in Africa and the developing world. Its thorough and rich treatment of this controversial subject renders this volume not only thought provoking for readers, but also timely and a much-needed contribution to the emerging ‘land grab’ academic literature.

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Affirmative Action in Plural Societies: International Experiences

Graham K. Brown, Arnim Langer and Frances Stewart (eds.)


This book provides a perceptive overview of affirmative action and an insightful set of papers on policy contexts, practices and outcomes in seven countries. The introductory chapter lucidly outlines debates and controversies, and presents a clear framework for thinking through affirmative action. Appropriately, the approach is methodical and multidisciplinary, and the tone tempered, steering clear of the polemics and presumptions that often infuse discourses on the subject. The chapter instructively frames the key issues of affirmative action, its justification and policy options, and discusses underlying philosophical issues and the inconclusiveness of the theoretical debate, notably on the issue of group stereotype and national integration. Affirmative action is commonly criticised for stigmatising beneficiaries and fracturing society by reinforcing group identities – and there is some validity to these assertions – but such societal prejudices also prevail before the policy, and could possibly persist and deepen in the absence of systematic advancement of disadvantaged groups through affirmative action.

This volume builds on the concept of horizontal inequality, which is clearly the target of affirmative action, and on which the editors have made seminal contributions. Nonetheless, more engagement on the interaction between horizontal and vertical (income- or class-based) inequality would have been beneficial – specifically, that policies addressing the two dimensions serve as complements and not substitutes to each another. One might expect criticism of this book to echo popular but misguided notions that only policies redressing vertical inequality are necessary as they are need-based and generally less objectionable, and moreover will indirectly redress horizontal inequalities. Such contentions, however, were not addressed in the book.

The opening chapter helpfully summarises the case studies that follow and outlines affirmative action in education, employment, asset ownership and fair employment legislation, showing cross-country variations in the form, context and magnitude of such programmes. The omission of asset distribution in Malaysia and education in South Africa arguably mischaracterise these countries, which have implemented affirmative action in these areas, even if racial quotas or targets may not be explicit. The discussion would also benefit from more consideration of differences across these main spheres of intervention. Need-based schemes are to some
extent germane and feasible in education – applying family socio-economic status as a selection criterion, with disadvantaged groups disproportionately benefiting. However, it is untenable to systematically grant preference to persons from poorer backgrounds in employment and asset ownership, because, *inter alia*, these policies pertain to the adult, not dependent, population.

Accordingly, the book’s only paper analysing country experience with alternatives to affirmative action is confined to university admissions in the United States. Chapter 2 gives an informative overview of the constitutional rulings that have mandated limits on affirmative action, and the responses of state governments and universities to maintain minority representation. The paper offers a cogent analysis of outcomes on enrolment and academic quality of student bodies. The chapter finds, on the one hand, that replacing affirmative action with indirect measures targeting minorities reduces their enrolment, but on the other that affirmative action corresponds with lower academic achievement. These results are quite expected, but provide empirical substantiation of the complications and dilemmas confronting societies pursuing affirmative action.

On South Africa, the subject of Chapter 4, we gain informative background on employment equity legislation and its implementation, and on labour market discrimination. This paper stands out methodologically, by decomposing disparities in employment and in earnings into the portion that can be explained by differences in productive characteristics – such as educational attainment – and the 'unexplained' portion attributed to discrimination, or differential reward despite identical characteristics. The authors find that differentials between Blacks and Whites in labour market outcomes were persistently or increasingly due to the discrimination portion.

These findings are important, but to assign to affirmative action policies a responsibility for alleviating discrimination, as the authors do, is questionable. Affirmative action’s principal objective, as the authors clearly explain in a primer on the Employment Equity Act, is to increase participation and representation of disadvantaged groups, while anti-discrimination law in this context plays a subsidiary role. Indeed, both coexist in some tension due to the positive discriminatory thrust of employment equity. Hence, it is somewhat misleading to assert that persisting labour market discrimination demonstrates a deficiency of affirmative action, when the more direct policy implication is a deficit of anti-discrimination enforcement.

Moreover, one can also interpret the findings as showing the effects of affirmative action in education – more commonly termed transformation or redress in South Africa – on reducing racial disparities, particularly in attaining degree-level qualifications, which in turn reduces the explanatory power of differences in average productive characteristics between Blacks and Whites. Preferential measures to advance Black educational attainment likely contribute to the relatively large unexplained portion, and thus discrimination as deduced in these decomposition exercises may well reflect gains in affirmative action. However, the persisting gap also arises from differentials in quality of education not captured in survey data, as the authors argue, which signal one of the major limitations of affirmative action.

Chapter 5 also focuses on income inequality – in Brazil, which recently initiated affirmative action. The genesis of the policy makes for interesting reading, driven as it was by social movements and democratic pressures, and growing informational empowerment that confounded a preceding denial of racial inequality. The article observes intergenerational transmission of inequality and assesses mobility, or lack thereof, and markedly finds persistent Black–White gaps and barriers to mobility that are too great to be resolved through affirmative action alone. Of course, Brazil’s principal interventions have also been relatively small-scale, although as the author maintains, promoting Blacks in universities and reforms in teaching basic education of African and Afro-Brazilian history hold out some potential for engendering the desired change.
The volume’s two chapters on Malaysia perhaps reflect its vast and intensive affirmative action programmes. The Malaysian story of progress and shortcoming has been widely told. Thus, it is somewhat underwhelming to read the analysis in Chapter 6 that barely departs from the familiar account, highlighting success in poverty alleviation and Bumiputera socio-economic advancement while acknowledging deficits in asset redistribution and Bumiputera commercial and industrial development. The paper duly recognises problems with quota-based allocations and criticises rigidity in enforcement, but averts systematic analysis of reforms necessary for Malaysia to shift away from its entrenched and blunted affirmative action institutions, especially in education. Chapter 7 offers more original perspectives, questioning state-centric explanations for Malaysia’s relative stability and elucidating changes outside of state action or responses to state policy that have shaped social relations. Notably, the author argues that intragroup contestations for state largesse have deflected focus and energy away from intergroup conflicts.

Chapters 3, 8 and 9, respectively, on India, Northern Ireland and Nigeria, draw attention to country-specific structures of inequality, impetus for affirmative action and design of policies and institutions. India makes for an intriguing case, with group reservation established in its Constitution and preceding other countries. Over the years, minority groups have increasingly campaigned for reserved positions in universities and the civil service, with strategic and conflicting alliances also forming between disadvantaged groups and elites. The policy’s benefits are acknowledged, but India’s seeming inability to conceive positive discrimination measures beyond quotas is a cause for concern. The role of fair employment legislation in fostering inter-group equality in Northern Ireland is instructive for cross-country considerations, especially as a concomitant to positive discrimination measures. Nigeria’s Federal Character Commission, as a framework and agency, also generously informs the widely pursued objective of equitable group representation in branches of government. Conditions for effective execution arise from the Nigerian experience, particularly clearer merit criteria alongside equitable representation requirements, independence of oversight bodies and incorporation of relevant selection criteria, in view of the country’s omission of ethnicity and religion while emphasising regional representation.

All in all, this book makes a welcome and important contribution to the literature, as evidenced in the range of perspectives and points of contention reviewed above.

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