



Indelible Inequalities in Latin America

INSIGHTS FROM HISTORY, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

PAUL GOOTENBERG AND LUIS REYGADAS, EDITORS

FOREWORD BY ERIC HERSHBERG



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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book grew out of an exploratory project called *Durable Inequalities* in Latin America, funded by the Rockefeller Foundation and hosted at the Latin American and Caribbean Studies (LACS) Center at Stony Brook University between 2003–2006. The original idea was to take an urgent social problem—inequality in the Americas—one with a strong presence in the “social sciences,” and revisit it with emerging humanistic, cultural, and historical perspectives. Stony Brook became a bustling interdisciplinary site, with six residential visiting fellows, most of them from Latin American universities, who sparked a wide dialogue with our faculty, graduate students, and other new inequality study groups. For if there was one thing we discovered during these years of debate, it was that inequality is now an issue with a deep resonance among scholars, activists, and communities across the hemisphere. The recent election of Barack Obama to the presidency of the United States, in 2008, presaged by the democratic turn to the Left in much of Latin America and by the Bush-era global economic collapse, should lend further momentum to anti-inequality movements. The moment to confront inequality is here, but we need new intellectual tools and mobilizing strategies to do it. This book is a modest attempt at this retooling.

In terms of resources, we need to thank the generosity of the Rockefeller Foundation’s (now redefined) Program in Creativity and Culture, especially the vision of the program officers Tomás Ybarra-Frausto and Scott MacDougall, who took a personal interest in the Stony Brook initiative, though it lay slightly off their usual map of concerns. Domenica Tafuro, our remarkable LACS administrative assistant, was active at all stages of the project—from helping to polish Gootenberg’s first proposal as then LACS director, to welcoming the fellows at Stony Brook, to aiding in the final editing of this book. Other offices of the university also supported the project: especially the College of Arts and Sciences (under the deans Bob Liebermann and James Staros), Office of the Provost, Graduate School, Linda Merians in University Advancement, the Humanities Institute (HISB), and the Departments of History, Sociology, and Hispanic Languages and Literature. The

most crucial individuals, besides our fellows, were an interdisciplinary team of “Latin Americanista” faculty who served on the selection committee and participated in seminars and a series of symposiums convened at Stony Brook’s Manhattan site. Most notable were Javier Auyero (formerly of sociology, who first suggested inequality as our topic and who contributes to this volume), Katy Vernon (Hispanic languages), Fred Moehn (music), and Eduardo Mendieta (philosophy), as well as Tim Moran (sociology), Tracey Walters (Africana studies), Tom Klubock and Brooke Larson (history), and the anthropologists Pamela Block and Karen Kramer. Said Arjoman and E. Ann Kaplan served as program advisors. We are also indebted to Eric Hersherberg, then at the Social Science Research Council (SSRC), who took an immediate interest in the initiative, served as the external member of the selection committee, participated in our events, linked us to other inequality study groups (such as the Princeton project of Jeremy Adelman and Miguel Centeno), and contributed the foreword to this collection. At one point, the legendary Columbia University sociologist Charles Tilly, who first lit this theme, played interlocutor to a memorable discussion at the SSRC around the “relational” and proactive nature of inequalities. Sadly, Tilly passed away in April 2008, as we were putting the final touches on this volume so influenced by his ideas. A string of graduate students in history worked as research assistants to the fellows: Gabriel Hernández, Consuelo Figueroa, Greg Jackson, Alberto Harambour, and Alexis Stern. Celina Bragagnolo, a graduate student in philosophy, helped with two of the book’s translations. Martín Monsalve, a historian now doctored and teaching in Lima, did a savvy job of organizing the multilingual publicity and applications process for the Durable Inequalities program, which garnered scores of fascinating applicants from across the globe.

At the center of this collective learning experience were six interdisciplinary visiting scholars: Jeanine Anderson (Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú), Luis Reygadas (Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana [UAM], Iztapalapa, Mexico), Lucio Renno (Universidade de Brasília, Brazil), Odette Casamayor (Cuba, and now University of Connecticut, Storrs), Christina Ewig (University of Wisconsin, Madison), and Margaret Gray (Adelphi University), all represented in this volume. What a stimulating and committed team of colleagues! It is they who brought questions of inequality and now this book to life, born from papers presented at a fellows symposium held in May 2006.

Paul Gootenberg wants to especially thank his coeditor Luis Reygadas for his intellectual vision as well as his patience, insight, and skills in navigating

the shared tasks of criticism and editing. Mexico City and New York are now linked by an anthropologist and a historian from different academic cultures, even if our home universities share the same “statist” architecture. In 2005 the Mexican anthropological journal *Alteridades* published some of this volume’s essays in embryonic form in a special Spanish-language issue, “La desigualdad en América Latina” (14, no. 28 2004).

Luis Reygadas, in particular, wants to express his gratitude to the Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana, for providing the sabbatical year for his research leave in New York, and Stony Brook–LACS, which hosted him during 2003–2004 with a Rockefeller fellowship in the Durable Inequalities in Latin America program. Eduardo Mendieta made valued comments on the first draft of the essay Reygadas contributed to this volume. Gabriel Hernández, who is a living example of overcoming inequality, worked as Reygadas’s research assistant at Stony Brook.

At Duke University Press, we thank Valerie Millholland for her timely nod to the project, as well as Miriam Angress, who was so indispensable in guiding the book through the editorial process. Many thanks to the excellent copy editor, Patricia Mickelberry, and to Amy Chazkel, who prepared the index. We also thank three insightful and sympathetic press readers, including John H. Coatsworth.

The Paradox of Inequality in Latin America

ERIC HERSHBERG

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.¹

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.² 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.

PART I

New Approaches,
Old Disciplines

Latin American Inequalities

New Perspectives from History, Politics, and Culture

PAUL GOOTENBERG

As an introduction to this volume, this essay broadly paints Latin American inequalities onto their larger canvas of politics and scholarship. Latin America's historically defining inequalities cry out for newer and sustained kinds of historical, political, and cultural analyses, ones to complement the largely social and structural-reformist frameworks common to past understandings of inequality. This introduction then charts the way to a series of bold essays written by a working group of inter-American scholars that, from a variety of disciplinary angles, grapples with the task of thinking anew the many dimensions and legacies of indelible inequalities.

The Weight of Inequalities

Latin America is in fact a critical region for the global study of inequalities. Neither the poorest nor the most culturally divided region of the world, Latin America is by far the most unequal. By standard social indicators (cross-national Gini coefficients), Latin America is much more unequal than Asia, Africa, and of course the post-industrial West (Inter-American Development Bank [IDB] 1999). These measurements derive from wage differentials and thus overlook other material factors (such as wealth or the instability of work) that further skew the region's opportunity structures. In a vivid daily sense, Latin Americans live and see these disparities in how they do politics, build urban spaces, work the land, join new and older social movements, experience crime and environmental stress, and access educational, nutritional, healthcare, legal, cultural, and media resources. The problem lies not simply in the existence of rampant poverty in the region—during the last decade, some 210 million (or 40 percent of) Latin Americans fell in that category of distress—but in the more conveniently ignored other part of the

problem: the region's extraordinarily wealthy and politically sheltered upper classes. The wealthiest 5 percent of the population hoards a quarter of total income, making some nations—such as Brazil or Guatemala—among the most unequal places on earth (IDB 1999; Korzeniewicz and Smith 2000). Few exceptions stand out against the typical Latin American pattern. Only Uruguay, Costa Rica, and Trinidad support reasonably egalitarian societies in the region, and even relatively developed economies such as Argentina and Colombia have recently experienced sharp increases in social inequality, which has ignited internecine conflicts and governability crises. Even Cuba, after its flurry of initial revolutionary redistributive programs, has suffered renewed inequality over the last decade (during its post-Soviet crisis), replete with new signs of racial and gender discrimination. Latin America's inequalities are not just or simply a matter of underdevelopment, poverty, or bad policy—they run much deeper.

Since the very birth of European colonialism, Latin America has likely been the zone of the sharpest global inequalities—the veritably eternal land of contrasts—between privilege and destitution. Historical evidence remains impressionistic, though historians have long grasped the larger picture. Caste divisions born from the Spanish Conquest (in Mesoamerica and the Andes) and African slavery (in Brazil and the Caribbean) hardened during centuries of colonialism; through the advent of two dozen independent republics and the liberal export-capitalism of the nineteenth century, such inequalities eventually transformed into class, cultural, and citizenship differentials, but carried forth anew (Burns 1983; Thurner 1997). Twentieth-century modernities (urbanization, mass culture, industrialism), active liberation movements (agrarian-reform, populist, democratic, and revolutionary), and now globalization, neoliberalism, and even emergent reactions to them have done little to change Latin America's historical inequality, despite the high hopes invested in all these ideas and programs (e.g., Eckstein [1977] 1988). In fact, from the 1980s to the 1990s Latin America suffered deepening social gaps, during the so-called lost decade of development, with no clear sign of relief at the start of the twenty-first century. Latin American inequality is a disturbing paradigm for the resilience of oppressive and dysfunctional social systems.

The key words “durable inequality” come from the renowned sociologist Charles Tilly's recent book of that title (1998). Tilly challenges scholars and citizens alike to confront the centrality of inequalities in modern societies: “categorical inequalities,” shaped by relational processes, boundary-

making, and resilient social bonds. Inequality assumes a bewildering array of concrete forms: of wealth, income, and opportunity; of gender, race, age, region, and ethnicity. Hierarchies of power, education, technology, language, culture, honor, beliefs, and influence pervade individuals, groups, and nations, perhaps more than anytime in history. Tilly's book is part of a new movement to reclaim, in subtle ways, the methodological vitality of the social in cultural and historical analysis, as a foil to the methodological individualism of mainstream North American social science and to some variants of the "cultural turn."¹ However, with his stress on relational structures, Tilly himself tends to downplay the cultural, historical, or global dimensions of inequality.

Latin American inequality is certainly durable in Tilly's sense, as well as being historically, socially, and culturally "constructed," which suggests the unnatural origins of hierarchy and subordination. But we prefer in this volume the guiding term "indelible inequalities," which underscores the human agency and culture at play in their creation and perseverance, their complexity and camouflage beyond stark categorical divides, and their fluid and peopled possibilities of change. Historically, indelible legacies are difficult to erase, but they are not structurally ordained or inevitable. Indelibility also implies that inequality is no longer the sole domain of model-building and data-crunching social scientists. But neither can indelible inequality be wished away, from the other academic shore, simply by a new critical discourse or a postmodern imagination, as useful as these may be for overcoming teleological understandings of poverty, development, or progress (Escobar 1995). In cultural-history terms, recognizing the indelibility of inequalities may help unveil the larger commonalities behind ephemeral or essentialized fissures of racial, class, or gender discrimination and difference. It is also a move, one hopes, beyond the often non-analytical particularism of academic "identity politics" (Brubaker and Cooper 2000) and its analogous new "ethnic politics." Foucauldian-inspired cultural studies has heightened awareness of culturally construed, power-laden realities, and those insights are useful to grasp why inequalities continue to pervade social, cultural, and political edifices. A focus on inequalities interrogates how diverse societies and cultures have reproduced (tolerated and elided, contested or altered) hierarchy over the long term. Study of indelible inequalities helps center the social, historical, and cultural issues at the heart of Latin American studies, but not as a monolithic paradigm or research agenda.

Inequality is now a global concern. If the twentieth-century world was

marked by fundamental struggles over the “color line” (race and colonialism) and the conflict between capitalism and socialism, the new century may well be defined by multiple global struggles over inequality. Concerned international organizations such as the Inter-American Development Bank (Iglesias 1992; IDB 1999) and the World Bank (Stiglitz 2002; de Ferranti et al. 2004), economists and social scientists, agenda-setting foundations, and prescient public thinkers are beginning to trace the new profile of this global dilemma. Inequalities are not fading away with twenty-first-century “globalization”; in fact, it is quite the opposite, with most observers predicting that disparities will widen along with global informational processes of change, which generally lower labor costs and reward high-tech, capitalized, and educated strata and migrants both within and between nation-states. For example, intensified global migration, rather than narrowing income and cultural gaps, has tended to create more heterogeneous pools of exploited minorities. Significantly, unlike eighteenth- or nineteenth-century humanism and liberalism, the current wave of historical globalization barely tries to legitimate itself by making universal equality claims, beyond equal access to markets, regardless of equity outcomes. This agnostic stance is now evoking an intellectual and ethical backlash. Such global cultural fragmenting and its rationalizers have not escaped the notice of respected sociocultural analysts (such as Appadurai, Harvey, and Jameson), who read the postmodern global condition precisely in terms of these intensifying and kaleidoscopic inequalities.

Another factor in play is steeply rising inequality (and a growing tolerance for such) in the United States, which already holds the position of an outlier in post-industrial societies. In the so-called New Economy since the 1980s, 47 percent of income gains accrued to the top 1 percent of families (Wolff [1995] 2001; Lardner and Smith 2006). With the erosion of its mid-twentieth-century fiscal policies, industrial base, and blue-collar working class, the United States now has a wealth-distribution profile that approaches those of Latin America, with the upper 5 percent hoarding nearly half of all national assets. Illustrative of the social impact of these developments, average life expectancies in the United States, while longer, are now demonstrably more unequal. These shifts have occurred alongside the abandonment of hard-won social-welfare policies, freer hemispheric trade (North American Free Trade Agreement and its emulations), and the arrival of a new generation of unskilled immigrant workers, most of whom are refugees from Latin American and Caribbean inequalities and who are forming new classes of categorical inequalities. The United States’s own global cities (Sassen 1991) now exhibit

Third World extremes, with homelessness, hunger, street bazaars, resurgent diseases of poverty, and the specter of terrorism. A flurry of academic critiques of North American inequalities (Jacobs and Skocpol 2005) note the paradox, so familiar to Latin Americanists, that social distances have widened in the same era as the expansion of individual rights (civil rights, multiculturalism, gender equity), and that rising inequalities are, Latin American-style, eroding prospects for political equality and the democratic process in the United States. Inequality has become an open topic of debate in major political campaigns, with those who speak out on the issue being labeled “populists.” The Latin American experience governing harsh inequalities may have much to say now to North Americans, and also about the possible linkages between Latin Americans and North Americans.

Finally, there are both scholarly and real-world movements to contest inequalities, driven by the recognition that not all hierarchies are created by material conditions alone, with concerns such as gender, sexual orientation, nature, indigenous and cultural autonomy, and human rights. The contributors to this volume refer not only to the long-vaunted “new” social movements of Latin America (Alvarez and Escobar 1992) or to the developed world’s motley antiglobalization forces, long laying low after 9/11. There are multiple voices: a decade-old post-Marxist discussion, rooted in Latin American labor and civic rights, of “open-economy social democracy” (Roxborough 1992; Castañeda 1993); and sociological specialists on inequality who call for the “high road to globalization” for Latin America, including equity, sustainability, and social-capital initiatives (Korzeniewicz and Smith 2000). There are surprising Latin American cases, such as Costa Rica, which have grasped equality-enhancing environmental and upgrading technological niches in the new global order; there are also the recent successes of Chile, a nation traditionally marked by inequality, in combining export dynamism with poverty-alleviation programs. During Mexico’s post-2000 democratic transition, a devoted capitalist president, supported by key nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), embraced as a path out of Mexico’s persistent inequalities *micro-empresa* experiments reminiscent of those of Peru’s neo-capitalist intellectual Fernando da Soto (de Soto 1986), and gaping Mexican class divisions framed the controversies of the country’s 2006 presidential election. The Brazilian president Lula de Silva’s now second-phase social-democratic experiment is bringing the subject of inequality openly into an expanding public sphere; Bolivia’s centuries-silent have-nots have somehow reached the apex of their wobbly state; whereas in Venezuela inequality

politics dons a more traditional uniform. Inequalities are fueling the early-twenty-first-century return of Left-leaning and nationalist politics to Latin America, but it is unclear how much these new regimes will be able to do to redress the problems that generated them, given the political and economic constraints of the post-1980s global order (Hershberg and Rosen 2006; Drake and Hershberg 2006). But one cannot approach inequalities in the Americas from the dismal standpoint of the region's apparent stubborn social realities alone, in the spirit of "fracaso-mania"—the political economist Albert O. Hirschman's wise lament of Latin American policy fatalism (Hirschman 1972). One must also seek out and embrace emerging ideas, possibilities, or utopistics (Wallerstein 1998) of hope and change.

Shifting Scholarly Paradigms

Much has been said and written about inequality in the Latin American context. In the academy at large, the issue of inequality has suddenly assumed a central urgency: the 2008 Presidential Address of the American Historical Association was titled "Developing Inequality" (Weinstein 2008), the American Anthropological Association meeting of 2007 focused on inequality and difference, and the Latin American Studies Association adopted the keynote theme "Rethinking Inequalities" for its international congress in 2009. For Latin America, inequality may have been the overriding, if rarely explicit, motif of the region since 1492. Scholarly works also point to major omissions: the construction of inequality over long historical transitions, the nonmaterial bases of inequality, and the seemingly indelible politics and cultures of inequality.

In disciplinary terms, economists and political scientists staked out the most explicit studies of inequality and are among the most methodologically conservative of social-science researchers. During the mid-twentieth century, economics discourse on inequality was dominated by debate of the "Kuznets curve": the notion that developing countries faced a necessary trade-off between accumulation (or growth) and distribution. The policy lesson, taken all too well in Latin America, was that countries should throw themselves into rapid, large-scale development and only later worry about equity. In today's era of waning neoliberalism, paradoxically, an opposing view has emerged; investments in social and human capital or in democratic and micro-institutions are now believed to potentially spur economic growth. In part this reflects better knowledge, since no strong correlations