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Citation

Antunes, C. A. P., & Jerónimo, M. B. (2021). The Inequalities of Empire: comparative perspectives. In M. Nico & G. Pollock (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of contemporary inequalities and the life course* (pp. 394-409). London: Routledge. doi:10.4324/9780429470059-39

Version: Publisher's Version

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Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4247921>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

The inequalities of empire

Comparative perspectives

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Introduction

Imperial formations generated, reproduced and administered inequality, becoming thus part and parcel of a long process of collective imagination regarding cross-cultural differences and similarities. Imperial and colonial imaginaries, practices and experiences were crucial to the ways equality and inequality became thinkable, demonstrable, justifiable and contestable (Stuurman, 2017). This chapter addresses colonial/imperial creation, reproduction and the administration of inequality as interrelated dynamics, offering historical illustrations of the ways in which imperial formations actively participated in the enactment of economic, political (including legal), and sociocultural mechanisms that induced multifaceted inequalities between individuals and communities across the globe.

Producing difference

Imperial formations actively contributed to the fabrication of inequality in history (Scheidel, 2007; Stoler & McGranahan, 2007), through intense land expropriation, fiscal and labour extraction, and extensive discriminatory practices. These inequalities resulted in an uneven distribution of economic, social and political rights, by which colonial empires became major historical protagonists in the *longue durée* dynamics of disparity between, but also within, numerous societies. Therefore, empires produced diverse forms of income and wealth inequality that were in turn intersected by hierarchies of gender, race and class (Hancock, 2016; Sen, 1980). Imperial and colonial rule created hierarchies and diverse regimes of accessibility to institutions, rights, services and resources, frequently along ethnic and racial lines (Bethencourt, 2014). The *politics of difference* – the languages and repertoires of power that combined, in different ways and degrees, became strategies of incorporation and differentiation apropos multi-ethnic realities – were exercises in the production of multiple inequalities (Burbank & Cooper, 2011, p.14). In the Early Modern period, regimes of subjection were decisive. Being the subject of a specific king(dom) defined the boundaries of access into a particular regime of institutions and rights. Subjection cut across colour, ethnicity, language or place of birth. In the Iberian cases, subjection only cut across religion, as religion was the

main cultural determinant in Early Modern societies (Herzog, 2003). In other words, inequality in Early Modern societies was essentially determined by regimes of access to specific privileges offered by the polity through subjection.

After the last quarter of the 18th century, place of birth (“location”) became more decisive than class affiliation in determining inequality across the globe, and to be born in a colonial society as a member of the colonized communities was surely critical. In Africa and in Asia, the incomes of Europeans were substantially larger than those of local, native communities (Milanovic, 2016, p.128). Despite these and other relevant differences in time, from the Early Modern period to the moment of global decolonization, colonial societies revealed the highest extraction ratio and were closer to what Branko Milanovic termed the “Inequality Possibility Frontier” (Milanovic, 2011, 2006).

In the history of empire, the Spanish and Portuguese expansion in the Americas after 1492 stands as one of the most important moments in the production of inequality worldwide. Land ex- and appropriation was quickly followed by a broad system of fiscal extraction and forced allocation of labour that culminated in two of the most aggressive and consequential cycles in the generation of difference. On the one hand, there was the expropriation of autochthonous American populations out of arable lands and urban settlements, contemporaneous to the physical destruction of many of these autochthonous groups as a result of violence, disease and constrained access to foodstuffs. On the other hand, the development of plantation economies, particularly in Portuguese America (Brazil) after the extraordinary economic results with the sugar plantation experiments in the Atlantic islands of Madeira and São Tomé, provided the first impulse for the massive importation of an enslaved workforce and its latter commodification. Autochthonous Americans and enslaved Africans were not only religiously and culturally different, they became “the other” as their juridical status (on a sliding scale of freedom) was permanently associated with lack of accessibility to wealth (land), income (outputs of agricultural production) and even the ownership of their bodies (enslaved Africans) and lives (Brienen & Jackson, 2008; Gruzinski, 1993; Johnson, 1972; Restall & Fernandez-Armesto, 2011). The plantation complex expanded subsequently to the Dutch, French and English domains in the Americas and the Caribbean (Beckert, 2014; Caldeira, 2011; Curtin, 1998; Rönnbäck, 2018).

The production of inequality in the Americas, however, generated the easing of inequality in Iberian societies. The growth in the availability of relatively cheap land and the opening up of multiple labour markets (maritime activities, urban colonial settings, religious organizations, military and bureaucratic structures) alleviated, at least temporarily, inequality. Notwithstanding, the imposition of fiscal constraints by Iberian Monarchs upon the commercialization of labour (slave trade) and agricultural outputs (sugar, brazilwood or cochineal), on the one hand, and the monopolistic approaches to the extraction of mineral resources (gold from West Africa and silver from America), on the other hand, provided the metropolitan state with an extraordinary power to continue with policies that, consciously or not, resulted in a growing social distance between metropolitan and colonial societies and between the different social actors (individual or collective) in colonial societies. The power to distribute the privilege of access to land, mineral resources and maritime routes positioned the Iberian Sovereigns in a unique position to determine the social groups that could access wealth and attain income, while determining the fate of the groups that were forced to labour and whose status resembled those of inanimate objects (Albiez-Wieck, 2020; Alfani & di Tullio, 2019; Borucki, 2015; Bowser, 1974; de Alencastro, 2018; Grafe & Irigoien, 2006; Heat, 2016; Rout, 2003; Thornton, 1992). The Iberian experience was further appropriated

and improved after the 1620s through the system of land grants for Dutch and British North America and New France (Canada) (Roper & van Ruymbeke, 2007).

In the context of the Early Modern period, fiscality was exploitative and created difference, but its indirect nature imposed restrictions in how efficient and assertive Iberian states could be when forcing fiscality on their American colonies. However, fiscality produced complementary difference when it was used as an instrument by colonial powers to incorporate autochthonous American groups (*encomienda*) whereby the disenfranchised were partially pulled into the benefits of colonial exploitation and in the process acquired specific rights in view of other excluded groups. Even if autochthonous Americans were still different and certainly suffered from the social and economic inequality Spanish and Portuguese colonial societies produced, they were less unequal than the enslaved Africans whose juridical absence as human beings left them outside of the framework of fiscality and thus outside of the boundaries of society and stakeholdership of empire altogether (Bicalho, 2019; de Alencastro, 2002; Grafe & Irigoien, 2012; Price, 2001; Schwartz, 1992). Later in time, colonial taxation continued to be decisive to the production and management of difference, with enduring consequences. The policy of economic self-sufficiency, which made the costs of administration fall upon local populations, deeply influenced the practices, the effects and the legacies of colonial rule, in Northern Rhodesia and Kenya, or in Portuguese Africa. In the former, “the relationship between taxpayers and the colonial state was central to the deteriorating relationships between colonial administrations and those they were trying to govern; this deterioration would ultimately lead to the Empire’s collapse” (Gardner, 2012; Havik, Keese & Santos, 2015). Colonial fiscal capacity varied greatly from Asia to Africa, sometimes coexisting, and joining forces, with “traditional” structures and authorities, other being used to redesign power relations and related social and ethnic hierarchies (Frankema & Booth, 2020).

If, in many ways, colonial and imperial contexts were sites of inequality-creation, between colonizers and autochthonous communities, they also exacerbated differences within each social group. For a significant minority, however, imperial formations generated opportunities to redefine one’s social and economic position, as colonial empires were privileged spaces for social upward mobility. Among other aspects, cultural dynamics in the colonial context, formed by ethnic, religious and political affinities associated with diasporic and migratory movements and communities – the “software of empire” – enabled and enhanced trade and promoted specific “structures of economic opportunity” and “non-market advantages”. “Co-ethnic webs of trade” in colonial situations provided beneficial conditions for the sometimes rapid transformation of social status and economic wealth (Magee & Thompson, 2010, p. 16).

Reproducing difference

Empires produced as much inequality as they reproduced it in continuous cycles, albeit with variations in time and in space. Colonial and imperial authorities and major stakeholders of empire strove to find ways to sustain, in their view, beneficial forms of inequity. “Thinking like an empire” involved pondering about mechanisms to preserve (im)balances and hierarchies of power, to maintain uneven social entitlements and economic benefits (Burbank, 2007; Cooper, 2005, p. 154). Institutions, political and legal expedients, economic mechanisms, and social and cultural instruments, sometimes working in isolation, sometimes combined, perpetuated inequality and difference. For instance, territorial conquest and related land expropriation by imperial formations were enacted and legitimized through a set of ideologies and institutional justifications and mechanisms – political, legal, military. The

outcome of these coercive dynamics of land acquisition and redistribution was a renewed configuration of political, economic and social order and hierarchy. Such result needed to be maintained and recurrently legitimized (Mignolo, 2012; Pagden, 1995). “Native” claims and opposing repertoires were (violently) set aside (Belmessous, 2012), as control needed to be constantly restored, preserved and adapted. Ideologies of justification and governance were particularly important to preserve colonial rule and the multifaceted modalities of inequality-production that the former entailed (Bell, 2013; Rosanvallon, 2013).

The production and institutionalization of specific social categories originated particular “categorical inequalities” and created the optimal conditions for their endurance over time. The mechanisms that explain durable inequalities are manifold and interdependent. Dynamics of emulation (the prolongation of unequal social relations and related categories from one social setting or institution to another in time) and of adaptation (the routinization of categories and practices of inequality and related categories) are key aspects. They both cement forms of exploitation and “opportunity hoarding”, as noted by Charles Tilly, as the history of resilient, institutionalized dichotomies that strengthened “durable” inequalities if over time are of the essence (Mann, 1999; Tilly, 1999).

Even if political institutions were not the sole protagonists in the reproduction of inequality, political legitimation was fundamental for the endurance of social difference and differentiation (Reid-Henry, 2015). In the Early Modern world, courts (civil and religious) were perhaps the best equipped and most efficient sources of reproduction of inequalities as they enforced, substantiated and continued individual and collective identifications of the individuals that used or were forced to use their frameworks.

The Inquisition was one such institution. Created in Europe to persecute religious heterodoxy against Christian (later Catholic) practices, it excluded first and foremost recently converted groups (like the Jews and the Moors) or religious dissidents (protestant movements). The efficiency of the institution was such that to religious trespassing were added crimes of sexual, social or behavioural nature that significantly overstretched the social reach of the institution. As such, the Inquisition did not only promote, fabricate and imagine inequality but emphasized difference, as it reproduced social stigma and exclusion throughout the Early Modern period (Bethencourt, 2009). The jurisdiction of the Inquisition extended further to the territories outside of Europe and well into the depths of the colonial world. There, the institution was particularly weary of the religious orders involved in grand scale conversions (Franciscans and Jesuits), as the threat of bringing non-Christian groups onto the centre of the Church challenged and threatened previously crystalized social hierarchies within colonial societies. But the control of the Inquisition was furthered still, as the enrolling of new Christianized populations opened up immense opportunities to enforce pre-designed social, cultural and religious categories. Surveillance of unorthodoxy among Christianized Africans, autochthonous American groups or South Asian groups was particularly intense and violent (Green, Havik & da Silva, 2021; Greenleaf, 1978; Paiva, 2017; Sweet, 2003). The more or less violent enforcement of categorizations formatted according to European standards marked the initiation of cycles of control and reproduction of inequality and difference that were continued by military forces and police institutions in the 19th and 20th centuries.

Even though religious courts like those of the Inquisition were fundamental in the reproduction and perpetuation of inequality, civil courts made available to colonial societies through the administrative body of colonial government performed a similar role. Under the rule of the Dutch and English East India Companies in Asia or the Portuguese general government in Brazil or the Spanish vice-royalty in Peru, civil and criminal courts became performative stages of difference and perpetuators of inequality when categorizing complex

non-European and colonial social constellations. Here, the selective application of Roman (Civil) and Common Law simultaneously destroyed and appropriated local legal systems, sucking into the dynamics of empire all groups, even those slightly connected with colonial spaces (Benton, 2009; Herzog, 2015).

At the same time that courts forcefully imposed mostly European categories on non-Europeans and on creole societies, local individuals and communities saw European colonial courts as emancipatory spaces, particularly in questions regarding the regulation of private paternal authority and the administration of property rights. Women, children and unfree were protected (and condemned) by a broad Christian driven framework of values and practices that often acted against extreme forms of abuse, while curbing most paths of emancipation and freedom. Likewise, the recognition of specific regimes of property rights empowered particular segments of the non-European and creolized colonial groups to ensure social upward mobility. However, their dependence on European law and law enforcement for the recognition of their property rights resulted in a greater (co)dependence between these groups and the colonial power, wherein the reproduction of social and economic inequality stood at the centre of the former's social ascendancy and the latter's success as exploitative system (Benton, 2002; Benton & Ross, 2013; Mirow, 2004; Premo, 2017).

In similar ways, although with distinct degrees of social penetration and mobilizing a discrete and ample administrative apparatus, portraying a different “infrastructural power” (Mann, 1984), political institutions of modern colonialism were particularly active in the formulation of idioms of justification and legitimation, including regarding patent inequalities and related forms of discrimination within colonial societies (and between these and the metropolises). For instance, in Southeast Asia, colonial administrations strove to enact administrative processes that defined, codified and ruled communities and their histories. “State simplifications” resulting from several “investigative modalities”, including census and surveys of existing natural and human resources, enabled economic and sociocultural interventions on local societies. Some of these instruments reproduced (and perfected) colonial rule and existing inequalities in order to ensure the continuation of economic privilege and advantage, through ethnic, racial and sociocultural differentiation (Cohn, 1996; Dirks, 2001). In West Africa, ethnic labels and related arguments for identity-formation, political and economic rule, were crucial, in diverse ways, to shape the interactions between colonial administrations and local communities (Keese, 2016). The “grammar of difference” and related categories were heterogeneous and surely contested, but they nonetheless reveal the efforts made by political institutions to justify existing inequalities, reproducing their meaning, reasoning, and aftermath (Stoler & Cooper, 1997, p. 3). The codification and institutionalization of ideas, representations and categories of difference, strongly related to ideologies of Western superiority over non-Western populations (in which technological aspects had an important role as the “measure of man” (Adas, 1989)), turned the latter into practical mechanisms of power that were crucial to sustain inequality. The numerous declinations of the proclaimed “civilizing missions” that supposedly encouraged European imperial and colonial projects since the late 19th century are important examples of these dynamics (Conklin, 1997; Fischer-Tiné & Mann, 2004; Jerónimo, 2015).

Some efforts to sustain beneficial forms of inequity were more effective than others, as a result of diverse human and material resources, distinct degrees of institutional reach, or different capacities to justify and legitimize particular measures or policies. Such variation in the effectiveness of inequality-reproduction was also related to recurrent antagonism by those expecting further privilege or, above all, those being marginalized by those measures and policies. As a consequence, imperial and colonial authorities frequently needed to adjust to

local circumstances and to (im)balances of power. “Contingent accommodation” prevailed, entailing negotiated loyalties and forms of belonging, as well as several patrons and clients, and frequently backed by a variety of modalities of symbolic and material violence (Burbank & Cooper, 2005; Newbury, 2003). In situ negotiations between local actors, about territories claims and delimitations, were decisive (Herzog, 2015). The same happened regarding the assigning of rights and obligations to communities and individuals, therefore tentatively regulating their unequal distribution, which was crucial for several forms of inequality. In Russia, for instance, the imperial rights regime was patently the result of recurrent evaluation of the principles behind rights and obligations, legal codification and social distribution. In that sense, it was a “flexible tool for rulers”, used to administer social difference (Burbank, 2007, p. 106). Similar developments took place in Africa and Asia. Moreover, in situ negotiations were not only crucial to define the relationships between imperial and colonial authorities and local, “native” populations, but they were also consequential regarding the ways political authorities and colonizers interacted. The boundaries between politics and economics and between public and private were frequently blurred, and the struggle for the preservation of privileges and rewards in imperial formations was competitive, and sometimes highly conflictive. The Dutch, French and British chartered companies across the world (Phillips & Sharman, 2020; Roper & van Ruymbeke, 2007) and the system of “prazos” of the Portuguese in Mozambique are revealing examples (Isaacman, 1972).

Administering difference

Empires also administered inequality. Metropolitan authorities and institutions, as well as their colonial counterparts, faced the consequences of their inequality-inducing and reproducing methods and policies. Destitution, famine, discrimination, in different ways and degrees, led to social unrest, protest, revolt, and emancipatory aspirations (de Melo, 2003; Derrick, 2008; Garrigus, 2006; Geggus, 2015; Kars, 2020; Puntoni, 2002; Schwartz, 1995). Inequality carried thus the seed for conflict, notwithstanding some productive historiographical controversies about this causality (Bahgat et al., 2017; Østby, 2013), as conflict, violence and disasters are perceived as the only levellers of inequality history (Scheidel, 2018), although recent scholarship has demonstrated that levelling after catastrophes is short lived and carries little impact onto the future (Alfani, 2013, forthcoming). The need to manage, mitigate or even suspend the various risky effects of diverse dynamics of inequality was always present. Colonial administrations and its departments (including those focused on maintaining “order”), religious bodies (churches and missionary societies) and, later in time, welfare agencies (some private and lay) faced several challenges and devised numerous responses. Multiple establishments of “social economy” were projected as a consequence, with different motivations, functions, resources and goals (Arrom, 2000; Grafe, 2018).

Iconic responses to colonial inequality in the Early Modern period that, in turn, facilitated the administration of different and perpetuated cycles of exploitation were the *misericórdias* (charities), the societies for the protection of the orphans or the *aldeias* (villages). *Misericórdias* were Catholic charitable institutions that provided for social relief and functioned, to a certain extent, as institutions that counter inequality. However, the membership regime associated with the *misericórdias* was exclusive and privileged the higher echelons of urban societies. In the colonial context, these regimes translated into a difference between the group(s) that administered charity and could, thus, by privilege enter the ranks of the institution, and the ones receiving charity. In this dynamic, managers of charity selected the receivers of charity according to moral and religious principles that were formatted, labelled and reproduced by European and

creolized colonial societies. In this context, *misericórdias* provided as much solace to inequality as they actively promoted and aggravated the power differential between privileged colonial elites and the lower social strata (Sá, 2004, 2007; Sennett, 2003). Even if *misericórdias* were the pioneers of poor relief, social assistance and welfare overseas, protestant colonial powers produced similar institutions after the 1600s (Benedict, 2002; Grell, 1997; Niemeijer, 1996).

There were cases of poor relief and social welfare that were instrumentalized by colonial powers in order to escape constraints of European inequality, while imposing, managing and aggravating that same inequality elsewhere in the world. The case of convicts and orphans are cases in point. European kings were particularly vested in externalizing their social outcasts by supporting the forceful sentencing of convicts for service in the colonial settings, alleviating European urban societies of social undesirables, while opening up an opportunity for effective settler's colonization and a growing social penetration of Europeans in colonial offshoots. As most of the convicts were young men, European states heavily supported policies that promoted the use of public dowry systems for orphaned girls, young women and widows. The costs social institutions of poor relief had with these women were thus offset into patterns of marriage that served to define social, cultural and even ethnic formations in different colonies, as these systems did not only apply for women born in Europe, but also for women that were born overseas under European rule (Anderson, 2018; Coates, 2002; de Vito & Lichtenstein, 2015; Gagné, 2001). Convicts and orphans remained key elements in the politics of colonialization and levelling of inequality within empires well into the 19th and the 20th centuries.

The expropriation of land and resources from the American autochthonous populations resulted in an agglomeration of autochthonous indigenous groups being forced into slavery as the only alternative for their survival and inclusion in the Spanish and Portuguese empires. However, slavery led many of these men, women and children to death or suicide and Catholic orders like the Jesuits and the Franciscans initiated a campaign against the enslavement of American indigenous populations with great success, as enslavement of indigenous peoples was quickly forbidden across Latin America, being indigenous slave and forced labour overall replaced by enslaved African workers. The reasoning of members of the Jesuit order regarding the enslavement of the indigenous American populations was based on the idea that they were obvious targets for successful evangelization campaigns and, as such, should be protected from the risk of enslavement. In other words, freedom was to be recognized to indigenous populations within the premise that they would become Christians. Because they were new Christians, they became obvious targets of the Spanish and the Portuguese Inquisitions in the Americas and later on in the Philippines. However, another reason moved the Jesuit and Franciscan orders. As recipients of large land grants in the Americas, the orders were as dependent upon the constraints of labour as all other landowners. By excluding indigenous populations from enslavement, the orders guaranteed free and cheap access to a stable source of labour that fell out of the competition in the labour market, putting them in a clear advantageous position when compared to other landowners. Furthermore, the fact that both orders limited the mobility of the indigenous populations by intern them in *aldeias* (villages) and *misiones* (missions), they functioned as middlemen in the administration of diversity and perpetuation of inequality in the name of God, but at the service of the King. Even if not juridically enslaved, indigenous Americans saw their social and physical mobility, rights of reproduction and freedom of religious worshiping extricated from their ancestral practices. Social upward mobility was now only accessible to the ones that remained within the order. This world of inequality and differentiation compared positively, though, to the situation of similar groups under different empires. For example, by continuously offering safe passage and nominal freedom to indigenous populations living under Dutch and British controlled areas in the Wild

Coast, Franciscan convents and *missiones* were able to attract a significant number of indigenous families and runaway enslaved Africans during the later decades of the 18th century (Alden, 1996; Canedo, 1988; Castelnau-L'Estoile, 2006; Gómez, 1999; Hoonhout, 2020; Hoonhout & Mareite, 2018; Marzal, 1999; Marzal & Tua, 2005; Reff, 2005).

Institutions of “social economy” in colonial contexts continued, and multiplied. For instance, the post-Second World War momentum brought about the multiplication of institutions of welfare in colonial contexts, in part as a result of the ongoing developmentalist drive of late colonialism. The “ruling compassions” of late colonialism had welfare at its core, envisioning the administration of inequalities within colonial societies. This process had clear securitarian concerns, especially with the intensification of organized conflicts in British Kenya, French Algeria, Belgian Congo, Portuguese Angola and Mozambique. Nonetheless, signs of “welfare colonialism” proliferated, partially connected to a growing recognition of patent inequalities in colonial or “non-autonomous” societies, generated by imperial and colonial *modi operandi* (Feichtinger, 2017; Hunt, 1990; Jerónimo, 2018; Lewis, 2001). In the British empire, with the Colonial Development Act of 1929 and the Colonial Development and Welfare Act of 1940, the interventionist role of the colonial state expanded. “Social development” and the provision of social services (mainly regarding education and health) were considered major goals, in Kenya, in Northern Rhodesia and also in West Africa, for instance in the telling case of the Gold Coast. Notwithstanding patent limitations, and the fact that social provision continued to be delivered by European missionaries and by local philanthropy, the tropical “new deal” amounted to an average 20% of the total expenditure of the colonial administrations (Gardner, 2012, pp. 157–158). In the French empire, the Fonds d'Équipement Rural pour le Développement Économique et Social (Rural Economic and Social Development Fund, FERDES) was created in 1949, an example of a developmental drive that animated the formulation of colonial policies in the post-war momentum (Massa, 2003). In the same year, a Ten-Year Development Plan was launched in Belgian Congo, after the previous constitution of a Fonds du Bien-Être Indigène (Indigenous Welfare Fund) for the Congo, Rwanda and Burundi, in 1947 (Vanthemsche, 1994). In the Portuguese empire, several developmental plans – *Planos do fomento* – were devised to modernize the imperial and colonial worlds since the 1950s, gradually including sums directed to social affairs (Jerónimo & Pinto, 2015).

Some of these developments were already taking shape in the interbellum, partially influenced by international organizations such as the League of Nations. The latter redefined the ways in which the inequalities of empires could be justified and, in some aspects, enacted or suspended. Uneven and discriminatory access to education, health services or proper nutrition started to be evaluated in colonial or mandated territories. Debates about “development” as a way to minimize inequality and, therefore, to mitigate the patent hierarchies and difference between groups and communities within dependent territories emerged, entailing more and more data, fostering expanding institutional processes and protocols of international scrutiny, involving more voices and arguments (Borowy, 2009; García, Rodogno, & Kozma, 2016; Jerónimo, 2020; Pedersen, 2015).

The historical dynamics that reinforced the role of empires as administrators of difference and inequality, which sometimes was juxtaposed with their role as reproducers of difference and inequality, were diverse. One example is the rise of *global humanitarianism*, for instance connected to the anti-slavery movement and related arguments about humanity (Forclaz, 2015; Miers, 1975). Another example is the late 19th-century interimperial competition in Africa, which had political, economic and religious dimensions and was shaped by discourses about philanthropy and “civilization” in relation to the conditions of colonized, or about to be so, peoples (Jerónimo, 2012). These two examples reflect the way in which colonial

empires evolved as administrators of difference and inequality. The challenges resulting from the gradual and convoluted suppression of the transatlantic slave trade (Law, 1995; Lovejoy, 2012) and from the international conditions governing the “rights” of occupation led colonial administrations to find ways to enact and legitimize colonial expansion and rule and, simultaneously, find institutional and practical solutions to manage their consequences. Notwithstanding, imperial states continued to include references, even if more *de jure* than *de facto*, to the improvements meant for the “native” populations and the mitigation of their disadvantages, many of which produced and reproduced by the imperial formations themselves (Anghie, 2004). The formulation of specific “native policies” – sometimes more a loose collection of measures than a coherent and systematic set of procedures – aimed to establish and regulate the actual exercise of rights and obligations of indigenous populations. Therefore, they produced and reproduced inequalities in colonial contexts, regarding political and legal rights, labour, health care, education, land ownership and utilization, and gender relations. Solutions such as the regime of the *Indigénat*, first devised in Algeria in 1881, later adapted to other French colonies and to the Portuguese colonial world (coming to an end in 1961), added to the instruments devised to uphold racial, ethnic and religious differentiation and unevenness. This dual juridical regime was the overarching framework that codified inequality, strove to legitimize it on racialized assumptions, and proclaimed to offer the instruments needed to minimize its consequences (Mann, 2009). The formulation of “native policies”, crucial as they were to the institutionalization of rule in colonial contexts – the dynamics of the colonial state formation – was the heterogeneous by-product of competing forms of “ethnographic capital” that actors claimed to possess in order to interrogate, differentiate, classify, hierarchize and administer local populations. In the German colonial empire, this varied from brutality and exclusion to social paternalism and “civilization” (Steinmetz, 2007, 2008).

“Civilization” and “assimilation” were the proclaimed ultimate goal of policies of difference, which had a long history, from Portuguese and Spanish occupation of the Atlantic Islands and the Americas to the British empire in the 19th century. Advocated by some, rejected or selectively appropriated by others, these policies assumed different forms and had diverse effects. Norms and practices of miscegenation were as much praised as they were utterly precluded. But they were seen as tools to mitigate difference and multifaceted inequalities, including by those that were the object of such legal instruments and political rhetoric. As they fed expectations of social upward mobility and enhanced political participation, and corresponding redistributing of rights and rewards, they became one of the major sources of routinized grievances against imperial and colonial rule (Belmessous, 2013; da Silva, 2012). As succeeded with citizenship, that “useful fiction” that challenged persisting modalities of exploitation and discrimination with a long history clearly connected with dynamics of inequality-production and reproduction, they were frameworks for “debate and struggle”, opportunities for claim-making, exploring the tensions between proclamations and realities, logics of integration and exclusion (Cooper, 2018).

Those policies of difference were also shaped by international, transnational and even global dynamics (Monteiro, 2020). Colonial inequalities continued to be scrutinized, and tentatively transformed, in international fora, with the contribution of an increasing number of state and non-state actors. The expanding focus of the United Nations and its specialized agencies on the inequalities of development (Unger, 2018), social and economic rights (Jensen, 2019), poverty and living standards (Alacevich, 2011), education (Jones, 1988) and human rights (Burke, 2010; Burke, Duranti, & Moses, 2020; Jensen, 2016) was significant, if not always consequential. Despite contributing to the production, reproduction and legitimization of inequalities across the world – in political, economic and even cultural terms – for

a while enabling the continuation of colonial solutions, until the global decolonization momentum of the 1950s–1970s, these international spaces nonetheless provided new conditions for participation, denunciation and claim-making regarding a heterogeneous set of manifest inequalities (Terretta, 2012). Global and international agendas, such as the ones associated with the UN development “decades”, were therefore shaped, and clearly influenced, the historical dynamics of languages and repertoires of action related to (in)equality (Sayward, 2017).

Conclusion

The production, reproduction and administration of inequality in imperial formations were significant and generated enduring effects (Cogneau, 2006; Lange, 2009; Mahoney, 2010). An intensification of in-depth global studies of imperial formations can contribute, meaningfully and significantly, to the ongoing debates about the most appropriate conceptual, methodological and analytical frameworks to understand the plural production, reproduction and administration of inequalities, without losing sight of variations in time and in space. Even historically informed economic assessments of regimes of inequality fail to incorporate imperial formations as crucial analytical frameworks, and to question if the “nation” is indeed the right unit to think about dynamics of inequality. The question of the scales of inequality (national, regional or imperial and international and global), and their historical intersections, is crucial. At the same time, those assessments also neglect the extent to which connected colonial dynamics in history (e.g. slave trade or forced labour and conscription) are crucial to past and present configurations of inequality, which are associated and contingent (Bhambra, 2021; Piketty, 2020; Stanziani, 2015).

In order to move beyond a predominant economicist form of conceiving and assessing inequality, other disciplines are invited to provide multiple perspectives that may nuance current views regarding inequality. The epistemological, methodological and analytical problems caused by the politics of large numbers and by “poor numbers” must not be ignored. They need to be taken cautiously as causality between existing data and historical development falls short of characterizing and nuancing current knowledge (Bruno, Catrice & Touchelay, 2016; Desrosières, 2010; Jerven, 2013). The recent efforts to elaborate more on the formation of idioms and repertoires of inequality, broadening the geographical and institutional spaces under scrutiny and the actors, voices, arguments, projects and processes under analysis, will surely benefit from the systematic inclusion of imperial formations as major protagonists (Christiansen & Jensen, 2019). They were polities in which vital, existential and resource inequalities were particularly visible, interdependent and sustained in time (Therborn, 2013). They show why and how time and history matter in the study of inequality. Contextualization and historicization are thus the way forward towards a deeper understanding of the ways different forms of inequality were enacted, persisted, changed or intersected. Finally, the study of imperial formations allows researchers to move away from exclusive national histories of inequality-formation, reproduction, and administration, bringing trans-territorial and transnational dynamics to centre stage.

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