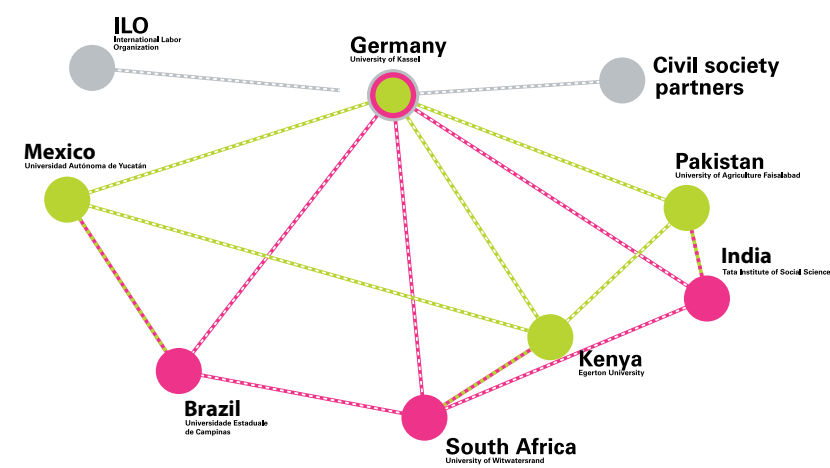


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Social Inequality and Social Policy outside the OECD

A New Research Perspective on Latin America

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Social Inequality and Social Policy outside the OECD

A New Research Perspective on Latin America

Hans-Jürgen Burchardt / Nico Weinmann

"Latin America is a beggar atop a mountain of gold"
(Skidmore/Smith 2005: 5)

ABSTRACT

Almost all Latin American countries are still marked by extreme forms of social inequality – and to an extent, this seems to be the case regardless of national differences in the economic development model or the strength of democracy and the welfare state. Recent research highlights the fact that the heterogeneous labour markets in the region are a key source of inequality. At the same time, there is a strengthening of ‘exclusive’ social policy, which is located at the fault lines of the labour market and is constantly (re-)producing market-mediated disparities. In the last three decades, this type of social policy has even enjoyed democratic legitimacy. These dynamics challenge many of the assumptions guiding social policy and democratic theory, which often attempt to account for the specificities of the region by highlighting the purported flaws of certain policies. We suggest taking a different perspective: social policy in Latin American should not be grasped as a deficient or flawed type of social policy, but as a very successful relation of political domination. ‘Relational social analysis’ locates social policy in the ‘tension zone’ constituted by the requirements of economic reproduction, demands for democratic legitimacy and the relative autonomy of the state. From this vantage point, we will make the relation of domination in question accessible for empirical research. It seems particularly useful for this purpose to examine the recent shifts in the Latin American labour markets, which have undergone numerous reforms. We will examine which mechanisms, institutions and constellations of actors block or activate the potentials of redistribution inherent in such processes of political reform. This will enable us to explore the socio-political field of forces that has been perpetuating the social inequalities in Latin America for generations.

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1. Overview

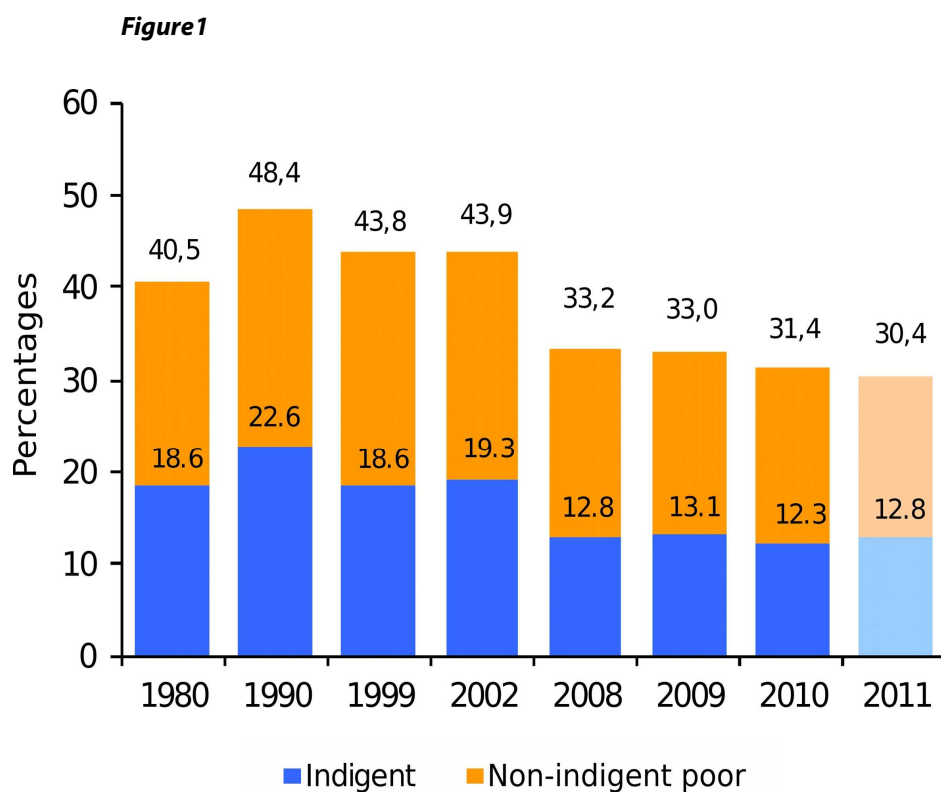
Almost all Latin American countries are still marked by extreme forms of social inequality – and to an extent, this seems to be the case regardless of national differences in the economic development model or the strength of democracy and the welfare state. Recent research highlights the fact that the heterogeneous labour markets in the region are a key source of inequality. At the same time, there is a strengthening of ‘exclusive’ social policy¹, which is located at the fault lines of the labour market and is constantly (re)producing market-mediated disparities. In the last three decades, this type of social policy has even enjoyed democratic legitimacy. These dynamics challenge many of the assumptions guiding social policy and democratic theory, which often attempt to account for the specificities of the region by highlighting the purported flaws of certain policies. We suggest taking a different perspective: social policy in Latin American should not be understood as a deficient or flawed type of social policy, but rather as a very successful relation of political domination. “Relational social analysis” locates social policy in the ‘tension zone’ constituted by the compulsion of economic reproduction, the demand for democratic legitimacy and the relative autonomy of the state. From this vantage point, we will make the relation of domination in question accessible for empirical research. It seems particularly useful for this purpose to examine the recent shifts in the Latin American labour markets, which have undergone numerous reforms. We will examine which mechanisms, institutions, and groups of actors block or activate the potentials of redistribution inherent in such processes of political reform. This will enable us to explore the socio-political forces that have been perpetuating social inequalities in Latin America for generations.

1 In the first instance, we understand social policy as concrete political interventions in people’s living conditions and life chances and in the management of their everyday lives. These interventions consist of welfare payments and investments in social infrastructure and public services; they are ‘steered’ by media such as law, money and morals. More specifically, ‘labour policy’ is comprised of (a) the political regulation of the relations between the actors in the world of work, and (b) labour market policy in the sense of the institutional, process-oriented, and decision-oriented dimensions of political activity that aim to regulate the labour market.

2. Latin America: A Continent Marked by Extreme Inequalities

Latin American societies are marked by some of the highest rates of social inequality in the world. In the last few decades, there may have been a slight decrease; but even after a decade of economic boom, the level of inequality is still 60% higher than the OECD average (Wehr/Burchardt 2011). If the Gini coefficient is taken as an indicator, only sub-Saharan countries are currently experiencing similar peak values (CEPAL 2011: ch. 1, p. 14).

A characteristic feature of social structures in Latin America is the high level of income concentration. On the one hand, the top tenth controls up to 50% of the total income of the Latin American population (Bourguignon/Morrisson 2002). Until the end of the last decade, on the other hand, more than 30% of people lived below the poverty line and had no or insufficient access to medical care and schooling. Almost one sixth of all Latin Americans lacked dignified working conditions as well as sufficient nutrition and housing. During the last decade, poverty rates may have fallen considerably, but the 15% of people who managed to escape poverty are hovering just above the poverty line. They lack sufficient social security, are dependent on the performance of their countries in the world market and are permanently faced with the risk of renewed social degradation (CEPAL 2010, 2011).



Latin America poverty and indigence, 1980-2011

Source: CEPAL 2011: ch.1, p. 5

Extreme inequality does not just consist of inequalities of income and wealth, but also of unequal access to land and to key public services such as education, social security and healthcare (De Ferranti et al. 2004; Lopez/Perry 2008; Milanovic/Muñoz 2008). Regional labour markets are key factors in the generation of various dimensions of social inequality and act as a “primary stratification device” (Barrientos 2009: 89; CEPAL 2011: ch. 3); whether in relation to income distribution and access to social security systems, life chances (for education see Peters 2011), ethnic and gender disparities, or spatial discrepancies (city/countryside), all of which represent powerful “horizontal inequalities” (Kreckel 2004, translated).

The various dimensions of social inequality trigger a self-reinforcing dynamic, which is portrayed in the literature as a “vicious circle” (World Bank 2006), “negative complementarities” (Hall/Soskice 2001; Schneider/Karcher 2010) and “poverty traps” (Sachs 2006). Latin America is faced with structured inequalities in the sense of permanent restrictions that have existed for generations and concern people’s access

to commonly available or desirable social services and positions. The origins and causes of these structures remain an object of controversy, but there is general agreement that social inequality became fixed from the 19th century onwards at a level above the global average (Acemoglu/Robinson 2006; Coatsworth 2008; Engermann/Sokoloff 2006, 2005; Frankema 2009; Robinson 2008; Wehr/Burchardt 2011).

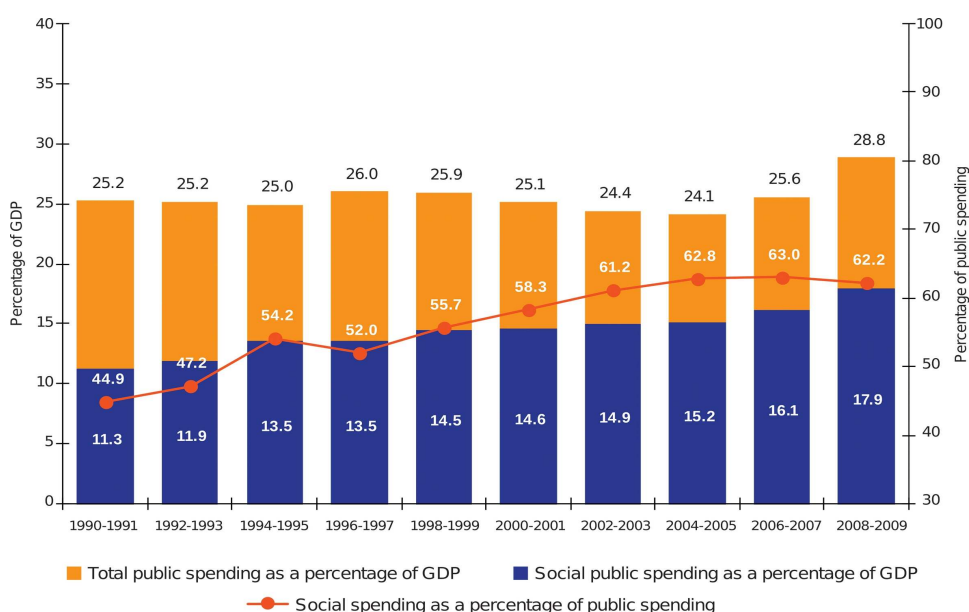
The persistence of these extreme forms of inequality is surprising. After all, throughout its volatile history, Latin America has experienced various economic development models and approaches to democracy as well as some fairly developed welfare regimes. The consolidation of social inequality has occurred in a relatively independent fashion, in spite of the given economic structures and the (partly high) degree of economic development (Segura Ubiergo 2007). None of the economic strategies pursued, which differ considerably (compare, for example, import-substituting industrialization [ISI] from the 1930s onwards and market radicalism in the 1980s [Burchardt 2007]), have significantly reduced the rates of inequality. Even the booming economy of the last decade only resulted in a slight decrease in the rates of inequality, but not a reversal of the trend. Today, the Gini coefficients in the region are approaching the level of the early 1980s, regardless of whether we look primarily at agrarian or industrial countries (CEPAL 2010; López-Calva/Lustig 2010).

As a result, the persistence of inequality in Latin America is a tough challenge for social scientists, in particular because it contradicts crucial aspects of the dominant theories of democracy and social policy, which reflect mostly European and North American experiences.

3. The Exclusive-Democratic Welfare State in Latin America

Even today, the majority of social scientists assume that participation in political decision-making entails extended social participation in the long run (Acemoglu/Robinson 2006; Boix 2003; Lindert 2004), and that political and social rights converge in the “democratic welfare state”. Most scholars refer to T.H. Marshall’s classic text *Citizenship and Social Class* from 1950, which highlights the connections between civil, political and social rights. Quite often, this is interpreted as the “social promise” of democracy: the market is characterized by economic efficiency and generates social inequality, but democracy produces political-legal equality. The resulting antagonism between freedom and equality can only be reconciled through the existence of social rights: the democratic welfare state, which generates social rights, becomes the entity guaranteeing prosperity, equality and stable social development (Marshall 1977).

Figure 2



Latin America and the Caribbean (21 countries): total public spending and social public spending, and social spending as a proportion of total public spending, 1990/1991 to 2008/2009.

Source: CEPAL 2011: Síntesis, p. 39

The *Latin American Paradox* (Burchardt 2010) emphasizes the fact that so far, there has not been a decrease in social inequality in the region, despite democratic impulses. Authors in the area of democratic theory often link this state of affairs to flaws in the political regime. They either focus on processes and institutions, identifying “defects” and forms of “low-intensive-citizenship” (O’Donnell 1999), or they produce typologies that portray Latin American democracies as “diminished subtypes” (Collier/Levitsky 1995) of the occidental original. Even if such criteria are used to measure the quality of democracy, it is important to point out that in the area of political freedom, Latin America does relatively well compared to other regions of the world, e.g., Eastern Europe (Freedom House 2012). In a long-term study, the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) established that most elections in the regions are “fair and free”, and that chances for participation by disadvantaged groups (such as women and indigenous people) have improved (PNUD 2004). In some areas, new forms of civic engagement have emerged in the region that serves as a model for other parts of the world; participatory budgeting is a notable example (Avritzer 2009).

Reflections in the area of democratic theory are not only too narrow. The oft-heard assumption that social policy in Latin America lacks resources is also mistaken. Many societies in the region have long traditions of welfarism. In countries such as Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Cuba and Uruguay, social security systems emerged as early as the 1920s (Mesa-Lago 1978). Socially liberal social policies of neoliberalism from the 1980s onwards may have resulted in deepening social disparities rather than in the intended efficiency gains for the economy and social policy (Berg et. al. 2006; Grassi 2003; Ocampo 2007). But it did not entail a continuous reduction in the resources available to the welfare state. Today, social expenditure in many Latin American countries fluctuates at around 20% of BIP and accounts for more than half of total public expenditure (CEPAL 2011); countries like Uruguay and Costa Rica have reached levels of expenditure comparable to those of Norway and Switzerland (Segura-Ubierno 2007).

Social policy in the region followed western models, in particular the Bismarckian model, and focused on systems of social insurance that were linked to formal, male wage labour. In light of the rise of various labour movements in the region, social policy acted as a mechanism for the integration of the emerging strata of white- and blue-collar workers. This rise was accompanied by upward social mobility; in their heyday in the 1950s, labour movements secured welfare provisions and social rights for a

large and increasing part of the population. In some countries, this included up to 60% of all people (Mesa-Lago 1978).

Nevertheless, social policy in Latin America always remained highly selective and exclusive. From the start, it was based on a vertical strategy of integration, which focused on improving provision for those already insured, rather than on the horizontal extension of coverage. It was mostly urban, male employees and civil servants who profited from the expansion of the welfare state. There was hardly any reduction in inequalities, and the (mostly rural) poor were excluded from key welfare provisions. Vertical integration often provoked strong centralization, excessive administrative costs and the misallocation of resources. At the level of party politics and government, it promoted clientelistic and paternalistic policies aimed at securing existing privileges (Mesa-Lago 1985). The focus, in gender terms, on the male breadwinner ignored (and continues to ignore) the working and living conditions of many families, which are shaped by female employment. It is not a surprise that the Latin American welfare state, even in its phase of prosperity, did not reduce social inequality significantly and that it was possible to present the “two-thirds” societies in the region as a product of successful social policy (Franco 1996).

The neoliberal reforms in social policy from the 1980s onwards that introduced selective, targeted and conditional income transfers, were not completely unsuccessful. In a modified form, policies of this type are still in use in many countries, some with progressive governments among them. However, they initially deepened the existing social disparities (Harvey 2005). Many people experienced the neoliberal restructuring of the welfare system as a retrenchment; large portions of the middle classes felt the pressure while an exclusive stratum of the wealthy enjoyed privileged access to the welfare state was able to hold on to its entitlements (Haggard/Kaufman 2008). Today, the selectiveness and exclusiveness of social policy in Latin American is still reflected in all facets, despite neoliberal restructuring and retrenchment, and later attempts at redress. It can thus be seen as a historical constant (Barrientos 2004; CEPAL 2011: ch. 3).

In the last decade, the social question that had always remained a pressing issue reappeared as a key item on the political agenda (Schamis 2006). This resulted in a significant shift in the political landscape (Weyland 2009; Weyland et. al. 2010), which in many Latin American countries was reflected in the implementation of various

reforms of social and labour policy (Barrientos/Santibañez 2009; Weyland et al. 2010). Nevertheless, it is still mainly high-waged employees who benefit from the welfare state, despite the fact that welfare provisions are partly financed through indirect taxes and levies and are thus funded in particular by social groups not covered by the social security net (Huber et. al. 2009). In Europe, each fifth of society receives about 20% of the overall welfare expenditure; in Latin America, the top tenth gets 70%, and in the regressive pension sector, the number is 80% (Riesco 2007; Segura-Ubierno 2007). The poorest people in the region are not even entitled to basic welfare services; even in Costa Rica, a model country for social policy, the bottom fifth only receives about 12% of all welfare expenditure. It is hardly possible to counter enormous income inequalities with this type of resource allocation (Goñi et al. 2008). The redistributive effect of fiscal measures is also relatively limited, which is partly due to the fact that the imposition of a taxation monopoly has only been a partial success (Boeckh 2011; Goñi et al. 2008; Lindert et al. 2006; Lopez/Perry 2008).

4. Research on Social Policy and Welfare Regimes: State of Knowledge and Debates

The re-emergence of the social question, its return to the political agenda and the experimentation with new social policies in Latin America (Barrientos/Santibañez 2009; Fraile 2009) has been accompanied in recent years by a stronger engagement of social policy research with the region. Two different branches of research have emerged: on the one hand, social scientists use methods and insights of policy analysis to establish the patterns of social policy in Latin America. On the other hand, research on welfare regimes has become more prevalent. Despite the fact that both branches have contributed to furthering our knowledge considerably, they do not succeed in our view in identifying the essence of the Latin American Paradox: that is, the existence of an exclusive-democratic welfare state based on high rates of inequality.

Policy studies are mainly dedicated to studying the effectiveness and efficiency, as well as the normative implications, of the impact of different welfare reforms. This thread of analysis entails controversies about practical policy-making, e.g. demands for “new” fiscal or social contracts (Lora 2007; Machinea/Serra 2008) and how to judge political reforms. Currently, some social scientists are observing a “silent revolution” (Lora 2007) taking place within the Latin American welfare regimes, while others believe that these regimes are at a critical juncture (see Luna/Filgueira 2009, and for more critical accounts, López-Calva/Lustig 2010 and Weyland/Madrid/Hunter 2010). Depending on their standpoint, authors use diverging criteria to evaluate the efficiency of social policy. For example, they ask to what extent a certain policy reduces poverty and inequality, or if the chosen strategy of combating poverty results in excessive economic costs. The objects of inquiry are usually discrete political projects. Thanks to this branch of research, there is now a significant corpus of empirical studies in social policy research (e.g. Rawlings/Rubio 2005, Fizbein/Shaby 2009).

At the conceptual level, much of the research on social policy in Latin America overlaps with that of policy analysis in general: there is a link between the production of knowledge and policy improvement as well as problem-solving. “It is this problem

orientation, more than any other feature that distinguishes policy analysis from disciplines that prize knowledge for its own sake" (Dunn 2008: 2).

Regardless of whether policy research of this kind is produced in academia or in political consulting, it is mostly characterized by a technocratic-governmental bias. It assumes the position of the people in government looks at problems through their eyes and takes their criteria for success and efficiency as guidelines. The strengths of policy analysis, according to Dunn, can also be seen as its weaknesses. Due to the policy turn in political science and the shift of focus to research on policy results, the discipline is increasingly losing sight of the contradictory aspects of politics (Greven 2008). There is a tendency for policy analysis to overlook the fact that policies are not only altruistic instruments aimed at resolving problems, but they also always have the potential to cause or deepen problems. In other words, it is often a question of standpoint whether a certain phenomenon is perceived as a problem or not, and whether a certain social policy is seen as the solution to a problem or as its exacerbation. The current, lively debate on Conditional Cash Transfer Programmes (CCT) may illustrate this argument: Whereas some social scientists welcome such programmes and highlight their relatively dramatic effects in terms of reducing poverty, others argue that they prevent people from integrating into the primary labour market; critics further argue that the costs outweigh the benefits and that the programmes promote paternalistic practices (Rawlings/Rubio 2005).

Studies on welfare regimes take a different perspective on social policy. Following Esping-Andersen (1990), they establish the specificity of the welfare regimes prevalent in Latin America (Barrientos 2004, 2009; Espina 2008; Filgueira 2007; Martínez-Franzoni 2008; Valencia Lomelí 2010). Thanks to Esping-Andersen, multi-level analyses of various configurations have replaced quantitative and comparative approaches to the welfare state that make overly simplified, linear assumptions and use oppositions such as "more/less", "better/worse" and "developed/under-developed". According to Esping-Andersen, welfare regimes are relatively stable, institutionalized arrangements of regulation that address the problematic nexus between work and welfare. They are constituted by a specific welfare mix consisting of public and private welfare provisions, which are based on three key institutions: the state, the market, and the family. The quality and scope of social rights is determined by their potential for decommodification. This is a reference to welfare provisions that enable people to survive without being dependent on income generated in the labour market (Esping-

Andersen 1990: 35–54). Welfare regimes are characterized by their own logics of social structuring (55–78). Based on these, Esping-Andersen has developed profiles of various welfare states. This attempt to analyse welfare-state arrangements in the context of the social relations of reproduction and of complex, interwoven causal mechanisms was ground-breaking. Esping-Andersen became a constant point of reference for social policy research and for scholars exploring and producing typologies of the new worlds of welfare. (Arts/Gelissen 2002; de Beer/Wildeboer 2001; Lessenich 1994).²

Undoubtedly, the application of this approach to the Latin American case contributes to updating the state of knowledge: it goes beyond the description of flaws in social policy that was common in the past, embeds social policy in the social relations of reproduction, and attempts, to a stronger degree, to take into account regional specifics.³ Nevertheless, it is fraught with difficulties, especially since the adoption of this concept of the welfare regime tends to result in the mechanical construction of ideal types. In fact, Esping-Andersen himself concedes that he constructs ideal types (1990: 58). He argues that following Max Weber, these should “only” be seen as a methodological prelude to the construction of theories or as an instrument for the generation of theories. However, in his actual research practice, he (just like his later adherents) turns these ideal types into the actual content and results of his theoretical reflections (Rieger 1998: 75–81). As a consequence, the approaches that follow his research tend to be incapable of descending from the “heights” of the “big picture” (Esping-Andersen 1990: 2) into the “lowlands” of social practices and the reality of social policy. Accordingly, the method has already been critically discussed in detail in the literature.⁴ In Europe, this has led to the modification or extension of Esping-

2 The field of validity of this approach was soon extended to Southern Europe (Ferrera 1996; Lessenich 1995), and to Australia and New Zealand (Castles/Mitchell 1990). Empirically, it also inspired general studies on states outside the OECD (Gough/Wood 2004, 2006) and more particular studies on Latin America (Barrientos 2004; Martínez-Franzoni 2008; Rudra 2007; see Valencia Lomelí 2010 for an overview and Wehr 2009, 2010 for a critical appraisal).

3 Due to its focus on expenditure, this happens primarily by producing differentiated accounts of Latin American welfare mixes. Accordingly, there are many studies that provide complex descriptions of the patterns of expenditure of the various welfare regimes in the region. They also highlight the relatively limited role of the state in producing welfare. However, they neglect a strategically important dimension of social policy: the generation of state revenue (Wehr 2010: 91–93).

4 The construction of ideal types is usually based on a complex form of correlation and regression analysis. It can be challenged by pointing out that the resulting studies are usually cross-sectional and only valid for a limited time (Kohl 1993: 79). If data are collected again after a time lapse, there is a possibility that the variance within each individual regime will become larger than that between the various regimes. Moreover, a change in the method used for analysing the existing data usually tends to lead to the reversal of the research conclusions (Obinger/Wagschal 1998). A study by Scruggs and Allan (2006a), which reapplied

Andersen's "three worlds". Most accounts of Latin America in this area have followed the same path. They primarily attempt to adapt typologies to local conditions without, however, questioning the principle of constructing ideal types (Martínez Franzoni 2008).

This methodological weakness is especially apparent if we look more closely at a category of crucial importance to Esping-Andersen: "decommodification". Based on a dichotomous logic of "politics against markets", his decommodification ranking (Esping-Andersen 1990: 52) makes it an analytical requirement to clearly differentiate between commodification and decommodification. This requirement concerning typology threatens to lead to a distorted perception of social reality. In other words, the concept of decommodification informing the research on welfare regimes is static, de-contextualized and individualistic, but the social world is dynamic, contextualized and relational (Lessenich 1998: 93). In fact, commodification and decommodification are dependent on each other: the former is impossible without the latter if the reproduction of the market society, or the "satanic mill", is not to be undermined (Polanyi [1944] 1978). The state and the economy should not be understood as antipodes, but as interdependent categories; actors should not only be seen as individuals, but also as collectives, and the social world should not only be viewed as a static entity, but also as a process.

Esping-Andersen takes these relationships seriously in his introductory remarks, but they blur and even vanish once he begins constructing ideal types. This suggests that they have no relevance for his empirical research.⁵ The initial factual determination of social policy as a form of decommodification mutates into an a priori, normative determination. According to this new determination, the essence of welfare provision consists of the ability to offer alternative sources of income located outside the market to wage dependent people (Rieger 1998: 64–66). The category of decommodification

Esping-Andersen's main decommodification index, had the following results: "Relying on the same characteristics as the original decommodification index, our results suggest a very different ordering and clustering of countries. Based on our analysis, the previous results misclassified almost half of the cases" (Scruggs/ Allan 2006a: 69; see also the critical appraisal of the index of stratification in Scruggs/Allan 2006b).

⁵ Esping-Andersen begins with a declaration of intent: "In summary, we have to think in terms of social relations, not just social categories" (1990: 18). This declaration is stripped of its analytical potential once he makes the following statement: "As we survey international variations in social rights and welfare-state stratification, we will find qualitatively different arrangements between state, market, and the family. The welfare-state variations we find are therefore not linearly distributed, but clustered by regime-types" (26).

becomes a (mostly implicit) political ideal; on the basis of this, it appears possible to make normative judgements by transforming it into a linear criterion for development, according to which the partial negation of the value form of labour power becomes the norm for a successful welfare state.

The majority of studies on welfare regimes in Latin America follow these basic principles and primarily discuss the question of commodification/ decommodification from this perspective. They nevertheless display a high degree of sensitivity for the issues discussed. After all, they concern themselves with the fragmented labour markets in the region, which forces them to critically reflect on Esping-Andersen's concept of decommodification. Rudra, for example, explicitly states that this analytical focus on the category of decommodification presupposes a successful process of commodification in her account of the welfare regimes in Latin America, Africa and Asia (2007). This, however, has not yet often happened in the regions of the world in question: vast parts of the employable population are excluded from formal labour markets. At this point, the research on welfare regimes takes existing knowledge on informality⁶ into account. Moreover, it highlights that precarious forms of labour market integration often entail precarious forms of social security, which in turn strongly shape the regional welfare mix.

In this situation, political decision-makers are faced with the complex problem of either implementing decommodifying policies targeting a relatively exclusive circle of formal employees (protective regimes), or aiming for the commodification of informal employment (productive regimes), or possibly combining both (Rudra 2007). In their interregional studies, Gough and Wood (2004, 2006) highlight the fact that formal labour markets outside the OECD are only partially capable of absorbing workers. The consequence is that for vast parts of the population, the social security provided by the state remains fragile. In this situation, family and informal relations are crucial,

⁶ There are current approaches that attempt to move beyond traditional dichotomies and conceptualize the separation between the informal and the formal sphere in a more fluid way. Rather than speaking of "sectoral separation", they tend to refer to an "informal economy" (Chen 2005: 5, translated). In so doing, they aim to produce a more differentiated picture at the empirical level; that is, a more adequate representation of the multiplicity of activities in the informal economy (ILO 2002: 19, Chen/Vanek/Heintz 2006: 2136). The majority of studies on informality, however, are still not capable of providing a precise and concise definition of informality itself (Altwater/Mahnkopf 2007: 337; de Freitas, 2009). As a result, they tend to construe the non-formal, in the last instance, as the antithesis of the mostly male industrial-capitalist wage relation. Studies adopting this negative determination often fail to identify the autonomous social logics and particular social mechanisms of regulation in the informal economy.

which is why Gough and Wood characterize numerous welfare regimes in Latin America, East Asia, and Africa as “informal security regimes”. Barrientos (2004, 2009) argues along similar lines in his account of the development of Latin American welfare regimes. He discusses the question of whether the neoliberal rift from the 1980s onwards can be seen as a “critical juncture”, at which the traditional “truncated conservative/informal regimes” turned into “hyphenated liberal-informal regimes” due to labour market liberalization among others factors. Despite these changes, informality remains a persistent feature of the welfare regimes in Latin America.

An increasing number of recent studies on welfare regimes highlight a fact that is in our view essential for research on social policy in Latin America, but which is only understood in an unsatisfactory way: the share of non-formal employment (especially outside agriculture) in Latin America is massive and possibly applies to the majority of the labour force. The usefulness of Esping-Andersen’s analytical instruments is limited when it comes to studying this phenomenon. There are many examples of informal economies where vast sections of the population have not yet been commodified. There are also highly commodified informal sectors which have been integrated into formalized networks of production and distribution, yet do not respond to decommodification policies or prove incompatible with the dominant social policies. The studies in question do not use this knowledge in order to analyse, in a relational fashion, the convergences and dynamics between the various modes of labour market integration and the labour and social policies pursued by governments. Instead, they are primarily concerned with the construction of new ideal types of welfare regimes and thus produce static schemes. In other words, they work methodologically with the normative assumptions and dichotomies that they have criticized to a certain degree at an earlier stage.

5. New Perspectives on the Exclusive-Democratic Welfare State

There is no reason to doubt the innovative character of much of the current research on social policy and welfare regimes. Against the backdrop of our critical appraisal of this research, we nevertheless advocate rewriting the research agenda. The panorama of social inequalities illustrated at the beginning of this paper allows room for a variety of conclusions. On the one hand, there seems to be a *Latin American equilibrium* (Robinson 2008): that is, a balance of forces achieved through a limited form of coordination among elites, which enables certain groups to persistently defend their privileges, despite the existing pressures to adjust, as well as economic, political and institutional change. This is managed in the face of significant parts of the population, with elites having enjoyed democratic legitimacy for years. On the other hand, the labour market and social policy should not only be viewed as a political response to social problems, but also as a reflection and potential amplifier. Latin America permits itself to invest in relatively exclusive welfare regimes, which spreads social risk broadly while focusing provisions on a small stratum of favoured people. This suggests that social policy is very efficient, not in terms of reducing social inequalities but in terms of their consolidation and continuous reproduction. Because the welfare state has been enjoying democratic legitimacy for three decades, it appears that there is either a regional consensus accepting inequality, or (and this is more likely considering opinion polls)⁷, the specific structure of Latin American democracies systematically prevents the majority of people from enjoying social participation, despite the existence of political freedom and political-legal equality.

Social inequality, poverty and electoral democracy appear to generate a “Latin American Triangle” (PNUD 2004), in which liberal democracy does not facilitate social participation, but legitimizes social inequalities, just as it is legitimized through these inequalities. In other words, social inequality should not only be understood as a deficiency characterizing democracy, institutional configurations and the welfare state in Latin America, but also as a reflection of an institutionalized form of political domination which is very successful considering its persistence. Consequently, in the

⁷ According to opinion polls, more than three quarters of the Latin American population regularly state that they experience income distribution in their countries as unjust or very unjust (CEPAL 2009).

remainder of the paper, we will conceptualize labour and social policy as a crystallization of power relations domination (Weinmann/Burchardt 2011).

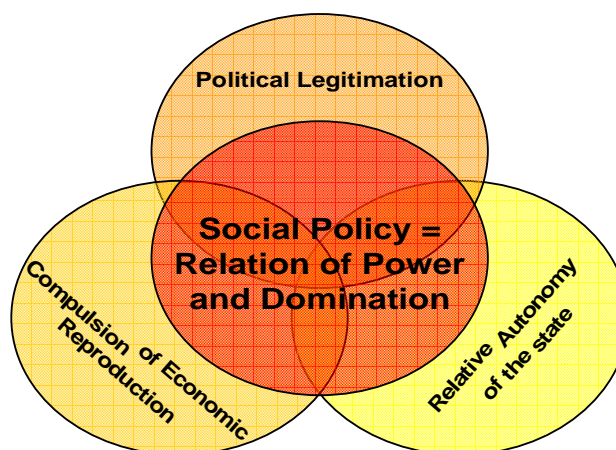
Currently, there are many studies committed to problem-solving or producing typologies; but very few approach the perpetual social inequality in Latin American by examining the empirical base of the Latin American Paradox, which consists of a form of (re)production of inequality that enjoys democratic legitimacy. We should not just ask to what extent certain policies are capable of reducing social inequality, but also to what extent they perpetuate or even advance it. As a result, social inequality will appear as the starting point and result of unequal power relations and thus of unequal opportunities for political participation. We assume that taking this into account provides us with a key analytical reference point for uncovering the institutional barriers to redistribution and the social relations of forces perpetuating social inequalities. Consequently, we aim to discover how social inequalities reproduce themselves despite the formal promises and guarantees of equality in consolidated democracies. How is it possible to continue containing the interests of disadvantaged social groups (Kreckel 2004: 23-24) while also re-stabilizing and re-legitimizing (in a democratic fashion) a status quo characterized by inequality?

Social policy in Latin America is (re)producing social inequalities in its own ways. The extreme disparities are not only the result of the famous “invisible hand”, but also of “clearly visible hands” (Boeckh 2002: 526). With this in mind, it is possible to develop a perspective on recent developments in the region capable of addressing the issue at stake. It seems apt to focus our research on Latin American labour markets and their political regulation because they are of key importance, as we have pointed out, for generating social inequality, and are currently subject to deepening change. Labour markets should be understood as a crystallization of the (re)production of social inequality. Within them, various social interests meet and actors within and outside the state shape processes of (re)production via informal as well as formal democratic policies. With the help of an empirical analysis of recent labour market reforms, it becomes possible to establish which actors and institutions preserve, reinforce or reduce social inequality as well as how they assert themselves against others; and how this is legitimized. An analysis along these lines promises new insights into the mechanisms that generate social inequality in Latin America.

5.1. Relational Social Analysis as a Research Approach in the Social Sciences

It seems particularly useful to pursue this question by employing the theoretical framework of “relational social analysis” (Offe 1972 [2006], Borchert/Lessenich 2006; Weinmann/Burchardt 2011). This approach is based on relating the various functional logics of social macro-structures as well as their sub-systems to one another while taking into account their mutual “dynamization” and contradictions. On the one hand, there are requirements for the reproduction of the economic system. Under conditions of democracy, on the other hand, there is also a normative-legitimizing system, or a need for legitimacy. Moreover, there is tension between these two features of society and the “interest of the state in itself”, i.e. its “relative autonomy” in the sense of a specific, autonomous logic of state-administrative activity.

Figure 3



Social Policy and Relational Social Analysis

We assume that social inequality in Latin America is not a reflection of economic and political deficiencies or other flaws, but the historic-concrete and repeatedly successful result of political domination. Therefore this approach seems promising. After all, it does not give primacy, in terms of the logic of explanations provided, to socio-economic structures, political institutions, the form of the state or single social actors. Rather, it is ‘open at the empirical level’.

Consequently, we assume that the tension between economic compulsion, political legitimation, and the form of the state materializes in labour and social policy. In the words of German sociologist Claus Offe, “we understand the term social policy to include the totality of those politically organized relations and strategies that

contribute to the resolution of [...] structural problems by continuously effecting the transformation of owners of labour power into wage-labourers“(Offe 1984: 99-100). Consequently, the state’s management of the permanent transformation of non-wage-labourers into wage-labourers and the existence of a public space within the scope of the welfare state are the reflections of complex social relations. We can establish the dominant modes of societalization and the form of societalization by examining the relations of compatibility and correspondence; that is, the relations among various form of labour and their position vis-à-vis the relations of total social reproduction.

Relational social analysis helps us to pose crucial questions regarding the socio-economic configuration and the logics of power and domination in Latin America. Regarding heterogeneous labour markets and the large share of informal employment, the following questions are of interest: Why has the permanent and large-scale transformation of non-wage labourers into wage-labourers not yet taken place in Latin America? Why is the owner of labour power not required to become a wage labourer in order to (formally) become a citizen? With these questions as a guide, it becomes possible, in principle, to establish how various forms of social labour shape the material living conditions of people. This gives rise to the fundamental question of what is the dominant mode of societalization and what are the prevalent social contradictions in Latin American societies. In this context, we should ask whether it is adequate to speak of ‘social production vs. private appropriation’ as the predominant, fundamental contradiction in society. In other words, we should find out whether the fragmented and segmented labour markets and the large share of informal employment are expressions of a specific form of societalization with distinct characteristics. This suggests that Latin American societies are exposed to specific structural and legitimation problems, which most analyses still neglect or even suppress.

The next step would be to examine, from a relational perspective, how the state influences the development of various material and institutional forms of labour. According to this perspective, state activity is subject to restrictions concerning its own economic functionality and social implementation, which means that the relative autonomy of the state is limited by economic crises, social conflicts, the efficiency of production and the interests of collective and corporatist actors. However, we assume that there is no a priori appropriation of the state by particular groups. Instead, state

activity is motivated by an “interest in itself”, or a commitment to being compatible with and creating a balance between the requirements of the economic system and the compulsion of legitimation resulting from democratic consent. The state is selective vis-à-vis the economic sphere in a double sense; it is selective vis-à-vis the narrow single interests of economic units, and also vis-à-vis the anti-systemic interests of certain parts of the population (Offe 2006 [1972]). This insight opens up our analysis for considerations on the internal logic of political institutions and political processes.

We believe that it is still necessary to determine the modes of societalization in Latin American societies, and that the relationship between social privileges and state domination should be examined more closely. We need to investigate the extent to which state-administrative activity is enjoying relative autonomy vis-à-vis the potentials of influence and conflict linked to elitist, particular interests. To what extent are privileged groups with particular interests able to get their way if they rely on state support or operate via the state? An analysis of domination focusing on social inequality in Latin America should involve investigating (a) whether and to what extent the self-interest of the state can develop if tension between economic and political compulsion is supplanted by privileged, particular interests and (b) how this, in turn, influences all other determinants of political domination.

In this context, one issue is of key importance: the sources of revenue that any state apparatus must possess simply to ensure its own reproduction. But how does the self-interest of the state constitute itself in Latin America? After all, the domestic extraction of revenue via taxation appears to be limited. This is due to the limited taxability of the informal economy and the tendency of elites to evade taxes, which are both reflected in the highly regressive structure of taxation. Do such configurations favour economic policies that focus on obtaining resources abroad and consider developing and formalizing the domestic market as secondary? Does the weakness in domestic appropriation lead to the strengthening of world market-oriented policies, elites and international actors such as TNCs, resulting in export-oriented models of resource extraction, as it appeared during the neoliberal turn in the 1980s? Could this be part of the explanation as to why labour market policies and policies of de-commodification are only applied in a segmented and limited fashion, primarily in the sectors relevant for the world market? Is the orientation to external sources of finance the product of the self-interest of the state or of demands by local elites, or is there a congruence of both factors? To what extent did Latin American countries succeed in integrating

influential groups and elites in domestic strategies and to convince them to pay higher taxes, and what results did it have? (In this case, a historical, longitudinal analysis would be particularly interesting.) What are the experiences of the progressive and democratically legitimized governments in the last decade that have committed to these political aims? How taxation policies has in the region developed in qualitative and quantitative terms, and are there attempts to increase the tax base through the formalization of labour relations? Are there indications that state-administrative activity, in the sense of Offe's self-interest of the state, advances such aims, or do power and interest groups use the state apparatus to block innovations in the area of taxation? In a nutshell: What are the results of the empirical exploration and the analytical examination of Latin American tax policy if viewed as a crystallization of political domination and a potential mechanism reflecting the self-interest of the state?

If there are powerful particular interests inside the state that contribute to the formulation and implementation of social and labour market policies, there are unavoidable restrictions to social participation. This, in turn, is at odds with the democratic constitution of Latin American societies (Burchardt 2010). If we want to avoid the usual typologies based on deficiencies, we need to look at the mechanisms that generate systematic (im) balances of power in spite of the democratic promise of equality. We need to find out how they privilege (or neglect) particular interests, needs and entitlements in the course of political decision-making. In this context, we neither assume that negotiations between various interests always take on a pluralist form, nor that there is a simple translation of resource nor class power into politics. There is rather a complex institutionalized process of "filtering" political decision-making and selecting particular interests inside the state (Offe [1972] 2006: 101). Selectivity is thus a key criterion for the effectiveness of power relations when it comes to shaping political processes.

In the empirical analysis of *particular* modes of selection, it is most likely possible to link the theory and method of relational social analysis with early approaches in community research in the US in the 1970s.⁸ The old debate on non-decisions (Bachrach/Baratz 1977; Lukes [1974] 2005) placed particular importance on non-

⁸ This idea can be found in Claus Offe's work, but it was only used to a limited extent in his empirical studies (Offe 1975, 1977).

decisions for questions of power and distribution as well as the problem of providing empirical evidence. By drawing on this debate, we will be able to detect institutional filters and modes of selection at the empirical level. In other words, we will identify specific modes of selection preceding and pervading institutions dedicated to decision-making. These modes ensure that the activities of certain social groups prevent others from pursuing their interests, fulfilling their needs and taking advantage of entitlements.

Our approach thus rejects both structural determinism, which derives the actions of actors solely from their social positions and functions, and formalistic conceptions of democracy, which assume the existence of a pluralist utopia and neglect structural relations of determination. Instead, we opt for a perspective that allows for the study of empirical political processes and the drawing of conclusions on fundamental relations of domination.

5.2. Redistributive Potentials in Recent Reforms: Convergences as a Reference for Comparisons

Finally, we want to demonstrate with reference to the reforms in Latin American labour policy, how the categories of relational social analysis enable us to analyse patterns of institutionalized filtering and the constellations of actors involved. Before we start looking for institutionalized elements of filtering, we need an object of social conflict for which boundaries can be identified at the empirical level. In our view, we should extract this object from the exclusive-democratic welfare state in Latin America, from the policies crystallized in institutions that perpetuate the unequal status quo. For this purpose, we need to establish an analytical frame of reference that permits building hypotheses on the logic of stratification inherent in redistributive potentials and barriers to redistribution. This will enable us to produce research findings on institutionalized barriers and social relations of forces in political processes that can be measured and compared.

Initially, two issues need to be addressed: Who are the key *actors* influencing labour market reforms? Which interests do they represent? Since the contents and successes of social policy reforms depend to a large degree on long-term factors (Scharpf 2000; Schmidt 2001; Pierson 2003), the determination of actors must take place with consideration of regional and local path dependencies. Since the era of import-substituting industrialization, labour relations in Latin American have usually been

characterized as “paternalistic-statist” (Birle/Mols 1994, translated) and based on political bargaining. In this way, they have been distinguished from autonomous processes of collective bargaining (Córdova 1981). Consequently, Latin American labour market policy has often been seen as aiming for the corporatist inclusion of unionized employees in key strategic industries and in public administration (Mesa-Lago 1978). In most cases, the resulting selective-corporatist arrangements have displayed a surprising degree of persistence, despite several factors: the often drastic limitation of union rights through authoritarian policies in the 1970s; the gains in autonomy since democratization took place; and the far-reaching economic reforms of the 1980s and 1990s (Haggard/Kaufmann 2008; Dombois 2006; Dombois/Pries 1999). As a result, the focus of research should be employers, governments and trade unions as stake-holders of privileged interests (Haggard/Kaufman 2008). Due to changes in the political relations of forces in the last decade, some authors ask whether there is a new era of incorporation (e.g. Luna/Filgueira 2009). Consequently, we should not only investigate this specific kind of tripartism. We also need to discover to what extent other actors have become more important for processes of political reform (such as new trade unions, social movements, parties, and international agencies) and what are the key institutional settings that reduce or expand the capacity of particular groups to shape outcomes. However, it is not only formal, institutionalized aspects of reform that need to be considered. The significance of informal factors is highlighted by much of the research on Latin America (Lauth 2004).⁹

Moreover, if we want approach the social relations of forces that perpetuate the unequal status quo, we need quantifiable criteria that reveal whether recent labour market reforms have triggered qualitative changes in the area of redistribution, or whether they only represent modifications that will result in the adaptation of the labour market to the interests of the traditional distributive coalitions aligned to the status quo. We assume that these criteria can be assembled into three concrete issues, which we will call “points of convergence”. They concern qualitative changes in the logic of distribution and can be derived analytically from the previously dominant patterns of social policy.

⁹ On the distorting effects of Latin American electoral systems see Snyder/Samuels 2001; for a historical comparison of constitutional safeguards for elite privileges, see Gargarella 2005; Menaldo 2008.

First, we need to ask to what extent the reforms contribute to the de-coupling of entitlements to social insurance and public welfare provisions from formal wage labour. This issue is particularly relevant because entitlements to social insurance are mostly reserved for formal employees in strategically important sectors, which is a product of the Bismarckian character of Latin American social policy. This is also the reason that many authors speak of truncated welfare states (de Ferranti et al. 2004). Whereas a further vertical deepening of welfare provisions would conform to the previously dominant logic of distribution, a horizontal expansion of coverage to formerly excluded workers, especially those in the informal economy, would amount to a departure from the dominant patterns. In addition, it would support the claim that there is a new era of incorporation, for which there is little empirical evidence so far (Luna/Filgueira 2009).

Second, we need to examine to what extent the policies in question contribute to the formalization of informal activity. The expansion of entitlements to social insurance does not necessarily entail changes to the structure of employment or a fundamental modification of the often precarious character of informal employment (for example, in relation to working times, wage levels, and health and safety). Furthermore, the expansion of formal labour is often the result of employment effects and growth-inducing policies. Consequently, we have to examine whether labour market reforms contribute to redistribution in a qualitative sense; in other words, whether (and if so, where) the volume of formal employment is increasing *proportionally* to informal activities. If there is an increase in formal labour that does not exclusively rely on economic growth and employment effects, this would signal a reversal of the 1990s trend, during which activities in the informal economy were growing (ILO 2000).

Third, it is highly significant whether the reforms succeed in integrating particularly precarious groups such as women, agricultural workers, adolescents or migrants into the formal labour market. These are social groups overrepresented in the informal economy, and are frequently missing from statistics because of their “invisible” activities.¹⁰ Moreover, they are represented disproportionately in the poor and precarious segments of the informal economy (ILO 2002). We need to find out to what extent social actors attempt to promote the political representation of this group or to

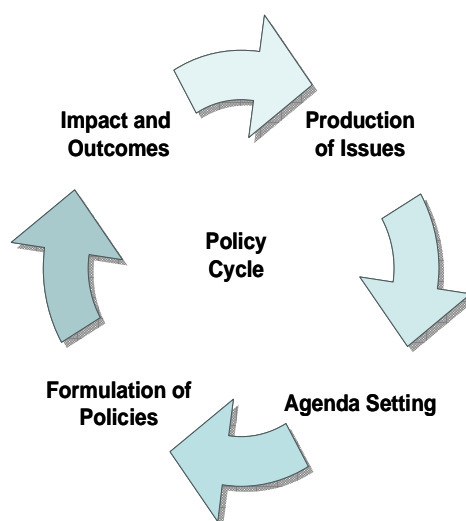
¹⁰ For more than a decade, the global network “Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing” (WIEGO) has been attempting to optimize the gender sensitivity of standard data sets and statistical methods.

block it, and whether recent reforms have created incentives for its integration into formal employment relations.

5.3. Analysing Reforms in Labour and Social Policy

We use the policy cycle model in order to identify points of convergence and to detect the multi-layered, institutionalized processes of filtering at work in the state (Jann/Wegrich 2003: 82).¹¹ This model serves as a heuristic instrument for structuring the stages of political processes. It enables us to position and structure the reforms examined and to reduce complexities if necessary. We distinguish four phases: (1) issue production, (2) agenda setting, (3) policy formulation, and (4) impact and outcomes. This enables us to identify the groups of actors that, according to the points of convergence, appear to be central to a given process of reform. The three social forces behind tripartism – employers, employees and the state – are at the heart of the analysis, but they are also complemented by organized interests located outside this traditional configuration of actors, for example new trade unions or social movements. We will ascribe specific characteristics to each section. In so doing, we will identify patterns and logics according to which certain interests, needs and entitlements are favoured and others are filtered out. We will be able to depict mechanisms of selection that have an impact on redistributive potentials and barriers to redistribution.

¹¹ We explicitly take into account critiques of the policy cycle approach and see them as ‘health warnings’ concerning our research strategy. These critiques highlight unjustified simplifications and imprecision in the description of policy processes, including: the assumption that there is a linear logic informing the policy process, which conceals non-sequential aspects; the one-sided focus on state actors and institutions; the two-dimensional perspective on policy formulation and its implementation, which prevents a differentiated take on the dynamics and complexities of political processes; and the lack of congruence between the purported stages and the reality of politics, where the different stages overlap and exist in parallel (Gellner/Hammer 2010: 69-73). Against this backdrop, we refrain from delimiting stages by dividing them into neatly separated periods. Rather, they should be seen as fluid and semi-contradictory passages between other stages. By proceeding this way, the approach can be transformed into an open and dynamic model (Blum 2011: 133-134) that allows examining reforms in a systematic fashion.

Figure 4

Process of Political Reform

When we look at the first phase (issue production), we will address the question of how interests, needs and entitlements become inputs of political reform processes.¹² At this point, which precedes the actual process of legislation, the research focus is on how collective actors formulate interests in terms of the three points of convergence. For example, we need to examine which exact positions and demands are voiced when trade unions or social movements support (a) the extension of entitlements to social security and rights and standards at work, and (b) policies of inclusion for groups acutely affected by precariousness and poverty.

We will identify processes of marginalization internal to the associations involved in order to detect the mechanisms ensuring that the interests of certain social groups are not considered at all, for example because these groups turn out to have a limited capacity for organization and conflict. Which role does the trade union apparatus and its functional surroundings play for the political system and the corporatist institutions? Was it attempted (and if so, how) to encourage trade unions to respond to the interests of workers in the informal sector? What is the position of employer

¹² Every political process begins with a social issue or conflict that leads social actors to voice demands according to their interests. The aim is to ensure that these demands become part of the political agenda. However, we cannot assume that social issues are automatically addressed by the political-administrative system of the state. As a result, we have to ask to what extent various interest groups perceive problems in a subjective manner, and how they transform them into issues and develop them according to political demands.

associations and parties on these issues? Are there visible alliances of interest? How do members of the organizations in question react, and which groups are over- and underrepresented?

An analysis of processes of marginalization would most likely reveal that so far, many Latin American trade unions have only transformed the interests of informal workers into one of their “issues” to a limited degree (or not all) due to incapacity or unwillingness to get involved. As a result, it was hardly ever necessary for the state to implement social policies addressing this issue. Within the framework of relational social analysis, we can highlight a particular structural problem faced by Latin American trade unions: due to the existence of fragmented and segmented labour markets, attempts to represent the resulting heterogeneity through a few centralized organizations are necessarily going to produce problems of integration. In this context, trade unions can operate according to the principle of “social closure” (Weber) and generate internal solidarity for certain groups of employees. If they do so, however, they exclude those on the outside (the people who are not represented). As a result, even the trade unions reproduce (or even reinforce) the fault lines and hierarchies in the labour market.

The next step consists of addressing the question of agenda setting. We will examine how issues are put on the political agenda, and how they are negotiated politically by legislative and executive bodies. In other words, how are the specific demands of trade unions, social movements and employer associations put on the political agenda, and which demands and problems are ignored (and why)? Finding an answer requires identifying the various mechanisms of selection and marginalization. Among these mechanisms are party-based modes of selection (e.g. restrictions on participation in electoral competition existing in every party system). After all, the needs and interests that cannot be aggregated via parties or have not prevailed against others at party level are being filtered out before the process of legislation even begins. This raises the question of to what extent (and why) the demands made by trade unions, social movements and employer association are matched by those made in the political process of legislation. At this point, the research focuses on the difference between the production of issues in the form of powerful demands and the actual input into the process of legislation in the form of legislative initiatives. Legislative activities such as refusing to act, rejecting action (non-decisions), diluting demands and being selective will provide indications as to the fundamental groups of actors involved. Either certain

interests are not articulated at all, or their opponents are so powerful that topics do not manage to “leap” from the public agenda onto the political agenda. In this context, we have to look more closely at informal forms and patterns of influence. And yet, Latin American political systems are characterized by highly formalized, constitutionalized rules of competition, which often reflect post-authoritarian origins. Many regime transformations are based on elite coalitions (see Merkel 1999: 129-135), which limit the scope of democratic governments (Hagopian 1990; Karl/Schmitter 1991).

Procedures of selection outside the political-administrative system consist of the transformation of certain interests, first into issues and then into inputs. Once these procedures have been completed, the phase of policy formulation and decision-making follows; policies are designed (for example reform projects), and alternatives are negotiated. “Articulated problems, suggestions and demands [become] projects of the state” (Jann/Weigrich 2009: 89, translated). According to our relational interpretation, the state-administrative apparatus is faced with a fundamental dilemma at this point; it has to balance the demands admitted into the political sphere and the needs authorized by selection with the requirements and the durability of the economic sphere, and to do so without neglecting its own interests. The demand for compatibility, which always remains precarious, results in the need for internal rationalization of welfare provision systems: “[...] the corresponding *pressure* for rationalization results from the fact that the conflicting ‘demands’ and requirements faced by the political-administrative system continually call into question the compatibility and practicability of the existing institutions of social policy” (Offe 1984: 104).

By determining which actors and “bearers” of interests in the central arenas of executive and legislative bodies shape and modify this output and how this happens, we obtain relevant information regarding the groups of domination in a society. Political output is shaped in the formal arenas of government and parliament, but also via informal channels of exchange and negotiation that involve various interest groups. Once again, we need to investigate whether actors such as trade unions or employer associations not directly participating in legislation are nevertheless capable of making their demands heard, for example via the ministerial bureaucracy, commissions, or non-parliamentary protest. Policy analysis takes into account the fact that systems of government, the polity and the political culture vary across different

national states. This suggests a need to distinguish various policy networks as well as diverging and distinct groups of actors. These should clearly include informal sites of negotiation (Schneider 2009): political decisions are not only shaped by linkages between decision-makers and voters, but also through relationships between decision-makers and influential interest groups.¹³ At this point, whether decision-making in each concrete case is geared towards electoral majorities or the demands of strong lobby and interest groups becomes a relevant question.

In addition, we need to consider constitutional or other institutional mechanisms (the electoral system; the division of capacities between executive and legislative bodies; the role of second chambers, federalism and referenda) that are either geared towards diluting demands for redistribution and stabilizing the status quo, or towards turning redistribution into an explicit topic of political debate via constitutional or other types of institutional change (as happened in Ecuador, Bolivia and Venezuela). This can be done by identifying constitutional or institutionalized veto points (Tesebelis 1995: 307) and by examining counterstrategies aimed at overcoming or weakening institutional barriers to redistribution. There are various constitutions of Latin American states that contain detailed provisions imposing public expenditure and taxation ceilings. In this way, they exclude numerous issues relevant for redistribution from normal procedures of legislation (see Menaldo 2008). Against this backdrop, some authors argue that constitutional policy represents a key means for economic and political elites to protect themselves from the potentials of expropriation inherent in democracy (Acemoglu/Robinson 2006). Our research design enables us to gauge the relevance of such instruments (such as vetoing minorities) in concrete cases.

The distinction between the formulation of policies and political decision-making is fluid. Decision-making entails moving between the poles of positive and negative decisions. Negative decisions and non-decisions usually tend to preserve the status quo (Howlett/Ramesh 2003: 129); in some cases, certain topics may make it onto the public and political agenda, but the political process is obstructed. It is also possible to

13 Even in less unequal societies, political decision-making does not simply reflect the preferences of the majority. Quite often, they mirror the preferences of lobby groups, which are usually better organized (cf. Berg-Schlusser/Kersting 2000; Ruß 2005). Nevertheless, there is a positive feedback loop between active social policy and the electoral mobilization of disadvantaged groups (Hall 2008; Hunter/Power 2007). Consequently, the precise configuration of influence affecting political decisions that are relevant for social inequality should be established with the guidance of case studies.

identify modes of selection at the level of the political system, at the parliamentary level and, to a degree, even at the administrative level. This is done by examining drafts and legislative initiatives, from the formulation of a policy conception via its modification and adjustment to its approval or rejection in parliament. Moreover, it is also possible to give systematic accounts of how contents change by comparing the initial aims with the actual outputs. This is achieved by examining party manifestos, government announcements, and the wording of laws, decrees, minutes of congress sessions, and budgets. In this context, our knowledge interest is tracing the links between actual political results and specific interest groups.

During the last phase, we look at the outcomes and the impact¹⁴ of the chosen process of political reform. We focus our analysis on the question of how the instruments of “steering” and the regulations and laws in the field of labour relations are used in practice. The following questions need to be considered, which all concern the impact of political reform: How do state actors interpret laws (“agenda specification”). How do they implement agendas? Which resources are provided (Jann/Wegrich 2009: 95)? This can be achieved by examining contracts, single decisions, and the distribution of resources. Apart from that, we need to ask what the direct effects of the reform are on trade unions and employers. The implementation of labour and social policy is located somewhere between its undistorted implementation by the administration and government and the resistance of interest groups blocking it in various ways, for example by employers refusing to observe legal provisions or by trade unions and social movements engaging in social protest. In such cases, the outcome can be the reformulation of a policy.

It is more difficult to evaluate the social impact of recent social policies. Particularly in the field of labour and social policy, this can only be done with the benefit of hindsight. In order to consider the material impact of a certain social policy, it should be discussed in relation to historical experiences and, at the stage of implementation, in relation to common knowledge as regarding likely impact and outcomes.

¹⁴ We understand impact as effects of a political reform that concern the people explicitly addressed, while the outcomes are effects that trigger reactions from the political system (Jann/Wegrich 2003: 80).

6. Conclusion

The research design presented in this paper is not only aimed at elucidating the connection between inequality and social policy in Latin America. Based on relational social analysis, it is strongly characterized by context sensitivity and empirical openness. As a result, it could be used to detect autonomous social logics in other political fields and in other regions and countries outside the OECD. The categories and indicators developed here facilitate precise empirical measurement and systematic comparisons. Our approach does not deny the validity of proven and tested methods and knowledge in social policy and development research. Rather, it attempts to develop them further by making adjustments and establishing new links at the level of categories. To us, relational social analysis is a promising way of doing justice to the demand that the western, universalistic traditions in social theory should be decentered, but it does so without losing itself in particularities or cultural relativism and cutting the link to general debates in the social sciences. In fact, our change of perspective is a reaction to the exigencies of global structural change in the 21st century; there is a growing influence of societies about which we know little and we have limited experience with how to generate new knowledge about these societies. Western scholarship should reinvent itself in the course of discovering such unfamiliar worlds. In so doing, it would shield itself from loss of relevance in the near future.

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