

Editorial

Affirmative Action Revisited: Impacts of recent policy and discourse on race and social inequality in Brazil

Despite empirical data on social and ethnic indicators showing persistent and pervasive discrimination, Brazil was generally considered to have no “need” for policies of Affirmative Action (AA), given its powerful, longstanding national narrative of a “racial democracy”. However, while countries globally sought solutions to racial inequality beyond AA, public universities in Brazil, including the most prestigious ones, began experimenting with AA policies in 2002, with some implementing racial quotas. There arose a broad, unprecedentedly intensive debate among the scientific community, politicians, the courts and the media, which divided society sharply along hitherto invisible lines. Within a decade, with widespread support, Brazil passed a federal law mandating quotas at all 63 Federal Universities: 50% of their vacancies to be reserved for public school students, in line with the ethnic composition of each state. How could this paradox between verifiable reality and national myth be sustained, and how was such a rapid institutionalization of AA possible?

Globally, Affirmative Action (AA) has a history of more than half a century. As policy and as research topic it was already considered inefficient and outmoded by the 1990's, replaced by other minority or diversity policies and approaches. The recent revival of AA in Brazil, and elsewhere in Latin America, has not been duly recognized by the international scientific community. While language barriers may play a part, it is above all because their particularity and newness in the design of these policies, their remarkable impact on citizenship and the societal and culture structures at which they aim has not been perceived. An analysis of Brazil's introduction of AA between 2002 and 2012 sheds new light on an old debate and contradicts the apparent death knell by Thomas Sowell's *Affirmative Action Around the World* (2004).

The Brazilian case of debating and introducing Affirmative Action policies offers a new understanding of minority policies and societal consensus-building. In this special issue we explore the process of implementation and the (possible) negotiation of a new consensus achieved through positive day-to-day experiences

during the experimental phase (2002-2012), continuous scientific evaluation/dissemination of results, along with the strategic accommodation of (uncomfortable) race-based demands within a broader class-centered framing as “social inclusion”. We draw attention to the biggest obstacle to implementation: the historical Brazilian imaginary of uniqueness as a “racial democracy”. This self-portrayal entwined with national identity, inhibited and delayed race-based approaches to social inequalities.

Together we open a window for understanding how conflicts and negotiations, despite the presence of a hegemonic imaginary of a post-racial or even non-racist society and contentious debate, can lead to a new social consensus.

Most of the contributions present in this special issue are the outcome of the International Network Project “When Inclusion Masks Exclusion: Disempowerment and Depoliticization of Minority Issues through ‘Harmonizing Discourses’”, funded by the Danish Agency for Science, Technology and Innovation during the year 2015. The activities of this network, conducted in collaboration with two institutional partners, Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro and Copenhagen Business School, included two joint research periods in Brazil as well as a concluding two-day workshop/conference at the University of Copenhagen. Previous research conducted by PUC-Rio's Interdisciplinary Center for Afro-descendant Reflection and Memory (NIREMA) was included with special regard to data (57 qualitative interviews realized between 2006-11 with Affirmative Action administrators at 20 universities). Thus, these papers reflect interdisciplinary collaboration at the intersection of language, communication, politics, history, anthropology and sociology. The interdisciplinary collaboration was integrative, as it underpinned the entire research process from the delimitation of the research topic and the formulation of the problem to the development of adequate approaches. The concluding workshop/conference, which additionally drew on research of the Berlin-based multi-institutional research network on interdependent inequalities in Latin America *desiguALdades*, as well as the Teresa Lozano Long Institute of Latin American Studies at The University of Texas at Austin, enriched the platform for the discussion of research results spurring most of the contributions included into this special issue.

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