

## Ingrid Wehr/Hans-Jürgen Burchardt [Hrsg.]: Soziale Ungleichheiten in Lateinamerika: Neue Perspektiven auf Wirtschaft, Politik und Umwelt

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Review: *Paul Talcott*

◆ This volume conducts theory-driven inquiry into the difficulty of reducing longstanding disparities in Latin America among social groups in income, access to education, health and other resources. One of the important contributions of this volume is to bring to bear the full breadth of literature from comparative politics, political economy and regional studies on Latin America on empirical realities in policy areas including taxes, health, welfare, education, labor markets as well as analytical categories including gender, race, environmental awareness, and comparative capitalism. The contributions also balance each other unusually well for an edited volume.

While the regional focus is clear, nearly all contributions anchor their analysis in discourses which extend beyond Latin America, demonstrating the productive interaction between discipline-based studies and area studies, whether through in-depth application of Claus Offe’s relational social analysis to the region (Weinmann/Burchardt), gender dynamics (Oettler), welfare state theory (Wehr: 257ff), or varieties of capitalism (Noelke: 137-42; Schneider et. al: 175). While the theoretical starting points have roots in Western European cases, they do help bring Latin American examples into the broader project of building more general theories. In particular, the regional distinctiveness of Latin America provides a stark contrast to expectations drawn from Europe concerning reductions in inequality that accompanied democratization (Wehr:

14). Moreover, the complexity of regional history and the limits of the nation-state concept (Wehr: 24) for understanding the origins and contours of conflicts over inequality render the identification of a single external or internal source of inequality impossible. Most of the other chapters, therefore, delve appropriately into cross-cutting approaches or specific policy areas to shed light on the phenomena of persistent inequality.

Deep empirical studies into factors that could mitigate or reinforce social equality demonstrate the vital importance of specific knowledge of languages, history, and culture(s) in districts, countries and regions. Studies of indigenous movements (Ernst) and other recent social mobilizations (Tittor), labor markets (Karcher) and education (Peters) complement nuanced statistical descriptions of differences in the region, and over time, for health care (Tittor), taxes (Boeckh), and composite measures of inequality (Schneider et. al., Barozet). Understandably, when engaging clear problems of the magnitude of social inequality in Latin America, and in the face of data problems, the authors go beyond a causal analysis and make prescriptions for both analytical and practical changes to better understand and to mitigate the distinctive social disparities among people in Latin American countries. One author, Emmanuelle Barozet, develops an innovative multidimensional technique for measuring social inequality in Chile (Barozet: 321) with wide potential appli-

cability, not just in Latin America. This is another positive example of how empirically grounded research in a region brings portable expectations into the global discourse.

An additional analytical challenge facing this volume is to explain why something did not occur. The choice of a historical institutional approach (Wehr: 19) is therefore quite relevant, since the persistence of social inequalities under radically different political and economic conditions throws doubt on the usefulness of purely political or economic approaches by themselves. Particularly for proponents of the new left governments, the level of disappointment in the potential of politics in the face of entrenched social, political and economic conditions is quite high (see Ernst: 64), and due to the high role of the informal sector, even in the effects of welfare state policies normally associated with left power (Wehr: 274). History, however, is also not stable: reinterpretations and even nostalgic celebration of core elements of power and inequality such as the apparatus of the *hacienda*, and its reinforcement by international cultural tourism both demonstrate its pan-regional resonance (Kaltmeier: 40-41) and the complicated task for confronting contemporary inequality.

The contributions of this volume are particularly insightful in nuanced understandings of why even improvements in democratic processes or participation by social movements do not mean that policy will change quickly. One explanation advanced by Boeckh concerning tax policy provides a sobering underside to the very real electoral democracy that has taken root in many Latin American countries: frequent regime change, even by democratic means, makes the establishment of a long-term social contract quite difficult, particularly

in the context of popular distrust that the state would use tax income wisely (86). Another significant ambivalent finding is that even when labor movements are successful in fighting off neo-liberal reforms that would increase inequality, in this case in access to health care, their own success as an organization brings with it a range of incentives that center more on protecting union interests than on improving public health or access for all (Titto: 251).

Taken together, this volume advances considerably the understanding of the state of the art of inequality research in Latin America, in its broader theoretical context. Due to the limited space in book chapters, the empirical chapters were not all able to address a matched set of cases across time, countries, or policy sectors. Yet in the design of this volume as a whole, and its empirical, analytical, and theoretical diversity, scholars working on inequality will find it a useful spur to careful thinking about this vital issue from a wide range of analytical approaches. ♦