

## ARTICLE

**Racism as a Form of Politics: Brazilian Racial Politics<sup>\*,\*\*</sup>****Carlos Augusto Sant'Anna Guimarães<sup>1</sup>**<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5802-0181><sup>1</sup>Fundação Joaquim Nabuco. Recife/PE, Brazil

In this article, I consider the approach of racial relations versus the perspective of racial politics. The former, formulated within the framework of the Chicago School of Sociology in the 1920s, assumes that races interact with each other according to the “cycle of racial relations”. This interpretation highlights the cultural and psychological dimensions and neglects the ideological, political, and institutional factors constraining and driving individual and collective choices. The racial politics approach suggests that social interactions are mediated by attributes other than race. The racial or ethnic factor is part of the social framework, and it establishes value and meaning to social categories and creates criteria for social hierarchization. In the first part of the article, I criticize the racial relations perspective and propose an analytical framework centered on the state and social movements, with a mechanism- and process-based explanation. In the second part, I retrace Brazilian racial politics, identifying the mechanisms operating over time. I argue that racial democracy is an ideology that regulates social relations, denies racism, delegitimizes black protest, creates obstacles, and hold back the fight against racism. Finally, I put forward the expression post-racial democracy as an alternative and challenging notion vis-a-vis racial democracy.

**Keywords:** Racial politics; racial relations; racial ideology; mechanisms and process; post-racial democracy.

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The expression racial politics is commonly associated with openly racist regimes such as Germany (1933-1945), South Africa (1948-1994), and the United States (1877-1964). However, racial politics may be present even if words such as race, genetic improvement, and others are not employed. Another very distinct issue is to mistakenly equate policies to combat racial inequalities with eugenic policies and policies of racial segregation. (FRY et al., 2007).

The specialized literature offers numerous examples of systems of racial politics formulated by different political regimes in specific historical contexts. The cases of Germany, South Africa, and the United States are the most representative; however, England, Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Cuba, and other countries have also adopted systems of racial politics. Such systems are not exclusive to a type of state or regime.

The notion of racial politics is based on the understanding that state decisions affect classified social groups distinctively, according to their phenotypic (race and ethnicity), morphological (sex), identity (gender), and confessional (religion) characteristics. Andrews (1998) also includes non-state institutions: political parties, churches, and trade unions. The racial politics perspective seeks to bring to light how institutions' regulatory powers induce and modify individual and collective attitudes and behaviors based on the notion of race.

Liberal political thought has difficulties in addressing racial, ethnic, and gender dimensions (BUCK-MORSS, 2017; JUNG, 2006; SMITH, 1993). Tocqueville (2005), for example, was concerned with the future of democracy in the United States after the end of slavery: Prejudice and discrimination against blacks and indigenous people would increase, which would lead to a bloody conflict. Despite his prediction, Tocqueville does not question the values and democratic instruments of American politics, thus disregarding racism as a form of politics (HANCHARD and CHUNG, 2004).

The Tochevillian description of American political culture founded an influential narrative concerning the uniqueness of the United States as the example of liberal society (SMITH, 1993). Smith contends that this narrative should be reviewed since egalitarian institutions were exclusive to white European men. Access to or denial of full citizenship was based on race, ethnicity, and gender

(SMITH, 1997, 1993). Nevertheless, studies on the effects of race and racism occupy a peripheral position in political science (MILLS, 1998). Since 1998, the use of the expression 'racial politics' by academics who focus on the subject has progressively increased.

As for the exercise of full citizenship, the Brazilian case is not very different from the American one. Race, gender, and religion were – and still are – used as classification criteria to restrict and limit the exercise of citizenship (HOLSTON, 2013). The inclusion of the black population in a subaltern position did not derive from an alleged incapacity to compete or from the absence of protective policies aimed at the newly freed (ANDREWS, 1998; AZEVEDO, 1987; MARX, 1998); rather, it resulted from a deliberate action by the Brazilian state to hinder the socioeconomic development of blacks. For the project was to build a white nation.

The purpose of this article is to demonstrate that recent transformations in the direction of Brazilian racial politics result from complex processes simultaneously linked to 01. transnational politics; 02. the actions of the black movement; and 03. the division among the elites on the issue of race. At the same time, I recognize that racial politics contains elements of change, permanence, stagnation, and setback. To reach the goal in view, I discuss the concept and nature of racial politics. I argue that racism is not solely an intersubjective phenomenon, of an interpersonal nature, or an epiphenomenon of an economic nature. I start from the premise that state action is decisive in shaping racial orders.

The remainder of this text is divided into six sections. In the first section, I present the methodological path taken to achieve the goal in view. The second section discusses the concept and nature of racial politics and reveals the distinctions between racial politics and the 'racial relations' approach. In the third section, I present the analytical framework. The fourth section discusses Brazilian racial politics, which is characterized by its 'racist inclusivism' (HOLSTON, 2013, p. 106) or 'inclusionary discrimination' (SAWYER, 2006, p. 02). I seek to demonstrate how the state has shaped racial politics in Brazil. In the conclusion, I contend that the expression 'post-racial democracy' should be used to refer to racially egalitarian societies.

## Methodological path

To corroborate my hypothesis, I used secondary sources, as prescribed by the methodology used in historical and comparative research. Unlike historians, social scientists are not urged to remake primary sources. The concern here is not to present original data, but to compose a historical framework capable of providing explanations for the phenomenon under analysis. According to Skocpol (1984), “good comparative historical sociologists nevertheless must resist the temptation to disappear forever into the primary evidence about each case” (SKOCPOL, 1984, p. 383). The fact that this research did not gather primary data does not invalidate its findings. The goal is to trace the trajectory of racial politics in Brazil, identifying significant episodes, critical events, and causal mechanisms.

To compensate for the use of secondary sources in a comparative historical study – and in response to historians' criticism in that regard (FERNANDES, 2004) –, I resorted to numerous sources and consulted a broad and heterogeneous literature, as well as publications with testimonies and interviews with black leaders (ALBERTI and PEREIRA, 2007; PEREIRA, 2008; ALVAREZ, 2012).

The analysis is based on the theoretical categories of mechanisms, processes, and episodes (TILLY, 2001). The task was to identify episodes that indicated the direction of the events. I found that some events, once combined, indicated a certain path (process). I have consulted secondary sources extensively to identify significant episodes and determine the explanatory mechanisms. The interpretative framework was built by analyzing the historical evidence in light of the analytical categories.

## Racial Relations versus Racial Politics

In contrast to what scholars and people in general commonly think, the issue of race has always been among the concerns of Latin American elites. Convinced of the superiority of the white race and dismayed by the racial formation of their respective countries, these elites, since the mid-nineteenth century, designed racial policies based on European immigration.

In the ‘racial relations’ paradigm, the state is not considered a relevant actor. Despite recognizing that racial groups compete for goods and resources, this paradigm does not consider the state as the referee or main arena in this dispute.

This analytical deficiency stems from the tendency to theorize racism as a product of the master/slave order (KING and SMITH, 2005).

The racial politics perspective emerges from criticism of the limitations and inadequacies of 'racial relations' theories. Hanchard (2001) and Hanchard and Chung (2004) point out that Katznelson (1973), departing from the pluralist and behaviorist approach of 'racial relations', inscribed the term and the subfield 'racial politics' in the political science lexicon, initiating a paradigmatic transition.

The 'racial relations' lens focuses on the events and dynamics that unveil racism, inequality, and prejudice at the individual level (HANCHARD, 2001). Katznelson (apud HANCHARD, 2001) states that, by highlighting the cultural and psychological dimensions, this approach underestimates structural factors, which define and limit the scope for individual and collective choices. Emphasis on individual attitudes, behaviors, and choices minimizes historical and institutional contexts and underestimates the intrinsic link between race and power (HANCHARD and CHUNG, 2004).

The assumption of the 'race relations' approach is that races interact with each other. Nothing is more misleading. Races do not relate to each other (HANCHARD and CHUNG, 2004). Social interactions are mediated by variables other than race, such as class, educational level, socio-economic status, and gender, among others. The state, the labor market, and economic, cultural, and educational institutions shape and mediate the wide range of interactions and social relations. Race and ethnicity are part of the framework, assuming meaning and value as they define positions within a social structure.

The 'racial relations' approach is rooted in Robert Park's theorization of immigration and racial conflicts. 'Racial relations' follow the sequential stages of the 'race relations cycle': contact, conflict, accommodation, and assimilation – a cycle that tends to repeat itself, as a law of historical development capable of defining and measuring the evolution of 'minority' groups in a fixed continuum (DESMOND and EMIRBAYER, 2009; OMI and WINANT, 2015).

The perspective of the Chicago School – ethnographic-based, deterministic, resolutely apolitical (PARK (1950) had an aversion to political sociology) – underestimated racial conflict as it did not see it as a political phenomenon. Racial

inequalities and injustices were not perceived as the effects or goals of public policies; rather, they were seen as a phenomenon of civil society. Given their disregard for politics, 'race relations' theories neglect collective action and political agency (despite recognizing the tenacity of racially subordinate and oppressed groups). Park (1950) and his followers argued that racial conflicts generate pressures for equality and inclusiveness, an optimistic perspective in which the (presumably white) assimilation of racially subaltern groups corresponds to the final stage of the cycle. His analyses often made analogies between America's racial battles and European ethnic conflicts (OMI and WINANT, 2015).

Mills (1998) maintains that both the dominant version of the 'racial relations' theory and the 'melting pot' reference, with their optimistic visions regarding assimilation, employed race as a synonym for ethnicity. They equated the trajectory of blacks in the United States with European immigration. The Chicago School reduced racial conflict to cultural aspects, thus reducing the process of social integration to an effort to overcome cultural disadvantages imposed by slavery and exclusion. The institutional and ideological nature of racism was neglected; Chicago scholars did not realize how rooted in social and power structures racism is, pervading and shaping areas such as education, social policy, the arts, law, religion, science, and the exercise of political power (OMI and WINANT, 2015). Explanations for racial systems lie in politics, not the economy (KING and SMITH, 2005).

By clinging to whether race is or is not a scientifically valid concept, one erases its socio-historical, concrete, and dynamic existence. By doing so, analyses of the effects of racial categorizations in terms of stratification, hierarchy, and social exclusion become clouded. It blurs our vision, preventing us from penetrating the core of social and power relations. Nevertheless, Park (1950) and his followers confirmed how wrong the basis of this debate was.

Omi and Winant (2015) affirm that the notion of race encompasses elements of a political, historical, and economic-cultural nature, as well as it includes personal experiences. They reiterate that racial categories may prove to be inaccurate and arbitrary, but never meaningless. Quijano (2010) explains that the notion of race was formed with the conquest of America. The new identities correspond to the subjugated geo-cultures of the conquered people. "The phenotypic differences between winners and losers were used as justification to

produce the 'race' category, although it is, first and foremost, a creation of the relations of domination as such" (QUIJANO, 2010, p. 119, free translation).

We can thus affirm that races are a construct created from within the European expansionist movement, which subjected and hierarchized geo-cultures based on phenotypic traits, which were naturalized and associated with positions in the societal structure, therefore justifying domination/exploitation/control. Race, as an invention, emerges from the logic of politics rather than from the logic of biology. A political and state-based categorization, not something emanating from nature (MARX, 1998).

Phenotypic traits become socially meaningful when they are turned into markers for the creation of hierarchy. Historical-political processes assign social and symbolic meaning to perceived phenotypic differences. In this respect, politics should be of prime interest to the research on racism (KATZNELSON, 1973, apud HANCHARD, 2001, p.32). Hanchard and Chung warn that "rather than focus on the hollowness of race as a concept" (p. 322), it would be more productive to think "how the term is utilized to give meaning to behavior, norms, and structure across national-territorial and cultural boundaries" (HANCHARD and CHUNG, 2004, p. 323). The way race is viewed shapes attitudes and behaviors and produces norms and social structures in multiple cultural realities.

In addition to broadening our understanding of how social interactions between groups classified as racially distinct evolves, the concept of racial politics ascribes meaning to institutional and power behaviors, as well as to identity and mobilization in and between racial groups (HANCHARD, 2001). According to Hanchard (1999), the "term 'racial politics' encompasses the role of social constructions of race and racial difference in formal, institutional politics as well as in the political interactions of daily life". (HANCHARD, 1999, p. 01, emphasis in original).

The notion of racial politics avoids reifying the concept of race and sets it free from the constraints imposed by the debate between essentialists and constructivists. Although race is not an appropriate criterion for referring to human differences, it can be used as a heuristically robust category to explain social reality. The lexical-discursive asepsis, which denies race its conceptual relevance since it does not exist in concrete terms, is not a solution (D'ADESKY, 2001).



The social markers of difference are not timeless, or the result of spontaneous psychological manifestations; rather, they are socio-historical phenomena. The selective markers for integration and marginalization were first defined by the state; they are not prior and external to its structure (JUNG, 2006). The state creates, classifies, and labels who fits into which racial categories (MARX, 1998). For example, in the United States, the ‘mulatto’ category was introduced in the censuses in 1850 in response to a demand from ethnologists who intended to demonstrate that miscegenation produced inferior individuals (KERTZER and AREL, 2006). In 1930, the category was banned (MARX, 1998; NOBLES, 2000).

Generally, political scientists treat race, ethnicity, and religion as threats to democratic institutions and the social fabric (JUNG, 2006). The problem is that they “continue to treat them as independent variables — a cause rather than a result of politics” (Jung, 2006, p. 364). Far from it, “race is an interdependent variable that assumes meaning only in relation to the specific social and historical contexts in which it is embedded” (HANCHARD and CHUNG, 2004, p. 332).

It should be mentioned that black feminism (COLLINS, 2019; DAVIS, 2016; HOOKS, 2019) and the concept of intersectionality are tributaries of the racial politics perspective. Two references in the international debate are Lélia Gonzáles and Luiza Barrios, both Brazilians.

Thus, the debate should not be focused on the essence or illusion of race, but rather on the processes of racialization, since, ultimately, race reflects the submission and exploitation of human groups. Racialization imposes “*the extension of racial meaning to a previously racially unclassified relationship, social practice, or group*” (OMI and WINANT, 2015, p. 111, emphasis in original). As conceived by Dixon and Johnson III (2019), racialization “refers to the ways in which the codification of racial categories and hierarchies assigns values based on skin color and phenotype resulting in negative differential treatment in the political economy, labor markets, education, health care and the administration of justice” (DIXON and JOHNSON III, 2019, p. 01).

The notion of racial politics refers to long-term political processes, in line with the process-based perspective of “cumulative and cyclical development” (OMI and WINANT, 2015, p. 07). Nevertheless, one can analyze a specific phase of racial politics, taking care to situate it in the course of history. Racial politics thus has



phases (different from ahistorical stages), defined according to the political-historical context. In the conceptualization of racial politics, inequalities have multiple determinants and cannot be understood with a single causal explanation. Focusing on racial politics does not mean replacing one causal variable for another (HANCHARD, 1999).

### **Fields and approaches of racial politics**

After Katznelson's work (1973) was published, the field of comparative studies on race and ethnicity expanded progressively (HANCHARD, 2001; HANCHARD and CHUNG, 2004). Hanchard (2001) shows how the ideology of 'racial democracy' has contributed to creating and justifying inequalities in Brazil and demobilizing black activism. This author also edited a book (HANCHARD, 1999) whose chapters explore how social inequities are structured and how they shape Brazilian racial politics. Hanchard and Chung (2004) mapped four fields of comparative studies on racial politics: political economy of race; comparative analysis of culture, symbols, and ideas; social movements; and state-centered approaches. They affirm that "race signifies not only group differentiation but also identity, structure, and power. Racism is certainly a form of politics" (HANCHARD and CHUNG, 2004, p. 332).

Sawyer (2006) formulated the 'racial cycle model' to explain racial politics in Cuba. In the field of urban studies, FREUND (2007) investigates the links between racial politics and the political economy of urbanization in the United States. Sze (2007) explores the connections between racial politics and health, environmental, and urban development policies. Sze reports that, at the end of the nineteenth century, W.E.B. Dubois had identified a correlation between race, class, and morbidity patterns.

The chapters in the edited book 'The racial politics of bodies, Nations and knowledges' (BAIRD and RIGGS, 2009) discuss the specificities of racial politics in Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and South Africa and highlight "how the racialisation of bodies, nations and knowledges occurs in complex and context-specific ways" (BAIRD and RIGGS, 2009, p. 02). Another edited book (REITER and MITCHELL, 2009) focuses on racial politics in Brazil. It discusses the particular forms of racism in Brazilian society and examines affirmative actions, the new black

middle class, the fight of black women for urban services, and black cultural activism.

Would Barack Obama's victory, hailed as the inauguration of the post-racial era in the United States, be part of the realization of Myrdall's (1944) predictions in "An American Dilemma"? Obama's election victory instigated researchers from different fields to try to answer this question, using different methodologies.

After analyzing statistical information, Kinder and Dale-Riddle (2012) note that racial inequalities have persisted while spatial segregation has increased to levels higher than those observed at the end of the twentieth century. Ferguson (2013) investigates the ways in which the racial liberalism of the North American elites changed in the 1960s and how it modified racial politics – the election of Obama being its greatest expression. Race, however, remains vital.

Culture and mass communication have not escaped scholars' scrutiny. Jackson (2014) questions the role of journalism in shaping racial politics in the United States. In a case study, the author examines and compares decades' worth of traditional white press coverage with black media coverage. Jackson II (2006), in turn, analyzes the politics of the black body. He scrutinizes the social construction of a racialized blackness and questions the nature of the racialization of bodies in the public sphere. Thompson (2014) investigates popular culture and the entertainment industry and postulates that public entertainment in the United States originated with slavery, as it was a rule for the enslaved to amuse white audiences, which contributed to creating and crystallizing the stereotype that black people have innate skills in music, singing, and dancing. Lastly, assuming that the film industry is a powerful instrument for shaping consciousness, Erigha (2019), in turn, emphasizes that Hollywood produces racial inequalities on a global scale.

McAdam and Kloos (2014) indicate that the interaction between race and religion and the dynamics of the relationship between social movements and political parties since the 1960s have shaped the evolution of politics in the United States. They assert that the main social movements and counter movements (civil rights, white backlash, New Left, Tax Revolt, Christian Right, Tea Party) carry the mark of race. They contend that partisan polarization and high economic inequality are irrevocably intertwined with racial politics.

The analyses in the book edited by Dixon and Johnson III (2019) address the dynamic interplay between social power and racial politics, as well as their implications on the histories, politics, identities, and cultures in Latin America and the Caribbean.

The studies mentioned in this section share a criticism of the simplification associated with assuming race as the single category for explaining inequalities. Instead, they corroborate that the interactions between class, ethnicity, gender, and religion create particular subjectivities vis-à-vis hierarchical processes.

### **The analytical model of racial politics**

To analyze Brazilian racial politics, I draw on the perspectives offered by Sawyer (2006). Based on McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly (2004), Sawyer examined Cuban racial politics from the perspective of mechanisms and processes and devised the 'racial cycle model'. By combining the discussions on ideology, structure, events, and agency, in a dynamic, non-linear approach, this model seeks to elucidate how the dominant racial ideology and the actions of racially subaltern groups can transform racial politics. There are distinct forces operating, both at the state (macro) and individual (micro) levels, making advances and causing setbacks and stagnation in politics.

From the perspective of the 'racial cycles', racial politics is an interactive process that involves the opening and closing of the regime; changes in the system of racial politics are limited by racial ideology. In this perspective, historical, cultural, political, and ideological aspects are incorporated, as well as the everyday experiences of each specific racial formation.

The mechanism- and process-based explanation focuses on salient features of episodes, or significant differences between them, in order to identify, among episodes, robust mechanisms of relatively general scope (TILLY, 2001).

The differences in sequences of events highlight the importance of actors' and institutions' performances and of context in generating the result. It is up to analysts to account for the relevant links and causal relationships related to the phenomenon.

This theoretical and methodological framework is not concerned with identifying the necessary and sufficient conditions for producing a given social

phenomenon. The purpose is to identify the causal mechanisms acting to produce the phenomenon, as well as the concatenation of these mechanisms (McADAM, TARROW, and TILLY, 2004). Mechanisms are “a delimited class of events that alter relations among specified sets of elements in identical or closely similar ways over a variety of situations” (McADAM, TARROW, and TILLY, 2004, p. 24).

As for their features, mechanisms can be environmental, cognitive, and relational. The first refers to externally generated resources that affect people's conditions to act. It does not apply to actors but to the context. It indicates the nature of the cause-and-effect relation. The second type of mechanism alters individual and collective perceptions. It includes actions related to mental frames. The third category includes mechanisms that establish or alter the connections between people, groups, and interpersonal networks, modifying the relations between individuals, groups, and organizations (TILLY, 2001) and interacting with each other in complex processes. For example, relational and environmental mechanisms affect political processes without having to connect with cognitive mechanisms at the individual level. They operate differently in heterogeneous contexts, generating varied results. The causal effects depend on the interaction of mechanisms with aspects of the context in which they operate (FALLETI and LYNCH, 2009).

Processes are combinations or sequences of more frequent mechanisms. “Processes are regular sequences of such mechanisms that produce similar (generally more complex and contingent) transformations of those elements” (McADAM, TARROW and TILLY, 2004, p. 24). Episodes, in turn, are events such as protests, elections, new governments' inaugurations, marches, revolutions, etc. These events affect the interests and positions of different actors.

### **Racial politics in Brazil: mechanisms and processes**

The racial order that was built concurrently with the process of abolishing slavery is not simply a continuation of the slave system. It is, undoubtedly, a legacy of slavery, but with differences and specificities. The new order began in 1850, based on six pillars: the slow and controlled end of slavery<sup>1</sup>; incentives for European

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<sup>1</sup>Cf. Brasil (2012); Alonso (2015).

immigration; restrictions on access to land (Land Law)<sup>2</sup>; exclusion of the majority of the population from political participation (electoral reform of 1881); state intervention in the labor market; and the ideology of racial harmony<sup>3</sup>.

In that same year, the parliament approved reforms<sup>4</sup> to prepare the country for the end of slave labor, attract Europeans, and keep the land under the control of the oligarchies (ANDREWS, 1998; HOLSTON, 2013). Immigration was “part of a long-term modernization project, in which the whitening of the national population was highly desired” (HASENBALG, 2005, p. 165, free translation). In the hegemonic abolitionist discourse, slavery was an obstacle not only to modernizing the economy but also to attracting immigrants (HASENBALG, 2005)<sup>5</sup>. Scholars agree that immigration was a state project (ANDREWS, 1998; HASENBALG, 2005; HOLSTON, 2013; MARX, 1998)<sup>6</sup>. While Europeans were encouraged to enter the country, Africans and Asians were mostly barred from it (THEODORO, 2008)<sup>7</sup>.

The electoral reform of 1881 established that only adult men with proven education level and a minimum income established by law could vote (CARVALHO, 2006)<sup>8</sup>. State intervention in the labor market (ANDREWS, 1998; AZEVEDO, 1987) barred Afro-Brazilians from competing with whites and hindered their occupational diversification (HANCHARD, 2001). In 1920, half of the industrial workers were foreigners (MARX, 1998).

The end of slave labor without compensation for farmers created a political and institutional crisis because large landowners (latifundiários) who owned slaves – and were dissatisfied – allied with the republicans to decree the Republic<sup>9</sup> with the

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<sup>2</sup>Law N° 601/1850 defined that the only legal forms of land tenure were through purchase or inheritance.

<sup>3</sup>The harmony among the three races appears in Nabuco (2003, p.38). For the racism of Nabuco, cf. Azevedo (2001)

<sup>4</sup>Adoption of the commercial code, creation of national banks, reformulation of the ‘Banco do Brasil’, and construction of railroads (HOLSTON, 2013).

<sup>5</sup>Abolitionism does not imply defending equality (KING and SMITH, 2005).

<sup>6</sup>Immigration was in part financed by the government of the Province of São Paulo (HOLSTON, 2013; MARX, 1998) through a public fund to which taxes on slave ownership were allocated (AZEVEDO, 1987).

<sup>7</sup>Decree N° 528/1890.

<sup>8</sup>The Constitution of 1891 eliminated income as a criterion but maintained education. In 1870, about 10% of the adult population could vote; in the Republic, it was less than 03% (ANDREWS, 1998; CARVALHO, 2006).

<sup>9</sup>The Republic is considered to have been the elites' effort to "contain and reverse the political, social, and economic consequences" of abolition (ANDREWS, 1998, p. 90).

support of the army. During the First Republic (1889-1930)<sup>10</sup>, the state exercised strict social control over the black population. Racial politics was characterized by incentives for whitening the population and by the marginalization of blacks from socio-economic development. Police and social repression prevented any form of collective action in the 'black milieu' (FERNANDES, 2013).

After the First World War, a new form of associativism emerged in the black milieu. Blacks began leaving behind the heteronomous condition to which they had been reduced. They created civil associations (recreational, cultural, and political) and started challenging the racial order (FERNANDES, 2013) in the face of informal segregation, which involved preventing blacks from entering numerous social spaces, even squares and streets (DOMINGUES, 2008; FERNANDES, 2013; NOGUEIRA, 1998; SANTOS, 2007). A corollary of these mobilizations was the establishment of the Brazilian Black Front (Frente Negra Brasileira, FNB)<sup>11</sup>, in 1931. The ephemeral FNB was dismantled in 1937, one year after it had obtained its party registration, when Vargas extinguished all political parties, dismantled social movements, and imposed a state of exception.

The FNB was formed during the political crisis that emerged from the impasse among the elites after the presidential election of 1930 was contested. The 1930 Revolution, a political and military movement led by Vargas, overthrew the oligarchic republic. In the presidency, Vargas issued Decree Nº. 20,291/1931, which required companies to have 2/3 of Brazil-born Brazilians in their workforce, which enabled black workers to enter the formal labor market (ANDREWS, 1998; MARX, 1998).

We can see here two types of mechanisms altering the course of racial politics: environmental and relational. State crises activate these mechanisms, opening opportunities for incremental changes in racial politics (SAWYER, 2006). However, changes occur in circumstances marked by ambivalence and contradiction. The Revolution of 1930 and the reduction in the immigration flow triggered mechanisms that changed the course of racial politics<sup>12</sup>. While Vargas' decree and other of his measures led blacks to identify with the president and his

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<sup>10</sup>Cf. Carvalho (2004).

<sup>11</sup>Cf. Fernandes (2013); Domingues (2008); Azevedo (1996).

<sup>12</sup>The prognosis was that in 2011 the black population in the country would disappear (SCHWARCZ, 2011). Cf. tb. Azevedo (1987).

party, the PTB (SOUZA, 1971), the Brazilian political system managed to demobilize racially based movements and co-opt their leadership (LAMOUNIER, 1968).

Between 1917 and 1945, a consensus was reached among the Brazilian elites on issues of race, education, and public health, bringing together the main conservative Catholic leaders, the military, and progressive reformers (DÁVILLA, 2006). Eugenic thought has strongly influenced health and education policies (DÁVILLA, 2006; DIWAN, 2007; KOBAYASHI, FARIA and COSTA, 2009; STEPAN, 2004)<sup>13</sup>. While the eugenic movement advanced, the state elites faced potentially explosive demographic, cultural, and socio-political challenges. After experiencing large-scale immigration in the 1920s, Brazil became an 'ethnic bomb' (GUIMARÃES, 2002). The "Revolution of 1930 and the Second Republic used their common sense to defuse the ethnic bomb that was building (...)" (GUIMARÃES, 2002, p. 120, free translation). The device they used was 'racial democracy'. In this period, the notion of 'racial democracy'<sup>14</sup> – with its vague and malformed definitions of race, racial mixing, culture, and democracy – was disseminated and consolidated with the status of a Brazilian institution (GUIMARÃES, 2002). The regime cleverly conflated eugenics and 'racial democracy' to enable the state-building process.

The military dictatorship (1964-1985) did not address the issue of race; rather, it silenced any attempt to reject the racial order. The military was concerned that the ideas promoted by those fighting racism at the international level, which they saw as a threat to racial harmony, would pose a challenge to the regime (KÖSSLING, 2008). In an ironic twist, the military regime's project would end up germinating the seed of racial contestation.

In the mid-1970s, as part of the political mobilization against the military dictatorship, several black organizations emerged, leading to the creation of the Unified Black Movement against Racial Discrimination (Movimento Negro Unificado Contra a Discriminação Racial, MNUCDR) in 1978. The re-emergence of the contemporary black movement was in part propelled by the expansion of the secondary and post-secondary education system promoted by the military

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<sup>13</sup>There were significant divisions within the eugenics movement. The Brazilian eugenics was of Latin-American origin (STEPAN, 2004).

<sup>14</sup>The idea of racial democracy dates to the late nineteenth century (ANDREWS, 1998; MARX, 1998). Its foundations and justification as a national ideology would be formulated in the 1930s (GUIMARÃES, 2002).



dictatorship (HASENBALG, 1984; SANTOS, 2007; SANTOS, 1985) – “in Brazil, unlike some Latin American countries, political repression promoted higher education, both public and private” (SANTOS and CERQUEIRA, 2009, p. 06, free translation). According to Sampaio (1991), “in about twenty years, the number of students enrolled in higher education institutions went from 93,902 (1960) to 1,345,000 (1980), with the years 1968, 1970, and 1971 having the highest growth rates” (SAMPAIO, 1991, p. 17, free translation). The choice was clearly to favor private education. “Between 1965 and 1980, enrollments in the private sector jumped from 142,000 to 885,000, going from 44% of total enrollments to 64% in this period” (MARTINS, 2009, p. 23, free translation)<sup>15</sup>.

The university education boom in Brazil led to an increase in the number of black men and women with a university degree, who soon discovered that holding a degree did not eliminate color barriers, nor did it lead to social rise and the end of racial discrimination. The fact that the promised ‘racial democracy’ was not delivered further exposes the contradictions of Brazilian racial ideology (HASENBALG, 1984; SANTOS, 1985). Also relevant are the socioeconomic and cultural transformations influenced by the American black movement; in domestic politics, it is worth mentioning the workers' mobilizations and strikes in São Paulo, the reemergence of civil society; at the international level, we had the decolonization of Africa, the civil rights movement in the United States, the First UN World Conference against Racism, in 1978<sup>16</sup>.

This multifaceted context activated environmental, cognitive, and relational mechanisms. The increase in university admissions – part of the government's project to modernize and adapt the country to the demands of capitalist growth – led to a greater number of black people accessing formal education. The confluence of these different events changed how individuals and collectives perceive racial democracy; it also brought together the black youth, fostering interpersonal networks of trust and creating organizations to contest racial domination.

Ten years after being re-established, the black movement protested on the occasion of the centenary of abolition, with the ‘March against the Farce of Abolition.

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<sup>15</sup>Cf. Sampaio (1991); Durham (2003); Neves and Martins (2016).

<sup>16</sup>The Second World Conference to Combat Racism, in Switzerland, in 1983, had no repercussions in Brazil.

Nothing has changed, we will change' (Marcha contra a Farsa da Abolição. Nada mudou, vamos mudar), in Rio de Janeiro, on May 11, 1988. Despite the army's brutal repression (CARVALHO, 2005; HANCHARD, 2001; PEREIRA, 2008), the march further exposed the contradictions of Brazilian racial ideology (HANCHARD, 2001). Another remarkable event that year was the promulgation of the Federal Constitution, which offered provisions that could benefit the fight against racism: The ethnic and racial plurality of Brazilian society was recognized; racism was defined as a non-bailable, imprescriptible crime; and the demarcation of lands occupied by 'quilombolas' (descendants of runaway slaves who settled in remote areas) was determined.

### **Changes in racial politics: the progressive phase**

In 1995, the black movement would once again take to the streets with more than 30 thousand people marching in Brasilia demanding public policies aimed at valuing the black population – the 'Zumbi dos Palmares March' against 'Racism, for Citizenship and Life' (Marcha Zumbi dos Palmares contra o Racismo, pela Cidadania e pela Vida). At the time, after receiving the leaders of the march, President Cardoso said that the state and Brazilian society were racist. That was a formal recognition that racism exists in the country. He promptly signed a decree establishing the Interministerial Working Group on the Valorization of the Black Population (Grupo de Trabalho Interministerial de Valorização da População Negra, GTI)<sup>17</sup>. The march and the GTI were a turning point in Brazilian 'racial politics'. Until then, the black movement had adopted a contentious repertoire in its relationship with the state. The march affected and modified the forms of interaction between the state and the movement. The GTI reflected this shift in the relationship between these actors (RODRIGUES, 2020). In his memoir, the former president noted: "I opened a range of actions in this area, without radicalism, (...), with the aim of gradually changing Brazil's 'racial politics'" (CARDOSO, 2006, p. 550, free translation). Still, throughout his terms in office (1995-2002), there was ambiguity regarding the possibilities of confronting racism and inequalities<sup>17</sup>.

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<sup>17</sup>President Cardoso's speeches are available at <<http://www.biblioteca.presidencia.gov.br/presidencia/ex-presidentes/fernando-henrique-cardoso/discursos/discursos>>.

The GTI offered suggestions for fostering the social and economic progress of the black population. However, the government did not create the conditions to implement these suggestions. Some ministers even boycotted the GTI recommendations (TELLES, 2003). During this period, the first municipal secretariat was created to address the issue – the Municipal Secretariat for Black Community Affairs (Secretaria Municipal para Assuntos da Comunidade Negra, SMACON), in the municipality of Belo Horizonte, in 1998 (MOREIRA, 2012). The GTI followed the pattern established by the Council for Participation and Development of the Black Community (Conselho de Participação e Desenvolvimento da Comunidade Negra), created by the government of the state of São Paulo in 1984 – an experience the PSDB was familiar with and evaluated as positive. As one of its creators has said: "The GTI, (...), was practically a large-scale reproduction of what we did: it was to open space, etc."<sup>18</sup>. Here is an example of a solution finding a problem (COHEN, MARCH, and OLSEN, 1972; KINGDON, 2014).

One of the problems faced by the GTI was that the intention was to address the issue of racial inequalities without abandoning the notion of 'racial democracy' (RIOS, 2012). The dominant narrative identified 'racial democracy' as a myth, a form of false consciousness, not as an ideology that permeates social relations. The fact that the term lost legitimacy (TELLES, 2003) does not mean that it has disappeared from the social imaginary (GUIMARÃES, 2002). The discourse that affirms that 'racial democracy' is exceptional – and thus negates the existence of racism – plays the role of suppressing black agency and limiting back pro-equality reforms, in addition to providing the justification for such limitation. (SAWYER, 2006).

Transnational politics is a driver of reforms in countries' racial politics, as it triggers different mechanisms. This fact is found in the literature (McADAM, 1985; MORRIS, 1984; SAWYER, 2006). The 3<sup>rd</sup> UN World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia, and Related Intolerance (3<sup>rd</sup> WCAR), in 1997, set in motion environmental, cognitive, and relational mechanisms.

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<sup>18</sup>Statement by Ivair dos Santos (ALBERTI and PEREIRA, 2007, p. 355, free translation). In an interview, President Cardoso corroborates this view. Available at <<http://www.biblioteca.presidencia.gov.br/presidencia/ex-presidentes/fernando-henrique-cardoso/publicacoes/construindo-a-democracia-racial>>.

The preparation for the WCAR included national and regional meetings. The Latin American and Caribbean regional meeting took place in Santiago, Chile, in December 2000. However, black movements from 10 countries met beforehand in San José, Costa Rica, in October of that year, and produced a final document that was presented to the governments of the subcontinent at the pre-conference meeting in Chile<sup>19</sup>. The document was accepted in full by these governments, who later incorporated it into their official platforms (TELLES, 2003).

The Brazilian national conference attracted about two thousand activists in July 2001, in Rio de Janeiro, an event that generated new connections between anti-racist organizations and activists (relational mechanism). According to Telles (2003), after these meetings, the Brazilian authorities, especially the Itamaraty, would no longer ignore the local racial problem. They started taking it seriously like never before, committing efforts and resources to the world conference.

With respect to the cognitive mechanism, the 3rd WCAR changed perceptions in certain sectors of the state elite, especially in diplomatic circles (TELLES, 2003), but also among black activists, as it revealed the possibility of another form of interaction between the state and social movements. After the 3rd WCAR, the Brazilian government began to admit the possibility of adopting affirmative action initiatives.

The Cardoso government proposed to create a fund for social reparation to finance inclusive policies, including the National Program for Affirmative Action (Programa Nacional de Ações Afirmativas). However, except for the racial quotas adopted for filling appointed positions in the Ministry of Agrarian Development and the Rio Branco Institute's affirmative action program aimed at encouraging blacks to enter the diplomatic career, these initiatives were implemented erratically with insignificant results (HERINGER, 2006; TELLES, 2003). The measures adopted by this government had limited effects (JACCOUD, 2009).

In the first decade of the 21st century, Brazilian racial politics entered its progressive phase. However, its pace and intensity would be curbed by the ideology of 'racial democracy'. Between 2001 and 2004, 69 initiatives to promote racial equality were identified at the three levels of government, in the private sector, and

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<sup>19</sup>The Brazilian government claimed it had no resources to host this meeting (TELLES, 2003).

in non-governmental organizations (HERINGER, 2006). Multilateral bodies provided technical support to government programs and projects, e.g., the Program to Combat Institutional Racism (Programa de Combate ao Racismo Institucional, PrCI), at the Ministry of Health and in two state capitals, which were implemented in cooperation with the United Nations Development Program (UNDP).

Another relevant event in the shift in racial politics was the clash between racial democracy and racial equality regarding the adoption of racial quotas for accessing higher education (JACCOUD, 2009) – such clash consumed time and energy of the government and of anti-racist activists to the detriment of formulating a broad affirmative action program.

Between 2003 and 2014, state agencies (ministries, departments, secretariats, offices, directorates) were created and legislative initiatives (laws and decrees) were produced at a fast rate, as well as meetings, seminars, and forums, not to mention the development of implementation plans, programs, and government projects aimed at changing racial politics, e.g., the creation of the Special Secretariat for the Promotion of Racial Equality (Secretaria Especial de Promoção da Igualdade Racial, SEPPIR); in the area of education, Law N<sup>o</sup> 10.639/03 and Law N<sup>o</sup> 11.645/08 were issued. It is important to note that, in 2010, the STF unanimously decided that the racial quota system used in Brazilian public universities was constitutional, paving the way for the Statute of Racial Equality (Estatuto da Igualdade Racial) to be approved (Law N<sup>o</sup> 12.288/2010, which instituted the National System for the Promotion of Racial Equality - SINAPIR); Laws N<sup>o</sup> 12.711/2012 and N<sup>o</sup> 12.990/2014 were also approved. In the area of health, the Technical Committee for the Health of the Black Population (Comitê Técnico de Saúde da População Negra) was created in 2004, and the National Policy for the Health of the Black Population (Política Nacional de Saúde da População Negra) was established in 2009 (ministerial directive N<sup>o</sup> 992/2009)<sup>20</sup>.

In twenty years, racial politics would advance significantly in terms of pro-equity institution building. Brazil became a reference in the subcontinent<sup>21</sup>. However, the results obtained fell short of expectations. As Jaccoud et al. point out,

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<sup>20</sup>Cf. Jaccoud (2009); Ribeiro (2014); Silva, Cardoso, and Silva (2014); Batista, Wernerck, and Lopes (2012).

<sup>21</sup>The reference is from a UN report on minority issues, available at <<https://undocs.org/en/A/HRC/31/56/Add.1>>.

“the lack of results is not explained by a lack of guidelines” (JACCOUD, SILVA, ROSA and LUIZ, 2009, p. 38, free translation).

### **The conservative backlash: the regressive phase of racial politics**

The first sign that the egalitarian agenda was losing momentum came in 2013, with street protests. In 2015, to meet economic and budgetary demands, the Rousseff government announced the creation of the Ministry of Women, Racial Equality, and Human Rights, the result of the merger of the four following secretariats: Policies for the Promotion of Racial Equality, Human Rights, Policies for Women, and Youth.

This is the moment when the regressive phase of racial politics began, fueled by the ‘jornadas de 2013’ – a major cycle of protests – and its conservative agenda. What follows is a political and institutional crisis stemming from an increasingly weakened institutional setting, a crisis that culminated in the impeachment of President Rousseff, which marked the end of the New Republic (AVRITZER, 2019) and beginning of a cycle that combines increasing political tension and the rise of the extreme right.

The government of Michel Temer abolished the Ministry of Women, Racial Equality, and Human Rights; it did recreate the Secretariat for the Promotion of Racial Equality, within the Ministry of Justice, but the institution had no force or expression. In the same period, part of the media made a fuss about the release of the UN report on Affirmative Action in Brazil, suggesting that such initiatives had failed<sup>22</sup>. However, the report is clear: “Additionally, despite affirmative action policies, Afro-Brazilians remain largely excluded from positions of power and influence” (ESTADÃO, 2016, p. 01). The text later states that “Brazil has been a regional leader in the development of affirmative action policies” (ESTADÃO, 2016, p. 09)<sup>23</sup>.

The 2018 elections exposed current social and racial cleavages. Candidate Bolsonaro won in the richest, white-majority cities, while Haddad led in black and

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<sup>22</sup>“Políticas de igualdade racial fracassaram no Brasil, afirma ONU”. Estado de São Paulo newspaper, March 14, 2016; see also <<https://noticias.uol.com.br/ultimas-noticias/agencia-estado/2016/03/14/politicas-de-igualdade-racial-fracassaram-no-brasil-afirma-onu.htm>>.

<sup>23</sup>See note 22

poor cities<sup>24</sup>. During his campaign, Bolsonaro expressed his opposition to the agenda for promoting racial and gender equality. By repeating this discourse endlessly since 2011, he legitimized and ratified his candidacy<sup>25</sup>. One can see a parallel with the United States, with the rise of right-wing political extremism and its refusal to accept the advances toward gender and race equality (KING and SMITH, 2005; McADAM and KLOOS, 2014).

Despite maintaining the Secretariat for Racial Equality in the Ministry of Women, Family, and Human Rights and despite having convened the V National Conference for the Promotion of Racial Equality<sup>26</sup>, the Bolsonaro government expresses contempt for the racial issue. His actions reveal the intention to restore the discourse of racial democracy and dismantle the policies designed to promote race and gender equity (and social policies in general), not to mention his role in encouraging attacks on democratic institutions.

## Conclusion

Multiracial societies, regardless of their political regimes, adopt racial politics – even if it is not a ‘de jure’ racial politics. In other words, racial politics do not need a formal legal framework. Unlike the cases of Jim Crow Law, Apartheid, and the politics of white Australia, in Brazil, as in Latin America and the Caribbean, racial domination emerged without the imposition of segregationist laws.

The hegemonic narrative regarding the process of nation formation exalts miscegenation and the harmony between races as a trait of Brazilian exceptionalism. In this corner of the planet, with no divisions among the elites, the national state was able to embrace the ideology of ‘racial democracy’, encourage racial mixing as a policy to whiten the population, maintain political and economic control over the black population, remove and criminalize the poor, and weaken the legitimacy of the grievances and demands of the black movement.

The interpretative framework of race relations proves to be incomplete and flawed as it does not identify the engine producing hierarchies and iniquities: state institutions. The racial politics perspective considers the state as the ‘locus’ where

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<sup>24</sup>Cf. <[https://brasil.elpais.com/brasil/2018/10/24/actualidad/1540379382\\_123933.html](https://brasil.elpais.com/brasil/2018/10/24/actualidad/1540379382_123933.html)>.

<sup>25</sup>Cf. Rodrigues (2020).

<sup>26</sup>Decree N° 10.774/2021.



the norms producing hierarchies and inequalities are created. When analyzed from the perspective of racial politics, government measures, apparently disconnected from each other, emerge as part of a project to build a white nation.

Political-institutional crises, regime change, and transnational politics complement the proposed analytical framework. The race cycles model suggests that political crises, regime change, and shifts in racial politics are linked; however, it is not possible to establish an unambiguous direction. [These political-institutional crises] may lead to either a progressive or regressive phase. It will depend on whether the actors have greater or lesser ability to act.

Finally, contrary to the notion that building a 'true racial democracy' is a possibility, I argue that this is a trap. 'Racial democracy' is the way in which domination is manifested in Brazil. The challenge is to overcome the notion that 'racial democracy' is a legitimate way of referring to multiracial and multiethnic societies. The utopian vision is to build a post-racial democracy in which race becomes an archaic and outdated notion.

Post-racial democracy results from the 'de-racialization' of social, political, and economic relations, distinct from lexical cleansing; it is a system under which racial classification and hierarchy lose meaning and sense. Ensuring isonomy is not enough, it is necessary to establish public policies that are conducive to a multiracial society. Sodré (COUTINHO et al., 2014, p. 08, free translation) suggests adopting "isotopia [the condition of being an isotope], (...) the right to occupy the same space" and "isogonia [equal right to free expression], (...) the right to speak without discrimination" as mechanisms to enable this change.

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