Unexpected narratives from Multicultural Policies: Translations of Affirmative Action in Brazil*

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Abstract

Multicultural policies have been spreading around the world. How does implementation of multicultural polices affect local ideas about race, inequality and multiculturalism? This paper investigates this issue with respect to affirmative action policies in Brazilian universities. Our interviews with university administrators and university students indicate that, when implemented in Brazil, affirmative action acquires class-based justifications, and ideas about racial diversity are replaced by ideas about class diversity. Our findings suggest that, differently from what some analysts have argued, affirmative action is not necessarily associated with postmodern concerns and identities: In Brazil, it is mostly associated with a modern discourse in which class cleavages are still very salient and the state plays a significant role in addressing inequalities.

keywords: affirmative action, Brazil, race, multiculturalism, class, higher education

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Despite their ups and downs in the United States and some European countries (Mitchell 2004; Wrench 2007), multicultural policies have been increasingly implemented worldwide to improve social conditions of marginalized racial and ethnic groups (1). International agencies have adopted multiculturalism by supporting indigenous groups in their demands for land and self-government; sub-state minorities in their claims for official recognition and enhanced regional autonomy; and immigrants in their struggle for recognition and accommodation (Bonnet 2006; Kymlicka and Bashir 2008). Similarly, many national governments and organizations have introduced their own multicultural policies, often borrowing ideas from abroad, while also responding to the demands of local and transnational social movements. Recent scholarship examines how multiculturalist ideas are reproduced and influence policy cross-nationally (Bleich 2003; Htun 1994; Paschel and Sawyer 2008; May 1999; Ali 2000).

Although much empirical work focuses on the causes of multiculturalist policy diffusion, normative debates are concerned with the consequences of this trend. Advocates hail such policies as redistributing resources to marginalized groups, and as promoting tolerance of individual difference (Sabbagh 2004, Winant 2004), or increasing political participation of otherwise powerless minorities (Bloemraad 2006). Some critics warn of a weakening of social cohesion and an increasing violation of individual rights and meritocratic ideals. Other critics fear the reinforcement of cultural stereotypes (Sowell 2004; Fry 2005). Yet others claim that multicultural policies and discourses are part of a new neoliberal agenda that draws attention away from inequalities that marginalized groups face (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1999; Friedman 2000). Politically at stake is not only how policies affect the distribution of resources, but also how these policies create a discursive space that can enable a society to achieve greater socioeconomic equality and other goals.

An interesting issue for social scientists, then, is how ideas about race, ethnicity, culture and socioeconomic inequality are impacted by the implementation of multiculturalist policies. We explore this issue in our paper, by looking at the case of affirmative action policies in Brazil.

Brazil has become a central case in both political and academic debates on the international spread of multiculturalist ideas and policies. Starting gradually in the late 1990s, Brazil has by now implemented
affirmative action in most of its public and private universities and a few public offices. Recent research explores the extent to which these policies—or the ideas that generated them—were the result of foreign imperialism vs. of homegrown social movements. Bourdieu and Wacquant (1999) argue that there is a strong influence of US academics and foundations on the diagnosis of—and proposed remedies for—race-related problems in Brazil. Critics of this view point to more homegrown origins of anti-racist activism, research and policy, which eventually led to affirmative action, but recognize the links with international networks and organizations (e.g., Hanchard 2003; Telles 2003; Johnson III 2005; Htun 1994). Empirical studies point to the constellation of local and international groups that have together brought affirmative action and adapted it to the Brazilian context (Htun 2004; Peria 2004; Tavolaro 2006).

But as affirmative action policies get institutionalized in Brazil, how do they change local discussions of issues associated with different multiculturalist agendas? In other words, how are these policies enabling changes in the way people talk about difference, equality, and race?

This paper examines the effects of the institutionalization of affirmative action on the worldviews of people directly involved with these policies. We focus on public universities, the most visible example of affirmative action in Brazil. First, we investigate how high-level bureaucrats responsible for implementing and administering these policies justify the need for affirmative action. Second, we look at how students at one of the first universities to implement affirmative action in Brazil understand the new policy. Throughout the analysis, we constrast the understandings of affirmative action in higher education in Brazil and in the United States—the most well known case of implementation of affirmative action.

We find that, through the experiences and sometimes conflictive interpretations of these agents, multiculturalist ideas have acquired a new form in Brazilian universities, conflating not only race and class, but also racial and class diversity. Most university administrators defend affirmative action policies as an instrument for socioeconomic inclusion, generally conflating race and class. When referring to diversity, they often translate it as the need to re-discuss the specificity of racial issues in Brazil, rejecting
or ignoring the American use of the term—which focus on the dialogue of different cultural groups. Students’ perceptions of those policies, as well as their understandings of race and inequality, are shaped not only by public discourse surrounding affirmative action, but also by the everyday experiences that affirmative action policies have created. In students' discourses, we find again the concept of diversity, now translated into class diversity. Similarly, discourse on race consciousness now provides upwardly mobile black students with a new language that de-naturalizes class differences.

These findings highlight the importance of analyzing the diffusion of multicultural policy beyond its original context in the Global North and the formal goals of international agencies. The implementation of affirmative action in Brazil had unintended consequences which have generated new understandings of race relations, socioeconomic inequalities and diversity. Our findings also challenge the association between multiculturalism-inspired policies and post-modern (see Grillo 1998) or neoliberal discourse (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1999; Friedman 2000; Bonnet 2008). While multicultural discourses may have had such characteristics as affirmative action came to Brazil, by now policies are framed in very modern terms, where class cleavages and the nation-state are still very salient entities.

**Brazil and the global diffusion of anti-racism: traveling solutions or traveling problems?**

In the 1990s affirmative action was not part of the public debate in Brazil. Although there were several proposals for race-based affirmative action in federal and state legislatures, none was close to being approved. Race was only a marginal topic in mainstream public policies. However, right after the World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance (Durban, South Africa, 2001), universities throughout Brazil started to implement affirmative action policies in its most radical form—racial quotas. In 2007, more than thirty public universities—some of the most prestigious and selective in Brazil, enrolling approximately 30 percent of higher education students—had implemented quotas in their admissions.

Many Brazilian journalists and academics claimed that such policies were imported from the United States. Although different countries have implemented affirmative action before and after the
United States, people, ideas and resources from that country exert an important influence in Brazil (Peria 2004). Brazilian black activists and social scientists were important advocates for anti-racist policies. However, they did so within international academic and human rights networks, where the exchange of ideas was common, and their activities were often funded by US foundations (Htun 2004; Johnson III 2005; Moutinho 1996; Santos 2005). Brazilian media debates on affirmative action in Brazil also made frequent comparisons with the United States, although often to stress the difference between the two countries.

Nonetheless, affirmative action policies in Brazil are different from those in the USA in many respects. First, they usually take form of quotas, which have been declared illegal by the US Supreme Court since the 1970s (Peria 2004). Second, quotas generally combine racial with socioeconomic criteria. The way that racial and socioeconomic criteria are combined varies widely between universities. A few focus exclusively on race, others have quotas by race and for students from public schools (serving as a proxy for lower socio-economic background), and the majority have defined a low-income criterion while establishing minimum thresholds for brown and black representation (2).

The more contentious debate about American imperialism, however, is not so much regarding the origin of affirmative action, but whether affirmative action is reproducing US style of race relations. Critics of affirmative action see race-based policies as heightening racial conflict (Fry et al. 2007; Maggie 2005; Fry 2005; Maio and Santos 2005). Supporters, on the other hand, see those policies as potentially generating healthy public debates about the race-specific nature of Brazilian inequalities (Guimarães 2005; Carvalho 2005; Medeiros 2004; Telles 2004).

Although we cannot address all those issues, our data provides a glimpse into what kinds of discursive opportunities affirmative action policies have created among those who are directly experiencing these policies.

Data
Our data originated from two separate research projects. Author 2 collected interviews on administrators for [his/her] comparative project between Brazil and South Africa [references removed for review] and Author 1 did interviews with students for [his/her] dissertation work on racial categorization and affirmative action in Brazil [references removed for review].

Author 2 conducted twenty-one in-depth interviews with university administrators and state officials in Brazil during the summers of 2005 and 2006. Interviewees were contacted by writing to the universities, explaining the general goal of the research, and asking them to suggest names of interviewees in the institutional planning, admissions policies, and academic development offices who were involved in the implementation and management of affirmative action in selection processes. Eighteen interviews were conducted with university deans, administrators, and legal advisors in six public universities that have adopted affirmative action policies in the five different regions of the country. Two federal officials and one state official involved in the implementation of these policies at the state and federal levels were also interviewed. Approximately half of the interviewees self-defined as black (negro) and five interviewees were active in black movement organizations.

Author 1 conducted twenty-eight interviews with students from one of the first public universities to adopt affirmative action. Students were recruited for interviews by advertising the research on e-mail lists and lectures, by approaching them in university corridors, and through limited snowballing. All but three students interviewed entered the university after the implementation of racial quotas. Fourteen studied Law, four studied Education (Pedagogia), four studied Social Work, four studied Nursing and two studied Medicine. In a short multiple-choice questionnaire that was administered to all but one student before the interview, nine students classified themselves as white, seven as black (preto), nine as brown, and two refused to answer. Fifteen were male and thirteen were female. Most lived in lower-middle class neighborhoods of Rio de Janeiro.

All racial categories attributed to particular people in this paper are based on self-identification.

**Policies acculturated: administrator’s views on affirmative action**
This section describes how university administrators translated the meaning of affirmative action during its implementation in Brazilian universities. We identified three salient arguments to justify the implementation of affirmative action: the benefits of racial diversity (diversity), the need to redress past discrimination (redress), and the need to include marginalized groups (remedial). The remedial justification is the most consensual (used by 17 out of 21 interviewees), followed by the diversity argument (used by 12 out of 21). The language of redress, which has become marginalized in black movement discourse (Santos 2005) and reduced to remedial arguments in mainstream defenses of the policy, was the least common among administrators (used by 5 out of 21 interviewees).

The centrality of remedial justification in Brazil is in stark contrast to the contemporary debates about affirmative action in the USA today—a country in which remedial justifications have lost force over time, in legal battles and public opinion (Skrentny 1996; 2002). Not only has the remedial justification become the most successful institutional compromise of affirmative action in Brazil, but also diversity arguments have a different meaning and purpose than they do in the United States and in international organizations.

As defined in the American legal debates, diversity arguments for affirmative action are based on the assumption that student diversity is a "compelling interest" for educational quality and for the country’s development. Having students from different racial and ethnic backgrounds enriches students’ learning. Affirmative action is justified as enabling students to understand cultural differences, learn from the perspectives of people from different backgrounds, and interact in diverse environments (Bowen and Bok 1998). In everyday talk, however, diversity in the United States is understood as referring to the tolerance and consumption of racial and ethnic cultural difference by whites. In this discourse, racial and ethnic differences are essentialized, and the relationship between diversity and inequality is rarely articulated (Bell and Hartmann 2007). Although much contested within the United States, this diversity framework in affirmative action has generated a network of experts, foundations and policy prescriptions that now travel around the world. The discourse of diversity in this new mode has now been incorporated and made consistent with free-market prescriptions of the World Bank (Bonnett 2008) and is seen by the
U.N. as the inclusion of minorities into mainstream institutions (Kymlicka 2008). In both the USA and in the discourse of international organizations, ethnic difference is assumed. What is at stake is the acceptance and inclusion of people who are already presumed to be different.

The initial implementation of affirmative action in Brazil was largely pushed by activists who were highly connected to international organizations, funding agencies, academics and activists, who participated in international conferences and events, and who could speak the language of international human rights (Santos 2004; Htun 2004). These activists therefore adopted a language of diversity and affirmative action that was superficially consistent with international discourse.

In our interviews, diversity generally appeared as a positive value—even if more fervently defended by those few administrators with some connection to the black movement. Similar to the US Supreme Court, these militant interviewees argue that black students should bring the specificity of the black experience, discrimination and culture to the university. They usually acknowledge, however, that the idea of racial diversity is seen as problematic in Brazil and argue that racial differences are often overlooked because: “The idea of diversity is seen as a threat to national unity, which will create conflict” (male, black).

Most interviewees, however, use the idea of diversity within the framework of criticizing the racial democracy ideology, assumed to be hegemonic in Brazil. The goal of affirmative action within this perspective is not only to include blacks in the university and encourage interracial integration, but also to strengthen black identities and increase awareness of racial discrimination and inequality.

We are not only discussing who is getting a spot and who is not, we are re-discussing the social reformulation of collective identities in this country, we are re-discussing who is white and who is not, those are debates that throughout our history have not been in the public sphere […]. When a middle class black is not allowed to compete, because his income is above what is necessary, how does this affect his sense of belonging to this group? He suffered the same type of discrimination, all the nefarious repercussion that racism has in the process of constituting oneself. […] So when you join
race and class this opportunity has been lost, and much due to the action of white left wing progressive people (male, black).

In other words, the purpose of diversity is not primarily to enrich the experience at the university or the country through greater inter-racial conviviality, but rather, to debate and reconstruct racial and national identities.

The idea of reclaiming racial identities and reconstructing black history is also central to the discourse of those few administrators who used the redress justification. According to the redress discourse, affirmative action would be justified due to the need to reclaim policies to compensate the inheritance of slavery. Differently from the United States, it is not the existence of race-based segregation in the twentieth century but the fact that Brazil never had a race-targeted policy since the end of slavery that would justify a policy like this. According one interviewee:

So it is shocking that after one hundred years since slavery was abolished, the Brazilian state never addressed, never created any social policy to integrate blacks into the formal aspects of social structure: education, job market, living conditions in general. In opposition to the United States, for example. People who make the comparison with the United States to argue if it is more or less racist, if in the United States racism is more or less explicit, but I think racism is racism, one is no less than the other. However, in the United States there are more than 100 black universities, created right after abolition, with small schools financed especially by the Northern states. Here there were no policies for inclusion. You can look at all Brazilian legislation from the Nineteenth Century on and you will not find any policy of racial inclusion. (male, black).

The redress argument, however, does not appear as a central justification in interviews with administrators. Attributing racial inequality to past discrimination—as opposed to present discrimination—usually implies that class-based policies would be sufficient to solve the problem. In addition, in the absence of a one-drop rule, white candidates could claim for access through quotas—since
they might have ancestors who were slaves. Therefore, focusing on past discrimination and slavery tends to underplay present discrimination and reinforce the remedial justification. In the quotation below in which an administrator translates the historical inheritance of slavery as a current socioeconomic problem:

To the racial profile corresponds a social profile, right? We know that the blacks are poor because that is how this racial group was historically constituted. So when you give access, democratize access of the poorest to education, you are also contemplating the reduction of inequality in the racial level. (female, white)

The remedial justification is the most common among administrators. The use of remedial arguments to justify affirmative action tends to support the conflation of race and class, framing the exclusion of blacks as a socioeconomic problem. Those who use the remedial justification may believe that racial discrimination exists, but do not see it as a central cause of racial disparities. The popularity of the remedial frame may also be due to the much greater consensus–compared to the USA–that government should help underprivileged people (Scalon 2004; Gilens 1999). Consistently, most interviewees assume that, in an unequal country like Brazil, it is not only blacks that are excluded. Therefore, they defend the inclusion of other segments of the population. As pointed out by another interviewee:

We are working with the idea that students from the public educational system and black students, especially those two groups that have most of the quotas, that within these groups there are distinctions, and among them the Institution decided to focus on low-income students. […] It is not enough to be from a public school, you have to be, necessarily, from low-income families. It is not enough to be black, you have to be necessarily from low income. The others can stay out of the quotas, they can run in the traditional system, only run in the reserved spots those who need a differential to compete. […] What we tried was to
get the initial spirit of affirmative action policies that really need to be, effectively, a mechanism of migration between social classes, otherwise this law makes no sense. (female, white)

Nearly all administrators argue for focusing on socioeconomic criteria, since both racial and public school quotas have the same goal: to decrease social inequality. Consequently, the specificity of the racial issue often gets lost in the policy debate. Indeed, in five out of the six universities in which interviews were conducted, socioeconomic criterion was the decisive factor—race came up as an additional criterion to guarantee minimum racial representation within the socioeconomic quotas. These tensions between social and racial quotas are well illustrated in the following quotation from a dean of a university that has adopted quotas for the first time in the 2005 admissions. According to him, quotas would never be approved if they were just about race. In his words:

Another important question is that some people agreed with quotas, but do not agree with the color question. To include people from the public school was fine, but some people – including important black people – thought this [selecting by race] would be problematic. But the black movement argued and we were convinced. However, we included race only among those who are classified within the public schools. The university always said that a purely racial quota would not happen. We – at the administration – would never defend that. So what ended up happening is that the public school quotas have a required distribution by color, but the percentages are similar to the percentages of the public schools in [our state]. So there is no discrimination [against whites]. There is a distribution of blacks and whites, but there is no disadvantage for one or for the other. So, in this case, to bring up color distribution is a historical acknowledgment that this country excluded by color. But in practice the quotas are social quotas. The student of the public school has no advantage of saying that he is black, because the required percentages are the percentages of blacks in the public schools. (male, white).

This long quotation portrays many tensions presented in the translation of affirmative action policies to the Brazilian context: the resistance of certain groups to accept the racial debate in Brazil, the
pressure of the black movement to keep the focus on race, the tensions between past and present discrimination (“historical acknowledgment that this country excluded”, does it still exclude?) and, more central to the remedial justification for affirmative action policies, the predominance of social quotas.

In short, the main tension in the implementation of affirmative action in Brazil, then, is between one camp that understands racial inequality as being reducible to socioeconomic issues, and another that stresses the specificity of the race issue, its independence from other inequality concerns, and the right of Afro-Brazilians to assert their black identity as different from a mixed-race national identity. Most universities that adopted affirmative action achieved a compromise between these two views, combining racial and socio-economic criteria. That is, the compromise among policymakers was to frame affirmative action as a remedial solution to racial inequality—often privileging lower-class blacks over middle-class blacks, and also benefitting lower-class whites. In other words, the translation of affirmative action to the Brazilian context placed socioeconomic exclusion at the core of the debate.

The opinions of administrators, however, do not matter only in the realm of ideas. Different compromises of their ideas became embedded in institutions of higher education, affecting the everyday experience of thousands of students enrolled in these universities. How is affirmative action and the debates and ideas associated with it understood by those whose lives are most affected by this new institutional design, i.e., university students?

**Policies in action: translations and interpretations from students at UERJ**

This section is based on interviews with students from the State University of Rio de Janeiro (UERJ), one of the first universities to implement racial quotas in Brazil. Quotas at UERJ were introduced through a law approved by the Rio de Janeiro state legislature, and modified a year later after a consultation between the state government and administrators, black movement representatives, and other “members of civil society.” There were two quotas: one for students from public schools and a racial quota. UERJ’s system became a compromise between groups with two different agendas. The Rio de Janeiro state legislature interpreted the policy as being mainly about addressing class disparities,
combining it with the public school quota and introducing an income limit afterwards (Fry 2005). Black activists wanted the policy not only to be race-specific, but also to encourage people to use the term negro (black), thus promoting black consciousness. This led them not only to defend racial quotas but also to push for the elimination of the label pardo (brown) in the second year of the quotas (3). The quotas increased both racial and class diversity in many of UERJ’s departments, especially the most prestigious ones (Machado 2004; Peria 2004).

While administrators align class-centered discourse with remedial justifications for affirmative action and race-centered discourse with diversity justifications, students combine those discourses and justifications in different ways. These combinations are informed not only by their exposure to ideas about affirmative action, but also by their experiences with affirmative action. Moreover, differently from administrators, students are not self-selected from among those who support the policy. Therefore, while students who favor affirmative action most often use remedial arguments, many of them do not see remedial arguments as sufficient for justifying policies. Similar to administrators, only a few students use redress justifications, often in combination with remedial ones.

Students use class-centered discourses to either legitimize or challenge affirmative action. Some argue that socio-economic disparities can be addressed by universalistic educational policies, like improving basic education. Others see affirmative action as a faster way of addressing those disparities. Still others seemed to accept inequality in Brazil (and in access to university) as an unavoidable evil.

Students' race-centered discourses concern the nature of—and the prescriptive stance toward—race relations and boundaries in Brazil. These discourses are informed by two opposing views: a “black movement” view, which promotes black identity, and a “racial democracy” view, which downplays racial differences among Brazilians. Students did not always pick sides on the racial debate, sometimes borrowing elements from both to make up their own, original views about racial issues. Race-centered discourse usually informed students’ position regarding racial diversity arguments for affirmative action. Additionally, some students incorporated the idea of diversity within class-centered discourses.
Class-centered remedial justifications

Like administrators, students often interpret affirmative action as having class-related goals. Several students assume that the objective of the quotas is to benefit poor people, regardless of color. Therefore, they believe that middle-class applicants—blacks or white—should not benefit from the quotas. After complaining that public school quotas benefit only people from elite public high schools, Sergio (4), a white student, adds:

The quota system for blacks is even weirder, because the students that go through the quotas for blacks are middle-class students. [...] Then I ask, you know, was the quota system designed to help middle class people? Or were they designed to help people who are the socially excluded?

Like many Brazilians (see Bailey 2002), Sergio believes that there is racism in his country, but that the main explanation for black disadvantage is their inherited low socio-economic status. Sergio thinks that quotas are not the best solution, because most people do not even get to high school. He sees university affirmative action as a populist measure used by the government to avoid dealing with the real issue, which is giving priority to basic education instead of spending most of its budget on universities.

Carla and Daniela share Sergio’s distrust for quotas (5). Carla says that quotas are a cynical policy because they mask the real problem: the lack of investment in basic education. Daniela says that quotas are “dangerous because they make people avoid the more important questions.” Even worse, she says, if the quotas are not targeted at the poor, they will serve to perpetuate inequality, since “[a]ny policy that should benefit the poor and benefits the non-poor concentrates income.”

Although most students favor improvements in basic education, not everyone sees this as a substitute for quotas. For Eduardo, quotas are a good short-term solution. “[T]his argument […] that you need to improve high school education etc. […] it’s an argument that is used only to break the current argument, and to postpone the quota […].” Students who defend affirmative action based on a remedial
frame usually see it as a temporary measure: most of the work should be done by improving the
distribution of resources outside the university.

Some students associated with the black movement also see affirmative action in a remedial
fashion, as being mainly targeted toward poor blacks. Others see it as giving opportunities to the black
middle-classes, increasing diversity in the Brazilian elite.

**Race-centered diversity justifications**

Black activists often use racial quotas to foster public recognition of different racial identities
and of racial discrimination in Brazilian society. Black middle-class students aligned with this discourse
often seek to detach race from class issues, breaking common-sense associations between blackness and
poverty:

Gabriel: [T]he goal of the quota is that the environment of the university is a multi-racial environment, that
the person gets used to seeing a black lawyer, a black judge, a black doctor, that’s it. [...] But the
connotation that was given to the quota for the black is that he has to be poor. Well, that’s interesting, I
think that quota for the poor is one thing, but quota for blacks is another. [...] If there is a black person that
is poor, great, he will get the quota, but the fact that he is poor and that he is black, I think, are distinct.

This race-centered diversity justification opposes both class-centered discourses and nationalist
ideologies of mixed-race identities. This emphasis on black identity, however, is highly controversial
among students. Some, like Ana, argue that quotas and black movement identity politics would lead
blacks to segregate themselves into “ghettoes”:

Ana: I entered through the quota for blacks, but the quota for blacks for me doesn’t make any sense,
because, really, it’s segregating, you know? [...] Because, I mean, they don’t fight all the time to be equal?
[...] Is he [the negro] different or not? [...] should we pity him or not? Should we reject him or not? Will we separate or not?

For Ana, diversity arguments reinforce the idea of difference. They also conflict with her reluctance in identifying herself as black. Ana classified herself as brown to qualify for the quota because, according to her, using the black label would be too hypocritical. When asked her if she was black she says that her family is “all mixed” and that in Brazil it’s hard to say who is black.

Critics of race-centered defenses of quotas argue not only that Brazilians should not be divided into “races”, but also that doing so is impossible, since Brazilians are racially mixed. Justifications that stress black identity thus conflict both with students’ experience of coming from “racially mixed” families and with their national identity.

Alexandre: I think that the main issue in Brazil, it’s a very miscigenated country, so, when you say who is black, who is white, who is brown, it’s complicated. Because everyone here is at least a descendant, an afro-descendant, a descendent of Europeans. [...] So this project. . . for me the quota system should be made, at least in the social area, not racial. This issue of putting race, you are discriminating, because [...] in this sense the quota would only in some way be leading to prejudice. [...] Because [people will think that] if you are black and are in the public university, it’s because you are a quota student. And this is not true.

Alexandre agrees that Brazilians are mixed, and that they should not be distinguished, a view that is consistent with the racial democracy myth, both as a description of a reality where racial boundaries are blurred, and as a prescription, where distinguishing by “race” will lead to increased racial discrimination (Bailey 2002; Fry 2005).

Affirmative action has brought a debate about racial issues among students, both through their exposure to the public debate and by enabling more blacks to enter the university. Angela, who
remembers being called “monkey” in school as a child, says, when asked if there is prejudice outside the university:

_Angela:_ No, […] I started to become aware of this prejudice stuff after I entered the university. Outside the university I always have this mindset, of lack of respect. For me there are well-mannered people and ill-mannered people. I never cared about this stuff. I started to pay more attention to this after I came in, especially because of the contact and because of this quota thing I heard people talking about it more, but. . . it does exist, but, I mean, it’s because […] I don’t care much so I don’t notice, it’s like, if I suffered, I didn’t notice.

The quotas have led her to re-think her experience of being black. However, Angela is still ambivalent about how to deal with discrimination, and thinks that the black movement is too radical and too focused on racial identity. Quotas have exposed more students to black movement ideology and to discussions about race and racism. However, students do not passively accept those lessons, but incorporate them in different ways.

For lower-income black students, black movement discourse may serve as a tool for social emancipation. Black movement organizations like Educafro and PVNC, both founded by black activist Frei David, offer preparatory courses for “black and needy” students to pass the university entrance exam. Educafro also requires students to take “citizenship classes”, where they learn about black consciousness. Students who have attended these organizations often incorporate black consciousness discourse into a broader narrative that de-naturalizes class differences. Gustavo, who entered UERJ through racial quotas, explains what he learned regarding black consciousness from Educafro:

_Gustavo:_ Educafro helped me a lot, even in this quest for self-confidence, of accepting yourself as black. […] I accept myself, I even teach that the black should accept himself as black, should have an attitude toward his peer of self-recognition, of supporting each other and to take this message forward that you are capable, that you can. Because […] there is a tension in […] poor neighborhoods, you live your whole life
preparing to obey, to be the servant of your father’s boss. […] Then the poor youngster, the black youngster, not just the black youngster, but the poor youngster, he does not have this idea that he has the intellectual capacity to seek something bigger. […] That everyone has the conditions to seek, to be equal, given the opportunities, the black, the poor, the rich, they end up becoming equal.

Gustavo transforms black consciousness into a broader framework where being black and being poor are more or less equivalent. Although Gustavo “translates” black movement discourse, this adapted discourse does not leave his life intact. An organization created by black activists not only gave him practical help in preparing to apply for college, but also helped him articulate his struggle for a better life.

Re-emerging diversity discourses

Affirmative action has brought more people from different social classes and skin colors into UERJ. This exposed middle-class white students to classmates who not only looked different from themselves, but also lived in different neighborhoods, had different income, spoke differently and had different lifestyles. When asked what he thought of people in his class when he first came to UERJ, Eduardo, a white student who grew up in a small-town, middle-class environment, said that there were “ugly people, beautiful people, annoying, nice, all kinds of people.” To a follow-up question on whether he thought people in college were different from those he knew before, he said they were very different.

Eduardo: Because people that I knew before were people very similar [to each other]. . . the way they talked. Everyone from the same town, almost everyone with the same life chances, everyone middle-class, so even though there were little groups and so on in high school, there wasn’t such a brutal difference as there is in public universities.

Author 1: And this difference was in which regard?

Eduardo: Everything, cultural, for example, in [his hometown] everyone wanted. . . when there was a concert, everyone went, 70, 60%, here there are concerts all the time, and so there are people that go someplace, others go someplace else, so there is an enormous cultural difference. There are people who live
in Copacabana, [...], people who live in São João de Meriti. There it wasn’t like this, everyone lived in the same town, everyone lived in similar neighborhoods, right, middle-class neighborhoods. . .

Quotas exacerbated Eduardo’s experience of diversity, which is also related to his move to Rio and his enrollment in a public university. Several interviewees with relatively homogeneous backgrounds mentioned this experience of increased diversity. However, though students see several dimensions of diversity, those associated with socioeconomic differences are most salient in students’ discourses. When asked what she thinks about the quotas in general and how it has worked in UERJ specifically, Daniela responds:

Daniela: Look, I like the mixture of my class. I like the possibility of having as a friend a girl that never had to work in life, in order to be here today, and also have that one who works since he was a little kid. […] And I think that it was important, at least this is what I learned from a friend of mine who was a black movement militant, that people also recognize themselves in their different possibilities in life. […] She said that […] in the movement they explained to her that it was important that a little boy knew that he could be a doctor. That not all doctors are blond. That not every university professor is red-haired or . . . do you understand? Or was white, or indigenous, or whatever. [...] So that he could see. . . or at least so that there could be this perception that there is social mobility. That you can choose your profession. That you are not limited to a certain kind of activity.

Daniela learned about diversity from the black movement. However, she translates it to include people of lower socio-economic background.

Having become marginalized in the institutionalization of affirmative action at UERJ, diversity discourses re-emerge among students, allowing them to make sense of their experience of being in a new university environment, where affirmative action policies intensify the mixture of people who are different on both their physical appearance and on socioeconomic dimensions. Students often interpret these experiences as class diversity. This is different from how diversity is commonly viewed in the
United States, where social inequality is mostly ignored and racial differences are essentialized (Bell and Hartmann, 2007). Affirmative action has an impact on students’ discourse about race and inequality and the language of diversity helps to modify this discourse, but this transformation happens in previously unintended ways.

Conclusion

Affirmative action policies are often criticized as an American invention, based on the American racialized system. Critics argue that ideas like multiculturalism and diversity do not make sense in a miscigenated country like Brazil. Yet affirmative action is being implemented throughout the country, and though opposition is vocal, there seems to be a wide base of support, especially among lower-class people (see Bailey 2002; Guimarães 2007). Moreover, many people involved borrow terms from the global affirmative action debate, such as “diversity.” How is it possible?

One answer is that affirmative action has been translated into the local cultural repertoire. However, this translation was not inconsequential—these policies did affect people’s perceptions of reality. At least to people most involved with the institutions created by affirmative action, this institutionalization along with the opening up of opportunities for less mainstream discourses, have produced new experiences and a new language for framing those experiences. Interestingly, affirmative action brought discursive transformations that would not be predictable a priori.

Most administrators we talked to see affirmative action as a policy of inclusion and democratization of university access. They often translate an originally racially targeted policy into a socioeconomically targeted policy. Even when the racial component appears, it is mostly not as a cultural identity, but as an equivalent to a socioeconomic category. In doing so, they take a pro-affirmative action, but still relatively mainstream, stance. They do not question hegemonic Brazilian ideas about racial boundaries, and accept the relatively widespread view that Brazil is an unequal country and that the government has a role to play in reducing this inequality (Scalon 2004). A few administrators challenge this hegemonic discourse, emphasizing the right to difference and the specificity of race over class. Although radical in Brazil, their
discourse is still oriented toward the national context, since it aims to challenge Brazilian common-sense ideas.

With a few exceptions, the remedial justification has prevailed in the institutionalization of affirmative action (Tavolaro 2006; Silva 2006). As students experience this new institutional form, they rethink race, inequality, and diversity. Many reject the notion of racial diversity, but re-invent diversity to make it consistent with their national identity and their class perceptions. Experiencing class and racial diversity at the same time, students more easily acknowledge the class dimension, and talk about diversity in these terms. For upwardly mobile, often darker-skinned graduates of organizations like Educafro, black movement discourse fits well with their racialized class experience, and race consciousness becomes enmeshed with class-consciousness.

Some authors associate multicultural discourses and policies—especially in the developed world—with a rejection of the institutions and ideas of modernity. Some see it as a reflection of post-industrialism, or post-modernity, where ethnic identities and the right to ethnic difference supersede class-based struggles and where transnational ethnic movements challenge the boundaries of the nation-state (see Grillo 1998). Others, more cynical, see post-modern multicultural discourses as compatible with a new brand of neoliberalism that emphasizes celebrating diversity while relieving the nation-state from addressing deeper socioeconomic inequalities (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1999; Friedman 2000; Bonnet 2008). We have shown that discourses on affirmative action in Brazil are, on the whole, still very modern. The large size of the quotas and the emphasis on class-based criteria in public universities attest to a high acceptability of a strong role for government institutions in addressing socioeconomic inequality. The Brazil-specific nature of the debate attests to the continuing importance of the nation-state. The class-based criteria and discourses—even if mixed with racial ones—attest that post-modernity is not yet what drives Brazilian identity politics.

**Endnotes:**
There has been much academic discussion about what multiculturalism means, and how the meaning of the word varies across societies (see Grillo 1998). Our goal is to contribute to knowledge of this variation. Therefore, we start from the common view of multiculturalism in the international policy-oriented discourse as encompassing all policies targeted toward racialized/ethnicized categories regardless of whether their goal is 'cultural' or not.

In primary and secondary education, private schools are generally considered better than public schools. The opposite is true for higher education. This means that most students who go to the higher quality, private, expensive high schools then enroll in public, tuition-free universities.

For a discussion of the misunderstandings between students and policymakers regarding the meaning of UERJ's official categories, see Schwartzman (2009)

We use pseudonymns in order to protect the confidentiality of the interviewees.

Carla classifies herself as brown, but only since the quotas. Daniela says she is of 'mixed' background and refuses to define herself racially.

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