



GLOBAL CENTRE FOR PLURALISM    CENTRE MONDIAL DU PLURALISME

# Building Pluralism Through Affirmative Action in Brazil: THE CASE OF EDUCATION

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Along with many other Central and South American countries, Brazil has long viewed itself as a society characterized by a single “cosmic race” formed through the mixing of indigenous peoples, former African slaves and European settlers. Until the 1990s, government policy often denied the existence of racial prejudice or racial inequalities. Over the last quarter century, however, Afro-Brazilians have been able to unveil racial discrimination and prejudice and have it acknowledged and addressed. Beginning in the 1990s, race-conscious policies have been introduced, including the collection of statistics on a racial basis and the adoption of race-based forms of affirmative action. These commitments have continued to evolve, resulting in the adoption of important 2012 legislation that requires federal universities to institute quotas for admission. In Brazil today, this narrative of a racialized and unequal society has both supporters and critics.

Brazil’s shifting narrative—from “racial democracy” to a racialized and unequal society—raises several

questions about affirmative action as a remedy for group-based inequalities and, hence, as a pathway to pluralism. Has Brazil’s expanding suite of affirmative action policies improved the relative position of Afro-Brazilians, or have they—as some critics charge—deepened the lines of difference in a society that, some argue, used to interact more freely? Defenders of the policy argue that Brazilian society has always been riven by stigmatization and discrimination, which the narrative of racial democracy simply denied. Affirmative action policies, they contend, promote mutual understanding and respect.

Commentators, both inside and outside of Brazil, have debated the origins of Brazil’s shifting changing narrative about race. Some argue that the commitment to affirmative action policies reflected the influence of a conceptual lens derived from American race relations that was superimposed on the Brazilian experience by powerful organizational actors. The resulting introduction of U.S.-style solutions such as racial statistics and affirmative

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This paper is part of a new publication series from the **Global Centre for Pluralism** called **Accounting for Change in Diverse Societies**. Focused on six world regions, each “change case” examines a specific moment in time when a country altered its approach to diversity, either expanding or eroding the foundations of inclusive citizenship. The aim of the series – which also features thematic overviews by leading global scholars – is to build global understanding of the sources of inclusion and exclusion in diverse societies and the pathways to pluralism.

action invented racial differences. Others reject these assertions, arguing that the push for affirmative action in Brazil by Afro-Brazilians was an outgrowth of domestic political dynamics, including an increasing commitment to pluralism.

Brazil's changed conversation about race and diversity has fundamentally altered the country's approach to inclusion and exclusion. In commissioning the Brazil change case, the Global Centre for Pluralism has sought to understand the impact of the country's recognition of diversity and its efforts to reduce inequality. Which historic drivers of group-based inequalities have changed in Brazil and which stubbornly endure? What lessons can we learn from the Brazilian case about the role of identity and recognition in addressing group-based inequalities and about the resistance to pluralism that these changed conversations imply?

## CASE NARRATIVE

Two competing narratives about the nation characterize Brazilian history: the narrative of a racial democracy in which discrimination does not exist; and a narrative of a racialized, unequal society. Although these two narratives are simplifications, distinguishing between them helps understand much about political action, rights, and public policies over time.

Universities also instituted an important change, similarly triggered by the Durban conference. Between 2001 and 2012, 70 public (federal and state) universities created affirmative action programs. In 2012 the Supreme Court ruled

that the quotas were constitutional. The same year, the federal government legislated quotas for admission to federal public universities and technical schools, to combat both racial and social inequality. Universities would reserve 50% of available positions to students from the public high schools, which low-income students attended most often. Of those, 50% of places would be reserved for those with a family income below 1.5 times the minimum wage per capita and positions were also to be reserved at least at the same proportion as the representation of Blacks, Browns, Indigenous peoples and persons with disabilities in the particular state. Institutions had four years to implement the law fully while the executive branch committed to reassessing the racial quotas after 10 years.

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Many have denied that such inequalities result from discrimination or racism. Public opinion surveys find Brazilians acknowledging racism's existence and the use of stereotypical categories, although denying any racial prejudice of their own and often blaming individuals for their lack of economic or social success. Such views accord with the narrative of racial democracy. While such

notions of racial harmony have been rejected for decades by intellectuals and the black movement, preparations for the 2001 World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance organized by the United Nations in Durban, South Africa triggered a broad conversation about racism in Brazil, channelling the idea of affirmative action from within the black movement to the wider political world. State agencies soon reacted: the ministries of agriculture and justice established quotas for hiring blacks, a national program for human rights was adopted, and a Special Secretariat for the Promotion of Racial Equality was created.

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This broad conversation after 2001 generated demand for data on racial inequalities, needed

to create awareness and improve policy. The media also participated, with investigations of racial discrimination. Tracking of public opinion attested to a lively debate and growing support for affirmative action programs. In sum, the recognition of racial inequalities challenged the prevailing discourse of a racial democracy, which denied Brazil's history of racial divisions. Efforts to acknowledge and close the gaps between groups have fostered new spaces of exchange both at universities and in the society at large, supported by the contextualized approach to rights launched with the 1988 Brazilian Constitution.

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This story of a national conversation and redefinition of national identity very much reflects Brazilian realities. Interpreting Brazil's adoption of affirmative action as a mere import of U.S.-style practices disregards a core difference in the goals of affirmative action policies. While in the U.S. affirmative action programs in universities seek to produce more diversity in educational institutions, in Brazil the programs using quotas are based on the principles of pluralism and substantive equality, including an appreciation of the impact of inclusion into education on social equality more broadly.

After Durban, Brazilians were also engaged in transnational, particularly South-South, conversations. These domestic and transnational dialogues propose a model of justice connecting rights (such as the right to education) to policies (such as affirmative action programs). Moreover, Brazil's approach incorporates the possibility of transcending affirmative action programs towards a more malleable and narrative-based concepts of individual, group and national identities but never ignoring the impact that structured social, economic and political hierarchies have on perceptions and definitions of self and nation. It also encompasses results-oriented designs, requiring continuous testing and thus an on-going conversation about how to promote pluralism in practice.

## THROUGH A PLURALISM LENS

### Sources of Inclusion and Exclusion

The Global Centre for Pluralism asked each author in the Change Case Series to reflect on the sources of inclusion and exclusion through pluralism – that is, using the Centre's "drivers of pluralism" framework. Some highlights from the full Brazilian change case are included here.

### Livelihoods and Wellbeing

- The narrative of racial democracy hid profound inequalities across racial groups in terms of income, education, health outcomes and access to positions of power and authority.
- The new narrative about racial difference, and with it affirmative action, has identified access to

education as the key tool to improve livelihoods and well-being of marginalized groups.

### Law, Politics and Recognition

- The recognition of racism and discrimination in society has paved the way for a contextualized approach to rights and policies that respond to the needs of differently situated groups.
- Affirmative action programs in some universities have catalyzed a domestic conversation about race, weakening the myth of racial democracy. A 2012 Supreme Court decision and legislation consolidated this commitment to inclusion via affirmative action programs.
- Despite positive outcomes, affirmative action programs in Brazil do not cover all excluded groups. Doing so would require addressing root causes with, for example, improved basic public education.

### Citizens, Civil Society and Identity

- A powerful narrative of racial democracy generated widely held beliefs that Brazil did not suffer from racial discrimination, which in turn obscured wide-spread patterns of systemic exclusion.
- The black movement and its allies mobilized around a major international conference, the preparation of which provided resources and recognition to civil society actors and their claims.
- The conversation on race and racism in recent decades has generated a more pluralist concept of national identity, framed around the encompassing idea that many races belong to the Brazilian nation.

## CONCLUSION

Affirmative action programs in Brazil have become part of a national conversation on race that has prompted a shift in how the country defines itself. Rather than ignore systemic exclusion and discrimination, Brazil's government has begun to accept that differences shape Brazilian society and has taken steps toward addressing persistent inequalities through affirmative action programs. Embedded in the Brazil model is an explicit understanding that a connection exists between promoting affirmative action in education and creating further substantive equality in society at large. The aim is not more diversity as an end in itself. As the Brazilian experience shows, a commitment to greater group-based equality through affirmative action can serve as a framework for the development of effective rights and policies of inclusion that support greater pluralism.

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**The Global Centre for Pluralism** is an applied knowledge organization that facilitates dialogue, analysis and exchange about the building blocks of inclusive societies in which human differences are respected. Based in Ottawa, the Centre is inspired by Canadian pluralism, which demonstrates what governments and citizens can achieve when human diversity is valued and recognized as a foundation for shared citizenship. Please visit us at [pluralism.ca](http://pluralism.ca)