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## **The Untold Battlefields Against Inequality in Latin America**

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In the introduction to his most recent book, Göran Therborn lays out his intellectual and existential commitment to make knowledge a means for mobilizing hearts and minds in the arduous but urgent task of successfully facing the *killing fields of inequality*. First, he says, it must be understood as a global and multidimensional phenomenon of lethal potency. Yes, “inequality kills” is the opener to the first chapter, setting the tone for a work that the author labels “civic intervention sustained by empirical evidence” (p. 35). In fact, the book is a quasi-manifesto interrogating us from start to finish, demanding that we take an unambiguous, definitive stance as we cross the many battlefields against inequality.

He starts by asking: “if you don’t agree with the current state of inequality, what institutions have to be changed first of all? What social forces can you hope for, and join if you should want?” (p. 5). The reader’s perplexity must be as profound as the author’s line of questioning is uncommon. How to respond, if this is a matter of rather absorbing Therborn’s uncomfortable, incisive, and consistent revelations, laid out in a vast and diverse array of information where indignation and rigor are interwoven in the use of data and its interpretation?

The book must not be misunderstood: what this book is not is a pure exercise of enlightenment, though it wields a whetted saber against our profound ignorance of contemporaneous processes and moments at which equality prevailed or was subjugated.

The tacit objective of Therborn’s book, meticulously plotted over nearly 200 pages, is to buffet the apathy that consumes us, seeking to feed our aversion to inequality and sweep us towards a commitment to equalization (p. 4). To that end, he also indicates a few paths forward. Unquestionably the work’s greatest achievement, however, lies in its disentangling of the different mechanisms that fuel inequality, be it vital, existential or resource-based. Therborn does this with such didactic accuracy that we feel at home with his concepts and categories.

His definition of inequality is drawn from Amartya Sen, but recontextualized and enlarged. “Inequalities are violations of human rights preventing people from full human development” (p. 41). This is, no doubt, a very powerful and straightforward statement of meaning, one that is easy to take up. Bit by bit, doubts fade and there comes a growing understanding of the gravity, urgency, and relevance of the problem

Therborn is setting before us; moreover, we find ourselves increasingly inclined to respond to his call.

Now, those who have followed his trajectory and learned with him are intimately familiar with the many facets of his intellectual fingerprint: he is an internationalist at heart, able to wield comparative approaches that combine conceptual refinement with genuine empirical experience; a masterful craftsman in dealing with intersectionalities, the hierarchies of which are not rigid and thus challenge the deconstruction of inequalities; an intellectual dedicated to tackling the minefield of misleading commonplaces on the topic, formulating impeccable, markedly unconventional theoretical frameworks that recast worn-out themes sapped of their ability to mobilize the “fellow citizens of the world”; an astute activist for whom “strength and struggle” (p. 142) are unavoidable ingredients in attempts to overthrow inequalities. As he puts it: “The deconstruction of inequalities will ultimately depend on the strength and the skills of the forces of equality” (p.159).

At times of austere orthodox models, the simplicity and efficacy that Therborn presents speak to his joviality, the unmistakable mark of a nonconformist. Another characteristic of his, and which calls for a brief but heartfelt homage, is his recognition of the centrality of feminist thought and struggle in the construction of a more egalitarian world, especially in the last third of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In this, Therborn set himself apart from many of his contemporaries in academia, for whom recognition did not necessarily mean incorporation. He chose to do so, and has done so with generosity and precision.

After recalling that “inequalities are produced and sustained socially by systemic arrangements and processes, and by distributive action, either individual as well as collective” (p. 55), Therborn identifies four major mechanisms – also cumulative in their mode of operation – that produce and reproduce inequalities: distancing, exploitation, exclusion, and hierarchization. By the same token, he acknowledges that for each of them there is an antidote which may counteract and rectify their pernicious consequences. To distancing corresponds approximation; to exploitation, redistribution and/or rehabilitation; for exclusion, the equality mechanism is inclusion; and for hierarchization, de-hierarchization.

He also acknowledges that “inclusion is perhaps the most widespread of equality mechanisms. It is intrinsic to the modern nation-state, which entitles its citizens, and normally also its permanent residents, to certain rights and public services” (p. 64-5). Inclusion consists of enforcing membership for those previously excluded, democratizing access, and combating stigmatization, a marker of exclusion.

In his view, these four equalization mechanisms were largely behind the dismantling of existential inequality, a major human advance in the recent past. Income (resource) inequality and vital inequality, in contrast, have not made similar strides worldwide (2013:145).

Therborn highlights Latin America as one of the regions to achieve significant progress in the recent past, especially in terms of the existential equalization “of indigenous peoples, of women, and of Afro-descendants, above all” (2015:25). Despite the fact that “the Latin American hour” (2015:14) seems bound to fade as a result of the commodities downswing, Therborn’s organizing categories may help us reflect upon the dynamics of inclusion set in motion in Latin America as of late. If inequality is about excluding people from the possibilities produced by human development, then it seems fair to say that the Latin American outlook is still quite bleak.

### **1. Mechanisms of (In)Equality in Motion in Latin America: Controversies**

Not too long ago, Latin America was the flavor of the month. Against the global tide of deepening socioeconomic disparities, the continent – although still topping the rankings of inequality – harbored hopes of becoming a role model on many fronts, particularly, but not exclusively, regarding existential equalization. Resource inequality was another field in which Latin America stood for the promise of inclusive economic growth, breaking with a long tradition of the marginalization of the working classes and minorities in terms of progress and well-being.

In the Andes, countries like Ecuador (2008) and Bolivia (2009) redefined themselves as plurinational entities, shedding the homogeneous nation-state as inherited from European notions of modernity. Their Constitutions not only recognize the plurality of political nations that comprise the state, but also adopt Indigenous concepts of Sumak Kawsay (living well, or *buen vivir*), thus accounting for a diversity of ways of life. Ecuador’s Constitution was a milestone in terms of environmental rights, the first in the world to recognize the rights of nature and the human right to water. Nature became a subject with rights, a move all the more significant in a place with a centuries-long tradition of extractivism as the key to an international insertion rooted in the commodification of nature and expropriation from Indigenous peoples. Extractivism’s days seemed numbered.

On the other hand, extreme destitution was addressed through conditional cash transfer programs, which were put into place in nearly all the countries of the region with almost no exceptions. For the first time, the poor were recognized by the State and included on a large scale by public programs aimed at extinguishing monetary deficits and vulnerabilities. These programs’ low cost and high impact, as they incorporated tens of millions of people into the consumer market who had previously been living largely on a subsistence basis, seemed to indicate that the domestic market would overcome its internal barriers, take on new scope and scale, and drive a new virtuous cycle of development. Thus would the worst-off escape from the segregation and stigmatization that had condemned them to second-class citizenship.

The return of economic growth, after a decade of stagnation followed by another of high volatility and uncertainty, revitalized the job market in the 2000s: informality dipped and opportunities swiftly multiplied, contributing significantly to a marked drop in poverty. Regulating mechanisms such as the minimum wage leveraged distribution in a

good many countries, acting decisively to push down income inequality. The rise in formal employment and average income indicated that structural heterogeneity, a hallmark of the region, was on its way to being overcome, thus promoting greater social cohesion and more homogenous patterns of consumption. The *myth of economic development*, in the phrase coined by Furtado (1974), now seemed a part of the past, with the present inaugurating a new model – that of Latin American exceptionalism.

Novelties in terms of social protection – such as *renta dignidad* (“dignity income”) in Bolivia or the return of public (PAYG) pensions in many countries where they had been replaced by fully-funded individual accounts – suggested that the incompleteness and weakness of welfare systems would be remedied. Social spending gradually grew, bringing with it optimistic prospects for equalization via an increase in schooling and greater access to colleges. Healthcare systems and housing policies drew some public investment. It seemed only a matter of time before the ascendant curve on this sort of spending would take on new dimensions.

All this was taking place under democratically elected governments, demonstrably progressive and in line with a South-South perspective. Three women occupied their countries’ highest posts in Brazil, Argentina, and Chile, signaling that the patriarchy – so deeply rooted in everyday gestures and social relations – might be definitively routed.

The balance, beyond being positive across the board, justified Therborn’s question as to whether “equalization efforts [would] keep their momentum” (2015:26) in Latin America. This was not a sure bet, given the characteristics of the inclusion process along this decade of progress and a discreet attenuation of inequalities. These are structural traits that inequality measures do not always grasp. Similarly, we might ask what sort of “economic inequality has gone down” in the region, since none of its tax reforms were effectively redistributive (Valdéz 2015).

Drawing on Therborn’s method, I have gathered data to support my line of argument.

## **2. Should Processes of Inclusion, De-Hierarchization and Rehabilitation Lead to Criminalization?**

### **2.1. Indigenous Resistance Criminalized**

In a radical rupture with the colonial State, Andean countries refounded their constitutions and adopted plurinationality. Bolivia elected an Indigenous president; Ecuador’s constitution has over 25 articles defining collective rights, including rights to self-determination and prior consultation for projects on Indigenous territories. In practice, however, governments have expanded concessions to extractive industries without Indigenous consent. Indigenous resistance to extractivism has resulted in violent criminalization, and even death.

The Observatory of Mining Conflicts in Latin America (OCMAL) estimates that there are 195 active conflicts due to large-scale mining. Peru and Chile have 34 and 33, respectively, with 28 in Mexico, 26 in Argentina, and 20 in Brazil. Mega-mining alone affects nearly 300 communities, many located on Indigenous territories. In Ecuador, over 200 people have been criminalized as of 2015, mostly Indigenous leaders defending water rights. In Peru an estimated 200 activists were killed between 2006 and 2011 for resisting extractivism (Zibechi 2013). Indigenous peoples constitute only 5% of the world population, but they account for nearly half of environmental homicides globally. According to Global Witness, about two environmental activists were murdered per week in 2014; 40% of them were Indigenous.

The challenge is that extractivism is – yet again - largely taking place on Indigenous land. For instance, the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues reported that Colombian mining concessions had been awarded in 80% of the country's legally recognized Indigenous territories in 2010.

Yet conflicts against extractivism should not be dismissed as matters pertaining solely to Indigenous peoples. They reveal the continuous role of extractivism in Latin American politics and contest a development model based on the corporatization of natural resources. Patterns of intensive and unregulated exploitation of natural resources, far from overturning a historical trend, have accentuated dependency on extractivism, leading to the multiplication and worsening of conflicts over land and water use. The most immediate result of this, derived from decades-long concessions on Indigenous land granted to multinational mining companies (mostly based in China or Canada) has been the reproduction of the colonial model in treating such holdings as *terra nullis*, once again expropriating those recently included in the realm of civic rights, as well violent repression and the criminalizing of Indigenous resistance (Picq 2015).

In Brazil the picture is even bleaker. As we read in the 2014 CIMI Report on Violence Against Indigenous People in Brazil, “unfortunately, despite the surmounting of the military dictatorship, violence against those peoples was only updated and heightened. Genocide and ethnocide are still happening in Brazil, well into the 21st century” (p. X). The report indicates a surge in human rights violations in general and suicide and murder cases in particular. In 2014, there were 135 suicides, most of them committed by young people. A look at records from between 2000 and 2014 in the State of Mato Grosso alone reveals the alarming number of 707 suicides. As for murders, in 2014, 138 were reported on the grounds of land conflicts. Most occurred as an attempt to curb Indigenous resistance. One emblematic case was the brutal homicide of young leader Marinalva Kaiowá. She lived in a tarp encampment on the fringes of a land that her community has been trying to get back for over 40 years. Marinalva was stabbed 35 times, two weeks after she had been to the Federal Supreme Court (STF) in Brasilia to protest a court ruling that annulled the process of demarcation of the Guyraroká Indigenous Lands.

Public power is equally remiss to the point of cruelty in terms of the provision of public services and the welfare of native populations, particularly on the score of healthcare. “Official data point to the shocking number of at least 785 deaths of children aged 0-5. The most alarming situations took place in Xavante villages, with 116 deaths of children aged 0-5, and among the Yanomami, with 46 records of deaths of children aged 0-1. As for the Xavantes, child mortality reached over 141.4 for each thousand born and a similar ratio is on record in Altamira, in the state of Pará, where the child mortality ratio reached 141.84 deaths for each thousand” (p. 15). Meanwhile, the average infant mortality rate for Brazil dropped from 29.02 per 1,000 in 2000 to 14.40 in 2014 and was celebrated as a huge achievement by a “left-wing” government.<sup>1</sup>

The State’s omission and delays in land regulation have also led to growing and damaging conflicts over territorial rights and the protection of a balanced environment. Federal-led ratification of Indigenous lands has fallen steadily since the Cardoso administration, when 145 came through over the course of his two terms (1995-2002). Under Lula (2003-2010), this number was cut by almost half (79), only to drop to 11 during Dilma’s first term (2011-2014) (Cimi Report 2014:43). Demarcation of Indigenous lands has been shut down. Even previously demarcated territories are systematically invaded by agribusiness; the expansion of soy and cattle on Indigenous territories is feeding a devastating death toll. The Kaiowa-Guarani have a homicide rate nearly 500 times higher than the Brazilian average, exceeding that of countries at war.

Beatings, humiliation, racist practices and intimidation are commonplace, to say nothing of degrading living conditions either in confined areas or in temporary encampments. As I write, Brazil’s Commission for Justice and Citizenship in the Chamber of Deputies, given over to the most conservative sectors of the country,<sup>2</sup> has just passed a bill (PEC 215/00) that transfers the right to recognize Indigenous lands, conservation units, and *quilombola* descendent communities from the executive branch to the Congress. This would freeze 228 demarcations of Indigenous lands, and appears to be unconstitutional. In the words of Deputy Molon in his critique of the bill, pending Congressional approval, “a bloodbath is to be expected.” This law is designed, in short, to pursue an even more aggressive expropriation of Indigenous lands.

Rights only exist if they are practiced, claim leaders of the Confederation of Kichwa Peoples in Ecuador (ECUARUNARI). Self-determination was established in international treaties such as ILO Convention No. 169 and the 2007 United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, then adopted in national law, but in practice neither governments nor multinational corporations respect Indigenous rights. The extraction of metals like silver and gold since colonial times has now expanded to crude, monoculture (soy), and intensive agriculture (especially cattle).

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<sup>1</sup> <http://brasilemsintese.ibge.gov.br/populacao/taxas-de-mortalidade-infantil.html>

<sup>2</sup> The three major caucuses in Brazil’s Congress, or the “Three Bs,” are: *boi* (cattle, for the rural caucus), Bible (the evangelicals), and bullet (those who support unlimited access to firearms and harsher punishments for crimes).

The Latin American economy's return to a dependence on raw materials is visible in their outsized role in total exports. According to ECLAC's 2014 Statistical Yearbook, in 2013 they stood at: 66.9% in the Argentine case; 63.6% for Brazil; 96% for Bolivia; 86.1% in the case of Chile; 93.3% for Ecuador; 75.6% for Uruguay, and 97.6% for Venezuela. In Peru, mineral exploration expenditures increased tenfold in a decade. In 2002, 7.5 million hectares had been granted to mining companies; by 2012 that figure had jumped to almost 26 million, or 20% of the country's land. About 40% of the land is licensed to or being solicited by multinational companies for mineral and crude mining projects (PBI 2011). According to OCMAL, 25% of Chile's territory was under exploration or operation as of 2010. Mexico's government opened the state-controlled energy sector to foreign investment, changing legislation to allow private multinationals to tap the country's oil and natural gas resources for the first time since 1938.

What all this indicates is that – at least in Latin America – when it comes to the recognition and application of the letter of the law as a safeguard for Indigenous rights, mechanisms of existential equalization are far from promoting more “autonomy, dignity, degrees of freedom and of rights to respect and self-development” (p. 49). Existential inequalities continue to run deep, and have been neglected since the development model of late has fallen back on a commodity export-based basis for growth. Still worse, they severely aggravate vital inequality for minorities, who seemed to finally be benefiting from a more promising, reparative legal context. In practice, the violation of Indigenous humans rights remains the rule.

### **1.1.Existential equality still denied to women**

Women have also been criminalized, despite their education levels being on the rise and superior to those of men, their marked participation in the job market, their role in generating household wealth and welfare, and despite constituting a considerable part of the so-called new middle class, whose tendencies and values ought to prioritize respect for individual liberties. None of this has brought broad and definitive recognition of their right to control their bodies in case of undesired pregnancy, through access to safe and free abortion.

According to the “Investigación sobre Aborto en América Latina y el Caribe,” the region has seen the highest estimated rate of unsafe abortions in the world (2015:20). Since abortions are generally clandestine, estimates say that a million women are hospitalized per year across the continent for complications resulting from high-risk abortions. In Brazil alone, for example, the public, universal-access Unified Health System (SUS) treats over 220,000 women every year for curettage-related complications post-abortion, whether the result of miscarriages or – as is the case with the majority – unsafe procedures.

Given the need for clandestinity, estimates of deaths resulting from unsafe abortions are difficult to measure.

The Latin American territories where the voluntary interruption of pregnancy is legal and guaranteed under adequate conditions are few and far between. They are Cuba; the provinces of Yucatán and the DF in Mexico; Guinea and Barbados, given their ties to the UK; Puerto Rico, under the American flag; and Uruguay, since 2012. It should be noted that, in the latter country, women who try to procure abortions after the period established by law (12 weeks) remain subject to criminal proceedings. That is to say: Uruguay has legalized, but not completely decriminalized, abortion, preserving legal mechanisms that may be triggered and punish the interruption of an unwanted pregnancy with jail terms.

Across the other countries, abortion is an offense included in the penal code. In the vast majority of Latin American countries, it is tolerated in certain conditions, such as acephaly or malformation of the fetus, risk of death for the woman, rape, or incest.

Restrictions, however, vary from country to country. Ecuador, Peru, and Bolivia, for example, do not allow abortions in case of rape (Investigación sobre Aborto en América Latina y el Caribe p. 156). Once raped, women are debased and stripped of their dignity, punished for having been victims of sexual violence. The principles of justice are inverted. In Venezuela, Paraguay, and Guatemala, meanwhile, therapeutic abortion is only authorized if the woman's life is in danger. That is to say: patriarchal society continues to exert power over women's bodies and their right to life.

In Chile, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, and the Dominican Republic, abortion is a crime under any conditions. In addition to having the most repressive antiabortion legislation in the region, they have imprisoned significant numbers of women for the practice of illegal abortions. These imprisonments ultimately signal the cruelty and humiliation to which those who question the sex-gender system are subjected. The effect is that civil liberties remain only partially accessible to women, since they are unable to do with their bodies as they please. Chile's Bachelet administration is currently attempting to adopt the less prohibitive restrictions that have already become standard in the majority of Latin American countries.

The UN has already recommended the revision of legislation criminalizing abortion in nearly all the countries of Latin America, given its absolute incompatibility with women's rights to life, dignity, and security. Moreover, keeping abortion illegal and unsafe flouts the principles of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, dating back to 1979. The criminalization of the practice does not prevent it from being carried out, nor does it reduce the rates of usage, but it does keep cases from being duly registered and puts the health and lives of women (especially when poor) in jeopardy.

Illegal abortion has kept maternal mortality rates high across Latin America, an indicator on which many countries in the region (Ecuador and Brazil, to name two) have not seen satisfactory performance in the latest statistics from the Millennium



Development Goals. One of the reasons for that is precisely the widespread practice of clandestine, illegal abortions.

By way of example, here we may look to official data from the government of Ecuador, which recognize a significant increase in maternal mortality in the nation over the 2000s, particularly so under the Correa administration. Indeed, such deaths had been declining since 2001 (56.63/100,000 live births), shrinking to a rate of 38.78 in 2006. This trend, however, would soon be reversed as the prevalence spiked at 70.44 deaths per 100,000 live births (INEC 2013:505). This abysmal performance reveals the indifference of this and so many other countries to sexual and reproductive rights in general, ultimately victimizing women. There is no record of the role that abortion plays in these elevated maternal mortality rates, but in Brazil it is estimated to be the fourth most significant cause.

Equally grave is the fact that even where restricted, regulated access to abortion is available, public health systems do not provide adequate, safe care. On the contrary, we find discriminatory, punitive treatment born of the prejudices of attending staff. This is symptomatic of the deficient, biased, moralistic training of healthcare professionals in terms of reproductive rights.

Another extremely troubling aspect is the repeated refusal to adopt alternative, cheap, and accessible abortive techniques, such as Plan B and other prophylactics available on the market. Why turn down existing products that might prevent pain, harm, and death, preferring to impose suffering on women as a way of expiating their guilt?

Here, Brazil steps in to prove that even a state of affairs as devastating as this can always get worse. In October 2015, the Congress approved a bill that goes against existing law and further curtails the right to a legal abortion in case of rape. It provides that permission to interrupt a pregnancy would be subject to the physical verification of rape via a medical examination and a police report, making the woman's word on the matter worthless. Arguing that "the legalization of abortion has been imposed across the world by international organizations (...) financed by American foundations tied to supercapitalist interests" seeking to promote "population control," the bill seeks to jail those who induce, instigate, or aid a pregnant woman to get an abortion. The current version of the bill would imprison only those directly involved in the abortion – the pregnant woman, and the person performing the procedure. The discriminatory cherry on top is the bill's prohibition on the circulation of information about and the sale of other abortive methods, such as Plan B.

According to the World Health Organization, countries with restrictive legislation see 22 million abortions performed annually, leading to an estimated 47,000 women's deaths. In nations where the interruption of pregnancy is legal and safe, that mortality rate is closer to zero.

Restrictions on reproductive autonomy that stifle women's ability to participate fully in society are a threat to democracy. However, these checks go beyond the realm of sexual

and reproductive rights. The curtailment of female autonomy in Latin America – down to women’s ability to come and go as they please, threatened as they are by acts of extreme physical violence, mutilations, and rapes – reveals the vices of processes of existential equalization that fail to go beyond superficiality, merely extending the logic of the market without breaking with standing hierarchies and other forms of exploitation and domination.

A recent report on femicide (*Mapa da Violência 2015: Homicídio de Mulheres no Brasil*, FLACSO, 2015) reveals that a murder rate of 4.8 women per 100,000 inhabitants (or 4,762 murders in 2013, as opposed to a thousand fewer in 2000) places Brazil in fifth place on the world ranking of this sort of crime, falling behind El Salvador, Colombia, Guatemala, and Russia. It should be noted that of the 10 countries with the highest rates of femicide, seven are Latin American.

It is clear that patriarchy and misogyny remain predominant beyond Asia or Sub-Saharan Africa, nor has multiculturalism succeeded in guaranteeing recognition and respect to Indigenous communities in Latin America.

### **1.2. Racism and Discrimination Continue to Claim Thousands of Lives and Provoke Mass Incarceration**

A final topic for reflection is the situation of people of African descent in many Latin American countries. Moreover, the contingent of juvenile delinquents is growing at alarming rates. Here, the Brazilian case threatens advances observed in the fields of education and socioeconomic inclusion.

Today, homicide is the main cause of death for youths ages 15-29 in Brazil, taking an especially large toll on Black youths living in peripheral communities and the metropolitan areas of urban centers. Data from the Ministry of Health’s Mortality Information System reveal that over half of the 56,337 homicide victims in 2012 were young people (27,471 or 52.63%), 77% of whom were Black (*pretos* and *pardos*) and 93.30% were male.<sup>3</sup> This considering that half of the Brazilian population is Black.

There is thus a clear imbalance in terms of the lethal impact of racism and discrimination, which can be seen mowing down lives. Between 2003 and 2012, 320,000 Black youths were killed with firearms, according to the 2015 *Mapa da Violência*. Over the same period, while the rate of homicides by firearm dipped from 14.5 to 11.8 per 100,000 Whites, for Blacks (*pretos* and *pardos*) it rose from 24.9 to 28.5. Thus, rates for Whites fell 18.7% while they increased 14.1% for the Black population.

The same document indicates that of the 13 most violent countries in the world, with elevated homicide rates per 100,000 inhabitants, Iraq is the only one outside the Americas. Venezuela held that tragic record in 2012, with 55.4 murders per 100,000 inhabitants; that number was 32.3 in Guatemala; 31 in Colombia; and 29 in Brazil

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<sup>3</sup> At the global level, males account for 82% of all homicide victims.

(Anistia Internacional Brasil, 2015 and Mapa da Violência 2015). As for Venezuela, it should be noted that the homicide rate went from an average of 20 deaths per 100,000 from 1994-1998 to over 55 per 100,000 in the second decade of the 21st century (Briceño-León 2012).

Violence has been a hallmark of Latin America, and self-proclaimed progressive, redistributive administrations over the pink decade (and they were not a few) did not manage to turn around a trend that has only deepened, as a few of the indicators mentioned here can attest. It is true that interpersonal violence is a universal challenge, “making homicide a more frequent cause of death than all wars combined” since 2000 (Global Status Report on Violence Prevention, 2014:2). Nevertheless, comparative data show Latin America’s appalling lead in the field: the annual homicide rate for middle- and low-income countries in the region is 28.5 deaths per 100,000 inhabitants, more than twice that registered in all African countries – the second-highest, at 10.9 per 100,000. The global average stood at 6.7 deaths in 2012, while high-income countries in all regions display a homicide rate of 3.8 per 100,000. While this rate fell quickly in high-income countries, the rest saw a near stagnation. According to the WHO, a homicide rate over 10 is considered epidemic.

As if these macabre trophies weren’t enough, Latin America is also the region with the highest rate of homicides by firearm in the world (75%, as opposed to an average of 48%). That is, access to firearms is not duly regulated and repressed. Yet again, the Brazilian legislature is in the process of adopting a new law with a view to making it easier to carry firearms. The reform of the “Disarmament Statute,” to be voted on at the end of 2015, has already had a preliminary text approved by the relevant committee. It calls for the reduction of the minimum age for carrying a firearm from 25 to 21; authorization to carry firearms at home, at the workplace and on rural properties; an increase in the period of license renewal from 3 to 10 years; arms license availability for those charged or under investigation for crimes; and the ability for lawmakers to circulate with arms, even inside Congress. The chances of this bill’s being approved are considerable, with this backsliding justified “in name of the people’s right to self-defense.” This deliberately ignores all the studies that indicate the preventive nature of policies for the repression and control of firearms in addressing youth homicides (Mapa da Violência 2015:96).

In addition to making up the bulk of homicide statistics, youths (ages 18-29) also represent 54.8% of the Brazilian incarcerated population, which lives in subhuman conditions in prisons falling far short of any humanitarian standards. Occupancy levels in Brazilian prisons reached 153.9% in 2014, according to the World Prison Brief and the Institute for Criminal Policy Research. Degradation and brutality in prison conditions are, however, even more drastic in Bolivia (298.7%), Venezuela (269.8%) and Peru (231%).

“Penal selectivity” – defined by color, age, and sex – puts Brazil at fourth place in global rankings of prison populations, as well as undisputed leader in South America.

The prison population rate per 100,000 inhabitants has already reached 300 (Conectas 2015), putting the country ahead of Uruguay (282); Colombia (244); Chile (232); Peru (239); Venezuela (178), and Ecuador (162), to name a few (World Prison Brief, 2015).

This becomes even more serious, however, when we see that each year brings more young people into the prison system. The Mapa do Encarceramento – Jovens do Brasil (2015) shows that the group of adolescents ages 12-21 has systematically increased its presence in juvenile prisons, where they are detained for a period of social/educational rehabilitation. Moreover, despite the existence of the Statute for Children and Adolescents (ECA)<sup>4</sup>, these youths are subject to the same punitive measures in place in adult prisons (p. 12), often marked by abuses and cruelty.

In Brazil, over 42% of detainees are in prison for non-violent crimes. In Bolivia, pre-trial detainees account for 83.2%, a surprising and dramatically high figure, but one not so far off from what we can see in Paraguay (75%) or Venezuela (68.4%).

In Latin America as a whole, the situation is equally worrisome. Correa (2015) recalls that, “in a recent debate about human rights in Latin America, Emilio Alvarez, the executive secretary of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, made the point that despite the democratic consolidation of the past 30 years, the region is undergoing the worst incarceration crisis in its history. Never before have so many people been imprisoned on such precarious conditions, subject to brutal violations of human rights.” In Latin America, prison is used as the rule, not the exception, as proved by widespread arbitrary detention – a form of denying recognition.

## **2. By way of conclusion**

The evidence above may inspire a certain doubt as to whether, as Therborn suggests, Latin America has seen existential equalization take a sustainable path (p. 413) or whether “the dismantling of existential inequality in recent years is a major human advance” (p. 145) by any measure.

I would argue that criminalization of Indigenous communities who resist the violation of their rights, the mass incarceration of the formerly economically excluded and socially discriminated, and the savage repression of women for having claimed control over their bodies and sexuality are not a transient paradox in the process of development, but rather entrenched and long-lasting existential inequalities that have survived market incorporation in Latin America. This has been the great change of recent years, a sign of the transition to a mass consumer economy without a real transformation of inequality-reproducing structures, whatever they may be. Segregation, polarization and marginalization persist as crucial features of Latin American inequality and prevent the full realization of equalization attempts.

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<sup>4</sup> According to the ECA (Estatuto da Criança e do Adolescente), which has been in place since 1990, adolescents found responsible for infractions are processed through different channels: they are sentenced to socio-educational rehabilitative measures, which may be administered at home or while detained, depending on the gravity of the act and/or recidivism.

Young Blacks in Brazil, whose color seems to constitute an infraction; the populations of Latin America's peripheries, who rarely see the public investments that might even out access opportunities leave the drawing board; poor and not-so-poor women for whom the cost of a reasonably safe clandestine abortion is ultimately prohibitive; and the Indigenous communities savaged by the prioritizing of economic development and modernity appear in this essay as warnings of a covenant that, while widely celebrated in the most unequal region on the planet, was a failure: the covenant of growth with redistribution and equity. The time for its fulfillment has been postponed yet again, as it is unthinkable that we Latin Americans accept a mere veneer of change. This is not a matter of being radical, but rather demanding the healthy, prosperous combination of a democratic and truly egalitarian environment.

The most recent report from CEPAL (2015) demonstrates that poverty reduction has stagnated since 2012, while extreme poverty has resumed its upward trajectory. It also indicates that as of 2014, only 49% of the region's population found themselves outside poverty, extreme poverty, and the zone of vulnerability that indicates a high risk of returning to severe levels of destitution. For half +1%, existential and resource inequality continue to undercut and outright impede vital equality.

Though Latin America appears miles away from a real and unequivocal egalitarian move, Therborn's call for action echoes in our ears and drives us to the battlefields for the fight against inequality. As he prophetically says, "the battle is about to start. Nobody knows how it will end. Which side will you be on"?

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