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# Universities, inequalities and public policy: A brief discussion of affirmative action in higher education in Brazil

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*Abstract*

 *In this article, affirmative actions for Afro-Brazilians and poor people in Brazilian public universities will be analyzed. Introduced in the early 2000s, these measures provoked intense public debate in the country, calling into question not only the viability of their application in a country with such a high level of miscegenation as Brazil, but also their effects on the quality of Brazilian universities. Our starting point is that these policies should not be considered only educational policies, since they are also ways to symbolically reframe the place of some social groups (poor people and black people) in the national imaginary. With this objective, we propose to understand the transformations in university education over the last two decades (an increase in the number of students, social and ethnic-racial diversification of the student population etc.) as evidence of changes not only in universities but also in Brazilian society as a whole.*

*Keywords*

*Affirmative Action; University; Education inequalities; Racism.*

*Résumé*

*Dans cet article, nous analysons les mesures de discriminations positives mises en place dans les universités publiques brésiliennes au bénéfice des populations noires et des pauvres. Introduites au début des années 2000, ces mesures ont provoqué un grand débat public qui remettait en cause non seulement la faisabilité de leur application dans un pays métissé comme le Brésil comme aussi leurs effets sur la qualité des universités brésiliennes. Notre point de départ est que ces politiques ne doivent pas être considérées uniquement comme des politiques éducationnelles, car elles sont également des moyens*

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*symboliques qui redimensionnent la place de certains groupes sociaux (pauvres, noirs) dans l'imaginaire national. De ce fait, nous proposons de comprendre les changements qui se produisent dans l'enseignement supérieur au cours des deux dernières décennies (augmentation du nombre d'étudiants, la diversité sociale et ethnique de la population étudiante, etc.) comme preuve des changements non seulement dans les universités, mais aussi dans l'ensemble de la société brésilienne.*

**Mots Clés**

*Discrimination Positive; Universités; Inégalités éducationnelles ; Racisme.*

**Introduction**

The debate about the role of education and, more specifically, universities in the reduction of social inequalities in modern societies is not new. In the literature on the role of formal education in upward social mobility in capitalist societies, higher education has a prominent place, since, generally speaking, the number of years of study enhances the chance of integration into the labor market and provides better salaries.

Certainly this is one of the most discussed aspects in international debates about the importance of public investments in education to fight poverty and reduce social inequalities.

The point of departure of the present text in its approach to this debate is an issue that has become highly visible in Brazil in recent years: the affirmative action policies favoring easier access to universities for the Afro-Brazilian and low-income populations. These policies were introduced from the early 2000s onwards in Brazilian universities, justified by the argument that by increasing the number of students from these groups, a greater diversity would be made possible in universities and the historical socio-economic inequality between white and non-white people would be reduced.

As detailed below, this brought about deep changes not only for Brazilian universities or the upward mobility of lower income populations. In the present text I intend to develop the idea that discussions about affirmative action policies also provide excellent material for us to think about the symbolic role of universities and the way inequalities are conceived and discussed in Brazilian society. I also intend to show how this has

affected hegemonic discourses about the country's national identity, changing the way Brazilians see themselves and their predominant idea of society.

**Universities as the space for fighting against inequality**

The last two decades witnessed great changes in Brazilian higher education. A series of public policies in this area triggered a debate about the role of universities in contemporary society and how to make them more democratic (Artes and Ricoldi 2015).

The Brazilian university system is characterized by a complementary relationship between public and private models. Indeed, together with the public system (composed of federal, state and municipal universities[2]), there are also private universities, authorized by the Education Ministry, but whose administration is entirely privatized. The affirmative actions considered here are those directed at public universities, mainly in the federal sphere. The reason for this is that even though there are specific policies for private universities, in the form of scholarships, the more politicized discussions were about the places reserved for low income and black people in public universities. This is due to the fact that public universities are considered the best in Brazil, meaning that introducing affirmative actions in them influences the modalities of the reproduction of the political and economic elites.

In any event, Brazilian universities are a recent phenomenon. While the first university courses originated at the beginning of the 19th century, still in the Colonial period, it

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[2] Differentiated according to whether they were sustained by the Federal Government, or by each of the states of the Brazilian Federation, or by municipal governments.

wasn't until the 1920s and 1930s that the first universities appeared, with the creation of the University of Brazil (Universidade do Brasil) (now Federal University of Rio de Janeiro - Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro - UFRJ) in 1920, in the city of Rio de Janeiro and, in 1934, of the University of São Paulo (Universidade de São Paulo), in the city of São Paulo (USP). The case of USP is paradigmatic, since it was created using a modern university project. Based on the arrival of foreign teachers, mainly from France (among which there were names such as Claude Lévi-Straus and Fernand Braudel), USP's creation meant the adoption of a university model based on the integration of teaching and research, something new to Brazil (Sampaio 1991).

So the creation of universities (by merging pre-existing faculties, as in the case of UFRJ and, afterwards, the case of most Brazilian federal universities, or by the creation of a new university model, as in the case of USP) was aimed at the formation of intellectual elites that could take part in a process linked to the modernization of the state and made necessary by fast socio-cultural, economic and political transformations, caused by industrialization, urbanization and the development of a mass society.

This elitist character of those institutions was conveyed by the limited number of university students in the country (approximately 27,000, in 1940[3], when the population of Brazil was close to 40 million) and by the level of demand for access and follow up courses (for instance, in some universities the teachers could teach in their native languages, which implied a knowledge of foreign languages by the student body).

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[3] Sampaio, 1991.

A significant growth of places in university institutions would happen only from the 1960s onwards, with the increase in places in the private sector and, to a lesser extent, in the public sector. So, if in 1960 the number of university students was 93,202 (with 44% in private faculties and universities), in 1970 this number was 425,478 (with 51 % in private institutions), in 1980, 1,345,000 (with 63.3% in the private sector) and in 1990, 1,540,080 students (62.4% in the private sector). As we can see, during the 1980s there is a certain decrease in the growth rate of the number of places in higher learning institutions, partly due to the severe economic crisis affecting the country during that period (Sampaio 1991).

This growth rate only recovered in the second half of the 1990s, with the stabilization of the economy. With the Workers' Party's (Partido dos Trabalhadores - PT) ascendance to power in the 2000s, this growth gains a new momentum, since university teaching becomes one of the priorities of the left-wing governments from 2002 onwards (Neves et al, 2007). So, if in 2000 the number of university students rose to 2,694,245 (67% in the private sector), in 2010 this number was 6,379,299 (74% in the private sector) and in 2015 there were 8,033,574 university students (with 75% in the private sector)[4].

Behind this valorization of university education was the idea that increasing the number of students would help to reduce social inequalities and enhance the integration of the Afro-Brazilian population in the Brazilian elite-forming spaces.

In any event, as we can note from the data listed above, the expansion of university learning has been vertiginous in the last few decades. However, the data do not show

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[4] IPEA, 2015.

the changes occurring in the profile of the students and the public debates about public policies directed at higher learning. Until the 1960s, the university was a space of reproduction of the richer classes and the traditional middle classes, who had the means to ensure the access to, and permanence of their children in university courses. However, with the fast industrialization of the country between the years 1950 and 1980, other groups also started to see universities as important spaces in their strategies for upward mobility. That explains in part the growth of the university population between the years 1960 and 1990, both in the public and the private sector.

This was partly structured by the means of selection employed by the higher learning institutions in the entire country. The prevailing means of admission to public universities (free of charge and with a reputation of better quality) was, until the middle 2000s, exclusively based on admission examinations organized by each university. Those examinations gave priority to the contents considered more important by the evaluators in relation to each discipline. This favored the students of private secondary schools, mainly from middle and affluent classes, who not only received better quality teaching in terms of classroom content (Sampaio and Guimaraes 2009), but also had the mobility to take part in admittance examinations in different universities. Consequently, up to the 2000s, most of the places in public universities were occupied by students from the higher rungs of the social pyramid[5], the majority being enrolled in the secondary schools of the private sector, and self-classified as white[6] according to the

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[5] In 2004, for instance, students from social strata of the richest 20% represented 55% of the students enrolled in higher learning courses in the public sector and 69% in the private sector (IPEA, 2015).

[6] In 2000, white people comprised 69 % of the university students of the country (this group represented 54% of the total population) and black people represented 35.3% of the students (with a participation of 45% in the general population) (Artes and Ricoldi 2015).

data of the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatísticas - IBGE).

From the 2000s onwards, however, there was the definite intention of the government to expand access to universities for social groups under-represented among university students, with an emphasis on black[7] and poor people, creating various mechanisms to make access easier for these groups. Among those measures, the Support Program for the Restructuration and Expansion Plan of the Federal Universities (Programa de Apoio ao Plano de Reestruturação e Expansão das Universidades Federais - REUNI)[8], the University for All Program (Programa Universidade para Todos - PROUNI)[9], the Higher Learning Student Grant (Financiamento ao Estudante do Ensino Superior (FIES)[10] and the proposal for the adoption by public universities of the National High School Exam (Exame Nacional de Ensino Médio - ENEM)[11] as the admission test for candidates, stand out.

Beyond those measures, in 2012 the government defended and approved, the law of quotas in the National Congress, making it mandatory for all federal universities to adopt a quota system, reserving 50% of their places for public school students. Besides,

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[7] In the present text we will apply the racial classification used by IBGE, according to which blacks are all non-white individuals, except for Asians and Native Brazilians. A debate about the Brazilian classificatory system would be beyond the scope of the present article (Sansone 1996; Osório 2003; Guimarães 2012).

[8] Instituted in 2007, this Program aimed to expand the number of places offered by public universities, including night courses, providing easier access to students who needed to work for a living.

[9] PROUNI is a program that allows private educational institutions to pay fewer taxes in exchange for full or partial scholarships offered to low income students from public schools, disabled people and blacks (in the same proportion to the population of each state).

[10] Loans with low interest rates offered by the state to needy university students.

[11] Unified evaluation exam conducted by the Education Ministry at the end of high school and adopted by most public universities and some private ones as an admission selection criteria for students.

the reserved places must have an ethnic-racial bias according to the racial composition of each Federation State and assure that half of the reserved positions (25% of the general total) are taken by students from families with a per capita income of 1 minimum wage and a half.

Simultaneously, some public higher learning institutions have adopted affirmative actions (quotas, bonus points in admission exams, etc.) for specific groups, according to the priorities of each institution: public school students, blacks, Native Brazilians, etc. This had already begun in 2001, when the State Universities of Rio de Janeiro adopted quotas for black students and students from public schools, and it quickly became an implicit rule among public universities, especially federal universities[12].

In any case, all those measures caused substantial changes inside Brazilian universities, expanding the access of population sectors with little representation in the past. So, for instance, the percentage of blacks in higher learning increased more than 100% between 2000 and 2014, from 19.5% to 42 %, according to IBGE data (2015). Even though this percentage is smaller than the ratio of Afro-Brazilians in the total population of the country (51% in the 2010 census), this shows a tendency to reduce the differences between whites and blacks in university learning.

We can then observe that the policies implemented in the last 20 years have effectively promoted a greater democratization in access to higher learning in the country, with probable effects on the upward mobility of the groups recently included in college education.

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[12] In 2012, approximately 69 public universities had implemented some sort of affirmative action (Daflon, Feres Jr. e Campos 2013).

How do those changes affect Brazilian society as a whole? And how are universities influenced? Those are the fundamental questions, which must be answered in order to understand the real impacts of the entire process.

Good evidence for understanding the importance of this issue is that while the roster of implemented public policies has been wide and diversified, public debate about affirmative actions has centered on the quota policies in public universities, precisely those considered the best in the country.

**University quotas, a paradigmatic case**

Affirmative actions in Brazilian universities appeared in public debates in the 1980s. During this period of political redemocratization[13], various social movements occupied the public scene to present questions which had until then been smothered by political repression and considered irrelevant by the political elites in power. Among those, the black movement occupies a place of symbolic importance, since those movements denounce the official discourses of the Brazilian state in relation to the existence of racism in the country. The official discourses on this topic affirmed that the country, since it has had a high degree of miscegenation between white and black people since Colonial times, had developed a sort of 'racial democracy'[14], with no place for racial or color prejudice.

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[13] Between 1964 and 1985 the country was under a military dictatorship.

[14] The concept of racial democracy was developed based on the work of anthropologist Gilberto Freyre (1973), who defended the idea that the miscegenation of whites and non-whites in Brazil was proof of the absence of racial prejudice, in a series of books written in the 1930s.

Now, it was precisely against this discourse that the black movement rose up. Based on a view strongly influenced by North American black movements and by national liberation struggles in Africa, the Brazilian black movements denounced racism and discriminatory practices that maintained the inequality between whites and non-whites in the country. Drawing upon academic studies that investigated racial inequality using statistic data (Hasenbalg 1978; Hasenbalg and Silva 1994), those movements started to demand compensatory policies for the black population, among which were the affirmative action policies in public universities and in the labor market.

Indeed, the Afro-Brazilian population occupies the lowest rungs of Brazilian society, mostly due to the racism still extant in the country and partly due to the heritage of a late end to slavery, abolished only in 1888. So, for instance, in 1977 black people received salaries around 50% smaller than the salaries of white people in the formal labor market, comprised the majority, around 57%, of the poorest 10% of the country and had less schooling than white people (Hasenbalg 1979; Hasenbalg and Silva 1990; Silva 1992; Henriques 2007).

If the demands of the black movement had relatively little visibility in the public space during the 1980s, this started to change in the 1990s. With the coming to power of center-left parties in 1994, the state starts to acknowledge the existence of racism in the country, stimulating the discussion about public policies to fight prejudice and racial exclusion.

At the same time, the signing of international conventions by Brazilian governments (such as the declaration of the Durban convention against all forms of prejudice in 2001, or ILO´s Convention 189, in 2002), led to debate about the need for affirmative policies

to reduce racial inequality in the country, since these texts contained recommendations for implementing affirmative policies for minority groups in situations of social fragility.

In any case, during the 2000s the debate around this question gained space in the media and in academia. This trend deepens when some public universities adopt various forms of affirmative actions for blacks and low income people, e.g. the State Universities of Rio de Janeiro and the State University of Bahia, in 2001 (Paiva 2010; Moehlecke 2002; Brandão 2007; Heringer 2000; Santos 2013).

As mentioned before, this happened partly due to greater political openness by the governments to the anti-racist discourses from the mid-Nineties, and to the greater visibility of the racial question in the government starting with the ONU Conference on racism, hosted in Durban, South Africa, in 2001.

## When Miscegenation Is no Longer a Justice Criterion

The debate about affirmative actions indicates a change in the hegemonic national identity model in the discourses of social groups engaged in public debates, and the state. While this debate emerged with the resurgence of social movements denouncing racism and the poor life conditions of black people in Brazil, it quickly reached various discussion spheres, from mainstream media to the scientific-academic world and the political world.

Stressing the fact that blacks constitute the majority of the low-income population, militant discourses challenged the idea of racial democracy, the identity basis of a great proportion of Brazilians, and simultaneously the official state discourse.

Indeed, the debates about the populace's racial composition had an important role in the constitution of a discourse about the Brazilian national identity (Skidmore 1989). That explains how Brazil's national identity has been constituted, especially after the 1930s, around the idea of miscegenation. From this perspective, initially expressed by Freyre (1973) and afterwards adopted by the national-populist state, Brazil was considered a successful model of pacific relations between different cultures and ethnic groups, the absence of prejudice making possible the emergence of a miscegenated society, where ethnic origins or skin color had little importance. This discourse will be the background of the official culture of the country until the end of the military dictatorship in 1985. While various socio-anthropological studies (Fernandes 1978; Hasenbalg 1979; Silva 1992) have demonstrated the permanence and consequences of the existing racial prejudice, official discourses kept presenting Brazil as a "racial democracy", a model to be followed from the point of view of the relationships between different ethnicities/races.

This situation will change with the democratization of the country from 1980 onwards. The emergence of social movements demanding specific identities will trigger a reshaping of national identity. The black movement will be one of the most influential movements in this process, since its denunciation of racism and racial prejudice put in check the very principle of the official Brazilian identity: the idea that miscegenation favored the development of a racial democracy, where the relations between

ethnic/racial groups, even when there were great social disparities, were characterized by conviviality and the absence of prejudice.

Those discourses will not promote great popular mobilizations (Neves 2005), but will become increasingly accepted in public debate and in public state policies in Brazil from the second half of the 1990s onwards.

However, it was after the early 2000s that those discourses triggered more acerbic conflicts in the Brazilian public debate. In this sense, the first experiences of the application of affirmative action policies, among which were the quotas for black students from public schools in some public universities played an important role.

So, when the government of the State of Rio de Janeiro approved a law introducing the quota system in state universities for black and public school students in 2002, a debate with an intense symbolic charge began in the country. The debate is intensified by the growing number of universities adopting modalities of affirmative actions for black and/or public school students and by the law projects discussed in congress during this period[15].

The arguments used by the defenders and opponents of those policies can help us to understand what is at stake. So, even if the affirmative policies implemented in universities are much diversified, the public debate about them has as its main focus the quotas for Afro-descendants. That shows how the racial question remains among the central concerns of all the people involved in the debate.

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[15] The aforementioned quota law was implemented in 2012, after a decision by the Supreme Federal Court (Supremo Tribunal Federal - STF) recognizing the constitutionality of quotas for blacks in the University of Brasília, and, consequently, in all public universities (Daflon, Feres Jr. and Campos 2013).

The main argument against racial quotas is that in a country as miscegenated as Brazil it is not easy to determine who is white or black, since most of the population can legitimately claim a certain degree of miscegenation. An example of this difficulty is the case of two twin brothers whose applications were approved due to the quota system for the University of Brasília, but one of them was prevented from enrolling because he did not look like an Afro-descendant, while the other could do so without any problems.

According to these criticisms, there would be the desire to import the bi-racial classification system from the USA, without taking into account the long history of miscegenation in Brazil, which makes the boundaries between blacks and whites less clear. So, in Brazil, people do not define themselves only as white or black, but use also other intermediary categories between these two poles. In this context, many of the critics of the quotas question how it is possible to implement a policy originally thought up for a society with stricter racial classification criteria.

For them, the quotas are at risk of creating in Brazil the same racial tensions existing in the USA, without taking into account the relative cordiality between races that historically is present in Brazil.

Other arguments against the quotas are used, but none of them has the same strategic place in the inner discursive economy of the valorization of miscegenation. Among these arguments, we can stress the claim that the quotas go against the constitutional principle of legal equality among the citizens. Besides, the quotas would mean a reduction in the quality of university education, causing at the same time the depreciation of university diplomas and the stigmatization of the individuals benefiting from these measures.

In contrast to this, the arguments for affirmative actions focus on denouncing the fact that miscegenation did not prevent the existence of racism and discrimination against blacks and mixed-race individuals in Brazil. The discrimination is visible in the job market, in police practices and in the more difficult life conditions of the Afro-descendants. Now, taking into account the place of university education in the process of personal social mobility and the formation of economic, political and cultural elites, the imposition of quotas for the black and poor population would be a measure to reduce the obvious social and racial inequalities in the country.

There is no space here to develop the symbolic implications of all those arguments further, but in relation to what interests us, it is evident that the main problem raised by the discussion on affirmative action policies in Brazil is that they mean, in a way, the denial of the integrative power of miscegenation, one of the principles of the Brazilian national identity.

In any event, based on the descriptive aspects of this discussion and beyond, we can suggest some explanations related to this matter.

Taking into account what we have seen so far, it seems plausible to claim that the Afro-descendant quotas in public universities have become an explosive theme in public debate by focusing attention on two primordial issues in Brazilian society: social inequality and national identity. In other words, the quotas do not only question the perception of justice extant in Brazilian society but also lead to a revaluation of self-representation by the Brazilians.

As demonstrated above, inequality in Brazil has a distinct racial mark, evident in the relative disadvantage of non-whites in relation to whites in various socio-economic and

political spheres. Consequently, it is no overstatement to say that racial inequality is a structural problem among us. It has to do with the historical heritage of a slave society and also with the representations and stereotypes limiting the upward mobility of non-whites. So any change in those areas has important symbolic repercussions, which explain the violent debates on the question

Since they are structural, the inequalities are not perceived as being generated by direct discrimination. Something I have elsewhere called "structural discrimination" (Neves 2000) acts to make the difficulties of upward movement for non-whites an effect of the social structure; which means that blacks are discriminated against and have fewer opportunities because they are poor, and not because they are black. That is why, for some actors, quotas tend to be considered unjust and ineffective, acting more on the effects than the causes of inequality.

On the other hand, it reframes national identity, which was constituted around the idea of miscegenation, the blending of different ethnicities in a melting pot of cultures and races (Freyre 1973; Guimarães2002). Now, the quotas, by presenting the issue of self-definition in terms of skin color, disturb this balance. By asking people to self-define as white, Afro-descendants or Amerindian-descendants, the quotas reframe the idea Brazilians are accustomed to having of themselves.

Naturally, if the quotas emerge as public policy proposal in the 2000s it is because the national identity was going through a process of transformation[16], as shown in the renewed discussion about racial discrimination and prejudice in wider public spheres

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[16] For a discussion of this identity transformation in political terms, see Telles, 2003 and Neves, 2005. In relation to the changes in the perception of black issues in recent decades, see Guimaraes, 1999; Sansone, 1996, among others.

from the 70s onwards. However, quotas go beyond the denunciations against racial prejudice; they also imply an instrumentalization of racialized identities on the public scene. What the Black movement did not achieve in decades of political action (Neves 2005), was being achieved by the quotas. That would be one of the main points of the present debate on this issue.

Additionally, quotas would also destabilize some regional identities in the country. I tried to show elsewhere (Neves 2005) how the black issue in Brazil gains distinct regional colors[17]. This means that not only are regional realities different in terms of population composition (in states such as Bahia and Sergipe, for instance, approximately 80% of the population is black and brown, while in the South-Southeast states, this percentage is below 30%), but also in terms of self-representation. So, in states where identification in racial terms is not widespread, the acceptance of quotas tends to be lesser than in states where the presence of racializing discourses is stronger.

If globalization, as indicated by some authors (Giddens 1991; Appadurai 1996; Beck 2006), means at the same time the development of global and local identities, we can postulate as a premise that a greater or lesser proximity of regional identities to racialized discourses will impact the acceptance or non-acceptance of affirmative actions directed at Afro-descendants.

Finally, university quotas for Afro-descendants became so controversial because they disturb the election process of an institution that symbolically has an important role in the reproduction of the Brazilian elites, which explains why racial quotas for certain

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[17] For his part, Guimarães (1999) draws attention to the fact that differences of interpretation developed by the intellectuals of the Northeast and the Southeast in relation to the race issue can be attributed to different realities linked to racial relations.

government jobs are not debated as much as university quotas.

In the national imaginary, access to universities is considered by many sectors of the population as the best way to move upward socially and to achieve status (Neves and Lima, 2007). This is related in part to the stratified character of Brazilian society and the central position of universities in the production of knowledge and in the professionalization of the contemporary world. In this sense, university quotas, more than other affirmative actions, will interfere in the expectations concerning social mobility for population sectors that theoretically did not depend on or did not have any right to them.

**A concrete case: quotas in the Federal University of Sergipe**

These issues can be better envisioned using the results of surveys I have been using regarding the quotas´ impact with the students of the Federal University of Sergipe (Universidade Federal de Sergipe - UFS) (Neves 2005; Neves and Lima 2007). In these surveys we look for evidence to understand how the quotas are perceived and justified. We are aware that these data cannot be used as a representative sample of the entire Brazilian population or even all Brazilian university students. Its main value is to serve as an exploratory study, a source of hypotheses and clues for future research.

The surveys consist basically of applying questionnaires to statistically representative samples in two distinct periods, one before and one after the introduction of quotas in the university, in 2010; the questionnaire included various questions about self-classification in terms of skin color, socio-economic data, perception of inequalities and

an evaluation of the quotas for different social categories (blacks, women, people with disabilities, etc.) in university education, in private companies and in public administration as a means of decreasing inequality in Brazil.

The empirical results of the surveys make us question the meaning of the quotas in the case of Brazil.

Most of the students (84% before and 83% after the introduction of quotas) recognize that blacks have difficulties in accessing universities and that it is unfair, because it generates difficulties of integration in other social spheres. However, racial quotas were not accepted before and after their introduction (76% e 61% respectively) as the best measures to reduce inequality. This seems to indicate a preference for universalist actions (based on individual merit) in relation to affirmative actions.

A question that may help us to understand this phenomenon is the evaluation of quotas for physically disabled individuals in public service, accepted by around 52% of the interviewees in both pieces of research. In other words, the quotas tend to be considered fairer when identified with some kind of physical or natural disadvantage. A plausible hypothesis is that the quotas, being identified with solutions intended to alleviate an inborn individual deficiency or incapacity, are not considered pertinent when used to address racial inequality. In this sense, quotas for blacks in universities are considered unfair, distorting the reality of the individual capacities of each candidate, going against the idea of equal opportunity and depreciating their beneficiaries, who are henceforth seen as intellectually inferior.

According to this perspective, the quotas would bring shame on those who profited from them, a certification of individual incompetence, and a discrimination-generating

stigma. In other words, university quotas would tend to be seen as ineffective or even as negative. They do not solve the problem, but rather make it worse, as they increase the discrimination against black people[18].

In additional, one of the objections to the quota system is that it is aimed at the individual and not at the group. Even if elaborated to solve a problem that affects a specific group (black people), the quotas benefit individually the best-prepared black people in the educational system. Therefore, the most marginalized blacks, exactly those more in need of collective and state help, are left out.

The limitations of affirmative actions are clearly perceived by those critics. They do not aim to change society's class structure or income distribution in a more radical way. They intend to form an intellectual and professional elite among the most disenfranchised social groups, in the hope that they become part of deeper changes.

So, for the critics, the quotas may mean an acknowledgement of the impossibility of changes in the life conditions of the poor (the majority of whom are black). This would be the same as saying social conditions unfavorable to black people will not be transformed, only worsened by policies like the quotas.

According to field research, the fact there is less resistance to quotas for public school students than for Afro-Brazilians seems to confirm this hypothesis. The connection of the possibility of benefiting from the quotas to the low-income condition serves as an overt admission that individual deficiencies of people of color and poor people are not simply theirs, but derived from the public education system as a whole and the life conditions of the working classes in the country. This also can mean a greater

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[18] This argument is used by Fry and Maggie (2002), Kamel (2006),  among others.

accountability of the Brazilian state in those questions (even though we should also admit that the quotas can be a mere cathartic expedient for the state: without investing a single cent in the improvement of basic public education, the quotas became the solution to the problem of racial inequality in access to education).

Maybe there we can find an explanation for part of the resistance to the racial quota system. Distributive justice cannot be seen as mere charity. To be socially acceptable, it must be perceived as a way to better the collectivity as a whole (Rawls 1971). So, the benefit given to an individual must be translated as an improvement in collective life. This, for example, was the main argument in the implementation of social welfare policies in European countries during the 20th century. In other words, public policies must not be based on the logic of favor and charity, but on the logic of retribution (Caillé e Lazzeri 2004).

As we have seen, the discussion about quotas opens the country's model of society up to debate, a discussion that refers implicitly to the juridical-legal model, based on the ideal of equality before the law, and the real and historical model, based on real social and economic inequalities between the lower classes and the affluent classes, which is just another way of saying, between blacks and whites. Even if it is not always overt, the bottom line of this debate is the dichotomy between egalitarian ideals and the reality of inequality, which has been characteristic of Brazilian society since the 19th century.

This explains both the perception of injustice and its naturalization, making the implementation of steps to fight it very difficult. Maybe this is exactly why there is so much controversy and expectation surrounding this issue. Amidst the difficulty of putting more structural strategies to tackle the country's inequality into practice, some

see the quotas as an achievable strategy, possible within the prevailing power relationships, the only way out in the face of demands against discrimination. And for others, by giving better chances to a certain number of black individuals, the quotas may serve as an excuse to postpone steps that would benefit the majority of Afro-descendants in Brazil.

As we have seen, the perceptions about the quotas say much about the "justice theories" prevailing in Brazilian society. Quotas, when seen as pertinent only to the disabled, are associated with charity, with the feeling of compassion and not redistributive justice, of amends and the concerns with the construction of a fairer and more equal society. In practice this means that the only discretionary measures accepted are those destined for people deemed afflicted by great natural deficiencies and unable to compete on equal terms and conditions. From this perspective, as the deficiencies of the blacks are not natural but historical and social, they can be overcome by individual effort.

In other words, differences considered natural and which do not depend on individual effort, can be compensated for by special policies, but not social deficiencies, the fruit of social organization. This can convey the feeling that we are not guilty that society is what it is. Is there a sort of naturalization of the way society is organized, with no space for attempting minor changes, as if you need to either change everything or not change anything? This is what may lie behind the fact that the inequalities and differences in opportunities that affect the blacks are recognized, but should not give way to specific measures; rather, they should be fought through universalist policies. Would that be a strategy to postpone to an unforeseeable future the resolution of injustice?

In the same way, don't those who defend the quotas risk delegitimizing the Universalist

measures that aim to indeed solve the problems of inequality? When they focus the effort on quotas without discussing them within a project to gradually solve the inequalities, there is the risk of turning the quotas into palliatives for something that is not intended, or believed possible, to be implemented in the near future. Would that not explain how easily state and federal government accept the idea of quotas in society? This is a central question in this debate, due to the way the quotas are being implemented to not imply a greater commitment of the governments to the allocation of resources to education or other sectors that would favor the blacks.

From our point of view, the resistance to the quotas can be seen both as a reaction against a vision that intends to change the classic liberal justice model, based only on individual capacities, and as a resistance to the kind of normal action that the quotas are becoming in Brazilian society: palliative measures that favor a limited number of Afro-descendants without addressing the condition of poverty affecting the majority of Afro-descendants. This apparently indicates that this discussion will only end when both fronts are attacked: be it through the expansion of the debate outside academic spaces and political environments, or through the clear and effective connection of the quotas to policies aimed at solving the problems of inequality in Brazilian society (improvement of public education, increase in places in public universities and technological centers).

## Conclusion

As we have seen, the debates about Affirmative Actions in Brazilian Universities emerge linked to the wider debate about the consequences of racism in the country and

how to overcome them, which in the Brazilian context means a debate about national identity and the state model prevailing in the country.

But what happens when affirmative policies start to be implemented in a country like Brazil? How can we interpret quota policies in the public universities of Brazilian society? Is this an action destined to reduce the differences between whites and non-whites or is it only a way to reinforce an identity based on African origin among the non-whites in Brazil? Are they able to change social inequalities or do they only correspond to a rotation of individuals in relation to prestigious social positions?

Anyway, quotas seem to be providing a certain symbolic valorization of the working class that did not see themselves as able to enter a public university before the implementation of place reservation for students from public schools and Afro-descendants. This can trigger changes in the imaginary of working classes about their chances of entering universities, and even about the place of the poor in society.
Could they also be causing changes in the imaginary of the elites? In our empirical research with students of a Brazilian public university, some apparently agree with this because, according to them, over time the tension between the quota students and non-quota students decreased (but did not disappear) in medicine and engineering, the most socially prestigious courses in the country. However, it is still too early to take this affirmation as proof of a wider tendency, since the students themselves point out contradictory situations: teachers who discriminate and at the same time students that leave behind their negative points of view. Nonetheless, what we can say about this is that the introduction of quotas brought a series of still undeveloped questions, which need further research for clarification.

Ultimately, what can be said about the way the students' self-perception has been influenced by the quotas?

The apparent answer is that the quotas have unleashed a comprehensive, but sometimes contradictory, signification process. The symbolic valorization of students from public schools certainly is one of the most evident consequences. But at the same time, the existence of tension between non-quota and quota students, and between teachers and quota students, shows that even if the self-esteem of those students grew significantly, their social esteem (i.e., the way other groups perceive them) seems to be changing at a slower pace.

In any event, the quotas introduced a series of changes in public universities and in other spheres of Brazil's social life. However, at the same time, they cause resistance and provoke problems as yet unsolved. It is not without reason that quotas have appeared as a central theme in public debates in the country. We have before us an issue that is close to the notion of social fact, proposed by Marcel Mauss (2003): a fact that, by dint of its complexity, touches diverse spheres of social life and in itself helps him to understand various logical processes which structure his society. Whatever future changes these actions bring about, can only be guessed at…

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