in which Hispanic origin is treated. The census, it should be noted does not have full control over how it asks these questions and how it codes the data into categories. By law the Office of Management and Budget determines how the census can ask about race and ethnicity and what categories it should fit the data into. It's still the case that the Office of Management and Budget requires two different questions. One is a question on race and the other is a question on Hispanic origin or Hispanic ethnicity, so there's a problem.

Richard Alba:

How do you combine what people say on the race question with what they say on the Hispanic origin question? And the census Bureau has followed the rule that if people say they are Hispanic, that is their primary category, so as a consequence, it's not possible in the current census data scheme to recognize

people who are part Hispanic and part non-Hispanic. It turns out this is actually a very large group because Hispanics have been intermarrying, especially with whites, for decades.

Tanya Domi:

Right, right.

Richard Alba:

And 20% of the Hispanic babies born in the United States today have a non-Hispanic, white parent.

Tanya Domi:

Parent.

Richard Alba:

And so, again, what happens as a consequence is that individuals who are partly white, have a white parent are shifted into the minority category and not counted at all in the white category. The census scheme really does not allow Americans to recognize the importance of mixed backgrounds. And to think about them as a status that's separate from being either solely white or solely minority.

Tanya Domi:

Yes. And then as you point out, it's constructed and in this census, they removed a category entirely and that's people who identify as LGBT.

Richard Alba:

Oh absolutely.

Tanya Domi:

Yeah, so the politics that drives this construction probably will not change until there's a change in the administration it would seem going forward.

Richard Alba:

I think you can take that as certain. The census Bureau recognizes that there is a problem in the disparate way it handles race where now multiple race is allowed and the way it handles Hispanic origin. In 2015, it tested a unified question in which Hispanic origin was treated as if it were a race. That meant that people could say meaningfully I'm Hispanic, but I'm also white or Hispanic and also black. But for that question to be implemented in 2020, the Office of Management and Budget would have had to change its standards for the measurement of race and ethnicity. And when Trump assumed power, it refused to change those standards. And so we're stuck in 2020 with the same-

Tanya Domi:

categories-

Richard Alba:

Format which produces misleading data.

Tanya Domi:

This is partly why you came to understand the data and the presumed white minority that was looming in the future was really not true. However, as you also write in your book, you reference Charles Blow, who talks about the white extinction anxiety. And you also write in your book about in reference to the 2016 presidential election, that quote white identity was crucial unquote and that a survey conducted by NPR, the Robert Wood Foundation and the Harvard School of Public Health determined in this survey that a majority of whites felt they had been discriminated against.

Richard Alba:

I think that the majority-minority narrative, as I said earlier, [inaudible 00:15:06] and it has had a real political impact. And the book has a whole chapter devoted to the 2016 election where I think we can see that there was a political impact that it was an impact by and large, that was favorable to the Republican candidate because there's a major portion of the white population is feeling uneasy about the changes that it believes are taking place in the United States. And it feels uneasy about whether the status of the white group is secure in this changing environment. And Trump with his appeals to xenophobia, with his appeals to racism, was able to take advantage of this unease. And I think it helped a great deal for his victory after all he won, not the popular vote, but only the electoral vote.

Richard Alba:

And he won that by very small margins in three States where working class whites heavily voted in his favor in Wisconsin, Michigan, and Pennsylvania. It's important, I think to get a more accurate and a more inclusive vision of how America is changing as a result of large scale immigration, that began in the mid 1960s and that continues today. The book argues that in fact, there's a lot of continuity between the changes that occurred in the mid 1960s when the so called white ethnics were assimilated into the American mainstream and the changes that are taking place today and assimilation is still an important force. And for, I would say rather self-evident reasons because immigrant minorities especially have come to the United States in order to get ahead, their children also are determined to get ahead and to get ahead means learning to work in a society where a lot of the important positions are still held by whites.

Tanya Domi:

In your chapter on assimilation. I would just say you're optimistic. I mean, you talk about expanding the mainstream of a much more diverse society in America. It does say-

Richard Alba:

Well, I think we can see the mainstream is expanding. Let's just take some of the cultural markers. Think of the incredible success that Hamilton the musical has had. Literally this is expanding the mainstream conception of what's an important play. What about our founding myths? The founding fathers? I think it's an extraordinary phenomenon. But it's very much speaks to the kind of cultural expanding that goes along with a kind of demographic expansion.

Tanya Domi:

Professor Alba you have talked about, and you have a chapter dedicated to assimilation in 21st century, a very diverse America. And this seems to butt up against the palpable white anxiety that Charles Blow calls the white, ethnic, rather white extinction anxiety. And the survey research shows that this is

present and we can presume at this point, given the conclusion of the Republican national convention, that the president is going to double down on his 2016 playbook and accentuate and make appeals to white people and the threats, the potential quote, unquote threats to them. What do you say about this conundrum and how does America move forward and possibly beyond the election?

Richard Alba:

Well, that's a very good question. I think first, we should understand that many of the whites who are supporting Trump are not just uneasy about demographic trends, they're also uneasy about their economic position or the economic position of their communities. And so they've often been described as the left behinds, and I think there are multiple senses in which that might be true as it happens I've lived part-time in upstate New York, so I'm familiar with communities where people feel left behind. And so I think for some whites, they see the economic opportunities, not just for themselves, but for their children as having markedly declined over time. And in the community that I'm most familiar with, young whites are either able to leave or they choose not to, they stay behind in an environment which is simply not very inviting in terms of sort of economic achievement.

Richard Alba:

Many of them fall into drugs and maybe become statistics in the so-called depths of despair that demographers have written about as effecting a lot of white rural communities. I think, these are complex problems that call for certainly partly economic policy solutions. But I do think that to move beyond this rhetoric and divisive, imagining as the American future, we need a kind of a sense of the future that's as I said earlier, more inclusive, including inclusive of whites. And I think that there's social psychological research that shows that if you vary the narrative about the future, and you have a more hopeful narrative, which is based in part on ideas about minorities assimilating into the mainstream, that whites reactions are less uneasy, less conservative, less anti minority. I think that correcting this misunderstanding, misapprehension really of the future that most likely lies ahead is really an important step. It's not the only step to take, but it's an important step.

Tanya Domi:

You have a chapter on policy recommendations on how to address these challenges. You want to conclude our conversation with an overview of what you see-

Richard Alba:

Sure.

Tanya Domi:

Besides what you just mentioned.

Richard Alba:

The book argues that assimilation today is a really important and underappreciated phenomenon. That it's leading, as you said to an expanded mainstream that brings in many more people of minority origin and creates a kind of multicultural mainstream in some parts of America, but all is not well. I mean, there's still a lot of barriers confronting people, so that assimilation today is nowhere near as open and inviting as it was for the white ethnics in the middle of the 20th century. And I go into the reasons for that after world war two, the economy of the United States, which was of course kind of the preeminent

power in the post world war two world created an abundance of opportunities for people to get ahead. We really need to address, I think some of the inequality and racial barrier challenges that are making assimilation less consequential than it could be.

Richard Alba:

And I see this as threefold, so one is intensifying economic inequality, which is by the way, a great contrast to the decades immediately after world war two, which were very unusual in American economic history, because inequality was so low. High inequality, and this has been shown by many studies, makes it more difficult for young people growing up in families at the bottom to really move ahead. And I think that we need to address this missing inequality by attempting to reduce it by redistributive policies, particularly with regards to wealth, because we know that wealth inequality is amazingly intense.

Tanya Domi:

Right, right.

Richard Alba:

I mean, we can talk about a few individuals who own as much as the bottom half of the American population.

Tanya Domi:

Right.

Richard Alba:

I don't think we've ever experienced wealth inequality at quite this level. But another prong I think of reducing barriers to assimilation is to address the consequences of racism, especially for people with African ancestry, because they feel racism most severely in our society. And I look at the Reparations Argument and some of the proposals that have been developed under that rubric of reparations. And I think that they are viable as ways that we can acceptably. And I mean, acceptably in this political sense, acceptably begin to draw down racism and its implications. I look at for example, measures that have been proposed by people like the economist, Sandy Darity, to reduce the rate, wealth and inequality between the average white and the average African-American for example, baby bonds, a proposal that has been made in the US Congress to give every child who's born in the United States, a small kind of capital infusion at birth-

Tanya Domi:

At birth, yeah.

Richard Alba:

And then to grow this over time and to grow it in ways that people who are more disadvantaged get bigger infusions of wealth. I think also, I mean, the book talks about the police as an enormous problem for African Americans. And this is before the black lives movement really got underway. We've had regrettably many demonstrations of why the police are such a problem for black Americans. And it's not just, of course people getting shot. It's simply the harshness of the treatment that many black men especially receive at the hands of the police. We have of course, a prison system, which

disproportionately is inhabited by minorities, but especially by African Americans, so we need to do important things to reform our criminal justice system, to make it less punitive and also fairer.

Richard Alba:

And then I think the third thing is we really need to tackle the problem of people in the United States who have no legal standing whatsoever because they're so called unauthorized documented immigrants.

Tanya Domi:

Right.

Richard Alba:

And I think Americans should accept or understand that the immigrants who have come here without authorization have come here because other Americans were willing to hire them and to profit from their labor. And this has been going on for decades. And some of the people in the highest positions in the United States, like the current president of the United States-

Tanya Domi:

Yes.

Richard Alba:

They have particularly benefited from the low wages that workers who are undocumented receive. And it's time to accept that if these people came because the American labor market wanted them, we should find a way to allow them to stay now legally and on a path I believe to citizenship. Those are the three policy areas that the book discusses.

Tanya Domi:

Richard Alba this is an important book and an important time. And I want to thank you for coming today and discussing it with us.

Richard Alba:

Always a pleasure Tanya.

Tanya Domi:

Thanks for tuning into The Thought Project. And thanks to our guest distinguished professor Richard Alba of The Graduate Center. The Thought Project is brought to you with production engineering and technical assistance by Kevin Wolf of CUNY TV. I'm Tanya Domi, tune in next week.