

## The Paradox of Inequality in Latin America

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At first glance there is something paradoxical about the stubborn persistence of inequalities in Latin America, a part of the planet that a recent sociological study labeled “the lopsided continent” (Hoffman and Centeno 2002). Military regimes have given way to civilian rulers almost everywhere in Latin America, but patron-client relationships endure throughout the region. Human rights are central to the rhetorical repertoire of governments, yet large segments of the population are routinely subjected to striking levels of everyday violence and brutality. The restoration of civilian rule over the past quarter century has given rise to new understandings of citizenship, including long-suppressed recognition of indigenous peoples and populations of African origins. Still, the rule of law is upheld unevenly, and discrimination pervades employment, education, and the judiciary. And if the integration of Latin America into global markets has created new opportunities for investment and employment, these opportunities for the most part present themselves unevenly, as evident in Gini coefficients that, as Luis Reygadas makes clear in his contribution to this volume, confirm strikingly unequal income distribution. In short, Latin America is experiencing an era of unprecedented social, political, and economic opening, yet this new environment coincides with—and perhaps even reinforces or exacerbates—longstanding, deeply entrenched dynamics of exclusion and inequality.

Seeking to make sense of current trends, some scholars have been tempted to conclude that underlying structures refined since the Iberian conquest have proven their enduring powers. Indeed, historians and others have often tended to invoke durable inequalities in Latin America as evidence of the intractable power of continuity to explain present conditions. Ironically, this misses what is so important about examining inequality since, in spite of the apparent timelessness of the gap between haves and have-nots, Latin America

has also been the region where leaders, intellectuals, and social forces have most explicitly made inequality a matter of public debate and policy initiative.

The present volume thus fits into a long tradition of analytic inquiry and practical intervention. Pushing the boundaries of research on inequalities in Latin America, it encompasses studies that cross traditional disciplines from a variety of complementary perspectives and empirical foci. In so doing, the book identifies promising, intersecting themes that can help to illuminate both the nature of deeply embedded inequalities and the factors that foster their reproduction over time. The title's depiction of inequalities as "indelible" offers an apt metaphor for layered phenomena that endure as if imprinted on the region's DNA. Social scientists and humanists alike will find much to be gained from a reading of the individual chapters and of the volume as a whole. The book is sure to have appeal for teaching as well as for scholarly research.

A crucial recognition of this volume, and of the research fellowship program at Stony Brook University from which it arose, is that inequality has never been limited to simply the economic sphere. Whether conceived in terms of access to information, which Lucio Renno shows in this book to be profoundly unequal, or in terms of the policies of welfare-state regimes, which Christina Ewig reveals in her essay as producing systematic gender bias, inequalities pervade political and social domains as well. Nor is inequality a phenomenon that can be adequately grasped exclusively through quantitative methods. The divides that separate groups into what the late sociologist Charles Tilly (1998) articulated as "bounded categories," which operate through discursive and performative mechanisms, are no less important than the factors rooted in differential control over tangible resources. This is one reason why it is essential to bring insights from the humanities to bear on fields normally reserved for social scientists. Odette Casamayor's analysis of popular culture in contemporary Cuba reinforces this point, as does Jeanine Anderson's textured treatment of everyday life in impoverished neighborhoods of Lima. What is clear throughout is that inequality is more than just a "cause" of moral outrage: when social actors see themselves as historical victims of inequality, they engage in a gamut of distributional and symbolic struggles. In so doing they acquire or change social identities. It is by examining the everyday forms of (re-)making inequality that scholars can reveal the activities of groups as they created, developed, or dismantled collective identities in ways that defined their relationship to other social forces and to the state (Joseph and Nugent 1994). A

focus on everyday interactions also illuminates the workings of institutional mechanisms through which groups are set apart from one another, whether inside entities such as the workplace or across organizational space.<sup>1</sup>

Latin America is a wealthy region in which resources are horribly distributed. Contrary to much conventional wisdom, what ails Latin America today is not poverty alone, which remains rampant but which affects a declining portion of the population, nor is it economic stagnation, which is conjunctural, if not infrequent. Rather, the specifically Latin American dilemma is the intractable persistence of inequality and the scarcity of mechanisms for reducing the gulf between haves and have-nots, rich and poor, insiders and outsiders. The unequal distribution of valuable resources, money, information, status, and opportunity permeates politics and social life.

That this appears to be the case in periods of prosperity as well as during the region's recurrent bouts of economic decline undoubtedly has much to do with the revived fortunes of the Latin American Left, which in the first decade of the twenty-first century has experienced a series of electoral victories that challenge longstanding inequalities in the sphere of the polity. The discourse of successful presidential candidates (Lula in Brazil, Evo Morales in Bolivia, Fernando Lugo in Paraguay), as well as that of aspirants who nearly achieved victories at the polls (Ullanta Humala in Peru, Andrés Manuel López Obrador in Mexico), has centered in large measure around the scourge of inequality. Yet as much as they suggest an empowerment of long-excluded constituencies, the inroads achieved by the Latin American Left have failed so far to engender tangible progress toward reversing economic inequalities. In some quarters, this generates pessimistic conclusions about the limitations of civilian-led competitive political systems across the region (Robinson 2006), while for other observers it jeopardizes the consolidation of democracy itself (Smith 2005).

Skepticism as to the prospects for achieving meaningful redistribution through representative government has motivated a growing number of subaltern actors to abandon the preoccupation with liberal citizenship, opting to reimagine questions of rights in radically different ways. Indeed, it could be argued that the expression of frequently suppressed collective identities—most notably nowadays in the central Andes, but evident in the practices of social movements across much of the region—is simply the latest of the countless ways in which inequalities have been framed along ethnic and racial lines throughout centuries of Latin American history (Wade 1997; Yashar 1999). By framing their demands in terms of categorical differences,

as exemplified by the confrontation between indigenous and mestizo in Bolivia, subaltern populations may ironically in the end reinforce the very identities that their historic antagonists have drawn on in order to set themselves apart from, and above, those who are by such definition intrinsically different.

A core message of this volume is that inequalities are relational, which suggests that understanding them requires attention to elite behavior as well as to dynamics in the broader society. Drawing effectively on the insightful work of Tilly, the authors in this collection reiterate that inequality does not exist because it is natural; rather, it persists because it is produced and reproduced over time, and this involves relationships within and between groups, as well as institutional mechanisms that reinforce and channel conflicts to produce distributive outcomes. The idea that inequalities are “reinforced” is particularly crucial in Tilly’s analysis: interactions shaped within institutions coincide with category divides that cross-cut the domains of social life. Such a dynamic is clearly in play in Christina Ewig’s exploration of the ethnic and gendered dimensions of welfare-state regimes.

In turn, the institutionalization of bounded categories has been explicitly contested, enforced, and reshaped over time. Indeed, looking at inequality through the great shifts in the identification of collective actors, under sharply different models of capitalism and various types of political regimes, compels one to see inequality as a multifaceted process rather than as a fixed condition.

Whether expressed in terms of “nations” inserted into the world economy in ways that transfer wealth to rich countries; in terms of classes locked in a struggle for control of the workplace and thus seeking to enforce or redress property relations; or in terms of political subjects with unequal rights who are thus trying to expand or redefine the terms of political membership along gender, ethnic, and regional lines, resistance to inequalities has been a basic catalyst to social mobilization. At times, resistance has undermined democracy; at other times, it has contributed to the restoration and even the strengthening of democracy.

Latin America today is replete with examples of popular mobilizations around emerging categories of identity that reflect experiences of inequality and that have ambiguous implications for democratic development. Consider the widespread protests of public-sector employees, who throughout most of Latin America find their long-fought-for middle-class status to be jeopardized by market-oriented reforms that expose them to extreme degrees of economic risk.<sup>2</sup> Or witness the support that the Venezuelan presi-

dent Hugo Chávez has received from shantytown dwellers, whose networks have been essential as a bulwark for his regime, but whose precursors and identities go back to the upheavals of the late 1950s, which toppled the dictatorship of General Pérez Jiménez. These shantytown movements must be understood in ways that go beyond the common view of them as spasmodic reactions of basically atomized and marginalized masses to material deprivation. Rather, these movements and the reactions they elicit reflect the acute divisions that separate rich and poor, privileged and excluded, and the particular ways in which these are articulated at specific moments in time. An important insight to be gleaned from Margaret Gray's contribution to this volume is that these divisions, and the identities and movements they spawn, are increasingly transnational in nature, encompassing Latin Americans living as migrants in the north as well as those who live in their countries of origin.

If democracies are to foster the development of more inclusive societies, in which citizenship is more equally distributed than has been the case up to the present, the problem of inequalities will need to rise to the front and center of governmental agendas. Whether this comes to pass will hinge in large measure on the degree to which Latin American societies broadly reject the persistence of vast expanses of discrimination and exclusion. One is reminded here of Albert Hirschman's classic formulation (1973) concerning shifting levels of tolerance for inequalities. Contributors to this volume offer grounds for cautious optimism: inequalities have made it onto the Latin American agenda, and important books such as this one will ensure that the topic remains in the public eye. If fresh perspectives on inequalities open the way to tangible social and political changes, the paradox to which we have alluded may finally be overcome, and inequalities may prove less indelible than they have been thus far.

## Notes

This foreword draws on ideas developed in an essay prepared in collaboration with Jeremy Adelman, which gave rise to a project on "paradoxical inequalities" at Princeton University, as well as on ongoing exchanges with participants in the Stony Brook University project from which this volume emerged.

1. This distinction follows Tilly's (1998, chap. 3) consideration of internal and external categories.
2. Of course, as an anonymous reviewer pointed out, public employees may also

monopolize resources that might otherwise be directed toward meeting the needs of the most disadvantaged segments of the population. Interpreted in Tillyian terms (1998, chap. 5), public-sector employees, and indeed formal-sector workers as a whole, engage in “opportunity hoarding” in order to capture rents and thus to maintain their comparatively privileged status.