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**DEBATING RACE-BASED AFFIRMATIVE ACTION POLICIES IN THE
U.S. AND BRAZIL OVER TIME: THE TRUMP-BOLSONARO ERA**

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1. Introduction

The United States and Brazil share plenty of historical similarities: They were the biggest European colonies in the Americas, both have had their native populations dominated and wiped out by overseas' powers and both have later instituted slavery systems relying on an extensive workforce imported from Africa. Also, in the nineteenth and twentieth century, the two countries welcomed a large number of European immigrants as a cheap labor force to ignite their industrialization. Since then, in the words of Edward Telles (2006, p.1), “the light-skinned descendants in the United States and Brazil have come to dominate their darker-skinned compatriots through discriminatory practices” creating racially stratified societies. Eventually, trying to reverse this scenario, both nations would come to adopt race-based affirmative action: public policies aiming to facilitate the access (and permanence) of persons belonging to racial minorities into public spheres.

The resemblances, however, do not go much further. In the U.S., with Jim Crow laws, black people were legally segregated and excluded from American democracy for more than half of the twentieth century. In Brazil, on the other hand, for most of the same century, there was no democracy at all, as the country was under dictatorial rule, and the post-slavery (alleged) guiding principle was one of “equality in the eyes of the law, regardless of race”. Demographically there are also disparities between the two nations: the percentage of black people, for example, is much smaller in American society, constituting a little more than 13% of the national population, according to data from 2019. In Brazil, black people constitute over half of the population (56%), according to data from the same year.¹ The processes and rationales behind the creation and implementation of race-based affirmative action and diversity-related policies in the U.S. and Brazil, though similar in some respects, were not the same – as they have mirrored these historical and demographic differences.

Recently, American president Donald Trump and Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro (elected in 2016 and 2018 respectively) stirred a wave of comparisons in public and academic discourse, with the latter frequently being portrayed as an almost identical “tropical version” of the first (Shear & Haberman, 2019). When it comes to race-based affirmative action policies, the two politicians resemble each other for rebuking them and threatening to dismantle them. Yet, considering the historical differences in race relations in each country, how similar can their reasons for opposing affirmative action really

¹ These numbers are available at census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/US/PST045219 (Black population in the USA is 13.4%), and sidra.ibge.gov.br/tabela/6403 (Black population is 56.1% in Brazil). In both countries Indigenous populations account for around 1% of the total.

be? This paper attempts to advance knowledge in this topic by examining how different race relations have shaped the debate about racial injustice and the arguments in favor of or against affirmative action in Brazilian and American societies. What are the fundamental concepts and arguments used to justify the making of such policies in each country? How did they change over time? What are the core ideas used to oppose these policies in the Trump-Bolsonaro era? How do they reflect the particularities of each context?

In order to answer these questions, the paper is divided in three parts. First, relying on the works of American sociologist Nancy Fraser (1995) and Brazilian political scientist João Feres Jr. (2007), I present three core concepts generally used to justify affirmative action against racial injustice. These concepts are: *redistribution* (or distributive justice), *recognition* (or valorization of diversity), and *reparation*. In the second part, I trace how different race relations and racial ideologies in the USA and Brazil ended up shaping, distinctively, the justifications for affirmative action policies in each nation over time. Last, relying on excerpts from interviews, tweets, and presidential documents, I look at the discourse of Trump and Bolsonaro on the matter of diversity-related policies, examining how they resemble or diverge from each other given their countries' historical similarities and differences.

Comparing race relations and affirmative action policies in the U.S. and Brazil is not uncommon and has been done before (e.g., Kaufmann, 2007; Moses, 2010). It is not my goal here to trace in detail how race relations developed historically in each country, nor to trace in detail which affirmative action policies were adopted or dismantled throughout the past decade and the consequences of such moves (for this, see Mesquita, 2021; Moraes Silva, 2021; Harpalani, 2021). The goal is to examine, in a comparative way, *the discourse* of those who have argued for and against affirmative action in both countries – with an emphasis on the discourse of Trump and Bolsonaro. In line with scholars such as Sugino (2020), as well as Silva and Larkins (2019), I argue that, although these presidents' rationales reflect notions that are historically and contextually different, they both rely on very similar discursive tools, particularly one of multiculturalism as a regime “that celebrates diverse people in a hodgepodge of happy plurality without meaningfully dismantling their oppression” (Sugino, 2020 p.200).

2. Key concepts behind affirmative action justification

According to Nancy Fraser (1995), racial injustice is particularly hard to solve. Fraser argues that there are two distinct understandings of injustice. The first is socioeconomic, originated by features of the economic structure (when people are exploited, marginalized, and deprived), and the second is cultural or symbolic, founded on social representation and interpretation (when people have their cultural manifestations stereotyped, disrespected, or not recognized). However, “economic injustice and cultural injustice are usually inter-imbricated so as to reinforce one another dialectically” (Fraser, 1995 p.72).

Racial injustice in the U.S. and Brazil is itself an example of such inter-imbrication. At first, race resembles a socioeconomic class: the injustice started in the times of slavery, when race strictly determined people’s place in the economic system, and lasted until nowadays, when higher-paid, higher-status jobs are mostly held by whites and low-paid, low-status positions are mostly held by non-whites. At the same time, another major aspect of racism is frequently the cultural devaluation of anything (music, clothing, religion) coded as non-white, by stereotypically depicting these things as criminal or primitive. Cultural and economic injustices reinforce one another in a sense that “cultural norms that are unfairly biased against some are institutionalized in the state and the economy; meanwhile, economic disadvantage impedes equal participation in the making of culture, in public spheres and in everyday life” (Fraser, 1995 p.72).

According to Fraser, solving socioeconomic injustice requires *redistribution*: reorganizing the economic system, for example by redistributing income or by transforming basic economic structures (such as division of labor). Solving cultural injustice, on the other hand, requires *recognition*: changing people’s symbolic representations and interpretations, by recognizing the uniqueness of a group and by valorizing its contribution to cultural diversity. As racial injustice is both economic and cultural, both solutions must be sought out simultaneously. The problem is that the claims for recognition call out for differentiation (to note, value, and respect a group for its distinctiveness), while claims for redistribution tend to try to undermine the differences (affirming that division of labor, for example, should be “blind” to race or gender). The dilemma posed by these contradictory aims is challenging, but it can be softened, as Fraser argues, especially if the measures adopted to achieve such aims attack and deconstruct the deeper structures that generate racial disadvantage.

The arguments in favor of affirmative action policies in American and Brazilian societies are rooted largely in these two concepts (*redistribution* and *recognition*) – either one at a time or combined, as it will be discussed later. Another concept that must be addressed before moving forward is the concept of *reparation*. According to Brazilian political scientist João Feres Jr. (2007), along with what he calls “distributive justice” and “valorization of diversity” (which are in essence the same as redistribution and recognition, respectively) an important idea behind the adoption of affirmative policies is that of compensating a certain social group for abuses and injustices perpetrated against them (or against their ancestors) in the past, as an act of restitution or indemnity (Feres Jr., 2007).² In the next section, I trace how these concepts interact with each other in the making of affirmative action policy, first in the United States, then in Brazil.

3. Justifying affirmative action over time: USA vs. Brazil

The term *affirmative action* refers to a body of public policies aiming to remove barriers or to facilitate access of persons belonging to minority groups into public spheres. It is an attempt to remediate the social gaps resultant from past or present discrimination. Examples of affirmative action can be the reservation of a percentage of spots for people belonging to minorities in universities or workplaces (or the addition of extra points in their admission exams), as well as the promotion of awareness-raising programs to foster better inter-group understanding. These actions are focused on promoting immediate equality of results and are usually established with the intent of being temporary (Oliven, 2007), serving as a first “push” in the direction of an ideal egalitarian and multicultural society. As it was mentioned earlier, though such policies are similar in countries like the USA and Brazil, the moral and instrumental rationales behind them are not the same in both nations – nor were they the same over time.

In the United States of America, after the end of slavery, blacks and whites lived in worlds apart. During the entire first half of the twentieth century, segregation between them was formalized through the legal apparatus in a way that the Supreme Court considered constitutional to have separated

² These are the recurrent rationales listed in literature, though they can be presented differently by different authors. Moses (2010), for example, divides them in only two groups: moral (i.e., compensate for past wrongdoing, valorizing diversity) and instrumental (i.e., help disadvantaged people, reach economic equality).

accommodations for black people in restaurants, hotels, parks, and public transportation, as long as the accommodations offered the same characteristics as the ones designated for whites (Oliven, 2007).

Prior to the civil-rights reforms that happened in the 1960s, this philosophy of “equal, but separated” built up a wall between races and established a rigid and visible classification of “us” and “them” as the dominant ideology of American race relations. After the reforms, according to Edward Telles, whites still dealt with blacks largely “by maintaining considerable social distance from them, whether through avoidance in residence, marriage, friendships, or elsewhere” (Telles, 2006 p.3), which resulted in the conservation of high levels of racial inequality.

The first time American policymakers debated the adoption of affirmative action was still in the 1960s. The Civil Rights Act from 1964, not only banned all kinds of discrimination, but it also granted the federal government power to implement positive measures that would remedy the harm done by segregation. The first main arguments favoring such measures were grounded in the concepts of *reparation* and *redistribution*: President Lyndon Johnson, talking about this matter in a speech from 1965 at Harvard University, argued that “you do not wipe away the scars of centuries by saying: now you are free to go where you want, and do as you desire”. Additionally, he stated that “you do not take a person who, for years, has been hobbled by chains and liberate him, bring him up to the starting line of a race and then say, ‘you are free to compete with all the others,’ and still justly believe that you have been completely fair” (Johnson, 1965). From these statements it is possible to capture the moral appeal to compensate black people for the social harm inflicted on them in the distant and recent past, as well as the defense of positive state intervention in the socioeconomic frameworks in order to make sure that black people would not be disadvantaged in the present due to their former segregation. President Johnson’s statement therefore advocated respectively for moral *reparation* and *redistribution* of economic-competitive tools.

The argument for reparation eroded with the passage of time – as victims grew older and memory was less heavy in the new generations – and so did the argument for distributive justice – as Ronald Reagan was elected in the end of the 1970’s dismantling many welfare programs and reducing the scope of affirmative action (Feres Jr., 2007). In response to the deterioration of these core arguments, the Black movement (now followed by other organized minority groups which also sought positive action, such as Latinos and native-Americans) brought up to the debate the concept that remains most prominent until nowadays: the one of proper *recognition* and valorization of cultural diversity,

advocating that the presence of individuals belonging to minorities in different spheres of public life is essential to promote multiculturalism and deconstruct stereotypes and prejudice. They claim that each group should be represented in universities and public spheres proportionally to their presence in society (Oliven, 2007). With that, there is a hope to achieve also distributive results, as the decline of prejudice would open new doors in the economic scenario.

In Brazil, after the end of slavery, the development of race relations took the opposite turn from the one taken in the USA. Rather than segregation, the Latin-American society built up a collective belief that Brazilians were, more than any other society, biologically mixed across races to the point that racial distinctions became unimportant (Telles, 2006 p.5). In other words, Brazilian traditional ruling racial ideology became one of a “racial democracy”, where there are no Black, White, or Indigenous, only “Brazilians”, a unitary result of the miscegenation of all races. The American bipolar model of “us” and “them” was radically rejected, and a hybrid model was adopted instead (Pagano, 2006). Racial mixture in Brazil was frequently more romanticized than real and, when real, it was often a heritage from the not-so-democratic “whitening ethos” founded in the late nineteenth and earlier twentieth century, when political leaders, prominent scientists, and intellectuals encouraged miscegenation in the hopes that the populations would grow whiter and whiter (Pagano, 2006). Anyhow, throughout most of the twentieth century, the classic tendency in Brazilian mentality was to deny the existence of any racial conflict.

If in the USA the concepts behind justification for affirmative action (reparation, redistribution, and recognition) emerged early (in the 1960s), took turns in prominence, and transformed themselves in time, in Brazil they gained traction in public discourse only recently (in the early 2000s), conflictually, and all at once. It was only after the end of the military dictatorship (in 1985) that black activists had enough room to articulate and advance their claims in terms of public policies. The National March against Racism, for Citizenship, and Life, attended by 30,000 protesters in Brasilia in 1995, as well as the presidency of Fernando H. Cardoso (1995-2002) – a social democrat who acknowledged Brazil’s nationwide racism – marked the beginning of a governmental anti-racism agenda and of the cooperation between the state and black movement leaders (Mesquita, 2021 p.50). With the arrival of the left-leaning Workers Party to the presidency, in 2003, support for the black movement’s claims grew even stronger and the debate about affirmative action laws finally made its way into Congress (Silva & Larkins, 2019).

When taking a careful look at data from the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics, it is easy to notice that the non-white population faces (and has always faced) great disadvantages. Despite being a numeric majority, black people are greatly underrepresented in leadership positions – while being overrepresented in unemployment, for example (Afonso, 2019). In 2002, when the HDI (Human Development Index) of white Brazilians and black Brazilians was measured separately, the results were quite discrepant, as the first group scored 0,814 (superior to Croatia) while the second scored 0,703 (equivalent to El Salvador and worse than Paraguay). Another revealing fact is that the homicide rate among white Brazilians from 20 to 24 years-old in 2005 was of 102,3 per hundred thousand inhabitants, while the rate among black Brazilians at the same age was of 218,5 (more than double) (Oliven, 2007 p.32). Additionally, black people are found in considerable larger number among the incarcerated population and in considerable smaller number among university students. In the year of 1997, for example, prior to any affirmative action, only around 5% of blacks between 18 and 24 years-old were studying in Brazilian universities or had already graduated (Carvalho, 2014).

Facing these numbers, it is no surprise that one of the major arguments favoring the adoption of affirmative policies in Brazil has been *redistributive*: making sure that the non-white population would have a fair share of the country's wealth, especially by increasing their presence in the universities (the most important tool for socioeconomic ascension in the country). But, for the racial redistributive argument to work, the public would have first to be convinced that racial inequalities *do exist* in Brazil (what goes directly in opposition to the common belief of “racial democracy”).

In the largest Latin-American nation, “the supposedly neutral set of difference-blind principles of the politics of equal dignity is in fact a reflection of one hegemonic culture” (Taylor, 1994 p.43). It is not that the Black culture (or Indigenous culture) doesn't exist in Brazil: it has actually been ignored, glossed over, and assimilated to the dominant identity under the universalist slogan of “we are all Brazilians, equal in the eyes of law”. Therefore, an important justification for affirmative action in Brazil is *recognition*. But in this case, unlike the American one, even before promoting recognition as a synonym of valorization of diversity as a culturally enriching element, the recognition of diversity *per se* must be promoted. Some authors refer to this transition (from a “hybrid” race relation into a polarized one) as the “Americanization” of racial identity in Brazil (e.g., Pagano, 2006). Throughout the 1990s (and also most of the 2000s), therefore, this was the main task the Black movement had to carry out: to challenge the idea of a racial democracy in Brazil and expose the existence of racism to a broader section of the population (Alfonso, 2019).

The *reparation* argument was also frequently brought up in the Brazilian mobilization for affirmative action, as an attempt to appeal to people morally. This argument did not achieve its full potential in Brazil for essentially the same reasons as it often failed in the American case, but in a larger scale. In the American situation, the argument faded as victims of the abusive segregation grew older, whereas in the Brazilian case, when the debate about affirmative policies started (around the year 2000) the victims of slavery (which ended in 1888) were nowhere to be found and granting reparation to their descendants, so far in time (especially in a society with a higher degree of miscegenation), has had a lower appeal in public opinion (Feres Jr. 2007).

Despite some of the challenges described above, and decades of dispute, those arguing for reparation, recognition, and redistribution succeeded in bringing to life – and keeping in effect – some sort of affirmative action in both countries. In the U.S. these policies appear in the form of guidelines for race-conscious admission, hiring, and contracting; outreach campaigns; and employee and management development programs. In Brazil, these policies include racial quotas in universities and public service; awareness campaigns; as well as affirmative changes in school curricula. Recently, however, the election of Donald Trump in 2016, and Jair Bolsonaro in 2018, shifted attention to the arguments rebuking such policies, as both presidents persistently threatened to dismantle them. In the next section, relying on excerpts from interviews, tweets, and presidential documents,³ I examine the rhetoric of the two presidents, interpreting their arguments through the conceptual lenses introduced in the previous section. I argue that, despite mirroring historically different notions, their reasoning relies on very similar discursive tools.

4. Opposing Affirmative Action: the rhetoric(s) of Trump and Bolsonaro

Bolsonaro's views on race and race-based affirmative action rely on key aspects of the national ideological tradition regarding it: the myth of Brazilian racial democracy, in which race mixing is a

³ Combining the names of the presidents with terms such as “affirmative+action”, “diversity+policy”, or “racial+justice+policy”, in search engines I mapped instances (speeches, tweets, interviews) in which they addressed *specifically* the topic relevant to the study (race-based affirmative policies). From Bolsonaro, I came across a few of such instances (6) and included in the study the three key occasions in which Bolsonaro addressed the topic at greater length (see reference list). Together, the materials reach saturation and repetition of themes. When it comes to Trump, there were fewer instances when the topic of affirmative action was addressed specifically, and only once it was addressed extensively and cohesively. Due to the lack of dense and cohesive spoken material, and with Trump's twitter account suspended, the key empirical piece (with enough cohesion and length) analyzed here was Trump's 2020 Executive Order on Combating Race and Sex Stereotyping.

positive characteristic of national identity and, itself, a proof of the inexistence of racism (Alfonso, 2019; Silva & Larkins, 2019). From this belief, the president infers that any affirmative action or race-based diversity-related policy is not only unnecessary, but also harmful, as it creates racial divisions that – in his view – do not exist. Back in 2018, during his presidential campaign, in an interview to Cidade Verde TV, he was asked whether affirmative action actually reinforces prejudice and racial conflict. Bolsonaro replied that it sure does:

Policies of racial quotas in Brazil, for example, are completely wrongful [...], all of it is a way of dividing society, we should not have ‘special classes’ due to skin color, sexual preference [*sic*], region of origin, or whatever else – we are all equal under the law, one single people under one single flag, one single green and yellow heart (Bolsonaro, 2018b).

Starting from these assumptions, the president then claims that affirmative action policies have undermined merit-based criteria. He had once stated (in 2011, when he was a federal representative) that he would not board an airplane piloted by a beneficiary of quotas, nor undergo a medical operation performed by a doctor admitted to university through affirmative action – assuming that these professionals were “let in” despite their potential incompetence (Alfonso, 2019 p.43). He went on to repeat this line of argument during his presidential campaign, saying that “those who dedicate themselves, who make an effort – through merit – logically reach a better life than those who decided not to make an effort when they were young” (Bolsonaro, 2018b). Merit and effort alone explain socioeconomic disparities, according to Bolsonaro, not race (nor any other variables). From these excerpts one can see how the Brazilian president discards the arguments for *redistribution* and *recognition*: there is no need to redistribute (for there is nothing maldistributed), and there is nothing special to recognize.

Bolsonaro also discards the argument for *reparation*. During his campaign, when asked how he then proposes to pay back the debt left by slavery (if not through race-based affirmative policies), Bolsonaro said “what debt? I have never enslaved anyone. What kind of debt is that? [...] if you take a look at history, the Portuguese haven’t even stepped in Africa, it was the black people themselves who handed the slaves [to them]” (Bolsonaro, 2018a). Bolsonaro does not seem to accept that black people were mistreated by whites in the past, and even if he does accept that, he sees reparation as impossible – since perpetrators are long dead and “punishing” a group of white people who were never directly responsible would be unfair.

Bolsonaro's attitude remained unchanged throughout his presidency. In November 2020, Black Awareness Month in Brazil, the president shared a long text on Twitter addressing the topic of race and diversity-related policies (such as the very existence of a month dedicated to Black awareness campaigns), reinforcing his belief that policies of the kind are the creators of inequality, not the solution to it. He says:

Brazil has a diverse culture, unique among nations. We are miscegenated people. Whites, blacks, browns, and indians make up the body and spirit of a rich and wonderful people. In a single Brazilian family, we can contemplate a greater diversity than in entire countries. It was the essence of this people that has won the world's sympathy. Yet there are those who want to destroy it by replacing it with conflict, resentment, hatred, and class divisions, always masking it as "a fight for equality" or "social justice", all in search of power. We are far from being perfect. We do have our problems, problems that are much more complex, and that go way beyond racial issues. [...] It is useless to divide Brazilian suffering into groups. Problems like violence are experienced by everyone, in all aspects, be it a mom who loses her son, be it a case of domestic violence, be it the case of someone who lives in an area taken by organized crime. [...] Let's not let ourselves be manipulated by political groups. As a man and as the president, I am color-blind: everybody has the same color. There are good men and bad men. It is our choices and values that make the difference (Bolsonaro, 2020).

The fact that statistics show that violence is in fact *not* experienced equally across races (Bond, 2020) – with non-white groups being severely more vulnerable to it – does not faze him. Jair Bolsonaro repeatedly states that racism is a rarity in Brazil (Romano, 2019), and that it was the Black movement (and especially their pursue of affirmative action) who fostered racial discrimination and conflict in Brazil. In response to that, he promises to reestablish – or restore – a Brazil from the past – a past when racial conflicts did not exist – a "pre-racial Brazil" (some mythical time between the end of slavery in 1888 and the early 2000s).

The exact same rhetoric would be harder to articulate in the U.S.: American history was marked by a post-slavery period of obvious segregation and racist discrimination that lasted up to the second half of the twentieth century. Yet, Trump's discourse on race and diversity-related policies also denies racism and relies on "nostalgic" references to a post-Civil Rights period when equal legal treatment proved itself enough (allegedly) to guarantee a "post-racial", multicultural America.

A post-racial society would be one in which racial prejudice and discrimination no longer exist – a society "in which the ethnoracial categories [...] would be more matters of choice than ascription [...]"

and in which economic inequalities would be confronted head-on, instead of through the medium of ethnorace” (Hollinger, 2008 p.1033). This concept thrived especially right after Obama’s election, when many people argued that the election of a black president itself proved that a post-racial America was already a reality.

Despite claiming in a couple of occasions that “he was fine with affirmative action” (Harpalani, 2021), Trump persistently worked to dismantle diversity-related policies. His Executive Order, from September 2020, defining and restricting the use of federal resources for diversity-related trainings within the federal workforce is an example of such efforts. Its purpose, according to the president, was to “combat offensive and anti-American race and sex stereotyping and scapegoating” (Trump, 2020). In the text of the presidential document, Trump states:

[...] Heroic Americans have valiantly risked their lives to ensure that their children would grow up in a Nation living out its creed, expressed in the Declaration of Independence [...] ‘that all men are created equal’. [...] America has made significant progress toward realization of our national creed, particularly in the 57 years since Dr. King shared his dream with the country. Today, however, many people are pushing a different vision of America that is grounded in hierarchies based on collective social and political identities rather than in the inherent and equal dignity of every person as an individual. This ideology is rooted in the pernicious and false belief that America is an irredeemably racist and sexist country; that some people, simply on account of their race or sex, are oppressors; and that racial and sexual identities are more important than our common status as human beings and Americans. [...] Our Founding documents rejected these racialized views of America [...]. Yet they are now being repackaged and sold as cutting-edge insights. They are designed to divide us and to prevent us from uniting as one people in pursuit of one common destiny for our great country (Trump, 2020).

This excerpt shows very similar discursive tools as those used by Bolsonaro. Trump’s core claim is that America has indeed dealt with racial discrimination in the past, but that past wrongdoings have been already repaired – directly dismissing the *reparation* argument. Likewise, the equal dignity of every individual and the common legal status shared by all Americans, mentioned by Trump, signal his dismissal of any *recognition* or *redistribution* argument.

According to Trump, the inflammatory language and the “divisive concepts” used in current affirmative workplace trainings are responsible for repackaging and promoting old, racialized views, not for eliminating them. The content of these training, according to him, are “contrary to the

fundamental premises underpinning [the] Republic: that all individuals are created equal and should be allowed an equal opportunity under the law to pursue happiness and prosper based on individual merit” (Trump, 2020). He claims (unlike Bolsonaro) that the existence of diversity trainings is not *per se* problematic, and that they could be “appropriate and beneficial”, as long as they fulfill the condition of adopting a unifying, conciliatory, “we are all American” rhetoric.

In sum, the rhetoric of both Bolsonaro and Trump regarding affirmative action consists of three recurrent themes/arguments: first, that reparation is unnecessary (either because there has never been any wrongdoing, or because wrongdoings have long been overcome); second, that affirmative action creates or revives divisiveness and inequality; and third, that affirmative action unfairly redistributes power and resources, in detriment of merit.

While attention frequently falls on some of Trump’s and Bolsonaro’s more overtly racist statements (e.g. Keneally, 2018; Folha de S.Paulo, 2020), their opposition to affirmative action is actually built with discursive tools that embrace and employ multicultural incorporation. That does not mean that there is a contradiction. In the American case, Sugino (2020) explains that the discursive tool of a “post-racial” multiculturalism thrives precisely

on incorporating oppressed people on the surface without radically altering society. This combination is precisely what enables a society to emerge that can celebrate the first black president, [...] and name a street in every major city after Martin Luther King Jr., while at the same time remaining steadfast in its commitment to a burgeoning prison industrial complex, [and] anti-black policing practices [...]. Multiculturalism, then, is not overt racism’s opposite (Sugino, 2020 p.192)

The same is valid for the Brazilian case. Both Bolsonaro and Trump deny racism, claim to be color-blind, and hold on to ideas of a multicultural “pre-racial Brazil” and a multicultural “post-racial America”. Under this rhetoric, they manage to include diverse people into an existing structure of hierarchy without dismantling that hierarchy. Their outright racism and their multicultural-embracing discourse operate symbiotically, not simply parallel to each other (Sugino, 2020 p.197), and not at all in opposition to each other.

5. Conclusion

Although both United States of America and Brazil have adopted, in the late twentieth and earlier twenty-first century, similar policies to remedy racial discrimination and inequality, the reasoning used to justify them is not the same in both countries. That happens because each nation has developed different systems of race relations: on one side, American history of long-lasting constitutional segregation, created a racial ideology strongly grounded in the clear racial definition of “us” and “them”, and in the differentiation of “black” and “white”. In America, since the 1960s, Black movement activists who called for positive state interference, first relied on the argument of *reparation* as a means for *redistribution* and later in time, joining forces with other minority groups, relied on the argument that *recognizing* and assuring their presence and value in all public spheres is not only fair but essential to a truly multicultural society. On the other side, the Brazilian collective construction of the idea that Brazil is a “racially democratic society”, where the only race is the “Brazilian” race, delayed the calls for positive policies until the early 2000s. By proposing affirmative action, Brazilian Black movement activists not only sought to address *distributive* racial issues, but they were also trying to undertake the major task of deconstructing that traditional Brazilian mentality, so themselves – as Black, a distinct group – could be properly *recognized* as rightfully existent in that society.

These different systems of race relations also shaped the recent Trump’s and Bolsonaro’s rebuking of affirmative action policies. Still, although their discourse does not drink from the same historical and contextual sources, their reasoning for opposing diversity-related policies, and their “color-blind” rhetoric, is strikingly similar. Both presidents deny racism in their countries and accuse affirmative action of creating racial tension instead of solving it. From their rhetoric results a policymaking road that cements race-based hardships under the veneer of legal equality.

The discussion presented here does not exhaust the topic. My intention was limited to tracing the most prominent rationales supporting and apposing affirmative action (with a special focus on Trump’s and Bolsonaro’s), highlighting their historical and contextual particularities. The character and development of each policy, their success or failure, were not scrutinized. With Trump failing to be reelected and Bolsonaro’s term coming to an end, the effects of their administration (both practical and discursive) on future disputes over affirmative action will certainly become the target of academic scrutiny.

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