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Affirmative Action in the Brazilian Higher Education System

The purpose of this article is to discuss the advantages and disadvantages of affirmative action in the Brazilian system of higher education, which is aimed at benefitting Afro-Brazilians suffering from the legacy of structural racism and economic inequality. The authors will highlight some of the problems linked to the racial quota system, and demonstrate that its implementation is deeply hindered by several factors, such as traditional denial of existing racial prejudice in Brazilian society, a lack of precise, normative definitions of eligibility for programs, failure of pre-university public education to properly prepare students for university-level academics, and – last but not least – a lack of sufficient support from academic institutions. The article will present both quantitative and qualitative data that show the expectations, doubts, and fears of the Brazilian academic environment with regard to the racial quota system. After a review of Brazil's racial history and an analysis of students' and professors' opinions, the authors will argue that, in order for colored citizens to become fully integrated into Brazilian society, they must first be legally enabled to overcome social, educational, and economic obstacles and handicap.

Key words: Brazil, education system, affirmative action, racism, racial relations

Introduction

21st-century Brazil has become an extremely fertile field for research in many different academic disciplines. Without a doubt, one of the issues that deserves profound analysis is the historical legacy of slavery in the country, which is still often referred to as a "racial democracy." This often involves disguised, covert, and inconsistent color-based prejudice, race-based exclusion, a discriminative informal code of social behavior, and lack of self-acceptance and self-esteem among non-white Brazilians.

The aim of the article is to concentrate on just one aspect of race in Brazil: affirmative action.¹ Affirmative action, introduced over the course of the past 15 years

¹ Affirmative action (a term used for the first time in the USA in 1961 in Executive Order No. 10925, signed by President John F. Kennedy) is understood as every kind of policy aiming to legally protect minorities and other groups which have suffered from discrimination by

as a result of new governmental policies, is a program intended to level social discrepancies in higher education brought on by over three centuries of slavery. This article will explore the specificities of racial relations in Brazil, as well as the current legal means and proposals for dealing with the still-visible legacy of slavery. The main thesis of the article is that, while Afro-Brazilians and their descendants have never faced any kind of formal discrimination or racial separation in post-Abolition Brazil (including in the education system), the real social and cultural obstacles to introducing affirmative action in Brazilian universities stem from: 1. inadequate social acknowledgement of the fact that racial prejudice does exist in Brazil, and that elimination thereof requires a legal basis for assuring equal opportunities and equal citizenship rights for all; 2. the difficulty of working out a clear principle regarding who and on what basis is entitled to benefit from affirmative action (given that the society of Brazil is profoundly racially mixed); 3. the failure of the public education system (especially on the primary and secondary levels) to properly prepare students for university education, and the lack of effective, complementary support from institutions of higher education to all those eligible or already admitted to Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) on the basis of quotas. This argument will be supported by the following: an outline of the development of racial relations in Brazil; comments on the specificity of affirmative action in Brazil; a discussion on problems with implementation, based on the experience of the authors acquired at two different academic institutions in Brazil²; and the effects to date of racial quotas in the university system.

An Outline of the Development of Race Relations in Brazil

Brazil was the only European colony that in its history won over all the others in the world in size and importance of the biggest forced immigration from Africa – the import of slaves. Just like in other parts of the American continent, slavery in Brazil was only imposed on people of color (Indians were also held as slaves, especially during colonial times). This implies directly that slave status could not be applied to white people, which even today has strong social, cultural, and economic implications.

Though strong African influences are clearly noticeable all over Brazil (not only in the historically “dark” sugar cane plantations of Northeast Brazil, but also in the much “whiter,” European-populated South), the exact number of African slaves brought to Brazil is unknown. This is because many of them simply did not survive the harsh conditions of the transatlantic passage or died soon after reaching Brazil; and also because most of Brazil’s slavery archives were destroyed after the Abolition by the abolitionists themselves, as a way to symbolically de-shame their country. However, cautious statistics usually estimate that around 3 million African slaves

giving them equal opportunity in various areas of life. The criteria for affirmative action have mostly been based on race, gender, ethnicity, and economic status.

² Information will be mostly based on research from the questionnaire conducted among the students at UnB (Universidade de Brasília), as well as on the participatory observations and anonymous opinions extracted from qualitative interviews at the UERJ (State University of Rio de Janeiro). Both HEIs were the first ones to introduce the affirmative quota system.

were transported to Brazil during the more than three centuries of Portuguese colonization (Kula 1988).

At the end of the 19th century, before white Europeans started pouring into the country, the overwhelming majority of Brazilian society was either black, mulatto, mestizo, or simply '*pardo*' (dark skinned) (Viotti da Costa 1966; Calmon 1937, v. II). With no legal or customary separation between races, miscegenation must have been more than common, (though everyday practice might have been discriminatory). Moreover, even in the colonial past, there were black ex-slaves with letters of manumission or free/freed mulattoes who achieved a rather high status in society, and went on to pursue careers in the times of the Old Republic.³ In Brazil, therefore, legal status was more important than race (although slaves were usually at least part black). The small size of the white Brazilian population, and the total disinterest in manual jobs on the part of the Portuguese colonizers – who tended to shun physical work when possible – meant that colored people often became the craftsmen, artists, mechanics, settlers, discoverers, and pioneers that were much needed by society,⁴ albeit out of necessity rather than equality. In addition, for many centuries, Brazilian society had nothing against the importation of large numbers of Africans to the country. It was not until the early republican period after the Abolition that the presence of Africans started to be viewed as undesirable (i.e. the need for population "whitening"). Despite these changes, the solution to the problem was far from discriminatory segregation. Indeed, the most effective way of whitening the Brazilian population was thought to be through process of miscegenation with the masses of European immigrants.

These were perhaps the main reasons why, beginning in the 1930s, the predominant view in Brazil was that the country had already solved its slavery problem, and with no historical burden of violence. Indeed, Brazil had implemented a rather benign system of a "patriarchal slavery," in which traditional slave-owning "patrons" provided a place in the social hierarchy for everyone, no matter their skin color or freedom status. This view was propagated by the sociological works of Gilberto Freyre (especially the classic *The Masters and the Slaves*, 1st ed. 1933) and his successors (for example: Dornas Filho 1939; Senna 1938). It was also during this time that the contribution of African slaves to Brazilian nation-building was not only recognized but stressed and appreciated. This perfectly served the creation of the myth of Brazil as a "racial paradise," which was eagerly referred to by scholars, politicians, and average Brazilians who were proud of the absence of racial discrimination and prejudice in their society. Ironically, this growing sentiment was simultaneous to the

³ For example, there were colored – usually mulatto – doctors, writers, lawyers, and politicians at the local, regional, and federal level. One of the most important writers of the 19th century and president of the prestigious Brazilian Academy of Literature was Machado de Assis, a self-educated mulatto from a poor background. Also, one of the first presidents of the Federal Republic of Brazil was Nilo Procópio Peçanha, a mulatto from a poor family with many children.

⁴ Africans often became settlers and pioneers against the wishes of their "importers." Indeed, examples include a "rebellious" and hostile group of African-born slaves who created slave hideaways, or *quilombos*, deep in the Brazilian hinterland, which successfully fought off repeated assaults from slave hunters. One of these *quilombos* was called Dos Palmares, and functioned as a regular republican army (Carneiro 1966).

appearance of the first black organizations fighting for the rights of those who had theoretically never been oppressed.⁵ However, these organizations were weak, un-influential, and short-lived. This was perhaps due to the famous Brazilian “mulatto escape hatch,” which allowed those of lighter skin to ascend the social ladder much more quickly and easily, thus inhibiting the development of many Afro-Brazilian leaders, and proving that lighter skin color did matter in Brazilian society (Degler 1971). Although republican Brazil has never had any legal race discrimination system, and the inferiority of colored people has never been officially or publicly recognized, social attitudes have in fact been prejudicial. In other words, Brazil is by no means “color-blind.” Even if not openly, Brazilians do categorize people according to the shade of their skin, the shape of their lips and nose, and the structure of hair, with clear emphasis on appearance rather than ethnic background (Santos 2009).

For a long time, the above mentioned complacency of “racial democracy” was not conducive to academic investigation of the validity of Freyre’s assertions and the national discussion on race in Brazil. In fact, many Brazilians themselves insisted that there was no need to talk about something which did not exist. The aversion to the idea of racial prejudice in Brazil gained momentum over subsequent decades, and resulted in many different theories, including one that stated that in Brazil there is no race, but rather class prejudice, which explains why people of color are over-represented at the very bottom of the economic and social pyramid. In any case, this phenomenon of “colored” poverty is still a direct result of slavery, whose legacy has been passed on from generation to generation, without the proper capital or education to break the vicious circle (Theodoro 2008). Education, and especially higher education, is considered essential to social mobility in Brazil. Affirmative action has been recently applied to higher education, and is now one of the most disputed and controversial social reforms of the day, which proves that limited access to higher education is the greatest barrier to full social equality.

Brazilian Affirmative Action and its Specificity

Although there were some attempts to implement race-based affirmative action in Brazil, for example in 1968 and 1980,⁶ none of them turned out to be very successful. The racial discourse in Brazil today can be traced back to the new constitution of 1988 – Art. 5 of paragraph XLII officially considers acts of racism crimes punishable by imprisonment.⁷ The new democratic political context, as well as black activism (especially *Movimento Negro Unificado*, which organized a big march in 1995 to present its claims), gave society a chance to voice its concerns on racial inequality. The correlation between skin color and socioeconomic situation in Brazil was becoming increasingly clear based on detailed analysis of information from general censuses⁸

⁵ For example: *Frente Negra Brasileira* in 1931, *União dos Homens de Cor* in 1949.

⁶ The former was The Ministry of Labour’s project to establish mandatory racial quotas in private industries. The latter was Abdias Nascimento’s project proposing compensatory action for Afro-Brazilians.

⁷ Brazil, Constituição da República Federativa do Brasil, 1988, Art. 5, § XLII., http://www.planalto.gov.br/ccivil_03/constituicao/constituicao.htm, (access: 27.04.2016)

⁸ Made by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE): www.ibge.gov.br

(Hasenbalg, Silva 1988). The immediate reaction of Congress, universities, and the media was to acknowledge and discuss the problem, which led to proposals of new affirmative action projects by both governmental and nongovernmental institutions. The government of Fernando Henrique Cardoso organized seminars and created a new ministerial organ (*Grupo do Trabalho Interministerial de Valorização da População Negra* – GTI *População Negra*) tasked with focusing on fighting discrimination and planning compensatory policies. However, despite many projects and initiatives (for example *Programa Nacional de Direitos Humanos*), they finally failed to establish any effective affirmative action for Afro-Brazilians. The crucial moment for the debate came only with the Third World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance (Durban 2001). Brazil, as an active participant of the Conference, signed the final Declaration to fight racism by implementing affirmative social policies aimed at doing away with racial discrimination.

However, the first racial quotas were not implemented on the federal initiative. In 2002, the State University of Rio de Janeiro (UERJ), for the first time, officially reserved places for colored applicants in order to encourage non-white students to enter and change the ethnic proportions of the campus. The first federal university to formally implement racial quotas was the University of Brasília (UnB) in 2004. This was done on the bases of a decision from the UnB council, as there was still no federal law regulating the matter at the time (Moura 2004). By the 2006, 30 public universities had already implemented racial quotas, and priority was usually given to students who had received their primary and secondary education from public schools (Heringer 2006).

Even though the implementation of these quotas was a fast process, it was not free from mistakes and controversies. Right from the start, they seemed to have as many opponents as supporters. Therefore, the Federal Law of 2012 (Lei Federal 12.711/2012, also called the “Law of Social Quotas,” signed by president Dilma Rousseff on the 29th of August) drew from this experience (debates, existing programs), attempting to combine both social and racial quotas, while giving priority to financial criteria (i.e. family income). This explains why students admitted on the basis of quotas are not only dark-skinned (Contins 2004). The new law requires public universities to reserve half of their admission spots for Brazilian public school students. In addition, the law requires that 50% of these be reserved for Brazilians of African, mixed African, and Indigenous ancestry in numbers proportional to their relative populations within each state. The racial quotas will be discontinued in 10 years, but are expected to have a profound social and economic impact on the equalization of chances and opportunities for students of all colors and financial backgrounds.

However, the big national controversy over academic affirmative action by no means stops there. On the contrary, one of the main reasons for introducing admissions quotas for HEIs is that, unlike in well-developed, high-tech economies, in Brazil a university diploma is still the passport to a good, well-paid and prestigious job, private medical insurance, generous pension scheme, etc. The black and colored population, while well represented at the level of public primary education, is heavily underrepresented at the university level. According to the latest OECD Report *Education at a Glance* (2015), c. 28% of Brazilians aged 25-64 have a secondary education, while only 14% have a tertiary education (this figure increased 3% between 2009-2013). This is well below the OECD average (34%), and below the

figures for some of Brazil's Latin American neighbors: Colombia – 22%; Chile – 21%; Mexico – 19%; Costa Rica – 18%. Instead, a large share of Brazilian youth (c. 20%) is still not involved in any kind of formal education. This could be due to a number of factors, such as a sense of inferiority on the part of colored Brazilians from poor backgrounds with no tradition of education, as well as discouragements, disillusionments, and failures at the level of primary education, which is in dire need of more funding. The very same report clearly shows a huge disparity (350%) between the salaries of Brazilians who have graduated from universities and those who only have a secondary education.

One more interesting (and quite disturbing) fact provided by the report is that, while the overwhelming majority of Brazilians attend public schools at the primary and secondary level, the minority attend public schools at the university level. Only 26% of students are enrolled in public universities, which are free and boast excellent quality. This 26% consists primarily of those who have previously attended private schools and therefore have received better opportunities and more individualized education. Raising even more concern for equality is the fact that, according to the OECD Report, Brazil invests more in education than most other countries in the world (5.6% GDP); and the majority of these resources is pumped into public universities.

The other reason for the controversy is not so much affirmative action itself – as quota systems (for example for women or disabled persons) have already been successfully introduced in Brazil (Bernardino 2004) – but rather the barrier to recognizing socioeconomic inequity as being directly related to skin color, which is not easy in a society that has long boasted racial democracy. The opponents of social policies based on skin color quotas claim that the state should direct their programs towards the poorest sectors of Brazilian society, regardless color or ethnicity. This, however, would ignore the legacy of slavery and symbolic discrimination disguised as Brazilian “color blindness.”

The other seemingly unsolvable problem is how to set the legal limits of affirmative action. The quotas are meant to benefit black people and *pardos*, but who should be entitled to decide who is eligible in such a mixed society, where there are literally dozens of different words used to describe a person's appearance based on skin color (for example: *cafuzo*, *mulato*, *mameluco*, *cabolco*, *escurinho*, *moreno*, *marrom-bombom*, *café-com-leite*, etc.)? Universidade de Brasília encountered this problem very quickly. To determine the eligibility of candidates, they used not only the self-identification method, but also created a special commission responsible for analyzing photographs of the applicants and conducting interviews. This system was heavily criticized, especially by anthropologists, who saw the danger of letting someone else determine a candidate's race and ethnic identity (Maio, Santos 2005). However, it was only in 2007 that the University decided to change this system, after an incident known in Brazil as the “Case of Alan and Alex.” That same year, two identical twins, Alan and Alex, applied to UnB via the quota program. After analyzing their photographs, the competent commission accepted only one of the boys, which highlighted the inadequacy of classification based on the phenotype only.⁹

⁹ <http://g1.globo.com/Noticias/Vestibular/0,,MUL43786-5604-619,00.html> (access: 18.01.2016)

Federal law provides for 5 categories of self-identification: *amarelo* (yellow); *branco* (white); *indígena* (Indian); *pardo* (dark); and *preto* (black). These categories, despite having been approved by the IBGE and used in censuses,¹⁰ are not the best solution for two reasons. Firstly, as was already pointed out, it is not possible to use only 5 terms to describe a complex and profoundly mixed society of over 200 million citizens who represent an infinite number of phenotypes and racial and ethnic self-identities. Secondly, self-identification is based on identity, which by definition is vague and unstable. Therefore, the above classification scheme can easily lead to mistakes or even fraud, which one of the main reasons for the strong quota opposition movement.

Last but not least, it is argued that the tertiary level of education should produce the future elites of the country, and that academic quotas are in fact counter-meritocratic, as they admit students on bases other than objectively measured knowledge and skills. This has caused dissatisfaction among many professors and non-quota students who define themselves as opponents of academic affirmative. Many times during our field research, we encountered the following opinions: "the university has not been the same since the quota students have come;" "the university has been unnecessarily darkened;" "the quota-students lower the level of the Academia;" "they threaten the quality of teaching;" "the University is not for just anyone, it's for the elite;" "not everyone must become a university graduate;" etc. These statements indicate that there is still a strong internal cultural and social opposition among HEI bodies towards affirmative quota implementation, which does nothing to improve the academic atmosphere or the social inclusion of darker and poorer newcomers. What's more, informal segregation and discrimination is apparent among students who have already been admitted to universities, especially within the most competitive faculties. One professor explained why she had divided her class into quota and non-quota students: "[The quota students] simply come with very different skills and preparation. They don't read as much as others. They have problems expressing themselves in correct Portuguese, not to mention writing. It is extremely difficult to work with such groups. Actually, my decision is profitable for everybody involved." It seems that the university environment is not always mentally prepared to deal with quota-based admissions or promoting a genuine experience of systematic, positive interaction among all representatives of the academic world.

Quotas are a fair counter-balance for those whose knowledge and skills haven't been developed at expensive, professional private schools. This is not to say that all those admitted to universities on the basis of the quota system turn out to be poorer students; on the contrary, the results of quota students after their first year of university indicate that they generally work harder, and that their performances – just like those of other students – range from poor, to outstanding (Randolpho Paiva 2004). Still, many of them need lots of extra help from their HEIs in subjects such as foreign language, IT, and academic writing skills. Unfortunately, this is not always provided in a timely manner (or at all), so the drop-out rate is generally also higher than for non-quota students, who are much more motivated and better-supported

¹⁰ *Características Etnico-raciais 2008*, Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística, http://www.ibge.gov.br/home/estatistica/populacao/caracteristicas_raciais/notas_tecnicas.pdf (access: 27.01.2016)

by their families (Contins 2004). For many students from poorer backgrounds, extra financial help to cover the costs of transportation, meals, copies, didactic materials, Internet access, etc. is absolutely indispensable. Some universities have already started providing this kind of assistance, but many students are still in need.

The Ups and Downs of Academic Quota Implementation

As soon as academic quotas were introduced, those responsible for their implementation had to face various attacks from opponents of affirmative action in the academic world. The first objections were the result of the policy in the state of Rio de Janeiro. A couple of students who had not been admitted to one of the universities there made a complaint to the court stating that the new quota system was the real reason for their rejection. Another legal case was brought before the court by one of Rio de Janeiro's congressmen, who directly requested that the Supreme Federal Court investigate if affirmative action based on race is in conformity with the Constitution (Herninger 2006). The matter was resolved on the 24th of April, 2012, when the Federal Court announced full conformity of this type of policy with the Brazilian Constitution.

However, in spite of this decision, society was still strongly polarized. Probably the best illustration of this polarization is the 2006 publication of two manifestos by two opposing groups of Brazilian intellectuals, summing up their arguments against and in support of racial quotas. These texts were addressed to congressmen who, by that time, had started actively discussing the federal law on academic affirmative action (Oliven 2007). The first of the documents, entitled *Todos têm direitos iguais na República Democrática*¹¹ ("Everyone has equal rights in the Democratic Republic"), was signed by those who wanted to prevent affirmative action. It was based on two main arguments. Firstly, in the authors' opinion, the new law would violate the political and legal equality of citizens – one of the main foundations of the Republic. Secondly, human rights simply cannot be applied differently on the basis of skin color or race criteria. They also expressed their concern that affirmative action could result in interracial conflict by artificially dividing Brazil's heretofore racially democratic society into a bipolar nation of black and white, where the former are oppressed by the latter. Instead of focusing on race, they preferred universal solutions to the problems of poverty and marginalization. The second manifesto, *Manifesto a favor da Lei de Cotas e do Estatuto da Igualdade Racial*¹² ("Manifesto in Favor of Quota Law and of Racial Equality"), was a response to the former, with the intention of proving the necessity of compensatory action at universities. By invoking the research of national institutions (for example that of Instituto de Pesquisa Econômica Aplicada from 2001), it was stressed that racial inequalities were a direct legacy of slavery and race discrimination. The manifesto also recalled that the exclusion of black people from higher education in Brazil is one of the most extreme and visible cases thereof in the world, and can only be corrected by the means proposed at the World Conference in Durban: racial quota programs. In response to *Todos têm direitos*, it was stated that the only way to achieve the desired universal equality is by implementing "positive discrimination."

¹¹ <http://www1.folha.uol.com.br/folha/educacao/ult305u18773.shtml> (access: 18.01.2016).

¹² <http://www.observa.ifcs.ufrrj.br/manifesto/index.htm> (access: 18.01.2016).

Six years after these two publications, Dilma Rousseff signed the Federal Law on Quotas. However, the voices against it did not relent. The students once again started to protest, in some cases with the full support of their professors. For example, Edward Madureira Brasil, rector of the Federal University of Goiás (UFG), argued that the adopted model for the program violated the autonomy of universities.¹³ One of the most popular slogans used by the protesters was “educação – sim, cotas – não” (education – yes, quotas – no), which implied that the government had made a mistake by focusing mainly on affirmative action instead of improving the quality of public lower education, and that the quota policy should not be treated as the main weapon in the fight against racial inequality at universities.¹⁴ It was also suggested that the funds needed to improve public schools had been wasted in the big corruption scandal of 2005-2006, known as *mensalão*.¹⁵

Although some time has passed since the initial implementation of the “Law of Social Quotas,” the subject is still a hot issue in Brazil, sparking lively public debate and dividing Brazilians into camps of opponents and supporters.

The University of Brasilia (UnB): a Case Study

At the University of Brasilia, the institutional quota program has been in force for twelve years now, and the 2012 Federal Law for four. It may seem that everyone, including those in academic circles, has accepted these controversial policies which are now a part of university life. This, however, is not true. If we examine what students think about the programs (50% of places reserved in accordance with the federal law, and 5% reserved for self-declared black students), we can see that their opinions are far from uniform.

In the summer of 2014 (July and August), 150 students on the main UnB campus (Darcy Ribeiro) responded to our short questionnaire aimed at revealing their opinions on the racial quotas system. The survey was divided into two parts. In the first, the respondents were asked to answer seven questions with five possible answers each, indicating to what extent they agree or disagree with the following phrases.

Racial quotas:

- ... equalize chances of being accepted to the university.
- ... violate the objectivism of the recruitment process.
- ... help decrease inequalities resulting from ethnic background.
- ... consolidate social divisions related to skin color.
- ... should remain a policy without modification.
- ... should be completely liquidated.
- The current classification criteria for the program are adequate.

¹³ <http://g1.globo.com/goias/noticia/2012/08/reitor-da-ufg-diz-que-novo-modelo-de-cotas-fere-autonomia-universitaria.html> (access: 18.01.2016).

¹⁴ <http://g1.globo.com/goias/noticia/2012/08/em-go-estudantes-protestam-contranova-lei-de-cotas-para-federais.html> (access: 18.01.2016).

¹⁵ *Mensalão* was a scandal in which the ruling party (PT) paid regular monthly bribes to members of the Congress from other political backgrounds in order to make them vote according to its needs. The guilty were tried and sentenced in 2012.

In the second part, the students were asked to give some personal information. For example: if they were admitted to the university on the basis of the quota system; when they started their studies; what their sex is; and what their specialization (faculty) is. They also had to identify themselves using the 5 official categories chosen by IBGE, in order to correlate their opinions with their ethnic identity.

Among 150 respondents, 76 people declared themselves as *branco* (51%), 55 as *pardo* (37%), 16 as *preto* (11%), and 3 as *amarelo* (2%). Nobody chose the category *indígena*. 18 students were admitted to the university through the quota system (13 on the basis of race and 5 on the basis of social status). All answers were analyzed both collectively and individually, and grouped in accordance with the ethnic declarations of the respondents. There was also an indicator for respondents' general opinions on the quotas, based on all answers combined.

The first important finding was that the majority of respondents were either neutral (28%) or positive (39.3%) towards affirmative action. Also, the statistics did not indicate strong polarization. Only 5.3% had a very negative opinion, and 9.3% very positive. This may seem surprising given the various manifestations for and against affirmative action presented earlier. However, it is essential to point out the considerable representation of white people in the survey: 51%. The influence of their answers on the data as a whole is clear when we analyze the same indicator for the group who declared themselves *pretos*. In their case, three quarters of respondents (75.1%) had a positive or very positive opinion, and only 6.3% were rather negative about the program. The correlation between self-declaration as black and positive feelings towards quotas is even more evident when we evaluate every question separately. In almost every statement, the majority of self-declared blacks (between 62.5% and 71.3%, depending on the question) expressed a positive attitude towards the impact of quotas. However, there were two exceptions. Less than half of this group (43.8%) was convinced that the system should remain unchanged and, what is more, 56.3% had no clear opinion on the adequacy of current classification criteria.

The other noticeable and quite unexpected tendency concerns the group of students who declared themselves *pardos*. Despite the fact that the federal policy is also targeted to benefit them, their opinions differ significantly from their black-identifying counterparts. Some of their answers were much more critical, even though this is not evident from the combined data, which shows that 40% of them evaluated affirmative action positively, and 32.8% negatively.

What is interesting is that, despite the visible discrepancy among each groups' opinions (especially the *pardos* and *brancos*, as opposed to the *pretos*), what seems to unify the majority, regardless of their race declarations, is their dissatisfaction with the form and classification system of the program. This was most strongly manifested among the whites, of whom 59.2% do not approve of the classification criteria, and 73.7% doubt the adequacy of the form. What is worth mentioning is that the percentage of students who had neither a positive nor negative opinion (taking into account all 7 questions) was 19.5%. This figure may lead either to the conclusion that for many young Brazilian students, the subject of racial quotas at universities is rather complicated and ambiguous; or that affirmative action is increasingly regarded as natural, and therefore less controversial. Moreover, in addition to the survey results presented above, we were able to draw conclusions from participatory observations.

When responding to the questionnaires, some students had obvious difficulties with answering the question on self-identification. Some of them, not knowing exactly how to classify themselves, asked friends for their opinions or even compared their own skin color with others. This observation may be an indicator that the categories established by IBGE are inadequate, and provides us with a clue as to the extent that race factors into the identity of young Brazilians.¹⁶

Conclusions

As we can see, Brazil's 1888 declaration of freedom for people of color was not enough to put them on an equal footing with the mostly white elite. The persistence of the structural racism that reproduced wealth for whites and poverty for people of color had to be combated by new legal means and strategies to promote social inclusion in the 21st century. This was done through affirmative action, including in the academic environment.

However, many doubts, fears, controversies, and negative emotions are linked to the implementation of quota programs. Teachers fear ill-prepared groups of "quota" students; their "non-quota" peers fear a lowered level of education due to incoming students with educational handicaps; and representatives of the upper and middle classes fear losing their social status and competitive advantage over those who are making their first foray into university life, or at least into the most competitive faculties (Law, Medicine, Economics). In such situations, the problem of color is all too present, in spite of the penalties for racial discrimination, which have existed formally in Brazil since 1951 (Afonso Arino Law), are enshrined in the currently valid Constitution from 1988, and have been strengthened by the 2010 Statute of Racial Equality and the 2012 Law of Social Quotas.

Still, the state needs not only to provide legal opportunities for everyone – thus preventing inhibition of advancement for the most vulnerable social groups – but to take compensatory actions, without which those groups will not be able to ascend (even though social mobility is provided for by law). Brazilians of color from poor family backgrounds, with no social capital, must be legally and organizationally promoted in order for them to overcome social, economic, and psychological handicaps. "Positive discrimination" at universities, closing the quality gap between public and private schools, and above all provision of professional help with preparation for entrance exams (*pre-vestibulares*) are goals that need to be recognized both by the state, the teachers, and students from better-off families. The effective implementation of affirmative action must therefore be based not only on the recognition of racial prejudice in Brazil (even if denied by the "racial paradise" myth), but also on clearly defined rules and regulations concerning the new, more socially inclusive, academic system.

The opportunities for both colored and poor people in Brazil should be improved, expanded, and reinforced wisely in order to counteract the contradiction

¹⁶ Although the study may give us an interesting view on how affirmative action is perceived in the academic environment, we need to remember its limitations. The sample presented reflects an only relatively small percentage (0,5%) of all UnB students due to limitations of time and scope.

between the professed “racial democracy” and the social reality. However, it is important to remember that affirmative action is treated only as a temporary solution. Therefore, the most important action to be taken now by the Brazilian government is to revise and invest heavily in lower education in order to provide the same, or at least comparable, opportunities for those attending private and public educational institutions, no matter what their racial or family background might be – even after the law on affirmative academic quotas expires.

The research presented above shows that there is still some social resistance towards acknowledgment of racial discrimination in Brazilian society; and that the quota system is just one way to compensate black and dark-skinned Brazilians for centuries of reduced or no opportunity for social ascension. However, two of the biggest challenges to the implementation of academic affirmative action are still: working out a set of easily applicable rules regarding who and on what basis is entitled to benefit from the established quotas; and securing adequate investment in the public education system on the primary and secondary levels, as well as – at least temporarily – on the tertiary level in order to help those who have been admitted to universities on the basis of the quota system.

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