

Maria Sibylla Merian Centre Conviviality-Inequality in Latin America: New horizons for interdisciplinary work and International Cooperation

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Studies on conviviality-inequality at Mecila offers an open platform for innovation in interdisciplinary cooperation in the broad field of the humanities and social sciences.

The term conviviality was introduced in the human sciences by the Viennese philosopher Ivan Illich in his 1973 book *Tools for Conviviality*. On that occasion, Illich chaired the Centro Intercultural de Documentación (CIDOC) in Cuernavaca, Mexico, an ecumenical and plural space where the ideals of global solidarity of the Latin American left and the libertarian values of European critical thinking converged. Illich's book combines these influences by transforming conviviality into a research and action program for the building of more democratic, equal, and sustainable societies. Since then, and more clearly since the 2000s, studies on conviviality have spread to various disciplines and thematic fields, from anthropology and sociology to geology and computer sciences, turning conviviality into a polysemic term.

Inequality is also a multifaceted and multilevel notion. Inequalities can be material, but there are also inequalities of power, of access to environmental resources and protection against manufactured risks, of rights, of epistemic possibilities, and of social positions and conditions. Researchers understand inequality as a pervasive characteristic of social life, a background for understanding any given context of social action. Inequalities are thus both structural and (re)produced within daily interactions. Understanding social life in its many aspects and shapes requires understanding how it is constituted by inequality.

For the research team at the Maria Sibylla Merian International Centre Conviviality-Inequality in Latin America (Mecila for short), the polysemic feature of conviviality is always understood in association with the multidimensional elements of inequality, enhancing their explicative force. The hyphen in the Centre's name ("Conviviality-Inequality") stresses the intimate nexus between inequality and

conviviality and the fact that they are reciprocally constituted. To research inequality is to research conviviality, and vice-versa.

The bridging of these two notions forms the basis for the interdisciplinary collaboration taking place at Mecila. Developed in various thematic fields, studies on conviviality-inequality at the Centre aim at offering an open platform for innovation in interdisciplinary cooperation in the broad field of the humanities and social sciences. We want to provide an intellectual and academic environment in which different disciplines can develop their research in collaborative empirical work, theoretical synthesis, and relational methods that go beyond usual disciplinary boundaries. Accordingly, Mecila is an open space for academic experimentation that challenges the methodological nationalism, anthropocentrism, and Eurocentrism that are deeply embedded in our disciplines.

Based in São Paulo, Mecila is a network of outstanding Latin American and German academic institutions: the University of São Paulo and CEBRAP (Brazil); El Colegio de México (Mexico); Universidad Nacional de La Plata (Argentina); and Freie Universität Berlin, University of Cologne, and the Ibero-American Institute (Germany). The Centre offers a stimulating intellectual environment for interdisciplinary reflection, based on research developed in Latin America.

There are not many examples of institutions dedicated to studying in an integrated way and translating in theoretical terms the diverse social experiences of Latin America. The best-known case was the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC/CEPAL), created in 1948. Under the intellectual leadership of Raúl Prebisch, ECLAC focused from the 1950s to the 1970s on Latin American economic and social-developmental theory. ECLAC's mission was to promote democracy and social justice in a mostly unfavorable context. As we know, its influence and theoretical reach went far beyond the limits of the region.

Not many institutions have exerted such a lasting and far-reaching influence on the intellectual and institutional history of a region. These were times when the theory of modernization, rephrased by researchers at ECLAC, maintained its unquestioned global hegemony, ensuring a high degree of theoretical convergence and the persistence of ECLAC's influence.

Today, given the current mood of theoretical and institutional pluralism, it is somewhat likely that similar efforts will be more successful when undertaken not by a single institution but within an international network of researchers and institutes. Such a system should reflect the varied social experience of its members and promote

analytic pluralism. It should also include new forms of cooperation capable of overcoming or at least mitigating the regional, generational, ethnic, class, and gender hierarchies that mark so deeply the conventional circuits of knowledge production and circulation. Developing new formats for transdisciplinary collaboration between academic and non-academic *connoisseurs* (shamans, activists, artists, community leaders, etc.) is also crucial if it comes to produce sophisticated and socially relevant knowledge.

We at Mecila believe we can make a unique contribution, even if a modest one, to the much-needed process of institutional building in Latin America. Mecila shares with ECLAC a commitment to democracy, which is integral to its research program. For achieving our academic and institutional goals, close cooperation with international institutions based in Latin America, such as the Consejo Latinoamericano de Ciencias Sociales (CLACSO) and the Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales (FLACSO), is essential. Also, cooperation with the other four Merian Centres (in New Delhi, Guadalajara, Accra, and Tunis) is indispensable for shaping our transregional perspective.

For Mecila's very open institutional purposes, conviviality-inequality refers to constellations constituted by difference, conflict, violence, and domination. In this sense, the conviviality-inequality compound names less the starting point than the (possible, expected, potential) research findings that may emerge when looking at reality from the perspectives developed at our Centre. Conviviality-inequality corresponds to a view of the world that searches for structural elements of existing patterns of coexistence. For this reason, it is also a theoretical and empirical research tool for overcoming the rigid categories of the contemporary debate on living together in plural and unequal contexts.

Neither a concept nor a theory or method, conviviality-inequality is an approach under construction, a permanent work in progress. Therefore we see a normative *a priori* concept of conviviality as unnecessary, even though we do not condemn those who wish to embrace one.

For our 2020-21 term, Marcos Nobre and Sérgio Costa are the Centre's directors; Gloria Chicote (Universidad de La Plata) and Barbara Potthast (Universität zu Köln) are the co-directors and follow the Centre's activities from their home institutions. We expected a very lively and intense exchange *in-situ* between researchers of the Centre and fellows who would come to São Paulo for long research stays. The pandemic forced our conversation to go digital. We have learned a lot from

these limitations and developed new cooperation formats, including virtual colloquia, remote research modes, and virtual public events involving Mecila's researchers, practitioners, and the fellows. From September 2020 five senior and four junior fellows have started a cooperation of seven months with Mecila (see <http://mecila.net/2020/09/16/mecila-fellows-2020/>). We are convinced that novel and essential insights will emerge from this collaboration, helping to unravel the complex nexus conviviality-inequality.

Marcos Nobre (Unicamp, Brazil) is Mecila's Director for 2020-21.

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