Mecila:

MARIA SIBYLLA MERIAN CENTRE
CONVIVIALITY-INEQUALITY IN LATIN AMERICA

POLITICS OF CONVIVIALITY
Research Area

Politics of Conviviality

| **Coordinator** | **Mariana Teixeira** · Freie Universität Berlin |
| | *m.teixeira@fu-berlin.de* |

Speakers	**Laura Flamand** · El Colegio de México
	Marcos Nobre · Centro Brasileiro de Análise e Planejamento
	Sérgio Costa · Freie Universität Berlin

The main concern of the Research Area Politics of Conviviality lies in how markers of difference are negotiated in contexts of power asymmetries and subsequently impact patterns of inequality within convivial configurations. It inquires how various agents either enhance or challenge existing inequalities through their everyday and institutional practices.

In line with Mecila's theoretical approach, the Research Area Politics of Conviviality considers that an entanglement between conviviality and inequality always pervades social interactions. This means that there are no "purely convivial" nor "purely unequal" social relations: each social setting features a specific combination, or constellation, of the two. However, acknowledging that conviviality and inequality are always entangled is not the ultimate aim of our endeavours, but rather the starting point. The constellation of conviviality and inequality is different – and many times radically so – in each social context.

In this sense, to illustrate how the entanglement between conviviality and inequality can assume the most varied forms, we can look at the contrasts one will find in observing the social relations involved in two scenarios. On the one hand, the precarious and often illegal labour performed by informal workers in the peripheries of many Latin American and Caribbean cities (which comprise complex relations with local communities, suppliers, customers, law enforcement, often also paramilitary forces, etc.). On the other, the relationships of intimacy and affection among family members who share a domestic life and engage in many different forms of care activities (childrearing, care for the elderly and persons with special needs, household work such as cleaning and cooking, etc.). Neither can be said to be based

entirely on inequality or conviviality alone, for there are instances of conviviality in the first case (relations of solidarity among fellow workers, for example), and inequality can also be found in the second (for instance, the gender-based inequality in the distribution of care work and emotional labour). Hence, beyond acknowledging that the conviviality-inequality entanglement is present in both scenarios, it is of great importance to understand how this entanglement works in each case, how it came to be this way, and what possibilities they conceal of a less asymmetric or oppressive form of entanglement.

It is not necessary to draw on stark contrasts to find distinct and unique forms of entanglement between conviviality and inequality. Even within the realm of precarious labour, to give but one example, the correlation between these two factors varies greatly depending on the geographical region of Latin America and the Caribbean, whether one looks at rural or urban areas, at export-oriented economic sectors or domestic labour, at gender-specific practices and customs, at the different ethnic origins of the subjects, or their religious affiliation, etc. And besides varying according to more or less spatialized contexts, this correlation also changes over time, as transformations in each social sphere – e.g. law, culture, economy, politics – impact the others with unpredictable, complex, and at times even contradictory consequences.

Therefore, we strive to understand specific constellations of social relations through the lens of conviviality-inequality in the present, the past, and a possible future. The singular ways in which conviviality and inequality intermingle in particular configurations (synchronic dimension) and regimes (diachronic dimension) is precisely what is of interest to us. We investigate these specific constellations by exploring their inner dynamics and their connections to the broad web of political, economic, social, legal, and environmental interrelations in which they are embedded.

The main concern of the Research Area Politics of Conviviality lies in how markers of difference are negotiated in contexts of power asymmetries and subsequently impact patterns of inequality within convivial configurations. It inquires how various agents – including social movements and activists, governmental agencies, the academic community, migrants, indigenous peoples, informal networks or groups, the digital public sphere, and many

others – either enhance or challenge existing inequalities through their everyday and institutional practices.[1]

One should not understand the reference to the negotiation of differences as a sign of a non-conflictual conception of social relations. Rather, we assume that negotiation is always taking place within asymmetrical power relations and often in hostile or contentious forms. Indeed, there are convivial constellations where negotiation of differences is fragile, if possible at all, due to asymmetries of power that are so acute that they render any non-violent exchange between agents ineffective at best – and perniciously ideological at worst. In these instances, the conviviality-inequality framework shows its usefulness because it allows for the critical examination of such configurations as limit cases.

This does not, strictly speaking, apply to those cases where the physical elimination of an agent or group of agents by another is involved. In such extreme cases, one cannot any longer speak of a social relation, for a proper social relation requires the existence and maintenance of different interacting agents. Latin American and Caribbean societies are unfortunately all too familiar with extreme cases, such as genocide. It does not mean, however, that in such circumstances the conviviality-inequality framework does not apply and would have to be replaced for a more fitting one. The radical situation in which a social relation is itself brutally terminated can only be understood as a result of a previous, and severely violent, relation, where the correlation between conviviality and inequality is dramatically imbalanced. Thus, extreme cases do not make the conviviality-inequality framework superfluous. Instead, such situations reinforce its value as a complex and internally differentiated analytical tool.

Moreover, it is crucial to note that the idea of "the political" should not be conflated with the realm of institutionalised politics, macro-structures, and top-down power relations. It involves, to be sure, the analysis of conviviality-inequality within party systems, electoral polls and disputes, political

---

[1] In line with Mecila's critique of Anthropocentrism, it is crucial to remark here that "agents" is a category that embraces not only human beings, but also the many forms of non-human entities: technologies, animals, plants, spirits, artefacts, etc.

preferences, contexts of legal decision-making, public policy, governance, and so on. But the scope of this Research Area is not limited to this formal arena: as we see it, politics also encompasses everyday life interactions, unstably codified practices, unspoken conflicts, and informal agreements, which are also marked by inequality and conviviality in particular ways. In this sense, both the public and private spheres of social life are eminently political.

Neither is politics understood here as opposed to other social spheres as if the latter were apolitical in their nature. The economy, the production of knowledge, the media, legal procedures, the cultural dimension of symbolic interactions and traditions, the relation to natural and human-made environments, demographic shifts and displacements, gender disparities, artistic expressions, religious practices – these are all seen as politically constituted from the start; they are not externally affected by politics, they are political from within. They are all pervaded by more or less negotiated markers of difference within contexts of more or less asymmetrical power relations, giving rise to a myriad of convivial constellations where inequality plays a constitutive role. The aim of the Research Area Politics of Conviviality is then to outline and understand the contours of these entanglements and critically challenge their seemingly static, fixed nature.