

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the construction of political subjects through a focus on articles and letters-to-the-editor published in the press about affirmative action, or the new public policies regulating access to Brazilian public sector universities. The theoretical framework for the research is based on principles in Critical Discourse Analysis, on Laclau's concept of social groups as socio-discursive categories (2005), and on van Leeuwen's framework (1996) for the study of the representation of social actors in discourse. The results of the analysis of the corpus of this research suggest that social inequality and disadvantage are construed through narratives which highlight distinct structural and social dimensions constraining access to tertiary education in Brazil.

KEY WORDS: affirmative action, education, narrativity, political subjects.

NARRATIVITY AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF POLITICAL SUBJECTS

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RESUMO

Este artigo explora a construção de sujeitos políticos através do estudo de artigos e cartas-do-leitor publicadas na imprensa sobre o tema da ação afirmativa, mais especificamente das novas políticas públicas que intervêm no acesso à universidade pública brasileira. O trabalho se desenvolve na tradição dos estudos críticos do discurso e apóia-se no conceito de grupo social como categoria sociodiscursiva (LACLAU, 2005) e no quadro teórico de van Leeuwen (1996), para o estudo da representação de atores sociais no discurso. Os resultados da análise do *corpus* sugerem que o espaço democrático brasileiro é construído de forma distinta através de narrativas que destacam diferentes dimensões estruturais e sociais que limitam o acesso à universidade pública no Brasil.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: ação afirmativa, educação superior, narratividade, sujeitos políticos.

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There has been a lot of controversy in both the press and the media about the so-called 'quota system' in public sector Brazilian universities: the 2003 entrance exams at the State University of Rio de Janeiro (UERJ), for example, implemented a Rio state-level law which required that 50% of its places be reserved for students from public sector schools, with another 40% available for students of African descent.

A particularly conspicuous dimension of the controversy in the press is represented by narratives with distinct representations of Brazilian society, insofar as differential access to public goods or services (healthcare, housing and education) is concerned with what in this research will be referred to as 'the Brazilian democratic space'. In this research, we focus on this dimension of the controversy through analysis of a *corpus* of published articles which engage in the public debate about access to public sector Brazilian universities.

There are texts in the *corpus* which discursively represent the Brazilian democratic space as a site of competing demands between whites and blacks, insofar as public sector university education is involved. In other texts, race is construed as secondary to the dimension of social background in access to tertiary education. This suggests that different democratic imaginaries are being drawn upon in the public debate about the quota system.

Our argument in this paper is that published texts on the subject do not merely *describe* the democratic space in Brazil, as if there were well defined social groups excluded from the public sphere, on the one hand, and, on the other, social segments with access to public goods and services. On the contrary, the texts in the *corpus* of this research discursively *construct* these democratic spaces, naming the social segments considered legitimate candidates for a re-distributive public policy. There is thus a performative dimension at work here: constructing a particular discursive identity for social segments in the press translates, on an empirical level, as constituting them as political subjects, in the context of this research understood as subjects with a legitimate demand. Another line of argument in the paper, which runs parallel to the one just spelled out, has the following direction: the fact that the texts in the *corpus* of this research narrativize the democratic space in Brazil in distinct ways suggests we are dealing with a discontinuous discursive space in the media, as far as the quota system is concerned. This is a discursive space characterized by competing threads of meaning. This paper is organized in the following manner. First, the criteria in the constitution of a *corpus* of published texts about the quota system are presented, followed by a description of the analytical category adopted to examine the *corpus*. The other sections in the paper introduce the analysis of the published texts

and considerations about how the media contributes to shaping public debate, and how, in its turn, the public debate contributes to the constitution of political subjects.

METHODOLOGY

This section gives the reader elements to evaluate how the research was conducted. In the constitution of the *corpus*, the general criterion adopted was that suggested by Gouveia (1997, p. 114), who argues that when one is dealing with a controversial subject in the media, collecting texts through a period of forty-five subsequent days provides a fairly accurate picture of the way the debate is discursively structured. It was thus felt to be necessary to establish criteria for the choice of a starting point for the compilation of published texts. At first, March 2003 was thought to provide an appropriate temporal point of departure, as this was the month following the original date set for the enrollment of students who had passed the UERJ entrance exams of 2003, the first one to implement the quota system in Brazil.¹ It was also thought that February the 27th could be an appropriate starting date for the compilation of published texts, as this was publicized in the media as the date of a Seminar on the quota system, promoted by the Rio de Janeiro State Department of Technology (Secretaria de Estado e Tecnologia do Estado do Rio de Janeiro - SECTI). Both the Seminar and a number of law suits sued against UERJ gave public visibility to the process of intervention in the access to public sector Brazilian universities. However, during compilation of the published texts, it was noticed that the public debate in the media had started before the Seminar promoted by SECTI and before the results of the 2003 UERJ entrance exams. It was then felt to be appropriate to amplify the period of data collection to the beginning of February; thus, texts published between February 1st 2003 and April 13th of the same year were collected.

The concept of textual genres provided another criterion for the compilation of the *corpus*, adopted with the objective of narrowing down the scope of the research: only articles, editorials and letters-to-the-editor were compiled. Although news stories also contribute to the production of meanings about a particular subject (and are thus not understood, in this research, as a mere *record* of facts), it was felt that the open expression of opinion would provide more latitude for probing into the social imaginary about how the democratic space is constituted in Brazil.

1. The dates for enrollment were initially set for the 11th through the 13th of February, but they had to be changed on account of various law actions sued against the University.

Having thus defined the criteria for the constitution of the *corpus*, it was time for the selection of newspapers. Although at this point in time the public debate focussed almost exclusively on the quota system at UERJ, a public university in Rio de Janeiro, it was decided that the *corpus* should feature both a newspaper from São Paulo and another one from Rio de Janeiro to give the *corpus* a national, and not only regional, dimension. With this goal in mind, the newspapers *O Globo* (from Rio de Janeiro) and *Folha de S. Paulo* (from São Paulo) were selected: both have similar profiles, as the newspapers' own descriptive statements indicate. Their readership is basically made up of upper middle class, educated readers, and they are newspapers widely read across the country.

TABLE 1: DESCRIPTION OF THE CORPUS

Newspaper	Month	Day	Genre	Title and Identification
Folha SP	February	11	Editorial	Cotas e nada mais / The quota system and nothing else (FSPo-1)
Folha SP	February	21	Editorial	Cotas em questão / The quota system under discussion (FSPo-2)
Folha SP	February	17	Letter-to-the-editor	Cotas / The quota system (FSPc-1)/ Folhateen
O Globo	February	21	Letter-to-the-editor	Untitled (OGc-1)
O Globo	February	24	Letter-to-the-editor	Cotas coloridas/ Colorful quotas (OGc-2)
O Globo	February	24	Letter-to-the-editor	Untitled (OGc-3)
O Globo	February	26	Letter-to-the-editor	Untitled (OGc-4)
O Globo	February	28	Article	Racismo e papel da universidade / Racism and the role of the university (OGO-1)
O Globo	February	28	Article	Dever inadiável / A duty which can no longer be delayed (OGO-2)
Folha SP	March	07	Article	O papel estratégico das cotas / The strategic role of the quota system (FSPo-3)
Folha SP	March	09	Article	Universidade vira sonho da casa própria / Entering university becomes the dream of owning your home (FSPo-4)
Folha SP	March	10	Letter-to-the-editor	Mais cotas / More quotas (FSPc-2) / Painel do leitor
O Globo	March	12	Article	Quem tem medo dos negros? / Who's afraid of blacks? (OGO-3)
O Globo	March	12	Article	Ação afirmativa, sim; cota, não / Yes to affirmative action; no to the quota system (OGO-4)
O Globo	March	21	Article	Introduzindo o racismo / Introducing racism (OGO-5)
O Globo	March	22	Article	Mau exemplo / A bad example (OGO-6)
O Globo	April	01	Letter-to-the-editor	Untitled / Magazine (OGc-5)
O Globo	April	01	Letter-to-the-editor	Untitled / Magazine (OGc-6)

The Table 1 introduces a description of the *corpus*, organized around its distribution in time. It also identifies the newspapers where the texts were published² and their genre.

Given the goals of the research, it was decided to adopt Theo van Leeuwen's (1996) framework for the study of the representation of social actors in discourse. In this framework, one is concerned with the ways in which the participants of a social process are discursively represented in a text, or in a sample of texts. From an empirical point of view, there are a number of social actors involved in a particular social process, but only some of these actors will be represented in a text. It is thus felt to be important to identify the social actors discursively represented in a text and the lexicogrammatical choices made for the representation of these actors.

THE ANALYSIS

Discontinuities in different dimensions were observed in the *corpus*.³ There are discontinuities as regards the discursive representation of social actors involved in the debate about the quota system: in a number of texts, the debate is represented as taking place among discursive actors directly involved in the process (legislators, state administrators, the Justice Department, the elite, defenders of the quota system), while in others more distant discursive actors are drawn upon, which contributes to narrativizing the debate within a cultural and historical framework (the country's unconscious, the representation of racial relations in literature, the intellectual tradition which has concerned itself with racism and inequality in Brazil). The following examples illustrate discontinuities in this dimension:

Example 1: In adopting the quota system in the entrance exams, the university is enforcing two [state-level] laws *passed unanimously in the Legislative body and sanctioned by then governor Anthony Garotinho* (OGc-4; my italics).⁴

2 The letters in parentheses identify the newspapers (FSP stands for *Folha de São Paulo* and OG for *O Globo*) and the textual genre (the letter 'o' indicates editorials or articles and the letter 'c' indicates letters-to-the-editor). The numbers refer to the constitution of the corpus, organized around date of publishing. It was often felt to be necessary to indicate the section where the text was published.

3 In translating corpus material into English, it was felt to be important to give readers as literal a translation as possible so they could have a flavor of the analytical procedures adopted. This accounts for the awkward translations.

4 In Portuguese: "Ao aplicar o sistema de cotas no vestibular, a universidade está cumprindo duas leis aprovadas por unanimidade pela Assembléia Legislativa e sancionadas pelo então governador Anthony Garotinho" (OGc-4).

Example 2: The burden of social inequalities inherited from slavery remains as a *problem to be solved in the country's unconscious*. Even though geneticists and anthropologists have irrefutable evidence of what, in practice, we may easily conclude that beneath our skins, mulatto, black or white, we are all equal, social opportunities still reflect an unbalanced proportion in relation to the racial distribution of the Brazilian population (FSPo-3; my italics).⁵

A cursory examination of the textual fragments highlights the distinct staging of social actors: if example 1 features social actors directly involved in the quota system, example 2, by contrast, narrativizes more abstract voices in the constitution of the public debate. What varies, then, from one text to another, is the way the debate is narrativized, or the ways social actors are discursively represented in it.

There are discontinuities as regards the narrativization of the 'State' as a social actor directly involved in the process of social intervention in access to public sector universities, as the examples below suggest:

Example 3: Affirmative action is a legitimate tool for a *democratic State*, that is, one whose aim is to promote equality of opportunities for discriminated groups. (OGc-1).⁶

Example 4: In present conditions in Brazil, the principle of the quotas is a strong tool [= *of the State*] for the promotion of rights, for the enhancement of citizenship and for the construction of a national democratic edifice. (OGO-3).⁷

Example 5: Apart from this, [quota system defenders] do not want to concede that the simple fact that *the State* makes it mandatory for some individuals [= those who apply for quotas] to classify themselves racially in and of itself consolidates and celebrates racial divisions. (OGO-5).⁸

In the first three examples, a narrative is created that associates the 'State' with so-called democratic values (equality of opportunities, citizenship, social rights). By contrast, example (5) narrativizes the 'State' as a bureaucratic

5 "O peso das desigualdades sociais legadas pelo regime de escravidão permanece como um problema a ser solucionado no inconsciente do país. Ainda que geneticistas e antropólogos tenham provas irrefutáveis daquilo que, na prática, podemos facilmente concluir que, por baixo da pele, seja parda, negra ou branca, somos todos iguais, as oportunidades sociais ainda refletem uma desproporção exagerada em relação à distribuição racial da população brasileira" (FSPo-3).

6 "Ação afirmativa é um instrumento legítimo do Estado democrático que visa a promover maior igualdade de oportunidade para os grupos discriminados" (OGc-1).

7 "Nas condições brasileiras, o princípio das cotas é uma ferramenta forte [= do Estado] para ampliar direitos, fortalecer a cidadania e o edifício democrático nacional" (OGO-3).

8 "Além disso, não querem [= os adeptos das cotas] concordar que o mero fato de o Estado chegar a obrigar certos cidadãos a se classificar racialmente já em si consolida e celebra divisões raciais" (OGO-5).

apparatus, which stimulates the political apathy of individuals (“making it mandatory” for individuals to indicate their color, as blacks or whites).

There are also discontinuities in the way the democratic space at large is represented, in the present social formation in Brazil. In a number of texts, the democratic space is narrativized as a site of conflict between two competing groups: an undifferentiated group of people (‘us’), on the one hand, and a social segment with specific demands (‘they’ = the blacks), on the other. In other texts, this space is discursively represented as being constituted by a homogeneous group, where there is “mixture and racial confusion” (Example 9 below). There are others still which narrativize the Brazilian democratic space as a site of struggles between social segments based on temporary alliances (around a specific demand), on the one hand, and social segments characterized by the stable nature of their alliances (‘the elite’), on the other. The following examples illustrate the distinct ways the Brazilian democratic space is narrativized:

Example 6: A few injunctions granted by the Rio de Janeiro Justice Department were enough for the Brazilian media to be flooded by the opinions of *those against the adoption of the quota system for blacks and mulattoes in public universities*. (OGO-3).⁹

Example 7: To say the least, forces in action are plural, *the interests of dominant segments have been crystallized for centuries*, the Brazilian State itself has not been a brilliant example in the exercise of its prerogatives for the broadening or enhancement of citizenship. (OGO-3).¹⁰

Example 8: However, defenders of the thesis [= pro quota system] should not allow people to intimidate them and should mobilize to avoid its [the law’s] obstruction, such as would please *the elites [of this country], who are wildly excited when they see, on the social and historical horizon, the possibility of [social] ascension of millions of Brazilians who have been in the margins of the present process of modernity* (OGO-3).¹¹

Example 9: The quota system is here to radically change the way in which we should imagine Rio de Janeiro – no longer the wonderful city of *mixture and racial confusion*, but as a place divided, in a Cartesian manner,

9 “Bastaram algumas liminares, concedidas pela Justiça do Rio de Janeiro, para a mídia brasileira voltar a ser inundada com as opiniões dos críticos da adoção de cotas para negros e pardos nas universidades públicas” (OGO-3).

10 “Afinal as forças em movimento são plurais, os interesses dos segmentos dominantes estão cristalizados há séculos, o próprio Estado brasileiro não tem sido um exemplo brilhante no exercício de suas prerrogativas, no sentido de ampliar a participação da cidadania” (OGO-3).

11 “Entretanto, os defensores da tese não podem se deixar intimidar e devem se mobilizar para impedir o seu engavetamento, tão ao gosto das elites, que se eriçam quando vêem no horizonte social e histórico a possibilidade de ascensão dos milhões de brasileiros que ficaram à margem no processo de conquista da modernidade contemporânea” (OGO-3).

between blacks and mulattoes, on the one hand, and “the others”, on the other hand. Is this really what the quota system defenders want? Some of them would say yes, as they think that the city is already divided along these lines, but *many others recognize the dangers of racialization*. (OGO-5).¹²

In the examples introduced, one notices lexicogrammatical formulations of a more general nature, such as “those who oppose the quota system”, as well as other formulations of a more specific character, such as “the elites”, or “the dominant social segments”. In the case of “those who oppose the quota system”, the strategy adopted, in van Leeuwen’s terms, is one of assimilation / collectivization (the representation of social actors, not as individuals, but in groups) in which the temporary nature of the association among social actors is highlighted. Since there is no positive feature in the characterization of this social segment, the latter picks up a transitory dimension, inasmuch as it is the product of an alliance which exists only in relation to a specific goal (in this case, its members’ position against the quota system). By contrast, with “the elites” or “dominant social segments”, the narrativization of individuals organized in groups is quite distinct, as the group is identified by the positive feature “social class”. Here, a strategy of identification / classification is adopted, which contrasts with assimilation / collectivization: whereas the expression “those who oppose the quota system” constructs a temporary and unstable alliance among the members of a particular social group, in “the elites” and “the dominant social segments” a division is recognized in the present Brazilian social formation, one with a stable nature.

Finally, there is another kind of narrative in which there are social segments in favor of the quota system, and also represented as having a temporary character:

Example 7 (repeated and enlarged): The implementation of an idea such as [the one contained in] the quota system – new in Brazil, although it has already been tested in many countries around the world, with distinct results [in each case] – will certainly not follow a linear path, without making any mistakes. To say the least, forces in action are plural, *the interests of dominant segments have been crystallized for centuries*, the Brazilian State

12 “O sistema de cotas veio para mudar radicalmente a maneira pela qual devemos imaginar o Rio de Janeiro – não mais a cidade maravilhosa da mistura e da confusão racial, mas como um lugar cartesianamente dividido entre negros e pardos de um lado, e os “outros” de outro. É isso mesmo que querem os defensores das cotas? Alguns sim, porque pensam que a cidade já é dividida nessas linhas, mas muitos outros reconhecem os perigos da racialização” (OGO-5).

itself has not been a brilliant example in the exercise of its prerogatives for the broadening or enhancement of citizenship. (OGO-3).¹³

In this example, Brazilian society is not only characterized as being constituted by stable social segments (“dominant segments long crystallized [in the Brazilian social structure]”), but also by social segments discursively represented as more volatile (“social forces in action”), a form of expression which could be understood to indirectly refer to organized movements of civil society in Brazil (such as the Movimento Negro, organized for combating racial discrimination).

Still on the theme of discontinuities in the *corpus*, different discursive formations are articulated in the texts, with distinct values on account of the way they are brought together in a particular text. For example, some texts feature only values associated with a democratic discursive formation (collective rights, citizenship, equality of opportunities), while others articulate, within the same text, a liberal discursive formation (universal values, individual freedom) with another one of a more democratic nature. It is also important to draw attention to the different orders of discourse articulated in the texts, with a predominance of juridical discourse.

Finally, one notices discontinuities as regards the discursive representation of collective identities in the *corpus*: in some texts the signifiers ‘blacks’ or ‘blacks and mulattoes’ (or ‘afrodescendants’) are constructed within a chain of significations which highlight a history of exclusion and discrimination. In others, by contrast, the association between ethnicity and exclusion is questioned and ‘blacks’ (or at least ‘some blacks’) are discursively represented as ‘subjects of rights’ (in this paper understood as individuals with access to quality private education, and thus with guaranteed access to a public sector university). In texts which share the same argumentative orientation, the association between ‘whites’ and the concept of ‘subject of rights’ is deconstructed through the use of the term ‘the poor white’. Not all whites, according to some journalists, have access to private education (or quality education), thus not all ‘whites’ are automatically guaranteed access to public sector universities – not all ‘whites’ are ‘subjects of rights’ in Brazil.

The following is an example which illustrates a discursive practice in which the question of social inequalities is superimposed on the question of collective rights:

13 “A implantação de uma idéia como a das cotas – nova no Brasil, embora já testada em vários países do mundo, com resultados diferenciados – não seguirá certamente um caminho retilíneo, sem erros. Afinal as forças em movimento são plurais, os interesses dos segmentos dominantes estão cristalizados há séculos, o próprio Estado brasileiro não tem sido um exemplo brilhante no exercício de suas prerrogativas no sentido de ampliar a participação da cidadania” (OGO-3).

Example 10: Quota system defenders have always justified their position claiming that this segment of the population is the least protected and the most distant from public resources, [thus] not able to compete, on an equal footing, with whites.

For all this, I found it extremely interesting to come across a figure in an article entitled “Only 36.6% enter Uerj outside the quota system” (Section Cotidiano, 15/2). The article showed that *19.7% of the total number of blacks and mulattoes admitted through the entrance exams had not studied in public sector schools*. It seems that the condition of blacks – although it is far from coming close to that of the white population – is not as catastrophic as the defenders of the quota system want to make us believe it is.

This fact shows that this system, although it is imbued with good intentions, is prone to leading to injustices, be it with respect to *the poor whites* – who are not in a position to derive benefits from the quota system – or from the point of view of *blacks who are in a position to afford a private school* and thus should not be granted the privilege of the quota system. Ricardo Greber Arini, São Paulo, SP (FSPc-1; my italics).¹⁴

The democratic space, in this text, is represented discursively as a site of competing demands between students from public sector high schools and others from private schools. In more technical terms, the feature ‘social class’ (‘the poor white’; ‘blacks who can afford private education’) is superimposed on the feature ‘functionalization on the dimension private vs. public sector’ (‘students from public-sector high schools’; ‘students from private schools’) in the discursive representation of collective identities in the *corpus*. In terms to be fully discussed later on in this paper, the empty space of the ‘universal’, insofar as tertiary education in Brazil is concerned, is construed, in this text, as a space occupied by a ‘subject of rights’ characterized by the features ‘social class’ and ‘functionalization on the dimension public sector vs. private system’. The feature of ethnicity is thought to be secondary to the dimension of functionalization / provenance or origin from the private system and subordinate also to the feature ‘social class’.¹⁵

14 “Os defensores das cotas para negros e pardos nas universidades sempre justificaram as suas posições alegando que esse contingente da população é o mais desassistido e desprovido de recursos, não tendo condições de competir em pé de igualdade com os brancos./Por isso, achei bastante interessante um dado que consta da reportagem: “Só 36,6% entram na Uerj fora das cotas” (Cotidiano, 15/2). A reportagem mostrou que 19,7% dos negros e pardos aprovados não estudaram em escolas públicas. Pelo jeito, a situação da população negra – mesmo longe de ser equiparada à da população branca – não é tão catastrófica como querem fazer crer os defensores das cotas. /Esse fato vem mostrar que esse sistema, apesar de imbuído de boas intenções, comete injustiças, seja do lado dos brancos pobres – que não podem se beneficiar das cotas – seja do lado de negros que têm condições de pagar uma escola particular e não deveriam ter o privilégio da reserva de vagas” (FSPc-1).

15 This letter-to-the-editor is representative of a pronounced discursive position in academia today. Demétrio Magnoli (from USP, São Paulo State University), for example, in a recent article published in *O Globo*, February 8th, 2007, argues that “poverty does not have a color”.

From a theoretical point of view, the group or social segment is not considered a natural 'referent' in this research, as in functionalist sociology, but as a socio-discursive category: social groups are constituted, not through their homogeneous or transparent features, but through their demands. This is an argument by Ernesto Laclau, a sociologist from Argentina, in a book entitled *On populist reason* (2005), which has been drawn upon extensively in this research.

From a discursive point of view, as pointed out in the introduction, there is a performative dimension in the naming practices featuring in the *corpus*: attaching to specific social segments the discursive identity of legitimate candidates to the quota system presupposes constituting these segments, on an empirical level, as political subjects. What the public debate in the media does is to produce, retroactively, a discursive identity for particular social segments. And 'retroactively' means during the debate – these social segments did not have a discursive identity prior to the debate. Thus, for example, naming 'students from public sector high schools' as legitimate candidates to a re-distributive policy entails constituting this group as being made up of political subjects, who question the "universality" of the category 'subject of rights' in contemporary Brazilian society.

The struggle to temporarily fix the meaning of the concept of 'subjects entitled to the quota system' (or subjects with a legitimate demand to a re-distributive public policy) translates linguistically (or discursively) as a struggle over the appropriate symbolic oppositions that narrativize the Brazilian democratic space (whites vs. blacks; the rich vs. the poor; students from public sector high schools vs. students from private schools, to give just a few examples). The concept 'subjects entitled to the quota system' will never reach the status of a universal concept, as this is an impossible dimension: when a symbolic opposition is established, some elements are included while others are inevitably excluded.

An important point in this respect, about which the informed reader is already raising questions, has to do with the ways in which symbolic representation is embedded in practices and institutions: naming does not have an exclusively verbal dimension or is not an exclusively verbal operation – it is a social practice, which may or may not consolidate itself institutionally. For example, it is not enough for a particular social segment (say, civil and military police forces) to address society with a claim to having their children entitled to the quota system. For this verbal operation to be effective, it is mandatory that it has an affective investment which, in a political dimension, entails that the particular social demand be politically salient in a particular social formation (LACLAU, 2005, p. 63). A symbolic opposition which is particularly salient in Brazil today is the one that organizes the democratic

space around the distinction public sector vs. private system in education. The narrativization of the collective identity 'students from public sector high school', within the context of the public debate over the quota system, pays lip service to the idea that this opposition is not a merely verbal distinction, but an opposition overdetermined by specific circumstances related to the history of public sector services in Brazil, particularly within the domain of education. One recognizes a very specific narrative in the *corpus* about the lack of resources in public sector schools in the country and specifically about how public sector schools were "abandoned" by the middle classes once public funding was withheld from public sector schools, and diverted to the private system.

It is this overdetermination, or differential investment, that takes the term 'student from public sector schools' beyond a simple functional characterization (a feature of provenance, or origin) and turns it into a signifier of social exclusion or lack of access to public resources. The narrative highlighted is one that stages public sector schools as major political actors in the Brazilian democratic space.

Discontinuities such as those observed in the *corpus* are dear themes to discourse analysts within a critical tradition, as the latter are particularly concerned with change in society and in discourse. The existence of such discontinuities guarantees the instability of social meanings and values attributed to the quota system, which distinct political actors try to fix in a particular direction.

THE ROLE OF THE MEDIA IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF DEMOCRATIC SPACES

Discourses in the press about affirmative action in Brazil (in the area of public sector university education) may be characterized by the heterogeneity of their statements, which try to partially fix the meaning of a re-distributive public policy. One might argue that the heterogeneity of the statements about the quota system "mirrors" the different tendencies in Brazilian society with respect to the theme of differential access to public sector universities through the quota system. Against the illusion that the press gives the reader a "sample" of distinct attitudes towards controversial subjects or subjects of general interest, this paper has introduced an argument that the role of the press is much more important than merely "reflecting" tendencies: the press is constitutive of the debates, or shapes the form of the debate on account of its discursive conventions.

Supporting evidence for this argument may be found in the *corpus* of this research: there is no article in the *corpus* produced by representatives of organized movements of civil society which fight against racism, which seems

to indicate unequal access to the media. Apart from this, there is no discursive representation of these movements of civil society in the texts which make up the *corpus*. In the letters-to-the-editor, as well as in the articles, the “targets” of the quota system are represented in the role of ‘beneficiaries’ of the system, as in the following examples:

Example 11: Affirmative action is a legitimate tool of the democratic State whose aim is to promote equality of opportunities for *discriminated groups* (OGc-1).¹⁶

Example 12: Tremendous semantic confusion permeates the debate about policies *towards social minorities*. (OGO-4).¹⁷

Example 13: A number of injunctions, granted by the Rio de Janeiro Justice Department, were enough for the Brazilian media to be flooded by the opinions of those against the adoption of the quota system *for blacks and mulattos in public universities*. (OGO-3).¹⁸

There is no sense of agency for these social actors in the texts pertaining to the *corpus* under discussion, although there is evidence that suggests the mobilization of sectors of civil society who fight against racism and social inequalities in Brazil (HERINGER, 2004). This seems a trivial statement, but one should not lose sight of the fact that there is no congruence, or a one-to-one relationship, between the roles of social actors in a particular process and their discursive representation in texts.

Thus, it is necessary to reject the false conception of journalism as news *after* the fact, or as commentary *after* an event (WILLIAMS, 1989, p. 21). What these false ideas promote is the notion that there is a separation between reality and the institutions that produce news/culture/information. The press is part of social life: although it is not responsible for intervening in the process of access to public sector universities in Brazil, it is directly implicated in the process, to the extent that it engages in public debate about affirmative action, shaping the attitudes of its readers, as well as formatting the debate in a particular direction, given the “authorized” voices that take part in the debate. There is a circularity between debate and social process.

From the point of view of the genres ‘article’ and ‘letter to the editor’, it is argued, in this paper, that they support the discursive conventions of written journalism: although the cited genres are said to be demarcated spaces which do not conform to journalistic conventions (whose alleged aim is to inform

16 “Ação afirmativa é um instrumento legítimo do Estado democrático que visa a promover maior igualdade de oportunidades para os grupos discriminados” (OGc-1).

17 “Grande confusão semântica entrava o debate sobre políticas voltadas para minorias sociais” (OGO-4).

18 “Bastaram algumas liminares, concedidas pela Justiça do Rio de Janeiro, para a mídia brasileira voltar a ser inundada com as opiniões dos críticos da adoção de cotas para negros e pardos nas universidades públicas” (OGO-3).

in an impartial and objective way), these genres reinforce the illusion of the “subjective” nature of opinions, as contrasted with the “facts” of other sections (MARIANI, 2004, p. 8). Thus, they support the illusion of the “referentiality” of journalistic texts, which in principle follow the conventions of objectivity, neutrality, impartiality and veracity.

A critical view of the press, from the perspective of its discursive conventions, does not entail neglecting its role in the construction of democratic spaces: a retrospective glance at the recent social formation in Brazil is enough to recognize the role of the press in the consolidation of democratic institutions, or in the construction of new representations for women (FERREIRA, 2006), to give just two examples. However, as a constitutive part of society, the press is affected by existing power relations. As it is not open to the entire spectrum of a particular social formation, the press suffers from an ill which is common to other contemporary media: the limited access of specific social segments to institutions which produce culture, leisure and information.

An example from the *corpus* of this research provides evidence for the argument that, although it is affected by existing power relations, the press is not a discursive instance which contributes to the total subjectivization of the masses.¹⁹ The following fragment is from a text in which “the popular demand for a place in a public sector university” is put on the same level as “the dream of owning one’s home”:

Example 14: [Entering] public sector universities has become the dream of owning one’s home [...] A fairly recent tendency in Brazilian society is the popular demand, even in the lowest social segments, for places in universities, especially in public sector ones, free of the expensive tuition [one has to pay to enroll in a private sector university in Brazil]. *For hundreds of thousands of young people from public sector high schools, [this demand] equals the dream of owning one’s home.* However, on account of lack of resources, these institutions have progressively faced problems in providing new places and guaranteeing the quality of their teaching (FSPo-4; my italics).²⁰

It seems relevant to focus on the lexicogrammatical codification in this text of the expression “the dream of [having] your own home” (“o sonho

19 A position which would be incompatible with a major theoretical assumption informing this research, namely, that discourse has a double dimension: it should be seen both as a locus for the inscription of historical meanings, as well as a site of meaning production.

20 “Universidade vira sonho da casa própria/ [...] /Uma das novas tendências brasileiras é a demanda popular, mesmo nas camadas mais pobres, por vaga nas universidades, especialmente as públicas, livres das pesadas mensalidades. Emparelha-se, para centenas de milhares de jovens de escolas públicas, ao sonho da casa própria. Mas, pela falta de recursos, essas instituições têm cada vez menos condições de abrir novas vagas e garantir a qualidade de ensino” (FSPo-4).

da casa própria”). In the body of the text (“[the popular demand] equals the dream of your own home”), the expression in Portuguese has generic value (DUBOIS, 2004, p. 302), that is, it is predicated, not in relation to a particular person or to a particular moment in time (for example, “his dream came true”, or “I had a dream yesterday”), but in relation to an undifferentiated group of people and with no temporal anchorage (“everybody’s dream of owning a home”). This positive generic feature derives from a chain of significations the term acquired in a particular discursive formation, or within a set of social meanings and values relatively stabilized at the time of the “Brazilian miracle”, when the middle classes demanded access to public goods and conditions to buy their homes.

From this point on, a specific demand, that is, a demand put forward by a particular social segment, crystallized into a privileged discursive position, which partially fixed the meaning of a ‘subject of rights’ in Brazil: “every Brazilian has the right to own their home”. “The dream of owning a home” may, from this perspective, be seen as a specific element which fills the empty place of the “universal” in the Brazilian democratic space: something that “everybody” is entitled to having. Proceeding with the discursive analysis of the text, in bringing together two distinct discursive formations, or constructing an equivalence between popular demands in the present and demands put forward by the middle classes in the past, the text forces, if one may say so, the broadening of the scope of the concept of ‘subject of rights’ in Brazil, in the direction of a generalization of its referent (individuals from popular social segments, not only from the middle classes, may occupy the position of ‘subjects of right’, in this case specifically in relation to access to public sector universities).

CONCLUSION

The public debate about the quota system in the press gives form and expression to the question of the relationship between the universal and the particular, one of the most pressing questions nowadays, both in the intellectual and political arenas. In the debate, the dichotomy translates as an opposition between universal rights (the right of every Brazilian to admission to public sector universities) and collective rights (the rights of minorities, for example, to public policies which attempt to address a history of social exclusion). Collective rights in Brazil emerged in the 80’s, as a result of the participation of Indian organizations in the public debate that led to a reformulation of our Constitution, in what has been called the period of

democratic transition in Brazil (SOUZA FILHO, 2001).²¹ Implicit in this and in similar movements is an attack on the notion of a 'universal subject of rights' – a concept that would regulate relationships between individuals in democratic societies.

Part of the argument implicit in this attack is represented by the idea that there are no 'natural' rights, or rights prior to society: individual rights may not be defined in an isolated manner, but within the context of social relations of a given nature, in a particular social formation. In Brazil, for example, this would translate as forcing the examination of the relationships between the statement "every Brazilian has the right to admission to a public sector university" and the social practices, in time and in history, which actually organize the access of individuals to public sector universities.²²

Thus the concept of 'universal' is rejected and replaced by a conception characterized by the following features. First, there is a growing tendency to believe that neither universal categories nor radical particularism provide appropriate answers to contemporary problems. If, on the one hand, 'universal' categories do not include within their bounds the plurality of actors in contemporary society, on the other hand, democratic spaces are not simply the result of the recognition of differences, or of the distinct demands of different social segments: the logic of difference, or of the plurality of social demands, may lead to social fragmentation. The construction of democratic spaces presupposes the existence of a common ground for different subjects, or subjects with distinct demands.

To Laclau, this common ground is what constitutes hegemonic struggle: the logic of hegemonic struggle is the logic of social processes through which particular demands are negotiated and accepted as serving the interests of the entire spectrum of a particular social formation. It is the logic, not of the Universal as the site of a totality, but of "the Universal contaminated by a particularity", to use an expression by Laclau himself (2000, p. 51). Taking the quota system as an example, the demand of a specific social group (blacks and mulattoes) should be seen, within the context of asymmetrical relations in Brazil, as characterized by its particularity as well as by a more comprehensive or "universal" dimension, insofar as it addresses the construction of an actual democratic space in Brazil. To some, the quota system universalizes the demand of blacks and mulattoes for public sector university education, transforming it into the bearer of a meaning that

21 This is the so-called 'Constituição cidadã', dated 1988.

22 Paraphrasing Badiou (1995, p. 84), "every Brazilian" in this formulation does not refer to the entire spectrum of social segments in Brazil, but to 'some' individuals only, namely to those with privileged access to public sector universities on account of their education in private schools.

transcends its particularity (inasmuch as the demand is understood as a step in the construction of really democratic public sector universities). The common ground for different subjects, in a particular social formation, is thus constituted by discursive practices whose aim is to construct a hegemony, or to force the body of a particularity to serve the function of universal representation (LACLAU, 2000, p. 303).

A second argument against the logic of the universal is organized around the central claim that there is an irreducible distance between reality and its modes of narrativization, or symbolization – symbolic processes are not reduced to the description of positive data or the positive properties of “natural” referents. Much on the contrary: in Žižek’s words (ŽIŽEK, 2000, p. 93), symbolic processes “always entail a certain distance in relation to positive reality”. Bringing this home to the theme of this paper, the concept of ‘subjects entitled to the quota system’ is not a mere description of reality, but an empty signifier filled, on different occasions, by contingent or particular contents. And ‘empty’ does not mean ‘abstract’; it does not refer to a ‘general’ term, or one that applies to different entities. ‘Empty’ is used to refer to an unattainable totality (LACLAU, 2000, p. 63).

This is a new way of conceiving the political order – against the fiction of a universal ‘subject of rights’, a novel concept is introduced. That of an unrepresentable universalism, or of a universalism which refers to an unattainable totality. Even in a localized context, such as the public debate in Brazil, the concept of a subject entitled to the quota system does not exhaust reality, or does not include every social segment, as, according to Lacan, apart from the lack of correspondence between reality and the symbolic order, there are always residues of meaning in relation to the symbolic order itself (ŽIŽEK, 1991, p. 55). A number of simple questions might be formulated here, which would help bring home to us the Lacanian notion of residues of meaning: how many university students are the children of rural workers? How many of them come from Brazilian Indian communities? Are the categories constructed in the debate about the quota system adequate to include these social segments?

From the point of view of a social theory, according to Laclau “the idea of a totally emancipated, transparent society, one from which all tropological movements²³ have been eliminated, is an idea which presupposes the end of the hegemonic relation (and the end also of all democratic politics)”. Another way of saying this is that the constitution of democratic spaces is never complete: there is no democratic discourse that includes within its bounds the population it represents.

23 Or every contradiction.

And it is this understanding of the contingent and unstable nature of democratic discourse that guarantees that “the moment of universality” (in Gramsci’s term) is a political moment – the moment when a demand ceases to be seen as a contingent demand, put forward by a specific social segment, and starts to be seen as a *necessary* demand, one that meets the interests of the entire spectrum of a particular social formation.

The public debate about the quota system, from this perspective, should not be understood as an intellectual debate undertaken by well-intentioned social actors whose major aim is to contribute to setting up the best social system, as Habermas (1987) would argue, within a theoretical framework in favor of “communicative action”. The debate should be seen, rather, as a symbolic struggle over a system of distribution of wealth and material resources, undertaken by social actors who represent well demarcated institutional positions and whose discourse emerges from legitimate speaking positions.

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