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Re-Defining Race and Class

Recent Debates on Affirmative Action in Brazil

BY GRAZIELLA MORAES D. SILVA

THE DEFINITION OF BRAZIL AS A RACIAL democracy has been contested for decades. Yet, few people would predict that by 2007 more than thirty Brazilian public universities—the most prestigious in the country—would have implemented the most radical form of affirmative action—quotas—to address racial gaps in higher education enrollment.

Since race-targeted affirmative action in Brazil was implemented in Brazil, many debates have emerged. I want to explore this issue by focusing on two 2006 manifestos that were widely discussed in the media: one in favor and one against racial quotas in public universities. Both manifestos accept the existence of racial inequalities in Brazil. However, they offer different understandings of the mechanisms that produce and reproduce these inequalities. By comparing the arguments used in these two manifestos it is possible to unpack the underlying similarities and differences in the two images constructed about modern Brazil: one, as a color-blind Republic, and the other as a society built on a racial hierarchy.

Both manifestos partially reconcile these two images in their debates around affir-

mative action policies. This reconciliation emerges from the shared understanding of race and class as complementary categories and the use of socioeconomic exclusion as a defining attribute of race and racism. This understanding has allowed for the rapid growth and acceptance of affirmative action policies. However it might have consequences for the development of collective action and racial mobilization.

The population in Brazil is divided among blacks, browns, and whites (6 percent, 39 percent and 54 percent, respectively), but the main color line has always

South Africa.


Since the end of slavery in 1888, all state policies have been formally color-blind—Brazil never had anything equivalent to either South African apartheid or U.S. Jim Crow segregation. Furthermore, the Brazilian educational system has never formally used race as a criterion of exclusion. Certainly, discrimination does exist, although the belief in racial democracy has been prevalent in popular culture and some academic works.

Despite differences in formal policies, Brazil is similar to the United States and

Since race-targeted affirmative action emerged in Brazil, many debates have emerged. Two 2006 manifestos for and against racial quotas highlight the arguments.

been between whites and non-whites (from now on referred to as blacks). However, the distribution among these groups has changed over time due to high rates of miscegenation and intermarriage or simply by changes in self-classification, making Brazilian racial boundaries much more blurred than those in the United States and

South Africa in that blacks are overrepresented among the less privileged groups in society and underrepresented in professional occupations and in higher education. This has been the main argument to push forward the implementation of race-based affirmative action policies. Since the end of military rule and the return to democracy,



The search for equity in education in Brazil takes many forms, ranging from a much-debated affirmative action program to experiments in youth education. To obtain equity, both the private and public sectors must be involved.

A young boy participates in a video workshop in Tefé.

affirmative action policies in the form of quotas have been constitutional. Quotas for racial and ethnic minorities, women, and the handicapped have been implemented in the public service sectors (Piovesan 2006). In the United Nations Third Conference against Racism and Discrimination in 2001 in Durban, South Africa, Brazilian black movement advocacy groups denounced the existence of racial discrimination in Brazil. The conference, widely publicized in the media, served as a catalyst for universities to implement racial quotas. The formal legality of quotas, however, has not hindered a heated public debate on the legitimacy of quotas and other racially targeted

policies. The two manifestos published in 2006 illustrate the main arguments that have emerged in the past four years since quotas were first implemented.

The first manifesto—the one against the quotas—was published on June 30, 2006. It is short, very well written, and signed by a small group of prominent artists, scholars and public intellectuals. It presented three main arguments to reject the implementation of quotas and other race-conscious policies in Brazil. First, Brazil is a Republic that had not relied on race classification for any social policy since the end of slavery. Second, exclusion of blacks from university education is not a problem

of race discrimination—since the criterion for university access has always been color blind—but a problem of socioeconomic inequality and low-quality public education. Third, using race as a criteria for distribution of resources will intensify racial antagonism in Brazil.

These arguments are not unique to Brazil—similar arguments are used in the United States to reject affirmative action policies, and the imagery of Republic is used to reject any type of racially or ethnically targeted policies in France. However, unlike citizens of these other countries, Brazilians are more willing to accept the idea of racial and socioeconomic inequali-

ties as structural problems of one of the most unequal countries in the world. A recent survey of Brazilian elites shows that they view poverty, inequality and low educational levels as the most important threats to Brazilian democracy (Reis and Moore, 2005). This same survey, however, showed that these elites are against any type of affirmative action for women or ethnic groups, arguing that this would be discriminatory against white males. Instead, they support universal policies of education and land reform. They insist that race is a subproduct of class. As defined in the manifesto—written mostly by members of these elites—acknowledging racial categories in public policies would mean giving up on racial democracy as an ideal, “allowing the strengthening of racial conflict and intolerance.” Ironically, the manifesto against affirmative action argues that diversity should be supported as “one lively and integrating process of humanity.” Diversity here is understood not in the U.S. sense—as an acknowledgment of the unique perspectives and contributions brought by people from different backgrounds—but rather as a process of assimilation into the spirit of the Republic. The U.S. version of the diversity concept is seen as a threat, because it questions the homogeneous Brazilian national identity as a “mixed country.” Accordingly, Brazil’s blurred racial boundaries are perceived as a great asset that is to be preserved. Or as put by Guimarães (2007), the authors of this manifesto argue that it is acknowledging racial diversity that creates racism.

The second manifesto, published on July 5, 2006, came as a reaction to the

overcome the history of slavery and selective immigration. Most of the text, however, addresses the need to acknowledge the existence of racial inequalities in schooling, employment and income—providing references and data on the racial gaps in these areas. The goal of the manifesto is to respond to the class-race distinction arguments of the previous document and to stress the racial hierarchies in Brazilian society. Here racism creates race, instead of the other way around. However, when the manifesto goes on to justify the need for affirmative action, it focuses on the universalistic need of social inclusion—coming closer to the Republican argument. In other words, if blacks should be targeted because they are poorer than whites, there is an acknowledgement that poor whites should also benefit from affirmative action policies.

In the second manifesto, traditional race-based arguments like diversity and slavery redress are not central as justifications for affirmative action. Diversity is rejected based on a belief in assimilation combined with weak cultural boundaries between racial groups in Brazil—the word diversity does not even appear in the manifesto favoring quotas. Slavery redress arguments appear in the formal justifications for affirmative action, but are rejected as a criterion for selection of beneficiaries due to the difficulty in identifying who are actually descendants of slaves. For example, in a survey of Rio de Janeiro, approximately 70 percent of all respondents claimed to have some “African descent.” In the same survey, 37 percent of whites claimed to have black ancestors, while 80 percent of browns and 59 percent of blacks claimed

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first document and as a defense of racial quotas and affirmative action policies. It is much longer and unfocused. It was signed by more than 200 people—many of whom are black activists—but also by intellectuals and artists. The manifesto starts by differentiating between formal and substantive equality, arguing that to achieve the latter, affirmative action is necessary to

to have white ancestors (Telles and Bailey 2002). In addition, by the end of slavery in Brazil, many blacks were already free and had slaves themselves.

In sum, race in Brazil is defined by the color of skin, not by hypodescent laws (i.e. by having a certain percentage of black ancestors). Therefore, deciding who should benefit from race-targeted policies based



on a redress for slavery argument can be problematic: can people with white skin be included if they can prove their ancestors were slaves?

The use of socioeconomic inclusion as the goal of affirmative action policies has had strong consequences in the policy implementation and public debate. There is a trend in Brazil’s affirmative action policies to place a higher degree of emphasis on income or “social class” instead of (or in addition to) race. For example, the state universities of Rio de Janeiro have created a 50 percent quota for students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Race appears as an additional criterion: within the social quota, 40 percent of the selected students have to be black. This has been the model recently approved in the Brazilian Lower House of Congress and, if approved by the Brazilian Senate, will become mandatory for all federal universities in the country.

The two universities that have insisted on purely racial categories—using pictures in addition to self-identification—have