A pioneering look at **social inequality**

A researcher of the ruling elite advocates for the continued development of comparative studies to gain a better understanding of social phenomena

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PORTRAIT Léo Ramos Chaves | Published in April 2018

At a time when the issue of poverty was mobilizing other researchers in her field, the political sociologist Elisa Pereira Reis was developing innovative studies on social inequality. Based on comparative analyses of conditions in a range of different nations, her work has influenced thinking about the imbalance of the distribution of resources not only in Brazil but also around the world. By focusing on the ruling elites' perspectives on the problem, Reis advanced the development of a new understanding of social disparities. In her conception, the elite is composed of people who occupy high-status positions in certain institutions, controlling both symbolic and material resources; in other words, they not only have money but also the ability to influence the decisions that reinforce their own power base.

A descendant of landowners from Araxá, Minas Gerais, Reis has been married to economist Eustáquio José Reis, a researcher at the Department of Macroeconomic Policies and Studies at the Institute of Applied Economic Research (DIMAC/IPEA), for over four decades. At the age of 20, she obtained a degree in sociology and politics from the School of Economic Sciences at the Federal University of Minas Gerais (FCE-UFMG) in Belo Horizonte. She defended her doctoral thesis at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in 1979.

AGE 72

SPECIALTY
Political sociology

INSTITUTION
Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ)

EDUCATION
Undergraduate degree in sociology and politics from the School of Economic Sciences at UFMG (1967); doctorate in political science from MIT (1979)

SCIENTIFIC PRODUCTION
Approximately 50 scientific articles and 11 books authored or edited

Now a tenured professor at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ), Reis currently divides her time between political science activities, teaching, and two global research projects. "The time I spend teaching is what keeps me feeling consistently challenged. My first teaching experience was during my last year as an undergrad, when I taught an introduction to sociology for a social science class that had just passed the 1967 college entrance exams at the UFMG School of Philosophy," she says. "I'm retiring from UFRJ, but I want to continue teaching, including undergraduate classes." In the following interview, the researcher speaks about her studies on inequality and her current projects.

Your path in academia could be considered a hybrid since your work covers both politics and sociology. Where does your interest in the social sciences come from?

I left my parents' house at the age of 14 for high school in Uberaba in preparation for studying engineering. In the first months of the course, however, I got caught up with social justice issues and became involved in high school politics. This motivated me to opt for the social sciences. Like many others of my generation, I was motivated by the idea of changing the world. I received my undergraduate degree at the School of Economic Sciences at UFMG, in Belo Horizonte. At the time, I thought political science, economics, and sociology were the same field of study. Today I define myself as belonging to the field of political sociology, but I will never lose the stamp of political science in my education.

How did you get to MIT?

I took the college entrance exam in 1964. I have always enjoyed studying the people who control material resources and their relations with the state. My Master's thesis attempted to show how, in 1930, the state subordinated the coffee-growing elite to support the industrial elite. I received an education that approximated a political economics degree since I was in the last class to receive an undergraduate degree in sociology and politics at FCE. I had classes in international law, constitutional law, economics, and the history of economic thought, but not in the fields dealing with social thought, for example. The degree was harder compared to social science degrees. The economics courses I took then were far more politicized than they are today. The university's environment at the time could be considered legendary for—among other reasons—pioneering the introduction of the competitive scholarship system for undergraduates, investing in books and periodicals, and fostering intense activity in its reading rooms and library. I lived away from my family, in the city, and I considered school my home. I graduated in 1967, at the age of 20. The following year, while obtaining my degree in development sociology at the Latin American Institute of Doctrine and Social Studies [ILADES] in Chile, I lived with people from all over the world and with many exiles from Latin American dictatorships. The idea of producing comparative studies, which I find so interesting, began with my experience in Chile. When I arrived at MIT in 1972 for my doctorate, the institute had very few women and foreigners in the political science field. Soon I began taking classes from teachers who had been my bibliographical references, such as Samuel Huntington, Hayward Alker, Daniel Lerner, and Barrington Moore. Being a "bibliography" student is good because you demystify the person and come to believe that it is possible to go far yourself.

> "I work with the concept of the elite, which comprises people who control both symbolic and material resources

What did you study for your doctorate?

With my doctorate, I endeavored to answer the question of why Brazil had so much difficulty in consolidating its democracy. To do this, I developed a macro-historical study that examined the time period from the abolition of slavery through the Revolution of 1930. I tried to show with empirical data how the conditions were created that led to Getúlio Vargas [1882–1954] carrying out his authoritarian revolution. In my thesis, I argue that the 1930 Revolution was not bourgeois but was cultivated by the agrarian elites during the Old Republic, creating the conditions for Vargas to install a modernizing dictatorship. At the time I was pursuing my doctorate, many social science researchers were concerned with explaining why Brazil was authoritarian. Many of us, such as Simon Schwartzman, Otávio Velho, and Luiz Werneck Viana, developed macro-historical theses to understand the dictatorship. That was the question of the era. I never published my thesis, but I wrote several articles that derived from it. One of the most widely read, "O Estado nacional como ideologia: O caso brasileiro" (The nation state as ideology: The Brazilian case) (Estudos Históricos, 1988), I consider an early-stage writing. In it, I worked with an unprecedented concept of "nation" that had already been approached by Benedict Anderson [1936–2015] in his 1985 book Nation and National Identity, which I had not been aware of.

When did you first become interested in studies on inequality?

I continued to work on the relationship between government and the market, keen to understand how economic interests were part of the construction of the state in Brazil. Because of my growing concern, my focus gradually shifted to studying inequality. My concern has always been very theoretical and macro-historical, unlike the tradition in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo. I eventually joined the sociological theory committee of the International Sociological Associ-

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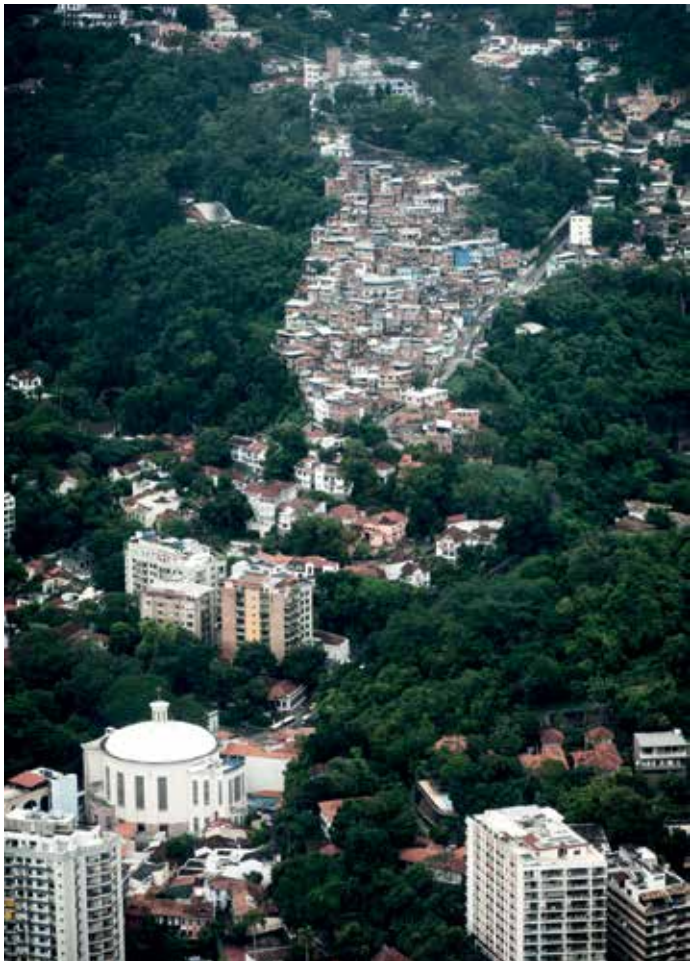

Researcher seeks to understand how people who are not poor coexist with misery

ation. At that time, I converted from political science to sociology, but I continued to focus on the relations among the state, society, and the market. In another study, I created a database to map the relationships of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) with the government. I submitted questionnaires to 300 NGOs involved in social policy in five Brazilian states as well as to a group of beneficiaries of these organizations' programs. My goal was to assess how leaders of these institutions relate to the state and the market and how their beneficiaries viewed these organizations.

What are you researching today?

I am working on two fronts. One study is my personal project of investigating the ruling elites' perception of poverty and inequality. The first phase of this initiative was developed between 1993 and 1995 by a group from the former University Research Institute of Rio de Janeiro [IUPERJ], which is now the Institute of Social and Political Studies (IESP/UERJ), as part of the study "Strategic Elites and Democratic Consolidation," which focused on the process of redemocratization in Brazil. I joined this team to ask the elites questions about their perceptions of inequality. We conducted a survey with politicians, bureaucrats, and business and union leaders from all over the country. I then continued this research in a study developed in partnership with European colleagues, including the Dutch sociologist Abram de Swaan, a professor emeritus at the University of Amsterdam. We set up a group to investigate the perceptions people had of poverty in Brazil, South Africa, the Philippines, Bangladesh, and Haiti. We prepared a questionnaire to interview 80 representatives of the elites in each of these countries. The results were published in 2005 in the book *Elite Perceptions of Poverty and Inequality*, which I edited with Mick Moore, a professor at the Institute of Development Studies at the University of Sussex in the United Kingdom. The work was well received by other specialists but has only recently gained visibility. At that time, inequality was not the main concern of my partners, who were more focused on poverty issues. I had trouble persuading them to include the word "inequality" in the title of the work. Today, what draws the most attention to the book is precisely the fact that it deals with the idea of inequality. I just returned from a doctoral panel at the London School of Economics and Political Science in which the doctoral candidate analyzed the views held on inequality and poverty by the wealthiest 1% of London's population. She had developed her thesis based on the book that Mick Moore and I edited. Between 2013 and 2014, I further developed the same study with another team of researchers to evaluate the perceptions of elites in Brazil, South Africa, and Uruguay. Questionnaires were completed by 180 people in each of these countries. The idea was to assess whether there were changes over time and what they were. We have not published the results of this project yet. I am behind on it because I got involved in another big project to which I have currently been concentrating most of my energy.

How did your interest in elites develop into an object of research?

The concept of "elite" has many definitions. Instead of adopting, for example, a concept based on income or wealth or notoriety and celebrity, I adopt a positional criterion; in other words, one based on an institutional position. By doing this, I presume that those at the top of certain institutions control material and symbolic resources. By the 1990s, after the dictatorship, the Brazilian political scene was optimistic. There was, however, the perception that inequality was widespread and nothing was being done to change the landscape. I began to feel concerned about the reality of living under these conditions. How do we organize our thinking in a society with so much disparity in terms of perspectives on life? At that time, various studies had already been performed on poverty and survival strategies under precarious conditions. However, I did not want to approach the subject from that point of view. I wanted to understand how people who are not poor live with, and justify, the existence of poverty.

And did you?
Most people who study poverty and inequality argue that to reduce disparities in society, it is necessary to rely on the goodwill of the elites, focusing on philanthropy to achieve this goal. I agree that philanthropy can be one path. However, with this study, I wanted to identify motives that could stimulate the elites' interest in investing in reducing inequalities. In the first stage of our research, the results of which were published in 2005, we identified that, in general, the elites of Brazil, South Africa, the Philippines, Bangladesh, and Haiti understood poverty and inequality as being problems that affected them. According to our questionnaires, they preferred to protect their property individually, investing in security, walls, and alarms without allying with the state. In an effort to understand how the Brazilian elite mobilizes to do something for the most needy, I have based my research on the Swaan model. He argues that the welfare state was built in Europe because elites thought they should involve the government in the protection of their interests. For Swaan, elites act reactively and supported the creation of this welfare state because they felt threatened. During our research, I observed that this motivation can be based on fears of violence or threats to material assets. This has allowed me to state that the stimulus for reducing inequality can be both philanthropic and defensive. In the quest to secure their position in political, intellectual, corporate, or bureaucratic spheres, the elite needs to consider that inequality and poverty also pose risks to it.

What was your finding regarding Brazil?
During one stage of research performed in 2013 and 2014, I observed a different attitude in Brazil. The country was experiencing a period of economic and social prosperity and the elites realized that if there were a redistribution of income, they would also benefit because the consumer market would become more dynamic and the workforce more qualified. As a result, they began to bet on social progress as something that would also generate benefits for themselves. Comparing Brazilian data with data from South Africa, we noticed significant differences. In the original study, the elites of the two countries thought similarly. Later, in Brazil, the people who occupied these positions still considered economic growth to be the most important factor for the nation, but they recognized that if there was social progress for the poorest, the possibility of economic advancement for all groups increased. Here, the elites positioned themselves in favor of progressive economic measures such as the Bolsa Família [the federal Family Allowance] program. In South Africa, elites continued to argue that it was necessary to grow the economy first and then redistribute income.

What is the other project that you're involved with?
Along with other researchers, I am coordinating the development of a global panel to assess social progress in various countries, especially over the last 50 or 60 years, and map out the problems currently affecting us and any serious threats to continuous progress. The preservation of the environment, the issue of chemical and biological weapons, and the imperative of sustainable growth are a few of the enormous challenges we are faced with. I am part of the scientific committee, and I coordinate one of the chapters together with the Dutch historian Marcel van der Linden. The panel involves approximately 300 researchers and is being drafted without government financial assistance because we wanted to maintain our autonomy as regards possible political pressures. Three books containing the results of this project will be published in July by Cambridge University Press. In addition, six of us who are coordinating the project have written a short work presenting the panel's results for a nonacademic audience, which will also be published by Cambridge University Press later this year. My research on the elite and the panel on social progress are the two intellectual activities that occupy me most these days.

> “Incentives to reduce inequality can be both philanthropic and defensive

Has the panel identified any social progress?
Of course, there is no denying that mankind has experienced immense material progress, among them improvements in the areas of health and life expectancy. However, these gains are not distributed equally, and miserable conditions are the reality for millions of people. It is also necessary to take into account issues concerning equality and the recognition of diversity. There is no doubt, for example, that patriarchal domination has declined significantly in many contexts, but much remains to be done. Thousands of women around the world still have to fight for the right to merely attend school, as seen in places such as Pakistan and Afghanistan. Religious freedom is brutally denied to many minorities, such as Christians in Nigeria. Homosexuals are punished by imprisonment and, according to recent reports, even capital punishment in countries such as Sudan, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen. Moreover, we have recently witnessed the rise of authoritarian tendencies that threaten the democratic achievements we have been accustomed to thinking of as enduring and continuously expanding. The emerging crisis of democracy indicates that we urgently need to find new institutional formats to ensure political representation and participation. The growing worldwide wave of populism feeds on the dissatisfaction of significant portions of the population with a political establishment that ignores their concerns. In this context, many people are seduced by false salvationist promises of opportunist leaders.

Where is Brazil in this scenario?
In the case of Brazilian society, the schism between official politics and the demands of citizens is remarkable. The climate of frustration is spreading and resentment and intolerance are growing, making dialogue impossible and helping set back various social achievements. The situation in Brazil can be seen almost as a parable of what is happening in the rest of the world. It seems that we have difficulty understanding something very simple: if the rights that some enjoy are not generalized to include everyone, we are talking about privileges and not rights. The liberal-democratic agenda, by definition, must be universal. The resistance to including new sectors of society fosters not only the dissatisfaction of the excluded but also the irrational defense of the status quo and often retrogression itself. The consequence for everyone is the loss of democratic coexistence. The magnitude of the inequality on the one hand and the denial of respect for so many on the other have led to a serious crisis of sociability among us. We all lose when social solidarity shrinks. However, it should not be inferred from the present crisis that we are condemned to face decline and barbarism. What motivates our panel's project is exactly the conviction that, as agents given rationality and volition, we have the moral challenge of thinking about alternatives to ensure that science, technology, and innovation are effective partners in the advancement of social achievements.

You have also been very involved in political science activities. What are they?
Since 2013, I have been vice-president of the International Social Science Council (ISSC). There were two councils until recently: the ISSC, for the social sciences, and the International Council of Sciences (ICSU), made up of the so-called hard sciences. These two organizations are coming together to form a single council, the International Science Council (ISC). In June, we will have the first assembly of the new organization, which now includes all the sciences. The idea of unifying the organizations occurred because there is a growing awareness that we must think about social problems together, rather than separately or by discipline. We discussed this merger for two years. In late 2017, we concluded the discussion on unifying the two councils into a new organization. That was a subject that kept me very busy in recent years.

> “Brazil originated as an authoritarian state, but I do not think it is fated to continue as such

With such a long and intense research history, what do you still need to accomplish?
I coordinate the Interdisciplinary Network for Studies on Inequality, (NIED), which has been around for 20 years. We performed a great deal research, and it bothered me that I had never studied color-based inequality in Brazil. Then, in 2004, the sociologist Michèle Lamont, a professor at Harvard, invited me to participate in a comparative study in this area. The idea was to understand how black people in the United States and Brazil and minorities in Israel deal with inequality, prejudice, and stigma. In Brazil, research on this subject usually focuses on the study of individual cases and life histories. When I received the invitation, I felt uncertain about it because I am not an expert on race. Michèle proposed that I work with Graziella Moraes Silva, currently a professor at the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies in Geneva, Switzerland, who developed a thesis at Harvard comparing black liberal professionals in Brazil and South Africa. It took us ten years to complete this study, and at the end of 2016, we published a book presenting our results, titled *Getting Respect: Dealing with Stigmatization and Discrimination in the United States, Brazil, and Israel* (Princeton University Press, 2016). I want to publish this book in Brazil, but for now it is only a concept.

In the article “The National State as Ideology: The Brazilian Case,” you call attention to the fact that authoritarianism is in the genesis of the Brazilian state. Even so, is it possible to build a new national project?
This is a subject that really energizes me. I have one foot in macro-historical sociology, but I do not consider the genesis of a society to be an “original sin.” If I thought that because we originated as an authoritarian state we were fated to continue as such, I would not have studied social sciences. We choose this career when we believe that it is possible to change things. Sometimes historical works are read as if they were concrete evidence that we have a manifest destiny of authoritarianism. We do not. We choose things. It is common to hear that, in Brazil, there is color-based inequality today because we had slavery in the past. I agree that this is the origin of the problem, but inequality and the discriminatory and elitist aspects of our society are constantly being recreated and reactivated. These conditions do not automatically remain unchanged. We need to know how to explain why they do not change.

How do you view current production in the social sciences in Brazil?
When I was a student, I learned that I should work with the research subject held at an objective distance and that we had to choose topics that we were not emotionally close to. However, that idea has changed, and I gave it up. Choosing a topic because it moves us is not a problem. It is also necessary to recognize that we all want to be original in choosing our subjects, but I think that this tendency is exaggerated at times and contributes to an excess of fragmentation, which makes it difficult to consolidate and generalize results. Teamwork is critical to academic research. ■