

# A Comment on Jonas Zoninsein “Ethnic Minorities and the Political Economy of Development”

Edward Telles\*

Professor Zoninsein argues that even though affirmative action has clearly taken root in Brazil, there continues to be conceptual and institutional immaturity in its development. Governments and universities have failed to invest in student academic and financial support and develop institutional frameworks for implementation, goal setting and evaluation, thus endangering the programs that they have decided to support. In so doing, Professor Zoninsein proposes Brazil go beyond the current ad-hoc and decentralized affirmative action programs to a much-needed national strategy of affirmative action that includes policy analysis, institutional support and appropriate governance. He makes a strong argument about the inevitability of quotas throughout Brazil, which, if correct, suggests that serious and thorough policy development in this area is urgently needed.

Zoninsein believes that affirmative action should have three goals: distributive equity, nation building and economic growth. The first of these is clearly the main goal of social movement activists and the policymakers that designed affirmative action. Affirmative action has generally been thought of as a program to redistribute societal resources more fairly. On the other hand, the other two goals are rarely discussed. To his credit, Professor Zoninsein raises these issues.

As Zoninsein points out, affirmative action has implicitly affected Brazil’s national project although there is no concerted effort, as far as I can see, to use affirmative action to build a new kind of nation. By default, though, affirmative action based on race, may have put the last nail

---

\* Professor do Departamento de Sociologia da UCLA. E-mail: [telles@soc.ucla.edu](mailto:telles@soc.ucla.edu).

in the coffin of racial democracy. The new race-conscious affirmative action now makes race and explicit racial distinctions a new feature in the Brazilian nation. Racial democracy claimed *negros* were uniquely included in the Brazilian nation, although in practice they were mostly excluded. The new policies seek to explicitly include them and create a racial democracy in practice. However, by naming race and specifying who is a *negro*, the new nation no longer ignores race, which some scholars have lamented. Ignoring race, at least in ideology and law, was superior to the U.S.'s historical obsession with it and presumably allowed racial difference to also be ignored. But, in social practice, we know that racial differences were never ignored in Brazil. Indeed, the Brazilian nation now believes that it must acknowledge race and racial distinctions in order to combat racism.

There is now enough of a consensus that racial democracy does not exist, to get affirmative action policies instituted. Even among opponents of affirmative action, the racial democracy claim is rarely raised. The issue is whether affirmative action based on race should be used in defining public policy to promote disadvantaged members of society. The fact that it has been, shows how far Brazil has gone.

Whether affirmative action can contribute to economic growth is the most controversial of Zoninsein's three goals of affirmative action. Considering that roughly half of the Brazilian population is considered *negro* and is excluded from the middle class, may suggest that the inclusion of this segment can only help the economy. Convincing the Brazilian public, especially the middle class, that affirmative action contributes to economic growth, would surely contribute to its wider acceptance. But will it really help economic growth in its current or in another form? This may be the real acid test for quotas in Brazil. Zoninsein and other economists need to urgently make their case for linking affirmative action to quotas.

For affirmative action to be successful requires, as Zoninsein points out, more than redistributing admissions slots. Universities and the government need to invest resources to ensure that students admitted under quotas become as productive as those that are not so admitted. This includes financial assistance and programs to help quota students

overcome prior educational deficiencies. The goal then becomes to have an affirmative action policy in which graduates can continue to contribute to overall societal productivity.

Zoninsein claims that growing “social harmony” and as he says later “the legitimacy, stability and trust of democratic regimes” depends on generating distributive gains for blacks and improving income and investment opportunities. In this scenario, everyone wins through economic growth and affirmative action is therefore likely to be widely accepted. First of all, I question whether there is growing social harmony in Brazil. Rising crime and especially homicide rates are just one indication that this may not be true. Also, the implementation itself of affirmative action has caused new fissures in society, although at the juridical level, which is perhaps more benign than crime. It may be that since Brazilian society has discovered the importance of racism and racial discrimination, fissures around race are inevitable. The positive part of this is that blacks themselves are now more likely to demand inclusion, recognition and redress. Therefore, affirmative action for blacks is a sign of the government’s willingness to create racial justice. Without it, then, Brazil risks a further breakdown of social harmony. In terms of economics and foreign trade, as Zoninsein notes, Brazil risks international legitimacy as a democratic society and foreign investment is also threatened.

Regarding investment costs and institutional procedures of affirmative action, Zoninsein seems to support affirmative action because it “can be implemented at a far lower cost” than “an alternative social policy” of improvements in public primary and secondary education. I find this troubling since affirmative action will benefit only a small minority of blacks. Quotas will not affect most blacks because they have not or will not have completed secondary education. Thus, I find that both universal programs, especially improvements in basic education, and university affirmative action need to be implemented. The problem for most blacks is that they are stuck at the bottom of a very steep income hierarchy and educational inequality, as economists have demonstrated, is the prime determinant of income inequality. Unless the shape of the educational hierarchy improves, racial inequality, like overall income inequality, will continue to be great. Given that most Brazilians do not or will not have

access to universities, particularly public ones, affirmative action will continue to be a program for inclusion among elites. At the same time as university affirmative action, Brazil needs to invest in primary and secondary education, as Zoninsein later suggests.

Now that Brazil is going ahead with affirmative action and to continue to make positive gains in that direction, I would like to second Professor Zoninsein's call for creating a government institutional grant program, which would provide a central place for information and most importantly, financial resources from which universities could draw. The available funding is likely to be used more efficiently with such a program. Without such resources, affirmative action may fail and threaten, as Zoninsein notes, nation building and democratic consolidation.

Among its roles, such a government program should create models for programs that work including how to set appropriate goals in the university and how to link graduates with the labor market. Getting *negros* into the university is only a first step. The transfer of skills to the labor market is mediated by social networks and blacks need help to offset white advantages there. Finally, such a program should help find effective and viable ways to set standards for defining beneficiaries, which involves the tricky issue of Brazilian racial classification. For affirmative action to be successful in Brazil, we should heed Zoninsein's calls for showing how the economy may benefit and work to greater efficiency through centralization of resources.

*Recebido para publicação em julho de 2004.*