

CRISES OF INEQUALITY

Shifting Power for a
New Eco-Social Contract

● SPOTLIGHT

From affirmative action to collective action: Confronting legacies of racism in Brazil

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Brazil is one of the most unequal countries in the world. This inequality was produced in a historical process through the control of various forms of capital—economic, political, cultural, educational, military, technological and symbolic—by a specific social group: white, rich, heteronormative men.¹ Inequality has been further exacerbated by patriarchal norms (machismo), institutional patrimonialism and structural/institutional racism.² In this Spotlight I look specifically at racism.

Racism is not an anomaly in the Brazilian reality; it is not something dysfunctional, something to be overcome through institutional advances. It is the defining element of social, economic, cultural and educational relations established in Brazilian society. In the early days of Portuguese colonization in the 1500s, white men were granted privilege and access to wealth by the state, receiving land, titles of nobility and power over institutions. This process continued after independence in 1822 and well into the period of the Brazilian Republic. Today, the family, the state, market structures and even many civil society organizations operate based on the normalization of this white dominance.

The reproduction of inequality in Brazil depends on the premise of an alleged meritocracy: those who are in high social and economic positions have attained them because of their competence and talents. With this markedly ideological premise, Black Brazilians—who make up 55 percent of the country's total population—have not had (and continue not to have) proportional representation in universities, the judiciary, diplomatic posts, management or similar positions of power.³ For example, among Brazil's 500 largest companies, less than 5 percent of executives are Black; in the judiciary, only about 16 percent of judges are mixed race and less than 2 percent

are Black. At the same time, almost 70 percent of Brazil's 750,000+ prison population is Black.

Racist logic prevails in relation to migrant populations as well, where white migration—especially North American and European—has been historically seen as positive and valued by dominant groups as part of the logic of the whitening of local society. At the same time, Latin American and African migration is often viewed with contempt and distrust by dominant groups. In the case of Haitian migrants, who make up the largest group of Black migrants in Brazil, the discrimination is even more severe as it is worsened by the stigmatization of Haiti as a country marked by poverty, political instability and natural disasters.

Fortunately, in the last two decades, a significant portion of civil society and non-governmental organizations committed to broadening democratic and citizenship rights in Brazil have understood that, in order to overcome inequality in all its dimensions, the material and symbolic consequences of racism must be treated as defining elements of the political agenda. The institutional and power structures that fuel racism must be transformed.

Some steps toward achieving this have been made, beginning with the implementation of affirmative action policies in federal institutions in the early 2000s. Similarly, universities, the judiciary and electoral processes have begun to establish quotas for Black and Indigenous participation. This racial and ethnic diversity—the presence of empowered members of historically marginalized communities in the daily life of institutions—beyond addressing long-standing injustices, is also strategic in that it makes space for new practices and perspectives for overcoming structural racism. Still, affirmative

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action must also reach the job market: Black youth, upon graduating from university, must have the same opportunities to reach top positions in the private sector as their white counterparts. Several large Brazilian companies have been voluntarily implementing strategies in this direction.⁴

Another important step to address these inequalities is the improvement of urban infrastructure (schools, health facilities, water, sanitation, roads, energy and Internet), provision of other services (financial, cultural or legal), and income transfer programmes benefitting marginalized territories, which have historically been secondary recipients of these policies. More progressive governments such as that of the Workers' Party (Partido dos Trabalhadores, PT) have followed an agenda leading in this direction through actions that are deemed an “inversion of priorities” of what historically has been the focus of Brazilian policies, just as they have sought to expand credit opportunities for Black entrepreneurs. Indeed, the state continues to play a strategic role in guiding the creation of public policies that expand the rights of peripheral and marginalized populations.

However, it is also true that the PT governments which held power from 2003 to 2016—the year when the constitutional coup to overthrow President Dilma Rousseff was orchestrated by the National Congress—were somewhat contradictory in their reform policies. On the one hand, they achieved great success in reducing poverty, bringing tens of millions of people into the labour market and expanding access to universities and technical schools, among other policies geared toward marginalized populations. They also opened space for civil society organizations to carry on their struggles for affirmative action. On the other hand, they were less successful in reforming the legislature and the judiciary and did not implement substantive reforms regarding tax policy, electoral rules or other political reforms that would increase opportunities for political participation beyond the quota system mentioned above. Accordingly, the rich remained privileged by state structures and, paradoxically, became richer and more powerful without any constraints imposed on them through public or private institutions.

The simultaneous control of the state and of corporate structures by economic and political elites made way for the constitutional coup in 2016. This was followed by a process of delegitimization of politics, driven largely by the media and key actors in the judicial system. In 2018, this brought about the election of an authoritarian, far-right president who openly defends Brazil's brutal military dictatorship (1964–1985) and its use of torture. In this challenging context, it became evident that a democratic agenda capable of empowering poor and marginalized groups would only move forward because of citizen engagement. Since 2019, thousands of political education and mobilization collectives promoting social rights and democracy for all have been created. This activism has been a key instrument in disrupting the institutional practices that continue to drive inequality in Brazil.

Certainly, it will not be enough to simply defeat Bolsonaro in the 2022 presidential elections and remove the far-right political forces from office. It is necessary to build a new political project that confronts and subsequently dismantles the structures that reproduce inequality. This will be a challenge for generations to come, and the Instituto Maria e João Aleixo as well as a broad coalition of progressive civil society organizations and actors are completely embedded in it.

Bringing awareness to the phenomenon of Black migration in Brazil is a central component of this agenda. Brazilian racism makes no distinction between Black migrants and their Brazilian brothers: all are deprived of rights and treated unequally. In practice, however, Black migrants lack networks, information and resources to make their voices heard and claim their rights. Thus, encouraging the organization of migrants, strengthening their collective associations and seeking to construct a unified agenda and coalition that fights for their rights is essential. It is part of the global process of overcoming the still present effects of slavery, colonization and our subordinate integration in global markets.

This struggle belongs to all Brazilians, all migrants and all peoples around the world. For, in the name of human dignity, all people have the right to live in a world defined by justice, equality, solidarity and love. This last element, given the intolerance and hatred of fascist forces, has become an increasingly fundamental theme in the fight for our humanity. Love, in its various expressions, is a political issue: it should be granted the same importance as material themes and placed at the center of our agenda for social transformation. Without abandoning rationality, the defeat of barbarism requires new narratives, new gestures and new practices. May we learn to build these with love, intelligence, energy and a readiness to fight.

Endnotes

- ¹ Bourdieu 1995 [1987].
- ² Institutional patrimonialism refers to the state transfer of economic resources and means of power toward a privileged social group, for example through tax, credit and interest rate policies, investment in urban infrastructure, the allocation of services in affluent neighbourhoods and privileged access to public offices.
- ³ In Brazil, the category of “Black” encompasses the population that self-identified as “brown” or “Black” in the census carried out by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE) and other forms that ask for the respondent’s racial and/or ethnic identification.
- ⁴ Good examples are Banco Itaú, the largest private bank in Brazil, which has established a diversity committee with a focus on racial diversity. Natura, the biggest cosmetics enterprise in Brazil and one of the biggest in the world, as well as Magazine Luiza, a retail corporation, have similar arrangements.

References

- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1995 [1987]. *Coisas Ditas (Choses Dites)*. São Paulo: Editora Brasiliense (orig. Paris: Editions de Minuit).

