Racial Quotas and the Culture War in Brazilian Academia

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Abstract

Dozens of Brazilian universities recently adopted racial quotas for negros, read Afro-Brazilians, in higher education. Anyone familiar with the Brazilian context will recognize this step as a paradigm shift in the state’s approach to ‘race’. State discourse in past decades touted a mixed-race population not beset by overt discriminatory practices. In response to this new approach, two well-defined clusters of professors in Brazil’s universities authored several dueling manifestos supporting and opposing race-based affirmative action. This article suggests a ‘culture war’ framing of the debate and delineates the contrasting historic ideologies of racialism and antiracialism that inform the divergent racial worldviews of each academic camp. It then explores four points of contention from the manifestos that characterize their conflicting perspectives. They differ in terms of (1) their images of the Brazilian nation, (2) their diagnoses of the mechanisms behind non-white underrepresentation in Brazilian universities, (3) their prognoses for a remedy via racial quotas, and (4) their motivations for entering the debate. At the same time, the article locates some possible common ground.

Dozens of public universities in Brazil have recently adopted racial quotas to increase the presence of negros, read Afro-Brazilians, in higher education. Moreover, the Brazilian national congress is considering legislating racial quotas in the country’s federal universities. Anyone familiar with the Brazilian context will recognize these steps as uncharacteristic. Race-based policies directed at its citizens have been absent in post-abolition Brazil in terms of both negative and positive discrimination, much unlike post-abolition United States (Bailey 2009; Telles 2004). State-level discourse in past decades touted a mixed population not beset by the types of discriminatory practices that would illicit race-based intervention. Hence, new affirmative action policies place ‘race’ center stage in a society previously reticent to officially engage it. Some applaud this ‘progression’; others lament this ‘regression’.

In fact, the opposing views on Brazil’s new race-targeted policies are well-defined and locked in a bitter battle reminiscent of ‘culture wars’ (DiMaggio 2003; Hunter 1991). These are ‘conflicts over issues that are rooted in non-negotiable conceptions of cultural and moral order’ (Mouw and Sobel 2001, p. 915) and are typified by a lack of common ground between sides. In the United States, the culture war concept has been employed to understand the struggle between conservative evangelicals and liberals, and over such issues as abortion, gay rights, feminism, among others. The tenacity of the US culture war did not reside, however, in single policy issues, but involved greater stakes such as the country’s self-image and culture.

Evidence of culture wars might typically entail dramatic splits in public opinion or perhaps even the possibility of violence between factions (DiMaggio 2003; Mouw and Sobel 2001). In contrast, in Brazil, the warring sides are not numerous population segments, but two clusters sharing space in Brazil’s universities – its professors. These pro- and anti-quota intellectuals view the issues surrounding the relationship between inequality in
higher education and color in seemingly incompatible ways. Despite being academic colleagues, the divisions are intense and surprisingly indecorous, each group exchanging biting accusations. Pro-quota intellectuals, for example, compare anti-quota colleagues to anti-abolitionists; the anti-quota side likens supporters of the race-targeted approach to scientific racism thinkers of centuries past.

In this article we attempt to clarify the opposing perspectives in this academic clash in Brazil. We offer a unique view by exploring four dueling ‘manifestos’ sent to the Brazilian National Congress in 2006 and to the Brazilian Supreme Court in 2008 in support of the divergent positions. Some of Brazil’s most prominent professors are their signatories. These documents lay out clearly the disagreements, and we identify four core points of contention. The sides are divided on: (1) how they imagine the Brazilian nation, (2) their diagnoses of the ills of the Brazilian educational system, (3) their prognoses of the effect of racial quotas in higher education, and (4) what most profoundly motivates their militancy on this issue. We also explore whether these documents reveal any possible points of agreement.

Framing the debate: racialism and antiracialism

Each side in the debate embraces very different racial worldviews developed much earlier in the history of racial thought in Brazil that underlie their positions on race-targeted policy. Researchers describe these contrasting ideologies as racialism and antiracialism (Bailey 2002, 2009; Guimarães 1999, 2001). Racialism traditionally referenced 19th century scientific racism purporting that humans belong to biologically distinct and hierarchically ranked ‘races’ (Nobles 2000; Skidmore 1974). Race science of the time was particularly interested in the African or Negro race, and it was in the US context that the hallmark of racialism emerged: the rule of hypodescent (Bailey 2009). According to this rule, racial mixing was a degenerative act, and one drop of ‘negro blood’ was enough to disqualify an individual from coveted whiteness (Davis 1991). For most of 20th century, mixing with Africans and their descendents in the United States did not create individuals of ‘mixed race’; the power of the race construct meant that mixing merely created more of the inferior black race.

Beyond the United States, racialism also reverberated in Brazil. Its greatest influence there may have been in the reaction it prompted by some intellectual elite during the first half of the 20th century in the form of a counter-ideology, antiracialism, aimed at discrediting the very concept of race (Guimarães 1999, 2001). The impetus behind this reaction was in large part the desire to reposition Brazil as an emerging modern nation. If the tenets of racialism were true, Brazil was doomed to a low status because of its large contingent of non-whites and its social habit of racial mixing. Instead, antiracialism touted Brazil as a miscegenated nation, a fusion of races; racial mixing created hybrid vigor, was never outlawed, and foretold a bright future for Brazil. Importantly, the rejection of racialism was also a rejection of US social dynamics characterized for much of the 20th century by Jim Crow discrimination.

Social scientists adopting an antiracist frame focused on social class, not race, as the most important social cleavage in Brazil (Freyre 1959; Wagley 1952). These researchers treated color as a demographic not synonymous with race, but as one determinant among others of an individual’s overall class status. They did recognize the disadvantage that possessing darker skin entailed; however, that disadvantage was clearly secondary. In addition, they noted the lack of social group formation along racial lines, another welcome contrast to the racially segregated United States (Harris 1964).
There was certainly something different about Brazil in stark contrast to the United States in the first two-thirds of the 20th century (Degler 1971). However, there were also similarities that, although downplayed during the reign of antiracialism as a national ideology, came to the forefront in the ending decades of that century. In the waning years of Brazil’s last period of military rule (1964–1985), black movement actors began challenging the antiracist view that Brazil had significantly moved beyond race and racism. Moreover, some social scientists began providing heretofore absent quantitative evidence of chronic racial inequality (Hasenbalg 1985; Silva 1985).

The result was a growing rejection of antiracialism in some intellectual circles. Moreover, the data suggested that discrimination worked along white vs. non-white lines (e.g., Silva 1985), thereby supporting a discourse on the centrality of race in white and black. In that antiracialism had discredited the race concept as a lens for understanding social dynamics in Brazil, much of the last two decades of the 20th century was spent denouncing antiracism as an ‘oppressive ideology’ associated by its detractors with the myth of racial democracy (Guimarães 2001, p. 159; Hanchard 1994). Brazilian society needed to ‘recuperate the race concept’, was in need of a ‘racialist turn’ (Guimarães 2001; Oliveira et al. 1983). This contemporary racialism, though, was not the biological type of old, but one recognizing race as a social construct and central to the antiracism struggle.

The first decade of the 21st century has witnessed a transformation of the country’s racial worldview in much elite discourse, but, perhaps more importantly, in terms of the state (Peria 2004). As we lay out in the next section, the Brazilian state has clearly abandoned antiracist discourse and adopted a race-centered lens (Daniel 2006). That lens echoes strongly for the social scientists supporting quotas and is strongly repudiated by those opposing a race-centered turn.

Background

According to the 2000 census, Brazil is 54 percent white (branco), 39 percent brown (pardo), 6 percent black (preto), and 1 percent Asian/Indigenous. Also in 2000, 82.8 percent of the people holding advanced degrees in Brazil were white (IBGE 2000). Everyone recognizes there exists a dramatic underrepresentation of non-whites in Brazilian universities. In 2006, for example, one in five white students of college age was attending university, while among browns and blacks, in this same age group, 93.7 percent were not in the university (Paixão and Carvano 2008).

In response to non-white underrepresentation, several public universities began implementing racial quotas through their highly competitive vestibular entrance exams. Unlike the university system in the United States, where students submit several evaluative items, including standarized entrance exam scores, high school transcripts, and personal essays, applicants to Brazil’s public universities choose their careers upfront, register to take the vestibular in that area and are admitted based solely on the outcome of the exam. Access to these public university programs is hotly contested. Top programs of study at some of the elite federal universities may accept as few as 10 percent of applicants (World Bank 2002).

The first vestibular system to employ racial quotas was in 2001 at the State Universities of Rio de Janeiro where 40 percent of openings were reserved for non-whites. In 2003 the University of Brasília became the first federal university to adopt a system of quotas for negros (20 percent) in its vestibular competition. (The term negro, which is akin to the United States ‘black’ classification, folds into one racial group individuals of both the brown and black census color categories [Nascimento and Nascimento 2001]). Then, in 2005, in order to open up spots for low-income students in Brazil’s private universities,
which account for 85 percent of the country’s university population, the federal government began giving tax incentives to private institutions to provide scholarships for needy students (principally, students from households whose incomes do not exceed three times the minimum wage per person [ProUni 2010]) through its ProUni program (Ceaser 2005). Importantly, browns and blacks have to be included among scholarship recipients in numbers mirroring their presence in local populations. Of the country’s 1442 private institutions in 2005, 1142 were participating in the ProUni incentive plan. Of the 224 public institutions in Brazil, all of which are tuition-free, 38 have adopted some type of affirmative action for non-white candidates (Jaccoud 2008).

Most recently, the National Congress is debating proposed legislation that would create a substantial quota in the country’s federal university system for students who attended public high schools, and within this percentage, a ‘sub quota’ for non-whites. In fact, many quota initiatives combine ‘social quotas’ for low-income students from the public basic education system with racial quotas.

Manifestos

In response to affirmative action initiatives and lawsuits questioning their constitutionality, in 2006 the two opposing groups of professors drafted manifestos and sent them to the National Congress. The first of these, All have Equal Rights in a Democratic Republic (Anti-quota 2006), took a stance against racial quotas, and the second, Manifesto in Favor of the Quotas Law and the Racial Equality Statute (Pro-quota 2006), argued in favor of the measures. Then, in 2008, two new manifestos were sent to the country’s highest court: One-Hundred and Thirteen Anti-racist Citizens against Racial Laws (Anti-quota 2008), and later that year, 120 Years of Struggle for Racial Equality in Brazil: a Manifesto for the Justice and Constitutionality of Quotas (Pro-quota 2008). The argumentation and deep-seated polarization of the two sides can be clearly gleaned from these manifestos, as we lay out in four points of contention. Not only do these points highlight diverging policy positions, but also clashing views regarding the Brazilian nation, its culture, and the very nature of human diversity.

A Nation’s image: fusion of races versus clash of races

On one level, the debate concerning quotas is about Brazilian national identity. Radically different views of the country are put forth by each side.

Fusion of races Anti-quota intellectuals point to the principles and practice of miscegenation, or racial mixing, as a basis for Brazilian national identity. For this group, these foundational ideas, formative of a large part of Brazil’s culture, have profoundly influenced Brazilian social relations in very positive ways. Miscegenation has meant that in Brazil ‘interracial marriages are not uncommon and residential segregation is a phenomenon basically tied to income, not skin color’ (Anti-quota 2008, p. 11). ‘Brazilians’, they write, ‘tend to erase “racial” boundaries, as much in the practice of racial mixing as in their conceptualization of identity…’ (p. 11). For example, about 40 percent of Brazilians self-classified as mixed race in the 2000 census; in stark contrast, <3 percent of Americans in 2000 self-classified as of more than one race (Farley 2002).

As they unfurl their argument, anti-quota scholars point to other ways Brazil is manifestly different from the United States. ‘After abolition’, they write, ‘in the place of the “one-drop rule” [the rule of hypodescent], the Brazilian nation developed an identity
based on the antiracist idea of miscegenation and created laws that criminalized racism’ (Anti-quotas 2008, pp. 10–1). For these scholars, the United States stands as an exemplar of what Brazil is not: a republic with a history of legalized segregation and clear divisions in black and white based on hypodescent. Moreover, they describe the United States as a country plagued by overt racism and division, whereas Brazil ‘hasn’t had organized racist movements or significant expressions of racial hatred. Racial prejudice, repressed, hides itself in shameful oblique expressions, afraid to show itself’ (Anti-quotas 2008, p. 11).

For these scholars, it is the idea and practice of miscegenation, coupled with the country’s tradition since abolition ‘of denying support for racial laws’ (Anti-quotas 2008, p. 2), that can help explain the particular type of less virulent racism that exists in that country. They ask legislators and the court to consider these facts not as ‘proof of our failed history’, but as evidence that ‘there is something very positive about Brazilian national identity’ (Anti-quotas 2008, p. 11).

Clash of races In contrast to the characterization of Brazil as a largely tolerant, mixed society, pro-quotas scholars describe a nation of racial groups in conflict. They do not discuss a brown category or racial mixing; instead, their view of Brazil depicts a country of whites, negros, and Indigenous governed by a state with a long and continuing racist legacy.

From slavery forward, they argue, Brazil has been a racist country. ‘After the installation of the Republic’, they write, ‘the negra community was simply abandoned by the state as though it owed them no debt’ (Pro-quotas 2008, p. 5). These scholars describe an earlier state project which involved the construction of ‘a Brazilian people’ through ‘whitening’, including the ‘[transfer] of state resources for the promotion of immigration policy based on clearly racist criteria’ (p. 5). In their view, the state’s policies of promotion of European immigration, informed by ideologies of whitening, amounted to nothing less than ‘practices of extermination’, as some elites predicted ‘the end of the negra population’ and ‘final predominance of “white blood”’ (p. 5).

From this perspective, the nation’s slave past – ‘Brazil, we remind you, was the country that enslaved the most Africans and was the last country to abolish slavery’ (Pro-quotas 2008, p. 36) – has continued to mark the present such that ‘inequalities caused by three centuries of slavery’ (Pro-quotas 2006, p. 8) reverberate in the exclusion of negros from higher education, effectively barring them from exercising full citizenship. If nothing is done, they argue, ‘we will continue reproducing the cycle of deep racial inequality that has been the mark of the entire history of the republic to the present’ (p. 8). Brazil is largely defined, then, by oppressive race relations and racism.

Diagnosis: class versus race discrimination

Beyond the divergent images of the Brazilian nation, anti- and pro-quotas scholars point to very different causal mechanisms behind non-white underrepresentation in higher education.

Class discrimination Anti-quotas intellectuals do not deny the existence of racism in Brazil. In their 2008 manifesto to Brazil’s highest court, they write: ‘Brazilian society is not free of the open sore of racism, something that is evident in the daily lives of people with darker skin tone, especially among low-income youth’ (Anti-quotas 2008, p. 10). However, these scholars are not convinced that racial discrimination is the proximate motor behind the failure of Brazil’s universities in terms of color inclusivity. They point to the vestibular system detailed above to explain:
Vestibular exams, by which one gains entrance to elite institutions of higher learning “according to each person’s ability”, do not promote inequalities per se, but take place on terrain already seeded with pre-existing social inequalities (Anti-quota 2008, p. 3).

Those existent social inequalities, which are extreme in Brazil, affect all sectors, leading these scholars to the conclusion that ‘poverty in Brazil comes in all colors’ (Anti-quota 2008, p. 3). Indeed, they offer statistics to illustrate their point:

[In] 2006, of the 43 million people between 18 to 30 years of age, 12.9 million had a per capita household income of one-half the minimum salary or less. Among people in this poorest group, 30 percent self-classified as “whites”, 9 percent as “blacks”, and 60 percent as “browns”. Out of these 12.9 million, only 21 percent of the “whites” and 16 percent of the “blacks” and “browns” had completed high school, but very few of any color continued studying beyond that (Anti-quota 2008, p. 3).

Armed with these data, the anti-quotas group makes their most conclusive statement about the causes of non-white exclusion from higher education in Brazil: ‘Basically, it is differences in income, with everything that comes associated with those, and not color, that limit access to higher education’ (Anti-quota 2008, p. 3). Social inequality may be correlated with color lines, but racial discrimination is not its principal cause.

Race discrimination Scholars supporting racial quotas are also cognizant of generalized social inequality in Brazil that a large majority of the citizenry suffers. In fact, they do not oppose the other type of quota system that many universities have adopted, the so-called ‘social quotas’ for students from the public school system, many of them ‘low-income whites’. Nonetheless, their historical reading leads them far from a focus on class discrimination. Rather, they point directly to racial conflict between negros and whites as the mechanism behind negro exclusion:

We, defenders of public policies for the negra community, insist that Brazilian racism is the historic result of discrimination from whites against people of African phenotype. It was this negative social representation that influenced the exclusion of negros from higher education, and thus we advocate the use of compensatory public policies for the people that are victims of this same representation (Pro-quota 2008, p. 32).

The discrimination they point to clearly has historical roots beginning in the earliest days of colonialism and slavery. After abolition, however, the Brazilian government’s discriminatory practices continued to fuel race-based discrimination into the present:

If a negra person is the victim of racism and if we have a past of 350 years of slavery, it is more than legitimate to try to eliminate the work of slavery, which is the discrimination suffered until today by those that carry the physical appearance of enslaved Africans (Pro-quota 2008, p. 36).

So the inter-racial conflict that began in slavery continues. ‘[W]hiteness confers advantage in Brazilian life’ (Pro-quota 2008, p. 37), and that advantage is echoed in its universities.

The pro-quota scholars do not present statistics to evidence negro student underrepresentation. This, of course, is recognized by all. Rather, they state:

The perspective, therefore, is to continue to advance toward an academic year where the proportion of negro students in our public universities is equivalent to their percentage in the Brazilian population (Pro-quota 2008, p. 45–6).

It is clear to all that Brazil is far from that goal.
Prognosis: no reduction versus dramatic reduction in inequality

Just as the two sides strongly disagree on the mechanisms of underrepresentation, they are also sharply divided on the efficacy of quotas as a remedy. The fact that quotas have been in place in some universities since 2001 allows some evaluation of their effects.

No reduction Anti-quota intellectuals strongly disagree that quotas for negro students actually reduce inequalities. Instead, they highlight what they consider to be the dangers of this public policy:

Presented as a way to reduce social inequalities, racial quotas do not contribute to this, they conceal a tragic reality and divert attention away from immense challenges and urgent issues, social and educational, that confront the nation (Anti-quota 2008, p. 3).

The central tragic reality to which they refer is the disastrous public basic education system in Brazil that is the real cultivator of inequalities.

Moreover, racial quotas simply cannot meet the challenge of reducing social inequality in an inadequately funded public higher education system of limited reach. They draw on statistics to illustrate this point:

The 2006 National Household Survey (PNAD) reports that 9.41 million students attended high school, but only 5.87 million were enrolled in higher education. Of these, only a minority, 1.44 million, were attending public institutions of higher education. The racial quota laws do not change this picture at all and do not result in social inclusion (Anti-quota 2008, p. 4).

These scholars also highlight the capacity of quota policies to create new inequalities where none had previously existed. Taking the case of quota initiatives that combine social and racial quotas, they write:

Racial quotas embedded in quotas for candidates from public schools…separate students from families with similar income levels into two polar racial groups, generating a natural inequality in an environment characterized by social equality. The foreseen result is to offer privileges for candidates arbitrarily defined as negros that attended better quality public schools, to the detriment of their fellow students defined as white and to all of the students from lower-quality public schools (Anti-quota 2008, p. 4).

Thus, while quotas may appear to be a strategy to reduce inequalities, they do not produce that outcome. Instead, quotas create new inequalities; ‘they select “winners” and “losers” on the basis of criteria that is highly subjective and intrinsically unjust’ (p. 4) at the same time that they do nothing to address the problems of a public education system in dire need of state investment.

Dramatic reduction The scholars that support racial quotas argue that these measures have produced the desired outcome: inclusion of more negros in higher education, and as a result, a reduction in racial inequality. This positive evaluation is made clear on the first page of their 2008 manifesto:

The latest evaluations demonstrate, without the shadow of a doubt, that in only the last five years there have been enrollment increases for negro students in higher education greater than was reached in all of the twentieth century (Pro-quota 2008, p. 1).

Statistics for the public and private university quota programs are offered to further highlight the success of the quota programs in bringing more negro students into higher
education: ‘Currently, the country has more than 20 thousand negro quota beneficiaries attending college in Brazilian universities across all regions’ (Pro-quotas 2008, p. 21). Pro-Uni, the country’s federally funded quota program for private universities, is similarly lauded with reducing racial inequality:

Parallel to this enormous movement of racial inclusion in the public universities, since 2005 ProUni has been opening the doors of [private] universities for low income youth, with a percentage of negros among them...In only three years ProUni has already allocated 440,000 grants and has more that 380,000 students [including 171,660 browns and blacks] (p. 21).

Predictions for the future are equally optimistic. Both the nationwide quota program for private universities, ProUni, and the quota programs in public universities are expected to have a significant impact on inequality. In their words:

If we combine the two movements creating space in higher education for low income whites and non-whites, in only five years quotas in public universities and ProUni will be able to place almost a half-million negro students who will then enter into the workforce or post-graduate education (Pro-quota 2008, p. 22).

Hence, in the view of these scholars, quotas can be expected to continue to usher in dramatic social change in the university system and the job market ‘without parallel in the history of Brazilian society’ (p. 22).

Motivations: racialization versus reparations

Lastly, we address the points that appear to be core to the opposition to racial quotas and the principal impetus behind those supporting them.

Racialization Those scholars opposing racial quotas write that it is not affirmative action in general that they reject:

What motivates us is not a fight against the doctrine of affirmative action when understood as an attempt to realize [the ideas of] the Preamble Declarations of the Constitution, thereby contributing to the reduction of social inequalities... (Anti-quota 2008, p. 5).

Instead, what does motivate their opposition is the ‘manipulation of this doctrine with the intention of racializing the social life of the country’ (p. 5). That is, they believe that racial quotas will result in the ‘making of official races’ (Anti-quota 2008, p. 14) in negro and white.

A conceptual distinction that is central to these scholars is between color and race. They do not voice opposition, for example, to the decennial census’ recording the color composition of the population. In their view, those color categories, which include an intermediate term, ‘allow for the embrace of miscegenation’ (Anti-quota 2008, p. 8). In contrast, they write that ‘[r]acial laws in Brazil are something very different’ (pp. 8–9). These laws...

... propose to affix “a label that an individual is impotent to change” and, in the case of quotas in vestibular exams, nominally associate each young candidate to one of two polar “racial” categories, imposing upon them an unchangeable [irrecomível] official identity (Anti-quota 2008, p. 9).

This bipolar race construct rests on the ‘negation of biological and cultural mixing’ (Anti-quota 2008, p. 7) realized through collapsing the brown and black categories into a
singular negro race classification. According to these scholars, the passage from color to race is made possible through ‘drink[ing] from the poisoned fountain of the “one-drop rule”’ where ‘on the basis of their skin-tone’, an individual receives an official black/white race status (p. 7). They write, ‘History has already painfully condemned these attempts’ (Anti-quota 2006, p. 1). In this way the vestibular system becomes a race-making mechanism. It forces individuals to forego their own views of their position along a color continuum, thereby resulting in the ‘invalidation of the principle of self-classification’ (Anti-quota 2008, p. 13).

This racial sorting is difficult for a society that never institutionalized the rule of hypodescent. Hence, universities have had to implement ways to get around racial ambiguity. They write:

Whereas, in Brazil, we do not know who exactly is “negro” and who is “non-negro”, racial certification commissions established by the universities have put themselves in charge of tracing a border...in a sinister process in which university commissions investigate and deliberate over the “true race” of the young candidates by examining photographic images or by means of identification interviews (Anti-quota 2008, p. 13).

The actual adoption of what they view as ‘race tribunals’ has been, if fact, one of the most controversial steps in the implementation of racial quotas. These social scientists insist that ‘human races do not exist’ (Anti-quota 2008, p. 5), and that the state adoption of race criteria could bring disastrous consequences, pointing to the United States as evidence of what could come:

In the United States... the abolition of slavery was followed by the production of racial laws based on the “one-drop rule.” This rule, that denies biological and cultural miscegenation, established the division of society into ghettos – legal, social, cultural and spatial. According to the rule, people are, irrevocably, “whites” or “negras.” It is from this example that the inspiration for the racial quota laws in Brazil is drawn (Anti-quota 2008, p. 7).

In sum, science has refuted the race fallacy and racial quotas could ‘threaten national cohesion’ (Anti-quota 2008, p. 14).

Reparations What is the principle impetus behind the support of racial quotas for the pro-quota side? This group is not swayed by the worries of the anti-quota side: ‘To admit negro students as quota beneficiaries does not imply any ‘belief in race’ as they allege (how many times will we have to repeat this?), nor in the making of “official races”’ (Pro-quota 2008, p. 39). Rather, for these scholars, Brazil is already a country of defined racial groups struggling with one another due to the unmistakable presence of racism. What should be the result of 350 years of slavery and 120 years of state racism? It should be the ‘reparation of the damages caused by the racism of the Brazilian republic’ in the form of racial quotas (Pro-quota 2008, p. 4).

Not to support these reparations would ‘isolate present day Brazil from the progressive forces of the world’ (Pro-quota 2008, p. 37). What are those progressive forces that the pro-quota scholars view as vital to move Brazil beyond it historical record in terms of Africans and their descendants? They are those that have been agreed upon by the international community concerning issues of racism and human rights, which include affirmative action:

The United Nations High Commission for the Elimination of Racism works precisely in this direction: slavery is considered, as is the Jewish holocaust, an indefensible crime against
humanity and because of this urges the countries of the African Diaspora in the Americas and the Caribbean to develop public policies of affirmative action for the descendants of enslaved Africans (Pro-quota 2008, p. 36).

Understood in their deepest dimension, these strategies represent an answer to a call to action:

[Affirmative action] should be understood as a coherent and responsible response of the Brazilian state to the various international legal instruments to which it adheres, such as the Organization of the United Nations Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD), of 1969, and, most recently, the Durban Action Plan, result of the III World Conference Against Racism, which took place in Durban, South Africa, in 2001 (Pro-quota 2006, p. 3).

Brazil is a signatory of these international conventions and treaties, and these scholars claim that ‘there exists a strong international expectation that the Brazilian state will finally implement public policies consistent with affirmative action’ (p. 3). That expectation is born of the fact that ‘the country has the second largest negra population on the planet’, (p. 3) and because its ‘level of racial exclusion in higher education is one of the world’s most extreme’ (p. 5).

For the pro-quota advocates, then, the ongoing paradigm shift in Brazil from a racist state to one embracing race-targeted intervention aligns Brazil with hallmarks of progressive shifts around the globe. They view this change as analogous to ‘movements for civil rights in the United States and the Truth and Reconciliation movement that mobilized South Africa with the fall of apartheid’ (Pro-quota 2008, p. 21). Hence, they celebrate the progression of the Brazilian state seeking to evolve the country’s ‘inter-racial relations’ (Pro-quota 2008, p. 39) through concrete reparations in the form of racial quotas in higher education.

Discussion/Conclusion

As judged through the content of the four dueling manifestos, the two groups of scholars that are their signatories view the relationship between inequality and skin color from very different perspectives, as well as the past, present, and future of Brazil. In one view, Brazil is a fusion of races; in the other, it is a country of racial groups in conflict. For those supporting quotas, racial discrimination is behind non-white underrepresentation; for the others, the country’s generalized social inequality is its root. Racial quotas will do little to challenge social inequality for one side; the other views them as initiating momentous change. Finally, one group laments the state’s racialization of its population; the other celebrates the initiation of race-based reparations.

These contending views in Brazil are contemporary manifestations of the two earlier divergent racial ideologies: racialism and antiracialism (Bailey 2002, 2009; Guimarães 1999, 2001). Mid-century antiracialism rejected the biology of race and focused on social class dynamics. The opposition to contemporary race-targeted policy echoes that worldview. These anti-quota scholars continue to be very wary of race, even when framed as a social construct, as an irredeemable conceptualization of human diversity. In the 1970s, a racialist or race-centered perspective began to embrace the ability of race in negro and white to frame Brazilian dynamics, although rejecting the biology of race (Oliveira et al. 1983). Recent support for a race-targeted approach clearly reflects that racial worldview and the belief in the utility of a race-centered focus for antiracism.
The positions appear intractable, split on policy recommendations and on their conceptualizations of the Brazilian nation and human population diversity, at the same time exchanging biting accusations reminiscent of bitter enemies in battle. These characteristics suggest the utility of a culture war framing (Hunter 1991; Mouw and Sobel 2001). It is difficult, however, to gage how this exchange in academia reverberates among the general population. DiMaggio (2003, p. 83) writes, ‘Maybe culture wars are waged only by people who follow the controversies of the day: voters, the politically active, and college graduates’. In Brazil, the same probably holds true; the struggle over racial quotas may be only at elite levels of government, academia, and social movements with a stake at play. Very little may reverberate elsewhere.

Hence, more than a war of cultures, DiMaggio (2003) suggests that the phenomena that appear to fall under that category may be best understood as struggles ‘to construct new forms of political identity and define the terms of political engagement’ (p. 94). In the US, the culture war between conservatives and liberals in the last decades of the 20th century was at its base a campaign urging ‘religious conservatives to make their faith (rather than their gender, age, race, occupation, or neighborhood) their primary identity and to define this identity as germane to many political positions’ (pp. 92–3). Identity construction, then, may be at the heart of culture wars viewed as attempts to reconfigure a society’s multiple and overlapping social identifications, privileging some over others for their political engagement.

This insight on the essence of phenomena framed as culture wars may bring us closer to the crux of the Brazilian debate: it is at its core a struggle to define the nation in terms of its population diversity. Brazil’s originating myth concerning how the nation came about may help to understand how far apart the sides are on this issue. The founding ‘fable of three races’ references Europeans, Africans, and Indigenous peoples sharing the same territory long ago in very unequal relationships. From their centuries of struggles and interactions, through the earliest days of colonialism to independence and to the formation of a Brazilian republic, these three ‘racial stocks’ birthed a nation. In one version of that story, formerly the ‘official’ one, the interchanges eventually lead to the creation of a new people, a miscegenated nation, one with lessons to teach a racially segregated world. To divide along racial lines now would be to admit the complete failure of Brazil’s utopian dream (Anti-quota 2008, p. 14). In the other version, a revision of the founding myth, the three originating races continue intact through time as does the exploitation. The situation can no longer be tolerated, and the engagement of race identification offers a solution. For one group, then, time has blurred boundaries, for the other, perpetuated them.

Although it is difficult to reconcile divergent national images, is there no common ground that would point away from these two positions being intractable? We believe the manifestos reveal that there is: both agree on the rejection of the biology of race and on the recognition of racism. Perhaps, as in many heated discussions with so much at stake, these feuding academics do not recognize those commonalities; rather, they focus on perceived differences. If both could concede the common ground, however, perhaps the struggle concerning real differences could be constructive as opposed to alienating.

**Short Biographies**

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