

# Comment

Income inequality has become a defining topic in the United States. As President Obama emphasized in his second inaugural address, “Our country cannot succeed when a shrinking few do very well and a growing many barely make it.” Recent data have been disturbing. “For millions of workers,” The New York Times reported in January 2013, “wages have flatlined.” Meanwhile, the wage share garnered by the top 1 percent rose to 12.9 percent in 2010, almost doubling from 7.3 percent in 1979.

Latin America is no stranger to income inequality. It has long been known as the most unequal region in the world, while the U.S. historically has been associated with high social mobility or the “American dream.” The latest data indicate an unexpected trend: a modest decrease in Latin American inequality and the unraveling of the American dream in the U.S.

Inequality is a critical issue for the economic future of both areas. The Center for Latin American Studies (CLAS) engaged this theme with a new, transcontinental series “Inequality: A Dialogue for the Americas” in fall 2012. Using videoconferencing and the Web to bring together live audiences on two continents, CLAS brought a range of perspectives from both Latin America and the United States to the fore. Speakers included prominent academics and political leaders; participants included students,

faculty, community members, entrepreneurs, and labor leaders. Highlights of the dialogue — including some surprising findings — appear in this issue of the Review.

CLAS also collaborated with the Museum of Memory and Human Rights in Santiago, Chile, to mount an exhibit of Fernando Botero’s Abu Ghraib paintings and drawings in spring 2012. This exhibit marked the first display in South America of these works, which the artist has donated to Berkeley. The museum proved to be a particularly appropriate venue, and the exhibit received intense national attention, sparking a thoughtful debate about torture, human rights, and democracy.

Also in this issue, Berkeley Architecture Professor René Davids reports on innovative urban design in Bogotá, Colombia, after a research trip in 2012. Many of these innovations have their roots in the city’s turn towards more democratic governance in the early 1990s.

Professors Deborah Yashar (Princeton), Thad Dunning (Yale), and Ben Schneider (MIT) gave diverse talks on their recent research. All are Berkeley political science alumni who were here to celebrate the career of Berkeley professor David Collier.

Finally, CLAS was pleased to welcome Chilean President Ricardo Lagos (2000-06) to teach a special seminar and give several public talks.

— Harley Shaiken

From left: Ricardo Lagos, Harley Shaiken, and Robert Reich, September 2012.



Photo by Jim Block.