THE ROLE OF AFFIRMATIVE ACTIONS IN BLACK EMPOWERMENT IN BRAZIL

EL PAPEL DE LAS ACCIONES AFIRMATIVAS EN EL EMPODERAMIENTO NEGRO EN BRASIL

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Abstract: *This article aims to highlight how the experience of slavery has deeply impacted the daily lives of the Black population in Brazil. By examining higher education access policies for Black students in Federal Public Universities, it emphasizes the importance of going beyond the mere recognition of Black identities as empowerment tools, adopting a multicultural approach. The deconstruction of ethnocentric and Eurocentric narratives is essential, using a critical intercultural perspective.*

Keywords: *Ethnocentrism. Black population. Affirmative actions. Education*

Resumen: *Este artículo busca evidenciar cómo la experiencia de la esclavitud generó impactos profundos en la vida cotidiana de la población negra en Brasil. Al examinar las políticas de acceso a la educación superior para estudiantes negros en las Universidades Públicas Federales, se destaca la importancia de ir más allá del simple reconocimiento de las identidades negras como herramientas de empoderamiento, adoptando un enfoque multicultural. La desconstrucción de narrativas etnocéntricas y eurocéntricas es esencial, utilizando una perspectiva intercultural crítica.*

Palabras clave: *Etnocentrismo. Población negra. Acciones afirmativas. Educación.*

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Introduction

Black identity in Brazil does not arise from an awareness of pigmentation differences among Blacks, Whites, and Asians, but rather from a long historical process that began with the arrival of Portuguese explorers in Africa in the 15th century and the mercantilist relations established between these peoples. This process included the colonization of Africa, the slave trade, and slavery (Munanga, 2003, p. 37).

Thus, this article's initial arguments trace the formation of the Brazilian nation, highlighting the construction of Black identity in its place of origin to understand the educational standing of the Black population in the national context and the importance of redefining Black identity and repositioning Black people in the educational context through affirmative action. It is important to note that the term "Black" is used in this article as a category to identify Brazilians classified by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics [Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística – IBGE] as Black and Brown (Osorio, 2003, p. 23).

Brazil's nation-building history is based on the myth of racial mixing, which supposedly connects three main races: the indigenous peoples who inhabited the national territory at the time of the arrival of the so-called "discoverers" of this land, the invaders of this land, and later the Africans brought to the continent as slaves. Guimarães (2009) broadly disputes the fallacy of this racial mixing and points to the formation of the Brazilian nation as an ethnocentric process of domination by one people over another, classifying the latter as primitive and inferior peoples.

The colonizers of this nation—people of European Christian and Judeo-Christian tradition—imposed, through military domination, their commercial, scientific, and religious culture on the indigenous peoples who inhabited Brazil's territory during the early years of colonization. Later, they imposed the same domination criteria on enslaved African peoples.

African slaves and their descendants, during the process of slavery in Brazil, experienced a massacre of their humanity through objectification, commercialization, dispossession, and dehumanization.

Although cruel and repressive, these factors were not enough to eliminate the culture and identity of African descendants, who found ways to maintain their identity/dignity through the formation of resistance groups. These efforts led to constant rebellions in quilombos and the preservation of their traditions and religious practices, even if syncretized or disguised.

When slavery was officially declared "abolished" by the legal provisions of the Lei Áurea on May 13, 1888, this "end" of slavery did not translate into public policies of social inclusion for the newly freed category. There were no measures to create conditions for access to basic services like sanitation, healthcare, education, employment, culture, and leisure for this population.

This reality only changed the status of this segment of the population on paper, continuing to reserve a place of marginalization and subordination for them. The only guaranteed "freedom" was nominal, while the enforcement of other rights remained unfulfilled in a concrete and equitable manner.

Black Identity

The slave society was so intense and impactful that its effects are still visible today. As Souza (1983, p. 19) notes, *"ao transformar o africano em escravo, definiu o negro como raça,"*[1] which established their place, their *"maneira de tratar e ser tratado, os padrões de interação com o branco e instituiu o paralelismo entre cor negra e posição social inferior"*[2].

Even today, Black people remain stigmatized, so much so that in modern society, they are either seen as naturally suited for manual labor, or, if not, the role of the unscrupulous Black person is imposed upon them. An illustration of this inferior position is highlighted in Oliveira's (2017, p.

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1 Own translation: "by transforming the African into a slave, it defined the Black person as a race".
2 Own translation: "way of treating and being treated, the patterns of interaction with Whites, and instituted the parallel between Black skin color and inferior social status".

140) study, which sheds light on how the "evil," or its symbolic personifications such as the devil or demon in Western culture, was depicted in darkness, shadows, and the color black, thereby reinforcing the construction of a racist and biased stigma.

This prompts the question: what is the "Black history" in today's society? Discussing Black identity in Brazil is merely a branch of colonialism that persists to this day. The process of nationalization and nation-building was conducted by an economic and intellectual elite through a path that was *"horrível, porque anti-nacional,"*[3] disregarding the interests of the nation, and excluding Black and Indigenous peoples (minorities and/or others) (Fanon, 2008, p. 147).

However, this is not a uniquely Brazilian case; it is a common event in countries that were subordinated for many years under European rule. National identity was constructed selectively, where the group in power historically asserted itself (Francischetto; Machado, 2013).

Goffman (1963), in his work on stigma, identifies several stigmatized groups, and in Brazil, these groups have been present in the education system for four centuries. Even today, we see the necessity of integration policies for Black individuals in the educational system. After all, how many Black teachers and successful individuals does this country, which has a majority Black population, have? And what positions do Black people occupy in today's society?

Given the nationalization process, it became necessary for Black people to search within their "roots" to find the basis for their voice, so that those in power could "hear" them. As Ratts (2006, p. 11) states, it was necessary to *"recolocar em pauta a voz das expressões negras, especialmente os (as) que viveram e escreveram acerca de seus deslocamentos por 'vários mundos'."*[4] Furthermore, the entire process of social integration was shaped by "occasional" policies, and, paraphrasing Guimarães' (2009) ideas, it would be impossible to deconstruct the concept of "inferior Black race" without resuming the debates that surrounded it.

Throughout these years, Black individuals have been associated with numerous derogatory terms, living in situations of inequality. Despite having secured certain power relations, this situation creates "equality," and *"qualquer posicionamento de si, qualquer estabilização de si mantém relações de dependência com o desmantelamento do outro. É sobre as ruínas dos meus próximos que construo minha virilidade"*[5] (Fanon, 2008, p. 176). Nascimento offers the following definition of "being Black":

> Ser negro é enfrentar uma história de quase quinhentos anos de resistência à dor, ao sofrimento físico e moral, à sensação de não existir, a prática de ainda não pertencer a uma sociedade na qual consagrou tudo o que possuía, oferecendo ainda hoje o resto de si mesmo. Ser negro não pode ser resumido a um "estado de espírito", a "alma branca ou negra", a aspectos de comportamento que determinados brancos elegeram como sendo de negro e assim adotá-los como seus.[6] (Nascimento apud Rats, 2006, p. 39).

The Black person carries a history of resistance, and cultural resistance developed with the goal of producing a Black culture in Brazil, which was forged over more than 300 years of history (Castells, 2002).

In Brazil's history, there have been ebbs and flows in the discussion about Black people and democracy. This topic was recurrent in the 1970s, particularly in the works of Roger Bastide, who, while searching for "roots of identity" in Africa, criticized the lack of positive symbols related to Black people. When such symbols did "exist," they underwent a process of "whitening," through

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3 Own translation: "horrible, because it was anti-national".
4 Own translation: "bring back to the forefront the voices of Black expressions, especially those who lived and wrote about their displacements through 'various worlds'".
5 Own translation: "any self-positioning, any self-stabilization, maintains relations of dependence with the dismantling of the other. It is upon the ruins of my neighbors that I build my virility".
6 Own translation: "Being Black means facing a history of nearly five hundred years of resistance to pain, to physical and moral suffering, to the feeling of non-existence, and to the ongoing experience of not belonging to a society to which they have given everything they had, still offering the rest of themselves today. Being Black cannot be reduced to a "state of mind," to a "white or black soul," or to behavioral traits that certain white people have chosen as belonging to Black people and thus adopted them as their own".

the "cultural assimilation of Whites,"

> [...] negro que se valoriza é sempre o negro assimilado a valores que não são os de seus antepassados, mas os dos países brancos [fazendo com que] a valorização do preto se resuma definitivamente em mostrar a capacidade de assimilação total do preto à cultural do branco [...].[7] (Bastide apud Arruti, 2005, p. 74).

From 1970 to 1980, there was a re-appropriation of the term *quilombo* by the Black movement, giving rise to Black resistance, which began to be remembered in the press for its intense and fiery social struggles, eventually leading to the formation of the Unified Black Movement [*Movimento Negro Unificado – MNU*], which in 1978 proposed the need for a date to mark the National Black Consciousness Day, symbolizing a new generation of Black militants and *"assumindo como símbolo Zumbi dos Palmares, que a partir desse momento se tornaria uma referência constante ao movimento"*[8] (Arruti, 2006, p. 76).

The struggles of social movements took advantage of the moments of "awareness" among the population about the (Black) history produced in academic spaces to demand their rights, as up until then, most of the population was unaware or had a limited understanding related to Black slavery. With academic work, moments of "rebranding" began in society, which only gained momentum with the pressure that the MNU imposed on the media.

This production of a new framework for Black people is even more important for Black individuals themselves, who until then had not seen themselves represented in roles that were truly their own.

The Caribbean thinker Fanon (2008) engages in a very rich debate on the topic. Let's take a look at a brief excerpt:

> Deve-se ter percebido que a situação que estudei não é clássica. A objetividade científica me foi proibida, pois o alienado, o neurótico, era meu irmão, era minha irmã, era meu pai. Tentei constantemente revelar ao negro que, de certo modo, ele aceita ser enquadrado; submete-se ao branco, que é, ao mesmo tempo, mistificador e mistificado. O negro, em determinados momentos, fica enclausurado no próprio corpo. Ora "para um ser que adquiriu a consciência de si e de seu corpo, que chegou à dialética do sujeito e do objeto, o corpo não é mais a causa da estrutura da consciência, tornou-se objeto da consciência". O negro, mesmo sendo sincero, é escravo do passado. Entretanto sou um homem, e neste sentido, a Guerra do Peloponeso é tão minha quanto a descoberta da bússola. Diante do branco, o negro tem um passado a valorizar e uma revanche a encaminhar. Diante do negro, o branco contemporâneo sente a necessidade de recordar o período antropofágico.[9] (Fanon, 2008, p. 186-187).

Thus, little by little, there was significant work in Brazil by both the Black Movement and

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7 Own translation: "[...] the valued Black person is always the one assimilated to values that are not those of their ancestors, but those of white countries [causing] the appreciation of the Black person to be ultimately reduced to demonstrating the ability of total assimilation of Black people into white culture [...]".

8 Own translation: "taking Zumbi dos Palmares as a symbol, who from that moment on became a constant reference for the movement".

9 Own translation: "It must have been noticed that the situation I studied is not a classic one. Scientific objectivity was forbidden to me, as the alienated, the neurotic, was my brother, was my sister, was my father. I constantly tried to reveal to the Black person that, in a certain way, he accepts being framed; he submits to the White person, who is both a mystifier and mystified. The Black person, at certain moments, becomes trapped in his own body. Now, "for a being who has acquired self-consciousness and body awareness, who has reached the dialectic of subject and object, the body is no longer the cause of the structure of consciousness, it has become an object of consciousness." The Black person, even when sincere, is a slave to the past. However, I am a man, and in this sense, the Peloponnesian War is as much mine as the discovery of the compass. In front of the White person, the Black person has a past to value and a revenge to pursue. In front of the Black person, the contemporary White person feels the need to recall the anthropophagic period".

Academia to deconstruct the idea of whitening the nation and the myth of racial democracy. Given the need to reformulate the subordinate local idea that Black people held in the Brazilian social context, a reality that was a reflection of slavery and affirmed the superiority and power of the white elite.

Affirmative Action in Brazil

In light of the entire history of racial discrimination in Brazil, Black people's access to public education was delayed, even though the Brazilian population as a whole had been deprived of such access for many decades. In his discussion of ethnic-racial education, Silva (2007) clarifies the educational purpose for this population:

> [...] A eles foi negada a possibilidade de aprender a ler, ou se lhes permitia, era com o intuito de incutir-lhes representações negativas de si próprios e convencê-los de que deveriam ocupar lugares subalternos na sociedade. Ser negro era visto como enorme desvantagem, utilizava-se a educação para despertar e incentivar o desejo de ser branco.[10] (Silva, 2007, p. 495).

Sousa (2011, p. 99) explains that since the creation of the Ministry of Education and Culture [*Ministério da Educação e Cultura – MEC*], which emerged in 1930 under the name Ministry of Education and Health [*Ministério da Educação e Saúde – MES*], it became a breeding ground for eugenic practices and thought, which reinforced white superiority and the implementation of eugenic nationalism, creating a framework for measuring students' intellectual capacities.

In this context, Kern (2013), when discussing the dialogues between eugenics, education, and the science of racial improvement at the beginning of the last century, refers to a shared playing field where the biological-racial perspective was crucial for understanding the social.

By studying the whitening policies of the early 20th century, Renk (2014, p. 225) asserts that national eugenic thought held that health policy and education would be the "redemption" of the nation, following the model of virtue, progress, and civility of the European white man, *"[...] mesmo que nos discursos se abordava a diversidade e miscigenação da população brasileira, na prática o 'modelo' era do homem de cor branca, pele clara, viril e não a população indígena ou afrodescendente"*[11].

In the context of the market economy, intellectual capacities denied the existence of superior races but admitted that there were social groups with more advanced cultures, which were capable of measuring cultural development (Renk, 2014, p. 225).

As Sousa (2011, p. 101) discusses, it was only after the 1990s that the MEC incorporated the ethnic-racial issue as a transversal theme of "Cultural Pluralism" [*Pluralismo Cultural*] in the National Curriculum Parameters [*Parâmetros Curriculares Nacionais – PCNs*], although in an incipient manner, in response to historical manifestations and demands from activists, organizations, and researchers from the 1970s Black movement.

Until then, MEC had no specific educational programs for the Black population, and it was only in 1999 that the book "Overcoming Racism in Schools," [*Superando o Racismo na Escola*] organized by Kabengele Munanga, was published, along with the first textbook on the subject, "A History of the Kalunga People," [*Uma História do Povo Kalunga*] in 2001, due to pressure from the Black movement (Sousa, 2011, p. 101-102).

In this regard, Dias (2012, p. 20) highlights the importance of the Black Movement's role

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10 Own translation: "[...] They were denied the opportunity to learn to read, or when allowed, it was with the intent of instilling negative representations of themselves and convincing them that they should occupy subordinate positions in society. Being Black was seen as a huge disadvantage, and education was used to awaken and encourage the desire to be white".

11 Own translation: "[...] even though the discourse addressed the diversity and miscegenation of the Brazilian population, in practice the 'model' was of the white man, with light skin, virile, and not the indigenous or Afro-descendant population".

in these achievements through its proposed interventions in the field of education, including the review of biased textbook content, teacher training for interracial pedagogy, the revaluation of Black people's role in Brazilian history, and the requirement to include the teaching of African history in school curricula.

As Sousa (2011, p. 102) clarifies, in response to international pressures and social demands from the Black movement, MEC initiated the University Diversity Program in 2002 and held the first University Diversity Forum, which, in Ruiz's (2003) words:

> [...] revestiu-se do formato de recomendações da sociedade civil, de intelectuais e de representantes de entidades e grupos constituintes do movimento negro e do movimento indígena para apoiar a elaboração de propostas de políticas públicas e estratégias de inclusão social no sistema educacional.[12] (Ruiz, 2003, p. 6).

One of the main outcomes of the Forum was the creation of Afro-Brazilian Studies Centers [*Núcleos de Estudos Afro-Brasileiros – NEABs*], to act as a political tool for Black researchers' access to racial debates within the MEC (Sousa, 2011, p. 103).

Regarding national legislation, significant advancements such as the amendment of the National Education Guidelines and Framework Law (*Lei de Diretrizes e Bases da Educação Nacional – LDBEN*) no. 9.394/96, introduced by Federal Law no. 10.639/03, made the teaching of Afro-Brazilian History and Culture mandatory in Brazil's official curriculum. The regulations for Law no. 10.639/03 were established by CNE/CP 003/2004 and Resolution CNE/CP 1/2004, which outline the Curriculum Guidelines for the Education of Ethnic-Racial Relations and the Teaching of Afro-Brazilian and African Culture.

As Macêdo, Pan, and Adorno (2012, p. 378) pointed out, in this context of social mobilization, Bill no. 3627/2004 was drafted, proposing the implementation of a quota policy for public universities. However, the bill was not passed, but several universities, using their autonomy, began to implement affirmative action policies. In this regard, Dias (2012, p. 23) notes that affirmative action became a reality in most higher education institutions in the country, even though the adoption of specific legislation on the matter only became a reality in 2012 with the approval of Federal Law no. 12.711/2012, known as the Quota Law. This law mandates the reservation of seats for Black, mixed-race, Indigenous people, people with disabilities, low-income students, and students who completed high school in public schools (Brasil, 2012).

Bezerra and Gurgel (2012, p. 95-117), in studying the effects of the quota policy at the State University of Rio de Janeiro [Universidade Estadual do Rio de Janeiro – UERJ], focusing on specific courses, found that the performance of quota students was similar to that of students who entered through the universal system, and the dropout rate for quota students was lower than for non-quota students. Santos (2017, p. 215), conducting qualitative research with students in the UFGInclui program at the Federal University of Goiás - Jataí Regional, found results that corroborate the aforementioned studies, showing similar performance between quota and non-quota students. Meanwhile, García and Jesus (2015, p. 146-165), through statistical analysis of quota and non-quota students at UNB across nine courses, found that significant academic performance differences occur in the early semesters of most courses, but these differences are overcome in the later semesters. According to the authors, this likely reflects a lack of preparation among quota students for foundational course subjects, highlighting the importance of affirmative action in the basic education system.

The promotion and implementation of affirmative action in education are crucial for achieving the fundamental rights of recognition and transforming the social imaginary constructed around Black identity. Dias (2012, p. 10) emphasizes the importance of public policies aligned with ethnic and racial reflections on citizenship as a way to foster more supportive, equitable, and just sociocultural relationships.

Affirmative action in education is a key driver of professional qualification and social inclusion

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12 Own translation: "[...] took the format of recommendations from civil society, intellectuals, and representatives of entities and groups from the Black and Indigenous movements to support the development of public policy proposals and strategies for social inclusion in the educational system".

opportunities. As Dias (2012, p. 14-15) states, *"[...] uma emancipação dos negros em uma sociedade com características racistas passa pela necessidade de assegurar sua inserção e permanência nas instituições formais de educação [...]."*[13] This access to citizenship, provided through participation in affirmative action, empowers and encourages beneficiaries to claim their rights and freedoms by affirming their identity.

The myth of racial democracy in the country has created a false idea of a nation with a universalist Brazilian culture, shaped in the mold of European white identity, with these values transmitted through a eugenic education system that still reflects in today's social imagination. Drawing on Munanga's (2010, p. 46) reflections, one might ask: who would make Brazilians uniquely descendants of Anglo-Saxons and Americans due to European ancestry? Or could they also be of African, Indigenous, or Eastern ancestry?

In this regard, Silva (2007, p. 498) states that this concealment of Brazilian diversity fosters a sense of non-belonging among Indigenous and Black peoples to Brazilian society, as this *"[...] visão distorcida das relações* étnico-raciais *vem fomentando a ideia, de que vivemos harmoniosamente integrados, numa sociedade que não vê as diferenças. Considera-se democrático ignorar o outro na sua diferença."*[14]

In order to reduce social inequalities and to understand the formation of the Brazilian nation from a non-Eurocentric perspective, it is necessary to recognize a different national identity, drawing from various cultural sources and seeking interculturality. It is worth noting that:

> As heranças culturais africana e indígena constituem uma das matrizes fundamentais da chamada cultura nacional e deveriam, por esse motivo, ocupar a mesma posição das heranças europeias, árabes, judaica, orientais etc. Juntas, essas heranças constituem a memória coletiva do Brasil, uma memória plural e não mestiça ou unitária.[15] (Munanga, 2010, p. 50).

In this regard, Silva (2007, p. 501) mentions that an education centered on a Eurocentric ethno-racial perspective makes us unable to correct the distorted image of Brazilian racial democracy, as this educational process causes us to overlook the experiences of being, living, thinking, and achieving of Indigenous peoples, Africans, maroons, Asians, and *"[...] tornamo-nos incapazes de perceber as vozes e imagens ausentes dos currículos escolares: empobrecidos, mulheres, afro-descendentes, africanos, indígenas, idosos, homossexuais, deficientes, entre outros."*[16]

Moreover, Dias (2012, p. 14) reiterates the dominant element in the fight for citizenship rights and Black self-identification, rather than a dilution of belonging in the so-called racial democracy or a universalism that dilutes the legitimate demands of empowerment. In the author's words: *"Não há como desconsiderar que as identidades negras são construídas também como instrumento de mobilização política."*[17]

Therefore, it is necessary to affirm Black identity and belonging in favor of the identification of the individual as a subject of public policies, through the redefinition of a stigmatized category.

However, this idea of the existence of a monocultural Brazilian identity harms both Black and non-Black people, as it reduces epistemic and cognitive horizons, hindering access to and recognition of Brazil's multicultural universe. This means that, epistemically, the lack of access to

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13 Own translation: "[...] the emancipation of Black people in a society with racist characteristics requires ensuring their entry and permanence in formal education institutions [...]".

14 Own translation: "[...] distorted view of ethnic-racial relations has been promoting the idea that we live harmoniously integrated, in a society that does not see differences. It is considered democratic to ignore the other in their difference".

15 Own translation: "The African and Indigenous cultural heritages constitute one of the fundamental pillars of what is called the national culture and, for this reason, should occupy the same position as the European, Arab, Jewish, Eastern, and other heritages. Together, these heritages form the collective memory of Brazil, a plural memory, not a mixed or unified one".

16 Own translation: "[...] we become unable to perceive the absent voices and images in school curricula: the impoverished, women, Afro-descendants, Africans, Indigenous people, the elderly, homosexuals, the disabled, among others".

17 Own translation: "There is no way to disregard that Black identities are also constructed as instruments of political mobilization".

education for the Black population and the non-inclusion of Black cultural content in academic spaces limits the construction of plural meanings of a national identity for all Brazilians, both inside and outside of academic settings.

Final Considerations

This article elucidates that the resistance and role of the Black Movement have always been present, actively and crucially contributing to social gains, from the early abolitionist movement to the struggle for quota policies in higher education. The Black Movement did not allow this group to remain victims, objects, and commodities, as were Africans under slavery, or Afro-descendant Brazilians, despite the claims that they were treated well by their colonizers.

Black identity has been and continues to be constituted as a form of empowerment. The positioning and action of the Black Movement in political contexts, as discussed in this article (from slavery to quota policies), were crucial for securing social rights, such as the right to education.

What we observe in the actions of the Ministry of Education (MEC) is an incisive approach at the time of its creation, with eugenic nationalist intentions, but this force becomes diluted when faced with the need to implement practices aimed at recognizing an intercultural Brazil. These practices validate an attempt to maintain a monocultural and whitening policy, as educational inequalities persist and are reproduced in the interest of the state.

It can be stated that the reflections on slavery still bear weight today for the population, not only perpetuating stigma but also depriving the dominant class of teaching and understanding "otherness" and true knowledge. The history that has been told through the lens of racial democracy in a one-race Brazil stems from a Eurocentric epistemology that configures the education system as anti-democratic, anti-citizen, and anti-life.

Thus, it is understood that it is necessary to build a historical reformation of the identity that was damaged, almost invisibly, over the centuries. This underscores the need for the maintenance and expansion of affirmative action to change this reality.

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