

Introducing

Silvia Otero Bahamón

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Silvia Otero Bahamón is an Associate Professor at Universidad del Rosario. Silvia's research topics include social policy, political economy of inequality, comparative politics of Latin America, state formation, and qualitative methods. Specifically, her research agenda focuses on the subnational dimensions of inequality, on which she is currently writing a book on subnational social inequality in Latin America and is advancing a research project on the reduction of income inequality in four Colombian cities.

Can you tell us more about your current book project on subnational social inequality in Latin America? What motivated you to explore this topic, and what key insights or arguments do you aim to present in your book?

I was born in an intermediate city in Colombia, which, despite being far from the capital, enjoyed good access to social services and other public goods. But my parents were from different, poorer areas of the country. When we visited our relatives, I noticed the stark differences in living conditions – the dirt roads, lack of running water and sanitation, prevalent poverty, etc. I was aware of the contrasts between regions very early and developed a curiosity for regional politics and development. In my first project after college, I investigated subnational infrastructure, clientelism, and armed conflict. The subnational lenses were a constant in my life, leading to my research into subnational inequality.



As my personal experience had revealed, I learned that, in many countries around the world, the chances of being poor, illiterate, or sick depend to a large extent on one's place of residence within the country; however, in other countries, place of residence matters little in determining differential access to services. There is, thus, a subnational side to inequality that is more acute in some countries than others, and, despite its importance, it is rarely studied. The book first conceptualizes this type of inequality and stresses how it differs from other types, such as income or horizontal inequality. Second, the book asks why some countries are more successful at reducing

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within-country unevenness in social indicators such as literacy and infant mortality. I elaborate on the argument in two steps. First, subnational social inequality reduction occurs when a policy sector is characterized by controlled decentralization and/or place-based sensitivity. Second, these traits in a policy sector depend on the balance of power between subnational and national political elites and the degree of policy-maker autonomy. To advance this argument, the book analyzes three cases in Colombia and Peru.

As part of the project "Subnational Policies for the Containment of Covid-19 in Latin America," you studied the variation in subnational responses to the pandemic. What factors or dynamics influenced these different responses, and did you uncover any interesting patterns or trends across Latin America?

In general, we would expect provinces and departments in unitary countries to have a more homogenous response to the pandemic and a more heterogeneous one in federal countries. We found that this helped explain the homogenous response of Bolivia and Peru, and the very heterogeneous response of Brazil and Mexico. However, the subnational response of Argentina – a federal country – was unexpectedly homogenous, and Colombia – a unitary country – unexpectedly diverse. We came to the conclusion that the pandemic needed both

things: a homogenous and centralized response at the beginning to allow the country to improve its infrastructural capacity, contain the spread of the virus, and put in motion a testing and tracing program, and a more heterogeneous response afterwards to allow subnational units to adapt to the changing trends of the pandemic. We found, however, that there was a lot of mismatch: subnational units closed when they had little contagion and closed when they were ascending towards a peak. The disconnect between what was going on on the ground and the policy responses showed us that the informational capacity of the state was key to developing adequate policy instruments.

In your teaching role, you cover a variety of topics in international relations, political science, and urban management. What teaching strategies or approaches do you find effective in engaging with and inspiring your students?

My teaching philosophy is based on creating spaces to promote three actions: arousing curiosity, discovering, and creating. One of my favorite strategies to generate curiosity, creativity, and discovery is to bring a real case or problem for students to solve. In my Intro to Political Science class, students help a legislator understand how a piece of legislation has changed during its passage through Congress; in my Research Design class, students advise a thinktank on the creation of a new concept on immigration and provide a strategy to measure it; in my Analysis of Internal Conflicts class, students must advise the president of a global NGO on how to speak about sexual violence during war. I also like to link students' personal lives, interests, and desires with the class goals. They bring topics they are interested in analyzing from a political science perspective. My classes are generally a combination of strategies, activities, and materials. We are always doing different things to keep the mood active, and the students motivated.

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