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COLUMN ONE

## A Racial Quake in Brazil

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**Where ethnicity is an elastic concept, and a barrier, the introduction of admission quotas at a top university shakes up notions of color.**



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RIO DE JANEIRO — Amid the kaleidoscope of skin colors that is modern Brazil, Diego Souza Barreto is like millions of other young men: He has a cinnamon complexion and features that borrow a little from Africa, a little from Europe and maybe a little from the Middle East.

A few months back, when he applied for college, Souza Barreto had to "self-define" his race for the first time. He chose the box marked *pardo*, which means brown or mixed race. "For me, *pardo* is a meaningless term," he said, frowning. "It's a word used to describe an envelope."

Diego was one of thousands of students to enter the State University of Rio de Janeiro this year as part of its new racial quota program. Never before had race been used as a criterion for admission to a Brazilian public university.

The quotas are an experiment in social engineering that many blacks here hope will help spark a revolution in race relations in Brazil. But at the State University of Rio, the attempts to redress the country's historic inequalities have plunged the campus into the complex and often bewildering world of racial identity.

Race here is a notion beset by paradoxes. Blacks and whites intermarry more commonly, perhaps, than anywhere else. Yet there is a clear racial divide between rich and poor.

"Brazilian law has always tried to deny that race exists," said Paulo Fabio Salguiero, the university's admissions director. "When slavery was abolished, all the records of the slave holders were destroyed."

Brazilian slavery was a less rigid institution than its American counterpart — a black slave, for instance, could buy his freedom — but Brazil was the last country in the Western Hemisphere to abolish slavery, in 1888.

Now, race is at the center of the admissions process, even though it isn't always clear who is black and who isn't.

In Brazil, the national myth has it that everyone, no matter how fair-skinned, has at least one drop of "black blood." But there is also an inflexible racial pecking order: Walk into an upscale boutique or a corporate boardroom in this and other Brazilian cities, and black people all but disappear.

"The world is beginning to realize this other truth about Brazil — that we are a country where racism has produced one of the most effective systems of domination in the world," said Ivanir dos Santos, one of Brazil's most prominent black activists. "Without a single law in place to support it, we have a hierarchy of skin color where blacks appear to know their place."

Dos Santos and other activists here say quotas at Rio's university and other reforms are long overdue. They see the university's step as the first in a Brazilian "reconstruction," like the 20th century revolution in civil rights that finally began to chip away at the legacy of slavery in the United States.

But, as in the United States, where racial quotas in university admissions were declared illegal in the 1978 Regents of the University of California vs. Bakke decision, the Rio plan has provoked an angry backlash. About 300 students have filed lawsuits against the quotas, and the state government has scaled back the program for next year.

In the Rio quota system's first year, 40% of admission slots were reserved for black and *pardo* students and half for students who had completed all their schooling in public institutions (one student could fill quotas in both categories).

"Any quota system is wrong because it discriminates against white students for the crimes of the past," said Jair Bolsonaro, a federal congressional deputy representing Rio. "I'm Italian. My father and grandfather were Italian. None of them had anything to do with slavery."

To these arguments, black activists respond with statistics illustrating glaring racial inequality. Blacks make up 2% of the nation's university students, even though nearly half of all Brazilians defined themselves as black in the most recent census.

Go to nearly any public university in Brazil, Dos Santos said, and you will be lucky to find even one Brazilian-born black in its medical school. "The only blacks are the exchange students from Africa," he said.

"We pay our taxes," he added, "so why shouldn't we receive this public service we're paying for, and which supposedly belongs to everyone?"

At the State University of Rio, putting the quota system into practice has been a bureaucratic and pedagogic nightmare that illustrates how deeply rooted Brazil's ethnic hierarchies are.

None of the students admitted through a quota received financial aid or counseling during the first semester. Although tuition is free, buying a dozen new books each term, in addition to other materials, is beyond the reach of many working families. Some students were so pressed for cash, they put on their old high-school uniforms to take the bus to campus — in Rio, high school students can ride city buses for free.

"The expenses are too much for me. Just the round-trip fare from home to the university was a lot for my family," said Flavio Andrade, a 21-year-old first-year electrical engineering student. "I can't afford to buy any books, so I Xerox everything."

Andrade failed two of his six courses the first semester. "It's a lot harder than I thought it would be," he said.

Already, just halfway into the 2003-04 school year, about 40% of black and *pardo* students have dropped out, said officials, who declined repeated requests to provide dropout figures for previous years.

In August, state legislators moved to address the financial problem by approving a monthly stipend of about \$65 for 1,200 needy quota students. More than half of the 5,000 students who entered this year did so through quotas.

Salguiero, the admissions director, sees the quotas as a very crude answer to the issue of racial injustice. Implementing them, he said, has been like performing surgery with a hacksaw.

The State University of Rio is the region's most exclusive institution of higher education, a Harvard and Yale wrapped into one that attracts the brightest and most ambitious students from Rio's best public and private schools. Before this year, admission was decided solely through notoriously demanding entrance exams.

"The process was already demented and perverse before we introduced quotas," said Salguiero, who before dealing with Brazil's racial quotas specialized in a subject only slightly less complex — nuclear physics.

"In the medical school, we have only 92 slots for 1,500 applicants," he said. What separates the 92nd student from the 93rd and 94th is a set of arcane questions that turns the exam into as much a game of chance as a true test of qualifications, he said.

"Scoring 90% on that test is like scoring 110% on any other," he said. "You're talking about a person who is clearly gifted."

Wagner Alves Pimenta, a white student who scored 91% on the medical school exam, didn't make the cut this year.

"I'm from a simple family. I went to private school with a scholarship," Alves Pimenta told O Globo magazine. He was thus disqualified from the public school quota. And he declared himself white on his application. "If I had signed up as *pardo*, I would have been in the top of the class."

Because applicants defined their races themselves and there are no official criteria to define what race is, there were highly publicized cases of white students claiming to be "*pardo*," including a Polish Brazilian student who entered the medical school with a score lower than Alves Pimenta's.

With leftist governments in power now in both of the country's most populous states and leftist Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva as president, momentum for quotas and other measures to redress Brazil's racial imbalances is growing.

"It's a blatant fact that blacks earn the lowest levels of income, have less schooling and the worst jobs, and make up more than their share of the unemployed," Lula, as he is popularly known, said during his successful campaign last year. "This isn't just a legacy of slavery. Racism is being continually reproduced and strengthened."

Earlier this year, Lula appointed Brazil's first black Supreme Court justice. Lula has more blacks in his Cabinet than any other president in Brazil's history and has created a Cabinet-level Special Secretariat for the Promotion of Racial Equality.

Black members of the ruling Workers Party have pushed for a broad racial equality statute that would bring quotas to everything from government hiring to television commercials. But opponents won a victory in the Rio state legislature last month.

Reports of the large number of highly qualified white students that were turned away this year helped persuade lawmakers to scale back quotas for the 2004-05 academic year.

The quotas will be reduced to 20% for black students, 20% for public school students and 5% for students with physical disabilities and those of Indian descent. All admitted through the quotas will have to demonstrate financial need and would receive aid. There will be no quota for students who declare themselves *pardo*.

That would leave students like Andrade and Souza Barreto in a curious position. They have similarly toned

complexions. In the United States, both could easily pass for black. In Portuguese, a black person is "*um negro*."

But they have very different answers to the question of whether they would declare themselves *negro* on an admissions form.

"I consider myself black," Andrade said. "*Pardo* is not a color. You are white or you are black. If a person is *pardo*, he should consider himself black."

Souza Barreto, on the other hand, doesn't subscribe to racial designations.

"I don't consider myself *negro*. We are all a big mix here in Brazil," he said. "It's hard to determine anyone's race. You just can't say what you are."

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*Times staff writer Paula Gobbi contributed to this report.*

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