ESSAY: 

Affirmative Action in Brazilian Universities:  
The case of racial quotas

Many Brazilians claim that we live in a “racial democracy”, where white, black and pardo people have the very same rights and opportunities. Is that so? Indeed, differently from the United States or South Africa, in Brazil there has never been an official “racial segregation”. Nevertheless, this differentiation between races, in a country where nearly half of the population is black or pardo, has always been implicit (when not explicit) in Brazilians’ acts and discourses. For instance, if we ask a white person if there is racial prejudice in the country we live in, he or she will probably answer that there is, but if we ask the same person if he or she is racist, the answer will be no. Nobody wants to be tagged as a racist, but our society keeps feeding this implicit prejudice. We can see it in the media or in school books. In the latter, the black population only appears when it comes to the history of Brazil Colony, with slavery; outside this period, it is simply not represented. In the former, black people are generally represented with submissive roles, leaving the white people as protagonists in soap operas, advertisements, and so on.

Indicators of the inequality between black and white people can be seen in public health, employment and education, especially in higher education. That is what is called structural or institutional racism. Here are some facts: regarding the access to public health, the Brazilian Social Atlas from 2004 shows that, in 1998, around 70% of black people got medical care in the two weeks preceding the survey, while among whites the percentage was 83.7%. Concerning the job market, according to another survey from DIEESE (Inter-Union Department of Statistics and Economic Studies), the unemployment rate among black people in Salvador city was 45% higher than among white people and in São Paulo city 41% higher. When it comes to education, the numbers are even worse. According to Martins (2004), in 2003, the illiteracy rate among blacks (16.9%) was more than two times the observed among whites (7.1%). In terms of years of study, whites have an average of eight year of study, which means complete basic education, while the blacks have an average of 6.3 years of study, that is, many of them do not even complete primary school. Finally in the university sphere,
only 2.5% of the black population had higher education in 2001, a quarter of the observed among whites. The discrepancy of access between the two races is indubitable. In this context, the Affirmative Action through racial quotas in universities came as an immediate attempt of extenuating this disparity. Though many people are against it, Affirmative Action through racial quotas in universities must be thought as a mechanism with positive effects on social and racial inclusion in society. THESIS STATEMENT

But what is Affirmative Action? It is a set of private actions or public policies that aims to repair discriminatory aspects that block the access of people from different social groups to manifold opportunities (IBASE, 2008). Quotas for women in public office or quotas for the physically handicapped in big companies are examples of Affirmative Action. Quotas for university access are, perhaps, the most controversial of them, especially when it comes to racial quotas. This policy was first implemented in the United States during the era of civil rights, in the mid-1960s, in a country where the exclusion of black people in society was – and still is – very strong. In Brazil, this policy began to take place in 2003, in the University of Rio de Janeiro (UERJ), and is already a reality in Brazilian higher education. According to IBASE (2008), in the same year of this publication, there were 54 universities applying the policy throughout the Brazilian territory. The following paragraphs will provide evidence that Affirmative Action can be understood, as said before, as a mechanism of social and racial inclusion in society [PARAGRAPH WITH DEFINITION AND INDICATION OF EVIDENCE PRESENTATION - optional].

First of all, Affirmative Action is an attempt to ensure the principal of equality for all [TOPIC SENTENCE – ARGUMENT # 1]. The main objective of the Affirmative Action is to give a new meaning to the concept of “social justice”. People that are against quotas claim that every person must have the same chances to undertake the entrance examination and get into a university, regardless of his/her age, race, gender, origin, etc. Hence, within the universalism, the notion of "fair" is to treat all people uniformly. The problem lies, however, in the fact that universal treatment does not mean equal treatment. If citizens are unequal, the result is inequality. In everyday life, people with different resources, not only financial, end up having differential access to rights and services. This way, treating a group that had fewer opportunities – and, thus, is disadvantaged - in a different manner is an attempt to reduce these inequalities. It is not a privilege (IBASE, 2008). Moreover, the principle of equality,
established by the Brazilian Constitution of 1988 and stated in the art. 3, item III, holds that: “The fundamental objectives of the Federative Republic of Brazil consists of: III – Eradicating the poverty and marginalization and reducing the social and regional inequalities [my translation].” The quotas policy is, therefore, in accordance to the Constitution proposal of constructing a society of freedom, justice and solidarity (IBASE, 2008).

Regarding the academic accomplishment, students that enter university through quotas reveal a good performance, since they tend to highly value this opportunity and to put effort in their studies [TOPIC SENTENCE – ARGUMENT #2]. Several universities have published surveys about the situation of quota students among their courses. In the University of Rio de Janeiro (UERJ), the first to adhere the policy in Brazil, from 2003 to 2006, the average rating of racial quota students exceeded the average rating of non-quota students in 29 of 48 courses (60% of the total), according to Penha-Lopes (2007). Another research from Federal University of Bahia (UFBA) shows that, in 11 of the 18 courses of higher competition (61% of them), the quota students achieved an equal or better performance than non-quota students in the year of 2005, which was the first year of implementation of the policy in this institution. For instance, in Law School, the coefficient of performance of quota students was 95.2, better than the coefficient of 88.9 from non-quota students (Queiroz & Santos, 2007). Another fact indicated by a study in UERJ confirms the commitment of quota students to get the diploma. Among blacks, the percentage of students who drop out is 12.99%, while among the non-quota students the drop-out rate rises to 16.97%. All these facts confirm that the presence of quota students in a university does not indicate a lowering of quality in the higher education in Brazil. On the contrary: A survey conducted by the Laboratory of Public Policies from UERJ in 2006 shows that 90% professors from 4 Brazilian universities, asked about this issue, affirm that the university development is equal or better after the adherence of quotas policy (IBASE, 2008). They also affirm that the concern over the raising of conflict in terms of prejudice and racism cannot be confirmed, since race relations have remained the same or improved.

Finally, it is measure to reassure racial inclusion and to light up the debate over racism and social exclusion [TOPIC SENTENCE – ARGUMENT #3]. Some people that are only half way against quotas claim that the reservation of vacancies in universities for students that come from public schools is fair – since the problems in public education are all evident -, but the reservation for black students is not. The
argument is that if a black person suffers from bad financial conditions, he or she has the chance to enter university through quotas for public schools; so there is no need for racial quotas. However, the truth is that the adoption of quotas for public school students does not meet the needs of the black population directly. The assumption above illustrated reinforces the misleading idea that there are no mechanisms of racial exclusion in schools, this being one of the factors that most reproduce the inequalities between black and white students. So, even among students from public schools, we would see a greater inclusion of white people in university. To bring evidence, data collected by the System of Evaluation of Basic Education (SAEB) and discussed by IBASE (2008) evaluated and compared the school performance of black and white students in the 4th grade, between 1995 and 2001. They came to the conclusion that black students had, in an average, a poorer learning performance then the whites, regardless of their socioeconomic conditions (for instance, in a Portuguese exam, black students of private schools achieved a lower performance [179 points] then the white students from the same schools [228 points]). For Munanga (1996, as cited in IBASE, 2008), this happens because “the prejudice instilled in the teacher’s head and his or her incapacity to deal with diversity in class, added to the biased content of books and the prejudged relationships between students from different ethnic-racial and social backgrounds, discourage the black students and compromise their learning process [my translation].” These barriers found in the school journey and life of the black students determine a serious and reduced expectation of the group with respect to the access in the university; they feel as if the university is not a place for them. To illustrate that, according to a study conducted in the University of Brasilia (UnB), the number of black professors in public universities does not reach 1% (IBASE, 2008). Of course the education in public schools must be improved, but as the process of exclusion tends to perpetuate inside and outside schools, the State needs to enforce a measure that may help lessen this inequality. Besides, the quotas policy has a role beyond promoting the entrance of a specific population in university. It encourages the debate on race, questions the diversity in education institutions and invites us to rethink old prejudices and stereotypes – consequence of our slavery past.

To conclude, having all of this in mind, Affirmative Action through racial quotas in universities does result in positive effects on social and racial inclusion. Certainly there are many other aspects involved in this delicate issue that were left unmentioned here, such as the difficulty of categorizing blacks, pardos and whites in a
country where the miscegenation has played an enormous role. About this issue, the American cultural theorist and sociologist Stuart Hall, in his lecture “Race: the floating signifier”, draws on the propensity, also referred to as a cultural impulse, of classifying sub-groups of human types according to essentialized characteristics, whether physical or intellectual ones. Hall believes that, in a way, classifying is very positive for us to generate meanings. The problem is when the systems of classification become the objects of the disposition of power. “That’s to say,” in his own words, “when the marking of difference and similarity across a human population becomes a reason why this group is to be treated in that way and get those advantages, and that group should be treated in another (Hall, 1996).” That is what happens with race. This is our reality. The Affirmative Actions are trying to attenuate this reality. Of course they are urgent, temporary measures, subject to constant evaluation for their improvement. Nevertheless, all these actions that attempt to reach a new sense of democracy by reducing inequalities of race, gender and others, must be seem as fundamental and also constant until the value of diversity and access can be universal in truth.

REFERENCES:


Text adapted from a student’s.