Civil Society and Race in Brazil: the role of NGOs and social movements in the translation of affirmative action policies

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In the U.S., the term affirmative action was used for the first time in 1935, in the National Labor Relations Act by which employers were forbidden to exert any type of repression over union members or leaders, and, still further, discrimination was prohibited with the use of affirmative action approved to enable victims to occupy positions they would normally have occupied if they had not suffered discrimination. In the 1960's, as reply to the Civil Rights Movement, Johnson’s Administration passed the 1964 Civil Rights Act that prohibited government agencies from discriminating against candidates because of race, religion and nationality; encouraged the use of affirmative action during recruitment of employees; and stimulated companies that hold government contracts to engage in affirmative action in order to guarantee equal opportunities to minorities and to the physically disabled, prohibiting any type of discrimination (Hodges-Aeberhard, 1999).

Other countries, such as the members of the European Union and South Africa, have also implemented affirmative action programs (Hodges-Aeberhard, 1999; Scott and Amos and Scott, 1998).

In order to understand contemporary Brazilian racial relations, it is necessary to examine the historical context within which the subject has been socially constructed during the last century (van Dijk, 1992).

After the abolition of slavery in 1888, the Brazilian economy was still largely agrarian – large latifundios (big farms), monoculture of coffee, cattle, or sugar – and politically characterized by clientelism. Wealth and political power were held in the hands of a few white landlords’ families. The need for agrarian workers, coupled with theories of scientific racism imported from Europe, led to a government-sponsored promotion of Brazil as a destination for millions of European immigrants as part of a concerted attempt to whiten (branquear) the Brazilian population. The ethos of whiteness (branqueamento) is one important way in which racial identity has been constructed as malleable in Brazil. Whitening refers both to “pseudoscientific theories” of the 19th century – completely rejected in the late 20th century - and to some sort of social beliefs that still endure. Those beliefs have been connected to the Brazilians tendency to identify with the lightest racial category permitted by their skin colour (Pagano, 2006). In the 1930s, the myth of racial democracy started to be shaped, along the advent of Brazil’s industrialization process, which called for profound political and economic transformations, in order to create a wave of modernization. To create an urban and modern Brazil, it was also necessary to create a strong State, capable of moulding its population in order to improve the quality of life, education, technical and professional training; to increase territorial occupation; and to stimulate linguistic and cultural unity and national identity (Oliveira, 2001). Thus, the Brazilian intellectual elite of the 1930’s believed that a feasible project to develop Brazil would only be successful with the acceptance of the multiracial characteristics of the Brazilian society, and introduced a picture of whites, blacks (Brazilian Afro descendents) and indians (native Brazilians) living harmoniously. However, the most curious aspect of this idea of racial democracy dwells in the fact that it is based on purely symbolic elements, being justifiable only by interpersonal relationships (affection, passivity, cordiality etc.) not by political aspects.

Although affirmative action initiatives towards the black population have been mobilizing the political agenda in Brazil after the democratization (1980s), real policies have started to be debated only in the middle of the 1990s.
Black social movements (from socialists to social-democrats), NGOs, government (in different jurisdictional realms) and international organizations (UNO, ILO) created a political atmosphere that pushed the need for affirmative action policies to be debated. Furthermore, even some policies were implemented, like the system of racial quotas to admit black students in public state universities and scholarships for minorities and underprivileged (ProUNI). In 2005, the Statute of Racial Equality (Estatuto da Igualdade Racial) - the most comprehensive set of affirmative action principles and norms to date - had a provisory approval by Brazilian Senate Commission. The Statute calls for increased racial quotas in the public service sector and the media, in addition to a vast array of non-quota based measures intended to counteract structural racism.

However, when affirmative action policies based on race started to be considered, and amplified, critics claimed they would be impossible to implement because of the ambiguity of the country's racial categories. “Who is black?” is the major consideration of critics of affirmative action policies. They affirm that affirmative action policies are adequate to the US or to South Africa realities because they had experienced a segregation system that had no similarity with the Brazilian context where race is not an issue of inequality as poverty is. Importing those policies, especially those supporting quotas system, would be a mistranslation of a strange policy to Brazil.

The objective of this paper is to analyse the different actors’ - social movements, NGOs, syndicates, political parties, governmental departments, politicians, academics - discursive strategies (van Dijk, 1992) involved in the creation and implementation of affirmative action policies in Brazil in the last 20 years. We conducted a discourse analysis using data gathered from documents, in-depth interviews and other qualitative material to understand the role of civil society – especially social movements and NGOs – in translating foreign mobilization strategies to push to racial agenda in Brazil towards pro-affirmative action policies.

References


