

## Book Review

**Bernhard Leubolt (2015) *Transformation von Ungleichheitsregimes. Gleichheitsorientierte Politik in Brasilien und Südafrika* [*Transformation of Inequality Regimes: Equality-oriented Politics in Brazil and South Africa*]. Wiesbaden: Springer. ISBN 978-3658073608. 406 pages. Softcover €49.99**

*Reviewed by Julia Harnoncourt, University of Vienna, Austria*

The aim of this book, as the author states, is to assess how governments can deal with inequalities, especially in terms of the policies introduced by the Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT) in Brazil and the African National Congress (ANC) in South Africa. The author promises not only to look at the political actors and the impact of social reform on the local, but also on the global field.

As the author uses the ASID approach – agency, structure, institutions, discourse – the recent changes introduced by the PT and the ANC are examined at actor, economic and governmental levels, while the contextual structures are seen as outcomes of historical development.

Besides an overview of the state of research, the author introduces a broad range of theories on nation–states, institutions, global and local inequality regimes, social structures, accumulation regimes, the world system, and so on. Then he separately addresses the case studies of Brazilian and South African unequal distribution. He proceeds in a historical manner, starting with colonialism and ending with the (at the time) current governments (PT and ANC), and to discuss the changes these governments brought. In these chapters, Leubolt uses the theoretical concepts that were introduced earlier to describe historical events in Brazil and in South Africa. In general, his analysis is focused on the economy and on government policies.

Next in the book is a chapter that compares the South African and Brazilian paths of development. And, as he follows a circular approach, verifying the theory through the case studies, he then circles back to add the knowledge gained from the case studies to the theoretical concepts presented in the introduction.

The author regards exploitation as the basis of inequality, which is, in turn, an outcome of the production process. Production processes are described as anchored in and reproduced through social structures, while the author rejects a meritocratic ideology.

Brazil and South Africa are both seen as semi-peripheral countries – that is, peripherally integrated into the global capitalist system. Both countries were able to achieve a relatively well-off economic position, but contain high inequality rates within their respective economies. The PT and ANC policies are looked at in a critical manner, and both still have, according to the author, potential for major changes.

As the book is mainly based on literature research, the author practically presents a summary and structuring of already-existing knowledge, which he does quite well, using different forms of

clustering and graphs, for example. But, in my opinion, the research question is never answered. He asks more about how states work and the options available to political actors and governments, than he enquires about the possibilities of minimising inequality. Therefore, through the examples of Brazil and South Africa, he is able to enrich the theories presented in the beginning, for example about the interaction between grassroots movements and state governments. But, in the end, the author has nearly nothing to say about the usefulness of the social reforms introduced in his case studies, their applicability to other countries, further possibilities to diminish inequality rates, how global power relations may restrict the potential of social reforms in countries that are peripherally integrated into capitalism, or if social reforms can ever be radical enough to really change the structures of countries.

The strongest part of Leubolt's book is clearly the theoretical section. For example, he not only introduces the Gramscian concept of organic crisis, but also shows the applicability in his case studies. Beside the many concepts he introduces, which inspire further reading, he emphasises intersectionality, which is of course important to the study of inequality. Applying the concept, he attests inequality in Brazil to be more class-based, while in South Africa it is based more on "race" (pp. 124, 341, 359). In my opinion, this does not reflect the concept of intersectionality, which finally describes the entanglement of these categories. In Brazil, for example, class is heavily based on socially constructed races and to a certain degree economically well-off positions can "whiten" people, but never totally as being poor and black are nearly equated in popular discourse (Hanchard, 2005). The difference is that racism in Brazil is kept under wraps, following the legacy of *democracia racial*, while the problem is openly discussed in South Africa, as the ANC poses a counter-project to apartheid, making class inequality a secondary problem. I would have wished to read more about the actual entanglement of social relations and the contradictory ways they are perceived by the public.

Another theoretical point of critique on Leubolt's work is that he describes Brazilian slavery as pre-capitalist (p. 139), even though Brazil was already part of the capitalist world system in the nineteenth century, the timeframe he writes about. Furthermore, he forgets to include the existence of "second slavery", a revival of slavery in the nineteenth century, adapting to the new circumstances of the market, providing raw materials and food for the industrialising core powers through the widespread use of slave labour (Tomich, 2004: 69). Additionally, many studies on slavery assess slave-based plantations to have been a breeding ground for capitalism and industrialisation itself, for example in the production of sugar, with Brazil as one of its most important producers (Mintz, 1985; Tomich, 2004). It seems that a common assumption is reproduced here regarding unfree labour and capitalism as contradictory, without mentioning the vivid discussion in the field of labour history countering this very assumption (Brass, 2009).

Regarding inequality regimes, Leubolt, like many other scientists working on Brazil, fails to consider the important difference between the northern and the southern states of Brazil, with the north and the northeast as periphery and the south as a centre. Also, the problem of violence is not reflected on in a comprehensive manner. Violence in the countryside by the landowning elite against the rural poor or indigenous people is not even mentioned, and police violence against the urban poor in the favelas and more recently in reaction to demonstrations is left out.

Furthermore, in the case study on Brazil, I wonder about the way the author treats the Getulio Vargas government. Vargas is painted as a social reformer and a reference point for leftist policies throughout history (pp. 155, 161–162, 184, 367), while his connection to fascist ideology as the dictator of *Estado Novo* is only mentioned once (p. 175). The resulting contradiction is never

discussed. The section on the recent PT government under Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, on the other hand, is reflected on with all its contradictions, describing the “two souls of Lula’s government” (p. 232), with its redistributive policies and leftist discourse, without actually breaking with the neo-liberal model, maintaining the power positions of the elite, the capitalist enterprises and especially the agribusinesses – a strategy that hindered the needed land reform (pp. 263–264, 266, 271). I would be very interested in a reflection on these policies from today’s point of view including *Lava Jato*, the recent corruption scandal.

The case study on South Africa, even if very short, seems well-organised to me, though I am no expert on the country. Leubolt’s description of the Boer’s self-perception and self-portrayal as an African ethnic group on the one hand, but a European race on the other, also used by English colonialism to secure a white power regime by elevating race over ethnicity, for example, seems very interesting to me. If this difference could be further explained it would add significantly to the discussion about the differences between the concepts of race and ethnicity, but this reflection remains to be written.

All in all, Leubolt’s book is a well-structured summary of different theories concerning social changes, nation–states and inequality, as well as on the political history of Brazil and South Africa. I would recommend this book to people interested in these topics, despite its weakness in evaluating existing and possible new ways of more equal distribution regimes.

## REFERENCES

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## BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

JULIA HARNONCOURT worked with disabled children and adults in Bolivia for one year following her secondary studies. Returning to Austria, she completed her master studies in history at the University of Vienna; the topic of her thesis, which was published in 2014, was population control in nineteenth-century colonial Algeria. The subject of her PhD studies, completed in July 2017, was *trabalho escravo* in Pará, Brazil. She has published articles on racism, resistance movements against colonialism and social problems such as the living situations of refugees in Austria. Her doctoral thesis will be published in 2018 by Promedia. [Email: [Julia.harnoncourt@gmail.com](mailto:Julia.harnoncourt@gmail.com)]