

Global Politics as a “Convivial Configuration:” Towards a Holistic Understanding of Global Interstate Inequalities

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Abstract

We present a literature review on the topic of global inequalities focused on states as the unit of analysis and based on the concept of convivial configuration. Three relevant academic debates are critically reviewed: economic inequalities – how to study and define them; the functioning of international organizations; and characterizing the international system. This research sheds light on the need to return to considering the state as an indispensable actor, whether as an obstacle or as a lever for efforts to reduce inequalities. The need for transdisciplinary studies on inequalities is highlighted.

Keywords: **global inequalities | convivial configuration | international relations**

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1. Introduction

The issue of global inequalities is a hot topic in current social science debate. Studies in this area have been proliferating since the early 2000s, although concern about the issues involved was already in place prior to this period (Griffin 1978; Grove 1979; Paukert 1973). Recently, prominent economists have highlighted how capital accumulation and income concentration induce inequality among human beings (Milanovic 2019; Piketty 2014). Another series of studies on individuals and global inequalities comes from the field of sociology (Braig et al. 2016; Jelin et al. 2018). It may be noticed that this academic trend is also present in Latin America (Henríquez Ayin et al. 2015; Puchet Anyul and Puyana Mutis 2018; Salvia et al. 2021).¹

These studies highlight how certain phenomena that occur on a global scale, which are brought together in the term ‘globalization,’¹ impact these inequalities. In the field of international relations, the deepening of interdependencies between actors has been attracting attention since the 1970s (Nye and Keohane 1977; Tokatlian and Pardo 1990).²

Authors recognize that these trends develop in a structurally unequal global context³ (Hurrell and Woods 1999; Walker 2002), but with the characteristic that there is no central government that allows them to be coordinated and managed. An example of this characteristic of international relations in the twentieth century is the division of the world into groups of states through the First/Third World dialectic (Christiansen 2021), which has been gradually replaced by the North/South divide since the publication of the Brandt Report in 1980 (Independent Commission on International Development Issues 1980). These inequalities are expressed in a number of ways; in terms of resources and capabilities and in the relationships between actors, their influence on decision-making and the development of global regulations, and in exposure to shared challenges on diverse topics that go beyond the economic sphere.

1 We could define it as the diffusion of transworld connections among people, which, in addition, is symptomatic of a change in the nature of social space towards supraterritoriality (Scholte 2008).

2 Nye and Keohane developed the concept of “complex interdependence,” which they defined as follows: “In common parlance, dependence means a state of being determined or significantly affected by external forces. Interdependence most simply defined means mutual dependence. Interdependence in world politics refers to situations characterized by reciprocal effects among countries or among actors in different countries.” They go on to state, “We do not limit the term interdependence to situations of mutual benefit” (Nye and Keohane 1977: 8–9).

3 To be clearer in our proposal, we use the terms “global,” “world,” or “worldwide” to refer to everything related to that which is external to a state, and the term “international” to for everything related to what is external to a state that is linked to its relations with other states. For example, the international system is limited to interstate politics, in contrast to global politics.

According to Mecila's central assumptions (Mecila 2019), inequalities are the result of complex social interactions and are linked to a variety of different mechanisms, so these postulates can also be applied to international relations.

Despite their fundamental contributions, studies that focus on the individual unit as their object of study leave scope for new research, since they omit the dynamics of inequalities among the other units of analysis, particularly collective and impersonal ones, and the challenges they represent to conviviality. If we take the global scale as our reference point, it seems essential to also study inequalities in relation to states. According to international law, the founding legal principle of the global order is sovereignty, which makes the state primarily responsible for organizing collective life within its territory.

Of course, we observe a growing diversification of entities acting with or against the state at the world level (Belmonte and Cerny 2021). Here we try to emphasize the fact that the state is the legal authority entitled to administer, finance, and supervise public policy, an attribute which is recognized by economists (Bourguignon 2014). It therefore seems essential to take the global context into account, in particular the location of the state (or states) from which one works, because this affects the state's ability to act, as well as the possibilities of influencing its performance (Lagos 1963). The global scope can provide leverage that facilitates action; for example, when obtaining funds to implement a social program, or when non-governmental organizations (NGOs) use provisions of public international law to pressure a government for particular human rights.

For peripheral states,⁴ such as those in Latin America and the Caribbean, this context tends to be more restrictive than permissive for their ability to act. Sometimes the state has to give in to pressure from more powerful actors, whether state or otherwise. In international negotiations, states must organize collectively to promote their visions. The Covid-19 pandemic also reminds us how difficult it is for states in the Latin American region to protect themselves from global economic cycles and global phenomena. The state serves as a transmission belt, and in Southern countries,⁵ globalization tends to exacerbate poverty and inequalities (Kacowicz 2013).

4 Here we use the term "peripheral" in the dependence sense, which refers not only to differences in development between economies in the world, but also to the way the international system operates, based on multiple inequalities (Cardoso and Faletto 1969).

5 We define "South" restrictively in this paper, since we limit it to state actors. The global South allows for greater ontological diversity. We argue that Southern countries can be considered as such if they meet the following conditions: having experienced some type of political domination – colonialism would be the most explicit form, having socioeconomic indicators that differentiate them from more developed states, and that they themselves claim this political label (Brun 2022; Lees 2012).

The design of public policy is not immune to this set of opportunities and restrictions represented by the global context. The most extreme case in this regard is that of the members (Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Mexico) of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), who have to follow high demands in terms of respect for liberal standards – in the sense of good governance – and data production. To put it simply, governments do not do whatever they want, both because of citizen scrutiny and because of the specific insertion of the respective state in the world. Therefore, the limitations of their global environment that challenge their ability to act must be taken into account in the fight against inequalities and in support of conviviality.⁶

Studying global inequalities from a state-centric perspective in a context of interdependence obliges us to think holistically. Compartmentalizing inequalities by categories (political, economic, environmental, etc.) is no longer sufficient for understanding how they affect coexistence. In fact, the invitation to a holistic view appears in recent work in international relations that promotes transdisciplinarity (Flaherty and Rogowski 2021; Lockwood 2021), particularly between international relations and economics.⁷ We subscribe to this trend, with the difference that we select the state as our unit of analysis. We still lack more complete and interrelated research that combines work in international relations and economics to understand how inequalities govern the international system and relate to conviviality.

We propose to understand state-centered global inequalities based on the concept of the “convivial configuration,”⁸ which was first coined for thinking about national politics. We have found few references that include the topic of conviviality in international relations and none in economics; most of them deal with development or post-development and to a lesser extent with migration. We did not find a single study in these fields that links conviviality to global inequalities.

According to Sérgio Costa, conviviality is a tool that can be used to address differences in situations of cooperation and conflict (Costa 2019: 23). Here he turns to Paul Gilroy, who sought to understand how to live in community based on cooperation.

6 This statement should be understood contextually and relatively. As noted above, this environment does not only represent limitations nor does it mean that states with greater capability to act will automatically implement policies against inequalities.

7 This is not an isolated reflection, as shown by the links between economics and history established in thinking about global inequalities (Klein 2021; Korzeniewicz and Moran 2009).

8 “Convivial configuration,” the expression we use throughout this work, is an established term in this context. It could also be described as a “configuration of coexistence” or “configuration of cooperation.”

Inequalities between units generate differences that can be accommodated in a variety of different ways, from violence to solidarity. In this intellectual proposal, inequalities and differences become the structural elements of society (Nobre and Costa 2019). It is notable, then, that the duality between promoting differences and seeking greater harmony between actors is at the heart of what living together with conviviality can be (Wise and Noble 2016). The goal of this intellectual exercise is to understand these opposing facets jointly in their relationship to each other. This is a bold proposal for studying international relations: cooperation and conflict – and their coexistence – are the constitutive dialectic of global politics. After all, the first efforts to create the discipline of International Relations addressed the need to avoid the recurrence of war at the beginning of the twentieth century.⁹ The objective of this essay is not to analyze the presence of conviviality in this field, but to characterize it as a convivial configuration to open up ways to think about international relations in terms of conviviality. A convivial configuration refers to the relationships between interdependent units that negotiate and manage their differences and inequalities in everyday life and within the institutions that regulate their relationships. It is important, then, to analyze both structures and interactions in contexts of domination and differentiated power. This configuration is characterized by the presence of state actors, as mentioned above, as well as by the marked inequalities between them.

Based on the characteristics of international relations mentioned at earlier, we argue that the concept of convivial configuration is applicable to the study of global inequalities centered on states for a number of reasons. First, with an understanding of inequalities as dynamic and malleable, the conceptual proposal aims to bring studies on structural phenomena back to the foreground, not focusing on previous, already analyzed aspects (Heil 2022). It is therefore not a question of observing fixed patterns of overlapping inequalities and their predictable effects on conviviality. Hence the multiple possible ways of studying them and the critical nature of the Mecila project.

Second, when the convivial configuration scheme is adopted, inequalities can be considered in a holistic manner, shedding light on the connections between the various types of inequalities and affecting the actions of the actors in the analysis. Once again, existing studies show us the variety of inequalities, their evolution in time and space, and the difficulty of generalizing and predetermining how they combine for or against

⁹ The debate on the existence and characterization of this discipline has not yet been resolved.

state action. The publications by Nicholas Lees on economic inequalities between states would suggest their persistence since the 1980s, but this is not confirmed by his economist peers (Lees 2021; cf. Section 1). While Ayse Kaya studies the slow process of reform in international economic institutions, Caroline FehI shows that inequalities are expressed less statically in arms control negotiations (Kaya 2017; FehI 2014). Although conclusions cannot be drawn a priori about the potential effect, positive or negative, of these inequalities on states, the most common view found in our review of the literature is that inequalities generally follow from limitations on the abilities of governments and institutions in peripheral countries to act.

Finally, the concept of convivial configuration entails a normative dimension, not a predetermined one (Nobre and Costa 2019). The common meaning of the adjective 'convivial' refers to a friendly context; a moment of cheerful, even festive, companionship, which does not correspond to the definitions adopted in academic works, these being closer to 'coexistence' (Hemer et al. 2020). This word means a peaceful side-by-side relationship such as that of multiple religions in medieval Spain (Gutiérrez Rodríguez 2020). An understanding that includes a moral dimension appears in Ivan Illich's 1973 book on conviviality, *Tools for Conviviality* (Illich 1973). This work was inspired by liberation theology, Paulo Freire, and the context of the rise of the Third World.

Understanding international relations as a convivial configuration not only facilitates a broad and relational study of inequalities, but also means, in our opinion, that they be considered as a problem. Inequalities are part of conviviality, but they do not facilitate cooperation and living together, which are, in the end, the desired objectives. This normative position does not mean, either, that these inequalities can be made to disappear, unless a certain idealism is assumed. It is at least a matter of understanding the transmission belt that is the state in a more complex and dynamic way and promoting a search for alternatives for societal life ranging from the external to the internal.

Therefore, it is not enough to describe inequalities as inherent characteristics of the world, as is often done in the field of international relations. The expression of a convivial configuration assumes a normative or ethical dimension, with a vision of the inequality characteristic of modernity. An operational definition of inequality would be an instance of something unequal, an adjective that usually characterizes something as different in quality, size, level, or amount. In the *Diccionario del español de México* of El Colegio de México, inequality is defined as the "lack of equality between one thing and another or between some people and others" (Diccionario del español de México n.d.) The ethical dimension is sometimes much more explicit. For example, the

Merriam-Webster Dictionary notes that the essential definition of inequality is “an unfair situation in which some people have more rights or better opportunities than others” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary n.d.), while the Cambridge Dictionary defines inequality as “the unfair situation in society when some people have more opportunities, money, etc. than other people” (Cambridge Dictionary n.d.).

Inequality as a difference requires a distinction of distance, dispersion, or disparity presented in a normative way – whether it is fair or not. Thus, the first thing to be defined about inequality is the dimension in which its existence is or may be problematic. However, the most common dimension, which economists have focused on for decades, is monetary wealth. In international relations, the conceptual thought around inequality is very different and is more related to the history of ideas, particularly those of the modern era. First, there are analyses that consider inequalities to be a problem, when this was not necessarily the case in the past (Walker 2002). Second, the study of inequalities confirms the fundamental importance of classifications in thinking about international relations (Donnelly 2009), in particular those of states (Beaumont and Towns 2021). Critics of mainstream economics¹⁰ point out that these works ignore the role of power relations (Pieterse 2002; Wade 2014), which is not the case in international relations. Nevertheless, the most common concept of power places more focus on the powerful states, whereas starting from inequalities makes the situation of the majority of states in a peripheral position more visible. In a more general argument, Nicola Phillips considers that inequalities are not a defect of the global economy, but rather a constitutive part of it, formed in the interaction between market power, social power, and political power (Phillips 2017). Thus, the concept of convivial configuration enables us to treat these dimensions that are considered essential by different academic areas.

The challenges to conviviality caused by inequalities, and that characterize the configuration of interest, can be divided into two dimensions. On the one hand, they represent a threat at the global level, since differences between states foster conflicts to the detriment of cooperation (for example, consequences of climate change). Furthermore, inequalities being a global issue; that is, a problem that no state can solve alone, solutions to inequalities require international cooperation (Legler 2013). Moreover, as the examples mentioned above show, global inequalities can also restrict the ability of states to promote conviviality at the national level (for example, the acquisition of medical supplies in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic).

¹⁰ We understand “mainstream” to mean researchers, universities, and journals, mainly based in English-speaking countries, that work in English and dominate the networks of dissemination of knowledge in social sciences.

In this study we present a review of the literature on global inequalities based on the state as the unit of analysis, and examine this research from a conviviality perspective. We therefore exclude studies that focus on other units, such as, for example, international or non-governmental organizations, migrants, or individuals in general. We also do not include studies that are dedicated to configurations of power in the construction of knowledge, where many decolonial works are found. We do not set out to propose an appropriate development model to promote conviviality policies, but rather study how inequalities are distributed and characterize the convivial configuration of states at a global level. In our examination of the literature, we only selected references that explicitly mention inequalities, since many analyses recognize the importance of inequalities, but do not reflect on them directly. Finally, we selected publications that problematize the existence of these inequalities and do not only consider them as just another characteristic of world politics. Our aim is to show more completely the configuration of the hierarchy implied by these inequalities and the limitations they impose on conviviality.

To carry out this study we consulted some three hundred academic references (books, chapters, articles in academic journals, working papers). We found it difficult to access publications in Spanish and Portuguese due to the absence or incompleteness of relevant search engines. As a result, our literature review is biased in favor of academic production in English.

The intersection of studies in international relations and economics on global inequalities from a state-centric perspective led us to divide the existing debates into three main themes, which are reflected in the structure of this paper. What stands out first is studies on economic inequalities, which focus on the capabilities of states and devote much attention to methodology. There is a notable recent effort to update dependency theories and challenge the dominant works in this area. Following this, both economists and internationalists analyze how inequalities between states related to their different capabilities are reflected in international organizations and are accentuated by these organizations through their rules of operation, the regulations that emanate from them, and the everyday informal practices by which they operate. Lastly, a large number of authors debate how to characterize the international system, mainly from the international relations point of view. Here the absence of dialogue between a certain mainstream body of thought (neorealism) and Latin American thought in this field of study is notable.

2. Economic Inequalities: The Mainstream in Economics vs. Dependency Reborn

The topic of global inequalities has become fashionable in the last fifteen years thanks to publications by economists, whose work has stimulated debate beyond their discipline. We first discuss the few studies of this type that take the state as a unit of analysis.

The literature review shows the importance of methodology for these authors. What stands out about these studies in economics is the emphasis on the capabilities of the actors. The unequal distribution of limited resources impacts the quality of public action. These publications have also been disseminated among internationalists, although without the emphasis on methodology and measurement. On the other hand, a more theoretical response can be perceived – as shown by the recent wave of updating dependency theories – which mainly comes from international political economy, a subfield of international relations that is more open towards critical visions of the world economy.

In the field of economics there is no consensus on the evolution of inequalities between states. For some academics, globalization increases inequalities; for others, however, causality cannot be demonstrated, and others even defend the point of view that it varies over time or that effects may overlap (Rasler and Thompson 2009). Actually, much depends on the chronology adopted. In the short term, and before the Covid-19 pandemic, economic inequalities between states seemed to be decreasing (Salvia et al. 2021) while at the same time increasing within them (Milanovic 2017; Piketty 2014).¹¹ The marked economic growth that was being experienced by several countries in the South, especially emerging ones, has led to a decrease in inequalities between countries. This trend has been widely accepted and analyzed by standard models such as the one proposed by Paul Krugman and Anthony J. Venables, heirs of the Kuznets curve, or convergence dynamics that characterized studies such as that of Robert J. Barro, although this has been called into question again in the era of the Covid-19 pandemic (Barro 1991; Krugman and Venables 1995). On the other hand, a longer term view does not seem to confirm this trend (Bértola 2018; Bosmans et al. 2014; Milanovic 2005). From an international relations perspective, Lees points out that despite the economic diversity among the countries of the South and the empowerment of some of its members, the North–South gap described by the Brandt Report four decades ago remains almost entirely intact (Lees 2021).

Some agree that globalization facilitates convergence among Northern countries but exacerbates the divergence between North and South (Rasler and Thompson 2009; Theil 1989). Furthermore, inequalities between states are deeper than internal

¹¹ For a use of these works in international relations, see Nogueira (2020).

inequalities (Acemoglu and Robinson 2015; Bourguignon 2014; Milanovic 2017). These conclusions confirm the structural nature – frequently described from an institutionalist or neo-institutionalist perspective – of inequalities (Acemoglu et al. 2001; Cimoli et al. 2006; Rodrik et al. 2004; Stiglitz 2015) and the importance of considering the state as a unit of analysis in this phenomenon and as a producer of inequalities (Giraud 2000). Nevertheless, they do not draw a conclusion about what these inequalities mean for the convivial configuration in which states find themselves at a global level; that is, about the political consequences of inequalities (Wade 2014).

The core of the debate is often centered around methodological considerations; that is, how inequalities should be measured and defined. We have not found publications that reflect on the use of the singular or plural to study this phenomenon. However, the difference matters, because it may reflect the dominance of one or another type of inequality. For example, in economics, the most widespread use of inequalities refers to monetary measures, or having monetary consequences.

There are two common units of analysis in studies with an international scope: one is the average income at the country level; that is, per capita gross domestic product (GDP) or average salary, although there are also some variants that study specific parts of a distribution; for example, the highest 10% or the lowest 50%. This leads to studies that make comparisons among countries, mainly referred to as inequalities between countries. The other is individual income analyzed on a global scale to construct analyses of what has been called “global inequality” (Bourguignon 2014; Milanovic 2005, 2017; Piketty 2014).

When economists address inequalities among states, they most commonly rely on socioeconomic indicators measuring differences among them, particularly World Bank rankings and United Nations Development Program (UNDP) reports. Another limitation of economics studies of global inequalities is their focus on the individual unit of analysis. When they observe the differences among countries, they use indicators that refer to the situation of individuals, such as GDP per capita, the Gini coefficient, or the human development index (HDI), which are not necessarily the most appropriate when the state is taken as the unit of analysis. In this case, GDP again has some relevance, despite its well-known limitations.¹²

¹² The literature that describes and analyzes the limitations of the gross domestic product as an indicator of value creation and of development is vast and is now part of the basic texts of macroeconomics. A relevant example from recent years is found in Mazzucato (2018).

The importance of measures should not be underestimated, because “ambiguous concepts lead to misleading statistics” (Ravallion 2003: 740).¹³ The conclusions may be different depending on whether inequalities are relative – as in the case of the Gini coefficient or the proportion between two segments of the distribution – or absolute – a difference in income levels, for example. For this reason, some authors express their skepticism about the dominant methodology for studying global inequalities in the economy. Jason Hickel presents a critique of the World Bank’s traditional narratives on inequalities measurements, and together with Anthony B. Atkinson, warns that while some large countries have grown rapidly (such as China or India), other developing countries have done so at slower rates (Hickel 2017; Atkinson 2016). It is therefore important to break down the statistics.

Wade questions the academic obsession with quantitative data and shows the difficulty in constructing data that is comparable between such different national realities (Wade 2017). A minor variation in methodology can lead to contradictory results (Ravallion 2017); as a specific example, Francesco Caselli, Gerardo Esquivel and Fernando Lefort, and Steven Durlauf, Paul Johnson and Jonathan Temple contributed to problematizing the debate on convergence between countries (Caselli et al. 1996; Durlauf et al. 2006).

The methodological debate has consequences for the definition of inequalities. Heterodox authors also stress the need to consider inequalities as a social, not only an economic phenomenon (Giraud et al. 2019; Jacobs 2017; Jones 2017), and Piketty put this at the center of the debate (Piketty 2014; Wade 2014). Some scholars criticize the neglect of geographical variables, essential for understanding differences between global inequalities (Jones 2017; Redding and Venables 2004; Rey and Janikas 2005). Others point out that if we adopt a *longue durée* historical perspective, a country scale for constructing indicators is not necessarily the most relevant (Stanziani 2015). This scale ignores the international insertion of the (then independent) countries and the effects of colonialism on their own dynamics of inequalities.¹⁴ Adopting this viewpoint opens the door to dialogue with more critical readings of global inequalities, particularly with dependency theories, as in sociology (Braig et al. 2016).

¹³ It is interesting to note that these critical analyses are published in alternative sources; that is, they are not published in English or in economics journals.

¹⁴ Acemoglu, Johnson and Robinson set out to identify the origins of certain international divergences in a certain type of colonialism, but they did so using econometric methods, not by historically and dynamically tracing these divergences nor from a global perspective (Acemoglu et al. 2001).

Heterodox work in economics has traditionally linked the economic, political, and social aspects more closely. These authors share a critical vision of capitalism, pointing out the failures or crisis of this economic model. Many found refuge in the subfield of international political economy, more epistemologically flexible than their discipline of origin.

Due to Latin America and the Caribbean's long history of experiencing the structural difference between political independence and economic dependence, academics in the region have developed visions that try to more explicitly include socioeconomic inequalities and their links to the international system. It began with Raúl Prebisch's questioning of David Ricardo's comparative advantages (Prebisch 1949). Latin America's fundamental economic problem is the inherent imbalance in the terms of trade; that is, the fact that exported agricultural products tend to be cheaper than imported industrialized goods. Argentine economist Raúl Prebisch thus challenged the conventional rationalization that the benefits of technological progress would be distributed equally throughout the international division of labor. His work would go on to be a source of inspiration for dependency theories. Its authors share three fundamental assumptions: global capitalism is structured into a center and peripheries; the evolution of peripheral economies is constrained by changes in the economies at the center; and this situation of dependence has an impact on the internal socioeconomic organization of the peripheries, which leads to reproduction of domination by local elites (Palestini 2021).

The dependentists are diverse and do not agree on the degree of importance of external factors or the potential for associated development for Latin America. Theotonio dos Santos and André Gunder Frank are part of the group of radicals who argue for the responsibility of the center, collusion by the elites, which prevents any negotiated improvement for the region (Gunder Frank 1967; Santos 2000). In contrast, Fernando Henrique Cardoso and Enzo Faletto believe in the dynamics of dependency at various scales and observe a partial beginning of development in some cases, although insufficient and not autonomous (Cardoso and Faletto 1969).

The repercussions of dependency theories have been enormous for social sciences worldwide (Griffin 1978; Lagos 1963). The best known of its influence is the world systems theory proposed by Immanuel Wallerstein, which is frequently cited in critical sociological works on inequalities (Boatcă et al. 2017; Braig et al. 2016; Lagos 1963). In his 1984 book, he addressed the nature of global politics based on states – particularly the central states, which were the United States and the Soviet Union; and those of the Third World – and the limitations of sovereignty in relation to the position of the actors in the international system (Wallerstein 1984), which led to a consideration of the inequalities within the periphery, in line with Ruy Mauro Marini.¹⁵ However, these

works received severe criticism in the fields of economics and international relations, and fell into disuse. Given the persistence of inequalities, and in the context of the current debate, we can observe a certain revitalization of dependency ideas, which facilitate dialogue with reflections on more diverse global inequalities in thematic and ontological terms.

In fact, based on the position of Latin American countries, although the functioning of international trade has evolved considerably, certain center–periphery structures persist in many economies. Agriculture, minerals, and raw materials for energy represent essential sectors of their economies and their relations with other countries (Karl 1997; Lees 2012; Ross 1999; Shafer 1994). What is more, the gaps in key sectors to combat inequalities are abysmal; such as, for example, finance, education, the energy transition, and technology (Backhouse et al. 2021; Filippo 1998; Schrire 2000). In this regard, the vast majority of developing countries are bystanders on the sidelines of the Fourth Industrial Revolution. Moreover, the Covid-19 pandemic acutely revealed the persistence of economic and technological inequalities between states, as well as the differential exposure to climate change, already well studied (Hickel 2020; Parks and Roberts 2008; Shue 1999; Taconet et al. 2020).

In all these areas, inequalities are expressed not only between states, but also between states and non-governmental actors (Hurrell 2007; Murphy 2001; Vahter and Masso 2018), particularly transnational companies, and to a lesser extent NGOs and international organizations (see Section 3). Dependency theories encompass this diversity, thanks to their holism, which in turn enables us to examine the complexities of the social configuration in which states find themselves, and to place emphasis on the situation of the majority; namely, a situation of restriction. Furthermore, dependency biases a state's ability to act, since from the dependency perspective the elites of the periphery operate in collusion with their counterparts in the center. This means that by controlling the state, public policies address its specific interests against internal conviviality (but in favor of transnational conviviality among elites).

These theories also can be applied to social power relations in a broader sense, especially the more sociological reading of dependency and world systems theory. On the basis of studies of military supremacy, control of the main currencies and transnational companies, and the soft power of the United States and some of its European allies, the theories conclude that this situation deepens inequalities and

15 For an updated reading of their proposal on subimperialism, see Sotelo Valencia (2018).

multiplies conflicts. All of these studies emphasize the role of colonization in economic inequalities (Boatcă et al. 2017; Henríquez Ayin et al. 2015). At the same time, they take into account the material and non-material resources and capabilities of states, as well as the production of inequalities in their relationships (Lees 2012).

These studies have begun to generate questions that start from economics, and expand the definition of global inequalities, going beyond a methodological debate. The examples of measuring inequalities linked to finance or climate change included in this section also illustrate this trend. At the same time, they establish explicit bridges with works by internationalists who focus on the state as a unit. For example, they readily dialogue with reflections on the differential military capabilities of states, based on the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) indicator or initiatives to measure material and non-material capabilities (soft power) between peripheral states (Morales Ruvalcaba 2020). These studies have in common the argument that global inequalities also translate into the internal politics of states, from their capability to act to the definition of the operational social arrangement. They can also serve as a basis for reflection on the organization and functioning of the international system, another theme of the debate on state-centric global inequalities.

3. International Organizations as a Reflection of Global Inequalities

Economics and international relations studies dedicated to state-centric global inequalities agree that the enormous differences in capabilities between states make sovereign equality, the cornerstone of public international law, a pipe dream. These inequalities impact countries in their relations with the rest of the world, particularly the design and functioning of international organizations.¹⁶ Such organizations are the most institutionalized face of international cooperation and, paradoxically, at the same time reflect and reproduce global inequalities.

Reflection has gone further in this direction in the field of international relations, questioning the very construction of public international law as a source of unequal structures. Moreover, a considerable body of research looks beyond the formal framework of

¹⁶ Here we refer to intergovernmental organizations that result from agreements between states to coordinate decision-making among them. These organizations are created with constitutive treaties that define their physical location, the organization of their headquarters with a secretariat and staff, their budget, their scope, and the formal rules of operation for the members.

international organizations to show how inequalities between states are expressed through the informal practices that operate in these institutions. Since the results of collective negotiations represent significant commitments for states – for example, obtaining a loan from a multilateral bank or drawing up shared commitments in the fight against climate change – these inequalities in international organizations also affect states’ abilities to carry out internal actions. The convivial configuration studied here shows how difficult it is, although not impossible, to achieve international cooperation with concrete and equitable results.

To begin with, many organizations are designed unevenly, especially when the decisions emanating from their members are binding; for example, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), the Bretton Woods institutions (International Monetary Fund, World Bank), and the World Trade Organization (WTO). There is a classic line of thought in international relations on the regulation of multilateralism and the intrinsic tension between representation, effectiveness, and legitimacy.¹⁷ Favoring the first is often equivalent to hindering the second (how to make decisions among almost two hundred member states?) while privileging the second can lead to casting doubt on the third. At the same time, given the inequalities between different states’ capabilities, how do we convince the most powerful to engage in collective actions that restrict their capability to act unilaterally?

Stephen Zamora studies how formal procedures influence the effectiveness and respect of international institutions, particularly economic ones (Zamora 1980). Thus, the “one member, one vote” system often leads to non-binding resolutions, as is the case with resolutions voted on in the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA).¹⁸ In contrast, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), in charge of maintaining international peace and security, is made up of fifteen members, of which five occupy permanent positions and have veto power (China, France, the United Kingdom, the United States and the Russian Federation). The other ten are elected for two-year terms and are distributed among different regions, of which Latin America and the Caribbean is one (Malone 2004).

¹⁷ It can be defined as “production by states, international organizations, and NGOs of rules and regulations that seek to establish a cooperative international order by regulating international interdependencies” (Petiteville 2009: 11).

¹⁸ This does not prevent peripheral actors from acting (Panke 2013).

In international economic organizations, the distribution of formal political power is related to the underlying distribution of economic power and even distorts it in favor of the most powerful economies (Kaya 2017).¹⁹ In the International Monetary Fund (IMF), each member has one vote according to the universalist scheme (basic vote), to which is added a proration of votes (quotas) calculated based on each one's respective weight in the world economy. This second point also establishes the amount of the financial contribution to the capital of the Fund and the right to borrow from the institution. With this mechanism, the countries that provide the organization with the most financial support are favored in decision-making. The United States, because of its quotas, therefore enjoys *de facto* veto power.

The organization of the IMF is also uneven; It is divided into three main bodies: the Managing Director, the Board of Governors and the Executive Board. Since its creation, and up to the time of writing this essay, the Managing Director has always been awarded to a European, according to an unwritten rule; the Board of Governors is made up of a representative from each member state and addresses administrative issues (admission, reorganization, inter-institutional ties); and the Executive Board is in charge of conducting matters of common interest: it mainly decides on the granting of loans and is made up of 24 directors, of whom eight are appointed by the countries that hold the highest quotas and the others by constituencies made up of multiple states (Carreau 2009).

Within the constituencies, the structures of power and influence are also forceful (Woods and Lombardi 2006). In addition, the directors usually come from the main economies of the group, given the system of distribution of votes. For example, in 2010, the largest group was made up of 23 African countries, but it only held 1.35% of the votes (Brun 2018), so it did not have weight in the negotiations. In this way, many international organizations adopt institutional designs that are not fully representative. Michael Barnett and Martha Finnemore describe this trend as the “non-democratic liberalism” of international organizations, since they pursue objectives linked to liberal values on the basis of procedures that are not democratic (Barnett and Finnemore 2004). Therefore, the results can only be unequal (Ocampo 2019).

It is not surprising, then, that these organizations also take part in actions that deepen inequalities between states. In the words of Joseph Stiglitz (2015), inequalities result from a political decision, which is why the responsibility can be attributed to the actors that deepen them. First, there is a collusion of interests between the organizations and the states with the most power of influence according to the institutional design (Stiglitz 2015). They then turn into agents that produce inequalities (Barnett and Finnemore 2004; Chwieroth 2010).

¹⁹ Formal political power is defined as the influence of a state within an institution according to its rules and procedures (voting system and state representation in the main bodies).

Stiglitz has pointed out the close collaboration between the IMF and the US Treasury Department (Stiglitz 2003). Many publications argue that financial institutions serve the interests of the countries that are richer and have more economic capabilities (Copelovitch 2010; Hickel 2017; Rodrik 2011). We observe that they do not reform even as the distribution of economic capabilities in the world, which favors Western economies, changes. Ayse Kaya studies the diverse dynamics of change in the IMF, the World Bank, the WTO, and the G20 as a function of how the dominant states interpret the respective institution's objectives, the way in which members finance each institution, and institutional norms and conventions (which favor gradual change) (Kaya 2017). Second, given the imbalances in votes that determine decision-making, the regulations that result from the negotiation process usually go in the direction of the interests and visions of the state actors with the greatest capabilities. The unequal effect of international standards is pointed out in international relations studies as well as economics; in particular the imposition of neoliberal precepts, the "new constitutionalism" (Gill 2002) in the countries of the South that needed IMF or the World Bank aid (Ocampo 2019; Pieterse 2020). Let us remember here the imbalance of votes in the IMF in decisions on granting loans. In turn, the states themselves produce inequalities due to the adoption of restrictive economic measures (Giraud 2000) which the United States government has not applied to its own economy (Stiglitz 2003). Therefore, the standards developed and implemented as per the different international organizations (re)produce inequalities between states and do not facilitate the management of differences between actors, which would be fundamental from the perspective of conviviality.

This argument echoes the research of critical international law specialists who also highlight the political construction of international law in favor of the most powerful states – in a game of manipulation and withdrawal (Krisch 2005). With this, a precarious balance is sought between structures of power and the ideals of justice. Based on the intersection between law and history, they demonstrate how sovereign equality allows legalization of the patterns of inclusion/exclusion of certain actors who do not meet the requirements to participate in the interstate game, and thus generate inequalities. These patterns do not necessarily correspond to other divisions of the international system based on inequalities. For example, the North–South gap is different if we consider that Latin American states have defended the concept of sovereign equality since their independence. These critical jurists are interested, rather, in entities that did not accept this form of political organization or who opposed the formal regulations of international law promoted by the powers.

More pointedly, Gerry Simpson studies two forms of legalized hierarchies that challenge formal equality (Simpson 2004). On the one hand, legalized hegemony refers to the prerogatives of the great powers, a type of elite recognized as such by other countries. They enjoy certain privileges, some of which are part of international law (Donnelly 2006). The other states accept these inequalities in exchange for rules and regulations that protect their own sovereign equality. Moreover, Simpson proposes the concept of antipluralism. This refers to another form of exclusion, in particular of outlaw states, which are denied full participation in the international legal order because of moral and political reasons (Simpson 2004). For example, in the nineteenth century, the division was between civilized and uncivilized states (Keene 2007).

Sovereign equality also reflects the liberal ideas defended by the most powerful states. Tanja Aalberts points out that after decolonization, this concept became the new standard of civilization (Aalberts 2014). The expansion of the concept serves to globalize a European liberal vision (the state as an independent, autonomous legal entity). Today, the discourse is around liberal norms, such as respect for democracy (Simpson 2004). Presenting sovereign equality as a right facilitates its validation and confirms the productive power of the law in the discriminatory definition of members of international society over time (Aalberts 2014).

Another observation in international relations is that inequalities have also been detected beyond the formal and regulatory functioning of international organizations. In the international system, inequalities are revealed through informal practices and “subtle forms of manipulation” (MacDonald 2018: 131). Vincent Pouliot argues that multilateral diplomacy produces inequalities between actors (Pouliot 2016). He shows how hierarchical structures operate in the informal everyday practices of international negotiations on security issues (North Atlantic Treaty Organization and the United Nations Security Council).

For example, consensus is a common unwritten practice that does not necessarily favor equal participation by the parties in a negotiation. More powerful actors may indeed have more leverage in this informal sphere as well (Fehl 2014; Kaya 2017; Woods and Lombardi 2006; Zamora 1980). Since consensus is the goal, they take advantage of this informal imperative to promote their vision and not block the outcome of the dialogue. The practice of minilateralism has also expanded. During negotiations on a global problem, it is common for a subset of the parties to meet to prepare the draft of the final declaration. Generally, these are the parties that have the greatest influence according to the written rules. This practice leaves little room for maneuvering by other participants; voting on the document frequently results in bargaining that takes place in the corridors of the venue. The majority is thus faced with a *fait accompli*. Minilateralism reinforces unequal relationships between members.

A symbol of this practice was the Green Room of the WTO. The organization worked by consensus; however, the success of trade negotiations depended on understandings among the most powerful states in international trade (Narlikar 2006). The same thing happens often, and even led to the failure of the Copenhagen Conference of the Parties (COP15) on climate change in December 2009. Only one non-mandatory text was signed by emerging countries and the United States, along with thirty other participants, the majority only taking note (Brun 2018). In their quest for integration into the privileged centers of decision-making or discussion, emerging countries participated in the reproduction of a type of minilateralism. The expansion of institutions and informal groups seemed like progress from the point of view of insertion of new actors into the global game, but could not be systematically considered synonymous with better representation (Badie 2013).

However, Caroline FehI has raised an innovative challenge to the prevalent argument that institutions reflect deep inequalities between states (FehI 2014). She studied the evolution of international arms control organizations since 1945 and concludes that they have not been characterized by a deepening of inequalities. She observes rather that patterns of inequalities change over time in a collective effort to adapt the regime to changing contexts. She presents a typology of different forms of institutional inequalities, understood as the privileges of powerful states that can be substantive (institutional design) or procedural (process for drafting regulations), or both. Institutional inequalities can take three forms; hierarchy, exclusivity, and informality.²⁰ This enables us to advance the debate since it does not consider inequalities as fixed, and leads to a better understanding of how they can hinder cooperation.

The unequal functioning of international organizations is a source of academic concern, because it represents a challenge to the convivial configuration of states at the global level. Inequalities increase the probability of tension, since actors with different capabilities and power to influence are not willing to cooperate in the same way. The most endowed states claim to be able to act alone; the others object that they have less responsibility for certain global problems but at the same time are more exposed, as in the case of climate change, and do not have the same leverage in negotiations (Parks and Roberts 2008). Inequalities are a limitation to international cooperation, both for states among each other and between states and other actors (Hurrell 2007).

²⁰ Hierarchy is an order marked by different degrees of rights and privileges of the powerful, which are supported by recognition by others. Exclusivity is when some actors are denied their rights, without their accepting it. Informality refers to unwritten practices. Various studies have examined unwritten rules as another way of producing inequalities.

4. How Should We Characterize the Inequalities of the International System?

One of the main debates in international relations has to do with identifying the factor that distinguishes this field from others; in particular, internal contexts. In the field of economics this discussion does not seem relevant. Inequalities are always included in the theoretical schemes of internationalists, but not from the same position. In any case, the lack of dialogue between different academic spheres stands out, in particular the blindness of the mainstream towards Latin American contributions. This occurs despite the fact that some mainstream scholars share a certain concern about an international system that is not very permissive toward peripheral actors in the sense of improving their visibility and, consequently, promoting their visions and encouraging their capability to act, both internally and externally. They also care about the convivial configuration of interstate relations being more cooperative.

In this section, by 'mainstream,' we essentially refer to the neorealist theoretical proposal. According to this perspective on international relations, the international system is the classic expression used to refer to interstate interactions, or to an order based on state actors. This system has traditionally been described as anarchic, since there is no authority above the states that regulates their behavior (Bull 1977; Waltz 1979). Bull and Waltz each discuss the possibility of cooperation between states in such a configuration; Hedley Bull, from the English School, considers it possible, while Kenneth Waltz, the founder of neorealism, interprets it instrumentally, as an option used only if it serves the interests of the powers.

It is Kenneth Waltz's work that will generate more debate on identifying the determining factor of the international system. He highlights the importance of the structure of the international system and its role in determining the behavior of states. The system is characterized by three principles. The principle of order is anarchy, which does not mean disorder, but the absence of a supranational regulatory body; that is, a body that would be above the states. The principle of definition characterizes the actors: the system is composed of units whose functions are similar; that is, differences in their internal characteristics do not matter for this purpose. Since the system is anarchic, the states are undifferentiated, or "similar units," because each one must seek its security and they can therefore only rely on themselves. The third principle refers to the distribution of capabilities among the units of the system: states are differentiated by their capabilities and not by their functions. Power gives a state a position in the international system and this determines its behavior.

For Waltz, the principles of ordering and differentiation are not decisive, since anarchy prevails and the main units in the system are states. What will characterize the system is the distribution principle. Then, notably, he includes inequalities in his analysis. Although they are not the functional basis of the system, because it is considered to be an anarchy, the ordering produced by inequalities produces different kinds of international systems; for example, unipolar, bipolar or multipolar. It is clear to Waltz that what matters are the powerful actors, not the majority of states. The principle of anarchy continues to be the foundation of much work in international relations to this day (Lechner 2017).

However, due to the enormous differences between states, and in a context where other actors are emerging, making interactions at a global level more complex, anarchy is increasingly being questioned and replaced by the concept of hierarchy as a fundamental principle of ordering the international system and, to a lesser extent, world politics. If anarchy underlines the absence of authority over states at the global level, hierarchy assumes that some actors call the shots and others obey (Hobson and Sharman 2005). At the same time, the distinction between internal and external becomes more blurred (Lake 2007). Hierarchy thus provides the advantage of placing inequalities at the heart of understanding international relations and at the same time helps to decipher how state action is permeated by global inequalities at different levels, including the internal one.

This proposal is not new (Clark 1989; Onuf and Klink 1989), but the concept has been the object of extensive dynamic reflection in this field recently, perhaps echoing the popularity of economic work on global inequalities, although there are few references to these in the discussion of hierarchy. In international relations literature, hierarchies are political because they are based on a mindset of the structure of power. It may be pointed out that while some publications analyze existing hierarchies in the international system, others also question them, and this can be linked to the reflection on conviviality and on regarding inequalities as a problem.

First, a number of references analyze the types and mechanisms of hierarchies between states at the global level. With respect to types, hierarchy can be understood as the result of negotiation between actors, the definition of roles and behaviors, and as an organizing political space (Mattern and Zarakol 2016). Hierarchies are expressed through rules and regulations, as we have seen; political systems (such as empires), authority mechanisms, or themes – such as gender (Cooley 2005; Zarakol 2017). Vincent Pouliot also observes the social production of hierarchies through informal diplomatic practices (Pouliot 2016).

Second, some authors emphasize the dialectic inherent in hierarchies, since they not only imply relations of domination, but also depend on a certain degree of acceptance by the subordinate actors. David Lake studies this through a rationalized approach:

states make a cost/benefit calculation to determine whether it is in their best interest to obey (Lake 2009). John Hobson and J. C. Sharman emphasize social norms and actors' construction of their identities to understand the rise or decline of specific hierarchies (Hobson and Sharman 2005).

Finally, a part of these reflections also includes the search for a way out from the dichotomy between anarchy and hierarchy. Jack Donnelly suggests making the definition of the international system more flexible and studying the rationale of structural differentiation depending on the contexts (temporal and spatial) (Donnelly 2009). For example, relations between states with similar capabilities and power of influence develop in an environment that resembles anarchy. In contrast, what prevails between states from the South and the North is a hierarchical structure due to the inequalities between the actors. But if inequalities are diverse and changing, as we saw in the other two debates, we can postulate that there are also different types of hierarchies. For some authors, hierarchies coexist with anarchy (Donnelly 2009; Hobson and Sharman 2005; McConaughey et al. 2018; Weber 2000), while for others, hierarchy cancels anarchy (Fehl 2014; Lake 2009; Mattern and Zarakol 2016; Pouliot 2016). From Latin America, Lucas de Oliveira Paes continues the process of fusion between anarchy and hierarchy by proposing an understanding of international hierarchies through the interactions between political and economic structures that produce differences between states (Paes 2019). He reinterprets Kenneth Waltz in light of the sociological theory of differentiation, which considers asymmetries as the result of a socialization process in a specific social system. Interstate economic and political relations have structuring effects on the international system, which in turn affect state agency.

Once again, this idea has been criticized on the basis that it focuses too much on the relationships between states despite the fact that hierarchies exist between multiple actors (Mattern and Zarakol 2016). This research agenda is still pending in international relations (Zarakol 2017). Thus, critical readings on hierarchy as an obstacle to international cooperation are linked together and facilitate the return of analyses that are based on the concepts of empire and imperialism (Jordheim and Neumann 2011). This, in turn, gives us a glimpse of bridges joining dependency theories and the dialectic of center and periphery.²¹

Despite these potential bridges, the English-language literature on hierarchy has developed in a rather self-referenced manner. These critical visions are not unlike postulates already proposed by Latin American authors as long as four decades ago, but which remain unknown in the wider debate. We have not found any reference to these authors in the works we consulted.

In Latin America, anarchy has been debated since the 1960s. Dependency theories inspired international relations researchers who thought about the possibility of autonomy as a space to make political decisions limiting external influence. Autonomy is analyzed from systemic perspectives and domestic considerations. They consider, in line with the followers of the dependentists (Amin and Camiller 2006), that inequalities between states constitute a structural central axis of the world.

They argue that the organizing principle of the international system is not hierarchy, but asymmetry (Jaguaribe et al. 1969). While hierarchy must have classification, asymmetry is a broader concept, which includes all social phenomena whose elements lack balance and harmony as a whole or with respect to a certain point. In the cases of the Latin American and Caribbean countries, the international configuration is restrictive and conviviality is hindered by the existing links between the structure of domination and inequalities. This proposal adopts a state-centric perspective, although it includes the inequalities faced by Latin American states in dealing with non-governmental actors, particularly transnational companies. Structural asymmetries at the international level must be studied on the basis of the specific insertion of peripheral countries in the world, because they determine the political and power relations between states (Míguez 2021). In this work, we focus on global inequalities from a global perspective. However, this structural gap should not lead to ruling out others that are present at other levels, given the diversity of the Southern states. In this regard, the inequalities among Latin American and Caribbean countries are also significant.

The lack of inclusion of these Latin American reflections in English-language publications on the determining factor of the international system exposes an ongoing deficiency in international relations studies. The problem is not that Latin American thought is backward and less advanced, for it is not, but rather that it is invisible, which reduces the scope of our overall understanding of the global scenario. It would be interesting to compare these contributions with those of other peripheral regions. The Latin American proposal presented here confirms that the international sphere cannot be thought of independently of inequalities. When new inequalities appear or when existing ones are challenged, it is global policy overall that is called into question (Walker 2002).

21 For an example, see Hinnebusch (2011).

5. Conclusions

The global inequalities that differentiate states in various ways characterize the convivial configuration in which they find themselves; that is, they define the terms of the tensions they face and represent a challenge to cooperation among them, cooperation that is essential to solving their shared problems. They also confirm the importance of studying the state as a unit of analysis to understand the effects of global inequalities, both on the states and for the individuals who are under their legal authority. The actions of states depend on the inequalities that affect them. For countries such as those of Latin America, this is a structural restriction that is essential to include in a reflection on their potential for action in global politics and at the domestic level.

We have presented the three debates that appear most in the reviewed literature, mainly in economics and international relations: economic inequalities and how to study and define them; the formal and informal functioning of international organizations; and characterization of the international system.

To appreciate the inequalities between states, a transdisciplinary effort is required. In this regard, much remains to be done in the field of international relations and even more in economics. There are few bridges between the two fields and their different debates, except, perhaps, with respect to dependency theories. In any case, we observe more openness to academic plurality from international relations; economics still does not seem to have adopted the critical revolution that is growing in other social sciences and the humanities.

²² The International Labor Organization (ILO) is an exception in this sense, since it brings together government representatives, employers, and workers.

Also notable is the relative absence of studies on the lack of formal inclusion of non-state actors in international cooperation processes.²² Since the 1970s, their appearance, as a result of the globalization process, has generated a growing interdependence between all agents in world politics. Consequently, analyses of the impacts of global inequalities on states involve the inclusion of other entities, such as transnational companies, financial entities, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). We find very few references that treat the relations between the state and these actors in terms of global inequalities,²³ in spite of the fact that the latter have greater capabilities than many states.²⁴ Their exclusion from international negotiations in sectors in which they are engaged represents an inequality for them. However, their participation also raises the question of their legitimacy and representativeness, in legal and also in political terms. Their ad hoc inclusion, such as in the health and finance sectors, also generates other inequalities to the detriment of states (Guilbaud 2015; Stiglitz 2003).

This essay is a call for any social science analysis of inequalities to take into account the external factor and not neglect the role of the state – as a lever and also as an obstacle – in the fight against inequalities. There are many challenges, given the epistemological and ontological implications at play. Indeed, associating the concept of conviviality with inequalities also means developing alternative, more critical studies of the world as it exists, if we accept that conviviality refers to the relational dimension of social life and assumes a certain normative quality. Finally, this association requires approaching the social sciences not only from the perspective of the most developed or powerful actors, but also from the South, to understand the structurally unequal character of the world we live in.

23 There are indeed studies on the inequalities caused by these actors within states.

24 Other works assume that these inequalities exist, but do not use this vocabulary (Babic et al. 2017).

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