

Higher Education and Race Relations in Brazil

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HASANI E. DOS SANTOS, NOV 17 2020

In this article I discuss the implementation of affirmative action in the Brazilian higher education system and its implications for the anti-racialization struggle in Brazil. Such policy represents one of the main democratic changes of the last decades after the country's re-democratization. I discuss, therefore, the education agenda and its relevance for the black population, as this topic, according to the sociologist Patricia Hill Collins (2009), is one of the main fields for inter-generational justice of the black population on a global scale. On the first part, I argue that the ending of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century were paradigmatic because of the black social activism, and its struggle for the implementation of affirmative action in Brazilian public universities, as well as the advancement of this public police. To prove my point I highlight important events and organizations responsible for these achievements. On the second part, I discuss the challenges to affirmative action and the public higher education system. I affirm that today we face an offensive on public universities that is related to the public policies of expansion and democratization of Brazilian higher education during the last decades. This challenge emerges as serious cuts on scientific research, the emergence of discourses that try to mischaracterize public universities, and the attempt to privatize higher education system in Brazil.

There are some strategies adopted by the Federal Government to discredit and render public universities precarious, and those strategies are a way of containing the advances and impacts of affirmative action in one of the main sectors of knowledge production in Brazil. I argue that there is currently a strategy of mischaracterization and dismantling of public universities because of the extremely conservative and liberal policies of the actual government, but also because of the political resistance of massive entrance of black people in those spaces. I conclude by arguing that affirmative action is one of the most important social achievements since the Brazilian democratic turn of 1988. Affirmative action in universities proposes the exercise of citizenship and economic mobility for the black community, but also implies the change in the curricular structures and knowledge production. Therefore, affirmative action seeks to change the predominantly and historically white Brazilian public university system. For all those reasons I consider the current political moment of Brazil as an expression of an imminent threat that aims to undermine the processes of democratization and the deeds of social movements in the past decades.

Black Activism's Struggle for Space in Universities and in Curricular Structures (From the 90's until Today)

For Silvério (2002, p. 233), affirmative action seeks to officially recognize the endurance of racism, racialization, and discrimination in all the systematic levels of our society, and seeks to implement public policies engaged with the widening of diversity and pluralism in all dimensions of social life, including education and the knowledge production. Affirmative actions are thus seen to induce cultural, psychological, and pedagogical transformations useful to suppress and reduce the subordination of one race over another from the collective social imaginary. In addition to an anti-racist policy, I see affirmative action policies and their potential to change the curricula of university courses and the production of knowledge as an "anti-racialization" policy, that is, as a policy capable of procedurally combating racism and the systemic process of racialization. In the United States, for example, this kind of policy began to be executed in the early 60's when Ivy League and other prestigious universities were predominantly male, white and Christian institutions. After the implementation of affirmative action and the quota system, black students started to be admitted massively to those institutions. According to Collins (2009), the Civil Rights Movement of the 50's and 60's linked education with the empowerment needed for the freedom struggle of black people, making affirmative

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action an achievement from those days, and education, an important terrain of struggle.

Nowadays there is a generation of black professors in prestigious American universities developing science and making advanced research, as is the case of the literary critic, historian and filmmaker Professor Henry Louis Gates Jr. a public intellectual who studied at Yale and now teaches at Harvard University. According to him, in an interview for *The Harvard Crimson*: “The class of ‘66 at Yale had six black graduates. My class, the class of ‘73, had 96. And the difference was because of affirmative action [...]. Without affirmative action, I would not have gone to an Ivy League school like Yale. And that changed my life”. Professor Henry Louis Gates Jr.’s trajectory expresses a perfect example of affirmative action as an ‘anti-racialization’ police, and its correlation with the impact of knowledge production. Nowadays, he is a Director of a distinguished Center in Harvard University – the Hutchins Center for African & African American Research – which supports research on the history and culture of people of African descent, and stimulates scholarly engagement in African and African-American studies to increase public awareness and understanding.

Meanwhile, in Brazil the efforts of democratization and expansion of public higher education started after the democratic transition – in the 1990s – when actions were undertaken by black activists and organizations in favor of the exercise and expansion of democracy. With the promulgation of the 1988 Constitution, the constitutional principle of equality started to be analyzed by the State more critically, taking into account the perpetuation of discriminatory practices concerning the black, indigenous population, women’s groups, and the LGBT community at the time. As Domingues (2005, p. 164) stated, the second half of the 1990s was marked by the introduction of the debate on affirmative action in Brazil. A key event of this period was the International Seminar on Multiculturalism and Racism: the Role of ‘Affirmative Action’ in the Contemporaries Democratic States, held in Brasília, in 1996. This event was attended by academics from Brazil and the United States, as well as leaders of the black movement. The purpose of the seminar was to create strategies for formulating policies aimed at the black population. Moreover, a year before, in 1995, the Zumbi dos Palmares March took place, which was a significant march promoted by black activists and black organizations. The march was held in Brasília in reference to the 300th anniversary of Zumbi dos Palmares’ death – who was an important anti-slavery political leader assassinated by the Royal Troops in November 20th 1695. Since this march, the November 20th has been an important day for black social activists and black organizations in Brazil.

Moving forward to the government of President Lula (2003-2010), the term “racial equality” started to be widely disseminated and adopted by the Government and was even institutionalized at the Ministry level with the creation of the Secretariat for Policies to Promote Racial Equality (SEPPIR) in 2003. One of the important developments of the last decade was also the enactment of the Racial Equality Statute in 2010, which had been debated since 2003. Education and Health were central areas in Lula’s programs to promote racial equality. Education, specifically, had always been a strategic area both for black activism and for academic studies on inequalities anchored in racial classificatory systems (that is, that use the term *race* as one of the main analytical categories for exposing Brazil’s social inequalities and, as such, become key for the understanding of the systematic production of inequalities in Brazil). Education has been historically central for black activism, and during Lula’s government, the possibility for the implementation of affirmative action became clear.

In 2005, the Zumbi + 10 March took place, bringing the secular demands of the black population to the streets of the Federal Capital. Black organizations and activists demonstrated for the creation of a national economic fund aimed at the implementation of racial equality policies, the approval of the Racial Equality Statute, and above all to celebrate the ten years of the above-mentioned 1995’s Zumbi dos Palmares March. Both the Zumbi dos Palmares March and the Zumbi + 10 March were important political events promoted and organized by the Unified Black Movement (MNU), an extremely important black political organization founded and organized in 1978, and that represents one of the leading black organizations within the black activism in Brazil and Latin America.

At this time, the creation and strengthening of various political organizations engaged in black activism also took place, such as the Centers of Afro-Brazilian and Indigenous Studies (NEAB’s) that were founded and organized around the late 90’s and early 2000’s in the public and federal universities in Brazil. The NEAB of Federal University of São Carlos (UFSCar) is an important example, because both affiliated professors, Petronilha Beatriz Gonçalves

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and Valter Silvério were central in terms of organizing a productive and renowned center of studies based on shaping and educating black scholars, as well as promoting the national debate around affirmative action policies at public universities.

Therefore, I argue that this historical period of debates on affirmative action and democratization of Brazilian institutions (e.g., public universities) was also a turning point in terms of black activism in Brazil, since we could see black activism taking shape and emerging in various organizations. These black organizations, such as the NEAB – UFSCar, were central for the advancement of important public policies in Brazil, and represent an interesting moment of change inside of the black activism. This moment reflected the changes in the political strategy of the black movement in Brazil, which started to be articulated, in the form of NGOs, collectives, center of studies and other associative forms, organized in national and mainly transnational circuits. Nowadays, affirmative action for the black and indigenous population is already a reality because of a lot of struggle and political engineering from these organized social movements. This context of debating and adopting affirmative action represents an important index of the most recent political changes in social relations in Brazil.

According to Turgeon, Chaves and Wives (2014) this context of conquest of black activism in the field of the higher education began to become systematically clear when, in 2001, the State University of Rio de Janeiro (UERJ) adopted the quota policy through the vacancy reservation system, reserving 50% of the vacancies for undergraduate enrolments at the university to black people. In 2002, the State University of Bahia (UNEB) also adopted the quota system through resolution 196/2002, and the University of Brasília (UnB), in turn, was the first federal higher education institution to adopt the quota system in 2004 (Turgeon; Chaves; Wives, 2014). Moreover, in 2008, 84 higher education institutions adopted some type of affirmative action. In 2010, approximately 91 public higher education institutions had already adhered to some form of affirmative action policies aimed at undergraduate courses (Turgeon; Chaves; Wives, 2014). Currently, Postgraduate Programs are adhering to such policies in their selections, benefiting black students and/or those from public schools. The Postgraduate Program of Sociology to which I'm currently associated (PPGS – UFSCar) adopted this affirmative action in 2018.

There are a large number of black students in prestigious universities in Brazil. An important study of the Institute of Applied Economic Research (IPEA) – The 2019' Social Policy Bulletin (BPS) – shows that between 2012 and 2015, the number of vacancies reserved for afro-descendants increased from 140,303 to 247,950. This is because 31% of public universities, which had not adhered to any type of reservation of vacancy, were forced to implement it because of the Federal Law 12.711/2012, which constitutionally guaranteed vacancy reservation and quota systems at 59 federal universities and 38 technological federal institutes in Brazil. It is because of these advances that the democratic policies of affirmative action are now facing a backlash. In the next section, I argue that recent cuts in investment in Brazilian public universities are associated with the attack on affirmative action. I consider the current Brazilian Government as an imminent threat that aims to undermine the processes of democratization and the deeds of the social movements in the past decades.

The Dismantling and Mischaracterization of Public Universities in Brazil: An Imminent Threat to the Affirmative Action Policies

As the racial issue started to be explored through several political actions aimed to combat historical social inequalities, sectors of society became divided between favorable and contrary to specific inclusion policies for the black population. The topic of higher education mobilized, in a polarized way, the public debate on the adoption of affirmative action policy. These debates generated an extensive production of scientific works focusing on the legal and sociological principles that guided the implementation of affirmative action policies, as well as the debate and implementation of such policies in public institutions of higher education. According to Lima (2010), detailed analysis of the profile of quota students at public universities was also produced, and this extensive scientific production, as well as the public debate in the mainstream media, created tension between those favorable and contrary to affirmative action policies at public universities.

According to Connell (2019), universities collectively represent institutions responsible for scientific production and technologies that encourage social change, economic mobility, and the exercise of citizenship. In this way, they

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educate professionals for the most diverse areas of knowledge. As such, they are, I suggest, responsible, directly or indirectly, for critical thinking, imagination, social and cultural thinking, and, also, for proposing and reviewing public policy planning. Brazil currently faces an ultraconservative and ultraliberal government, and its federal universities are central in the government's offensive and aggressive rhetoric. One example is a serious accusation from the former minister of education, who stated that federal universities had extensive marijuana plantations. This affirmation is, above all, a dishonesty, and a discursive way to mischaracterize public universities, its students and professors. There are also several tweets published by the former minister of education stating that federal universities are spaces of 'shambles' and 'indoctrination' (O Estado de São Paulo, 2020). These kinds of arguments have been used by the current government to justify cuts on investment for public higher education in Brazil. I argue that this strategy is due to the extremely conservative and liberal policies of the current government, which includes the project to privatize the higher education system in Brazil to turn universities into institutions destined and designed for people who can afford them as commodities.

But I also argue that those extremely conservative and liberal policies are also a form of political resistance to the massive entrance of black people into academic spaces. Thus, I argue that the current cuts in funds and financing are central to the dismantling and mischaracterization of public universities, thus undermining the past decades of democratization and expansion of the Brazilian public higher education. This graph elaborated by the Brazilian Senate showcases the menaces scientists are dealing with in Brazil, as it expresses the current cuts in investments for scientific research and highlights the low investments in scientific research, and its impact on the unsatisfactory policies in combating and preventing the effects of Covid-19 in Brazil. This document also exposes that the peak of investment in research and in public universities can be correlated with the chronology I presented in the first part of this text. The aforementioned chronology brought to light black activism's struggle for space in universities after the 90's, and its achievements during the last decades of massive entrance of black students in public universities. It meant that the role of black activism and its struggle was, and still is, fundamental for the exercise of democratization and expansion of the higher education in Brazil.

Hence, the whole public university system was beneficiary of the efforts of democratization and expansion, which certainly includes the affirmative action policies. As the aforementioned graph, along with IPEA's Social Policy Bulletin (BPS), highlight, the same years in which public universities had peak investments were the years of increase in the numbers of black graduates in the Brazilian public university system. We currently face an offensive on public universities caused by the cuts on investment on scientific research. This scenario is threatening for Brazilian public universities. The politics of mischaracterizing them, and making them precarious by cutting investments in research is – according to the evidence that has been provided in this work – also a way of containing the advances and impacts of affirmative action in the knowledge production sector.

Conclusion

I conclude, therefore, that two important historical moments help to understand race relations in contemporary Brazil. The first is expressed by the advancement of the democratization policies fueled mainly by the actions of black activists in the decades of 1990, 2000, and 2010, as I highlighted above. The second is expressed as a counter-offensive to this first moment of democratic advance. It is represented by the current political moment in Brazil. The first moment reveals an attempt of implementation and development of 'anti-racialization' policies, which are the next step of 'anti-racism' policies as they focus not only on the combat of racism itself, but of the systematic discourse that creates the division and the difference between being white and black which historically underlines racism. As those systematic discourses were historically supported by the scientific field, science and education are central for an 'anti-racialization' political action.

These anti-racialization discourses were strengthened by the entrance of black people in universities and by the knowledge production that allowed for the access to proper information about the history and culture of African descendants. As the above-cited examples of the Hutchins Center in the U.S, and the NEAB in Brazil show, there are important organizations, institutes and research centers headed by black professors, and composed by black scholars. These organizations and research centers are engaged with the impact of innovative science and with the public debate involving African descendants and black people. They are central to the debate on affirmative action,

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the change of the curricular structure, and to raise public awareness of African and African-American studies in their respective countries.

The second moment is the one we face in Brazil at the present, as it is expressed by the current government. I argue that the critical and severe cuts on investment in public higher education are made because of the liberal and ultraconservative posture of the president and his ministries who want to privatize higher education in Brazil, while also reflecting a counter-offensive movement to the democratic advances made by social activists in the last decades. Therefore, today we deal with a political scenario that clashes the panorama of possibilities and opportunities of affirmative action – the possibilities to change the curricular and university structure in Brazil – and the dimension of offenses and mischaracterization of our public universities. It is no coincidence that after three decades of massive entrance of black students in public and distinguished universities, such institutions are now under a threat of investment cuts. Thus, what is at stake in Brazil are the democratic advances and achievements of the last decades.

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