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Reviews

Merike Blofield (ed.), *The Great Gap: Inequality and the Politics of Redistribution in Latin America* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2011), pp. viii+407, \$39.95, pb.

ANTHONY HALL

London School of Economics and Political Science

Interdisciplinary attempts to understand the increasingly complex relationships between continuing inequality and politics in Latin America are somewhat thin on the ground. Merike Blofield's excellent edited volume, prepared under the aegis of the Observatory on Inequality in Latin America at the University of Miami, represents a welcome contribution in this regard. It addresses the apparent contradiction between two decades of formal democracy on the continent and its shift to the political left on one hand and, on the other, the persistence of severe socio-economic disparities, which remain among the highest in the world.

Fundamentally, the book questions why democratically elected governments have not done more to address these inequalities and how they are connected with the political and policy process. It asks how inequalities have affected politics and policy choices, whether democracy effectively challenges or perpetuates inequality, and what political opportunities might be generated to tackle the challenge of redistribution.

The book's 11 chapters are organised into four parts: historical, social and demographic; elite culture, public opinion and media framing; agenda-setting and access to resources; and taxation and social policies. Introductory and final sections summarise the book's major themes and conclusions while exploring implications for reducing inequality. Part I sets the scene by considering some of the socio-economic foundations of inequality in Latin America, drawing out country similarities and differences. Filgueira highlights the extreme levels of inequality across the region and high dependency ratios compared with other continents. He claims that incomplete demographic and labour market transitions have created social 'fault lines' that, unless addressed through basic reforms, present especially daunting technical and political challenges that will impede economic development. Crespo and Ferreira stress the fundamental inequalities of opportunity that are predetermined by distorted access to education and health and that compromise development.

Part II is particularly interesting in its focus on the way elite culture and media coverage help to reinforce inequality by perpetuating elite values and stereotyped class images. Reis examines this phenomenon in Brazil, whose wealthier groups see threats to their safety as the main consequences of crime and violence associated with poverty. They tend to deny any personal responsibility for this state of affairs and see no role for themselves in providing solutions, rather hoping that public policy interventions (such as basic education) will deliver the answers. This myopic vision is reinforced by media systems which, according to Hughes and Prado, are dominated by commercial interests to create an 'inequality equilibrium' that reflects the dominant values of powerful interests. Blofield and Luna suggest that persistent

inequality and (open or latent) class conflict could lead to the polarisation of public opinion and growing demands for redistribution. Interestingly, if perhaps optimistically, the authors find that these demands do not necessarily fit conventional ideological categories, paving the way for possible political coalitions to fight poverty and inequality, although these remain rather vague concepts.

Part III examines the elitist nature of policy agenda-setting and the consequently low prioritisation of redistributive issues. Illustrated by the cases of Brazil, Ecuador and Venezuela, Campelo argues that globalisation pushes politicians of all persuasions towards a conservative, neoliberal economic agenda, associated with democratisation and designed to attract foreign investment and reject redistributive options that might challenge the status quo. Bugarin and colleagues use an econometric model to explore how, in the case of Brazil at least, inequality raises electoral campaign costs, making politicians dependent on contributions from the wealthy, and helps perpetuate corrupt practices (as illustrated by the infamous *mensalão* scandal). No doubt this reflects in part at least the ‘incorporation crisis’ of representative politics, discussed in the following chapter by Filgueira and others. The section concludes with an examination by Blofield and Haas of how unequal access to resources and social class divisions influence the gender policy process in Latin America in the key areas of domestic violence, domestic workers’ rights and abortion.

Part IV looks at how public action may encourage incremental redistribution through tax and social policies. Mahon draws attention to the region's historical bias towards regressive, indirect taxation rather than income taxes, and the development limitations imposed. More encouragingly perhaps, Franzoni and Voorend explore how contrasting welfare regimes across the continent may serve to reinforce inequality – through heavily subsidised contributory pension schemes for the formally employed that take up the lion's share of the social budget to benefit a minority, for example – or offer assistance through non-contributory, targeted cash transfers, with Brazil (Bolsa Família) and Mexico (Oportunidades) offering the largest.

The volume concludes that inequalities have reinforced elite control over agenda-setting and policy processes, and ‘have made it harder for subaltern groups to get their voices heard and their interests addressed’ (p. 377). While this should come as no surprise, other evidence, as outlined in a recent issue of *LASA Forum* (43: 3 (2012)), suggests that inequality has nonetheless been falling slowly in Latin America, both under leftist administrations such as those in Venezuela, Brazil and Ecuador and in more conservative states such as Peru, Mexico and Colombia. This has been attributed in large measure to pro-poor government spending on health and education infrastructure together with targeted social programmes, especially conditional cash transfers. However, the impacts of minimum wage policy and economic growth in reducing Latin American inequality are also significant.

A word of caution is advisable, however: it remains to be seen how far such changes are sustainable. The fundamental challenge when addressing inequality, as the volume under review implies, is perhaps to make Latin American elites understand that they are in fact part of the problem. Could they become more sympathetic to the lot of the poor and be induced to take corrective action to promote resource redistribution? Unfortunately, the record of history does not augur well for the role of enlightened self-interest as a major driver of peaceful, progressive policy change on the continent. Whatever the political rhetoric of the centre-left, when push comes to shove, the rich and powerful in Latin America defend their own interests

above all else, while progressive policy-makers and activists continue to struggle with the immutable forces of reaction.