

Introduction Inequalities in Brazil, Yesterday and Today

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This third special issue of *Inequalities* is a vivid photograph of inequalities characterizing Brazil, a country that until recently was among the ten largest economies in the world and that, paradoxically, coexists with a high degree of income concentration and high levels of poverty, shaping a profoundly unequal reality.

What does explain this reality? How can we understand the causes and the multiple dimensions of inequality in Brazil?

Its main explanatory elements lie in its historical genesis, which dates back to the formation of the old colonial system at the beginning of the sixteenth century. Making use of the mechanisms of primitive capital accumulation, the colonial system of exploitation established by Portugal in Brazil destroyed the original production systems of Indigenous communities and imposed a brutal process of labor enslavement, carried out through the capture of millions of Afro-descendant men and women who were transferred to the newly occupied Brazil.

Its central objective was to establish in the Colony an agrarian export-oriented economy focused on producing agricultural commodities needed in the European market, such as sugarcane and coffee, as well as introducing mineral extraction aimed at finding precious metals like gold and silver, which were highly coveted by emerging mercantile capitalism. This process was defined by the

Brazilian historian Caio Prado Jr. as the “meaning of colonization” (*sentido da colonização*) (Prado Jr. 1967): an agrarian export economy, based on the enslavement of labor, whose purpose was to serve the interests of the emerging European mercantile bourgeoisie, which accumulated wealth through the trafficking of people.

In order to provide elements that allow for a better understanding of the process of genesis of inequalities in Brazil, this issue presents four important articles:

The article “Struggles, Conflicts, and Inequalities among Indigenous Peoples in Brazil”, by Marco Tobón, helps us to understand the resistance struggles of Indigenous communities in Brazil, which were decimated by the process of colonial exploitation.

The article “Capitalism, Racism, and Inequalities in Brazil”, by Deivison Faustino, discusses the profound social consequences of the enslavement of labor in Colonial Brazil – a wound that originates, shapes, and intensifies the racial inequalities that so deeply characterize Brazilian society.

The article “Racial/Colonial Capitalism in the Epistemology of Social Security Law: Inequality Patterns in Contributory Benefits in Brazil”, by Rainer Bomfim and Flávia Souza Máximo Pereira, addresses the multiple meanings of racism in Brazil, offering insights for an important dialogue between Marxism, racism, and decolonial thought.

The article “The Volkswagen Case in the Amazon: Structural Inequality, Contemporary Slavery, Human Trafficking, and Corporate Relations with the Brazilian Military Dictatorship”, by Ricardo Rezende, José Lucas Santos Carvalho, and Rafael Garcia Rodrigues, is a pioneering study that addresses the persistence and continuity of contemporary forms of enslavement in Brazil. This practice was used by Volkswagen during the Brazilian Military Dictatorship (1964-85) and has expanded across various sectors, especially in agribusiness, further intensifying social inequalities today.

As a country positioned on the periphery of the world system, Brazil’s integration into central capitalism was established and prolonged by consistently maintaining its condition of dependency by combining the triad of *exploitation*, *plunder*, and *expropriation of labor* – whether in rural areas or, later, in urban settings. In this way, particularly throughout the twentieth century, Brazil entered the industrial sphere, but always preserving its condition as a dependent, late-developing economy subordinated to major foreign capital as asserted by the Brazilian sociologists Florestan Fernandes (1981), Rui Mauro Marini (2002) and Francisco de Oliveira (2003).

This reality has been deeply aggravated more recently by the expansion of neoliberalism (in the early 1990s) and the consolidation of financial hegemony, which also brought about the explosion of the digital, algorithmic, and artificial intelligence era.

In order to provide an overview in contemporary Brazil, this special issue presents eight articles from different areas in which inequality manifests itself: economy, labor, income, education, environment, race, gender, immigration, and more.

Regarding the world of labor, the article “Inequality that Produces Precarious Work: The Concentration of Income and Wealth also Shapes the Brazilian Labor Market”, by José Dari Krein, Marcelo Ferrari Manzano, and Marilane Oliveira Teixeira, offers a depiction of the economic reality showing that, alongside the increase in income and capital concentration, there has been a rise in labor precarization - a trend that is becoming more the rule than the exception.

The article by Lena Lavinás and Guilherme Leite Gonçalves, titled “Brazil: The Assetization of Rights Corroding the 1988 Social Compact”, shows how, in the recent trajectory of Brazilian capitalism, financialization has been a central element in deepening labor precarization, increasing the working class’s dependence on the financial system, which, in addition to exploiting labor, has intensified processes of expropriation and dispossession.

The article “The Social Precarization of Labor and Inequalities among Workers in Brazil”, by Graça Druck, traces the various paths through which precarization has developed in recent Brazil - whether driven by the mechanisms of the capitalist system or legitimized by judicial apparatuses. It argues that this process can only be contained through struggles such as the movement for reducing working hours in present-day Brazil.

The article “Class Conflict and Rising Inequalities. How the Bourgeoisie United to Secure Approval for Labor Reform in Brazil”, by Pedro Micussi and Thiago Aguiar, provides a detailed analysis of the role played by the Brazilian industrial bourgeoisie in securing the approval of the (counter-)labor reform carried out by the government of Michel Temer in 2017. This reform was decisive in further increasing the precarization of working conditions in Brazil, whose most evident outcome can be seen in the high levels of labor informality in the country, generating new struggles and social confrontations.

The article “Race, Work, and Social Inequality. Reconfiguring Precarity in the Brazilian Labor Market”, by Ruy Braga and Marco Aurélio Santana, offers a solid analysis of how the relationships between class and race present new and decisive components for a better understanding of the deepening and intensification of social and racial inequalities in Brazil.

Moving to education, the article “The Production and Reproduction of Educational Inequalities in the Formation of Brazil’s Working Class”, by Célia Vendramini, Adriana D’Agostini, Carolina Picchetti Nascimento, and Sandra Luciana Dalmagro, demonstrates how this broad set of economic, social, and political inequalities is also present in

the Brazilian educational process, which ends up reproducing the social inequalities that mark Brazilian society in its multiple dimensions.

As regards the environment, the article “Brazilian Agribusiness and the Ongoing Planetary Ecocider”, by Luiz Marques, provides a dense and rigorous study of how the agro-export production model prevailing in Brazil is destructive - both as a driving force of global warming and through the use of agrochemicals - thus increasing environmental, climatic, and social disasters.

With regard to immigration, the article “Brazilians in Motion: Migration, Labor, and Social Reproduction in Japan”, by Mariana Roncato, presents a rich and original study on the dimensions of gender and class, based on social reproduction theory, in order to better understand the migratory movements of Brazilian women workers who seek better living and working conditions in Japan.

With this broad, rich, and diverse range of articles, the special issue of *Inequalities* offers a real panorama of the many inequalities that characterize contemporary Brazilian society.

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