

Proposal: “Inequality: forms of legitimation and conflict in Latin American societies”.

Presentation.

The problem of social inequality has been always relevant in Latin America, holding a central place in the regional social sciences. Also, during the past century, a good deal of the political movements and processes in the continent were articulated around the grievance for a radical transformation on the social distribution of wealth and resources.

This tendency changed after the authoritarian regimes which marked the decades of 1970 and 1980. The policies of adjustment radically modified the economic models in the Latin American countries, heavily raising the levels of social inequality. The process of gradual integration of the disadvantaged sectors – a key discursive element in the previous political setting – was halted. Furthermore, the dismantling of the social protection systems reversed the relevant developments on social inclusion, weak as they were. After the authoritarian period, most of the new democratic governments continued these policies, deepening in most cases their regressive effects on economic distribution. The concern about economical growth, and later about poverty, greatly hindered the visibility of social inequality as a problem.

At the same time, by modifying the role of crucial axes of social life such as work and state, the implementation of the new development models in Latin America raised new expressions of social inequality. Latin American societies are more unequal than 30 years ago but, beyond this, the social inequality has become more complex. Slowly, the “faces” of inequality have become more salient and diverse since the structural reforms, and facing this diagnostic the regional political actors are clearly divided between those who propose strong distributive transformations and those who argue in favor of the model continuity as a tool for improving economical development.

In this context, the Latin American social sciences have recently returned to the concern about the problems of social inequality. While “poverty” replaced the topic during the 1980s, social inequality is again in the center of debate. There is extensive research on the trajectories and distribution of incomes, both intra- and inter-generational social stratification, and the role of public policies in these processes (De Ferranti et al., 2003; Socías 2004; Cortés, 2000; Behrman et al, 2001; Filgueira, 2000). Still, a critical problem has remained excluded from most of the researchers’ agenda: the different ways in which the Latin American societies socially and politically address the phenomenon of inequality.

While most Latin American countries share certain tendencies in terms of inequality, there are outstanding differences about how each society has dealt with the problem. These differences, and the general patters that may be found despite them, constitute an extensive research area. Focusing on this area, this project deals with the following questions: What mechanisms implies the reproduction of an unequal social order? How the social actors incorporate or problematize the different mechanisms of inequality production in Latin America?

In order to deal with these questions, it becomes necessary to think “inequality” from a different point of view. It is not possible to circumscribe the problem to the distribution and appropriation of different resources in a given society. The complex and conflictive process of symbolic construction which is done around the resources distribution must be researched as well. In that way it shall be possible to understand the mechanisms which allow the social assimilation of inequalities, their supposed origins and explanations.

The proposed project involves research about two key concepts. The first is *forms of legitimation*: the project aims to document and analyze the different mechanisms by which the conflictive potential of inequality is processed and reduced. In these tasks, it proposes to carefully consider the roles of the State, economical elites and other relevant actors in different countries' context (Ansperger and Van Parijs, 2002).

The second key concept is conflict production. This project aims to analyze the different ways by which the social actors problematize inequality in specific social contexts. The underlying notion is that, in unequal societies, the tension between inequality legitimation and the raise of inequality-based conflicts heavily mark the political space (Cramer, 2005; Dahrendorf, 1996). It becomes relevant, then, to research how the Latin American social actors understand social inequalities and how the different political systems include, incorporate or exclude their positions (Dix, 1989; Foweraker, 2001; Hojman, 1996).

Research Plan.

The following plan is divided in four stages. The general strategy is to develop a general diagnostic of social inequality and its social and political expressions in Latin America, to perform later a series of case-studies in several countries, addressing specific forms of legitimation and conflict. By resorting to general macro-analyses and deep case studies, the aim is to provide a rich understanding of the research problem in a frame of comparability and scientific knowledge accumulation.

First Stage: The Setting. A Characterization of Social Inequality in Latin America.

The implementation of the new economical models in Latin America has given place to deeper social inequalities, but also to new configurations and expressions of them. Considering the regional approach used in this project, it is necessary first to define a clear description of the evolution and features of social inequality in the different countries and sub-regions. With that aim, this stage will include:

- 1) A general description of the problem of Social Inequality in Latin America, attending especially to the relevant differences between countries and sub-regions. A typology of national settings according to levels and forms of inequality and stratification will be developed at this stage.

- 2) For each country participating, an identification and description of the main social inequalities and their mechanisms of production and reproduction. This characterization shall be oriented to select one or more study cases in each country for the following research stage. The countries included in the project are Chile, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Mexico, and Peru, having support from institutions in each of these countries and from the ILA in Berlin. Nevertheless, the group is open and eager to include researchers from other Latin American countries as part of the related Research Group, which is applying also to the support for Research Groups of the Latin American Council of Social Sciences (CLACSO).

Second Stage: The Mesh. Forms of Legitimation of Social Inequality in Latin America.

For each selected case, an analysis of the legitimating mechanisms will be performed. This stage considers the following points:

- 1) Identification and analysis of relevant actors, aiming to understand the role of different actors in the legitimation of a given form of social inequality, in a certain social and political context.

2) Identification and analysis of the different discursive mechanisms developed by the actors around the studied form of social inequality.

Third Stage: The Rupture. Conflict and Inequality in Latin America.

This stage aims to analyze the relationship between inequality and conflict in the included countries. In order to do so, the following points shall be developed:

1) Identification of the main existent forms of conflict related with the studied inequalities, and their main expressions.

2) Analysis of the different social actors' roles in the conflict, especially attending to how they discursively deal with the specific problem of social inequality.

Fourth Stage: Synthesis. Balances and Perspectives about Inequality in Latin America.

This stage refers to the final and general analysis of the research problem, with basis on the compared analyses of the different included countries.

Theoretical Justification.

The Social Inequality is a structural phenomenon which refers to the hierarchic distribution of social resources among different actors. These resources are "social" as long as they: (a) are the material result of a *social* process of production; (b) are *symbolically* produced as values, considering their material uses and costs, and; (c) given their physical and/or symbolic properties, they possess an objective value *in a given social setting*.

Because resources are socially produced, any society needs to distribute them in one way or another. Thus, every historical society has produced norms about how social production is allocated and, therefore, which inequalities are valid and why. In this project, these norms and explanations are called as "forms of legitimation".

The social actors' ability to affect the definition of these regulations is conditioned by the resources they control. So, in unequal societies, the different forms of legitimation result from the symbolic action and production of actors which are in unequal positions to shape them, and therefore are always related to the existent domination relationships in a given historical context (Bourdieu, 2000).

In this context, the individuals' obedience to distributive norms is shaped by the unequal access to cultural production – educational and religious institutions, media, etc. – but also the different actors' power to control economical production and physically destroy or threaten the others. In that sense, the forms of legitimation must be understood as material productions with symbolic, economical and political-military dimensions, with special attention to the roles of the State, economical elites, and the different institutions specialized in symbolic production. Therefore, forms of legitimation are never decoupled from domination relationships.

On the other side, it must be stressed that domination is never complete. The social actors, even from subordinate positions, are able to build antagonistic discourses and to problematize the conditions of inequality which they live (Butler, 2004; Deleuze, 1991; Spivack, 2003). Forms of legitimation, then, are always prone to criticism and the construction of conflict. The conflictive discourses are shaped both by the actors' actions as much as by historical contexts, and therefore greatly differ between different societies. It is possible to observe highly diverse forms of conflict, inequality criticisms, or groups involved in them (Cramer, 2005; McSherry, 1992; Opp, 1990; Dahrendorf, 1996): just as the forms of legitimation, the production of conflict is a material phenomenon with symbolic, economical and political dimensions. Our understanding of

the process of conflict production has been always insufficient. The recent transformations in the Latin American societies and the different actors' involved in them, though, have made the theoretical reconstruction of this process even more necessary.

The aim of understanding how these mechanisms – forms of legitimation and production of conflict – work in the Latin American societies is an answer on how survive and develop societies with such high levels of social inequalities as those of Latin America. Considering that modernity has defined “equality” as one of its core normative principles, it is possible to presume that high inequality should be perceived as an undesirable and unfair phenomenon (Eder, 1989). This principle coexists with many others in modern societies, certainly, but it still remains a problem how is equality rejected or overlooked as a constitutive element of modern discourse in societies which, arguably, organize themselves mainly through modern institutions and norms.

On theoretical terms this question points out the problem of social disciplining and control. Particularly, becomes relevant the relationship between social control and the construction of subjectivity and social norms. This relationship has been one of the main concerns of critical theory (Eder, 1989; Nussbaum, 2007; Tilly, 2000) but, to our knowledge, has not been equally addressed by Latin American theorists and researchers.

Summarizing, the theoretical relevance of this project relates to the need of linking the structural phenomenon of inequality with the symbolic productions, both oriented toward legitimation and criticism, which are produced around it. In this understanding, also, it is needed to consider always the crucial role of the political institutions. With these aims, we propose a multidisciplinary effort considering the tools of political economics, history, anthropology, psychology, and sociology.

Founding Plan and Proposed Activities.

The present project emerges in the context of the Latin American Council for Social Sciences (CLACSO) call for Research Groups applications. It is an initiative supported by several institutions to which the participating researchers are affiliated, and aims to develop a wide network of research experts on Social Inequality and Conflict in Latin America.

Through the CLACSO founding, the group aims to develop a series of activities of coordination, diffusion and publication. At the same time, we count mainly on this application and the local institutions to support the direct costs of the research project. This mixed founding allows us to offer a clear plan for diffusion of results, which includes the following activities:

- The publication of at least two collective works, directly founded by CLACSO.
- The realization of at least six specialized international seminars in the following 18 months, at the different participating institutions.
- Two general meetings for discussion and coordination. The whole Research Group shall meet to discuss and prepare collective works in these working sessions.
- A Special Session in the next LASA Congress.

Project Coordinators

Name	Institution	Country (by Institution)	Discipline
Francisco Zapata	El Colegio de México	Mexico	Sociology
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Researchers

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Budget Proposal

Programme d Activity	Total Amount U\$	CLACSO Support		Participating Centers Support		Lasa FORD Support	
		Amount U\$	%	Amount U\$	%	Amount U\$	%
Research Group First Meeting	14000	12000	85.7%	2000	14.3%	0	0.0%
Research Stage I	2000	500	25.0%	1000	50.0%	500	25.0%
Research Stage II	8000	500	6.3%	3000	37.5%	4500	56.3%
Research Stage III	8000	500	6.3%	3000	37.5%	4500	56.3%
Research Stage IV	1000	0	0.0%	1000	100%	0	0.0%
International Specialized Seminars (x6)	9000	2000	22.2%	7000	77.8%	0	0.0%
Research Group Second Meeting	14000	12000	85.7%	2000	14.3%	0	0.0%
LASA Congress Session	12000	0	0.0%	9000	75.0%	3000	25.0%
Total	68000	27500	40.4%	22500	33.1%	12500	18.4%