

Interdependent Inequalities: Globalization from a Latin American Perspective

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The growing social gap between the rich and the poor has once again become an important social *problématique* and is attracting increased attention in social and cultural science research. Latin America is critical for understanding social inequalities for two seemingly contradictory reasons. It is the only region that has seen a reduction in inequalities in selected countries over the past 20 years. But as the current data indicate, the reductions in inequality are volatile and not sustainable. Latin America remains one of the most unequal regions in the world: Latin America, including the Caribbean, is the world region that exhibits the greatest social inequality: 28 percent of its population is considered poor and more than 12 percent extremely poor. Its societies are characterized by extremely polarized income distribution. The Gini coefficients (after taxes and transfers) of most Latin American countries exceed 0.45, while West European countries gravitate toward 0.3.

The great extent of economic inequalities and power asymmetries in Latin America is not a new development. These are historically persistent phenomena, which in their *longue durée* cannot be considered without their ties to colonial times and the historical foundation of each nation-state in the course of the nineteenth century. At the same time, both historical and contemporary configurations of inequalities in Latin American countries have been and continue to be shaped by their global interdependencies. Global interdependencies are understood here as entanglements between structures of inequality extending beyond local, regional, nation-state, and supranational spaces. In addition, these refer to temporal as well as spatial phenomena of inequality (e.g., inequalities between generations or between various places in different world regions).

In the discussion over the question of how to reduce inequalities, there is a widely shared consensus as to the positive effects that state action can have in making societies more equal. Hence, Latin American states are held to be the most powerful and important actors in reducing inequalities and related patterns of socioeconomic and political exclusion in the region. Such an approach, however, tends to underestimate two central aspects. The first is the question of politics, understood as struggles over the definition and implementation of state policies at a specific historical moment, in the making of inequalities in Latin America. The second has to do with the institutional legacies responsible for the reproduction of inequalities over time.

The analysis of interdependencies among different axes of inequality has a long tradition in Latin America, and it remains one of the central areas of research in the social sciences in the region. In the case of global interdependencies, since the early 1960s social research in Latin America has made important and innovative contributions to a more profound understanding of interdependent inequalities within a global context and between social spaces beyond the nation-state. The social sciences, particularly those developed in the context of dependency and marginalization theories, produced studies on the striking differences in wealth both between world regions and within individual national societies in Latin America. At the same time, they emphasized the reciprocal nature of the relations between individual nation-states and between world regions. These approaches interpreted dependencies as results of asymmetrical relations within the world economy and within the states of Latin America, in addition to factoring in historical dimensions.

While considering the particularities of Latin American socioeconomic inequalities, it is important to include different dimensions in the debate over the creation and reproduction of social inequalities. The intersections of different types of social inequalities and the global interdependencies of local constellations of social inequalities beyond the nation-state are at the focus of recent analyses. With special focus on the multidimensionality and interdependencies of social inequalities, such as sociopolitical and socioecological inequalities, it is important to address the historical roots and dynamics of persistent inequalities in the region.

Research on Latin America interdependent inequalities is contributing to a more diverse understanding of social inequalities, taking into account multidimensional and transregional interdependencies empirically and the theoretical contributions to understand dependencies and interdependencies. ■