

An exploratory analysis of admission and inclusion in Brazilian Higher Education: from inherited to relative merit^{1 2 3 4}

Uma análise exploratória sobre seleção e inclusão no Ensino Superior brasileiro: do mérito herdado ao mérito relacional

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Abstract

This article aims to conduct an exploratory analysis of the meanings of merit in inclusion policies in Brazilian higher education. Higher education admission processes are a fertile field for thinking about the issue of merit in our society due to the decisive role education plays in organizing social inequality. The analysis focuses on the National College Entry Exam (ENEM), the most comprehensive selection process in the country, the Unified Selection System (SISU), a mechanism used by most public institutions, the 2012 Quota Law and the Program for Inclusion based on Merit in Public Higher Education in São Paulo (PIMESP) of the São Paulo State Universities. Assuming merit as a value, the text begins by discussing this concept based on classical and contemporary work. It then addresses the process of educational expansion seen in the 20th century and how this movement led to changes in the organizing principles of admission policies and access to education, shifting from universal merit to relative merit. The third part of the text considers the work of Brazilian authors in discussing several institutional actions that combined ENEM, the Quotas Law of 2012, and SISU as examples of interconnection between universal and relative merit in higher education admissions, despite the problems identified concerning retention policies. By abolishing criteria connected to relational merit, PIMESP became the target of criticism. Considering the positive effects generated from the combination of the quota law, ENEM and SISU, the article stresses the need for revising the Law, slated for 2022, to preserve this critical inclusion mechanism. In conclusion, we suggest that expanding enrollment in higher education also implies challenges regarding retention and graduation policies. Therefore, such policies should consider the relative dimension of merit.

Keywords: higher education, affirmative actions, relative merit, ENEM, SISU

Resumo

Este artigo tem por objetivo propor uma análise exploratória sobre os sentidos do mérito nas políticas de inclusão no ensino superior brasileiro. O estudo focaliza o Enem, o Sistema de Seleção Unificada (Sisu), a Lei de Cotas de 2012 e o Programa de Inclusão com Mérito no Ensino Superior Público Paulista (PIMESP) das Universidades Estaduais Paulistas. O texto inicia-se com uma discussão sobre o mérito, a partir de produções clássicas e contemporâneas, para tratar, em seguida, das mudanças ocorridas nos princípios organizadores das políticas de seleção e acesso ao ensino, que passaram do mérito universal ao mérito relacional. A terceira parte trata de algumas ações institucionais que conjugaram o ENEM, a Lei de Cotas de 2012 e o Sisu como exemplos de articulação entre o mérito universal e o relacional no ingresso. O Pimesp, ao abolir critérios vinculados ao mérito relacional, acabou sendo objeto de muitas críticas. O artigo destaca a necessidade de que a revisão da referida Lei de Cotas, prevista para 2022, preserve este importante mecanismo de inclusão. A expansão do ingresso no ensino superior traz também desafios em relação às políticas de permanência e de egressos para que estas levem em conta a dimensão relacional do mérito.

Palavras-chaves: educação superior, ações afirmativas, mérito relacional, ENEM, SISU

Introduction

A differentiated principle of social organization characterizes modern societies. The family in which someone is born – or the individual’s social origins- is no longer the main criteria to define their position in society – or their social destiny. In different countries, particular configurations of social forces define new criteria that interfere with this relationship between origin and destiny, primarily organized around the notions of effort and talent. In most countries, this criterion takes the shape of educational levels, a possible and variable synthesis of the relation between talent and effort. As every teacher knows, the connection between these two points is tense and becomes even more complex with the development and affirmation of merit ideology, as shown by Goldthorpe (1997), ⁵In Peter Schaffer's (1979) play, which led to the movie Amadeus (1984), the character Salieri shows his disgust towards the contradiction between his immense effort and moral dedication to pleasing " the ears of the Lord" and the talent of an "immoral vagabond" as Mozart. From Salieri’s perspective, Mozart’s music would effectively charm divine ears. Despite the anachronism of the problem and the implausibility of

⁵ About meritocracy as an “ideology”, see (BARBOSA L., 1996)

doubt— Salieri was probably the most respected musician of his time – his repulse expresses one of the dilemmas that trespasses modern societies: what should be more valued? Talent or effort?

When we use the term ideology, it does not correspond to a concept encompassing a complex reality, such as those of social values, organized around the notion of merit. Ideology tends to be seen as a veil that covers the "true" reality. Consequently, the notion loses any possible heuristic value because it does not allow us to adequately unveil the significant social disputes – even those with material effects, such as salary difference – involved in the definition of merit given by each society. However, the treatment of the notion of merit as a value allows us to understand what Weber indicated in his studies about China, highlighted by contemporary authors (Barbosa, 2006; Helal, 2015; Walzer, 2003). The idea of rewarding worthiness is quite old in human history. For example, Imperial China had a strict recruitment system for public work. This selective process offers the empiric bases to create a typology that distinguishes the idea of merit as one of the many logical criteria to order society from the notion of merit as a dominant value between the principles of legitimation of inequality in the contemporary world from a sociological perspective (Cohn, 1979).

We will deal with merit as a social value, as a moral attribute whose substance is the direct result of fights that seek to impose on all the perceptions, beliefs, and practices that would be specific to a particular social group. The group that can seize this position in society assume itself as a dominant class or strata until other(s) group(s) can dispute this prerogative. The more efficient the institutional work to build the legitimacy of this domination, the more natural the rule of the social game will seem for players, even those in less privileged positions. This brings to the study of merit in modern societies the contribution of Durkheim and Weber, dealt with by Raymond (Boudon, 2017; Mijs, 2021; Mijs & Savage, 2020).

This article has three parts, besides this introduction and the final remarks, aiming to explore the senses of the merit in admission to higher education. Our analysis will focus on the National College Entry Exam (ENEM), the *Sistema de Seleção Unificada* (Sisu- Unified Selection System), a mechanism used by most public institutions, the Law of Quotas from 2012, and the *Programa de Inclusão com Mérito no Ensino Superior Público Paulista* (PIMESP- Program for Inclusion based on Merit in Public Higher Education in São Paulo) at the State universities of São Paulo. Considering that the approach proposed here encompasses merit as a value, we should start this text with a conceptual discussion about value from the perspective of classic and contemporary

Social Sciences authors. As the conceptions of merit are historically variable, the second section will deal with the process of educational expansion in the 20th century and the changes this movement implied in the organizing principles of selection and access policies to higher education described by Clancy and Goastellec (2007), discussing universal and relational merit. The third part of the text discusses some institutional actions that combined ENEM, the 2012 Quota Law, and Sisu with examples of articulation between universal and relational merit in the admission, despite the problems with permanence policies. Pimesp, when it abolished the criteria connected to relational merit, was heavily criticized. Considering the positive effects seen in the articulation of Quotas Law, Enem, and Sisu, we finish the text highlighting that the review of this Law, foreseen to 2022, must keep this vital inclusion mechanism. We understand that the expansion of high education access also brings challenges that need to be faced regarding permanence and graduate policies that consider the relational dimension of merit.

Merit as a value

In our country, the social disputes around inclusive policies in the selection processes for higher education are extremely intense. The positive initial results are quite unequal. Our approach tries to understand if and how a relativized and broad meritocratic principle for inclusion policies can contribute to these policies' democratizing effects. The *Exame Nacional do Ensino Médio* (Enem) is central to this type of analysis, considering the increasing participation of students and the significant increase in the number of institutions that use it as a reference for their selection processes. Similarly, the *Sistema de Seleção Unificada* (Sisu) and the political and legal formulations around quotas and affirmative actions complete the multidimensional framework of the social processes that influence higher education access in the country.

Considering merit as a value and the object of countless social disputes, it is not difficult to perceive its centrality in the moments of higher education expansion and implementation of some policies of social inclusion. The interpretation proposed intends to offer a comprehensive analysis of the relations between merit values, as they are understood in Brazil, the social politics towards the expansion of higher education public, and the translation of these values into specific processes and mechanisms with objective and measurable results- the social and institutional distribution of enrollments. In higher education, a space that guarantees access and

permanence to some relatively privileged positions, the legitimation of trajectories through merit values creates clashes and conflicts, as well as the diverse institutional practices and actions present in the inclusion policies.

The literature on political sciences has a significant contribution, complementing the anthropological and sociological approaches to values. Lamounier (2016) shows how the development of the ideology concept “established a radically different concept of everything that was known regarding the formation and the roles of ideas in society” (p.121). Destutt de Tracy, French philosopher from the late 18th century, proposed to establish a science that would show that ideas and abstract concepts originated in sensorial experiences. Marx developed this proposal, supporting that the ideas were deeply grounded in social life, even subordinated to the current economic relationships. Thus, if ideology appears as a veil hiding the truth, Mannheim, in his book *Ideology and Utopia* from 1929, raised the possibility of some social groups – in the interstices of the main classes- having the autonomy to create and develop intellectual projects acceptable for the society as a whole. As indicated by Lamounier (2016), based on the criticism of Clifford Geertz (1978), the possibilities of overcoming the dualism between science and ideology emerge in the Marxist approaches, even in its softer version, as the one of Mannheim.

Geertz’s perspective allows us to connect the understanding of ideologies, ideas, and conceptions with the theory of values by Boudon (2017). The author develops a typology to organize the diverse theories about the process of value formation. The first type included the post-modern theories that, based on Nietzsche, defined ideas and values as illusions. However, according to Boudon, Nietzsche’s influence and later Freud’s granted a psychological dimension to the formation of values. Marxist theory of ideology provides a social dimension: someone values something to the measure that this thing serves the interests of a class. These interests can be, and usually are, understood incorrectly or illusory. Again, Freud and the unconscious provide support for the post-modernist group. In Boudon’s (2017) understanding, Foucault, Lacan, and Bourdieu shared the perspective that understands values as illusions.

The insurgence against this relativism emerges in recent social research from two primary sources: the studies of Habermas and those of Rawls. Though these theories can be criticized by their a-historicity (Habermas and his merely procedural attempt and Rawls by offering only a few cases in which the answers fully depend on the functionality of good), both

with rational explanations for the formation of values. Boudon's cognitive rationality has as a starting point the contributions of Simmel, Durkheim, Weber, and Tocqueville (and, previously, Michel de Montaigne) to establish ways to explain values, which are contingent and historical, depending on the decisions and judgments of social actors historically located. Contrary to the relativism mentioned in the post-modern perspective, in this theory, the values are no longer seen as simply subjective. Considering Durkheim and Weber as the structural basis of his concept, Boudon (2017) shows the insistence of the first author, mainly in *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, of not considering values as simple illusions. Values are appropriated by individuals, initially because they are shared by other members of the groups and, later, because they seem true, in the sense of guiding their practices, as also shown by Geertz (1978). They are social and historical, therefore, variable. From Weber, he takes the principle that every human action has an understandable sense and, thus, rational. As a principle, Weber's comprehensive sociology demands intelligible actions, compatible with a decision/voluntarist theory or rationalist of values. In this framework, Boudon (2017) proposes a generalization of the rational choice theories in a cognitive model sociology, in which the author uses the Weberian notion of axiological rationality and builds a theory of values. This theory indicates that, as in the case of Protestant Ethics, the values (or the new ethics developed mainly by Luther and Calvin) guided individuals' actions but did not determine them. The individual decides to be correct in their business or work not because of nature or social structure. They do so because they judge – a vital word for Boudon – this is the most appropriate way for the principles that guide their lives. Therefore, it is an essentially non-determinist theory, with ample space for the social actor, the agent of his choices and destiny. We should highlight that in his "brief moral history of merit", Sandel (2021) considered that the aforementioned Weber's work is a bridge between the religious and secular debate on merit. When leaving the monastery, the secular debate oppressed the ethics of gratitude and humbleness, present in the religious discussion on human salvation through the work on Earth. It also established the original version of what the author considers "meritocratic hubris", which charges and blames individuals for their failures. In his words:

The protest ethics of work, therefore, not only originates the spirit of capitalism. It also promotes self-help ethics and responsibility for one's destiny, which is convenient to the meritocratic ways of thinking. This ethics releases a torrent of anxious and energetic effort, which produces enormous wealth but simultaneously reveals the negative side of the responsibility to win through one's own effort . (Sandel, 2021, p. 60, our translation from the Portuguese version)

Let us return to political philosophy, which analyses the principles of justice, and to sociology, which interprets them, as indicated by Weber, and how these principles guide social practices (Dubet, 2020; Morrison, 2020). The principles of justice – or the social values about what is fair and/or legitimate – help define a sense to our actions and to those who share our lives. They give instruments for each person to rationalize their judgments about justice and fairness of individual and collective actions, such as political ones. The sociological approach describes the senses regularly attributed to these actions and analyzes their prevalence, indicating which would be the dominant guidelines attributed to these actions in a given society.

Hence, merit is a justice principle that takes different shapes depending on the societies or, as indicated by Barbosa (1996, 2006), Dubet (2020), Goldthorpe (1997), and Mijs (2021), on social spaces. In art and sports, talent seems to be more appreciated, while effort is valued in education. Even so, it is not a unanimous value and, even less, equally noticed and measured.

The legal definitions of merit associated with the policies of inclusion represent a certain state of the correlation of social forces in which prevails a more relational principle of merit. In the Brazilian context, it was possible to include dimensions of students' social trajectories (those who studied in a public school or self-identified as black) in evaluating their effort to be admitted to higher education. Even so, the implementation of these policies has different facets that open broader or narrower spaces for social agents to defend their interests and fight for a greater or smaller opening of the educational system.

Summing up, the values would be the evaluation principles through which different social agents, individual or collective, guide their practices. Merit is one of these principles of evaluation that change themselves into social perceptions that judge and measure if and how a specific social practice can be considered legitimate, valid, and acceptable. The degree of acceptance or legitimacy of these social practices results from political debates, social movements, and the arguing and convincing ability each perspective can mobilize. The selection

process for each higher education system, the focus of our analysis, establishes a significant case of these practices and an extremely fertile field to think about merit in our society due to the decisive weight of education in the country's inequalities.

Because of this, as we will see later, the concept of merit is historically variable. The social circumstances force a permanent rethink of the same, distinguishing their connection with the other dominant values and social forms. In this framework, we can use this concept of value – merit, in the case of this article- to comprehensively analyze the selection process in a scenario of inclusion policies for Brazilian higher education. However, before this, we need to consider that the understanding of merit as a value guiding social practices that, in certain contexts, can be legitimate and acceptable, as we will suggest regarding relational merit, is not consensual and is subjected to debates and conflicts. For example, Sandel's (2021) contributions deserve attention. For this author, any type of organization based on merit brings a significant risk because, in essence, merit is antisocial. In the author's understanding, merit is divisive because it is arrogant and punitive when exalting winners and blaming losers. It does not create solidarity and a sense of belonging, key to any society. "It leaves little room for the solidarity that can arise when we reflect on the contingency of our talents and fortunes. This is what makes merit a kind of tyranny, or unjust rule." (p.38).

Educational expansion and lingering inequalities

Since the mid-1960s, a series of authors have started to contest, mainly from empirical evidence, the basic assumptions that support the "ideology" of merit, according to which the best people should occupy social positions according to their individual performance (Barbosa, 1996). Following this understanding, the expansion of educational opportunities in capitalist and socialist countries would have, at least, two positive consequences. On the one hand, it would contribute to supplying the need for a specialized workforce in urban-industrial societies, favoring economic and social growth. Besides this, it would increase the equalization of

opportunities, decreasing the weight of social inheritance on the social immobility between generations.⁶

Helal (2015) indicates that the theories of social stratification, strongly influenced by functionalism in the second half of the 20th century, understood that acquired status aspects would influence social mobility in modern societies more than by the variables related to individuals' socio-economic origins. In this understanding, education is vital in status allocation, and schooling "is an efficient and rational way to distinguish and select talented people, in which the most skillful and motivated reaches the highest positions" (p. 253).

Hadja and Becker (2016) illustrate this process as a meritocratic triad. On one edge is the social origin (O), and on the other, is class destiny (D). In the middle, we have Education (E), the variable of merit. The greater the schooling gains, the greater the gains and social mobility. The characteristics attributed to people would give way to educational conquests, based on effort, and merit, understood as the propulsion engine for social mobility. The challenge of this model is to universalize access to education in the different educational cycles because, once guaranteed access, social equity would come with time.

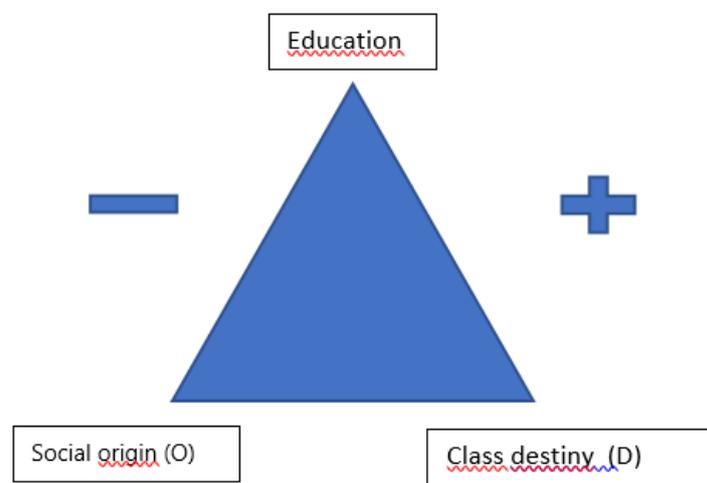


Figure 1: Meritocratic triad proposed by Hadja and Becker

Source: (Hadja & Becker, 2016)

⁶ We should mention the resonances of this understanding regarding the Theory of Human Capital, which emerged in the 1960s aiming to understand the role of education in the economic growth observed after World War II. In Schultz's perspective, the economic thought at the time restricted the concept of capital to material goods. For the author: "(...) the inexplicable economic growth (...) is provoked by forms of capital still not identified and measured, mainly human capital" (Schultz, 1967, p. 81, our translation from the Portuguese version). Therefore, human capital is understood as acquired abilities and knowledge that increase productivity. The main investment of this capital is education.

In this dynamic, Boudon (1974) identifies a paradox pointed out by studies in the field of the Sociology of Education:

For decades, social sciences and policymakers reflected and acted on education from an optimistic philosophical base: it was acritically assumed that education could cure every type of social problem, particularly that it *could bring more equity* among men. With the development of the Sociology of Education, this perspective was progressively reverted, and a new pessimistic philosophy emerged increasingly more convincingly. (Boudon, 1974, p. xii) Our translation

Greater social mobility did not decrease the inequality of educational opportunities. Mijs (2021) shows that the inequalities in income and patrimony, which corroborate less social mobility, increased more intensely in these countries in the last 40 years. Nonetheless, people do not perceive this inequality as resulting from broader structural processes but as a personal issue related to the lack of effort or work. In a sample research, gathering information from people from 23 countries between the 1980s and 2010s, the author shows that the belief in meritocracy increased in general but with significant internal differences. More unequal countries tended to understand inequalities as the result of personal efforts, while less unequal countries understood them mainly due to structural processes. To Mijs (2021), the perceptions and beliefs of people are formed in their relationship circles, in their relationships with relatives, colleagues, and friends. In this sense, the belief in a meritocracy would not be disconnected from reality, as we try to show in this article, but experienced daily. We will resume this point when dealing with micro and macro-mobility from Dubet (2020).

Several studies on the approach of social stratification, strong in the United States and with important centers in Brazil, such as IESP/UERJ, show that, despite the several cycles of expansion in the different education levels, the social inequalities continue or even increase (Alon, 2009; Sandel, 2021). Furthermore, the effect of social origin continues to define social destiny (Carvalhaes & Ribeiro, 2019). As stated by Helal (2015), “reality shows us that modern society is not meritocratic as preconized” (p. 256).

Regarding higher education, Reay et al. (2005) point out that the expansion of this level in the United Kingdom led to new forms of social inequalities. This scenario should be understood considering the stratification of the educational system, which increases as more people are admitted to this level. One objective of their book was to question the meritocratic

principle that, when celebrating the extent of higher education access, values the impartiality of the educational system. According to the authors, there are reasons for optimism and pessimism. In fact, the increase in higher education allowed the tertiary formation of groups, such as poor students, ethnic minorities, older people, and others, to which access to this educational level was practically improbable. However, this enlargement increased the internal distinctions in higher education systems, the so-called horizontal stratification (Carvalhoes & Ribeiro, 2019), producing and highlighting hierarchies in terms of university and college prestige, attended by poor students and those attended by middle and high-class students, the outcasts on the inside (Bourdieu & Champagne, 2003).

Bourdieu studies would be a collection of studies to demonstrate the break from meritocratic ideals embedded in French Revolution, according to Mijs. In the more critical and pessimistic lines, the author (Mijs, 2016) details that, as shown by the literature, educational institutions would distort the meritocratic ideal. Social conditions would define meritocratic opportunities, and any definition of merit always benefits one group. All these studies would show the impossibility of reaching a meritocratic ideal. However, as in our more modest study, the author establishes a research program on the social forms through which the values of meritocratic ideal permeated social relations, informing practices and choices.

In the context of inequality permanence, Clancy and Goastellec (2007) identify common traces in the agenda of access to higher education from different countries, reflected in three principles of organization of selection policies for the higher education system that evidence tensions between merit and equalitarian norms. The first would be the "inherited merit", prevailing in the 19th century, in which the listed characteristics (social position, family connections, race, gender, etc.) would be determinant and taken as legitimate to access higher education. Progressively, during the 20th century, the "inherited merit" gave space to the equality of rights. Thus, policies to increase higher education access for those graduating high school, regardless of their origin marks, were seen in different countries. This idea would be classified as universal merit when considering the equality of rights as a selection principle. However, as previously mentioned, the principle of equality was challenged by the persistence of the origin conditions in school destinies, regarding, for instance, access to more prestigious degrees and institutions. In the late 20th century and early 21st century, the principle of equality of rights was substituted by the equity of opportunities. This is the context of the policies of differentiated admission (quotas, etc). It is important to highlight that not all higher education policies in the

countries followed this historical pathway. Thus, they should not be understood as a pattern. We should stress that when the principle of equity starts to establish itself as policies of access and permanence, there is a redefinition of the concept of merit.

One response is to redefine merit as the distance between the academic levels reached by students and the diverse handicaps faced by them, whether in terms of their personal characteristics, family, community or schooling experiences (Clancy & Goastellec, 2007, p. 139)

Thus, relational merit is defined as a concept that conjugates the principle of equality (in access) and difference (*handicaps*) in the structure of opportunities. About this, former rectors of two of the most prestigious American universities (Princeton and Harvard) advocate that a selection process exclusively based on quantifiable and universal criteria could be a significant problem when seeking talented students, regardless of their origins. These institution managers, Bowen and Bok (2004), defend affirmative actions in the admission process in a similar perspective to the one discussed above. However, they do not justify them for the most known reasons, such as remedying historical inequalities, exclusion, etc., but the fact that these inclusion policies would benefit the university as a whole, including non-quota students, professors, and workers. Having students from different origins, talents, and experiences is a gain for the development of all, especially non-quota students. There is an inversion in the argument in favor of affirmative admission policies and merit. The issue here becomes the positive effects of quotas for non-quota students and the whole university. An episode reported by the authors illustrates this point. In a meeting, a famous black educator commented that his son was being considered for a prestigious graduate award.

"My son", said the professor, "doesn't need special consideration; he is so talented that he can self-make" (...) Despite this, we could question the father's conclusion. "Your son will do very well." said another person in the meeting. "But this is not the issue. Maybe he doesn't need us, but we need him!" [added emphasis]. (Bowen & Bok, 2004, p. 403, our translation from the Portuguese version)

Resuming Clancy and Goastellec's (2007) considerations, if the talents are randomly distributed among social groups and places, it is up to the educational institutions the responsibility of developing proactive admission processes that seek these people wherever they

are, reducing the effect of education choices. However, as the authors suggest, the path is long. Most prestigious institutions that form American "Ivy League" offer generous access and permanence programs for talented young people from underprivileged backgrounds. Nonetheless, the inclusion and permanence of these groups did not profoundly change the stratification within higher education systems (Clancy & Goastellec, 2007, p. 141). As shown by Sandel (2021), at Yale and Princeton, only one in every 50 students came from a low-income family (20% poorest) and the percentage of working-class children who studied at Yale, Princeton, and Harvard (the so-called Big Three) is the same today as it was in 1954. As a critic of the notion of merit, Sandel (2021) proposes a radical alternative to deal with such a persistent problem: selection by draw.

Dubet (2020) once more helps us understand the persistence of inequalities and how they are experienced by people in their actions, as suggested by Mijs (2021). According to the author, we live in a transition from a world articulated through a system of social class inequalities to a system of multiple inequalities. One of the consequences of this transformation is that the State develops a series of public policies that follow the multiplication of inequalities when it abandons the general system of protection established by the class system. In the case of higher education, we can mention the policies of affirmative actions towards the poor, black, and indigenous people, among others, based on the principle of equity of opportunities. From the perspective of French sociology, what happens is that "when opening up, the school changed the way of producing inequalities" (Dubet, 2020, p. 44).

The opening of schools for people that did not previously attend these spaces diluted the inequality of access but did not reduce inequalities along the way. Hence, it is essential to differentiate micro-mobility, the small displacements within the social structure, from macro-mobility, the significant changes between generations. The author states:

(...) due to the massification of higher education diplomas, the education level for hiring has increased between one generation to another. To reach the same level of their parents, young people should partake into more selective and longer school investments than their parents. However, this increasing mobility within the school system is not followed by professional mobility. Young people ascended on the school level but did not move on the job scale. Thus, they can have the same school level as the parents but decreased their professional qualifications. (Dubet, 2020, p. 48)

Micro and macro-mobility are records spinning in different rotations. In the system of multiple inequalities, the micro-mobility record turns quickly, while the large inequalities one is more rigid and slow. Studies that use long historical series, such as Mijs (2021) and Piketty (2014) internationally and Souza (2018) in Brazil, show that the income and patrimony concentration of the riches has been growing in the last decades, despite the social, political, and economic changes. Dubet (2019) warns that when celebrating merit and performance as the main principles to attribute status, current societies turn the inequalities experienced by individuals into personal failures.

Let us return to the disappointments created by school democratization, notably, the access to higher education. As we have mentioned, the production of inequalities altered with massification because there was no longer an access barrier but small inequalities produced through education choices. Works such as Reay et al. (2005) go in this direction. When analyzing schools and their habitus, the authors demonstrate a "tremendous difference in how private and public schools provide information about careers and higher education" (Realy et al., 2005, p. 39). This type of analysis corroborates the work of Dubet and Martuccelli (2006), which shows the effect of different experiences in school institutions when defining students' social trajectories. Lucas's (1999) conclusion goes in the same direction in a reaseach with an American school. For the author, the proactive behavior of middle-class parents, which have the informational advantages to navigate a stratified system and grasp opportunities from it, is the main reason for the maintenance and aggravation of inequalities. On the one hand, if the so-called "super protective parenting", as defined by Sandel (2021), brings advantages. On the other, it might also lead to negative emotional consequences for children.

These studies tend to show the second dimension mentioned by Mijs about how the school system would contribute to mine and distort the meritocratic ideal. They would also indicate how the social resources of the richest and most educated allow the appropriation of unequal opportunities to have merit.

At the end of the way, as Dubet (2020) suggests, small inequalities may become great ones. For the French sociologies, a large part of the resentments and anger of our days lies in the fact that inequalities, previously seen as social, as part of the system of class inequality, are now perceived as unfair discriminations or personal failures. In Sandel's (2021) view, these failures would be the visible expression of the tyranny of merit, in which the responsibilities,

understood initially as from the government or the companies, start to be attributed to the individuals, with severe consequences to the policies of social well-being. In this sense, the massification of education can broaden the feeling of inequality experienced by people "because we do not compare ourselves to those that are farther from us, but those who are relatively close" (Dubet, 2020, p. 31). As the list is long, we will present some examples. White people have a bad life because black ones and minorities take advantage of State affirmative policies. Workers lose their jobs because immigrants substitute them. Men lose their positions and dignity because women take their places. Summing up: "The enemy is the one cared for by the social system" (Dubet, 2020, p. 93).

In the next section, we will develop some examples and explore situations in which the universal and relational merit intercross from the policies to Higher Education, mainly focusing on the selective forms of Enem, Quotas law, and SisU.

Quotas, ENEM, SISU: spaces for relational merit?

In our country, the social disputes around quota policies, which aimed to implement the relational concept of merit in the selective processes for higher education, were intense. Even with the initial positive results, such as the increase in the participation of poor people, black, and women in Brazilian higher education, the research indicates that the occupation of places in different degrees and graduation chances are still highly unequal between these groups (Balbachevsky et al., 2019; Barbosa, 2019). In this approach framework, it is even more essential to understand if and how a meritocratic principle relativized and broadened by inclusion policies could democratize the access to higher education. Thus, we will examine some dimensions of the selective process through ENEM and its use by SISU.

The Exame Nacional do Ensino Médio (Enem), implemented by Instituto Nacional de Estudos e Pesquisas Educacionais Anísio Teixeira (INEP), "was created in 1998 aiming to evaluate the performance of Brazilian students at the end of high school. Since 2009, some changes were implemented to contribute to the democratization of opportunities to access university, considering that since that year, the exam started to be used as a selection mechanism to join higher education" (Figueiredo et al., 2014, p. 381). This transformation of the goal of the exam poses some technical problems. However, the increasing participation of students and the

significant increase of institutions that started to use Enem as a reference in their selection processes attest to the acceptance and legitimacy among relevant social agents. In 2010, 4.6 million students participated, reaching 9.4 million in 2014. Since 2020, we can see a significant decrease in the number of participants, either due to the pandemic or how the current government characterizes this exam, which may hinder its potential as a reference for admission processes.

According to the article in the newspaper Folha de São Paulo (18/11/2021), president Jair Bolsonaro stated the following regarding the claims of interference in Enem exams; "Take a look at the standard of Enem in Brazil. For goodness sake. Does that measure any knowledge? Or is that political activism and behavior issues?"

In 2020, 6.1 million students enrolled for the exam, against only 3.1 million in 2021. The Sistema de Seleção Unificada (Sisu), created in 2010 by the federal government, aimed to offer ways to facilitate and centralize access to public higher education. As is the case of Enem, Sisu is not obligatory. Nevertheless, most of these institutions adopted it, mainly federal and some state (Nogueira et al., 2017). As indicated by Santos and Scopinho (2016), the political and legal formulations about quotas and affirmative actions express the social representations (dominant values in Brazilian society, according to the perspective of this article) about individuals and their social position. The implementation of affirmative action policies resulted from the historical demands of social movements, as well as institutional initiatives developed independently. The first actions to reserve places for public school students and black ones were adopted in 2002, initially by UERJ (Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro) and later by other public institutions. However, the dissemination of these punctual initiatives was compromised by legal questions regarding the constitutionality of the quota system. The legal safety and legitimacy came one decade later, when the Supremo Tribunal Federal (STF- Federal High Court) unanimously decided that the quotas were constitutional (Heringer, 2014; Schwartzman, 2015). Two months after the STF decision, the Congress approved the Quotas Law (Law nº 12.711, August 29, 2012) (Brasil, 2012), which:

(...) stipulates that until 2016 at least 50% of places in federal institutions of higher education should be reserved for public school students. Within this percentage, the family income and racial self-identification should also be considered, defining a share

of quotas for blacks and Indigenous, according to their number in each state, following IBGE data.(Heringer, 2014, p. 23)

For our analysis, the comparison established by Santos and Scopinho (2016) between the federal quota policy and one of the proposals, also created in 2012 by the Conselho de Reitores das Universidades Estaduais de São Paulo (CRUESP- Council of Rectors of the State Universities of São Paulo) entitled Programa de Inclusão com Mérito no Ensino Superior Público Paulista (PIMESP- Inclusion Program by Merit in the São Paulo Higher Education), adequately expresses the different concepts of merit in the admission processes of public universities. We can also identify crucial points of resistance towards the policies, mainly regarding racial inclusion.

Though the São Paulo program had a similar objective to the Quotas Law, i.e., reaching in 4 years (2016) 50% of places reserved for students from public schools, from which 35% for black and Indigenous students, according to the percentage established by the 2010 Census, it did so through a different pathway. The program proposed the creation of an intermediary step, the Instituto Comunitário Ensino Superior (ICES- Community Institute of Higher Education), with two years of study in an intermediary period for black and Indigenous students, besides those from low-income groups. The admission of São Paulo state universities would be made after an intermediary period, depending on the academic performance and places the universities offered for the program. In the perspective proposed in this article, Pimesp articulates itself from the notion of universal merit, extending to its target audience the admission to higher education after this trial period. The parity of students from public schools, black, and Indigenous with their more privileged peers would be reached after this levelling period. The São Paulo proposal was not accepted, and the state universities opted for different bonus forms and levels. As pointed out by Santos and Scopinho (2016):

This proposal was grounded on the premise that certain groups are able to be admitted into the university and others are not. The suggestion of this pre-university "internship" points to a conservative and segregationist policy (p. 276)

On the other hand, we see that the Quotas law is quite close to the relational concept of merit. It seeks to establish a competition for places among people with similar social trajectories, among which there could be a fairer comparison, as seen in one of the interviews conducted by the authors " you have to be a bit unequal in the beginning so that later everyone

could be the same" (Santos & Scopinho, 2016, p. 274). As mentioned, underlying the bonus policy, there is a perspective of universal merit, not relativized by students' different conditions and starting points. Thus, different concepts organize distinguished policies to broaden access.

Enem as a selection process

Beyond the notion of who would have the right to access higher education, it is vital to consider that Enem is the most legitimate admission process in the country (due to the millions of candidates each year) and the role of Sisu as a mechanism to distribute places in the public system. The fact that Enem is a universal exam, i.e., applied in the same format to all students, might indicate that the universal merit perspective guides its creation and implementation. All students are submitted to the same exam, regardless of their individual and social trajectories.

As expected, a universal exam made explicit the inequality of educational opportunities. Many studies demonstrate this. One of them (Figueiredo et al., 2014) shows the social abyss between students from lower social groups (mothers with less educational level and lower income) and those from more privileged groups:

In general, the set of opportunities of the first group (low-income) is around 130 times lower than the second (higher). In this sense, (...) the possibility of a student from the minimum income level to be among the 5% best positions in the exam is 45 times lower than those in the highest income range. (Figueiredo et al., 2014, p. 386)

The authors also show that the low quality of public schools would be the greatest villain in this abyss of social inequality. When comparing the performance of students from similar social origins, we can see that those who attended public schools had significantly lower grades. We highlight this aspect because it is possible to create policies to improve the quality of these schools (Paul & Barbosa, 2008; Silva & Barbosa, 2012). This is not "naturally given" but the result of social actions and public policies that express the working of these schools.

A significant part of this literature indicates the double impact of family origin and the low quality of education sectors. Another research line, which investigates access to basic information about Enem, is particularly important to the studies on the legitimacy of admission processes. Many students, families, and even teachers do not know the procedures and

possibilities of Enem as a gateway for inclusion policies or ignore the existence of the exam, as shown by the works of Heringer (2013), Souza (2020), and Teixeira and Pires (2021).

However, in the perspective of our analysis, Enem, since the 2012 Quota Law, seem to have greater plasticity, allowing the possibility of conjugating universal and relational merit. Considered in itself, the grade in Enem means a universal perspective of merit without considering the social organization of school trajectories. Even so, its use by public institutions that meet the criteria of quota law is an effective practical implementation of the relational concept of merit.

The same can be said about private institutions, as Enem is also used to grant scholarships from the Programa Universidade para Todos (Prouni- University to All Program). Prouni scholarships target poor students (income per capita of 1.5 minimum wage maximum for a full scholarship and up to three minimum wages for partial ones). The scholarship distribution must follow the percentage of people self-identified as Indigenous or black, according to the last census of each state. In principle, the idea of measuring merit from social conditions is respected. Though there are cases of fraud or public schools colonized by middle classes (creating different conditions in these schools), the principle guiding the comparison is kept. The inclusive proposal of affirmative actions is maintained, as can be seen by the expansion in the number of "new students" in higher education. However, the limits of these policies, shown in the limited proportion of reserved places compared to the number of potential candidates, continue not altering the 'universal merit'.

Sisu and individual agency: belief in merit and the access to "possible" degrees

The case of Sisu has significant differences regarding its inclusion impacts, even considering its articulation with Quotas Law and Enem. This is suggested by Nogueira et al. (2017) from the information about the Sisu implementation at Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais (UFMG). In this institution, there were changes in enrollment, abdication, and even dropout patterns that can reduce opportunities and waste when the places in less prestigious courses are not filled. On the other hand, the authors demonstrate that the promise to increase student mobility, allowing them to study in any part of the country, was limited.

Though the Sisu online platform allows the candidate to enroll in any degree in any institution in the country, in reality, few can move and stay in places far from their hometowns. A considerable improvement in student assistance policies would be needed and increase the dissemination of information among candidates during the inscription to compensate, in some measure, the existing inequalities among students regarding their objective conditions to move around the country. (Nogueira et al., 2017, p. 87)

In this framework, if Enem opens doors to the relational concept of merit through its use in affirmative action policies, its articulation with Sisu and the Quota Law can, in many cases, have the inverse effect. The places reserved are not always used because their potential occupants do not have the economic and social conditions to move where they could study. Once more, good policies for student accommodation and permanence during their degrees could solve these problems⁷.

Regarding students' social inclusion, the authors point out that the number of candidates in the admission process allowed by Sisu increased the score to enter. This situation led to a "super-selection" within the quotas: "in many degrees [68% of those offered in the first semester of 2015], the minimum grade for approval has been higher in some modalities of quotas than in the general admission" (Nogueira et al., 2017, p.81). The ordinance of MEC nº 1.117, from November 2018, corrected these distortions establishing that "if the students, enrolled in the modality of place reserve due to the Law nº 12.711, reach a score through which they can be

⁷ A balance about permanence policies in Brazilian public higher education can be found in (DIAS, TOTI, SAMPAIO, & POLYDORO, 2020)

selected in the general admission, they will be selected through this modality and their enrollment is removed from the total of reserved places" (fonte?)

Furthermore, the percentage of high school students from federal schools has increased. Those schools have a higher admission selectivity and students from higher social origins. Sisu's promises would be feasible if followed by other investments, which are still unclear on the horizon of Brazilian public policies for education.

Sisu provides elements to reinforce our argument that the idea of relational merit has been gaining space as a way to legitimize the selective process to enter the university. As shown in the previously mentioned study by Nogueira and collaborators (2017), it is possible to identify the development of strategies for choosing degrees and institutions. Despite the authors' critical tone, these strategies indicate that these young people know the rules of the game and how to play them in their favor. This makes them legitimate: students guide their choices – even if toward possible degrees and not the most desirable ones – to guarantee their admission to higher education. Legitimizing a rule is attributing authority to it for affective, traditional, or rational-legal reasons. In Sisu, there is a rational-legal legitimation in which the selective rule is obeyed because it is rationally understood and used. Whether liking this rule or not, it is one of the parameters to access the world of higher education and its associated benefits. Poor young people know this and, exactly like their contemporary peers, organized strategies around the idea that they must make an effort and give their best to deserve the university.

The legitimacy of the meritocratic idea of the value of merit

The positive result of these strategies and the admission in any degree or segment of higher education reinforces the legitimacy of the meritocratic idea and is associated with other narratives about individual trajectories. The new demands to enter an environment that can be hostile (Almeida, 2009), the reinforcement of the idea of "I get by" (Pires et al., 2019). The alliances and mutual support are elements that forge the university experience of these new students. Admission to higher education blends personal and family strategies, and the economic, social, and psychological costs, mainly among students farther from the academic culture. There is an important literature about the suffering faced by these students in their university experience, who are often submitted to situations of discrimination or prejudice

(Bovério, 2014; Piotto, 2014; Pires et al., 2019; Ribeiro, 2018) or must develop attitudes and behaviors to be valued in the school environment (Lahire, 1997). Despite the discrimination and difficulties caused by the lack of better policies and institutional actions, the black and poor young people, together with their more privileged peers, share a feeling that their efforts were rewarded for reaching this point.

However, the social dimension deserves attention in an issue stressed by Dubet (2015). As the massification of higher education access does not necessarily mean democratization, the access to university happens through different doors (Barbosa, 2015). As mentioned, academic hierarchies unequally value degrees, institutions, modalities, and types of diplomas. This structure of opportunities is appropriated differently by the social groups (Prates & Barbosa, 2015; Santos et al., 2020). Thus, the academic hierarchy is built as a social hierarchy, with a strong impact on the reproduction of inequalities.

Thus, despite the prevalence of a relational perspective of merit in the inclusion policies and the greater access to higher education, there is no meritocratic organization of students during their degrees or after graduation. The decrease in access inequality does not translate into expanding similar opportunities. More than the admission processes, the institutional work of the higher education system seems to be an agent of inequality. A factor of horizontal stratification among students and graduates, the higher education system would work as one engine of multiple inequalities, creating resentment and individual blame in a time of sad passions (Dubet, 2020).

Final remarks

As with the other values, merit represents what society values and considers morally correct and fair. And as society encompasses multiple representations of ideals, merit is a historical value and socially variable. Since antiquity, people have been judged, positively or negatively, by their actions and accomplishments. However, when effort and talent become, ideally, a criteria to place people in social hierarchies and associated with schooling, merit gains space in the scientific discussion about current inequalities. Out the winner gladiator or the genius musician, in the successful student who can get a good job, a higher income, prestige, and even power.

However, as we know pretty well, a successful student is not simply the result of talent, as the idea of universal merit supposes to some extent. It is also not 'only' the outcome of trajectories filled with great personal and family effort. Besides a family that believes and can invest in their success, successful students need a quality school that can teach all students regardless of their social origin. These are social conditions of success that combine family investments and individual effort.

Hence, when merit is associated with results or educational performance, its social meaning changes. In democratic societies, this evolution can be seen in Clancy and Goastellec's (2007) typology: we go from an inherited merit (much more patrimonial than meritocratic itself) to the universal merit (perfect when competitors are all part of the educated elite) to reach the relational merit, an expression of the different effort done by socially different families.

Obviously, these values, ideas, moral perceptions, and symbolic architecture that, despite being imperfect and criticizable, as shown by meaningful literature, are incorporated into public policies, institutional actions and, considering the perspective used here, in the individual decisions to enter higher education. In reality, Enem would include a more universal view of merit associated with talent regardless of the social position. The dimension of differential effort, the idea of relation merit, affirms itself in the use of the Enem score combined with social and racial criteria established by the Quotas Law and Prouni. Even so, we could see that the conjugation of Enem, Quotas Law, and SisU, when not followed by permanence policies, can have a negative effect when not filling the places for specific courses. Among the examples given in this text, the levelling period, foreseen by Pimesp, would be the farthest from the relational merit.

The relational forms of merit that guide the policies to open access and student funding indicate advancements in the conception of inclusive public policies. Considering the importance of the Quota Law in providing legal safety and instruments to adopt access policies that dialogue with the relational merit, we understand that its review, predicted to 2022, should guarantee the continuity of such Law, with eventual improvements.

However, the equality of opportunities is not restricted to access. Besides the necessary improvements in measurement, the quality of assessments, and the mechanisms to distribute students, it is vital to develop more efficient and better-designed policies of student permanence, guaranteeing a higher number of graduates and ways to follow the alumni considering the

relational sense of merit. That is, policies that incorporate the recognition of students' distinguished efforts depending on their different positions and social groups.

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