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II. 'Race', class and affirmative action in Brazil: Reflections from a feminist perspective

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Feminist research and post-colonial studies

There is a range of feminisms and developments in feminist theories in contemporary debates. Within these various debates on feminism (Burman, 2005; Oakley, 1998), black feminism (Mirza, 1992), Marxist feminism (Spivak, 1994), scholar feminism (Mohanty, 1994) and activist feminism (Zavos et al., 2005), a key component for a feminist reading is to consider the issue of power in research; likewise in postcolonial studies (Balibar, 1991, Gilroy, 2000). Hence feminist postcolonial perspectives that focus on structural power argue for the need to consider intersections between gender, class and 'race' (Chantler, 2007; Mohanty, 1994; Spivak, 1994). As Anthias and Yuval-Davis (1996: 17) point out, ethnic, gender and class divisions 'involve differential access to resources and processes of exclusion and inclusion'; each has its effects in different ways. There are a range of views of intersections between gender and 'race', in terms of politics and structures (Balibar, 1991) and the gender construction of nation (McClintock, 2004). In this article, we provide a reading which focuses on power relations (Foucault, 1998) in discourse (Parker,

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2003), using feminist research and post-colonial studies as theoretical frameworks, to look at some key social aspects in intersection.

This reading is utilized in order to deconstruct discourses on 'race' in affirmative actions in Brazil, pointing out ambiguities and impasses of such discourses. This article examines discourses on 'race' and class because 'affirmative action' discourses are the main focus of public debate on racial quotas. In statistical terms, gender has not been seen recently as a crucial differential in relation to access to higher education (Censo da Educação Superior, 2007); however it is still important to consider gender dynamics, for example in relation to access to jobs.

The debate around 'race' and racism is rather complex in the Brazilian context where a mixed population is predominant and unevenly distributed economically, and where the dynamics of racism vary according to regions, all of which are also strongly connected with class. It is within this context that this article offers a critical reading of some practices of affirmative action policies by arguing that 'white' or 'black' is defined by/in encounters with 'Others' and that class, in Brazil, is a key component in the definition of *color*. At no point do we argue against the political importance of racial quotas but, rather, we highlight some paradoxes of the implementation of quotas and the need to adapt policies locally.

A historical contextualization is crucial for an analysis of the complexities of 'race' and racism in contemporary Brazilian politics as articulated in this article. Ideas about 'race' were configured in Brazil embedded in the encounter with the 'Other' – an encounter that produced both 'them' and 'us'. In this sense, the notion of fetishism, particularly the role of fetish in the construction of the 'other', will also be utilized in this article (McClintock, 1995).

In our analysis, feminist research and post-colonial studies are used because of their emphasis on power relations (Burman, 2008; Chantler, 2007; Harding, 1986) and on the need to historically and socially contextualize power struggles (Haraway, 1996). We argue that social policies should not be imported into a regional context wholesale, but rather in dialogue with and emerging from local needs. At this point, Badiou's claim that there are no ethics in general, but rather 'ethical processes by which we treat the possibilities of a situation' (2001: 16) fits well with the discussion put forward.

'Race', together with gender and class, are understood as performative (Butler, 1997). They are not fixed terms, but are produced and reproduced within specific historical, social and political locations (Ahmed, 2000). However, it is on the historical discursive fixity of specific terms that dynamics of racism are (re)enacted. As Balibar's (1991: 17) posits regarding racism:

> A true 'total social phenomenon' – inscribes itself in practices (forms of violence, contempt, intolerance, humiliation and exploitation), in discourses and representations which are so many intellectual elaborations of the phantasm of prophylaxis or segregation (the need to purify the social body, to preserve 'one's own' or 'our' identity from all forms of mixing, interbreeding or invasion) and which are articulated around stigmata of otherness (name, skin color, religious practices).

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It is within this framework, of reiteration of specific discourses on racism in an ever-changing context, that affirmative action policies based on race will be analyzed. It is a challenge to provide a reading, based on feminist theory and post-colonial ideas, to a *de facto* post-colonial territory where hybridity, not understood as a new liberal concept (Ahmed, 2000), is actually in place, while racism operates in diverse ways. Thus this analysis will draw on a multi-disciplinary perspective and Brazilian studies on 'race', while providing a feminist analysis for the phenomenon of racial quotas.

Brazilian context

In Brazil, in a period that started during colonial times, racial mixture was considered a problem for the future of the nation. Under the gaze of the dominant biological racism and up until the beginning of the 20th century, racial mixture was condemned as the cause of the degeneration of the country, distancing it from its 'natural' vocation as a European, civilized country (Schwarcz, 1993). The 'solution' was a policy of 'whitening and Europeanization', centered on the promotion of immigration from Europe. Immigrants arriving in Brazil symbolized the evolution of the country towards a more industrial economy, given that they were seen as more easily adaptable to waged labor than the ex-slave population (Seyferth, 1996). Crucially, European immigrants also embodied the desire for physical whitening, a desire that, alongside the ideal of modernization, remains present throughout Brazilian history (Skidmore, 1999).

McClintock's (1995) debate on fetishism and colonial times provides some insights into this dynamic. McClintock analyses how the fetishized 'other' in colonial times functioned for the definition of Enlightenment: 'The fetish-lands of Africa embodied a necessary universe of errors against which the Enlightenment could measure its stately progress: errors of logic, of analytical reasoning, of aesthetic judgment, of economic progress and of political legitimacy' (1995: 187). Fetishism here can be seen as related to conflicts of 'cultural' values whereby Europeans could frame what was not familiar, according what was different a negative value, and thus representing the colonial world as deviant, undervalued and negated. In this way, by defining the 'other', Europeans could also define what it was to be European and a modern civilization: modern, civilized and striving towards progress. In this way, fetishism provided space for the Enlightenment, creating the boundaries for 'us' and 'them'. This colonial dynamic can be seen in this period in the Brazilian context.

The phenotypical reality of Brazil's population was far from meeting the 'whiteness' aimed for. From the 1930s onwards, the acknowledgement of this fact, as well as its 'celebration', formed the basis of the works of sociologist and pioneer of 'culturalism' in Brazil, Gilberto Freyre (1957). His work exalted the alleged harmonious relations between different 'races' in Brazil, coining the term 'racial democracy' and pointed towards miscegenation (between Europeans, Africans and indigenous people), and the 'mulatto' figure as the true characteristic of Brazil and of Brazilians. From that period onwards, the Project for the Nation exalted

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mixture as the core of Brazilianness represented by the cordial and flexible Brazilian character. Nonetheless, some authors have pointed out that underneath the Freyrean project still lurks the ideology of whitening.[1]

The 'mulatto' figure became central in the debates on the nature of Brazilian race relations. Bearing in mind that Brazilian racial classification is based around 'appearance' and not ancestry (Nogueira, 1955), the system allowed for the maintenance of the ideology of white superiority while at the same time accepting the social ascension of 'mulattos' through their 'whitening', for instance by marrying lighter partners or through their association with jobs and activities considered as 'white'.

This 'whitening' of the 'mulattos' – a category referred to by the State in its censuses as *pardo* (brown) but popularly referred to as *moreno* amongst a wealth of other terms – has come under attack by academics and black movement activists. Since the 1990s, and coinciding with a resurgence of 'race' as a category for understanding inequality in Brazil,[2] both governmental institutions[3] and black movement activists have encouraged 'non-whites' to identify racially[4] as *negros* ('Blacks'). The argument behind this reasoning is that the category 'mulatto' (or its native terms), serves only to mask the racism that 'non-whites' suffer. However, some authors have pointed out that a black-white identificatory system excludes other categories such as 'indigenous', 'yellow' or 'mixed', subsuming them under the single *negro* label (Costa, 2002: 49). Another criticism leveled at this system is that it presumes the existence of racial identities based on 'biological' realities, denying the historical specificities of 'racial' systems as well as the right of self-definition outside of these 'branco-negro' models (Fry, 2000).

This possibility of describing Brazilian society as racially divided into *brancos* and *negros* is also at the base of some affirmative action programs aimed at reducing racial inequalities, such as those implemented in entrance exams for some public universities established since the beginning of the new millennium. However, the ambiguity surrounding the category *negro* in Brazil, used both in everyday life to refer to those with very dark skin and other external phenotypical markers of African ancestry, as well as a growing but not unanimous acceptance of the category to designate those with *any* degree of (visible) African ancestry (through features socially acknowledged to denote this ancestry, such as dark skin, kinky hair and wide nose and lips), adds to the complexity of the use of racial categories in Brazil.[5] At the same time, public exposure to affirmative action programs through discussions in the media can also help to reconfigure the use of racial terms in wider Brazilian society as well as, in some cases, to naturalize and dichotomize racial categories.

Affirmative action programs

Even though most of the affirmative action programs in Brazilian universities combine racial and class criteria (by selecting candidates who come from within the state education system or who have a low family income), the issue of its racial

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component has been hotly debated in the Brazilian media,[6] particularly around how to identify *negros* and *brancos* in a vastly miscigenated society.

For example, in June 2007 a 'scandal' arose over a pair of monozygotic twins, who described themselves racially as *pardo*, but who were considered to be of different 'racial' categories (one was considered to be *negro*, the other wasn't) for the affirmative action quota of the prestigious University of Brasilia (UnB). This institution uses the analysis of a candidate's photograph to decide who is eligible for the racial quota. The controversy around whether the beneficiaries of affirmative action policies should be defined on racial self-description or through third-party identification (as in the case of the UnB) has been at the centre of lively debates in Brazilian media and academic circles (Chor Maio and Ventura Santos, 2005). While some authors argue for the unalienable right of racial self-description, others, such as anthropologist Peter Fry (2006), argue that victims of racism are discriminated against on the basis of outward appearance, not on their racial self-description. Therefore it is more logical to choose the beneficiaries of these policies on the basis of their looks than their feelings of belonging.

This illustrates the difficulty of using dichotomic racial categories in Brazil, highlighting the social and historical performatic character of 'race'. The use of techniques to identify someone as 'black' by resorting to discourses on ancestry, culture and phenotype and, in some cases such as the UnB, to the analysis of photographs, can reinforce and (re)produce the idea of 'natural' racial classifications. Thus, while racism is not seen as having been overcome here, the fixity of discourses on biological heritage is paradoxically reiterated in these official classifications. Papadopoulos and Sharma (2008: 4) posit some key ideas about overcoming race through skin:

> Questioning the biological reductionism of race gives rise to post-race fantasies and the possibility of 'race overcoming' as Paul Gilroy puts it. While this position seems to be important for a vision which points beyond the tyranny of race it can neglect that racial exclusion is sustained not because it has a biological existence, but because it is literally made to have one (consider genetic screening, new databases which classify populations, genetic kinship and ancestry etc.).

One of the more contested issues in the debates on affirmative action in Brazil was the exclusion of the 'white poor', as well as indigenous people in most of these programs. It is important to mention that self-identification as 'white', as is the case with racial identity in Brazil in general, is based on the reading of external phenotypical characteristics that are permeated by class and regional differences.

Hence, the point we raise is that racial categories of 'black' and 'white' are reified by the eligibility for racial quotas as one is either eligible and therefore 'black' or one isn't and is therefore 'white', not accounting for other possibilities of identification and regional social differences. Although we acknowledge the symbolic and political importance of racial quotas in the discussion of racism in Brazil, we also argue that the way some of them are implemented can paradoxically reinforce racialist discourses, while at the same time erasing or obscuring the articulation between race and class within local specificities in the reproduction of inequalities.

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Conclusion

The ambiguity of color in Brazil, and the distribution of self-identified indigenous, *preto*, *pardo*, yellow and white populations within geographic regions are key to understanding how race and class overlap and how constructions of 'black' and 'white' categories are formed within historical and social contexts. The performativity (Butler, 1997) of race and the social construction of color (Ahmed 2000; Burman 2008; Chantler 2007; McClintock 1995) were highlighted in this article.

Furthermore, class should be seen in its symbolic dimension, as Jesse de Souza (2006) aptly sums up when he invokes Bourdieu's notion of 'social capital' to explain why Brazilian inequalities are reproduced over generations. De Souza argues that the incorporated and embodied *habitus* required by market is unevenly distributed throughout Brazilian society, condemning certain sectors to a position of exclusion. Following Bourdieu:

> Thus the task of legitimating the established order does not fall exclusively to the mechanisms traditionally regarded as belonging to the order of ideology, such as law. The system of symbolic goods production and the system producing the producers fulfill in addition, i.e. by the very logic of their normal functioning, ideological functions, by virtue of the fact that the mechanisms through which they contribute to the reproduction of the established order and to the perpetuation of domination remain hidden. (2000: 188)

In this article, we have highlighted the paradoxes of affirmative action based on race in Brazil and the need for a criterion that privileges class, or more broadly social capital and its symbolic dimensions, including 'race', gender, age, sexuality and other possible excluding parameters, as well as local and regional specificities. Finally, we provided a reading which drew on feminist research and theory and postcolonial studies focusing on power imbalance in relationships, transcending essentialist readings of gender, 'race', class, sexuality and with an emphasis on the historical and political contexts for the specificities of the situations.

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Notes

1. According to Guimarães 'racial democracy' came to signify the:

> ''ability of the Brazilian nation (defined as an extension of European civilisation in which a new race was emerging) to absorb and integrate blacks and mulattos. This ability implied, in a tacit way, the compliance of coloureds in rejecting their African or Indigenous ancestry. 'Whitening' and 'racial democracy', are, therefore, two concepts of a new racialist discourse' (1999: 53; our translation).''

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2. For example through the use of statistics to show the racialised nature of inequalities in Brazil (Hasenbalg, 1979; Hasenbalg and Silva, 1988).
3. For example through encouraging state school teachers to promote the model of identification in which anyone with (visible) African ancestry is considered *negro* (Baran, 2007).
4. In Brazil, the census categories for colour/race are five: *branco* (white), *preto* (black, referring to a very dark complexion and African features such as wide nose and lips), *pardo* (brown, category that includes from dark to light brown), *amarelo* (yellow) and *indígena* (indigenous). Notice that the term *negro* isn't a census one, although it is often used in statistical terms to denote the fusion of the *preto* and *pardo* categories. Throughout the text we use the native terms *negro* and *preto*, given that the distinction between these categories is impossible to convey with the single English term *black*.
5. In spite of being pushed as an umbrella category for all people of African descent, in *emic* terms *negro* is commonly used interchangeably for *preto*, that is, the category used to designate people of very dark complexion. There is, in fact, a common expression that says 'preto é cor, negro é gente' ('preto is for colour, negro is for people'). As such, it is not completely clear, when one talks of a person being *negro* in Brazil, whether they are referring to the wider or the more restricted meaning of the term.
6. For instance http://g1.globo.com/Noticias/Vestibular/0,,MUL43786-5604-619,00.html (accessed 14 May 2008).

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