

Environments of Inequality: Crises, Conflicts, Comparisons

International Summer School at the Maria Sibylla Merian Center for Advanced Latin American Studies (CALAS), Guadalajara, Mexico, Sep 25-30, 2022, co-sponsored by CALAS, the Collaborative Research Centre (SFB) 1288 “Practices of Comparing. Ordering and Changing of the World” at Bielefeld University, and the German Historical Institute Washington and its Pacific Regional Office. Conveners: Cornelia Aust (Bielefeld University, SFB 1288), Olaf Kaltmeier (CALAS), Simone Lässig (GHI Washington), Mario Peters (GHI Washington), Ann-Kathrin Volmer (CALAS). Participants: Jacey Christine Anderson (Montana State University); Luana Braga Batista (University of Rio de Janeiro); Alfonsina Cantore (University of San Martin, Buenos Aires); Dimitri Diagne (University of California, Berkeley); Devrim Eren (Humboldt University, Berlin); Sabrina Fernandes (University of Brasilia); Marianela Laura Galazino (National University of Litoral, Santa Fe); Tathagato Ganguly (University of Delhi); Natalia Gómez Muñoz (University of Bologna); Edna Liliana Guerrero Caidcedo (National University of Colombia, Bogotá); Angela Eva Gutierrez (Bielefeld University); Marie Jasser (University of Vienna); Kirsten Kramer (Bielefeld University); Valerie Lenikus (University of Vienna); Marius Littschwager (Bielefeld University); Emilio Necedal Rojas (Metropolitan Autonomous University, Xochimilco); Ángela María Ocampo Carvajal (Leuven University); Diana Ojeda (University of the Andes, Bogotá); Lorena E. Olarte Sánchez (University of Vienna); Rosa Philipp (University of Eichstätt-Ingolstadt); María del Pilar Peralta Ardila (University of Munich); Manoel Rendeiro Neto (University of California, Davis); José Antonio Romero López (Free University of Berlin); Gerhard Sagerer (Bielefeld University); Nina Schlosser (University of

Vienna); Michael Sondermann (BMBF); Livia de Souza Lima (Bielefeld University); Nino Vallen (GHI, Pacific Office).

Inequality is a defining feature of most Latin American societies. Wealth, gender, racial, and ecological disparities impact all aspects of daily life. The week-long summer school “Environments of Inequality: Crises, Conflicts, Comparisons” brought together over thirty doctoral students and scholars from sixteen countries to discuss different forms of inequality and the conflicts they are inciting in different places. The organizers invited participants to reflect especially on the interrelationships between social inequality and the natural environment. Since colonial times, the exploitation of Latin America’s natural resources has left deep traces in the social fabric and the region’s landscape. Yet, in the present age of the Anthropocene, the region’s less-privileged increasingly bear the brunt of the world’s consumerist and imperial mode of living. Against the background of the social and environmental struggles this development is producing, the summer school presented a timely forum for academic debate and activist exchange.

The first day started with the event’s opening ceremony at the University Center for Social Sciences and Humanities of the University of Guadalajara. Organizers and representatives of the hosting institutions and funding agency (Federal Ministry of Education and Research, BMBF) welcomed participants and underscored the importance of this international gathering. Referring to the current crises and disputes in Latin America, Olaf Kaltmaier stressed the importance of environmental conflict as a defining characteristic of the era of the Anthropocene. Kaltmaier underlined that studying these conflicts is important not only to understand what is currently happening in the region, but also to gain a better understanding of the solutions that are being developed. The opening ceremony was followed by a tour through Guadalajara and subsequent bus transfer to the Jaliscan countryside, where most of the summer school took place.

The first day ended with a panel on “Inequalities and Justice.” In her presentation, Devrim Eren discussed how caste, social class, gender, and waste colonialism interacted in the reproduction of social inequalities in Mumbai, India. Marianela Laura Galazino demonstrated how environmental conflicts in Argentina and Brazil prompted competing calls for justice within communities, as their members vied over fundamental questions about the exploitation and defense of nature, collective rights, and lifestyle. Finally, Nina Schlosser discussed the effects of lithium exploitation in the Salar de Atacama, Chile, both on nature and the lives of the region’s native residents, who increasingly embrace the exploitation of the natural wealth found on their lands.

The second day commenced with a panel on “Environmental Struggles.” Jacey Anderson compared the identities, livelihoods, and strategic relationships of those resisting mineral extraction in Chalatenango, El Salvador, and Montana, United States, revealing important similarities between the two contexts. Luana Braga Batista examined the role of land struggle in the emergence of the Union of Rural Workers in the city of Iaçú-Ba, Brazil during the 1970s, as well as the self-understanding and demands that these rural workers articulated in their opposition to the region’s large landowners. Meanwhile, Valerie Lenikus presented her study of agrarian extractivism in coastal Ecuador and the Amazon dry forest in the Chiquitanía (Bolivia), where, under the auspices of the countries’ Leftist governments, natural resources had further been commodified despite worsening climate and social-ecological crises.

The second panel of the day, “Extractivism and Territorial Conflicts,” continued exploring similar themes. Marie Jasser discussed the role of Bolivia’s plurinational state in changing, reducing, or consolidating new forms of inequality. Using the notion of motley territories, she demonstrated how the current distribution and uses of land must

be understood in relation to the varying territorial regimes that have developed in the region since colonial times. Lorena Olarte Sánchez's talk focused on our use of terminology and the discrepancies that exist between the analytical and everyday language of our subjects of study. Using examples from her fieldwork in the Northeastern Sierra of Puebla, she discussed communal understandings of territory and life and presented the project of *yeknemilis* (honest life) as one alternative way of being that is used to oppose the colonial and developmental logic of the modern state. Finally, Manoel Rendeiro Neto opposed the notion of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Amazonian lowlands as being located at the margins of the modern world. Instead, Rendeiro Neto argued that the region became the theater of struggles between the colonial state and Black and Indigenous workers over the uses of tropical land and water resources, in which the latter leveraged environmental knowledge to mitigate their place in exploitative labor regimes and make sense of the freedom denied to them.

The third panel of the day dealt with issues of "Race and (De) Colonization." Dimitri Diagne talked about the longevity of colonial visions in the Senegal Valley. Covering the period from 1802 to 1959, Diagne demonstrated how ideas about agricultural profit transplanted from the Caribbean to West Africa continued to shape early- and mid-twentieth century development initiatives, despite the misunderstandings of West African ecosystems and societies resulting persistently in unsatisfactory results. Angela Gutierrez presented her project about the shifting racial relationships in Cuba leading up to the "race war" of 1912. Focusing on comparison as a tool deployed in political conflict, she examined the role of the journalistic community and Afro-Cuban journalists in particular in shaping new ideas of hierarchy and segregation through their comparisons of the situation in Cuba, the U.S., and Haiti. Tathagato Ganguly once more underscored the importance of the histories of territorial claims and their

articulation for present-day struggles. Focusing on racial and gender discrimination in Esmeraldas, Ecuador, he called for solutions based on a profound understanding of how specific actors constructed their own notions of territoriality to give shape to more just forms of resource appropriation and social organization.

The fourth panel of the day centered on another of the event's key themes: the "Anthropocene." Edna Guerrero Caidcedo discussed Velia Vidal's book, *Oir somos río*, and Gabriela Carneiro da Cunha's performance, *Altamira 2042*, as novel, multi-sensational engagements with rivers that moved beyond the modern, functional gaze. Presenting the notion of *sentipensar* (feel-think) as the basis of her methodology, she argued that these works were not mere representations of the river but presented, instead, critical and creative ways to imagine new worlds via multi-sensational engagements. Ángela Ocampo Carvajal, in turn, pointed out the centrality of international law to the global transformations that have resulted in human-induced environmental change and in the resistance against it. Concentrating on processes of place-making, she called for a dynamic and creative challenging of the anthropocentric, state-centered visions of space and a readiness to incorporate alternative experiences, knowledges, and notions of nature into the legal arena.

The third day opened with a panel on "Feminism and Care." Alfonsina Cantore discussed the role of female members of the Mbya Guaraní community in Iguazú (Argentina) in the struggle against territorial enclosures and contamination caused by tourism in the region. Cantore drew a picture of the constellations of power in which these women operated while using their role as female caregivers to claim leadership in their community's struggles. Livia de Souza Lima discussed her work on the political performances of Black state legislators in Brazil's Congress. Zooming in on the uses of hair as a means of identity

politics, she reflected on the possibilities for these female legislators to reclaim territory for Black female culture in a space that is historically and hegemonically a white and masculine one. María del Pilar Peralta Ardila showed how she used life stories to study the leadership trajectories of female leaders defending and caring for the environment in southwestern Colombia. Meanwhile, Rosa Philipp examined, through the concept of *cuerpo-territorio* (body-territory), how women in Oaxaca, Mexico, defended their connection to the land, which was threatened by infrastructural and extractivist projects. Philipp showed how such connections were revived through everyday practices and traditions, including food consumption, festivals, and the knowledge of traditional medicine and sacred places.

The final thematic panel of the Summer School was dedicated to "Migration." Natalia Gómez Muñoz discussed Social Impact Bonds (a social form of investment in Colombia) and the impact this project had on people's lives. She underlined that, while the bond programs are being presented as a success, the transformative impact on the lives of those who participated in the program was limited. Too often the focus was on job placement, but the labor was hard, offered only short-term contracts, and provided few benefits. Emilio Nocedal Rojas discussed his research about La plazoleta de hermandad in Ciudad Ixtepéc, Mexico, a crossroads for migrants traveling from Central America to the U.S. In this space of distrust and often volatile interaction, Nocedal discovered in the touch of the anointment the potential for new encounters and thinking differently about migrant experiences. Ultimately, José Antonio Romero López used a self-produced video to outline his research project on the medial representation of the migrant caravan that generated intense public debate in mid-October 2018.

The second half of the day was dedicated to two different but equally inspired keynote lectures. In her talk, "Comparing Earth History and World History: Anthropocene Landscapes in

Patricio Guzman's Documentary Film," Kirsten Kramer argued that the era of the Anthropocene demands the development of a new politics of comparison. As she explained in the first, theoretical, part of her lecture, new perceptions of the interrelationship between the figure "earth" (geophysical space) and "world" (social, juridical-political space) call for comparisons that go beyond traditional comparisons between culture and nature, the human and non-human. In the second part of her talk, Kramer expanded on these ideas in a detailed analysis of Patricio Guzman's documentary film, *Nostalgia for the light* (*Nostalgia de la luz*, 2010). Analyzing both the Chilean filmmaker's story and the film's visual aesthetics, she discussed how technological infrastructure (e.g., astrological observatories) became an integral part of the natural landscape and the parallels the film draws between the moon and the earth and between the rocks and the human bones of the victims of Pinochet's dictatorship buried in the Atacama Desert.

In her lecture, "Latin America as a Sacrifice Zone: Challenges out of Dependency and into Radical Sustainability," Sabrina Fernandes called for radical changes in how the solutions for the world's current crises are being conceptualized. Fernandes argued that ideas about development and ecological transitions are deeply embedded in a capitalist and imperialist logic which holds that the solution to our problems is to be found in the exploitation of more resources (e.g., electric vehicles). Such an approach produces sacrifice zones, both in the Global South and the Global North, in which everything can be used as a resource, people can be treated as disposable, or the territory can be used to trash anything. In opposition to these solutions, Fernandes proposed initiatives for selective degrowth and a reframing of sovereignty in terms of radical sustainability that recognizes people's territorial rights and living arrangements. Although she recognized that such a path of transition is full of challenges and contradictions, she contended that this difficult route is unavoidable to find ways to create a better life for all.

After two days of intensive discussions, the fourth day was reserved for an excursion. Participants had the chance to learn more about Jalisco's primary export product: tequila. During the past two decades, the production of this distilled beverage made from the blue agave plant has doubled, leaving a clear mark on the state's highlands. With growing export volumes driving up prices, more and more land has been and is still being converted into agave plantations. Although similar processes had been discussed in other contexts during previous days, the excursion allowed participants to experience for themselves what the commodification of nature means. The guide for the day was Marcos Galindo, co-founder of La Dama Tequila, a brand that produces tequila in an ecological and sustainable way. After a visit to the distillery and a tasting of his product, he brought participants higher into the Sierra Madre Occidental, where he is growing blue agave not on plantation-style fields, but as part of a larger ecosystem. Participants experienced the contrast between the two methods first-hand. During the hour-long climb to Galindo's fields, they passed many agave fields, but it was noticeable when they crossed over into Galindo's land. With nature taking its free course, the temperature dropped, the air quality improved and became more fragrant, and they could suddenly hear insects and birds. This sensual physical experience inspired new reflections on our relationship with nature. Obviously, Galindo is unable to produce the same volume of agave as conventional producers, but his project nonetheless plays an important role in his campaigns for environmental education and community building, which can change the ways residents of the region think about agave. Doing so is crucial, as Galindo reminded us repeatedly, since current practices will deplete the land in two to three decades.

The fifth and final day of the summer school took place once more on the campus of the University of Guadalajara. The day began with a discussion about comparing and com-

parisons in a global world. Participants discussed Monika Krause's work on model cases and reflected on their own dissertations and their engagements with material research objects that are studied repeatedly. This discussion was followed by the keynote lecture, "Putting Life at the Center": Articulations of Feminism and Environmental Defense in Latin America." In her talk, Diana Ojeda made a strong case for using feminism as a lens to understand the logics and forms of operation of agrarian extractivism, as well as the ways in which people are resisting this socio-environmental regime. Ojeda first discussed her experiences in Tayrona and Montes de María, two Colombian regions in which land grabbing, often under the pretext of green initiatives, had drastically shaped the landscape of possession. Processes of dispossession produced deep frustrations about the loss of identity and the erosion of communities that were once able to sustain lives. Ojeda then turned her attention to the role that feminist thought is playing in imagining alternative futures that put life at the center – imaginations that are based on alternative ecologies, processes of commoning, and the recognition of a plurality of knowledges and worlds. The day ended with a discussion about the role of high-income demographics in locking in or rapidly reducing energy-driven greenhouse gas emissions and, finally, a general reflection on the summer school.

This brief report can hardly do justice to the richness of the exchanges and the learning that took place during this week. The format of the summer school, especially one organized in such a remote location, produced a dynamic unlike those of typical workshops or conferences. Shared experiences outside the academic setting enriched the discussions and helped build confidence to address difficult topics. Moreover, for a cohort of doctoral students who had started their doctoral research during the pandemic, this opportunity to connect in-person with like-minded scholars was of tremendous importance. One overarching question that deserves

more attention concerns the role of the social sciences and humanities in the remaking of new worlds that are more just, more equal, and in which a healthier, sustainable balance between humans and nature exists. With this and plenty more to discuss about the dynamics of world-making, we are already looking forward to the next summer school in 2024.

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