

INVISIBLE INEQUALITY IN LATIN AMERICA

“THE POOR WANTS TO
REMAIN POOR, I THINK THAT
THAT’S THE POINT.”

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INEQUALITY IN LATIN AMERICA has several peculiarities. Inequality is a persistent character, which has its roots in the colonial time and finds continuity in the subsequent construction and consolidation of the national state. During this time, there have been cultural elements that reproduce inequalities, giving legitimacy to the interactions between unequal subjects. In that sense, we can say that one aspect of inequality in Latin America is the constant reproduction of persistent stereotypes about the Indian, the black, poor and female.

Inequality in Latin America is not only present in the scandalous digits: is a landscape in which we live daily and, for this reason, sometimes it becomes invisible. There are 500 years of history that structure the horror, indifference or compassion that causes us the situations around. Many of these situations become invisible for us: some are victims who deserve to be helped, others just numbers or just part of everyday Latin American landscape. Thus, the struggle against inequality in Latin America is also a struggle to be considered worthy of compassion, help or indignation.

LOOKING INTO THE INVISIBLE INEQUALITY

As an example of this phenomenon, here I present some of the findings of my research on perceptions of social stratification in the Chilean case, particularly on the perceptions that middle class establish about the "poor" subject.¹ During this research we selected 35 people differentiated by occupation, income levels and trajectories of social mobility, which were tested with an interview. In this interview, they were inquired about what they considered distinctive about their social position and what they considered typical of



other actors in the social world: the elite and the "poor", as well as aspects of legitimation or tolerance to inequalities in Chilean society. The purpose was to observe what was behind the idea of poverty/wealth and how that impacted on the reproduction of inequality, framing the interactions of individuals in the everyday space. This question was urgent on one of the most unequal societies in the region, where the concentration of wealth in few hands has been relatively constant, with an increasing gap in recent decades.

The results of this research were marked by negative images of poverty. In all analysed middle class participants was verified the construction of negative images about poverty, linked to apathy, ignorance and lack of habits. The negativity of the images was aligned with the findings of poverty studies in Latin American, but it was shocking the fact that the subjects involved in an upward social mobility –i.e. coming from households of working-class origin or poor working class- were those who showed a more negative perception of these groups. Among these, there was a vision of the poor subject marked by three attributes, all negative: *no project and ambition, lack of education and carelessness body*.

These three elements informed the interactions of middle-class participants with whom they considered poor. Ultimately, this unveils the everyday discrimination that establishes serious obstacles to the possibilities of subjects to break the cycle of poverty. Furthermore, the participants accounted for poverty in terms of *individual responsibility*, thus reinforcing tolerance to social inequality. When being asked about their relatively privileged position over these subjects, the interviewed relied in notions of motivation or individual ambition to explain deprivation. For instance, one participant said: "The poor wants to remain poor, I think that that's the point. Because if you observe a poor, poor has the same things that a worker, because it has free health, has benefits for free, has money that gives the state,

so to them life is easy and they haven't got the ability to understand that the way is studying, so they let the children do what they want, because he is going to be provided all and everything will be easy for him" (Interview Case 3, Management / Supervisor, High income).

THE BODY OF THE POVERTY. MARKS AND DISCRIMINATION.

The dynamics of structured discrimination become particularly stark if we consider the corporal phenomenon. During the analysis process, it was possible to note that an important part of the negative narratives about poverty are condensed into a story about some "marks" in the corporal dimension: visible signals into the body which like landmarks in a map guided the subjects and placed the other in a particular position in the social space: this marks shows in a symbolic way who they are and where they come from. But in contrast to the signals of a map these do not have a fixed meaning and the subjects themselves often do not know they carry them: the corporality of an individual is full of these signals, which others understand and in front of which they structure their reactions. In the case of poverty, all middle class participants in the study developed a strong corporal description of 'the poor' defined by four elements: colour tan skin, dark straight hair, small size and overweight.

These corporal elements were not only outlined by a negative connotation in terms of models of beauty, but this negativity was linked with an specific group: the indigenous peoples. The first three corporal attributes condensed what the subject called "a native genetic," referring to marks that carried the specific subject, but also inscribed him on a certain group in the framework of a long-term historical trajectory of subordination. These corporal attributes are thus better interpreted as perceptions constructed in and inherited from the colonial period, recreated and re-actualized daily in contemporary Chile.

In the last corporal attribute, overweight, revealed



a notion of a general carelessness as an indicator of an apathetic attitude that accounts for poverty. The image of the poor "fat" extracted from this research is opposed to the classic image of poverty as lack of food, where the compassion of the subjects is set in motion immediately. In the case of these images of the poverty, overweight is linked not only to the apathetic attitude of the poor in front of his/her physicality, but also to the attitude they have against their own chances of escaping poverty, levels of discipline and care. A particularly eloquent vision of the link after these ideas of corporality and the legitimization of certain positions of subordination was observed when this "carelessness" of the body is linked to elements linked to reproduction and female sexuality. A significant example of this can be seen in this participant: "Poor women have many children; they have no job, too much legal problems, children of several parents. It seems that these women are polygamous. That's because they don't make it, they can't get out of the poverty" (Interview Case 28, professional, median income). This "carelessness" would be the origin of the reproduction of poverty for the subject;

therefore such judgments must be addressed and counteracted.

TOWARDS MORE EGALITARIAN SOCIETIES

To summarise, the results of my PhD research might signal the need to study into depth the cultural, everyday dimension behind the process of reproduction of inequality in Latin America. It is key to intervene and modify these frameworks of meaning in order to make progress in recent discussions on equality that exists in the region. Thus it is necessary to seriously consider challenging socially solidified classifications, construction of groups and names as an integral part of efforts to build more egalitarian societies. That is just the beginning of the great challenge of Latin America (and the world?) today: the disarticulation of persistent inequalities and the building of truly inclusive societies.

NOTES:

1. This article is based on research work of the author to obtain the degree of Doctor of Sociology, Lateinamerika-Institut, Freie Universität Berlin. 2013.

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