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Preprint · June 2017

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“Worst/better than before?”:

Perceptions of income inequality in Latin America and worldwide.

Máximo Jaramillo

After the economic crisis that began in 2008, and the global stagnation of income growth, the feeling of dissatisfaction with the current political-economic system has worsened, and one question becomes more important: "Why the bottom 99 % does not benefit from the current system"? It is partly because of the above, and with the support of very important academic research on the topic, that the issue of inequality has been positioned in the mass public debate.

In the case of Latin America, two important processes have occurred in the last decade: First, there had been much study on the decline in income inequality in the continent, at least for the period of the first decade of the XXI century, contrary to studies that shows an opposite tendency in other regions and countries of the world. Second, perceptions of inequality among Latin American individuals seem to "tolerate" the gap, in spite of considering that magnitude of the gap is "excessive". It is interesting how the perception of inequality in Latin America does not differ to a great extent (or is lower) to those other countries where clearly the objective levels of income inequality are much lower.

Considering this, there are two research questions that together reveals another one: 1) What has been the dynamics of income inequality in the world and in Latin America, in the last 20 years? 2) How have been modified the perceptions of inequality, both globally and in Latin America, in the recent years? 3) How are related the various current dynamics of inequality with perceptions of inequality?

To answer these questions, we analyze the dynamics of inequality with data from the World Bank that is complemented with the Chartbook of Income Inequality. To analyze the perceptions of inequality, data of the "International Social Survey Program" ("social inequality" modules) are used.

There are several important results. First, there's a worldwide trend on rising income inequality, with the exception of Latin America. Second, regional differences are found in trends on the perception of inequality, placing a special focus on the Latin American trend, where it is one of the regions that less perceive income inequality. Finally, a reflection is made on the relation between the tendency of income inequality and the perception of inequality, and how this is associated with persistence of tolerance and legitimacy of the current socioeconomic system.

1. - Introduction

In the last decades, there has been a lot of work analyzing income inequality around the world, proving the increasing trend almost in all regions of the world (Kerbo, 2011; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2010; Piketty, 2014). The bibliography that focus on inequality in Latin America had arrived to a different conclusion: Contrary to what happens around the world, income inequality in Latin America decreases, at least from the mid-nineties until the financial crisis years, close to 2007 (Gasparini, Cruces, Cruces and Tonrnarolli, 2009; Esquivel Gerardo, Nora Lustig y John Scott, 2010; CEPAL, 2010; Lustig et. al., 2012; Lustig, Pessino and Scott, 2013, Ferranti, Perry, Ferreira, and Walton, 2004; Jaramillo, 2015). In spite of reduction on inequality seen in Latin America, Gini Coefficient, a common measure for inequality, has not diminished enough to reach the levels of other regions like Europe, North America or East Asia & Pacific.

On the other hand we have perception of income inequality: What people think about the magnitude of inequality in their country. This is important because it helps to explain why people tolerate differences between rich and poor, or how much redistribution is people willing to demand (Wegener, 1987; Meltzer & Richard, 1981; Gimpelson & Monusova, 2014; McCall, 2013; Ravallion y Lokshin, 2000; Bredemeier, 2014, Castillo, 2011 and Castillo et al, 2012). In this paper, we will focus on the question "Differences in income in your country are too large?", i.e. how many people think inequality *is high*, leaving aside if they think inequality is more than it ought to be, or is just in the society.

But high levels of inequality perception (the subjective aspect of inequality) are not always close related to high levels of income inequality (the objective aspect). There are several hypotheses that try to explain this lack of correspondence, most of them focused on the individual level. One of them point to social mobility, where upward social mobility is related to a lower perception of inequality (or at least more tolerance or legitimacy of it) (Benabou & Ok, 2001; López Calva et. al. (2004)).

Another hypothesis relates inequality perceptions with bias on people self-place in society: if people seem themselves as members of a high stratum of society, even when they're not, they won't perceive inequality as high (Bredemeier, 2014; Engelhardt y Wagener, 2014; Loughnan et. al., 2011 and Cruces *et. al.*, 2011). There are other authors that link perception and tolerance to inequality with the *tunnel effect* (Hirschman & Rothschild, 1973): "It is possible to find tolerance to inequality between sectors and classes. This tolerance of inequality is allowed as long as there is the idea that it will diminish at some point, usually during the early stages of economic growth... the well-being of an individual depends on his present state of satisfaction and also on the state of Satisfaction you expect in the future" (López Calva et. al. (2004)).

In this paper, we will focus special attention at the macro level of inequality perception. This is due to our hypothesis about the relation between income inequality perception and real income inequality: In spite of not be related in their actual levels, we will find a closer relationship if we analyze the historical trend of both variables.

This hypothesis is based in the recognition of "naturalization of inequality" process, as linked to inequality perception. We can assume that inequality has become naturalized in the most unequal countries, and it is for this reason that inequality is not perceived as high. But if the inequality begins to change, the previous scenario of inequality, that was already naturalized, is now modified and the perception about inequality begins to move.

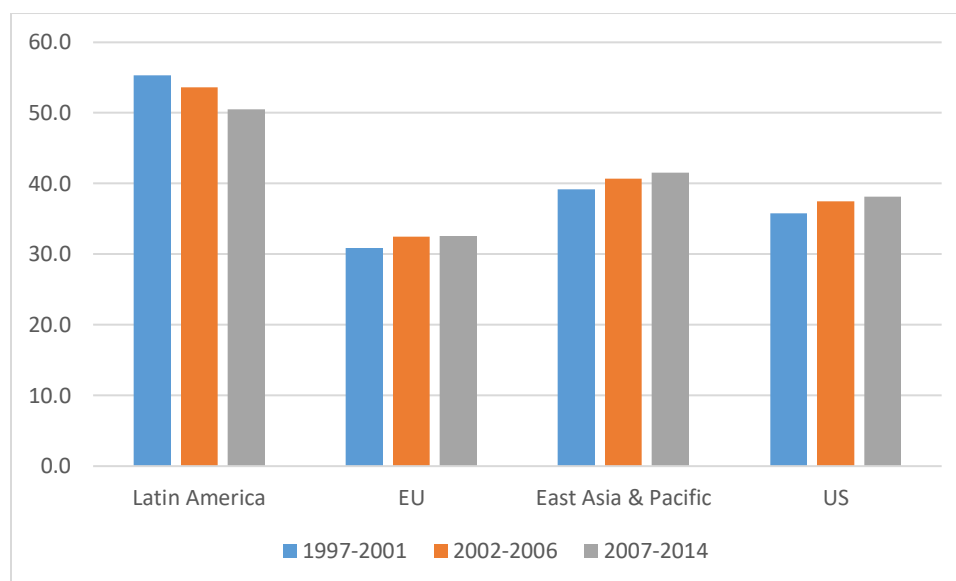
First, in the following section, we analyze the inequality of income (objective), its trends around the world and particularly in Latin America. The next section analyzes inequality perception, showing the differences between different regions of the world, and

highlighting that Latin America is not the region with the highest perception of inequality, in spite of being the most unequal region (objectively). Followed by this, we analyze together both perception and objective inequality, and test our hypothesis after showing the lack of correspondence between actual level on this variables. At last, we discuss our results.

2. - Worldwide and Latin American income inequality trends

As we already mentioned, there is an important difference between de Latin-American inequality of income trend, and the global trend. Using income inequality data from World Bank, the Latin-American trend shows a decrease on inequality (we can see it in the figure 1), with a constant decrease from 1997 to 2014. This trend has a contrary direction to the other regions of the world. Both in the *European Union*, in *East Asia and the Pacific*, and in the *United States*, the Gini Coefficient of income inequality has risen. Inequality of income in this regions seems to have increased more during the period 1997-2006 (before the economic crises), than after 2007.

Figure 1: Worldwide Gini Coefficient (average)¹.

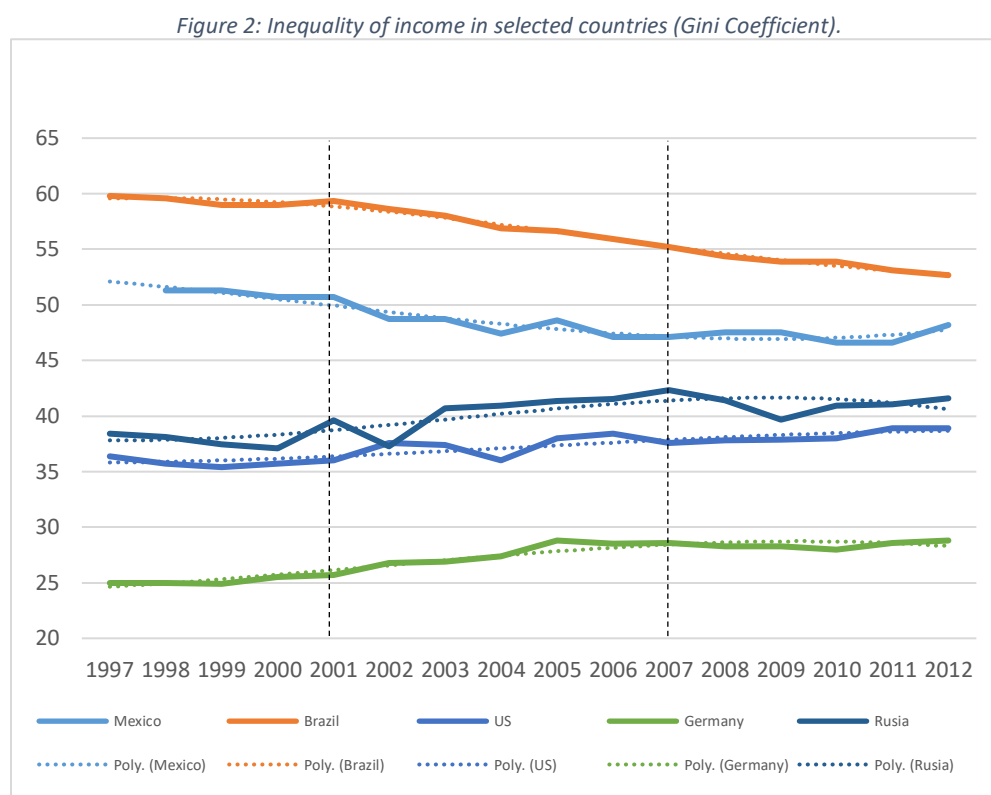


Source: Elaborated by the author using data from World Bank

¹ The Gini coefficient for each region was calculated weighting each data (for every country) with the total population of this country.

We can go deeper in this trends of income inequality, dividing the analysis with the financial crisis of 2007 and the dot-com crash, in 2001. In the next figure we can visualize that inequality in Germany and US has risen in the last 25 years, but this trend has slowed down after 2007. Russia has a similar trend, with a decrease of inequality after 2007. All these countries belongs to the regions where we have already proved that inequality has risen.

On the other hand, we have the *latino* countries. Even when it looks that both have the same decreasing trend, Mexico income inequality started to increase after 2009, and Brazil has maintained its trend. This example proves the differences in inequality trends inside country regions.



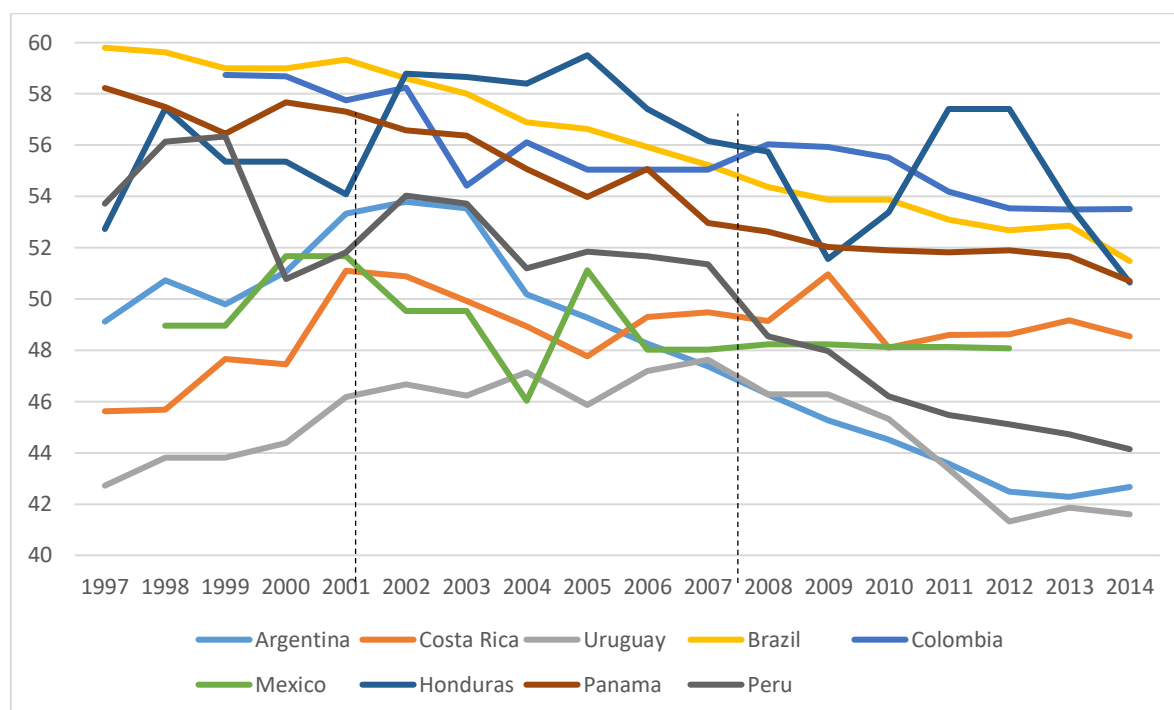
Source: Elaborated by the author using data from World Bank

We have seen that Latin America trend on income inequality is different, compared with other regions of the world. Let's take a look at the composition of this trend. As we can verify in figure 3 and table 1, we have countries like Argentina, Costa Rica and Uruguay, with a kind of inverted U shape (increasing inequality from 1997 to 2007-2009, followed by a

decrease). These countries have in common a Universalist welfare regime² (Barba 2009), something that can explain this inequality trend. Brazil and Colombia, both with a dualistic welfare regime, have a similar decreasing inequality trend. México and Honduras show irregularity in their inequality trend, both with a peak in 2005.

In general, we can conclude that dispersion of different levels of inequality has been reduced, with a major decrease coming from countries that had the highest levels of inequality; that's why in average the Gini coefficient in Latin America decreased. But we have a lot of heterogeneity *inside of the box*.

Figure 3: Inequality of income in Latin America (Gini Coefficient).



Source: Elaborated by the author using data from World Bank

Table 1: Gini coefficient of income, by welfare regimes.

	Universalist			Dualist			Residual		
	Argentina	Costa Rica	Uruguay	Brazil	Colombia	Mexico	Honduras	Panama	Peru
1997	49.1	45.6	42.7	59.8	-	-	52.7	58.2	53.7
1998	50.7	45.7	43.8	59.6	-	49.0	57.4	57.5	56.1

² A "welfare regime" is the specific institutional disposition adopted by societies in the search for well-being (Esping-Andersen, 1987). The diverse welfare regimes are classified according to different configurations of who is in charge of welfare (the Estate, Market or Family) (Esping-Andersen, 1990). Barba (2009, 2007) classified Latin American countries into the next three welfare regimes: Universalist, Dual and Excluding.

1999	49.8	47.7	-	59.0	58.7	-	55.4	56.5	56.3
2000	51.1	47.4	44.4	-	58.7	51.7	-	57.7	50.8
2001	53.3	51.1	46.2	59.3	57.8	-	54.1	57.3	51.8
2002	53.8	50.9	46.7	58.6	58.3	49.5	58.8	56.6	54.0
2003	53.5	49.9	46.2	58.0	54.4	-	58.7	56.4	53.7
2004	50.2	48.9	47.1	56.9	56.1	46.0	58.4	55.1	51.2
2005	49.3	47.8	45.9	56.6	55.0	51.1	59.5	54.0	51.8
2006	48.3	49.3	47.2	55.9	-	48.0	57.4	55.1	51.7
2007	47.4	49.5	47.6	55.2	-	-	56.2	53.0	51.4
2008	46.3	49.1	46.3	54.4	56.0	48.2	55.7	52.6	48.6
2009	45.3	51.0	46.3	53.9	55.9	-	51.6	52.0	48.0
2010	44.5	48.1	45.3	-	55.5	48.1	53.4	51.9	46.2
2011	43.6	48.6	43.4	53.1	54.2	-	57.4	51.8	45.5
2012	42.5	48.6	41.3	52.7	53.5	48.1	57.4	51.9	45.1
2013	42.3	49.2	41.9	52.9	53.5	-	53.7	51.7	44.7
2014	42.7	48.5	41.6	51.5	53.5	48.2	50.6	50.7	44.1
1997-2001	50.8	47.5	44.3	59.4	58.4	50.3	54.9	57.4	53.8
2002-2006	51.0	49.4	46.6	57.2	56.0	48.7	58.6	55.4	52.5
2007-2014	44.3	49.1	44.2	53.4	54.6	48.2	54.5	52.0	46.7

Source: Elaborated by the author using data from World Bank

3. -Perceptions of income inequality

Not only are the levels of inequality very different around the world, but also their perception. As we have already explained, this perceptions can be related with different social processes, from social mobility and self-perception of place in the socioeconomic structure, all of these at the individual level, and naturalization of inequality and defined conceptions of social justice at the macro level. For this section, we use International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) data, in special the 1999 and 2009 surveys, focused on “Social Inequality”.

With this data, we found that the European Union (EU) is the region that perceives more inequality in their respective countries (leaving aside the "others" region), followed by “East Asia & Pacific”, Latin America and US, with the minimum value in this perception (taking US as a region by itself). As we will discuss later, it is interesting that Latin America and US, the regions with the highest levels of income inequality, are the ones with the lowest perception of inequality.

When we analyze a group of selected countries³, we find higher differences between countries: for example, France registered a 69% of the answers in the “strongly agree” option, while Philippines has 21%.

For 1999 data, the survey doesn’t have more than one country of Latin America: Chile, which actually decreased its perception of high inequality. All regions had a lower perception of inequality in 1999. With the exception of Great Britain and Russia, all other selected countries also increased their perception of inequality. We will come back to this point later.

Table 2: Inequality perception, 2009 & 1999.

Differences in income in your country are too large?						
	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Total
2009						
Principal Regions						
Latin America	34.5	49.2	8.9	5.9	1.5	100
European Union	48.8	36.1	8.6	5.1	1.5	100
East Asia & Pacific	36.8	44.4	9.6	6.9	2.2	100
US	29.4	37.1	17.0	12.8	3.7	100
Others ⁴	53.7	38.3	5.4	2.2	0.4	100
Total	45.9	39.2	8.4	5.1	1.5	100
Selected countries						
Chile	37.8	49.7	7.0	4.4	1.1	100
US	29.4	37.1	17.0	12.8	3.7	100
France	68.9	22.1	5.9	2.3	0.8	100
Great Britain	29.3	47.9	14.9	6.6	1.4	100
Sweden	32.2	40.9	17.2	7.5	2.3	100
Philippines	21.0	30.4	15.3	21.6	11.7	100
Japan	43.2	34.8	14.9	4.5	2.7	100
Russia	62.3	31.4	4.9	1.0	0.4	100
1999						
Principal Regions						
Latin America	-	-	-	-	-	-
European Union	48.7	37.0	8.5	4.9	0.9	100
East Asia & Pacific	26.3	43.4	16.7	11.2	2.4	100

³ These countries were selected taking the ones that were in both 2009 and 1999 surveys.

⁴ Countries contained in “others” for 2009: Iceland, Israel, Russia, South Africa, Switzerland, Turkey and Ukraine.

US	25.0	41.2	21.5	9.2	3.2	100
Others ⁵	58.2	28.9	6.1	5.3	1.5	100
Total	45.0	37.8	9.8	6.1	1.3	100
Selected countries						
Chile	42.6	49.7	3.3	4.4	0.1	100
US	25.0	41.2	21.5	9.2	3.2	100
France	60.0	26.8	7.4	5.0	0.8	100
Great Britain	30.6	50.7	12.3	5.8	0.7	100
Sweden	29.2	41.9	18.1	8.4	2.4	100
Philippines	22.4	42.9	17.5	13.9	3.3	100
Japan	38.6	30.5	18.3	7.5	5.0	100
Russia	79.1	16.7	1.9	1.1	1.3	100

Source: Elaborated by the author using data from ISSP (2009).

Another way to analyze the inequality perceptions of people, is looking at their conception of government responsibility to reduce income differences between the rich and the poor. An answer where people agree on this responsibility implies that they believe that this difference in incomes needs to be reduced, which can rely in different reasons.

Again, the regions with the highest agreement on the government responsibility of reducing income differences are “Others”⁶ and the European Union, and the region with the lowest value is the US. When we analyze the selected countries in particular, US remains as the country that less attribute this responsibility to the State. On the other hand, Russia and France have the highest values.

This perception changes overtime, and, for example, Chile, in the most recent data, has a lower value than it had in 1999. The bigger change in both periods of time, on the selected countries, can be found in France, with an increase in the strongly agree answer, from 33.4 to 50.6.

Table 3: Government responsibility perception on reducing income differences, 2009 & 1999.

It is the responsibility of the government to reduce the differences in income between people with high incomes and those with low incomes?						
Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Total	

⁵ Countries contained in “others” for 1999: Russia, Canada and Israel.

⁶ Mostly due to the Russian result.

2009						
Principal Regions						
Latin America	22.4	49.6	16.0	9.5	2.6	100
European Union	35.9	38.3	13.4	9.1	3.4	100
East Asia & Pacific	22.4	42.5	17.0	13.8	4.3	100
US	7.9	24.7	16.1	31.4	19.8	100
Others	40.2	39.3	10.5	7.9	2.2	100
Total	32.3	39.7	13.8	10.5	3.7	100
Selected countries						
Chile	19.8	53.8	17.2	7.8	1.4	100
US	7.9	24.7	16.1	31.4	19.8	100
France	50.6	26.6	12.9	7.4	2.5	100
Great Britain	18.2	42.4	21.2	14.2	4.1	100
Sweden	21.0	37.0	23.6	12.4	6.0	100
Philippines	18.8	33.0	21.6	18.3	8.3	100
Japan	25.4	29.0	28.9	8.2	8.5	100
Russia	54.8	33.8	8.3	2.7	0.5	100
1999						
Principal Regions						
Latin America	-	-	-	-	-	-
European Union	35.0	37.6	13.7	9.9	3.8	100
East Asia & Pacific	17.8	34.7	21.9	17.8	7.7	100
US	11.1	24.2	25.4	24.7	14.6	100
Others	44.5	29.8	10.3	10.7	4.8	100
Total	32.1	36.3	15.1	11.8	4.8	100
Selected countries						
Chile	26.5	51.4	12.7	8.5	0.9	100
US	11.1	24.2	25.4	24.7	14.6	100
France	33.4	30.0	16.6	13.7	6.3	100
Great Britain	19.3	48.3	17.4	12.7	2.4	100
Sweden	23.7	35.8	22.2	12.5	5.9	100
Philippines	18.1	40.9	22.8	14.0	4.2	100
Japan	27.3	25.3	26.7	7.2	13.6	100
Russia	62.2	23.8	7.6	4.1	2.3	100

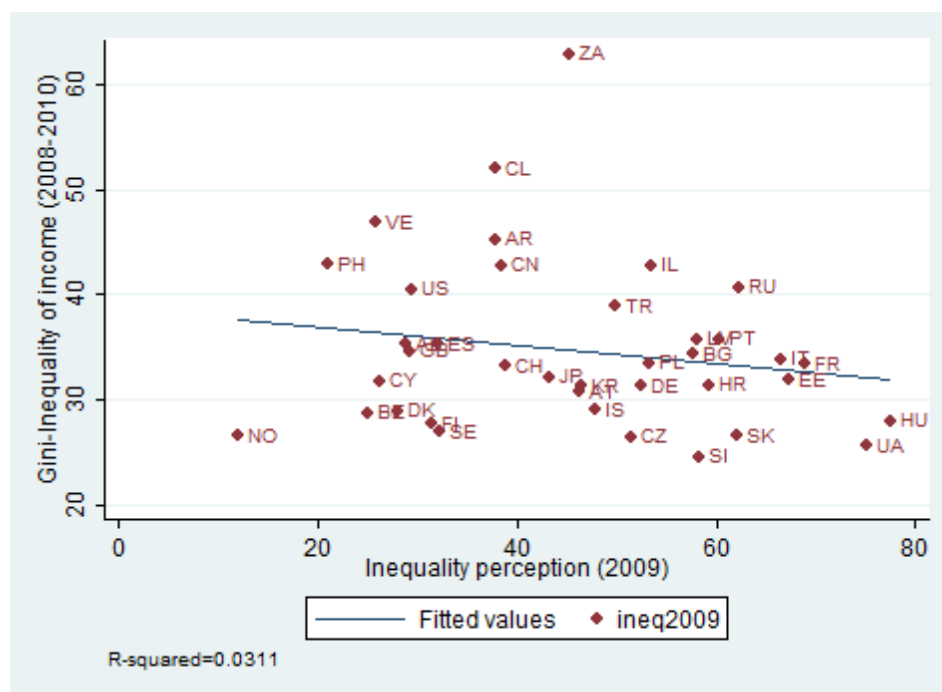
Source: Elaborated by the author using data from ISSP (2009).

These changes in income inequality and government responsibility perceptions are related with numerous social process at the same time. In the next section, we will focus in one in particular: the relation between this perceptions and the “objective” income inequality, measured with the Gini Coefficient, as we have already presented in the previous section.

4. - Relation between inequality of income and perceptions of income inequality

As we have found while analyzing data for different countries, perceptions of income inequality do not match necessarily with the “objective” inequality, and, instead, we proposed that these perceptions could be shaped for other social processes. Our hypothesis is that, as one of this processes, perceptions of inequality and inequality of income could be associated not by their actual level on each variable, but looking at the historical trend of both, that’s why we analyze here the relation between changes in perception of inequality and changes of inequality of income.

Figure 4: Inequality of income and inequality perception.



Source: Elaborated by the author using data from ISSP (2009)⁷.

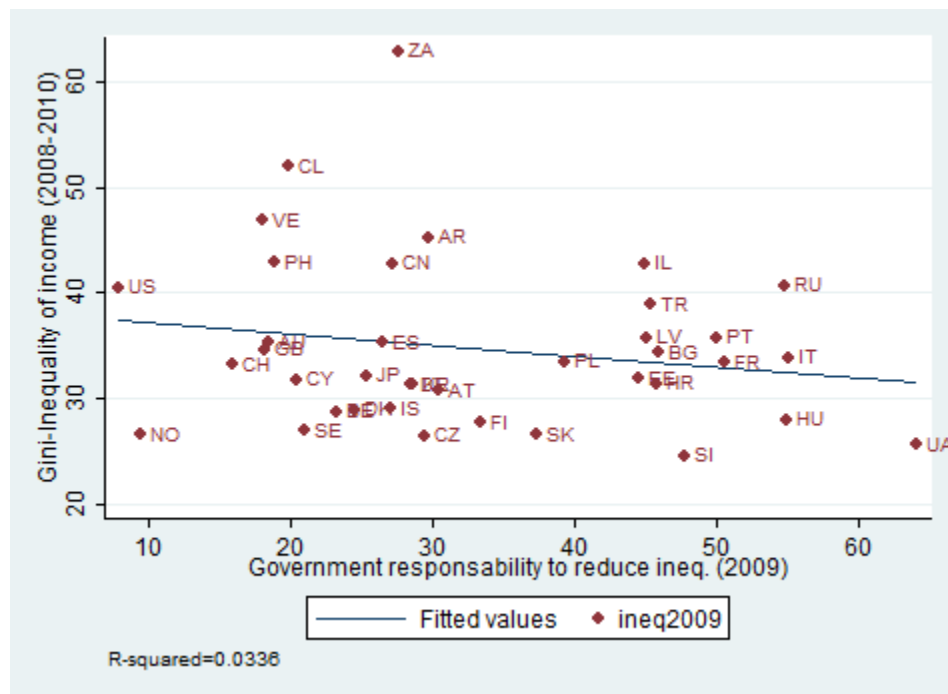
So, when we look just at the perception of inequality and inequality of income at a particular point of the time, for example 2009 (figure 4), we conclude that there’s not any association

⁷ Countries code: AR-Argentina, AU-Australia, AT-Austria, BE-Belgium, BG-Bulgaria, CL-Chile, CN-China, HR-Croatia, CY-Cyprus, CZ-Czech Republic, DK-Denmark, EE-Estonia, FI-Finland, FR-France, DE-Germany, HU-Hungary, IS-Iceland, IL-Israel, IT-Italy, JP-Japan, KR-South Korea, LV-Latvia, NO-Norway, PH-Philippines, PL-Poland, PT-Portugal, RU-Russia, SK-Slovak Republic, SI-Slovenia, ZA-South Africa, ES-Spain, SE-Sweden, CH-Switzerland, TR-Turkey, UA-Ukraine, GB-GBN-Great Britain, US-United States and VE-Venezuela.

at all. We have extreme cases like South Africa, with a Gini higher than 60, but an inequality perception lower than 50%⁸, and, at the same time, the case of Hungary, with a Gini lower than 30 and inequality perception of 77%. What we're proving here is that more inequality of income in a country do not necessarily goes accompanied with a higher perception of income inequality. So, we have countries where people realize the actual magnitude of inequality, and other where they do not.

The same goes for the relation between perceptions of government responsibility for reducing inequality and inequality of income. The four countries with the highest levels of inequality (South Africa, the Latin American: Chile, Venezuela and Argentina), all of them, are below other 17 countries in the government responsibility perception. On the other hand, Australia, being almost the county with less income inequality, has the highest level of demand on the government to address inequality.

Figure 5: Inequality of income and government responsibility to reduce inequality perception.



Source: Elaborated by the author using data from ISSP (2009).

⁸ Percentage of people that answered “strongly agree” to the question of inequality of perception analyzed in the previous section.

But not all hopes in this relationship of variables are lost. We compared the 2009 and 1999 survey, for inequality perception, and as a result obtained an increasing/decreasing trend. Then we compared this trend with the one for Gini coefficient (inequality of income). As a result, we found that in the majority of countries where inequality of income has risen, the perception of inequality has increased too. The same apply to a decrease.

Let's take an example. In Chile (the only Latin American country for which we have data of perception of inequality in 1999) the inequality level (Gini Coefficient) decreased, from 56 to 52, and this was accompanied by a decrease in the perception of inequality: from 43% to 38% of people that answered "strongly agree" to the inequality of perception statement. In France, to point another example, inequality has risen in the past years, but also the perception of inequality and the exigency to reduce the gap between rich and poor.

We can take all available data, for Gini Coefficient and both ISSP surveys, and take a look to the lineal association (figure 6). We obtained a much higher R^2 , than we did with the past bivariate relations (see previous figures). The direction of the lineal estimation show us a positive relation: With an increase of income inequality (Gini coefficient), the perception of inequality also rises.

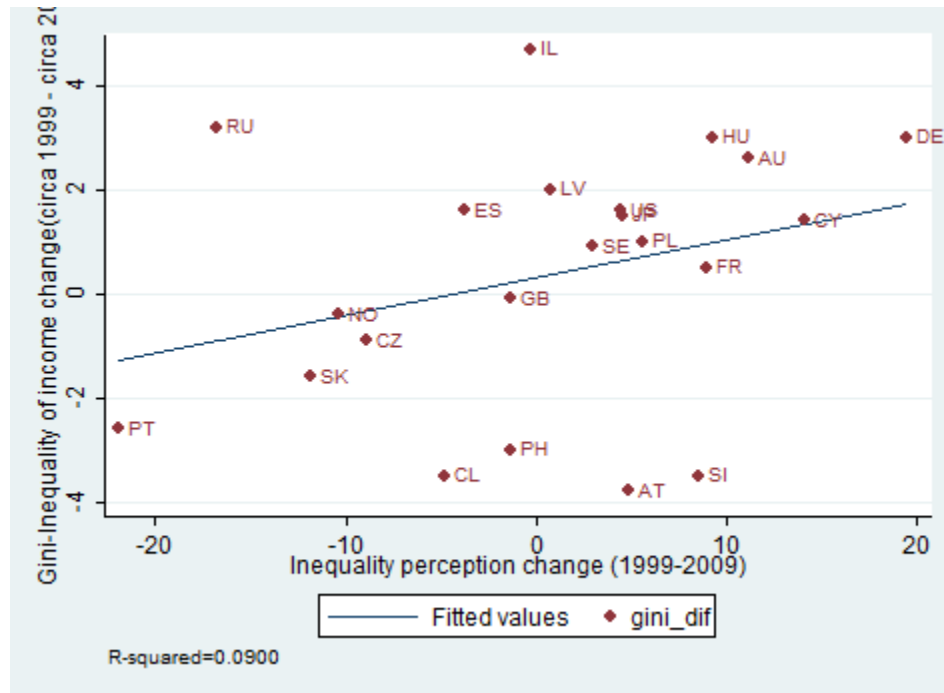
Table 4: Comparison between income inequality and perception of inequality trends.

	Income Inequality Trend (1997-2010)	Perception of high inequality			Government responsibility to reduce differences in income		
		Trend	2009	1999	Trend	2009	1999
Regions							
Latin America	Decreased	-	49.2	-	-	22.4	-
European Union	Increased	Decreased	36.1	42.6	Stable	35.9	35.0
East Asia & Pacific	Increased	Increased	44.4	26.3	Increased	22.4	17.8
US	Increased	Increased	37.1	25.0	Decreased	7.9	11.1
Selected countries							
Chile	Decreased	Decreased	37.8	42.6	Decreased	19.8	26.5
France	Increased	Increased	68.9	60.0	Increased	50.6	33.4
Great Britain	Stable	Stable	29.3	30.6	Decreased	18.2	19.3
Sweden	Increased	Increased	32.2	29.2	Decreased	21.0	23.7
Philippines	Decreased	Decreased	21.0	22.4	Stable	18.8	18.1
Japan	Increased	Increased	43.2	38.6	Decreased	25.4	27.3
Russia	Increased	Decreased	62.3	79.1	Decreased	54.8	62.2

Source: Elaborated by the author using data from ISSP (2009, 1999), World Bank and the Chartbook of Income Inequality.

Note: *Perception of inequality shows % of answer "Strongly agree"

Figure 6: Changes on Inequality of income and inequality perception.



Source: Elaborated by the author using data from ISSP (2009, 1999), World Bank and the Chartbook of Income Inequality.

5. - Discussion

We have already showed how low the association between actual levels of inequality and perception is. As we have mentioned, this could be related with the “naturalization of inequality” process, where people are used to the high levels of inequality, in a country where they always remember this situation. Furthermore, we use a cross-national analysis of inequality and its perception, but normally people doesn’t have others countries inequality as reference for evaluating inequality in their country, that’s why Japan and South Africa has the same perception of inequality, despite their wide actual differences.

But this “naturalization of inequality” can fall apart if the current levels of inequality change. It is because people uses past as reference (no other countries, as we mentioned above), that falling (or growing) inequality can modify perceptions of it.

With the above, two points remain important. First, this result is central, because it implies that is necessary to take historical analysis into studies of perception of inequality. If we’re

taking perceptions as related with tolerance or legitimacy of inequality, we should be more interested in the historical trends of perception of inequality than in the current levels.

Second, as we can verify in table 4, a reduction in inequality perception it's accompanied with a reduction in the government responsibility perception to reduce inequality. This could mean that now, with these reductions, inequality would be more tolerated (or more legitimate). For example, in spite of remain as the most unequal region in the world, perception of inequality in Latin American has decreased, also government responsibility on inequality perception, which could lead, as consequence, to lower demand of redistributive policies, followed by, maybe, a weakening of this policies, and, perhaps, a new rise on inequality.

It is necessary to continue an integral analysis of income inequality, perceptions of inequality and demand for redistribution, to deepen understanding about tolerance and legitimacy of inequality in the most unequal countries, as the Latin American ones.

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