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Latin America and the Caribbean: a scenario of contradictions and ambivalence

Several risks threaten the construction of multicultural democracies: the increase in intolerance, the dynamics of segregation in cities, the loss of democratic freedoms in the name of security, the criminalization of migration, the ignorance of diversities and autonomies or the conflicts that in recent years are being generated between freedoms such as religious and expression.



Presentation text of the book *The challenges of the Social Sciences in the Latin American conjuncture* (CLACSO – TNI, 2023) in which the [author](#) raises the urgency of overcoming the inequalities and inequalities of our region from a collective task and to outline a new social contract that allows the construction of a fairer world. In this way, the Social Sciences must acquire a leading role, since their tools will be fundamental to guide the

decision-making of governments, to rethink structural public policies and to outline a collective proposal in Latin America and the Caribbean.

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If an image can synthesize the current moment of Latin America and the world, it is that of the crossroads: a complex crossroads, because it is produced by a conjunction of economic, environmental, political, ideological, cultural, social and health phenomena. This complexity transcends the serious problems of poverty, lack of employment or concentration of wealth, and involves other dimensions, such as human rights, inequalities, migration, corruption, violence, insecurity, the postponement of the rights of indigenous peoples, the absence of State institutions, social mobilization, the quality of democracy, the authoritarian drifts of some governments, the lack of opportunities and the institutional weakness of the State.

During the last two decades, many transformations have taken place in our region, in different and, in many cases, conflicting dimensions: along with anti-elitist programs and inclusive perspectives, economic dependence on the exploitation of natural resources has also been maintained or even deepened. Likewise, the State began to gain again institutional substance and regulatory power, but the tax system was almost unchanged and numerous forms of job and social precariousness were sustained.



In the current political context, on the one hand, there are emergences and returns of right-wing and ultra-right, neoconservative and neoliberal governments, with regressive, exclusionary social policies and setbacks at the level of rights and dignified living conditions, as well as violations of institutionality and subjugation of freedoms and political and civil rights. On the other hand, there is also a permanence and, in some cases,

a revitalization of progressive or popular governments at the national and local levels, which opens hope for social transformation in the region.

Likewise, despite the relative improvement in economic and social indicators in recent decades, inequalities persist and worsen by leaps and bounds in this context.

Inequality is a historical and structural feature of Latin American and Caribbean societies that has been maintained and reproduced even in periods of economic growth and prosperity. Its high levels represent a clear obstacle to the exercise of people's rights and to the expansion of citizenship and democracy.

In our region, the difficulty of many people to access opportunities for advancement is not only a consequence of income inequality, it is also linked to place of birth, gender identity, ethnic group, race, religion, sexual orientation, and access to health, education, cultural, symbolic and recreational property systems. among others; dimensions in which inequality remains very wide in our countries.



More than half of Latin America's inhabitants still live in poverty or extreme poverty. For its part, the middle class that is at risk of falling into the same situation and whose majority works in informal jobs without social protection, represents forty percent of the population. The fight against this and other dimensions of inequality has not been effective, and today more than ever it remains a central challenge.

[ECLAC](#) notes in its 2022 report that, after the 6.5 percent expansion recorded in 2021, by 2022 the GDP of Latin America and the Caribbean is projected to increase at an average rate of 2.7 percent, returning to the path of low growth it exhibited before the start of the

pandemic. which will result in an increase in poverty. Before the pandemic, it had forecast growth of 1.3 percent. Now, however, it outlines a recession of 5.3 percent that will be the worst in its history (ECLAC, 2022). A central fact provided by the International Labor Organization (ILO) is that 53 percent of employment in Latin America is informal (Maurizio, 2021). These are 130 million workers who live from day to day and for whom quarantine was not an option, because stopping going out to work meant stopping eating. Job instability translated into low incomes and lack of essential protection mechanisms in a crisis like the one we face.



For its part, formal employment does not have better expectations either, since business, social, commercial and transport services, which represent 64 percent of this sector, were among the most affected by the confinement measures during the pandemic. In general terms, ECLAC expects the aforementioned slowdown in growth to lead to a slowdown in the growth rate of the number of employed persons in the region, from 6.7 per cent in 2021 to 3.2 per cent in 2022. For its part, the regional average unemployment rate would increase slightly, from 9.3 percent in 2021 to 9.4 percent in 2022. At the same time, the regional participation rate is projected to be 62.6 percent, an increase from the level recorded in 2021, but still below pre-crisis values (ECLAC, 2022).

While the dominant discourse in recent years has focused on the economic crisis and its effects, eyes should be directed to the fissures of a cultural and political order that, aggravated by a negative economic situation, is showing clear signs of exhaustion and demands a revision of its postulates. This is a task that should uniquely engage those of us who work and research in the field of social sciences and humanities.



These fissures are affecting our scope of freedom and our condition of citizenship, violating what we believed irreversible conquests in the framework of democracies in which we also see how old inequalities coexist with new exclusions, stigmatizations and segregations. The pandemic has only accentuated this situation.

In this sense, despite the fact that Latin America has the regimes and institutions of representative democracy and regular electoral cycles, the analyses draw attention to the limitations and deficits in the quality of political institutions. Among others, an element that requires particular attention is the extreme concentration of wealth, which is related, in many cases, to the concentration of power and which leads to democratic systems captured by those who hold that power. As a result, we note the existence of public policies planned and executed by the dominant sectors, policies that reinforce the dynamics of production and reproduction of inequalities and degrade the living conditions of the majority.

Thus, one of the dynamics generated by the production and reproduction of inequalities is precisely this capture of public policies by dominant groups. This capture, that is, the use of devices and institutions of the common to maintain the privileges and dominant positions of a few, is also expressed in the social and public discourses that are legitimized and consecrated to naturalize this type of policies. These discourses make realities invisible (for example, the living conditions of subalternized peoples, the precariousness of the life of the majority or the distribution of care and time), occlude discussions (such as those of the fiscal structure, the distribution of income or external indebtedness) and seek to blame certain groups for the malaise and degradation of the lives of the majority

(as is done in many countries with migrants, etc.). with those who are beneficiaries of social programs or with those who demand deferred rights).



These capture mechanisms are also complicated by knowledge control devices or "*technical veil*". With this denomination we refer to the mechanisms that seek to exclude the majority of society from the decisions that produce the conditions in which these majorities deploy their lives and that allow the groups with more resources to determine public policies – such as fiscal ones – and to shape them according to their own objectives and against the collective interest. This is often achieved by technical (or technocratic) and objective definitions that have an unavoidable political meaning. Thus, debates, meanings and effects of the policies adopted are hidden and decisions that actually express social relations and cultural configurations are sought to be naturalized, which are presented as the only possible ones, with the help of intellectuals, technicians and officials who control information and knowledge so that they are not made public. We live in a time in which, together with the demands for recognition of cultural identities, we are witnessing phenomena that call into question the horizon of societies based on the peaceful coexistence of differences.

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Access the book in PDF file, entering the following link:

[The challenges of the Social Sciences in the Latin American conjuncture](#)

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