

THINKING BRAZIL

UPDATE NO. 17 - APRIL 2005

An Electronic Newsletter of BRAZIL @ THE WILSON CENTER

U
P
D
A
T
E



Woodrow Wilson
International Center
for Scholars

Race, Inequality and Education: *Challenges for Affirmative Action in Brazil and the United States*

There are striking similarities in the field of race relations in the United States and Brazil. Both are American nations with an immigration history that includes Africans brought as slaves and Europeans who arrived as settlers. Both racially diverse nations, seeking to counter the lingering effects of past historical injustices, have adopted public and private policies of affirmative action in an attempt to eliminate longstanding societal ills. There are differences,

however, not only in the histories of the two countries but also in the genesis of their affirmative action policies, their application, their treatment by the legal systems, and the roles placed by NGOs and other non-governmental political actors. These important issues were examined at an April 11 session sponsored by the Division of United States Studies and Brazil @ the Wilson Center. Assistance from the World Bank in Brasilia enabled panelists and participants to interact via live videoconference from Washington and multiple locations in Brazil.



Melissa Woods

Opening the session from Brasilia, **Ricardo Henriques**, Executive Secretary, Brazilian Ministry of Education, underscored the extent to which income gaps reflect levels of education, further asserting that an educational quota system is necessary in Brazil. This is particularly true for Afro-Brazilians, who account for an estimated 45% of Brazil's population but only 2% of its university students. Quotas, or "reserved seats", are one mechanism for reducing the gap, and Brazil recently

enacted a law setting aside 50% of the entrance spaces at public universities for Afro-Brazilians and indigenous peoples from disadvantaged socio-economic and educational backgrounds. The law also makes coursework in African Studies a requirement. Continuing, Henriques conveyed that Brazil recognizes the importance of preparation for college. In this light, the nation is developing new approaches to middle-school teaching, revising and increasing financing for the primary school level, and experimenting



Robert Cottrol speaks while participants look on in Washington and Brasilia

with methodologies for keeping Afro-Brazilian students in schools by, e.g., utilizing new technologies and enhanced tutoring. The goal is to provide basic schooling while promoting diversity and giving all students the benefit of different perspectives.

Philippa Strum, Director of the Division of U.S. Studies at the Woodrow Wilson Center, defined affirmative action as “programs that seek to remedy past discrimination.” She suggested that the creation of affirmative action programs in education also reflects a state of mind which recognizes that many white Americans have better qualifications for university admissions only because they have not had to contend with obstacles, such as poor health care and the lack of encouragement to exceed academically and to apply to prepare for college, faced by most members of minority groups. Strum cited statistics from 1972 to demonstrate the educational and income disparities that existed in spite of the elimination of formal discrimination under the Civil Rights Act of 1964. That evidence convinced private and public entities of the need for the kinds of affirmative action programs that then began to be put into place. Citing more recent statistics as indicative of the

progress that has been made since then, Dr. Strum argued that much remains to be accomplished and the need for affirmative action still exists.

Robert Cottrol, Harold Paul Green Research Professor of Law and Professor of History and Sociology, George Washington University, explained some of the differences between affirmative action programs in the two countries. The United States uses a preference model, making race one of many subjective factors that influence university admissions decisions. Race is categorized on the basis of the “one drop” rule. In Brazil, however, where there are many more terms (such as *moreno*, *mestizo*, and *negro*) to designate one’s heritage, racial assignment is more elastic and less easily quantifiable. Public universities in the United States, which are organs of the states, run the gamut from non-competitive to elite admitting students by whatever criteria each state prefers. Considered the country’s best, Brazil’s public universities, which are all run by the federal government, rely exclusively on the challenging *Vestibular* exam for admission. Cottrol suggested three factors for the disadvantages some minorities face when applying to elite schools: (1) inadequate secondary education; (2)

poverty and households with limited education; (3) the psychological burden of exclusion. Noting that courts in the United States have held affirmative action to be legitimate only as a means for diversifying institutions rather than as a remedy for overall societal exclusion, he commented, I believe it is better to view it as a remedial model.

Ivete Sacramento, President, Bahia State University, President of the State University of Bahia (UNEB), offered a compelling look at social inclusion and policy. The first Afro-Brazilian woman dean of her university, Sacramento stressed the influence of President Luis Inácio Lula da Silva's policies regarding social inclusion in Bahia, where 85% of the population is black. Programs designed to target this population have been developed in over 2,000 communities throughout the state and include educational and work initiatives. Dr. Sacramento noted that studies conducted by UNEB during the last decade had shown that there was minimal representation of Afro-Brazilians and a marked preference given to those who had attended elite private schools. The greatest challenge for rectifying discrimination, she said, may be the conceptualization of race and the use of racial terminology, because many Afro-Brazilians do not self-identify as black.

A veteran of one of the affirmative action cases decided most recently by the U.S. Supreme Court (*Gratz v. Bollinger*), **Melissa Woods**, Assistant

Counsel, NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund, described the racial situation in the U.S. as one of willful neglect. While society-wide legal discrimination existed in the U.S. for hundreds of years, courts have held that affirmative action is unconstitutional in the absence of a showing of a specific pattern of discrimination by the relevant institution. She noted that the major civil rights legislation of the 1960's was passed only following violence, and insisted that the future of racial equality in the United States depends on people reminding each other both of the past and of continuing injustices. Revealing yet another difference between nations, Professor **Jose Jorge Carvalho**, University of Brasilia, pointed out that while the United States acknowledged segregation as a wrongdoing in the early 1900's, Brazil's elite has insisted that racism and discrimination never existed in that country. It will be interesting, he added, to see if the international image consciousness of the Brazilian elite affects that view.

Wrapping up the conference, participants called for continued discussion of affirmative action programs in the two countries, expanding to include the social circumstances in which these initiatives are framed. There was a general consensus that further examination could allow each country to benefit from learning about the other's successes and failures in this important policy arena.



Thinking Brazil Update is an electronic publication of *Brazil @ the Wilson Center*. This project is founded on the conviction that Brazil and the U.S.-Brazilian relationship deserve to receive better attention in Washington. Brazil's population, size, and economy, as well as its unique position as a regional leader and global player fully justify this interest. In response, and in keeping with the Center's mission to bridge scholarly research and public action, *Brazil @ the Wilson Center* sponsors activities designed to create a "presence" for Brazil in Washington that captures the attention of the policymaking community. *Brazil @ the Wilson Center* is grateful for the support of AES, ADM, and the Alcoa Foundation.

For more information please refer to www.wilsoncenter.org/brazil or email to brazil@wwic.si.edu