

Intersectionality and Social Inequality in the Public Spaces of Twenty- first Century Urban Latin America. Introduction

Interseccionalidad y desigualdad social
en los espacios públicos de la América Latina urbana
en el siglo xxi. Introducción

FRAYA FREHSE

Universidade de São Paulo, Brazil

fraya@usp.br

ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9501-5584>

FEDERICO NAVARRETE LINARES

Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Mexico

fnl@unam.mx

ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2766-7713>

This dossier brings together disciplinary perspectives ranging from Sociology to Urban Planning as well as Anthropology and History to examine five Latin American cities in the twenty-first century: São Paulo, Cali, Mexico City, Santiago, and Buenos Aires. The six articles that follow explore how specific social categories of difference –social class, gender, sexuality, family-bonding, race/ethnicity, spatial functions, victimization, resident status, racialization, age, nationality, etc.– intersect with social inequality in the public spaces of these major cities.

We are aware that socially forged asymmetries, of smaller or greater import, have shaped all human societies (Graeber and Wengrow 2021, 102, *passim*). Moreover, contemporary Latin America stands out globally for one specific form of social inequality: “national income share” (World Inequality Database 2023). This means that

class is a decisive “principle of social classification and mobility” (Ianni 1973, 12). In present-day Latin American countries, “property and the market (of means of production and labour force)” prevail in “man’s thought and action” as much they do in all class-structured, capitalist societies (Ianni 1973, 12).

Therefore, it comes as no surprise that class inequalities are also *publicly* visible in the urban streets, squares, parks, and other public spaces of Latin American cities. For us, the adjective “public” encompasses the most accessible empirical instances of urban space, whether legally, physically and materially, or informationally (Frehse 2018, 35). Indeed, this variegated public accessibility is inseparable from the relational nature of space itself. If we conceive space as a set of simultaneous, bodily mediated relationships between human beings and material and symbolic goods in specific places (Frehse 2017, 513-514), we understand why public spaces might publicly stage class inequalities.

Based on this conceptual framing, the particular interest of this dossier lies in the question of *how* the public-spatial facet of class inequality manifests in contemporary urban Latin America. The following pages address this issue from different angles ranging from homelessness in São Paulo’s streets and squares to the asymmetries between drivers and pedestrians on the main campus of Mexico’s largest public university. The discussion also turns to the physical presence of socially marginalized, self-built neighbourhoods in Cali, as well as bodily experiences of exclusion and discrimination in the public spaces of high-end consumption and recreation and in urban transport in Mexico City; in everyday work and leisure activities in Buenos Aires; and in activism and protest in Santiago.

That said, our analysis is not confined to *class* inequality. Social inequality in Latin America is highly diverse (Braig, Costa, and Göbel 2016; Costa 2020); even more so in its cities (Segura 2014) and in their streets and squares (Frehse 2014). This is why this dossier tackles social inequality through the lens of intersectionality. This concept was coined in 1989 by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) as a political-judicial tool and subsequently developed theoretically (Viveros-Vigoya 2024, 58) and methodologically (Esposito and Evans-Winters 2022; Misra *et al.* 2024). It helps us address how class intersects with gender, racial and/or ethnic identities (in short, race/ethnicity), sexuality, age, and other dimensions of personal and group identity to produce various forms of social inequality that permeate bodies, neighbourhoods, social activities, protests, and circulations in the public spaces of contemporary Latin America.

The discussion on the links between intersectionality and social inequality is not new. Mara Viveros-Vigoya has clearly shown (2016, 5-6; 2024, 56-58) that intersectional thinking is historically much older and geographically far more diverse than the term’s formal conceptualization. Since at least the early 1980s, Afro-Latin American women thinkers have been advocating for a political agenda centered on the intersection of gender and race together with class (Viveros-Vigoya 2024, 57). That said, the “institutionalization” of intersectionality in the 2000s (Viveros-Vigoya 2024, 58) marks a turning point. The concept of “inequality regimes”, for instance, emerged

in this context (Acker 2006, 441) as did, more recently, “situated intersectionality” (Yuval-Davis 2015, 95, 99) and “intersectional inequality” (Ragin and Fiss 2017). From a different epistemological standpoint, urban research began to emphasize the intersecting and overlapping role of “spatial inequality” alongside other “domains of inequality” in cities (Lobao, Hooks, and Tickamyer 2007, 262; for a concise theoretical overview, see Harding and Blokland 2014, 120-216).

Whether understood as an intrinsic dimension, an outcome, or a cause of social inequality, intersectionality has definitively come to stay. This holds true for both theoretical work (Mecila 2017) and qualitative and quantitative empirical methods (Esposito and Evans-Winters 2023; Donley and Johnson 2024; Misra *et al.* 2024, 11).

The originality of this dossier lies in the fact that all its articles address the *public-spatial dimension* of the relationship between intersectionality and social inequality in the region of the world with the highest levels of class inequality. This dimension is largely absent from the scholarship on intersectionality and social inequality, particularly with regard to Latin America. Moreover, it appears only sporadically in the urban research produced on the region.

Recently, Viveros-Vigoya (2024) showed that the regional “appropriation” of intersectionality in Latin America has brought to the theoretical foreground, among other elements, the foundational and structural role of racism in the region, the non-existence of Black women as a “homogeneous social group”, and the analytical importance of “intracategorical relations” regarding dominated/dominant and oppressed/oppressive groups (Viveros-Vigoya 2024, 61). These scholarly developments coexist with the intense extra-academic use of intersectionality by feminist collectives in the “public sphere”, where it has become part of their “contemporary language of political activism” (Viveros-Vigoya 2024, 62).

Taken together, these observations suggest that the current scholarship on intersectionality and social inequality in Latin America tends to focus on the political-communicational dimension of public space (for an overview, see Harding and Blokland 2014, 190). By contrast, our dossier addresses both the physical-material and social-cultural facets of public space. In that vein, it tackles public streets and squares, parks and virtual environments, shopping malls, public transport, and a university campus.

As for urban research on contemporary Latin America more specifically, spatial approaches to the relationship between intersectionality and social inequality in the region’s cities are both recent and rare (among others, Molina, Galleguillos, and Grundström 2022; Villalobos 2023). Moreover, they only exceptionally focus on public spaces – whether streets (Jaramillo Cruz 2022) or national borders (Villalobos 2023).

Against the backdrop of this brief bibliographic appraisal, we can now summarize the contributions that this dossier offers to the debate on intersectionality and social inequality, especially in urban Latin America.

A first contribution lies in the dossier’s distinctive, threefold deployment of the concept of intersectionality. Two of the papers make primary use of intersectionality as

an epistemological tool. Fraya Frehse applies it to interpret the “situational” impact of intersectional inequalities among and around homeless women on the production of urban public space in São Paulo. Federico Navarrete Linares employs intersectionality to shed light on how modernist urban design at the National University campus in Mexico City contributes to the production and reproduction of an intersectionally-unaware university space, shaping the experiences of students and other users according to their respective intersectional positions.

A second use of intersectionality is methodological in nature. In line with previous research on the methodological relevance of intersectionality for urban studies (Franco Calderón and Ramírez Torres 2023), Gynna Millán and coauthors envisage intersectionality as an operational tool to help design more inclusive public spaces in Cali.

The dossier’s three remaining articles use intersectionality as an analytical tool. Moctezuma Mendoza mobilizes it to conceptualize the public-spatial interface of social asymmetries experienced by youth from lower-income backgrounds in Mexico City. Mariano Perelman and coauthors present five case studies of intersectional differences among skateboarding enthusiasts, street vendors, informal recyclers, sewists, domestic workers, and gamers in Buenos Aires. Meanwhile, Daniela Vicherat Mattar analyzes how intersectional differences underpin the bodily ways in which women, students and families protest in the streets of Santiago.

The second contribution of the dossier to the scholarly debate on intersectionality and social inequality in urban Latin America lies in its twofold approach to conceptualizing and analyzing the *impact* of intersectionality on social inequality in the region’s urban public spaces. We demonstrate that urban space is (re)produced through the various ways in which intersecting categories of difference interfere with socially unequal bodily relations in these spaces. Although each article resorts to different concepts of intersectionality and space, the dossier as a whole addresses the connection between intersectionality and social inequality through their interactional interference rather than the intricacy or causal determination discussed above.

On the one hand, the impact of intersectionality on social inequality in public spaces is approached through various conceptualizations of its very nature. For some authors, the interference is situational (Frehse, Moctezuma, Mendoza, and Perelman *et al.*), while for others it is fundamentally embodied (Vicherat Mattar, Navarrete Linares). For others still, intersectionality exerts a social-structural influence on social inequality (Millán *et al.*).

On the other hand, the impact of intersectionality on social inequality is analyzed by means of different empirical research cases. While Frehse focuses on situations of face-to-face interaction, Millán *et al.* examine neighbourhood upgrading projects. Moctezuma Mendoza and Perelman *et al.*, in turn, describe experiences and feelings of exclusion and discrimination, whereas Vicherat Mattar and Navarrete Linares explore embodied experiences of inequality.

Hence, we arrive at this dossier’s third contribution to scholarship on intersectionality and social inequality in urban Latin America. Taken together, the papers highlight

the diverse and theoretically unpredictable functions that public spaces in the region's cities fulfill for different actors occupying different intersectional positions. Public squares and streets can become spaces of family-home interactions for homeless cis and trans women in São Paulo. But they can also serve as sites for political protests, rendering publicly visible the challenges and hardships of domestic life under neoliberal austerity in Santiago. In Mexico City, recreational public spaces that are experienced as safe by some members of society can be overtly hostile for others with different genders and bodies. In the same city, the public spaces of Ciudad Universitaria –designed to be welcoming and convenient for middle-class, car-driving students and academics– become dangerous and almost inaccessible for those without a car, for women, and for people with mobility impairments. In the neighbourhoods of Cali, public squares and parks may be taken over by unintended users at the expense of the communities they are meant to serve, unless their different intersectional positions are explicitly taken into account. Finally, in Buenos Aires public squares and online forums are used in various ways by different groups of skating enthusiasts, while gated communities may provide security for their residents yet remain overtly hostile to their domestic workers.

By bringing together these diverse approaches, we hope this dossier demonstrates how our broader understanding of social inequality in urban Latin America can be enriched by different applications of the concept of intersectionality to the region's public spaces. Ultimately, our hope is that spatially sensitive intersectional approaches, such as those gathered here, may inspire further research, inform public policy, and guide urban planning efforts to combat the many forms of social inequality found in the cities of contemporary Latin America.

FUNDING INFORMATION AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The theoretical and analytical research underlying this dossier was funded by the British Academy's Visiting Fellowships 2023 Programme (Project VF2\100498). Partial funding for this introduction was provided by the Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior –Brasil (CAPES)– Finance Code 001.

We are grateful to the British Academy, and in particular to the Centre of Latin American Studies (CLAS) of the University of Cambridge, for offering us the opportunity to connect and collaboratively develop this dossier in the wake of our stays at CLAS respectively as a British Academy Visiting Fellow (2023) and as a Simón Bolívar Visiting Professor (2022–2023).

REFERENCES

- Acker, Joan. 2006. "Inequality Regimes: Gender, Class and Race in Organizations." *Gender & Society* 20, no. 4: 441–464.

- Braig, Marianne, Sérgio Costa, and Barbara Göbel. 2016. "Social Inequalities and Global Interdependencies in Latin America: A Provisional Appraisal." *DesiguALdades.net Working Paper Series* 100. https://www.desigualdades.net/Resources/Working_Paper/WP-100-Braig-Costa-Goebel-Online.pdf.
- Costa, Sérgio. 2020. "The Neglected Nexus Between Conviviality and Inequality." In *Convivial Constellations in Latin America: From Colonial to Contemporary Times*, edited by Luciane Scarato, Fernando Baldráia, and Maya Manzi. Routledge.
- Crenshaw, Kimberlé. 1989. "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics." *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1: 139-67. <https://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1052&context=uclf>.
- Donley, Sarah B., and Melencia Johnson. 2024. *Intersectional Experiences and Marginalized Voices: Research, Analysis and Practice*. Routledge.
- Espósito, Jennifer, and Venus Evans-Winters. 2021. *Introduction to Intersectional Qualitative Research*. Sage.
- Franco-Calderón, Ángela M., and Danny M. Ramírez Torres. 2023. *Informal Settlement Upgrading with an Intersectional Approach*. Editorial Universidad del Rosario/Universidad del Valle/Robert Bosch Stiftung.
- Frehse, Fraya. 2014. "Desigualdades no uso corporal dos espaços públicos urbanos na América Latina." *DesiguALdades.net Working Paper Series* 95. https://www.desigualdades.net/Resources/Working_Paper/WP-Frehse-Online.pdf.
- 2017. "Relational Space through Historically Relational Time – in the Bodies of São Paulo's Pedestrians." *Current Sociology* 65, no. 2: 511-522. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0011392117697462>.
- 2018. "On the Everyday History of Pedestrians' Bodies in São Paulo's Downtown amid Metropolization (1950-2000)." In *Urban Latin America: Words, Images, Flows and the Built Environment*, edited by Bianca Freire-Medeiros and Julia O'Donnell. Routledge.
- 2021. "Time and the Production of Space in Sociology." *Sociologia & Antropologia* 11, no. 2: 389-414. <https://doi.org/10.1590/2238-38752021v1122>.
- Graeber, David, and David Wengrow. 2021. *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity*. Penguin.
- Harding, Alan, and Talja Blokland. 2014 *Urban Theory*. Sage.
- Lobao, Linda M., Gregory Hooks, and Ann R. Tickamyer. 2007. "Conclusion: An Agenda for Moving a Spatial Sociology Forward." In *The Sociology of Spatial Inequality*, edited by Linda M. Lobao, Gregory Hooks and Ann R. Tickamyer. State University of New York Press.
- Ianni, Octavio. 1973. *Teorias de Estratificação Social: Leituras de Sociologia*. Civilização Brasileira.
- Jaramillo Cruz, Javier. 2022. "Discapacidad y derecho a la ciudad en la producción social del espacio público." *Revista INVI* 37, no. 104: 152-68. <https://doi.org/10.5354/0718-8358.2022.65643>.
- Mecila. 2017. "Conviviality in Unequal Societies: Perspectives from Latin America. Thematic Scope and Preliminary Research Programme." *Mecila: Working Paper Series* 1. https://mecila.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/WP_1_Thematic_Scope_and_Research_Programme.pdf.
- Misra, Joya, Celeste V. Curington, and Mary G. Venus. 2024. "Methods of Intersectional Research." In *Intersectional Experiences and Marginalized Voices: Research, Analysis and Practice*, edited by Sarah B. Donley and Melencia Johnson. Routledge.

- Molina, Irene, Ximena Galleguillos, and Karin Grundström, eds. 2022. "Ciudad, vivienda y género desde una mirada incluyente e interseccional [Dossier]." *INVI* 37, no. 104. <https://doi.org/10.5354/0718-8358.2022.66855>.
- Ragin, Charles C., and Peer C. Fiss. 2017. *Intersectional Inequality: Race, Class, Test Cores, and Poverty*. The University of Chicago Press.
- Segura, Ramiro. 2014. "El espacio urbano y la (re)producción de desigualdades sociales. Desacoples entre distribución del ingreso y patrones de urbanización en ciudades latinoamericanas." *DesiguALdades.net Working Paper Series* 65. <https://refubium.fu-berlin.de/bitstream/handle/fub188/22077/65-WP-Segura-Online.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>
- Villalobos, Roxanna. 2023. "Reimagining Intersectionality via the Rural-Urban Borderlands." In *The Routledge Companion to Intersectionalities*, edited by Jennifer C. Nash and Samantha Pinto. Routledge.
- Viveros-Vigoya, Mara. 2016. "La interseccionalidad: una aproximación situada a la dominación." *Debate Feminista* 52: 1-17. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.df.2016.09.005>.
- Viveros-Vigoya, Mara. 2024. "The Travels of Intersectionality in Latin America: Bringing the Desks Out into the Streets." In *The Routledge International Handbook of Intersectionality Studies*, edited by Kathy Davis and Helma Lutz. Routledge.
- World Inequality Database. 2023. "Top 10% National Income Share [2023]." Accessed November 9, 2025. https://wid.world/share/#0/countriesmap/sptinc_p90p100_z/all/last/eu/k/p/yearly/s/false/24.781000000000002/80/curve/false/region.
- Yuval-Davis, Nira. 2015. "Situated Intersectionality and Social Inequality." *Raisons Politiques* 2, no. 58: 91-100.

