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Access to Higher Education and Inequality in Brazil

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Introduction

Until 1960, it was a common belief in Brazil that education would be a natural consequence of development, as can be confirmed by a simple analysis of the very limited expenditure in education. For instance, in 2004, resources invested in all the educational levels taken together represented only 4.6 per cent of Brazilian GDP, and less than 1 per cent was destined to higher education (OCDE 2012). The universalization of elementary education is very recent (1970), 150 years later than in the USA and almost 50 years later than in South Korea. It is only from 1970 onwards, that the country seemed to realize that prosperity depends on education, and expenditure in education started to rise, reaching the current 6.6 per cent of GDP (INEP 2013), which in current values approaches 96 billion dollars per year.

Data on inequality in the population of developed countries, particularly in the USA and in Europe, show a significant and unexpected increase. In the USA, the participation of 1 per cent of the wealthiest population in the national income rose from 12.2 per cent to 19.3 per cent between 1991 and 2012; in Europe, in the same period, taking the United Kingdom as an example, the percentage rose from 10 per cent to 15.4 per cent¹. Brazil, although still deeply unequal, has moved in the opposite direction, with income inequalities indicators getting systematically lower. In 1989, these

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indicators have reached a peak, where the proportion between the poorest 5 per cent highest income and the lowest income of the richest 5 per cent was evaluated as 79 per cent. Since then, the proportion underwent a systematic reduction, but at its lowest value, in 2012, was still calculated as 36 per cent (Arretche 2015). When compared to Latin American countries, the most unequal region in the world, Brazil is amongst the most unequal, surpassed only by Colombia, Paraguay, Venezuela and Ecuador, according to the index calculated by UNDP – United Nations Development Program – for 2012².

In order to approach the intersection between inequality and higher education, this chapter presents panoramic data on Brazilian higher education history, development and structure, the current state of the network of coverage, with particular attention to its recent expansion and changes in mechanisms of access, and student support in higher education. A more detailed and critical presentation about the current state of the adopted affirmative action policies for all state institutions from 2012 onwards is offered in the last section.

General Information about Brazilian Higher Education History

According to Aranha (2006), educational accomplishments during the colonial period were due to Jesuit priests' investment in the conversion of native populations, a requirement of the Society of Jesus for the dissemination of the Catholic religion in the New World. To this goal was added the need to educate children from the upper layers of society for a religious, literary or other prestigious careers³. The political model, dependent on the Crown, and an economy based in the practice of monoculture in large plantations, using African enslaved people as labour force during more than 300 years, did not require technological innovation, which made the presence of specialized professionals unnecessary for the development of labour activities. In this scenario, Portugal has kept an apathetic posture about the possibility of creating an educational system in the colony that included higher education institutions. According to Cunha (2010), this was also an important strategy to maintain a relationship of dependence between Brazil and the metropolis.

From the 17th century onwards, the Crown required that Portuguese became the exclusive language in the colony. Besides, the interest of colonizers in the use of natives as slaves, this led the Jesuits to create missions to keep a distance between natives and colonizers, and move ahead in their conversion project. At the missions, Jesuits submitted the natives to the European system of habits and beliefs, using the medieval scholastic methodology that combined transmission of knowledge, memorizing and physical punishment. The result was a conversion work that has enormously contributed to the nearly complete physical and cultural extinction of the original inhabitants of the colony. Santos (1999) calls attention to the fact that the loss of linguistic memory caused by disuse in socialization spaces, in this case the educational

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In face of these new challenges, it is very important that the debate on affirmative action policies continues in Brazilian society, and that the results of the measures that are being implemented are divulged and understood by the population, and particularly by those who can benefit from these policies.

Endnotes

¹ Data available at <http://topincomes.Parisschoolofeconomics.eu>

² Data available at <http://noticias.uol.com.br/ultimas-noticias/ansa/2014/10/30/america-latina-e-a-regiao-mais-desigual-do-mundo.htm>

³ Law and Medicine

⁴ From the 2.391 Brazilian higher education institutions, only 8 per cent are universities and attend more than 53 per cent of the students, being, thus, large institutions. On the other side, faculties have more than 84 per cent participation but attend only 29 per cent of the students (INEP 2013)

⁵ In 2012-2013, enrolments increased 3.9 per cent in present courses and 3.6 per cent in non-present courses (distance education). Non-present courses have a participation of more than 15 per cent in the enrolments in undergraduate courses (INEP 2013).

⁶ The 2010 Brazilian Census asked people to classify themselves in one of five categories: *branco* (white), *pardo* (brown), *preto* (black), *indígena* (indigenous), or *amarelo* (yellow [meaning Asian]). Blacks and browns constituted 50.7 per cent of the population; 7.6 per cent defined themselves as black and 43.1 per cent defined themselves as brown. In 2010, the Brazilian population was 191 million, including 47.7 per cent self-defined as white, 1.1 per cent as yellow, and 0.4 per cent as indigenous (IBGE 2010).

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