

The challenge of eliminating racism in Brazil: the new institutional framework for fighting racial inequality

Alexandre Ciconello

Racism is the key for one to understand how poverty and social inequalities are reproduced in Brazil and for overcoming them.

Mário Theodoro¹

Background

Recognising the existence of racism in Brazilian society

When asked about the role played by racism in maintaining racial inequalities in Brazil, Edna Roland,² a known militant of the black movement and Rapporteur General of the United Nations World Conference Against Racism, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance held in Durban, South Africa in September 2001, compared racism in Brazil to the Hydra of Lerna, a mythological, multi-headed creature. When you cut one of its heads off, other heads appear immediately in many other places and positions. According to her, racism is embedded in social relations in Brazil. Another feature of racism is that it changes over time, manifesting itself in different and new forms, generating the perverse structure of inequality prevailing between the black³ and white populations in the country, and keeping it intact.

Racism is identified and recognised by the Brazilian population. An opinion poll carried out by the Perseu Abramo Foundation in 2003 (Santos and Silva 2005) shows that 87 per cent of all Brazilians, both men and women, admit that there is racism in Brazil, but only four per cent of them acknowledge themselves as racists. These data lead us to two conclusions: first, that racism exists not as a result of awareness on the part of those who practise it, but rather as a result of its effects on those who suffer them; and second, that racism in Brazil, albeit perceptible, is always blamed on other people and never on the daily practices of its agents, making it even more difficult to eliminate.

Racism is one of the main structuring factors of social injustices that afflict Brazilian society and, consequently, it is the key for one to understand the lingering social inequalities that bring shame to the country. Half of the Brazilian population is black and most of it is poor. The unacceptable gaps that still separate black and white people in the 21st century can be felt in the microcosm of day-to-day interpersonal relations and are reflected in unequal access to goods and services, to the labour market, to higher education, and to civil, social,

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and economic rights. Other factors also explain the racial inequalities that still prevail in Brazil, such as the past history of exclusion and invisibility of the black population, its poverty, and particularly a scenario of denial of their rights after slavery was abolished in Brazil in 1888.

A Past History of Slavery

Brazil was the main destination of the international trade in African slaves between the sixteenth and the nineteenth centuries, and it was the last country in the Americas to abolish the slavery regime, in 1888.

It is estimated that 4.2 million men and women were violently forced to leave Africa and cross the Atlantic ocean under very precarious conditions to become slaves in Brazil. Up until the year 1800 Brazil had received 2.5 million African men and women, while for Spanish America as a whole the figure is less than one million during the same period. Circa 1872, 90 per cent of all slaves living in the country had been born in Brazil. In 1890, two years after the slavery regime was abolished, black people accounted for almost 50 per cent of the Brazilian population (Andrews 2004).

As opposed to other countries such as the USA and South Africa, Brazil never established a legal regime for segregating the black population, which according to various analysts shows that Brazil is an example of racial integration. At the same time, the mixing of races in this country was more frequent than in other places, and was used as a key argument for building a mythical social theory which later on developed into an ideology: that of racial democracy.

The myth of racial democracy, which is still present in the subconscious of Brazilians, constituted a sociological advance when it was created, back in the 1930s, when a 'scientific racism' was consolidating itself. However, at the same time that it acknowledges the role of black people in shaping the country, it makes the subordinate spaces that black men and women occupy in society commonplace, and it makes power relations between black and white populations invisible. The outcome is a society where racism and the resulting social inequalities are not revealed or discussed, and seems not to exist. The problem, they say, is not racism, but poverty; inequalities are not racial, they are social.

This invisibility is now beginning to change as a result of a redefinition of what it means to be a black person, with the aim of overcoming different negative stereotypes associated with being black that are reproduced in social relations and in the media. Appreciation of black people resulted in the subordinate social spaces occupied by the black population being challenged; in the labour market, in the national territory, and in symbolic representations of Brazilian society, among other spaces. This has improved the self-esteem of the black population and led to a higher awareness of racial inequalities fed by racism. This process, which has become more intense over the past 30 years, has made it possible to strengthen the black movement and to promote a more comprehensive public debate on racial inequalities.

Therefore, one cannot talk about overcoming racism and reducing racial inequalities without taking into account the protagonism of the black movement. The racial framework in Brazil maintains privileges and feeds social exclusion and inequalities. It produces a divided, unequal society where a black boy is much more likely to die from a violent death and to earn lower wages in the labour market than a white boy. A society where a black girl is more likely to die under the care of the public-health system than a white girl, and also more likely to die as a result of having less access to contraceptive methods, enhancing the possibility of pregnancy during adolescence and illegal abortions. Unequal opportunities, unequal possibilities, wasted talents.

Given these facts, the inaction of the state in relation to racism, prejudice, and to the inequalities resulting from them can no longer be accepted. This is a timely moment for exposing this social gap and implementing policies and actions to promote racial equality in the country. Brazil will never

become a truly democratic, free and fair state if racism is not eradicated from the country, allowing the black population to be integrated into society as an empowered group and not as one relegated to historically subordinate spaces.

The racial component of social inequalities in Brazil

Brazil is an extremely unequal country. Ranked as a middle-income country, Brazil is marked by such high-income inequalities that significant sectors of its population live in poverty while a minority keeps most of the national wealth. According to official data, Brazil is one of the ten most unequal countries in the world, where the richest 20 per cent keep 63.2 per cent of the national income and the poorest 20 per cent keep only 2.4 per cent of it (UNDP 2005, p. 271).

Racism is an important element in understanding the dynamic of this unequal framework: the small fraction of the population with a high income is essentially white; at the other extreme, most Brazilian men and women who live in poverty are black. A particularly important consideration is that although living conditions have improved significantly for the two population groups in recent decades, the gap between black and white people is still large and stable over the years. Things are getting better for the population at large, but black people are always disadvantaged in relation to white people.

In 2005, the black population accounted for 49.6 per cent of the Brazilian population, totalling 92 million people whose living conditions are usually unacceptable. According to the Institute for Applied Economic Research (IPEA):

'black people are born with lower weight than white people, are more likely to die before the age of one and are less likely to attend a day-care center. Their school repetition rates are also higher, as a result of which many of them drop out of the school system with a lower schooling than white people. More black young people die from a violent death than white youths and are less likely to find a job. When they do find a job, their wages are less than half those paid to white people, leading them to retire earlier with a lower pension, if they retire at all. During all of their lives, they are forced to rely on the worst health care system available in the country and end up living less and in greater poverty than white people'.
(IPEA 2007, p. 281).

Racism is perceived and experienced in the daily lives of black people: in elite shopping malls, where black people are forced to work as security guards or janitors and are seldom employed in jobs where they interact with customers; in television programmes, where black men and women, when they appear at all, are always shown in subordinate positions (as maids, muggers, prostitutes, street boys, security guards); in racist jokes and expressions which are commonplace in white family gatherings. Expressions such as 'I am not a racist, but I would never let my son or daughter marry a black person' are common in Brazil. We are talking about millions of attitudes and decisions that are taken on a daily basis within a social and symbolic framework in which the colour of one's skin is a major determinant.

Racial inequality in figures

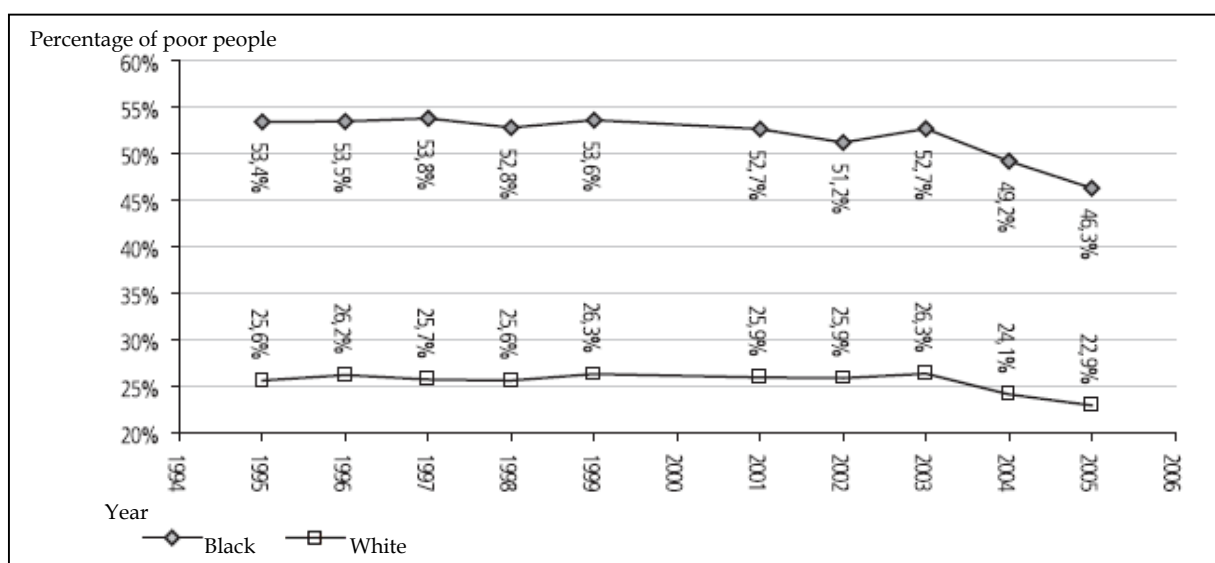
Since the early 2000s, more and more official statistical data is available on racial inequalities in Brazil in different areas, such as education, the labour market, poverty, health, and violence. The black movement contributed significantly to this process by pressing the government, think tanks, and research institutes to produce data of this kind. The process of briefing and preparing the Brazilian delegation to attend the 3rd World Conference Against Racism, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance in 2000 and 2001 also made it possible to reveal, in the light of social indicators, the gaps which separated and still separate black people from white people.

Poverty

Two-thirds of poor people in Brazil are black people. Furthermore, 46.3 per cent of the black population lives below the poverty line; this is twice as high as for the white population (22.9 per cent, as shown in Figure 1). As mentioned above, it can be seen that the gap between black and white people remains stable over the whole time period.

Another indicator that also exposes the abyss between black and white people, is the UNDP Human Development Index (HDI). In its 2005 report,⁴ apart from presenting the average indicator for Brazil, 0.766, UNDP calculated the HDI separately for the black and the white population. If each of these two groups formed a different country, the gap between them would be 61 positions. The white Brazil would have a high HDI, 0.814, and would be ranked in the 44th position in the world ranking. The black Brazil, in turn, would have an average HDI of 0.703 and would be ranked in the 105th position, behind countries such as Paraguay.

Figure 1: Percentage of the population living below the poverty line by colour/race - Brazil, 1995–2005



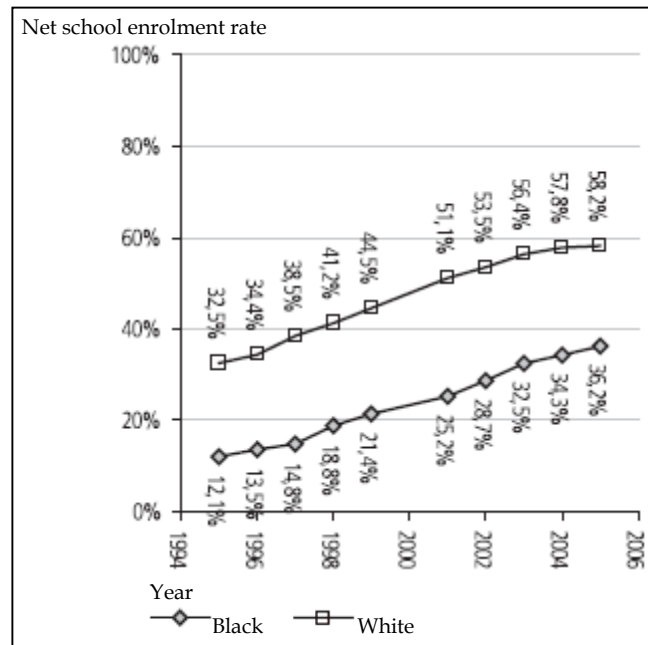
Source: National Household Sample Survey (PNAD) 1995–2005, data documented by IPEA (2007, p. 289)

Education

In the field of education, racial inequalities can be felt in different ways. For example, considering the situation in terms of access to the school system and the number of students who remain in the system, as measured by the net enrolment rate,⁵ huge differences can be observed between black and white students in secondary education, which can be as high as 22 per cent, as shown in Figure 2. The most striking feature of this situation is the stability of inequality over time: although enrolment rates have increased in recent years for both black and white students, the gap between these two population groups remains constant. Despite improvements observed in education in general, it has not been possible so far, to promote the inclusion of the black population in the educational system as expected – as a result of prejudice and racism.

The data shown in Figure 2 also reveal that about two of every three black youths (64 per cent) have dropped out of secondary education or are becoming increasingly old for the grades they are in at lower educational levels, i.e. 16-year-olds still in primary education (IPEA 2007, p. 284). Among white youths, this percentage is much lower, namely 42 per cent.

Figure 2: Net enrolment rates in secondary education by colour/race – Brazil, 1995–2005



Source: PNAD 1995–2005, data documented by IPEA (2007, p. 284)

In higher education, the situation is even worse. In 2005, only 6.6 per cent of all black young people were attending a university; among white young people, this percentage was about three times higher (19 per cent). The information available shows that there are guaranteed places for the white population in Brazilian universities, which are regarded as elite institutions that train professionals who will reproduce, in society, elements of prejudice and stereotypes that play a strong role in reproducing racial inequalities. The Brazilian universities are spaces shielded against the low-income population and, particularly, against the black population. Is not by chance that initiatives to establish quotas for male and female black students in universities are strongly criticised by journalists who studied in these universities, which are almost exclusively attended by the white elite.

Violence

Brazil is an extremely violent country. Each year, approximately 50,000 people are assassinated. The murder rate is one of the highest in the world: 26.7 homicides for every 100,000 people in 2004. In West European countries and in the USA, this rate ranges from three to six homicides per 100,000 people (IPEA 2005 and IPEA 2006). Once again, the situation here is much worse for the black population. According to data provided by IPEA (2006, p. 80), the murder rate for black people, 31.8 per 100,000 people, was about twice as high as the one registered for the white population (18.4) in 2005, and in the north-east region – one of poorest regions of the country – the murder rate for black people was three times higher than the one for white people.

It should be noted that when sex, race, age, and schooling are correlated, black youths aged from 18 to 24 years old with up to seven years of schooling are much more likely to be killed than other population groups. In the Federal District, for example, where the Brazilian capital is located, 'the murder rate for this group is 257.3 homicides per 100.000 population, almost 10 times higher than the one for all the Brazilian population and three times higher than the one for white people of the same age, sex and schooling – 79.3' (IPEA 2006, p. 80).

This shocking reality has long been denounced by the black movement, by artists living in the outskirts of big cities, by rap singers and by the hip-hop movement: Brazil is experiencing a true

'genocide of black youths'. In one of the songs on their CD called *Sobrevivendo no inferno* (surviving in hell), one of the most famous rap bands in Brazil, *Racionais MC*, says that:

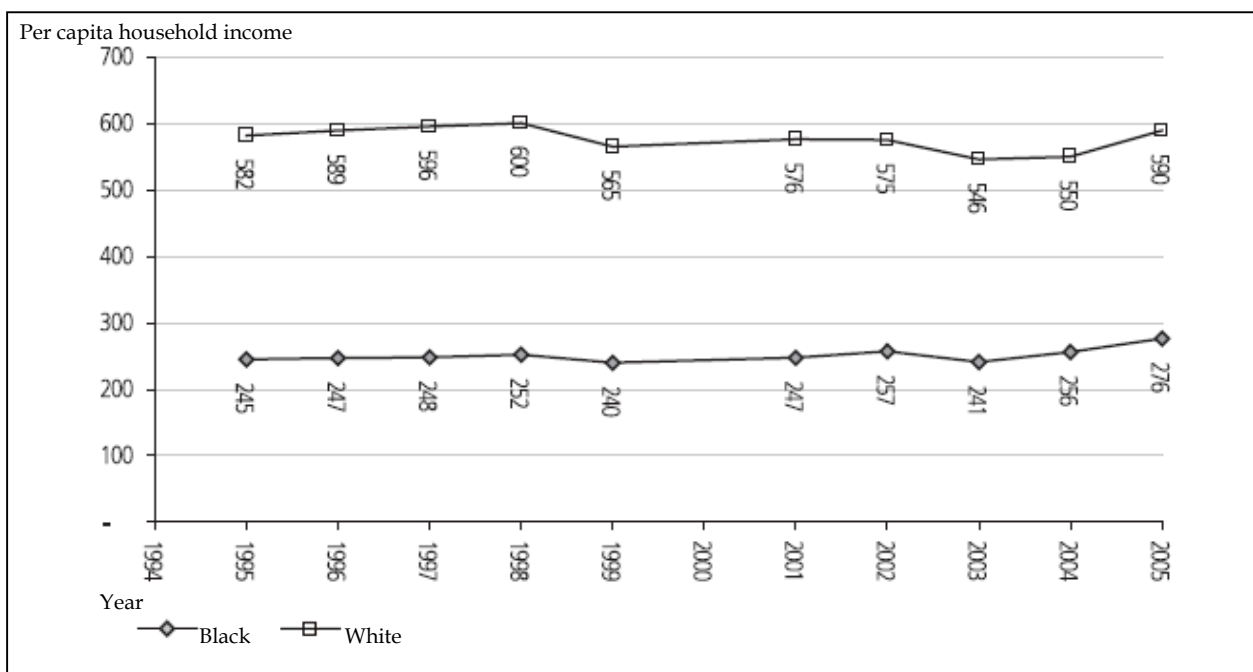
'60 per cent of all young people living in outskirts of big cities without a criminal record have suffered police violence. Of each 4 people killed by the police, 3 are black people. In Brazilian universities, only 2 per cent of the students are black. Every 4 hours a black youth dies from a violent death in São Paulo. This is your black cousin speaking, another survivor'.

Labour market

Educational performance is a key factor for inclusion in the labour market. Beyond simply generating income, the labour market is a privileged space for socialising and for accessing information and knowledge. In Brazil, 76 per cent of the income earned by families comes from labour (IPEA 2007, p. 286). However, the black population enters the labour market with a disadvantage, i.e. fewer years of schooling in relation to the white population, not to mention the quality of the education it gets.

In Brazil, black people earn, on average, half the income earned by white people (see Figure 3). The lower schooling level of black workers explains much of this difference; however, this gap is largely due to racism and prejudice. According to IPEA estimates, in a comparison between black and white workers with similar features in terms of age, occupation, education, location, and sex made in 2005, discrimination in the labour market was seen to be the cause of 40.1 per cent of income differences between white and black workers (IPEA 2007, p. 287-8).

Figure 3: Income from main job by colour/race - Brazil 1995-2005



Source: PNAD 1995-2005, data documented by IPEA (2007, p. 287)

Observation: The black population is composed of blacks and mulattos.

The available statistical information exposes a reality that most Brazilians refuse to acknowledge, revealing a huge gap in our society, where half of the population live as second-class citizens occupying predetermined and subordinated spaces as a result of being black and historically excluded. The different graphs presented here show that in relation to poverty, education, or the labour market, we have two parallel worlds that never cross one another. The data show that

universal social policies have not been sufficient, in themselves, to eliminate racial inequalities. These policies should be complemented by affirmative actions designed to fight racism and racial prejudice. There is a strong correlation between education (in terms of access, quality, and retention), the labour market, access to goods and social services, and violence. It is a vicious circle whereby inequality is reproduced and privileges are maintained, turning Brazil into one of the most unequal countries in the world. In addition, it produces and reproduces a hierarchies in society based on the colour of one's skin, making it much more difficult to eliminate poverty. The prejudice prevailing in Brazilian society in relation to poverty is associated with black people. It is a difficult obstacle to overcome, even by climbing the social ladder. This situation generates tension and outrage, as expressed by Flávio Jorge, director of the Perseu Abramo Foundation and of CONEN (National Coordinating Committee of Black Entities), 'racism in Brazil will not be cordial any longer'.⁶

The role of the black movement in denouncing racism and inequalities

In Brazil, the black movement has been a major protagonist in the struggle against racism and the huge gap that separates black and white men and women. It is made up of organisations, forums, networks, and groups (both formal and informal) of black men and women, which, albeit very diverse and plural, are mainly focused on fighting racism and eradicating racial inequalities.

The black movement is one of oldest movements in Brazil. There are many historical reports of episodes of resistance led by slaves in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries. Among them, special mention should be made of the example of the *quilombos*, i.e. communities of descendants of black runaway slaves set up in rural areas. These communities still exist today and after the promulgation of the constitution of 1988, they were ensured the right to own the land they occupy. The abolitionist movement of the nineteenth century, which fought to put an end to slavery, is another example of the historical struggle of the black population for its emancipation. In 1931, in response to the utter neglect and exclusion to which the black population was relegated when slavery was abolished, the Brazilian Black Front was established. It is estimated that this Front had more than 100,000 affiliates at one point. It was the first large organised political movement of the black population. It was persecuted and finally closed down in 1937, when the so-called New State, an authoritarian political regime, was established in Brazil.

Another major landmark in the struggle against racism was the establishment, in 1978, of the Unified Black Movement (MNU). When the military dictatorship was at its peak, black men and women took to the streets to demand measures against acts of racism and the murder of a black factory worker.

The year 1988 was key in Brazilian contemporary history, as it marked the re-establishment of the Democratic Rule-of-Law State – with the official proclamation of the new Federal Constitution – and, consequently, of equal rights and the criminalisation of racism. This was also the year of the 100th anniversary of the end of slavery in Brazil and one in which the struggle against racism gained momentum, as the state began to recognise its historical inaction and was pressured to take measures to promote racial equality.

Special mention should be made of the Zumbi dos Palmares March against Racism and for Citizenship and Life in 1995, on the occasion of the 300th anniversary of the death of the country's main black leader. The march brought together over 30,000 black militants in the capital of the country, who presented a list of revendications to the president of the republic.

Today, the black movement uses many different strategies expressed in many organisations and networks, such as the MNU, the National Coordinating Committee of Black Entities (CONEN), and the Union of Black People for Equality (UNEGRO). It should be highlighted that the black women's movement has been exposing the perverse consequences of the combination of race and gender inequalities in Brazil. Two groups that stand out in this struggle are the Brazilian Black Women's Network (AMNB) and the National Forum of Black Women (FNMN).

The main role of the black movement, besides raising the awareness of the Brazilian population of the effects and causes of racism, is to propose and claim concrete measures to overcome racial inequalities from the Brazilian state and society at large. The movement has been facing many difficulties (i.e. insufficient resources, lack of co-ordination, and links around a common project), but the main obstacle for the anti-racist movement and for the organisations and individuals engaged in it is the ideology of racial democracy. Many people criticise those who defend the rights of the black population, accusing them of importing racial problems (from the USA and South Africa) to Brazil that did not exist in the mixed-race Brazilian society. The very 'race' category began to be challenged, particularly by the media, according to which it is impossible to determine who is a black man or woman in the country.

Therefore, in parallel to the implementation of public policies, the struggle against racial inequalities requires a communication battle against stereotypes, prejudice, and ideologies, which deny the existence of racism.

'Where do You Keep Your Racism' Campaign⁷

One of the strategies adopted by the black movement is to pinpoint racism not only in the Brazilian state, but also in all its social organisations, such as political parties, unions, professional associations, NGOs, and others. The establishment of alliances and the recognition that the struggle against racial inequalities must necessarily involve society at large has been slowly bringing together new political forces around the fight against racism.

In this regard, the campaign 'Where do You Keep Your Racism?', which was launched in 2004, deserves special mention. Carried out by the *Diálogos Contra o Racismo* (Dialogues Against Racism) group, its objective is to stimulate a dialogue and an exchange of ideas; encourage changes in thoughts, habits, and attitudes; and stimulate a collective feeling of commitment to the principle of promoting equality. The path selected is one of revealing the profile of racial inequality in Brazil, exposing and discussing different expressions of racism, and proving that all of them are harmful, destructive, and contagious.

Dialogue Against Racism is an initiative that brings together over 40 civil-society organisations around the struggle for racial equality in Brazil, most of which do not belong to the black movement. The initiative emerged from the realisation that the problem of racial prejudice, which is invisible to many people, particularly to those who do not suffer its effects, should be dealt with by Brazilian society as a whole – and not only by black people and their organisations.

The role of the state in maintaining and overcoming racism

Oppression, poverty, and invisibility

The Brazilian state has to take historical responsibility for building and maintaining the huge racial inequalities prevailing in the country today. The state legitimised the slavery regime by institutionalising and legalising the traffic of African men and women and letting them be treated as merchandise by their white captors. After slavery was abolished, the state promoted a policy deliberately intended to 'whiten' the population by providing incentives for Europeans to immigrate to Brazil. The ideological justification of this policy was that the white 'race' was superior, based on the so-called scientific racism, which prevailed in those days. According to Andrews (2004, p. 118), the dominant ideology promoted the idea that 'In order to be civilized, Latin America would have to become white'.

After the end of slavery, late in the nineteenth century, no policy was implemented to include free black men and women and former slaves in the labour market. They were not allowed to work in agriculture or in the country's incipient industrial sector, as European immigrants took jobs in these sectors. Therefore, the absolute majority of black workers were relegated to subsistence sectors in the

economy and to precarious and low-paid activities. This is the origin of social exclusion and the informal sector.

It should be emphasised that the main policy adopted by the state in relation to the black population was one of repressing and controlling them through law enforcement. The most visible aspect of the actions of public authorities in relation to black men and women in Brazil has always been police force and violence, control, and forced submission.

The 'whitening' policy was softened and replaced by the ideology of miscegenation (mixing of races) and racial democracy in the 1930s, contributing to making the public debate on racism and inequality invisible and turning subordinate positions and violence against the black population into commonplace phenomena. At the same time, the state continued to repress – particularly during the authoritarian periods of the New State (1937–1945) and the military dictatorship (1964–1985) – the black movement and any political group which dared to challenge this 'paradise of racial integration on Earth,' as the Brazilian government and some intellectuals described Brazil in international forums. The racial issue and the potential 'racialisation' of social conflicts in Brazil were always taboo in the heart of Brazilian society. This situation would only change after the black movement began to press for actions in the 1970s and 1980s, in the wake of the country's redemocratisation process.

The state recognises the existence of racism and racial inequalities

The year of 1988 was a landmark in Brazil's redemocratisation process. This was the year of the promulgation of in which the Federal Constitution was promulgated and nicknamed the 'Citizen Constitution', after two years of intense debates involving many social organisations and movements. That was when the Brazilian state recognised, for the first time, the existence of racism, and took concrete measures to deal with it by establishing principles (equal rights) and laws (criminalisation of racist practices) and promoting an appropriate culture (recognition of the influence of black people in shaping Brazil).

Still in 1988, the first institutional framework of the federal administration exclusively designed to address issues related to the black population – the Palmares Cultural Foundation – was created with the purpose of 'preserving cultural, social and economic values derived from the influence of black people in shaping Brazilian society' (art. 1 of Federal Law n. 7668/88). For the black movement, this was an appropriate moment for denouncing and criminalising racism (although very few judicial actions were taken and very rarely were convictions registered). It was also an appropriate moment to redefine what being 'black' was all about and to promote the culture and history of the black population.

In response to the March of Zumbi dos Palmares against Racism and for Equality and Life in 1995, the federal administration created inter-ministerial working groups to draw up proposals for fighting racial inequalities through public policies. This still incipient institutional framework, added to the constant pressure from the black movement, and to the production of an increasing number of academic studies and official statistical data on racial inequalities (mainly data produced by IBGE and IPEA), led to gradual changes in the federal public administration, as a result of which the actions carried out by the ministries of health, education, justice, and rural development began to take into account the racial issue (Jaccoud and Beghin 2002).

A further step was taken during the preparatory process for the 3rd World Conference Against Racism that was held in 2001 in Durban, South Africa. Late in 2000, the National Committee for Preparing the Brazilian Participation to Durban was set up, bringing together government and civil-society representatives. This committee stimulated debates on the issues the conference building the Brazilian position, in a participatory manner, through seminars and workshops held throughout the country. The result of this preparatory process was significant participation of Brazilian men and women in the Durban conference: over 600 representatives from the government and civil society. The

person assigned to act as Rapporteur-General at the World Conference was a Brazilian militant, Edna Roland, the founder of a respected black women's organisation, *Fala Preta*.

Immediately after the conference of Durban, in October 2001, the Brazilian federal administration created the National Council Against Discrimination (CNCD), the first permanent council or collegiate institution made up of government and civil-society representatives with the mission of proposing, following up on, and evaluating affirmative public policies designed to promote equality and to protect the rights of individuals and social and ethnic groups affected by racial discrimination and other forms of intolerance.

All these small changes in the state framework towards recognising racial inequalities, besides the Declaration and Action Plan issued by the World Conference Against Racism, made it possible to foster the institutionalisation of policies for promoting racial equality in Brazil, and paved the way for further advances, which nevertheless were still insufficient, as will be described below.

Creating a new institutional framework for promoting racial equality

The election of the Workers' Party (PT), a historical ally of social movements in the struggle for redemocratisation and for equal rights in Brazil, to the presidency of the republic in 2002 was seen as a favourable opportunity for the black movement. In response to the demands of the black movement, the recently inaugurated federal government created SEPPIR (Special Secretariat for the Promotion of Racial Equality Policies) and CNPIR (National Council for the Promotion of Racial Equality). Another major advance was the inclusion for the first time in the country's history of a challenge specifically focused on reducing racial inequalities in the government's Multi-Year Plan (2004–2007).⁸

With the status of a ministry, SEPPIR reports directly to the Office of the President of the Republic. It is an executive agency in charge of defining and linking actions designed to promote racial equality in the federal government. The CNPIR is a consultative collegiate institution made up of an equal number of civil-society and government representatives (20 of each) in charge of proposing policies to fight racism and racial discrimination and to reduce racial inequalities, besides ensuring social control of these policies.

The process involved in holding the First National Conference on the Promotion of Racial Equality, in 2005, was another important advance. It involved over 90,000 participants in the many different (municipal, state, and national). During the meeting, just over 1,000 proposals for actions were presented that will be used as the basis for drawing up the National Plan for the Promotion of Racial Equality, not completed yet. The Second Conference is scheduled to be held in 2008. The process of the conferences is seen as a strategic action to ensure the participation of civil society in building consensus and developing proposals for public policies with the aim of overcoming racism in the country.

The creation of SEPPIR resulted in the multiplication of similar institutional bodies at local level: many co-ordinating boards, advisory bodies, and secretariats for promoting racial equality were created in different states and municipalities. Taking advantage of this movement, SEPPIR took the initiative to set up the Intergovernmental Forum for the Promotion of Racial Equality (FIPIR), whose goal is to 'foster continued actions involving the three governmental spheres (federal, state and municipal spheres) with the aim of linking, qualifying, planning, carrying out and monitoring actions designed to ensure the implementation of the policy for promoting racial equality'.

Finally, special mention should be made of the promulgation and enforcement of Law n. 10,639/2003, which included Afro-Brazilian History and Culture in the school curriculum as a compulsory subject, covering the history of Africa and of Africans, the struggle of black people in Brazil, the Brazilian black culture, and the role of black people in shaping national society, shedding light on the contributions of black people in the social, economic, and political arenas.

Enhanced presence of black people in decision-making spaces

An important change that happened under the administration of President Lula, which has been strongly praised by the black movement, is the enhanced presence of black men and women in high-ranking positions in the Brazilian government. As in television programmes, the presence of black people in high-ranking governmental positions had always been rare or non-existent. In an unprecedented decision, President Lula appointed five black people as ministers of state: Minister Benedita da Silva (Ministry of Social Assistance); Minister Gilberto Gil (Ministry of Culture); Minister Marina Silva (Ministry of Environment); Minister Matilde Ribeiro (SEPPIR) and Minister Orlando Silva Júnior (Ministry of Sports). The government also appointed Dr Joaquim Barbosa as justice of the supreme federal court, which is the highest court of appeals of the country.

These symbolic actions should be valued for their positive impact in changing the Brazilian collective mindset, which historically assigned black men and women to subordinate and under-privileged roles in society.

Despite these advances, particularly in terms of creating institutional mechanisms to deal with the racial issue, many challenges are yet to be faced:

1. A lack of general understanding in the state bureaucracy that the racial issue is a matter to be addressed by the state. This is the political-programmatic dimension of institutional racism (as we will be discussing below) that has been jeopardising SEPPIR's articulating and co-ordinating mission. It also explains why important norms created under previous federal administrations, which are still in force (such as a racial quota policy applied to the federal civil service) were never implemented in practice.
2. The proposal for the state to develop policies in favour of the black population is still a controversial issue for society, where the ideology of racial democracy still prevails. Politicians are reluctant to take more explicit positions in relation to promoting racial equality for fear that they could affect their public image and displease their voters, particularly because of the strong opposition of the media to any affirmative-action policy.
3. A third challenge lies in consolidating institutional mechanisms for fighting racial inequalities. For this purpose, SEPPIR and its equivalent public agencies in the states and municipalities must be provided with the necessary resources (human, financial, managerial) for empowering and enabling them to promote inclusive policies.

Obstacles preventing changes: institutional discrimination and the media

Institutional discrimination

Institutional discrimination is a major hurdle for eliminating racial inequalities and poverty in Brazil. Discriminatory practices are embedded in the way organisations are structured and define their internal procedures. An example of this unequal treatment can be perceived in the differentiated results of a policy designed to ensure universal and free-of-charge access to health-care services. According to data provided by IBGE, only 53.7 per cent of all black women aged 25 years old and over underwent a breast examination in 2004; for white women, this percentage was 71.3 per cent.

There are organisations that base their actions on the notion of institutional racism. The Program Against Institutional Racism is one of them, which defines the notion as:

'the failure of institutions and organizations to promote a professional service which is appropriate to all people, regardless of their colour, culture, racial or ethnic origin. It is expressed in discriminatory rules, practices and behaviours that are experienced daily in workplaces around the country as a result of ignorance, neglect, prejudice or racist stereotypes. In any situation, institutional racism always places people from discriminated racial or ethnic groups in a disadvantaged position for accessing benefits generated by the State and other organized institutions'.⁹

This programme is an important initiative implemented by a broad institutional network, which includes DFID, SEPIIR, the Ministry of Health, UNDP, and the Public Prosecutor's Office of Pernambuco through pilot actions carried out in the city halls of Recife/state of Pernambuco, Salvador/state of Bahia, and in the health-care system. According to the DFID representative in Brazil, Miranda Munroe, 'the decision of the British Government to support this initiative was based on the realization that persistent inequalities prevailing in the country were not caused by income inequalities only. Racial inequalities in Brazil actually keep people in poverty'.¹⁰

Institutional discrimination on the part of public authorities prevents universal policies from being egalitarian in practice; they benefit black men and women in a different way from that in which they benefit white people. According to Fernanda Lopes,¹¹ the former DFID co-ordinator of the above-mentioned programme, institutional racism operates through an interpersonal dimension – resulting in the fact that public services offered to the black population are inadequate and unequal – and also through a political-programmatic dimension, leading managers and politicians not to regard actions aimed at fighting racism and promoting racial equality as strategic actions, not to earmark public funds to them and, at the same time, to deny the existence of racism.

Another major initiative under way in Brazil – for fighting institutional discrimination in the labour market – is being carried out by the Public Prosecutor's Office for Labor Affairs through the National Coordinating Board for the Promotion of Equal Opportunities and Elimination of Prejudice in the Workplace. Its most exemplary action was proposing judicial actions against the five largest private Brazilian banks after a detailed investigation that confirmed the existence of discriminatory mechanisms for hiring, paying, and promoting black men and women in these organisations. These actions led to an agreement with the Brazilian Federation of Banks – FEBRABAN, which pledged to promote a racial-inclusion process in banking institutions that is being monitored by civil-society organisations, the Public Prosecutor's Office, and the Human Rights Committee of the Chamber of Representatives.

The Brazilian government should develop more initiatives of this kind and take more concrete actions to sensitise and train civil servants appropriately, reviewing discriminatory internal rules in public institutions which are not always written, but are experienced by civil servants in their daily work. More means should be available to communicate and disseminate information on the consequences of institutional discrimination on the provision of services by state.

The role of the media in maintaining negative stereotypes

The media is highly concentrated in Brazil. The main corporations of this industry – television and radio stations and the written press – are controlled by a handful of entrepreneurs with known links to political and economic authorities. The opinion of the population is strongly influenced by the media, particularly by television programmes.

According to a CONEN publication in April 2007, 'the image of black people which the media has built over time reinforced traditional stereotypes of the role of Afro-descendants in Brazilian society'. Black men and women are seldom seen in these programmes, in newscasts, or in advertisements. When Brazilian soap operas employ black men and women, which is not often, in most cases they play the part of maids, slaves, muggers, or loafers.

Apart from reproducing racist stereotypes, the media has, for the most part, opposed any affirmative-action policy for the black population, and discredited the discourse of the black movement and governmental initiatives in this area. One of the main Brazilian weekly magazines compared the adoption of racial quota policies in public universities to the Nazi regime and to apartheid in South Africa. According to the magazine:

'In all parts of the world where this was tried, even with very strong justifications, the results were disastrous. The worst case is that of the Nazi crazy experiences and the apartheid in South Africa. Both caused social turmoil and led to the creation of concentration camps and ghettos. The Nazis exterminated millions of people, mainly Jews, on the pretext of purifying their race...The racial policies being proposed for Brazil through legislation can lead to huge problems because they are based on a mistaken assertion: that Brazilian society is, in essence, racist. Nothing could be farther from the truth. After slavery was abolished, in 1888, no institutional barriers were imposed on black people in Brazil'. (Veja magazine, issue of the first week of June 2007).

Final considerations

As shown in this paper, racial discrimination can be largely blamed for the inequalities prevailing between black and white people in Brazil, as well as for social inequalities in general. These inequalities result not only from past discrimination, but also from active racial prejudice and stereotypes that legitimise discriminatory attitudes on a daily basis. The persistence of high racial inequality indices in the country jeopardises Brazil's democratic evolution and its actions to build a fairer, more united society.

In order to change this scenario and promote a diversity-based development model marked by an inclusive and equality-orientated culture, one should understand that racial inequality in Brazil results from a combination of different complex phenomena, such as racism, prejudice, racial discrimination, and even institutional discrimination. An effective state must join efforts with an active and strengthened society to face these phenomena. Interventions of different kinds are also required for this purpose, ranging from actions to repress racist practices to measures designed to promote appreciation for the black population, and a combination of universal social policies and affirmative policies.

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Alexandre Ciconello is lawyer, political scientist and human rights specialist.

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Notes

¹ Militant of the black movement, economist, university professor, and legislative adviser to the federal senate in an interview held in Brasília on 27 July 2007.

² Interview held in São Paulo on 9 July 2007.

³ The Brazilian Institute for Geography and Statistics (IBGE), an official agency of the Brazilian federal administration, as well as all other national information-producing agencies, adopts the procedure of establishing the self-declared racial/ethnic origin of its interviewees. The 'black' category adopted in this paper includes the mulatto or brown people.

⁴ UNDP (2005) 'Report on Human Development in Brazil – Racism, poverty and violence'.

⁵ Defined as the percentage of boys and girls attending the school system in the proper grade (IPEA 2007, p. 282).

⁶ In an interview held in São Paulo on 13 July 2007.

⁷ For more information see www.dialogoscontraoracismo.org.br.

⁸ The Multi-Year Plan (PPA) is the main strategic planning tool of the Brazilian state. It is prepared by the federal administration to be implemented over a four-year period, and describes all the programmes and actions to be carried out during this period.

⁹ Definition found on the website of the programme, www.combateaoracismoinstitutional.com

¹⁰ In an interview held in Brasília on 27 July 2007.

¹¹ In an interview held in Brasília on 8 August 2007.