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Affirmative Action in Brazil  
The Day of the Lambs  
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Guest Commentator

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When the first black Africans were on their way to Brazil, in the 16th century, considering their conditions in the ships, they could conclude that their destiny would not be rosy. What they and nobody else at that time could not guess is that the country would be the last one in the world to abolish slavery, in 1888; that even after being officially abolished – almost 4 million slaves later – the consequences of that tragedy would last until the 21st century in many imaginative forms of racism and discrimination, a medieval drama that their descendants would face like a four-century life sentence; and, finally, that one of these inventive forms would be Affirmative Action. Today, white Affirmative Action is everywhere in Brazil but, at least in one sector, higher education, its days are ending.

For a long time – a time that lasted from the country's discovery until two years ago – white students in Brazil could count on a kind of Affirmative Action for their own exclusive benefit. Among other things, that privilege explains why 98% of professors with masters or Ph.D degrees are white and why, although 48% of the population is black, only 14% of university students are black. White AA was not created by nature, of course, but was a perverse manmade system. At first, it was supported by laws that made it a crime to teach a slave how to read and write. Following that, other laws blocked their access to the land and profitable professions. Thus, abolition ended official slavery, but, far from being free, blacks were stigmatized by ignorance and condemned to material poverty, which provide the White Affirmative Action with subsistence. That's why, today, blacks and whites can be found, in the same proportion, in three places: slums, prisons and mental institutions. But not in professorships, justice, diplomacy and in first rank of government.

Finally, in October 2003, one of the best colleges in the country, the Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro–Uerj, announced a very revolutionary decision that started to change the color of AA: from that Thursday on, AA was adopted on its campus, this time, for black students. That was one of the first laws

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approved in Brazil specifically to benefit black people by giving them a share of what had for such a long time been a white privilege. (The country has always been wrongly seen as a "racial democracy" and, thus, never felt the necessity of being ethnically specific. In fact, the national census only recently started to count the black population.) More than 100 years after abolition, the decision was so unprecedented that white Brazilian society could not hide its shock. The elite got nervous, as they always do when their educational system has to admit a new group of the population, particularly in this case: the new one is poor and...black. After all, nobody loses a secular privilege without a pain. That Thursday came to highlight the Brazilian ethnic division. As the new law provided a quota of 40% for black students, the black community commemorated it as a national holiday, one more victory in their war for their civil rights. The white community didn't see that they still had the majority – 60% – and felt as if their right to admission, from then on, would just be stolen.

What authorizes white Brazilians to think of robbery? This kind of behavior has anthropological roots dating back to 1850, when the first law approved to regulate land ownership, the famous "Lei de Terras" (Law of Lands), excluded slaves and their descendants from the category of Brazilians and, so, gave no rights to them, as they were not considered as citizens. In those years Brazil was experiencing a very explosive time. The end of slavery was inevitably about to come, and white people knew that slaves had expertise in harvesting and selling agricultural products. So, if slaves had access to the land as property, then they could be in competition with white farmers.

The city of Salvador, the capital of the state of Bahia, with the largest black population, from time to time could be considered a war zone, because of the riots promoted mainly by Muslim slaves fighting for freedom. One rebellion, named "Revolta dos Males" (revolt of Males – Muslim slaves) had already appointed an African woman, Luiza Mahin, to be the queen as soon as Bahia would be considered a free country, which was not a dream but a concrete possibility. Fearing both the revolts and the black farm competition, white people used the law to set artificially high prices for the land, so that no future ex-slave could afford to buy. Additionally, anyone who wanted to buy a land had to make a petition...handwritten. The prices and the writing requirement would definitely place the ex-slaves out of the market. And they really did. From that time on, in the white psyche black people were not part of the country's society, consequently with no rights. For a very long time, Brazilian people in schools didn't study the contributions of black people to the development of the country. From the elementary school, white Brazilian students lived in an artificial white world, with no knowledge about anything beyond their own race. In their mind, the country was white and belonged to them. Simple like that.

As simple as useless, because it is impossible to deny that Brazil is a mestizo country, and the science is there to prove it. Scientific analyses of mitochondrial DNA show that the matrix of the Brazilian female population with white phenotype is 28% of African haplogroups, 39% of European haplogroups and 33% of Amerindian haplogroups.

Although divided in black and white almost by half, the two parts are very different countries, as shows a study issued last November. The economist and sociologist Marcelo Paixao, from the Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro, published his dissertation with some data proving, once more, that the color of poverty is black. He split the Brazilian society in two parts: black and white, and applied to them, separately, the human development program launched by the UN in 1990 to measure the quality of life in 173 countries – income per capita; life expectancy; and scholarship. This index, that has "Happiness Index" as its nickname, is the social counterpart of the National Growth Product (NGP), which measures economic development. According to the study, in 2002, Brazil was in 63rd place in human development, one step behind Namibia. Paixao's two countries, one white, one black, were compared, and the result is that if Brazil was a country with only white people, it would be in 44th place. If it were populated only with blacks, it would be the 105th. Worse than that, the study showed that between 1992 and 2001, while the number of Brazilian poor people decreased by 5 million, the number of Brazilian poor black people increased by 500 thousand,

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demonstrating that, while the whites got richer, the blacks got poorer.

"The nature of the lions is to eat lambs" – this is the saying Anatole France chose to explain the human compulsion towards domination, its impulse to submit and extract profits from the sacrifice of the weak. If so, another thought can be added to the great French writer's metaphor: For every action there is always a reaction. So, there would come the day on which Brazilian blacks would find a means to react against the lions of education. For white Affirmative Action, that day came in 2003.

Until then, the Brazilian universities had been a territory almost exclusively for white people. It is true that there were a few blacks, but they were there only to legitimate the rule and give an impression of liberalism and artificial diversity, masking what was really a system of racial preference. As the social order regularly reproduces itself, the son of a poor man is always in the danger of being as poor as his father. So, poverty and its consequences, that used to torment mainly blacks, constitute the foundations of white Affirmative Action in the best Brazilian schools, public or not. And white boys could be calm, because the public high schools were the only ones black students could get in, and they would never give them the amount of quality knowledge required for admission to the university. Universities admitted mostly people who came from middle and high socio-economic classes, which means white people. The others, considering the difficulties, didn't bother applying. Coming from expensive private schools and being better prepared for the most important exam – known as "vestibular" – to gain admission, white students could be sure they wouldn't face competition from blacks, a plus factor that can be seen as a massive educational benefit, in reality, a privilege. And more: this kind of white Affirmative Action is wide open. It is not restricted by any kind of quota and, so, involves the entire capacity of admission. And what is sadly ironic: the education of white students in public universities was being paid by the taxes collected among black people, too. (If blacks were paying these taxes and not using the universities services, the least the government could do was to give their money back.)

This explains why the biggest and the best public university in the country, the Universidade de Sao Paulo–USP, has more than 1000 professors and only 3 are black, and only 1.4% of black students. It is located, as its name indicates, in the state of Sao Paulo, the richest in Brazil, in which blacks are 27.4% of the population. Strange percentages: 27.4% in society, 1.4% in the university. In 2005, USP adopted a quota for black students in the masters programs of its law school, but only because the Ford Foundation proposed the system and gave the money to be used for scholarships.

Two years earlier, when Uerj concluded that it was time to make an effort to correct the diversity problem on its campus, the administration had to use the force of a law approved by the state assembly, and provided with a quota system, in order to avoid any means to cheat the law. Uerj admitted 4700 students under that system (it has 7000 today, in a universe of 24000 students), and its example immediately began to spread all over the country. As with everything that occurs in Rio de Janeiro, today Affirmative Action has been adopted by more than 10 Brazilian universities. Even better: the Congress has already approved a proposition to extend the quota system to every federal university. Almost half a century after the US, Affirmative Action is now a reality in Brazil and it is so successful that the prestigious French Sorbonne is studying the Brazilian system and may adopt it.

In 2003, those who were against the quota system, the lions, used to cite statistics to say that 42% of university students already come from public schools, thereby making Affirmative Action unnecessary. Yes, they were right, but not entirely. It is true that 42% is a big number, but, in reality, it hides the fact that more than half are students who had optioned for the less desirable courses. When courses like Medicine and Dentistry are included, that number falls to 15%. The lions used to say, too, that black students would finish the course without the same knowledge as the non-quota students. According to them, quota students will be "quota doctors," with this stigma in their careers. Of course, the lions were underestimating two very strong "details": the quality of teaching in the university and the willpower of the students. And, yes, they are

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wrong. At the end of that first year at Uerj, statistics on the academic performance of the quota students revealed that they had better grades than the non-quota students. At the same classes and with the same teachers. The results show that the black students, coming from public high schools, were much more hardworking than those who came from expensive private schools. The sad note: Reaffirming the perverse power of poverty, many of those black students had to give up the university during the middle of that first year – among other things, because they simply didn't have money for the bus between home and campus.

In 2005, the Universidade Federal da Bahia–UFBA, approved a quota system with great success and a strong lesson for those who were skeptical: in the law school, the student classified in the "vestibular" with the highest grade, 8.1, was a black quota one, and the highest grade for the non-quota student was 7.8. The general average of the non-quota students was 6.1, and 5.5 for the quota students.

The UFBA has a very combative chancellor, Naomar de Almeida Filho, who fought for the system. In a paper about Affirmative Action in university, supported by the vice-chancellors Maerbal Marinho and Manoel Carvalho, and by Jocelio dos Santos, director of the Centro de Estudos Afro-Orientais da UFBA, they showed that, for the first time, the percentage of black students classified in 2005, 73.4%, is very close to the percentage of Bahia's black population. To challenge the critics about the quality of the education, the paper demonstrated that the cut-off that year was slightly higher than the previous years, going from 42% to 43%.

Another effective answer to those who were against the quota system came from the courts, in 2005: Almost 100 white students of the Universidade Federal do Parana, in the Southwest, went to court against the quota system, and they all lost the case.

Maybe Brazil is just repeating the same paths the US has already traveled. Maybe, in dozen years from now, the Brazilian AA will be criticized, for the same errors the US has committed. Still, it would be of great value for Brazilians to know the history of the quota system in the US, when Yale, Harvard and Princeton had a quota system to limit the presence mainly of Jews. It was a college application procedure developed in the 1920s by Ivy League admissions offices. Jewish immigration from Eastern Europe had been increasing exponentially since the 1800s and Jews facing the in-house entry exam were considered "too scholarly" and "too smart." But under the pressure of the Cold War and humiliated by the bip sound of Sputnik, the elite colleges had to open their admission policies, in order to gain more technological and scientific skill to face the competition from the Soviet Union. The changes came rapidly and those universities never were the same; they became much better.

In Brazil, to be against black people should be the same as to be against gravity. Like gravity, blacks are everywhere, as miscegenation is one of the most visible marks of the country's society. But just like gravity, to be black in Brazil is not a force, because it is very difficult to find a black in the first rank of the government, diplomacy, federal justice, professorship. Proportionality between blacks and whites is found only in three places: slums, prisons and mental institutions. In the work market, in some of the largest cities, the salaries of blacks are the half of the salaries of whites. That is why it is laughable to see Brazil as a "racial democracy."

AA in Brazil is a volcano expelling quotas all over the country, in the contested terrain of the campuses. But all this heat is not enough to warm the private colleges. They are far from being the best ones, but, as the public universities don't have sufficient capacity for the demand, private colleges proliferated enormously in the last 10–15 years. If not for the high fees, they could be a very good option for higher education, but many of them are not very good schools and push the quality down. To cut their costs, they give hiring preference to professors with only masters degrees, because the Ph.D.s require higher salaries. And they keep staring at Affirmative Action with a bovine look, as if they don't have anything to do with it. This attitude reminds black Brazilians of how much more remains to be done until the day when all lions will be charged for all the

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lambs they have eaten since those first black Africans came to Brazil.

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