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## REVIEW ESSAYS

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### INEQUALITY IN LATIN AMERICA AND THE QUANDARY OF CLIENTELISM

*Roberto Patricio Korzeniewicz*  
*University of Maryland*

**Building Equality and Opportunity through Social Guarantees: New Approaches to Public Policy and the Realization of Rights.** Edited by Estanislao Gacitúa-Marió, Andrew Norton, and Sophia V. Georgieva. Washington, DC: World Bank, 2009. Pp. xxvi + 270. \$30.00 paper. ISBN: 9780821378830.

**The Legal Foundations of Inequality: Constitutionalism in the Americas, 1776–1860.** By Roberto Gargarella. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010. Pp. 351. \$85.00 cloth. ISBN: 9780521195027.

**Indelible Inequalities in Latin America: Insights from History, Politics, and Culture.** Edited by Paul Gootenberg and Luis Reygadas. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010. Pp. xvi + 228. \$22.95 paper. ISBN: 9780822347347.

**Declining Inequality in Latin America: A Decade of Progress?** Edited by Luis F. López-Calva and Nora Lustig. New York: UN Development Program; Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2010. Pp. ix + 253. \$34.95 paper. ISBN: 9780815704102.

**Living Standards in Latin American History: Height, Welfare, and Development, 1750–2000.** Edited by Ricardo D. Salvatore, John H. Coatsworth, and Amílcar E. Challú. Cambridge, MA: David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies and Harvard University Press, 2010. Pp. iii + 313. \$29.95 paper. ISBN: 9780674055858.

Academics and policy makers have come to a strong consensus that deep and persistent inequalities have shaped the past and present of Latin America and

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pose a major challenge to social and political improvements in the future. Examining inequality from different angles, the five books under review illustrate that the rising consensus has also advanced more problematic assumptions in regard to both the social and the political behaviors that engender inequality, as well as the policies best suited to promote it. Two of these books—*The Legal Foundations of Inequality* and *Living Standards in Latin American History*—are especially productive and innovative, for they provide important insights into patterns of inequality before the mid-twentieth century, a period about which many assumptions are made on the basis of very weak empirical data.

Most notable for its broad comparative approach is Roberto Gargarella's excellent study of evolving tensions between competing political projects in the nineteenth century and their impact on institutional arrangements that would affect inequality in later years. In Gargarella's compelling narrative, nineteenth-century political alternatives were embodied in three distinct constitutional projects, which he terms *radical*, *conservative*, and *liberal*. Radicals (and their majoritarian or populist project) successfully mobilized people for independence and democratic ideals, advocating unicameralism; a strict division of powers; direct representation; and limits on the power of the executive, clergy, and military. At the other end of the spectrum, conservatives embraced political elitism and moral perfectionism while pushing for a strong executive, a leading role for the military in achieving internal order, and political centralism against federalism. They also promoted electoral colleges, a judiciary, and a senate. Together, these arrangements aimed to protect property rights from "the 'ambitions' and 'excesses' of the popular assembly" (127). Finally, liberals presented a middle alternative, challenging both tyranny (the rule of one) and anarchy (the rule of many), but emphasizing that "nothing was as dangerous for personal freedom as the coercive powers of the state and its coercive apparatus" (157). According to Gargarella:

Liberals developed three basic institutional proposals that would become fundamental to the evolution of modern constitutionalism. First, they defended the need to limit the people's mass and direct participation in public matters. This was based on the assumption that popular bodies would act merely out of irrationality or self-interest. Second, they proposed to increase the existing distance between the representatives and the people, making the former more "independent" and autonomous in their choices. Third, they established a system of "mutual controls" or "checks and balances," aimed at preventing the invasion of one branch of power into the affairs of others. (197)

The outcome of these positions is that liberals had a very limited commitment to egalitarianism and were particularly reluctant to promote or allow any type of state interventionism. Gargarella explains that liberals "normally demanded respect for individuals' autonomous will while disregarding what we could call the 'conditions for adopting autonomous decisions'" (212).

Gargarella suggests that although radicals were successful in mobilizing people against inequities and in favor of egalitarianism, they were less successful in devising practical mechanisms to implement these ideals. As a result, they sometimes tended to authoritarianism, assuming that one voice could effectively speak for all the people, thereby ignoring or limiting the rights of minorities. In contrast, the conservative project had more enduring consequences for institutional ar-

rangements over the long run, sometimes unintentionally. For example, in their defense of landowners, conservatives ended up advancing “two fundamental political notions: the idea of minorities and the idea of rights” (147).

Gargarella skillfully traces shifting patterns of competition and cooperation between the three political projects. On occasion, surprisingly, even radicals and conservatives would ally against the perceived individualism of liberals. But this was exceptional. Conservatives and liberals had much more in common, as they shared certain fears (e.g., an unbridled majority) and cherished certain values (e.g., property rights). Challenging the common view that New England colonies were always a haven of democracy and that those of Latin America were a haven of dictatorship, Gargarella argues that, even compared to the United States, liberals in Latin America were explicit about their distrust of majorities, distinguishing between the sovereignty of reason, in which only the educated might take part, and the sovereignty of the people, whose “will is blind, capricious, irrational,” driven only by wants (170). Thus, the liberal project in Latin America immediately after independence was much more compromised by conservative elements than in the United States. In Latin America, the outcome of the conservative-liberal convergence was therefore that “the majority of the constitutions actually obstructed the idea of having a self-governing community . . . , discourag[ing] civic participation, reduc[ing] popular controls to a minimum expression, reserv[ing] the ‘last institutional word’ to the least democratic branch of government, and organiz[ing] a countermajoritarian political system to replace rather than to ‘discover’ or ‘refine’ the will of the people” (2).

Readers might have a few quibbles. Gargarella notes that radicals tended to have a weak presence at constitutional conventions in Latin America, so it is not clear why they generated so much fear among conservatives and liberals. To address this issue more effectively, one must examine the social and political dimensions of inequality at the time in detail. Gargarella chooses an alternative venue of analysis, focusing on the discourse of elites more than on the language and modes of political action that prevailed among mobilized popular forces. Regardless, he presents a provocative and nuanced understanding of the evolution of inequality, showing that there were moments in which the institutional arrangements underpinning inequality came under challenge or were in flux in Latin America. In this, his book provides a welcome alternative to the widespread notion that inequality in the region is simply a persistent legacy of colonial times.<sup>1</sup>

Another welcome addition to recent scholarship is *Living Standards in Latin American History*. Using anthropometric data, several of the studies in this volume contribute significantly to our understanding of historical trends in inequality before the mid-twentieth century, a period for which we have few precise indicators on income, wealth, and well-being. Amílcar E. Challú documents, for example, a decline in average heights in Mexico between the mid-eighteenth and the mid-nineteenth centuries, a decline more pronounced among the illiterate and

1. An example of the latter view is David De Ferranti, Guillermo E. Perry, Francisco H. G. Ferreira, and Michael Walton, *Inequality in Latin America: Breaking with History?* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2004).

the rural as a result of “mounting difficulties of the rural population to secure its food supplies in a context of increasing commercialization of the agricultural sector and growing power of the urban centers in procuring its food supplies” (51). This finding is significant, as in the early nineteenth century “height recovered or stagnated in France, Spain, and other countries, but it continued to decline in Mexico: by the 1830s, Mexicans had finally become ‘too short’” (53). Looking at the period from 1850 to 1950 in Mexico, and using height data from the “laboring classes” recruited into the military, Moramay López-Alonso argues that “the benefits of economic growth and public health . . . did not reach a substantial portion of the lower-income groups” (71). This failure of living standards to improve is particularly notable in comparison to the gains in stature after the late nineteenth century in countries such as Argentina, Spain, and Italy.

Luis Ríos and Barry Bogin focus on stunting (the reduced growth of children), usually a consequence of malnutrition and what the authors label a “pattern of structural violence” (300). They note that stunting has declined much less in Central America than in the rest of Latin America in the past decades and that estimated rates remain very high in Guatemala, at around 50 percent. Rates are higher in rural areas than in urban zones, and higher among Mayas than among Ladinos. Despite their low socioeconomic status, Maya immigrants to the United States show a very significant increase in height compared to nonmigrant populations in Guatemala because they have access to “better nutrition, clean water, and education” (287).

Luis Bértola, María Camou, Silvana Maubrigades, and Natalia Melgar look more broadly at a range of social and economic indicators for current Mercosur members over the course of the twentieth century to argue that the period 1940–1980 shows “economic growth and social improvement,” in contrast to “lower economic growth and far more instability” in the periods 1900–1940 and 1980–2000 (199). The cases studied by other contributors—Ricardo Salvatore on the period 1900–1940 in Argentina; Leonardo M. Monasterio, Luiz Paulo Ferreira Noguerol, and Claudio D. Shikida on the period 1939–1981 in Brazil; and James W. McGuire on the period 1960–1995 in Chile—also offer important observations. In short, *Living Standards in Latin American History* is a welcome resource for specialists on the topic.

An interest in the contemporary period and in identifying policies to enhance equality is shared by *Declining Inequality in Latin America: A Decade of Progress?* and *Building Equality and Opportunity through Social Guarantees*. Observing that Latin America stands out because twelve of the region’s seventeen countries for which data are available saw inequality decrease between 2000 and 2007, the former, sponsored by the UN Development Program, sets out both to explain this trend and to identify possible obstacles to future progress. Its several conceptual chapters and four case studies of Argentina, Mexico, Peru, and Brazil emphasize two key transformations.

The first involves the shrinking wage gap between skilled and unskilled workers, mainly because of greater access to primary and secondary education. A short chapter by Jaime Kahhat offers a framework for this development, explaining that “the effects of technological change are unequalizing at first but not in the long

run. For example, after the learning phase is over and workers become fully efficient in using the new technology, firms substitute relatively expensive skilled labor with more economical unskilled labor" (López-Calva and Lustig, 13). As a result, the decline in inequality in Latin America can be understood as "the outcome of a 'race' between technological progress, which increases the demand for skills, and educational attainment, which increases the supply of skills" (25). If access to skills was before constrained by market imperfections and discrimination, it has more recently been facilitated by state policies that expand education among the poor. Most of the case studies in *Declining Inequality in Latin America* (particularly the chapter by Leonardo Gasparini and Guillermo Cruces on Argentina) find that these policies have indeed had an impact on inequality in the region.

The second explanation for the decline in inequality involves greater efforts by the state to redistribute income to the poor. Indeed, this is the single most important variable according to the case studies by Ricardo Barros, Mirela de Carvalho, Samuel Franco, and Rosane Mendonça on Brazil; Gerardo Esquivel, Nora Lustig, and John Scott on Mexico; and Miguel Jaramillo and Jaime Saavedra on Peru. The editors argue that public spending has become more progressive, not only by providing cash transfers but also in the areas of "health, education, nutrition, and basic infrastructure," partly because of the expansion of democracy, and because in several countries democracy "has been accompanied by a transition from clientelistic toward nonclientelistic politics" (17).

James A. Robinson seeks to explain this success. His premise is that "it is not possible to talk about 'the market distribution of income' as if that were somehow free of politics. It is the political system, after all, that determines the nature of property rights and how free the market is. The outcomes that the market itself generates are heavily determined by policies and regulations passed by the state" (40). Drawing on cross-national research (with considerable emphasis on wealthy Western nations), Robinson reviews the political and institutional factors that empirical studies consider more or less conducive to equity: dictatorship or democracy, path dependencies, the organizational capacity of different social strata, the particularities of different constitutional systems, the extent of state capacity, and so forth. The list of variables is long, with many possible interactions.

Despite this complexity, Robinson singles out populism and clientelism (which tend to be portrayed as two sides of the same coin) as the major obstacles to greater equity. Showcasing the common sense that clientelism is nefarious, a view that has come to prevail in much of the social sciences, Robinson's chapter as a whole takes Western Europe as a model of the movement toward greater equality via the adoption of more programmatic representation. Robinson synthesizes the literature on this subject as follows:

Scholars make a distinction between "clientelistic" and "programmatic" approaches, which are conceived of as two polar political strategies that parties or groups contesting power might adopt. On one hand, political parties can compete for support by offering different types of public goods that affect the entire population. Their policies might concern ideological issues, such as human rights, or they may deal with more economic issues, such as law and order (for example, property rights), trade and macroeconomic policy, or regula-

tory regimes. On the other hand, instead of focusing on such collective or public goods, parties can concentrate on offering particularistic benefits or private goods to groups of supporters.

One of the problems facing the adoption of policies to eliminate poverty in middle-income countries is precisely the fact that clientelism is highly prevalent in those countries. (López-Calva and Lustig, 44)

Characterizing populism as “clientelism with macro policy instruments” (46), Robinson portrays both clientelism and populism as outcomes of two hundred years of path dependency, that is, as aberrant forms of political mobilization that obstruct truly progressive politics. He ends with a call for international organizations to help “parties with non-clientelistic redistributive agendas” (64).

López-Calva and Lustig, as well as other contributors, express skepticism as to whether inequality can continue to decline. This pessimism is not shared by Barros, Carvalho, Franco, and Mendonça et al., who state that in Brazil, “there is plenty of room for improving social policy design and the functioning of markets and thus plenty of opportunities to further reduce inequality and poverty” (135). The skeptics cite the difficulty of sustaining or advancing specific policies, such as the expansion of postsecondary education. More broadly, they fear political constraints: (1) that elites will resist more effective and extensive taxation, thus making it difficult to increase income transfers to the poor; (2) that the middle class, a powerful political force, will resist reforms that might redirect resources from universal programs to others more specifically benefiting the poor (e.g., cutting funds for tertiary education to enhance access to primary and secondary education); and (3) most important, given Robinson’s emphasis, that clientelism and populism are likely to continue disenfranchising the poor. This final point is reiterated by Esquivel, Lustig, and Scott, who find that the redistribution that has taken place since the mid-1990s “was a top-down process led by enlightened technocrats that was made possible by the weakening of the power of corporatist organizations; it had less to do with the empowerment of the poor and disenfranchised” (213).

Such conclusions illustrate the quandary of well-meaning politicians and scholars hoping to shape social policies in the region. On the one hand, they express conviction and certainty in their ability to identify policies to enhance social welfare and equity; nevertheless, on the other hand, they fear that entrenched interests could impede their implementation: elites and the middle class can obstruct them because they are politically powerful, and the poor might do so because they are mired in clientelism and populism, the politics of the poor. From such a perspective, change can come only from exogenous forces, such as models imported from more “advanced” countries or Robinson’s “enlightening” international organizations.

A similar message is delivered in *Building Equality and Opportunity through Social Guarantees*, a World Bank publication. The contributors argue that social guarantees are needed, an approach that “seeks to define basic universal entitlements and to eliminate obstacles that could prevent any group from receiving them” (144) and that “seeks to change the logic of the policy process so that the starting point is not the existence of people with needs that must be addressed, but



the existence of people with rights to demand certain actions, services, and conduct" (24). To be effective, the contributors argue, social guarantees must ensure not only access but also, and more important, quality, financial protections, the continuous participation of beneficiaries in evaluation and revision, and accessible mechanisms for redress. As a model of "how a social guarantees framework may be used to generate enhanced political and social consensus around a progressive policy framework" (15), the collection cites health-care reforms in Chile, analyzed in detail by Leonardo Moreno and Mauricio Rosenblüth.<sup>2</sup>

Other case studies explore the promise of similar policies—for example, Sibonile Khoza focuses on the judiciary's role in enforcing the right to housing and health care in South Africa—as well as areas in which the implementation of such policies has faced significant obstacles. These are numerous: South Africa, the Andean countries (Bolivia, Ecuador, and Peru), Jamaica and St. Kitts and Nevis, Uruguay, and Colombia. In most of these cases, even as there has been greater access to health care, education, and supplemental income, among other things, social policies lack enforcement, appropriate financial support, effective and steady civil society participation, adequate diffusion of information, and high and equitable quality standards. As well, the ability to tax high-income groups effectively remains limited. In contrast, several contributors see a strong potential for a more progressive system due to the presence in several countries of strong civil society organizations.

Like *Declining Inequality in Latin America*, this volume comes to identify clientelism as a crucial obstacle to more effective state policies. This is most evident in the chapter by Steen Lau Jorgensen and Rodrigo Serrano-Berthet, who advance a typology of regimes, with welfare-state regimes at one end because they provide the greatest guarantee of citizenship rights and, at the other end, insecurity regimes (prevalent in sub-Saharan Africa), which offer the fewest rights and protections. In between lie the informal security regimes of much of Latin America, where patron-client relationships are key to securing access to at least some measure of protection. For Jorgensen and Serrano, East Asia offers models (particularly China and Taiwan) of how to move from clientelistic arrangements to a productivism that might eventually approximate the again ideal model of a welfare state. Accordingly, "comparative perspective on global welfare regimes points to the need to focus social policy on 'declientelization,' confirming the consensus on a new citizenship- and rights-based approach to social policy" (55). In the editors' view, declientelization not only will allow for better policy making and implementation but also will "strengthen democratic governance" in the region more broadly (15).

Much in the content and conclusions of the previous two collections points to their good intentions: to promote greater equity, democracy, and economic growth. These three outcomes are assumed to have a natural affinity to one an-

2. For a useful analysis of some of the problems that have developed more recently in health-care reform in Chile, see Nuria Cunill Grau, María Margarita Fernández, and Marcos Vergara, "Gobernanza sistémica para un enfoque de derechos en salud: Un análisis a partir del caso chileno," *Salud Colectiva* 7, no. 1 (2011): 21–33.

other, yet the history of Latin America raises some serious caveats regarding this assumption, as illustrated, for example, in *The Legal Foundations of Inequality* and *Living Standards in Latin American History*. For haven't these outcomes combined in different ways over time? If anything, historical evidence suggests that we should be very cautious in making assumptions about both natural affinities and the ability of simple panaceas to transform complex social arrangements. In fact, well-meaning panaceas used to guide policy making have often led to disastrous outcomes for vulnerable populations.

Given repeated instances in which policy makers and political leaders failed to deliver on their promises of substantive reform, it is, moreover, not surprising that mobilization from below would distrust technocratic projects and be more likely to lead to the emergence or persistence of clientelism and populism. The latter might in fact be an effective means to challenge the effects of inequality in disadvantageous environments. In the historical memory of the poor, successive panaceas have often led to greater exclusion; despite good intentions, even the most transparent and democratic policies have tended to metamorphose swiftly into bureaucratic agencies run through by technocratic criteria, personnel, and methods that have contributed in new ways to exclusion. In contrast, clientelism and populism might appear more responsive and even effective in securing greater access to scarce resources.

Some of these issues are addressed in *Indelible Inequalities in Latin America*. Setting out a conceptual framework for the volume as a whole, Eric Hershberg observes in the foreword that "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 the state" (xii). Hershberg goes on to assert that the social identities constructed to challenge inequality can have a complex relationship with other factors and institutions, such as democracy, that bear on inequality, so that "at times, resistance has undermined democracy; at other times, it has contributed to the restoration and even the strengthening of democracy" (xiv).

Two initial chapters by the editors link the concept of indelible inequalities to Charles Tilly's *Durable Inequality* (1999) but stress that their intent is to emphasize agency and fluidity in the creation and reproduction of categorical divides over time. For example, after tracing the role of racial and ethnic differences in shaping inequality since colonial times, Luis Reygadas states that the "reproduction of the Latin American elite" in other governing groups "is not the outcome of continuity and immobility. On the contrary, it is also a story of conversions, ruptures, and transformations" (44). Like some of the authors mentioned here, Reygadas concludes by noting that a history of strong social movements affords hope that inequality in Latin America might be challenged more effectively in the future. Other chapters seek to provide more specific insights by looking at inequality in health policy in Peru and at cultural challenges to the persistence of racial divides



in Cuba, where social policies purportedly sought to eliminate discrimination and exclusion.<sup>3</sup> Margaret Gray shows “how Latin American inequality becomes Latino inequality” (169) by assessing the treatment of agricultural workers in New York.

In a strong chapter, Jeanine Anderson casts a welcome light on how the poor are frequently assessed and evaluated, whereas “their own ideas of what constitute legitimate and illegitimate measurements, and what should be considered the defining elements of poverty, are rarely consulted. Their perceptions of inequality are hidden from dominant groups because of the pain or risk of revelation and the confrontation it might entail” (81). Anderson draws on ethnographic research in Peru over the past three decades to argue that antipoverty programs had very limited success because their goals seldom matched the needs arising from constraints and opportunities that poor households actually faced. Her research also shows that the latter sought to improve their standing through various strategies: developing small businesses; building or gaining access to a home; religious reform or conversion; political projects and careers (including engaging in clientelism); and self-improvement at personal, family, and community levels.

Lucio Renno focuses on a less researched aspect of clientelism: how the poor “are prey to shortfalls of political information” (108). He explains: “The essence of clientelism is the idea that voters exchange political support for public or private goods distributed to their localities by politicians. Politicians exert power to allocate resources and are interested in the votes of the population for their political survival. Voters lack resources and need them to survive, period. Hence, inequality generates clientelism. But it also allows clientelism to persist in time” (108). With this thesis, Renno proceeds to report the results of a study of voting in the 2002 elections in Brazil, concluding that “inequality of information may thus help to explain how clientelism persists in Latin America” (127).

Alas, the specter of clientelism emerges once again. In fact, mainstream literature’s hope that social policies will promote better citizenship and eliminate clientelism has a parallel in the assumption of more alternative writings that the same results might be pursued and achieved by progressive social movements and organizations. Both theses converge in seeing clientelism and populism as poor forms of politics that trap the disadvantaged in an endless cycle of inequality.

Such a perspective serves only to create a new divide between the politics of elites (both technocratic and progressive) and the politics of the poor, a state of affairs that, not surprisingly, recalls the conflicts that Gargarella documents in the nineteenth century. Building on Anderson’s thoughts in *Indelible Inequalities in Latin America*, one may note that, by adopting a dismissive view of clientelism and populism, scholars and policy makers ignore what people in situations of

3. The case of Cuba illustrates better than others the skepticism with which subaltern groups can view public policies aimed at the poor and disadvantaged. It also reveals how the persistence of inequality is an *ex post facto* conclusion. For example, the racial inequality of Cuba in 1960 is not equivalent to the racial inequality of 2011; the latter is not a remnant, but a new ensemble of interactions that only through a certain lens can be classified as a continuity.

vulnerability have learned about their own lives and the strategies they trust for survival or social advancement. Poor people become an object of sympathy. There is little effort to inquire whether the forms of action that prevail among them—including clientelism and populism—might not in fact provide a legitimate lever to inch social and political arrangements toward greater equity.