

Paper for the Janey Program Newsletter:
***Resignifying “Race” in the Context of Affirmative Action in Brazilian Public
Universities: A Preliminary Approach***

Lilia G. M. Tavoraro
PhD Candidate
Graduate Faculty of Political and Social Sciences
Department of Sociology

This article seeks to point out some of the aspects implied in the current process of resignification of the racial category in the context of implementation of quotas for African descendants in Brazilian public universities, with a main focus on the State University of Rio de Janeiro (UERJ), the State University of Bahia (Uneb) and The University of Brasilia (UnB)¹. Rather than a conclusive paper, this is a sketch of some of the main issues to be analyzed in my dissertation, based on a preliminary field research I carried out in the summer of 2004 with the support of the Janey Program for Latin American Studies Summer Fellowship.

For many, not only discussions around but also the actual implementation of affirmative action policies may seem at odds with a society that has been usually said to brag about its “racial democracy”. Nevertheless, whereas the so-called myth of racial democracy might remain effective in informing Brazilians’ self image, it is also true that its demystification and the denunciation of racism in Brazil have long been the main task of social activists, and of sociologists (mainly Brazilians, but not only) at least since the Unesco project was initiated in the 1950s. The latter was part of a series of activities

¹ Other public universities have recently introduced affirmative action programs for Brazilians of African descent. Among them are some of the most prestigious federal and state universities such as Federal University of Bahia (UFBA), Federal University of Parana (UFPR) and the State University of Campinas (Unicamp). The reason why my research focuses only on the three cases mentioned above is the fact that they are all pioneer experiences that are also located in different regions of Brazil with different processes of racial categorization.

promoted by the educational branch of the United Nations to foster a social and historical notion of “race” as opposed to the biological one that had informed the racist ideology and practices of the Holocaust². Initially, Brazil was targeted by Unesco as an example of racial harmony. Research on racial relations in Brazil was then supposed to demonstrate that different “races” could indeed live together in peace. Against all expectations, however, the studies on racial relations from that period became well known for having disclosed racial discrimination in Brazil and unmasked the fallacy of the Brazilian racial democracy³.

Yet, it was not until the 90s, during President Fernando Henrique Cardoso’s administration, that demands for racial equality were finally translated into institutionalized measures for combating racism and racial inequality. In 1995, in response to one of the greatest marches organized by the Brazilian Black Movement against racial discrimination and for the implementation of public policies capable of promoting racial equality, Cardoso’s government launched a National Human Rights Program which included the creation of the inter-ministerial working group for outlining activities and policies to recognize the value of the black population, and of a Working Group for the Elimination of Discrimination in the Workplace and in Careers within the

² These activities also involved the elaboration of a “race manifesto” that highlighted the social and “mythical” character of race and the publication of a series of works and articles on race and racial relations. Levi-Strauss’s “Race and History” was among the articles published in this series. See: Levi-Strauss, Claude. “Race and History”. In: *Race and Science: Scientific Analysis From UNESCO*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961). On the history of the Unesco project and its development in Brazil see: Maio, Marcos Chor. *A História do Projeto Unesco: estudos raciais e ciências sociais no Brasil*. (Rio de Janeiro: IUPERJ, Ph.D. dissertation, 1997).

³ Some of the most important works developed in this period were: Bastide, Roger and Fernandes, Florestan. *Relações Raciais entre Negros e Brancos em São Paulo*. (São Paulo: Anhembi, 1955), Costa Pinto, L. A. *O Negro no Rio de Janeiro: Relações de Raça Numa Sociedade em Mudança*. (São Paulo: Companhia Editorial Nacional, 1952), Nogueira, Oracy. *Tanto Preto Quanto Branco: Estudos de Relações Raciais*. (São Paulo: T.A. Queiroz, 1955). For a more detailed account of the Brazilian “race relations” studies produced in this period see: Guimarães, A. S. *Racismo e Anti-Racismo no Brasil*. (São Paulo: Editora 34, 1999).

Ministry of Labor. In addition to providing support for private enterprises which undertake affirmative action and elaborating compensatory policies to increase the access of blacks to professional courses, the Program instructed the Brazilian Institute for Geography and Statistics (IBGE) - responsible for collecting official census data - to fuse the categories brown and black into the black one. This came in response to the black movement's mobilization around the Census categories and methods according to which blacks and browns tended to be outnumbered by the white population⁴.

On the level of civil society, many organizations supported by the government and international organs took action in order to effectuate compensatory programs to include disadvantageous social groups. The courses aimed at preparing poor and black students for the university entrance exams make interesting examples. This is, for instance, the case of the *Movimento Pre-vestibular para Negros e Carentes* (MPVNC) in Rio de Janeiro that counts on the support of the Catholic Church to provide very cheap training for underprivileged students. In 1994 the MPVNC signed an agreement with the Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro (PUC-RJ) according to which the students who passed the entrance exam were automatically given a scholarship (FRY, 2000:107).

The first attempts to implement quotas for blacks were thus brought into being. The then Minister of Agrarian Development, Raul Jungmann, was the first to introduce affirmative action on the federal level. He signed a decree in 2001 that reserves 20% of the jobs in the Ministry of Agrarian Development for black and brown Brazilians and

⁴ Fry, Peter. "Politics, Nationality, and the Meanings of 'Race' in Brazil". IN: *Deadalus: Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*, Vol. 129, Number 2, Spring 2000, pp. 83-118. The first initiative related to the Census had been taken in the 1991 Census campaign whose slogan was "Don't let your color pass in white: respond with good sense". The campaign reflected previous efforts to make the population data more sensitive to the racial dimensions of class inequality. For a more detailed account of the 1991 Census campaign, see: Nobles, Melissa. *Shades of Citizenship: Race and the Census in Modern Politics*. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000).

establishes that 20% of its consultants be blacks. In December of that same year, the Ministry of Justice reserved 20% of its appointed jobs to blacks and women and 5% for handicaps. These measures were brought into being as a set of law projects started to circulate in the National Congress such as the Racial Equality Statute which proposes 20% quotas for blacks in government jobs and public universities as well as the monitoring of black participation in television programs and political parties (Jornal de Brasilia, 08/18/2002).

In 2002 public universities became a major target of affirmative action programs. The State University of Rio de Janeiro (UERJ) and the State University of Norte-Fluminense (UENF) undertook a joint admission exam that reserved 40% of their places for self-declared “blacks” (*pretos*) and “browns” (*pardos*) and 50% for students who had attended public secondary schools. The quota system was then implemented as determined by a law passed in November 2001 in the Legislative Assembly of the State of Rio de Janeiro (Law # 3.708 of November 9th 2001). The State University of Bahia (Uneb) also established, through a resolution passed in the University Council (Resolution # 196/2002 of July 18th 2002), that 40% of its places should be destined to self-declared “afro-descendants” who had attended public schools. In both cases, the policy was supposed to revamp the disparity between disadvantageous blacks and browns and privileged whites regarding access to high education. According to data collected by the IBGE, only 3% out of the 1.4 million students admitted to universities in Brazil each year identify themselves as blacks or browns and only 18% come from public secondary schools. More importantly, most of these students are left outside from public universities, which are usually said to provide higher education of best quality only to a

very small portion of the population, usually white and wealthy students who have access to private schools⁵.

In addition to being accused of unconstitutional⁶, the Rio de Janeiro policy was fiercely criticized for privileging well-off blacks in detriment of poor blacks and whites. Indeed, among the students who had self-identified as black and brown, only 17.8% of those admitted had a household income between one and three minimum wages (less than US\$100.00) and 32.2% had a household income of more than ten minimum wages. Of the students coming from public secondary schools, 73.6% had household income of more than three minimum wages (O Globo, 05/18/2003). Other than that, university administrators said that 14% of the applicants who declared themselves “white” when they took the entrance exam, identified themselves as either black or brown when they submitted their applications to the university (Washington Post, 06/16/2003).

In an attempt to minimize the polemic on who should benefit from the quotas the state of Rio de Janeiro decided to recast the terms of affirmative action in public universities through a new law sanctioned in September 2003 (Law # 4.151 of September 4th 2003). According to the latter, public universities in the state of Rio de Janeiro are now to reserve 45% of its places for “needy” students from which 20% are to be taken by those who have attended public schools, 20% by blacks and browns, and 5% by handicaps and indigenous people born in the national territory. The law provides the universities autonomy to define the category “needy” insofar as they respect the official socio-economic indexes. Following these new criteria, the State University of Rio de

⁵ According to data collected by the Institute of Applied Economic Research (IPEA) in 2002, 65% of university students had been educated at private secondary schools and two out of three were drawn from the wealthiest 20% of the population.

⁶ Nearly 300 lawsuits were filed against the State University of Rio de Janeiro under the argument that quotas were discriminatory and thus unconstitutional.

Janeiro has defined as needy all those students whose household income is no more than R\$300 (about U\$100) per person (www.uerj.br).

One of the most polemic items of the policy has, yet, remained untouched, namely: the criterion of self-declaration to define the beneficiaries of quotas destined to blacks and browns. In September 2003, the Federal Justice Department of Rio de Janeiro organized a seminar to discuss the problem of fraud regarding the definition of racial groups. Representatives from the State University of Rio de Janeiro, the Department of Justice, the BNDES (Banco Nacional de Desenvolvimento) and NGOs got together in order to debate possible ways to avoid fraud in the admission by quotas. In the seminar the State University of Rio de Janeiro was accused of having admitted thirty-five whites that had declared themselves blacks. The University's representative rejected the accusation and claimed that they would continue to adopt the system of self-identification since there was no other legitimate way of defining a person's identity. Leaders from the black movement argued, by contrast, that self-declaration would necessarily lead to fraud and prevent those who should really benefit from the program to do so.

In June 2004, the University of Brasilia decided to introduce a new criterion for establishing the beneficiaries of quotas in an attempt to avoid lawsuits and the polemic around the identification process. It reserved 20% of its places for blacks (*pretos*) and browns (*pardos*) who considered themselves to be *negros*. The use of the term "*negro*" in addition to "*preto*" and "*pardo*" suggested that, besides skin color, the political dimension of black identity mainly given by experiences of discrimination and militancy in the black movement (*Movimento Negro*) would be also contemplated⁷. Once they

⁷ The terms "preto" and "negro" have had their meanings altered throughout history and they can mean different things in different contexts. The term "preto" has been traditionally applied to refer to the actual

opted for the quota system, having thus self-declared as blacks, prospective students were to take a picture in the moment of their application that was to be analyzed by a committee composed by “specialists on race” (whose identity remained classified) responsible for ratifying or denying their self-declaration. In case they had their application denied in the quota system, the university would automatically consider their application to the “universal system”. The vice-rector of the University of Brasilia, Mr. Timothy Mulholland, one of the main advocates of the quota policy at UnB, said that this was the way UnB found both not to infringe upon a person’s right to self-identification and to avoid fraud. When asked about the fact that UnB policy does not contemplate needy people or students from public schools, he suggested that by intertwining the racial category with class the UnB would help to foster the myth of racial democracy while misrecognizing the problem of exclusion of black people from high education as a problem of class rather than racial inequality⁸.

However, contrary to Mr. Mulholland’s expectations, not only did the pictures system complicated matters even more but also it turned the UnB into one of the main targets of criticisms from all over: the media, intellectuals, students, and even some black activists. From the total of 4385 students who applied to the quota system, 212 had their applications denied for not being black according to the committee. These students were given a chance to question the university committee. The criteria used by the university to then reconsider these students were not clear though. Some of the main Brazilian

color of the skin. The term “negro” which used to be pejorative, was resignified over the last decades to refer to a political stand for the recognition of blackness. On the difference and transformations of the terms “preto” and “negro” see: Sansone, Livio. *Blackness Without Ethnicity: Constructing Race in Brazil*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

⁸ In an interview conceded in Brasilia on October 14th 2004, Mr. Mulholland told me that class classification should be secondary, and he added: “People are not black because they are poor. On the contrary, they are poor because they are black”.

newspapers accused the University of Brasilia of inaugurating a racial trial and the Brazilian Anthropologists Association issued a document repudiating the criteria of identification implemented by the university (<http://www.aba.org.br>).

The notion of the myth of racial democracy has been generally evoked to explain Brazil's recent experiences of affirmative action. Some have optimistically suggested that the straight interconnectedness between "race" and class (as it has been the case of UERJ and Uneb), is an indication that the Brazilian desire to keep ambiguous identities as opposed to a rigorous classificatory system will finally work in favor of the inclusion of black and poor people without the need for thickening the racial category⁹. Others, such as Mr. Mulholland and most partisans of the black movement, have argued that the general repudiation to a clear-cut racial classification sounds like another attempt at keeping racism invisible. As though still intoxicated with the myth, Brazilians would be avoiding "race" by all means possible so that they would not have to touch a bleeding wound. From this standpoint, the idea that Brazilians are mixed and thus not racially identifiable would work as a powerful ideology that does not allow "race" to flourish and prevent, thereby, an effective struggle against racism.

In both cases the myth of racial democracy is seen as a mold that has given a permanent shape to the Brazilian social classificatory system. It is conceived as a symbolic structure that has played a determinant role in the definition of the beneficiaries of quotas. What the recent experiences of affirmative action in the Brazilian universities seem to suggest, however, is that the notion of miscegenation and cultural syncretism that have long informed Brazilians' self-image is being seriously confronted by dissonant

⁹ This is, for instance, the position of Peter Fry (2000) who contends that the direct connection between class and race is a sign of the definition of affirmative action in Brazil's own terms.

social demands and interests that might contribute to frame it in new ways, at least on the institutional level. In fact, though there might be some reluctance on the part of public institutions to establish definite criteria to define people's "race", it is undeniable that the black movement's claims have had an unprecedented impact in public policies these days and that their approach on racism and racial classification is no longer a marginal counter discourse.

So much so that in March 2003, the then recently elected government of Luis Inacio Lula da Silva created the Especial Secretary of Policies for Promoting Racial Equality. The SEPPIR (the Portuguese acronym for the Secretary) was established in recognition of the historical struggles of the Brazilian black movement and it is part of a broader political program for combating racism known as "Brazil without racism". Its staff is composed by representative members of civil society organizations committed with the eradication of racism. Its mission consists, among other things, of promoting equality and protecting the rights of ethnic and racial groups and individuals (especially blacks) who are victims of discrimination and other forms of intolerance (<http://www.brasil.gov.br>).

This growing visibility of racial matters in the public arena has come along with the institutionalization of a new interpretation of Brazil's racial relations, one that not only recognizes racism as a preponderant and continuing problem of Brazilian society but which does so through the official recognition of "race", that is, through public policies destined specifically for "blacks" and "browns", here understood as social and economically disadvantaged "racial groups" that have unequal access to public education, the health system and to cultural and symbolic recognition. This is not to say that such

institutional measures have already solved or will effectively eradicate the problem of racism and inequality between racialized groups in Brazil. Yet, this is a clear sign that to interpret the recent implementation of affirmative action in public universities solely in light of the myth of racial democracy and of the role it plays in Brazilians' self-identification could be misleading. For, however relevant it may be in informing the Brazilian national identity, it is clear that this image has been confronted by a different interpretation of the Brazilian society and racial categorization.

Therefore, it looks like it would make more sense to look into the quarrels around racial categorization in this context as the result from the embattlement among unequal and historically constituted social groups in a specific political, social and historical context rather than as the manifestation of an essentially Brazilian cultural characteristic.

Indeed, the experiences of the State University of Bahia (UnB), the State University of Rio de Janeiro (UERJ) and the University of Brasilia (UnB) are illuminating in that they indicate that in each one of these instances different elements have combined to give way to different approaches on the problem of racial inequality and racial categorization. Among the aspects that have played a significant role in delineating the contours of quota policies and discourses on "race" and racism in these institutions are: the universities' connection with the black movement, the social and economic profile of their student body, their status (whether they are more or less selective in their processes of admission), the degree of autonomy of the universities regarding state policies, and the very history of racial classification in each one of the regions where they are located.

It is symptomatic, for instance, the fact that in each case even the terms used to refer to “racial groups” vary: Uneb uses the term “afro-descendants”, whereas UERJ makes reference to “blacks” and “browns” and UnB adds the term *negro* to the color categories *preto* and *pardo*. This variance in the use of terms designating racial categories suggests that in each one of these instances universities have been in dialogue to varying demands and social actors. Professor Wilson Mattos from the State University of Bahia claimed that Uneb has always maintained a straight interconnection with the historical struggles of the black movement, which in Bahia have attributed a central role to Africa and to what is seen as reminiscences of African culture in the constitution of black identity¹⁰.

In Rio, the combination between color and poverty has to be understood as something that responds not only to specific political interests and social movement claims (such as the movement for the preparation of black and poor for the university entrance exam) but that also resonates with a genuine interconnection between being poor and having a dark skin in people’s perception of racial categorization. Livio Sansone’s research on the identification of young people of Morro do Cantagalo (a shantytown in Rio de Janeiro) indicates that there is a clear perception that being black is strongly associated with being poor and living up on the hills. According to Sansone, those who live in Cantagalo define their identity while differentiating themselves from those who live at the “pavement”, that is, the “bacanas” and “playboys” (terms usually used to refer

¹⁰ On the role of Africa as an important icon in the constitution of blackness in Bahia see: Pinho, Patricia de Santana. *Reinvenções da África na Bahia*. (São Paulo: Annablume, 2004). Of course that the africanization of black identity is not the only possibility of asserting blackness in Bahia. Livio Sansone (2003) shows, for instance, that whereas it is true that blackness has been traditionally associated with “africanisms” both by Bahian Carnival and religious groups and fostered by the official discourse and the media, it is possible to see other interpretation of blackness, one which is associated with “modern” black looks and pop culture especially among lower class young people.

to upper middle class and rich people). Such identification is further associated with a clear sense of the geographical distribution of colors: the hills tend to be perceived as inhabited mostly by blacks whereas the “pavement” is seen as white¹¹.

Moreover, by sticking to the notion of the myth of racial democracy - whether as a positive or a negative aspect of Brazilian culture - to understand Brazil’s racial categorization we run the risk of reproducing a reifying notion of “race”, one that, to use Bourdieu’s terminology, identifies it with “substances” rather than with a symbolic category of classification that results from social and historical *relations* of power¹².

Indeed, it is possible to argue that whether it has praised or demonized the idea of racial democracy, social research on race in Brazil has usually remained within the frame of “race relations” studies that have focused on the analysis of the relationship between different and unequal “racial groups” rather than on the social process that transform them into races. This is certainly the case of both the miscegenation and assimilation theories of the 1930s according to which the mere contact between blacks and whites would favor their approximation regardless of the interpretive framework informing their conception of each other¹³, and the structuralist approach developed from the 50s

¹¹ See: Sansone, Livio. “Não Trabalho, Consumo e Identidade Negra: Uma Comparação entre Rio e Salvador”. IN: Yvonne Maggie and Claudia Barcelos Rezende (editors). *Raça Como Retórica: A Construção da Diferença*. (Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 2002).

¹² To be sure, Bourdieu draws the idea of “substance” from Cassirer’s notion of substantialist thinking that implies the identification of reality with that which is immediately available to our ordinary experience. See: Bourdieu, P. *In Other Words: Essays Towards Reflexive Sociology*. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990), p.125. In this connection, a substantialist take on “race” would tend to identify it with individuals and groups as they appear to us in a certain social context without inquiring into the very process through which they have been constituted as such.

¹³ Some of the main works that have reproduced this strand of thought are: Freyre, Gilberto. *Casa Grande & Senzala*. (Rio de Janeiro: Editora Record, 2000); Pierson, Donald. *Negroes in Brazil: A Study of Race Contact in Bahia*. (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1965); Wagley, Charles. *Race and Class in Rural Brazil*. (New York: Russell and Russell, 1972 c1952); Harris, Marvin. *Patterns of Race in the Americas*. (New York: Walker, 1964); Azevedo, Thales de. *As Elites de Cor: um estudo de ascensão social*. (Rio de Janeiro: Cia Editora Nacional, 1955).

onwards which identified racial inequality as a persistent and structural problem in Brazilian society¹⁴. Even though the latter approach paid an invaluable contribution to understanding and disclosing racism in Brazil, here again, the problem of “race” was tackled through an analysis of the relationship between racial groups, i.e. between blacks and whites as always already existing social groups.

What the recent experiences of affirmative action in public universities in Brazil seem to suggest, however, is that “race” and racial groups for that matter, whether they do consist of social realities, are constituted in each instance of signification implied in the social and political struggle involved in this process. True, much is still to be investigated in order to explain and understand what is at stake in the process of implementation of quotas for racial groups in Brazilian public universities as far as “race” is concerned. Yet, the different criteria applied by the three universities mentioned above to define the beneficiaries of quotas disclose an important aspect of “race” as a socially constructed meaning, namely: the fact that however powerful and effective in determining people’s life chances, race has to be understood as a social construct that results from struggles among historically constituted social groups, and, thus, as a category whose meaning(s) does not derive from a frozen structure of symbolic classification but is (are), rather, contingent on the social forces at place in a given historical context.

¹⁴ Some of the seminal works produced in the 50s as a result of the Unesco project were already mentioned in a previous note. Other structuralist perspectives were elaborated later on which continued holding to the notion of myth of racial democracy to explain racism in Brazil. Some of the main works produced in the 70s and 80s are: Hasenbalg, Carlos and Silva, Nelson do Valle e. *Estrutura Social, Mobilidade e Raça*. (São Paulo: Vértice/Rio de Janeiro: IUPERJ, 1988); Hasenbalg, Carlos and Silva, Nelson do Valle e. *Relações Raciais no Brasil*. (Rio de Janeiro: Rio Fundo, 1992); Hasenbalg, Carlos. “Race and Socio-Economic Inequalities in Brazil”. In: P.M. Fountaine (editor). *Race, Class and Power in Brazil*. (Los Angeles: Center for Afro-American Studies, University of California, 1985).

