



Research Concept of *desiguALdades.net*

This brief overview on the main guiding research questions and objectives of *desiguALdades.net* serves as an orientation for scholarship applicants for developing projects in line with the network's research foci. The projects proposed by scholarship applicants shall explicitly address transregional dimensions and interdependencies of phenomena of social inequality in Latin America. Once they have been selected, doctoral students and postdoctoral researchers will closely work together with experienced international researchers from the network.

For further information see <http://www.desigualdades.net/>

desiguALdades.net is an international, interdisciplinary, and multi-institutional research network. It addresses phenomena of social inequalities that are embedded into transregional social configurations and that need to be analyzed within theoretical and methodological frameworks going beyond the nation state. By putting the emphasis on the interdependencies between different world regions, *desiguALdades.net* aims at overcoming the methodological nationalisms that until now have dominated research on social inequality.

From such a perspective, Latin America is a highly interesting and relevant region to be studied. First of all, Latin America has been characterized by severe and highly persisting forms of social, economic, and cultural inequalities throughout its history. Simultaneously, the subcontinent as a whole and the phenomena of social inequality in particular are affected by profound dynamics of transregionalization, related to different phases of globalization.

Last but not least, it is the dynamism of Latin American research on social inequality itself that makes Latin America a privileged region for developing a network on transregional phenomena of social inequalities. Concepts such as *dependencia* and marginalization contributed significantly to a global debate on interdependent social inequalities. Today, new perspectives on social inequalities are being developed in Latin American social sciences. On a theoretical level, they combine structure and power-oriented approaches as well as knowledge- and culture-oriented approaches in order to overcome dualisms of structure and agency. The current Latin American debates focus on (1) the phenomenon of ongoing persistence and even accentuation of socio-economic inequalities despite a general economic growth, (2) a shift from a purely economic understanding of social inequality towards one that acknowledges the multiple forms of power asymmetry by integrating non-economic dimensions of social inequality, such as culture, ethnicity, 'race', and gender, and (3) the link between the question of social inequality and the growing relevance of environmental issues for social inequalities at a global level. *desiguALdades.net* aims at connecting these different research lines within a comprehensive research design on interdependent social inequalities in Latin America.

Whereas Latin American social sciences are well known for being highly receptive to theoretical traditions and developments of German and European social sciences, the new perspectives on social inequalities developed by Latin American social scientists, have so far only been marginally taken into account in German debates on social inequality. German research traditions on social inequalities have for a long time played a leading role in debates on social inequality and have contributed main theoretical frameworks for the analysis of social inequality: economy-oriented class analysis (Marx), concepts of social stratification



related to status and prestige (Weber, Dahrendorf, Geiger), and approaches on processes of de-proletarianization and nivellation (Schelsky). Nowadays, the debate is even more diversified, including approaches on social milieus, lifestyles, individualization, and social fields. While emphasizing the multidimensional configurations of social inequalities and proposing a systematic analytical combination of structure and power, the global dimensions of social inequality have been rather neglected by German social scientists.

It is a major objective of *desiguALdades.net* to promote a systematic transatlantic dialogue between these two epistemic communities. Thus, the basic impetus of *desiguALdades.net* is not only to push for a paradigmatic shift in the research on social inequalities by including transregional interdependencies, but also to create networks and interlinkages between different, formerly separated or only loosely connected research threads. This will contribute to the development of new theoretical and methodological perspectives on social inequalities.

Central Research Questions and Dimensions

desiguALdades.net is guided by two central research questions:

- (1) To what extent is the distribution of resources and the access to aspired social positions in Latin America shaped by global and transregional interdependencies, in addition to local, regional, and national ones?
- (2) To what extent does the embeddedness of social inequalities into transregional interdependencies create enduring power differences and unequal opportunities for the social, economic, and political participation of the respective individuals, communities, or societies?

In order to work on these two central questions, *desiguALdades.net* analytically differentiates between three distinct dimensions of social inequality: socio-economic inequalities (Research Dimension I), socio-political inequalities (Research Dimension II), and socio-ecological inequalities (Research Dimension III). In the beginning, research in the network will be organized according to these three dimensions, providing the network with a clear structure. In the course of the project, however, the analytical separation between the three dimensions will be given up in favor of a comprehensive perspective, focusing on the systematic interdependencies between the different dimensions of social inequality.

The research on **socio-economic dimensions of social inequalities** (Research Dimension I) takes a clear structural perspective. The basic approaches derive from political economics and sociology. However, the interdisciplinary design of *desiguALdades.net* explicitly welcomes contributions from history and legal studies as well.

The research on **socio-political dimensions of social inequalities** (Research Dimension II) takes a pronounced power-analytical perspective while addressing (trans)regional representations, experiences, and negotiation processes of social inequalities. This perspective is mainly inspired by contributions from political sciences, sociology, ethnology, social anthropology, history, and legal studies.

The research on **socio-ecological dimensions of social inequalities** (Research Dimension III) looks at the environment as the prism of social inequalities influenced by



transregional interdependencies (as it is, for example, the case with soybean production or globalized mining). The analysis of power and knowledge as pursued by approaches within social anthropology, human geography, and sociology is at the core of this research dimension.

Emphasizing the transregional interdependencies of social inequalities, each research dimension will be confronted with theoretical and methodological challenges. These will be systematically addressed in the **Cross-cutting Research Dimension: Theory and Methodology**. Here, research will focus on new temporal configurations of social inequalities, be they synchronic or diachronic, as well as on new spatial configurations, be they local, national, regional, or global. The aim of the fourth research dimension is to systematize translocal and transregional entanglements in the field of social inequalities. On a methodological level, the fourth research dimension aims at developing new research designs and methodological approaches for analyzing transregional flows and connections that shape local phenomena of social inequality in Latin America such as multi-sited research, comparative research, or global ethnography. These approaches must be able to systematically integrate both structure- as well as agency-related dimensions of globalization and transregionalization. This will be realized by an active participation of all three other research dimensions and all disciplines involved in the network.

Research projects of doctoral students and of postdocs should contribute directly to one or more of the four research dimensions. In the following the research program of the respective research dimension shall be spelled out in detail to give some examples for possible research projects.

Research Dimension I: Socio-Economic Inequalities

- **Socio-economic inequalities in a globalized economy:** Since colonization, Latin America has always been part of an interdependent global economy. However, its position in the system of international division of labor has changed significantly throughout the course of its 'entangled history'. Besides research on the historical dimension, we focus on the recent reorganization of world trade. In many cases, this has led to an increase of socio-economic inequalities and to new interdependencies between economic processes in different world regions. Due to this reorganization, Latin America is integrated again into the global economy mainly as a provider of natural resources, carrying specific risks as well as opportunities to different social groups. In addition, new transregional interdependencies emerge, such as transpacific socio-economic interdependencies, constituting new systems of transregional inclusion and exclusion.
- **Socio-economic inequalities and financial crises:** Instabilities of the (global) financial markets have shaped the region's patterns of inequality to a significant extent. The continent looks back on a long history of financial crises, the current global financial crisis just being one of them. Financial crises have contributed to the high volatility of growth and income as well as to relatively low long-term growth rates when compared internationally. In that perspective, economic crises have strengthened the persistence and increase of poverty and inequality in Latin America.



- **Socio-economic inequalities and liberalization:** Latin America in the past decades has served as a laboratory for radical market-oriented reforms, with strong liberalization towards domestic and international markets. In this regard, one example of interdependent inequalities to be studied are price increases for relevant consumer goods and services in the context of foreign direct investments, causing a significant increase in costs especially for poorer households.
- **Interdependent flows due to migration and remittances:** While Latin America has been a continent for immigration for centuries, the recent enormous 'export' of migrants towards industrialized countries has caused a significant transnational redistribution in the last decades. This redistribution includes a large inflow of financial transfers with highly mixed effects, but also social remittances, understood as a complex set of ideas, practices, identities, and social capital. Both play a central role in reshaping local, communal, and individual configurations of social inequality. At the same time, migration can also be understood as part of the formation of new transnational production chains. Family economies for example are transnationalized through their integration in transnational care economies, in which (mostly female) migrants from Latin America and other low income countries take over care work within families of high income countries.

Research Dimension II: Socio-Political Inequalities

- **Social inequality and construction of otherness:** Since colonization, social exclusion in Latin America has been based on the construction of cultural, ethnic, and racialized otherness. Categories such as *indio*, *mestizo*, *mulato*, and *criollo*, as well as racialized gender and class constructs are at the core of social segregation and stratification processes, defining the position of different population groups in the social field. Moreover, these ethnicized, racialized, and genderized categories have influenced socially exclusive policies on education, welfare, urban development, poverty reduction, and the law, implemented by state and non-state actors. At the same time, however, these discriminating categories have been appropriated and positively redefined by social movements and form today the symbolic and discursive basis for new political identities and protests against social inequalities. It is obvious that these categories have been formed within complex transregional and global discursive spaces. It has to be asked how these globally constituted categories are negotiated in Latin America at local and regional level and how these negotiations shape processes of social segregation and exclusion.
- **Welfare state, social movements, and citizenship:** In Europe, working-class movements and other social movements have successfully worked towards the institutionalization of social and urban projects. In the twentieth century, social guarantees were created, national legislations complemented with social legislations, and important welfare state institutions established. In contrast, in Latin America social movements were not always powerful enough to integrate their political struggles into the nation building project and could only establish fragile alliances and interfaces with the state. Due to this lack of legally guaranteed economic and social rights, which was further strengthened by the structural adjustment programs and state downsizings since the 1980s, non-governmental actors and organizations,



among them different forms of community and neighbourhood (self-help) organizations and social movements, as well as international and transnational actors are increasingly involved in the delivery of education and other welfare and social services. Among these 'new' actors, a broad range of transnational actors, such as the Catholic Church, new evangelical communities, international think tanks, local/international non-governmental organizations, and transnational networks of migrants have come to play an important role in the negotiation of socio-political rights.

- **Public sphere and global communication:** Articulation and negotiation of inequalities passes through the public sphere. At the same time, access to the public sphere itself is marked by structural inequalities, giving different social groups different possibilities to raise their voice and make it heard. While the concept of public sphere has been developed as linked to the nation state, the increasing globalization of media and in particular the web-based digital technologies with global reach have opened new dimensions for cross-border and transregional articulation. While this should not too rapidly be mistaken for a 'global public sphere', desiguALdades.net will explore how this increased participation of transnational voices impacts on the inequalities in access to the public sphere as well as on the negotiation of inequalities.
- **Global legal structures:** In the late twentieth and the early twenty-first century, Latin America has experienced a wave of formal democratization, accompanied by constitutional reforms and the introduction of new social rights. However, it is questionable whether Latin American nation states have the capacity to actually implement these new rights. In this context, new forms of legal arrangements, which transcend national legal frameworks, increasingly function as legal and discursive sources for claiming rights and entitlements at a local level. This is true for the body of 'negative' civil rights which has been successfully anchored into a global human rights system. But also other, legally more fragile entitlements based for example on charters of social rights and development agendas of national and multilateral organizations increasingly influence globally interdependent legal arrangements. How these entitlements are negotiated locally and regionally and how they affect the inequality between different groups at national and regional level but also between different world regions has not been investigated sufficiently so far. desiguALdades.net puts the research focus on the interdependencies between the changed legal framework, redistributive battles on different levels, and different concepts and practices of citizenship such as *ciudadanía*, a concept that includes not only the complete range of social economic and cultural rights, but additionally integrates a subjective, agency-oriented perspective on rights.
- **State formation and international interventions:** Through the practices and policies of its institutions, the Latin American state has reinforced and frequently perpetuated rather than alleviated existing socio-political inequalities. This is due to the underlying social structures and resources that formed the basis of the regional state formation processes. In such a context, international interventions within the field of development cooperation, humanitarian aid, or transnational security arrangements ever since have had direct consequences for processes of (re)distribution of social, cultural, and economic resources at local level. Such interventions can reduce social cleavages, but may also contribute to their



accentuation or even produce new ones. At the same time, Latin America has served, and still serves, as a laboratory for modernity in which specific political, institutional, and economic concepts and practices are tested and then re-imported.

Research Dimension III: Socio-Ecological Inequalities

- **Environmental conflicts in a globalized economy:** The natural resource question is not a new one for Latin America. Since colonization, Latin America has been the arena of severe conflicts on the access, use, and distribution of natural resources. Today, however, these conflicts have gained a new quality, since an increasingly de-territorialized and interdependent global economy has produced new and more complex settings and processes of actors, institutions and regimes involved in these conflicts. On the one hand, globalization has intensified the competition on scarce natural resources on a global, regional, and local level. For example, Latin America has gained importance as a provider of natural resources (e.g. soybeans, minerals) for the expanding Asian economies with strong impacts on local societies. On the other hand, through global discourses on environmental protection (e.g. climate change, biodiversity) and the transnationalization of indigenous rights, awareness on the cultural and social values of ecosystems has grown. Pressure is raised on national and local governments to protect environments as common goods. Conflicts on globalized mining and tourism are increasing as they put local resource use patterns and resource rights at risk. Key issues are the unequal access to resources and the unequal distribution of resource values and gains. Therefore one research question of the network is whether the increasing transnational interdependencies of resource use lead to an intensification of economic, social, and cultural inequalities at regional and local level.
- **Unequal distribution of environmental risks and environmental costs:** Environmental risks and environmental costs are not socially neutral but have to be understood as the result of both, political and economic structures, regulations, and negotiation processes. At present, they are even literally de-located to less powerful regions and more vulnerable social groups. The social (re)distribution of environmental risks and costs (e.g. local impacts of climate change; agro-export of virtual water and nutrients; local water depletion and land degradation by mining) needs further investigation. Which control mechanisms exist at different political and spatial levels and how do they affect the distribution of environmental risks and costs? It also has to be asked which clashes and social cleavages are related to the exploitation and valorization of natural resources on the one hand, and to the protection against natural catastrophes and the management of environmental risks on the other. On the basis of local case studies, the network wants to analyze the unequal distribution of environmental risks and environmental costs. It also wants to gain a better understanding on the impact growing transnational interdependencies have on the unequal distribution of capabilities to handle environmental risks and recover from natural catastrophes.
- **Socio-ecological inequalities and knowledge:** If environmental problems and debates are seen as socially constructed and as embedded into transregional interdependent configurations of social inequality, power, and knowledge aspects



have to be put to the center of analysis. The geopolitics of knowledge in relation to cultural, social, and economic appropriation of nature are a key issue of the network. For example, the impacts of transnational interdependencies on unequal access to as well as the applicability of environmental knowledge will be studied. Another key issue of the network is how profits, coming from the exploitation of natural resources, are socially distributed according to ethnic, gender, and class lines and how they are spatially distributed on local, regional, and transregional levels. In addition, it will be analyzed how phenomena of social inequality are related to the social imaginary and to cultural practices—mobility, concepts of nature, local practices of using natural resources—of individual and collective social actors.

Cross-cutting Research Dimension: Theory and Methodology

In addition to the three thematic research dimensions, a fourth research focus concentrates on cross-cutting theoretical and methodological questions. The main objectives of the cross-cutting research dimension are a critical examination of:

- **Macro-sociological and historico-comparative approaches** to social inequalities. Especially those approaches have to be critically re-read that explicitly deal with the entangled character of social transformation processes in different world regions, and that highlight both connections and disconnections, junctures and disjunctures in global configurations of social inequalities. Additionally, the focus will be on creatively re-examining works from area and regional studies regarding their potential contribution to research on global interdependencies.
- **Current debates on social inequalities**, particularly of those approaches dealing with the transnationalization of social inequalities, with the aim to extrapolate their concepts of boundary making, social, political, and symbolic inclusion/exclusion, and social transformation.
- **Current debates on social inequalities in Latin America** by elaborating the ways how they integrate the transnational dimension of social inequality. The focus will be on the connections that are drawn between transformation processes on a macro-economic, macro-political, and macro-societal level on the one hand, and the emergence of transnational constellations on the other.

Further objectives of the fourth research dimensions are:

- **The elaboration of a theoretical and methodological framework** that is able to adequately grasp both the global and the historical dimensions of social inequalities in Latin America. A central question that needs to be addressed is how Latin America's particular position within global socio-economic and political contexts relates to the persistence and even to the growth of extreme forms of social inequalities.
- **A critical reflection on the basic categories of sociological thought and their methodological implications.** The notion of society, as used for a long time, has been related intimately to the idea of the unity of a territorially bounded nation state, a population living within this territory, and their distinctive and shared cultural identity and expressions. This 'container concept' of society has been challenged by the



changes that globalization has brought about for the constitution of social formations and processes of identity construction. But also other concepts such as upward and downward social mobility as well as social inclusion and exclusion turned out to be based on problematic assumptions. They have mainly focused on formal sector employment, private property, and individual rights, thus having a specific gender, class, and ethnic bias. *desiguALdades.net* takes up the challenge of deconstructing the methodological nationalisms and the different biases inherent in these concepts for adequately describing and analyzing transnational, transregional, and multidimensional interdependencies of social inequality in Latin America.

desiguALdades.net
Research Network on Interdependent Inequalities in Latin America
c/o Zentralinstitut Lateinamerika-Institut
Freie Universität Berlin
Rüdesheimer Str. 54-56
D-14197 Berlin, Germany
Tel. ++49 (0)30-838-53069
Email: contacto@desiguALdades.net
<http://www.desiguALdades.net/>