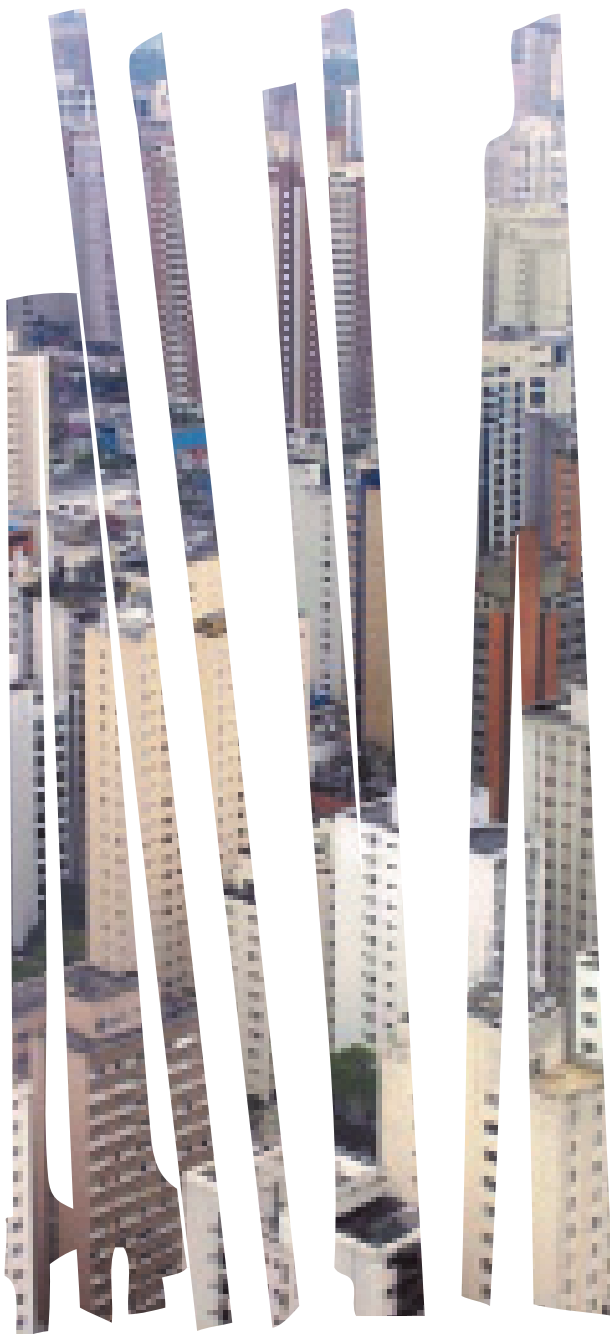# Contemporary Challenges to Equality

Elisa Reis

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Research Network on Interdependent
Inequalities in Latin America

Contemporary Challenges to Equality

Elisa Reis

Abstract

The paper discusses four contemporary processes that pose new challenges to the quest for equality: first, the rise of the ecological concern; second, the disentanglement of nation and state; third, the redefinition of civil society and solidarity; and fourth, the quest for complementarity between equality and difference. These four aspects are explored as components of an encompassing cultural change that evokes the idea of a new great transformation, to recall Polanyi's thesis. The major argument is that in this new scenario the ways of perceiving social differences and inequalities are profoundly affected, while conventional policies to tackle poverty and inequality call for revision.

Keywords: Socio-ecological Equality | Nation and State | Civil Society and Solidarity

Biographical Notes

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Contemporary Challenges to Equality

Let me first take this opportunity to congratulate the organizers of the seminar and to thank them for inviting me to take part in the program. It is indeed a great pleasure to be here and also very gratifying to be part of this promising research network. I also want to take the opportunity to express my gratitude to the German team for bringing us together as a network. I am sure that this initiative will be a great contribution to tackling the inequality problem in Latin America. I look forward to seeing desiguALdades to imprint its mark in the research community, adding new research issues to the agenda and producing new knowledge on our subject.

I have chosen to address here some of the big transformations that our world has experienced in recent decades and draw attention to their implications for the study of inequality. It is no novelty that the social sciences have always searched for inspiration in historical processes and events. We know that what moved our classics was the urge to make sense of the big changes in their time. Confronting past and present ways of living, they contributed to the deciphering of the great historical changes in progress by framing understandings of their present and pointing out trends shaping the future.

Not only researchers who adopt an explicit historical perspective, but even those who choose a more formalizing orientation are well aware that we are fully immersed in the historical flux and that our subjects are historical actors and processes. This is our bread and butter. However, I am not just talking about the temporality of social life. I am talking about historical processes of change whose scope and magnitude demand real innovation – innovation in our professional lenses, in our ways of looking at things and processing them.

I think we agree that there are changes in course that point to a world very different from the one anticipated by, for example, social scientists' writings around the middle of the twentieth century. It is true that – precisely because we are historical beings – each generation tends to think of their own present as involving a crisis that is bigger than ever. Yet, I believe we also agree that what is taking place today in our social world poses quite new dilemmas, threats, and opportunities, and it is in this changed scenario that we must place the inequality issue.

I want to point out four aspects – four big changes of the present – and to comment on some of the ways these changes affect or should affect the quest for equality.

(1) I will start by focusing attention on one particularly deep cultural change that is taking place during our lifetime. This is probably the most radical of the four transformations I will comment on here, namely, the growing awareness of environmental issues. It has a strong impact on the way we look at the world, bringing into question the frontiers between social and natural sciences. The rise of ecological sensibility is perhaps as profound as was the belief in the possibility of continuous economic development that marked the transition to modern times: While in former world views society was conceived as subordinated to cyclical movements or to a stability only disturbed by natural factors, modernity brought with it the idea that society's natural movement is progressive. It became common sense that economic growth and related material gains were the norm. In turn, stagnation or decay – traditionally perceived as natural facts – became, in modern times, social problems to be solved by knowledge and politics. The faith in science and technology followed the immense material gains that society experienced in modern times. Centuries after, we can now appreciate the huge transformations that the belief in progress had anticipated.

We seem to be less aware, though, of the full implications brought about by the much more recent belief in the possibility of self-sustained growth. **The idea that the continuity of development, or growth, involves not the colonization of nature, but rather nurturing it, is quite a revolution in our way of thinking.** It is a change of mind that is bound to have significant consequences for present and future generations (Costanza, Graumlich and Steffen: 2007). The reason why environmental concern and nature conservation have become a sort of religious belief for many today is the fact that this drastic change in the way of thinking takes on, for the time being, the feature of a charismatic revelation in search of new believers and supporters. Yet, as with any cultural change of such proportions, the mix of idealism and pragmatism is what sets the move ahead.

The cultural transformation in course reminds us of another great transformation, the one referred to by Karl Polanyi (Polanyi 1944). Indeed, his arguments suggested that a big cultural revolution took place, together with the great material transformation that put in danger the persistence of social life. As you recall, he insisted that the conversion of human natural activity into labor, of land (or nature) into capital, and of money into an artificial commodity involved such an encompassing transformation that it brought into action the invisible hand of society. In his view, society has its own automatic mechanisms that emerge in order to preserve the social fabric. Threatened by the destructive forces of the market, society introduced – through the State – corrective protective mechanisms. Thus, Polanyi's original thesis reversed Adam Smith, rather postulating an automatic response from society in order to restore the equilibrium

disturbed by a new way of looking at the world, the market perspective.

I suggest that the big cultural transformation of our times, the belief that growth must be self-sustained, may be seen as a re-enactment of the invisible hand of society, once again taming the destructive forces of the market. **This changed way of looking at nature will influence the way we conceive of social and distributive policies, not only within national borders, but on a global scale. Poverty itself is a negative externality that has an impact on the environment (Dasgupta and Mäler 1995). Moreover, let us recall that natural phenomena only become natural disasters to the extent that they are social events. Furthermore, preventing natural disasters is essentially fighting poverty, since the distribution of natural casualties is extremely unequal. It is the poorer regions of the world and the poorer people who suffer most from the global warming, from careless use of chemicals, from untreated garbage, etc.**

(2) The second historical process I want to comment on here involves the transformations of national-states affected by sub- and supra-national features, transformations that constitute yet other challenging issues the social sciences now confront (Robertson 1992). Even if widely mentioned, it seems that we have not fully appreciated the impact of the current transformations nation-states experience. Let us recall that, through a process that lasted over two centuries, (Anderson 1991 and Grillo 1980), the construction of the nation-state ended up with successfully promoting the ideological fusion of authority and solidarity (Reis 1998). The long-term process that eventually conferred a sort of natural status to the nation-state merged into one same thing: obedience to and spontaneous compliance with the authority of State. Such fusion between authority and solidarity was the basis upon which modern citizenship was built (Bendix 1964).

One of the major consequences of this successful fusion was to convert loyalty to the nation-state into a sort of natural identity people counted on. Actually, the successful construction of the nation-state was of such a sort that even sociological definitions of both nation and state mixed them together (Renan 1882/1996 and Weber 1946). Here lies the source of the sociological conflation between society and nation-states. What is now being criticized as methodological nationalism – the assumption that national borders are the natural contours of societies – is one of the signs that sociology is reviewing itself in order to be able to account for the historical changes in motion (Beck 2005 and Urry 2000). Beyond the methodological dimension, the new or restored salience of multiple focuses of identity and solidarity that cross sub-national and supra-national ecologies uncovers the ideological basis of nationalism as featured by the

European modernity project. The results of such a development may even lead to the revival of nationalism here and there, but where it happens it is still an expression of the contemporary moves that bring into question old established versions of modernity.

Not less significant have been the changes involving the authority side of the nation state. The sovereignty of the modern state, as defined along the lines of the Westphalia model, does not hold any more (Axtmann 2004, Guéhenno 1993 and Van Creveld 1999). Global processes involving communication networks, financial flows, supranational legislation, and so many other dimensions act to weaken the material and symbolic borders of national states (Albrow 1996 and Beck 2005). We then realize that authority structures have changed considerably and that our analytical resources must be redesigned to account for the new realities of power. ***In some sense, it is true that the authority of the state has been weakened lately as global networks of all sorts expand and unconventional wars persist. However, it is also true that nation states are the legitimate actors that are called to action in the efforts to settle new agreements, be they political, financial, or commercial*** (Reis 2004). Furthermore, not only International Governmental Organizations (INGOs) and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) multiply, but the goals of so many NGOs and transnational social movements are, precisely, to affect the decision-making process of national states. **Thus, states have suffered losses in their old authority functions, but they have also gained new ones.** In short, our old analytical models are no longer suitable to account for the dynamics of power and compliance, authority and solidarity.

(3) A third significant cultural change in motion that challenges social scientists is one that has quite an impact on our theoretical schemes. I have in mind the way we conceive today of the basic forms of organization that society counts on. Can we keep our old ways of looking at society and its basic forms of organization? It seems that, in many ways, our recurring recourse to dichotomous reasoning is becoming less and less helpful.

Thus, for quite a long period, we used to identify two essential instruments that society counts on to self-organize, namely, authority resources and exchange resources. This means to say, we became accustomed to thinking of society as being organized through structures of authority – chief among them the state – and structures of exchange, with the market as its typical form in modern society. Likewise, we got used to think of structures of solidarity as derived from common interests, be they material or ideal. In short, we learned to think of society as clusters of material and ideal interests that counted on public authority and on shared material interests in order to self-organize and to attain common goals. In such a perspective, state resources and market resources

constituted the two basic forms of social organization and the predominance of one of them, or else their variable combinations, accounted for major types of society.

Today, instead, we observe here and there that representations of social organization resorting to three – not two – basic forms of organization become the pattern. Reference to three-element schemes, to the triad authority/market/solidarity or to civil society as a third source of organization, is quite common (Reis 2009). *Sure, we know that it is not possible to take a one-sided view; that our analytical schemes not only reflect, but also promote the cultural changes in course. But, what is clear is that, one way or the other, changed perceptions have consequences for society and for the ways we grasp our objects.* We see then that the resurgence of the concept of civil society in recent decades draws attention to repertoires of action that were not satisfactorily contemplated by the old image of society, counting on either market or state resources (Wolfe 1989). As the compulsion of authority and the calculated interest of markets proved themselves insufficient, again, the invisible hand of society showed itself to set solidarity as a valid resource as well.

Reference to a third way in public life became trivial as well as partnership between civil society organizations and state actors. Moreover, we observe that responsibilities usually considered attributed to the state are now associated with the market as well. I am thinking here mainly of the notion of Corporate Social Responsibility which has become a positive value in the business world (Carrol 1999, Garriga and Melé 2004). At the same time, state authorities feel compelled to embrace practices and ideologies typical of firms. In the New Public Management ideology, states incorporate the value of efficiency, traditionally a market requirement (Barzelay 2001, Pollit and Bouckaert 2000). So, this move from a dual to a triadic perception of types of organizational resources, plus the borrowing of characteristics between state and market, are clear illustrations of change processes that raise demands for theoretical innovation and for innovative policy instruments as well.

Here too the connection to the equality issue is very visible: when they design policies to deal with poverty and inequality, policy-makers now have in mind three possible actors, not just two. The immense world of NGOs is a clear illustration of what I am saying. The heterogeneity of such actors is huge, but, for the moment, it is sufficient to recall that the designation as "non-government" or as "third sector" leaves no doubt that a deep cultural change took place, to the extent that we need to refer to an actor that is neither the state nor the market.

Here, it is impossible to ignore that the recognition of this third actor has direct implications for distributive policies aimed at reducing poverty and inequality. We know the issue is controversial (Koslinski and Reis 2009). To some, the acceptance of NGOs as partners in the conduction of social policies signals that authority is taking its hands off, giving up what are legitimate obligations of governments. Furthermore, it is said that market interests, including the cutting of taxes, are to be blamed for the retreat of the welfare state. In short, neo-liberal concerns are taken as the major factors behind the active involvement of civil society. The usual criticisms of neo-liberalism are the clear illustration here. Others, instead, see in the revival of the notion of civil society and in the growing importance of NGOs signals that democracy is making progress. To them, the civic component of citizenship is expanding, a factor that may have positive effects in reducing inequality (Clayton 1996 and Salamon 1999).

Regardless of the side we take in this debate, as researchers concerned about inequality we cannot ignore that the constitution of this third typical actor affects the formulation and implementation of social policies, and, therefore, deserves our attention. To whom are they accountable? How do they set priorities? How do they interact with the state and with the market? What are their claims for the legitimacy to affect the policy agenda? These are all relevant issues if we want to understand the role and place of policy actors who influence distributive policies.

(4) The fourth big change that I want to recall here – one that is also part of the profound cultural transformations that the global world faces today – is even more directly related to our main subject. I have in mind the widely referred question of the resurgence of difference as a central value. This issue can be tackled from many angles, but *I want to stress the historical cultural novelty that constitutes the co-existence of both equality and difference as opposites to inequality* (Reis 2006). We know how revolutionary the equality ideology was, replacing in modernizing Europe the traditional vision of the world as naturally stratified. We also know that sociology itself was an offspring of this culture, as a reflection about the changes in course. In its sweeping movement, the equality value conquered the world. It inspired national independence movements, demands for citizenship, and redistributive policies everywhere.

Of course, equality still plays a crucial role in justifying social justice. But, the historical cost of its success was the denial or neglect of differences in many instances. Thus, as I have just recalled while commenting on the nation state, the equality of co-nationals *vis-à-vis* the state suppressed long established identities. To be equal, people should not be thought of as different among themselves. In the context of the European modernization process, this was a very long-term move. A movement whose

turmoil we seldom realize. In more recent history, when we look, for example, at the de-colonization process, the artificiality of equality as the opposite of difference often becomes tragically visible.

As regards our own province, social theory, the suppression of difference – considered to be antithetic to equality – has serious consequences. Thus, for example, only in recent decades have we come to admit that there are different models of modernity, that modernization is not necessarily the single path which generations of sociologists sustained, and that, to reduce inequality, we must also recognize differences. The cultural changes we experience today suggest to us that, instead of repressing equality, differences can be a necessary (while not sufficient) condition for it. Incorporating the value of diversity, we enable ourselves to fight for a more egalitarian, more tolerant, and more enriched world (Reis and Silva 2010). **However, let me emphasize that recognition of differences is a necessary, not a sufficient condition**. It is not in the comfort of relativism that we pursue equality. Social justice, human rights, fraternity remain our universal values, the ethical ground that justifies social sciences or any other science for that matter. ***For us social scientists, the move from a one-sided conception of inequality, as opposed to equality, to one that conceives of equality and difference not only as compatible, but also as instrumental to each other remains a major task.***

Doing theoretical and/or empirical research, we are challenged to generate knowledge that provides newer understandings of the kind that may contribute to fostering justice and tolerance. The task social theory is facing remains to be the reframing of eternal questions over and over again. ***The test of social science's relevance is precisely its capacity to address issues as they are experienced by the historical actors here and now***. In order to provide the abstract frame through which actual problems and social concerns gain intelligibility, sociological theory has to preserve its freshness and vigor; in other words, recalling Weber's expression, to keep its eternal youth.

Thinking now specifically of Latin America, the object of our seminar and the one that binds us here into a research community and the very fact that ours is a research network to investigate inequality in Latin America are indeed signs that the world is much more integrated today, that this is not an area program justified by imperialist ideas in the center so as to understand the periphery. There are common research interests between Latin Americans and Latin Americanists. I am thinking, for example, of the first big change I observed above, the conception of nature as a resource to be protected and not an obstacle to be conquered. Such awareness is also the awareness that nature is borderless, that environmental issues are global concerns: if the global

temperature rises due to carbon dioxide emissions, the consequences will be felt all over the planet. Poor countries and poor people will suffer more than those who are better off, but some consequences will be felt by us all. There will be more poverty, more epidemic waves, more uncontrolled migration, because people will be expelled from their surroundings. Poverty and acute inequality have negative externalities that are more and more global. As de Swaan has observed, the same interests that historically led national elites to recognize the need for welfare policies are potentially present to enhance attempts at global governance so as to curb the perverse effects of poverty and inequality (de Swaan: 1988).

As an international community of researchers who share concerns about inequality, we can play a crucial role in making two key issues ever clearer: first, that the negative externalities of social inequalities go well beyond national borders and, therefore, must be tackled from a global perspective; second, that we need multiple analytical focuses and diverse research techniques to grasp the interconnectedness of the many sides of the distributive issue.

To conclude with, I will say a few words about the research group I chair in Brazil, the Interdisciplinary Research Network for the Study of Inequality (NIED). We are not a very large group, but we have sociologists, political scientists, and economists working on several projects. We are now in our third research program, whose title is "Public and private strategies to cope with inequality, discrimination and social exclusion". This program encompasses four big sub-projects: (a) the first is a more quantitative study that assesses the redistributive impact of recent and ongoing social policies, conducted mainly by economists. They have focused mainly on education, health, employment, care, and cash transfers; (b) second, we have an ongoing study on NGOs involved in social programs. Here we look at their structure, modus operandi, interaction with the state, perceptions of NGO leaders, and we also look at the views that their beneficiaries have of them. For this study we have relied on survey data, in depth interviews, and focus groups; (c) a third project investigates how black people in Rio de Janeiro deal with discrimination and prejudice. This is part of a larger comparative study about blacks in New York. We resort to qualitative data, using long in-depth interviews; (d) finally, we are about to start an update of the study I conducted over ten years ago on elite perceptions of poverty and inequality among elite members. Within the limits of our resources we seek to cope with the historical and theoretical challenges on which I have commented here and hope to contribute to the generation of knowledge relevant to reducing social inequality in Brazil and elsewhere.

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