

**POLICY AND REGULATION: TOWARDS A HISTORICAL-MATERIALIST  
ANALYSIS OF THE BOLSA FAMÍLIA PROGRAM IN BRAZIL<sup>1</sup>**

**POLÍTICA PÚBLICA E REGULAÇÃO: PARA UMA ANÁLISE HISTÓRICO-  
MATERIALISTA DO PROGRAMA BOLSA FAMÍLIA NO BRASIL<sup>2</sup>**

***POLÍTICA PÚBLICA Y REGULACIÓN: PARA UN ANÁLISIS HISTÓRICO-  
MATERIALISTA DEL PROGRAMA BOLSA FAMÍLIA EN BRASIL***

Carolina Alves Vestena<sup>3</sup>

**Abstract:** Often the Bolsa Família Programme returns to the newspapers. Its relevance, actuality and capacity to adapt to different party models and government regimes are systematically discussed. This article analyses the process of institutionalization of the Bolsa Família program (PBF) in Brazil during the governments of the Labour Party, but offers also insights in order to understand its continuity over the years. From a historical-materialist political analysis, I argue that the PBF is a hegemonic policy within the Brazilian social assistance that reinforces a paradigm of welfare based on access to basic services through the market and not as universal social right. Its hegemony has been consolidated through strategies of unification, centralization and agreements among federal entities. These strategies were elaborated within the process of agenda definition that led to the implementation of the program. The regulation model adopted is understood as a resource operated by managers in order to ensure hegemony by means of: (a) centralization of goals, (b) inter-sectorial conditionalities, (c) model of performance control linked to financial rewards to municipalities, (d) control of conditionalities and targeting counterbalanced by mechanisms of mass coverage and (e) strategies for social legitimation. The work offers a methodological approach for the analysis of researches conducted about the program, and establishes a dialogue with the field that focuses on the evaluation of social policies, especially with studies that examine the role of law within these policies, as well as with those dealing with the expansion of conditional cash transfer programs.

**Keywords:** Bolsa Família. Hegemonic social policy. Conditional cash transfer. Regulation. Historical-materialist analysis.

**Resumo:** O Programa Bolsa Família continua sendo altamente debatido no Brasil. Sua relevância, atualidade e capacidade de adaptação a diferentes modelos partidários e regimes governamentais devem, no entanto, ser sistematicamente discutidos. Este artigo, além de analisar o processo de institucionalização do Programa Bolsa Família (PBF) no Brasil, durante os governos do Partido Trabalhista, oferece insights para entender sua continuidade ao longo dos anos apesar das mudanças partidárias do regime brasileiro. A partir de uma análise política histórico-materialista, argumenta-se que o PBF é uma política hegemônica dentro da assistência social brasileira que reforça um paradigma de bem-estar baseado no

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acesso aos serviços básicos através do mercado e não como um direito social universal. Sua hegemonia tem se consolidado continuamente por meio de estratégias de unificação, centralização e acordos entre entidades federais. Essas estratégias foram elaboradas dentro do processo de definição da agenda que levou à implementação do programa. O modelo de regulação adotado é entendido como um recurso operado pelos gestores a fim de garantir a hegemonia por meio de: (a) centralização de metas, (b) condicionalidades intersectoriais, (c) modelo de controle de desempenho vinculado a recompensas financeiras aos municípios, (d) controle de condicionalidades e direcionamento contrabalanceado por mecanismos de cobertura de massa e (e) estratégias de legitimação social. O trabalho oferece uma abordagem metodológica para a análise das pesquisas realizadas sobre o programa e estabelece um diálogo com o campo que se concentra na avaliação das políticas sociais, especialmente com estudos que examinam o papel do direito dentro dessas políticas, bem como com aqueles que tratam da expansão dos programas de transferência condicionada de renda.

**Palavras-chave:** Bolsa Família. Política social hegemônica. Transferência condicionada de renda. Regulamentação. Análise histórico-materialista.

**Resumen:** El Programa Bolsa Família continua siendo muy debatido en Brasil. Su relevancia, actualidad y capacidad de adaptación a diferentes modelos partidarios y regímenes gubernamentales deben, sin embargo, ser sistemáticamente debatidos. Este artículo, más allá de analizar el proceso de institucionalización del Programa Bolsa Família (PBF) en Brasil, durante los gobiernos del Partido dos Trabalhadores, ofrece insights para la comprensión de su continuidad durante los años a pesar de los cambios partidarios del régimen brasileño. A partir de un análisis político histórico-materialista, argumentase que el PBF es una política hegemónica dentro de la asistencia social brasileña que refuerza un paradigma de bienestar fundamentado en el acceso a los servicios básicos a través del mercado y no como un derecho social universal. Su hegemonia ha sido consolidado continuamente por medio de estrategias de unificación, centralización y acuerdos entre entidades federales. Esas estrategias han sido elaboradas dentro del proceso de definición de la agenda que lleva a la implementación del programa. El modelo de regulación adoptado es entendido como un recurso operado por los gestores para garantizar la hegemonia por medio de: (a) centralización de metas, (b) condicionalidades inter sectoriales, (c) modelo de control de desempeño vinculado a recompensas financieras a los municipios, (d) control de condicionalidades y orientación balanceado por mecanismos de cobertura de masa e (e) estrategias de legitimación social. El trabajo ofrece un abordaje metodológico para análisis de las investigaciones realizadas sobre el programa y establece un diálogo con el campo que se concentra en la evaluación de las políticas sociales, especialmente con estudios que examinan el rol del derecho dentro de esas políticas, así como con aquellos que tratan de la expansión de los programas de transferencia condicionada de renta.

**Palabras clave:** Bolsa Família; Política Social Hegemónica; Transferencia Condicional de Renta; Regulación. Análisis Histórico-Materialista

## 1. Introduction

The year 2020 will go into history, not only because of the consequences of the global pandemic caused by the expansion of the disease due to the Covid19.<sup>4</sup> In the countries of the so-called global south, the consequences of a health crisis promise to be worse than one could expect. In the case of Brazil, the fact that the economic and social crises have not yet reached their most dramatic point can also not be ignored. In this context of uncertainty, the debate on the Bolsa Familia program (BFP) as a means of minimum social guarantee for people in situations of financial need has been renewed. President Jair Bolsonaro, which had been openly criticizing the Programme in his parliamentary period, has been discussing the possibility of using the benefits of the PBF as an urgent measure for people in situations of extreme poverty.<sup>5</sup> Before the outbreak of the pandemic, Federal Deputy Marcelo Freixo of the PSOL in Rio de Janeiro had also been criticizing the interruptions in the payment of benefits under the program and the filters imposed by the Special Agency for Social Development (Secretaria Especial do Desenvolvimento Social), which prevented the inclusion of new beneficiaries.<sup>6</sup> The possibility of reforming the PBF to create a new “social brand” of the Bolsonaro government has been gaining force and should be defined in the coming months if the social and pandemic crises so allow.<sup>7</sup>

The Bolsa Família program is a conditional cash transfer policy that was implemented in 2003 on the occasion of the first term of the Government of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva of the Workers' Party (PT). Its main objective is to create incentives for the beneficiary population to have access to health, education, prenatal care and other basic services. The continuous fulfilment of these conditions is a prerequisite for receiving a defined income, which is paid by bank transfer, usually to female heads of household (LAVINAS 2013, p. 35). This model of social assistance and to combat poverty is the most widespread in Latin America. In almost all the countries of the sub-continent there are records of some type of conditioned minimum income policy (see: Stampini and Tornarolli 2012).

Once the conditionalities are met, families receive a basic income that can be added to other subsidies in the case of large families. In its origin, approximately between 2003 and

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<sup>4</sup> More information on sanitary and political aspects of the Covid19 pandemic crisis, see Ventura, Aith e Rached (2020, p. 2).

<sup>5</sup> After considering cuts in the program and, in fact, having reduced the number of beneficiaries in some regions of Brazil, the President Jair Bolsonaro gave a statement on the possibility of granting a R\$100.00 bonus to the Program's beneficiaries due to the consequences of the Covid19 pandemic (ver em: Truffi e Taiar 2020).

<sup>6</sup> More details on the initiatives of the deputy regarding the PBF, see: <https://psol50.org.br/marcelo-freixo-e-urgente-a-derrubada-do-teto-de-gastos/> (30/03/2020).

2010, the program offered a basic payment of approximately R\$77.00, with an additional of R\$35.00 per child, and this amount could reach up to R\$235.00 if the family still found itself in an extremely precarious situation. In 2011, the program was reformed and expanded (VESTENA 2017, 147ss.). Benefits were adjusted and other policies were integrated into the BFP which, in this period, reached its highest number of beneficiaries (approximately 14 thousand families) (IBID., p. 175). Since 2015, the economic and political crises also affect the Bolsa Família, which has been constantly reassessed.<sup>8</sup> Since then, despite its maintenance, the program is at the centre of disputes and political decisions, which have changed its course and scope.

Since its implementation in 2003, the Bolsa Família has been one of the most studied programmes in the Brazilian social sciences, both because of its impact on the fight against poverty and on the creation of federal management structures (e.g. LICIO 2012; COUTINHO 2013), as well as the permanent criticisms raised and the course adjustments in public policy made over the years (LAVINAS 2017; LEUBOLT 2014; VESTENA 2017). In this sense, the impulse for research on the different political dimensions of the program is not new. Academic studies on the influence of regulatory models over the institutional design of public policies are increasingly numerous in Brazil. Their focus of analysis usually targets the legal mechanisms and processes of improvement of such policies, without questioning, however, their objectives or scope within political projects developed by actors with decision-making power. This article, in dialogue with this field of studies and considering the BFP as an exemplary public policy, offers an alternative of critical analysis of the legal phenomenon in public policies on the basis of a historical-materialist approach.

A growing number of legal experts has been engaging in the creation of analytic tools for the comprehension of how regulation is managed in order to contribute for the achievement of goals set in the planning of public policies. In Brazil one can identify a growing field committed to the analysis of law and public policies, in which many studies also address the relation between regulation and development.<sup>9</sup> These investigations elaborate theoretical elements for institutional and impact evaluations and frequently scrutinize concrete public policies. The researches on Bolsa Família program conducted by Coutinho (2010;

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<sup>7 7</sup> Mais detalhes sobre as iniciativas do deputado em relação ao PBF, ver em: <https://psol50.org.br/marcelo-freixo-e-urgente-a-derrubada-do-teto-de-gastos/> (Acesso em 30/03/2020).

<sup>8</sup> News of 2016 portrays this picture: “Ministro do Desenvolvimento Social prevê pente-fino no Bolsa Família”, O Globo, em 17/05/2016. (Agência G1, Globo 2016).

<sup>9</sup> In the field of Law and Development and its criticisms, see, for example: (Trubeck and Santos 2006, Trubeck and Shapiro 2012, Ban 2012, Bresser-Pereira 2009)

2012; 2013; 2014), Licio (2011; 2012), Annenberg (2014), among others, are examples of this subfield. The authors mainly observe how institutional mechanisms are designed to consolidate the objectives of concrete public policy and create means of participation and democratization of its management. What they do not observe, however, due to the adopted focus, is that public policies are the materialization of political choices, which reflect specific interests, namely, they offer an agenda for the agency of the State. For that reason, even when making in-depth analyses on the dynamics and limits of the outlined measures, they do not discuss the context and political projects that determine a certain design of the concrete action of the State.

Therefore, in order to identify the relations of power, interests and actors that shape the public policy it is necessary to raise other questions. It is crucial to observe the legal phenomenon inside the concrete policy with different lenses, which are directed to the purposes and relations of power materialized in a concrete praxis. In this sense, one had to look at the context in which a determined model is framed, which existing alternatives were left aside, and even which actors are responsible for the decision-making: finally, identify the strategies used to implement and support a policy model (VESTENA 2017, p. 59).

This article aims at demonstrating the theoretical premises and methodological paths that sustain a historical-materialist political analysis. It is argued that such analytical perspective can be productive for the observation of concrete public policies and to promote a critical assessment about their results in a broader political context. From this point of view, the role of law can be discussed and questioned as part of a set of resources and power strategies used for a specific political project. In this sense, the legal form is analyzed in relation to a political context of projects of hegemony. For that matter, a specific debate in the broad tradition of the materialist theory of the State and the interpretations of the concept of hegemony is reconstituted, drawing upon works of Poulantzas (2000; 1969), Jessop (1990; 2006; 2009), and Hirsch (2005), which are reinterpreted from the perspective of the Research Group “State Project Europe” (cf.: BUCKEL 2007; BUCKEL ET AL. 2014; FORSCHUNGSGRUPPE STAATSPROJEKT EUROPA ET AL. 2014; KANNANKULAM E GEORGI 2014). The investigative steps are organized as follows: context analysis, actors’ analysis (and their strategies) and process analysis.<sup>10</sup> This methodology was applied in a specific research on the Bolsa Família program, which was conducted in order to analyse its

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<sup>10</sup> This article adopts the historic-materialist political analysis framework developed by the research group “State Project Europe” (Forschungsgruppe Staatsprojekt Europa, FGSE). In this article, the initials HMPA, reflecting

developments over the years of 2003 to 2015. In short, the main objective of this article is to discuss the methodology of historical-materialist approach to public policies and the analytical paths it offers. Thus, the results of the concrete research on the program will not be brought in detail, but they will be referred in an exemplary manner in order to illustrate this methodological approach.

## 2. Theoretical foundations of historical-materialist political analysis

The tradition of materialist interpretations has pointed out, at least since the 1970s, the need for a non-homogeneous approach to the State. Only through a more complex view of this object it would be possible to comprehend how class struggle and conflict taking place in all social spheres materialize within institutions (BUCKEL ET AL. 2014: 22; POULANTZAS 2000). Within this field, studies based on the work of Antonio Gramsci offered an important turning point to materialist thought insofar as the questioning of traditional concepts of base and superstructure, civil society and intellectuals, ultimately reconfigured the very idea of State (GRAMSCI 2014a, Vol. I: 41–56).<sup>11</sup> Drawing upon the reflections elaborated on the *Prison Notebooks* these studies pose a key question to the theoretical and practical discussion of historical materialism: on which basis is forged the necessary stability to govern, considering the conflictive contexture of society?

As Opratko demonstrates (2014: 15), the Gramscian concept of hegemony plays an essential analytic role to answer that problem.<sup>12</sup> Gramsci observed the Italian reality in a context of acute inequality for European standards. The country was divided between the Northern region, in process of industrialization accelerated by the development of the

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the original term in German “historisch-materialistische Politikanalyse”, will be adopted in reference to that framework. Cf.: (Referência ocultada, blind review)

<sup>11</sup> See also *Prison Notebooks*, Notebook 6, §81, 88, 138, Notebook 7, §1683, Notebook 8, §179, 185, Notebook 13, §7, 11, 14, Notebook 14, §13, Notebook 15, §10, and 18 on expanded State and notebook 12 12, §1-3 on the concept of intellectuals. The indicated paragraphs refer to the original text of the author in the critical edition organized by Valentino Gerratana in Italian. In the Portuguese version, they can be found specifically by theme. On the Brazilian debate about Gramsci, Cf.: (C. N. Coutinho 1979; 2011b; 2011a; Fontes 2006; Meneses 2013; Nogueira 2013).

<sup>12</sup> The problem of the ability to govern and the investigation on the contexture of the State were approached directly in the work of Marx, but are not the objective of a finished political theory. According to Opratko, two interpretative lines of the concept of hegemony originated from the works of Marx. The first is based on the idea of “hegemony as a result of manipulation strategies of dominant classes”. The second is linked to the fetishist character of commodities, that is, the capitalist model of production and its ideology. Gramsci, in the interpretation of the author, follows a different conceptual and political strategy. He discusses hegemony from the problem of consensus of the subordinate classes in relation to the political project of the dominant classes (Opratko 2014: 30).

automobile industry, and a mostly agricultural South, with a predominantly rural population.<sup>13</sup> The concept of hegemony is developed in the *Prison Notebooks* in order to incorporate both domination and consensus. Hegemony is, on one hand, achieved by domination (almost analogous to coercion), which includes the potential or actual use of violence. On the other hand, it is achieved by intellectual and moral leadership, which represents a moral-cultural dimension of consensus (GRAMSCI 2014b, Vol. II: 763–764; Opratko 2014: 35).<sup>14</sup> From this perspective, Gramsci (2014b) argues that the struggle for hegemony must take place beyond the spaces of production; it should consider spiritual, cultural and intellectual dimensions in order to incorporate the interests of civil society, the location of disputes and the organization of hegemony.

The Gramscian concept of hegemony is based on an interpretation of the expanded State composed of the political society (State agents *stricto sensu*) and civil society. In this regard, the State is nothing more than the specific form of political domination existent in modern capitalism, which is not primarily executed by coercion and violence, but mainly by leaderships and consensus organization. This consensus does not mean in any way unanimous agreement. It is, oppositely, constantly obtained through institutions, apparatuses and social organizations that act for the production of hegemony as part of the expanded State (OPRATKO 2014: 38).

The Gramscian theory of hegemony and the conceptual framework developed by the author to comprehend the State in its expanded form are incorporated to the Marxist-based critical theory debates in many different aspects. These interpretations of the State criticize a monocratic view through which power would be transferred in a homogeneous way from the top to the base of society. For the analytic model here discussed, the premise is that in the bourgeois society, approval and consensus related to the existing order cannot be simply imposed through repressive measures of a superior authority. They increasingly need the hegemony obtained through the consensus of civil society (FGSE ET AL. 2014: 10).

This theoretical development allows the perception of the State not only as an institution of control *stricto sensu*, but also as a “dialectic relation between cohesion and consensus” characterized by hegemony (OBERNDORFER E CACERES 2013: 455). Theories designed based on this interpretation of hegemony aim to overcome materialist perceptions, which perceive the State as a unit, solely centered around forms of control

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<sup>13</sup> This debate was marked by the concept of “southern question” and spawns intense discussions in the fields of history, political science and sociology Cf. i. e.: (O’Hanlon 1988; Pereira 2009).

<sup>14</sup> On the debate about “hegemony protected by the armor of coercion”, cf.: (Buckel e Fischer-Lescano 2007).

(BUCKEL ET AL. 2014: 25). In order to develop an alternative approach, other categories from materialist and post structuralist traditions can also be used to address matters not usually considered, such as the role of subjectivity, of relations of gender and race dominations, and coloniality. In order to develop the methodology of political historical-materialist analysis – HMPA, in the original abbreviation, more four steps are added: the question of governmentality and micropolitics in everyday practice (a), the intersectionality and transnationality of forms of domination (b), the work of the regulation theory with the concepts of form, especially the legal form and political form (c), and finally the analysis of the intellectuals and universal systems that forge State apparatuses as material relations of forces (d).

The debate about hegemony includes the interpretation of *governmentality and the analysis of the micropolitics of daily practice (a)*.<sup>15</sup> Thus, the State is observed as a technology of power that assembles the technique of behavioral management and its “normalization”, which represents the “true art of leadership, direction, conduction, orientation, of how to manipulate men by the hands” (BUCKEL ET AL. 2014: 25–26). Since the analysis of governmentality is also an analysis of forms of domination, the latter unveils how such forms materialize in subjective relations, individual behaviors, micropolitical spheres of power, and consequently constitute a form of life management managed by institutions (BUCKEL ET AL. 2014: 27). The formation of subjectivities as a result of biopolitical processes can be analyzed in distinct dimensions. The consideration of the subjective dimension, highlighted by the dynamics of governmentality inside the concrete policy and its institutional modeling, allows the disclosure of domination relations less apparent than those visible from a merely economic point of view or by regarding institutionalism from a homogeneous idea of State.

To this perspective is added the interpretation of *intersectionality and transnationality of forms of domination (b)*. In order to develop a materialist historical analysis, it is necessary to observe the material elements and their role on the reproduction of capitalism, but not only. Relations of domination assume a far wider character than the struggle between classes. Domination, as demonstrated by post-colonial studies throughout the years, is related to domination of race, ethnic groups, language, sexual division of gender, that is, transversal dimensions that are added to the economic domination of one class over the other (BUCKEL ET AL. 2014: 26). In regard to the transnational character of domination,



traditional analysis of political science normally do not consider the asymmetries of power originated in the distinction between the North and Global South and the maintenance of symbolic colonization dynamics within institutions (BUCKEL ET AL. 2014: 28).

An analytical gain HMPA can offer is, therefore, its approach on the investigation of local public policies from the idea of transnationalization and the different dimensions that social phenomena assume considering they are situated as realities intertwined in global capitalism. In this sense, to analyze concrete public policies of the State also means to analyze, in a complex way, how power relations materialize in local context. To analyze the phenomena of a certain locality means to observe them under the perspective that their characteristics are influenced and influence other local phenomena, and this dynamics is intertwined in the global sphere.<sup>16</sup> Political historical-materialist analysis, as a method that takes these problems seriously, offers the possibility of highlighting different political strategies at stake in different contexts. Moreover, it points out how one can think about particularities and similarities in the directing of specific political strategies in distinct geographic dimensions.

A third central dimension of the political historical-materialist analysis lies in the categories originated from *the work of the regulation theory on the concepts of form, especially the legal form and political form (c)*. As aforementioned, a political project is elaborated and disseminates inside institutions, State apparatuses and also in civil society through forms of subjectivation and reproduction in micro-practices of daily life, which offers a broader meaning to the term “regulation” (BUCKEL ET AL. 2014: 27). Based on the notion of expanded State, the theory of regulation argues that the State is not a mere place of power relations among many others. Over the State, “falls a constant statization of these power relations” (BUCKEL ET AL. 2014: 27). To understand how different relations of domination materialize and assume a certain degree of autonomy in capitalist society, the theory of regulation uses the concept of *forms*. The *value form*, *political form* and *legal form* materialize relations of force and permanent antagonisms in society. These are forms “behind the backs” of subjects, according to the famous expression of Karl Marx from *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon* (Marx 2011). Such forms – value, law and political form – are reified practices, that assume “the reciprocal behavior of individuals in society regardless from their conscious desires and action”, conducting thus their perceptions, desires and

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<sup>15</sup> Foucault originally establishes the concept of governmentality in *Security, Territory and Population*, developed in the seminars of years 1977-1978 in Collège de France. Cf.: (Foucault 2008).

<sup>16</sup> On the concept of “entangled modernities”, cf.: (Randeria 2007).

interests, producing a social context in its almost “concealed” manner (BUCKEL ET AL. 2014: 27–28).

Marxist theory explains that, the value form occurs through the production of commodities mediated by exchange, and the legal form, through constitutions, contracts and court rulings. Political form, on the other hand, is separated from society and placed as its external body, permanently opposed to society in general, as a “segregated society” (BUCKEL ET AL. 2014: 28). In that sense, for Buckel and others, traditional political theories naturalize social actors, without questioning how they are constantly forged from material relations, to which are added relations of class, gender and race (BUCKEL ET AL. 2014: 29).

Hence, taking the works of Poulantzas, the proposition is to consider the State as a social relation, as the “material condensation of relations of social forces”, not as an entity in substance, but as a contradictory and fragmented arrangement of State apparatuses (BUCKEL ET AL. 2014: 29). Each of these apparatuses presents a singular specific dynamics, which, according to the theory of regulation, is explained through different forms – in this case, specifically, political and legal forms. The comprehension of the State in a fragmentary fashion allows the understanding of how a set of strategies, operated by actors within different apparatuses, acts in order to maintain the structures of capitalism in its system of contradictory reproduction. An approach centered solely on institutions – unitary State, law without political analysis, pure and simple observation of rules and means of problem-solving – does not help to make the relations of domination that exist in each of the apparatuses visible and, likewise, pretend the identification of their origins and relations of social forces.

Finally, another central dimension of historical-materialist analysis is to observe the role of *intellectuals and universal systems that forge State apparatuses as material relations of forces (d)*. In order to be dominant, a political class must be able to universalize its own interests so that its particular position is accepted and consequently imposed on ideas and institutions of bourgeois society. That also implies the consideration of opposite interests from subordinate groups, which makes it crucial to translate particular interests into a morality, political ethics, set of opinions, that is, a worldview or common sense, with potential to expand through the societal patchwork (BUCKEL 2013: 18). The concept of expanded State, reformulated by Gramsci, encompasses political and civil society in the analysis of relations of force that are engaged in order to define the constellation of different processes and struggles of society. The leadership of a given political project striving for

hegemony is not, therefore, only based on force: it presupposes the construction of a legitimation discourse, namely, a moral, political and intellectual leadership (BUCKEL ET AL. 2014: 31; BUCKEL E FISCHER-LESCANO 2009). The protagonists of the dissemination of such discourses are the so-called intellectuals, according to the definition of Gramsci (2014c, Vol. III: 1513–1551). As stated by Buckel, they are responsible for organizing the “relationship between knowledge and truth”, which is interwoven in certain codes of the hegemonic worldview (BUCKEL 2013: 18).

In this context, legal and political processes would be those with great potential to universally formalize the interests of groups of intellectuals (BUCKEL ET AL. 2014: 32). In this sense, institutions, the central object of materialist theory of the State, are also spaces of mediation of the most abstract social forms, such as value form, legal form and political form. They promote a path of mediation between these forms and concrete historical disputes, which, according to Georgi and Kannankulam (2014: 61), produces a complex context of conciliation. In order to observe how institutional changes occur, it is necessary to analyze the relations of force in its specific material condensations, that is, how they are materialized in political strategies and result in concrete political models.

In this regard, while discussing the theoretical premises presented above for the analysis of a specific social policy, the objective is to evaluate how a social policy condenses certain material relations of social forces; namely, how it is influenced by strategies at stake and the form it assumes based on the political dynamics in which it is inserted. A concept of State as the materialization of relations of force leads to a dialectic interpretation between structure and action, or, in an equivalent way, between structure and conjuncture, which “allows to differentiate local and temporal variations of the capitalist system from different forces, struggle cycles and strategies” (BUCKEL ET AL. 2014: 33). In order to understand how particular institutional configurations are forged, it is necessary to systematize and gather elements that characterize the specific material condensations of existing institutions of the integral State, that is, political-State institutions and civil society. Therefore, the question becomes how to make such concrete inputs operational in a methodology of analysis that allows the identification of concrete disputes, relations of forces and processes of institutional change (KANNANKULAM e GEORGI 2014: 62–63). This question stimulated the effort of researchers from the FGSE group towards the systematization of a set of steps for political historical-materialist analysis, based on empirical research for an observation of both the elements of the local structural economic, historical and cultural conjuncture and the

discourses and strategies adopted by actors with decision-making power, public policy makers or political groups resistant to the newly produced institutional configurations (BUCKEL ET AL. 2014: 37). The concept that summarizes the methodology is the idea of “project of hegemony”, meaning the “concatenation of multiple different tactics and strategies, by which a myriad of actors seek to transform their particular interests in general interests, to become hegemonic” (BUCKEL 2013: 19). The strategies are not exclusive to a single group. On the contrary, many can mean alliances and approximations guided by similar rationalities towards a given project (BUCKEL 2013: 19).

The category of “project of hegemony” aims to reduce social complexity and make the diversity of actors and social dynamics that entwine intelligible, shaping a specific rationality materialized in political strategies, social behaviors and institutional models. However, in spite of conferring the due importance to each of these strategies and to the individual power of each relevant actor in the relation of power, one shall remark that, it consists in a reduction of complexity. Actors are observed from contexts, strategic practices or even through interpretative constructions, causal links and plausible arguments. These paths of research seek to reveal the strategies of social actors in a broad sense, dismissing interpretations that consider the existence of a central political coordination or a homogeneous axis of power (BUCKEL 2013: 19).

In this sense, the investigation of strategies, actors, context and mobilized resources allows the verification of how materialized relations of force change and marshal new strategies seeking hegemony. Hence, it becomes possible to evaluate, regardless of projects, how particular policies achieve hegemony. The relation between project and policy amalgamates when the latter have the capacity to aggregate strategies centered on distinct projects and yet do not conform the conflict as a whole. When certain policies achieve hegemony, they can act for the strengthening of a project of hegemony, since they weaken the capacity of articulation of alternative or counter hegemonic projects, or act as a force of resistance. Therefore, struggle strategies aiming at striving against a specific project, with or without the capacity of altering power positions materialized in a particular context, should also be analyzed (BUCKEL 2013: 21).<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Not all analyzed strategies have a systematic character or can be observed clearly at the level of the materiality of institutions and political decision or through the discourse of easily identifiable relevant actors. Counter hegemonic strategies are mostly diffuse, fragmented, or even in internal disputes which, although concentrating similar objectives and strategies do not result in the formation of compromises and units for common practices in the struggle for hegemony (Buckel 2013: 21).

The political historical-materialist methodology of analysis offers tools to the study of concrete public policies to reinterpret a wide set of approaches, social and economic data, primers, speeches, enacted legislation, that is, a whole set of data that gathers the discursive manifestation of different strategies in practice. The practical application of this methodology can be developed in three complementary steps, which are shortly presented below: *context analysis, actor analysis and process analysis*.

### **3. Context analysis**

The first step of the HMPA aims to rebuild the historical context and its dynamics in relation to the specific researched conflict. It is about identifying each element of a historical situation, in which different social forces collide producing different reactions between political actors. The context, however, does not determine definitively the strategies of different groups in relation to the conflict at hand. It is co-determinant and structuring and, for that reason, it is in permanent motion or contingency, since it is also influenced by the different strategies at stake (BUCKEL ET AL. 2014: 54). Once the historical and structural layers of the conflict are exposed, it becomes possible to identify which elements combine to produce the investigated dynamics of relations of forces.

The analysis of the context assumes a different form depending on the object and interests of each work. It may acquire, for instance, a character geared more to the economic and institutional context and less to the historical aspect of the object. On the other hand, it may present historical milestones and relevant transformations in detail, outlined by institutional aspects that should be highlighted in the investigation (BUCKEL ET AL. 2014: 55). In brief, context analysis is the in-depth observation of the historical dynamics around the phenomenon, its conflicts, structural characteristics, social forces and political actors. A historical reconstruction of the elements at stake that are part of the considered factors for the elaboration of the public policy is implied.

### **4. Actor analysis**

The actor analysis aims to identify the conflicting strategies in a given situation or problem. It analyses the subjects involved in a given dispute and seeks to systematize their positions in the conflict. The widest objective is to reduce the complexity of the social context, identifying in the social relations materialized in the context, who are the actors

involved and how they implement different strategies, compromises and alliances (BUCKEL ET AL. 2014: 55). For operationalization purposes, the actor analysis can be subdivided into the analysis of strategies, grouping and analysis of projects of hegemony and analysis of relations of force. These dimensions seek to cover the various elements that form the constellation of a concrete social policy in light of a materialist analysis of the State.

A paramount challenge in actor analysis, therefore, consists in the identification of the multiple characteristics of strategies used by various actors, such as classes, in a broader sense, but also unions, associations, political groups, social movements and even political parties and their fractions. Even though each of these social groups are formed by a myriad of different opinions and even internal fractions – some more centralized, others less; some democratically defined, others not – it must be investigated which priority discourses emerge in relation to the proposed research problem and how a specific strategy ends up being conducted before a conflict. Thus, it is possible to establish theses about how a specific constellation of social actors gather, ally, engage in conflict with each other or form, ultimately, alliances in the struggle for hegemony (BUCKEL ET AL. 2014: 55).

A fundamental step is the analysis of the strategies conducted within the framework of the concrete social question. The importance of outlining the strategies consists in the possibility of reconstructing the rationality behind the actions of agents in relation to the posed conflict. As pointed out by the researchers of FGSE, “the actor analysis starts with the identification of the opposite strategies, from which social forces recursively reacted to the historical situation approached in the analysis of context, that is, the problems and essential questions of the conflict” (BUCKEL ET AL. 2014: 56). Strategies, therefore, can be identified through the way actors describe the problem at hand and the solutions they offer for their resolution (BUCKEL ET AL. 2014: 56). In this sense, the analysis of the strategies allows to identify how different movements react or ally to achieve a certain decision that defines alterations or important steps in the conduction of the concrete policy. This allows the inference of whether they possess an individual or particular strategy, whether they allied to other groups in order to achieve their objectives or even if the subject was, according to their interests, important enough so that they would get politically mobilized.

The following phases of actor analysis are those of aggregation and analysis of projects of hegemony. In both steps, strategies are analyzed not only based on the individuality and characteristics of each protagonist actor of a project, but as an alliance of strategies which similar objectives characterize a way of dealing with the issue laid out and

materialize a social position in the conflict. In this sense, one can evaluate how those strategies are complementary in the struggle for hegemony (BUCKEL ET AL. 2014: 56). Finally, based on the analysis of the relations of force, the “relative positions of projects of hegemony in relations of force within the investigated conflict” are evaluated (BUCKEL ET AL. 2014: 57). A mechanism to identify prominent strategies and central actors is to verify which resources of power each of them mobilize. By resources one can understand not only those of economic nature, but also organizational (the capacity and degree of organization of the actors, their “inventiveness”, creativity, innovation), discursive (knowledge, ability to invoke publically recognized discourses or to reach a wide audience), social and political (capacity of aggregation, network organization or access to State institutions), systemic (ability to make relevant decisions for the system, or convincingly influence relevant processes, having capacity to pressure, threat) and, finally, structural resources (capacity to obtain privileges through natural selectivity) (BUCKEL 2013: 20–21).

Even if apparently simple when explained didactically, the analysis of relations of force always implies structural difficulties. As the researchers of FGSE alert, “the position in a relation or forces is always relational, dependent and referent to other forces and to the concrete conflict, just as to relations between different actors and projects of hegemony” (BUCKEL ET AL. 2014: 57). From the materialist viewpoint, it is fairly complex to produce systematical research based on the concept of relations of force. Nonetheless, from the analysis of how different actors mobilize power resources, it is possible to evaluate and position them relationally. Thus, the “challenge of the analysis consists, from a given context, in specifying how these differences are manifested and which mechanisms and dynamics led certain actors to possess a stronger position in the relation of forces while others are marginalized” (BUCKEL ET AL. 2014: 58).

In short, the actor analysis allows the identification of strategies adopted by different groups, what, on its turn, exposes political relations in their heterogeneity. When listing the actors involved in the political phenomenon one diminishes the complexity of the matter and identifies which political compromises are established in the face of different interests. In order to analyze the actors, it is necessary to identify the opposing strategies, that is, how they dispute in a given historical reality. Their knowledge and discourses are reconstructed to analyze the political rationality they forge. These strategies must be summed up in order to highlight which complementary strategies are used to approximate or aggravate the conflict between diverging groups. Then, finally, it is possible to evaluate the positions occupied by

different groups of actors within the relation of forces or conflict. The research strategy developed throughout this article is the analysis of the resources of power of each group, for instance, how they bind up to the State apparatuses or create a determinate regulatory model for the public policy.

### **5. Processes analysis**

The third and final step of HMPA is the processes analysis. This step consists in the combination of the previous two in order to “reconstruct the researched conflict in its dynamics”. It is possible to reconstruct the researched object in its different phases and political milestones, in addition to highlighting which turning points or political decisions had greater impact on its paths and implementation model. Thus, some elements should be especially considered, such as the actions, practices and strategic-recursive tactics of the protagonists of the conflict, the meaning and specific articulation of structural conditions based on their relation with the context (BUCKEL ET AL. 2014: 58). As the researchers of FGSE point out, depending on the focus of the conducted research and the specific interests, whether social, political or law oriented, the processes analysis must assume distinct forms. The focus of analysis and the very definition of the problem may be directed towards specific actors and their conflicting political projects and solutions, or even towards the consolidation of the relations of force in the context of institutions, laws and State apparatuses (BUCKEL ET AL. 2014: 58).

### **6. Possible fields of application for HMPA: the analysis of the bolsa família program in Brazil**

So far, the article has explained the theoretical bases and methodological paths of a historical-materialistic political analysis. This approach allows a critical and accurate analysis of the political interests, agenda-definition process and the mobilized resources in the elaboration and implementation of a public policy. Throughout the steps of the HMPA, it was indicated how this methodology was used for a research on the process of institutionalization of the Bolsa Família program over the period of 2003 to 2015.<sup>18</sup> In this process, the continuous improvement and flexibility of legal regulation was a fundamental resource used by actors with decision-making power for the execution of the main political strategies of the

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<sup>18</sup> Even if this work sums up to this period, it is important to mention that the Bolsa Família program is still the social policy emblem of the current government, as was that of the government of Michael Temer between 2016 and 2018.



program: unification, centralization, agreement between federative agents and massive coverage. The coordination of these strategies through flexible regulation was, among other elements of the context, responsible for the hegemony of the Bolsa Família program within Brazilian social policies in the last few years. The hegemony of this policy is based on the implementation of a paradigm of welfare focused on the access to social services through the market and not on the acquisition of universal rights (VESTENA, 2017). This political project confirmed a financial-oriented model of social policy in the country, meeting the precepts of the hegemonic model of neoliberal accumulation marked by financialization and privatization (LAVINAS 2017).

The strategies used by the managers and policy-makers of the program and by the intellectuals who discursively legitimated the program in the public sphere resulted in the design of a public policy capable of aggregating distinct interests which, despite the societal dissent and divergent opinions, formed a foundation for continuity of the program – regardless and precisely because of the different interests the program assembles. On the one hand, the program assists the beneficiary population by providing a minimum income, which is fundamental in the face of extreme poverty. And this, the BFP achieves social legitimacy. On the other hand, the limitation due to conditionalities and restrictions arising from sanctions foreseen in the program reflects exactly the structural problems of this type of social assistance (VESTENA 2017, p. 211).

The historical-materialistic analysis of public policies questions, in this regard, which conflicts gave rise to this specific political configuration. The strategies featured by political actors that participated in the decision-making process leading to the implementation of the BFP – segments of the Worker's Party, public servants and policy-makers, NGOs, international agencies and academic or civil society experts – are directed towards the definition of an institutional design able to sustain the necessary consensus within the government and before society in order to guarantee its consolidation and maintenance. This interpretation can be exemplified through the reconstruction of the alternatives that were placed as options for social assistance in 2003. At stake was the possibility of expanding the Zero Hunger program with guaranteed participation by social movement and a participatory process accompanied by a food sovereignty agenda (BELIK 2003; 2010; TAKAGI 2006). In addition, the proposal of a universal basic income for citizenship, which had been historically sustained by Eduardo Suplicy within the PT itself (SUPLICY 2006; SUPLICY AND BUARQUE 1997; SUPLICY 2007), was also on the agenda. The inspiration for

implementing a conditional cash transfer programme came, however, from other international projects (World Bank) and from local experiences of municipal governments in the State of São Paulo (MONNERAT ET AL. 2007). These policies, which were mainly carried out with conditionalities linked to education, had shown positive results in the fight against poverty. Besides it they also were able to bring administrative advantages concerning payment management, registering and public accountability of the measures (VESTENA 2017, p. 180).

Throughout 2003 and 2004, the process of implementation of the Bolsa Família was accompanied by a weakening of Zero Hunger - which was also the target of political criticism in the period (“Zero Hunger was broader and emancipatory than the Bolsa Família, criticizes Frei Betto”, Instituto Humanitas 2008). The agenda for basic income of universal citizenship was though formally incorporated into the Brazilian legal system (Law N. 10.835 of January 8, 2004), but it has never really had concrete implementation. My aim is not to reproduce the critical jargon that the BFP would be a mere neoliberal policy because it contains traces of the Latin American conditional cash transfer policies coming from the policy papers of international agencies (de la Briere and Lindert 2005). On the contrary, the data showing the broad inclusion of beneficiaries and integration of the BFP policies with other social measures demonstrate the commitment of public managers to follow their own path of democratization and expansion of the scope of the program (LICIO, MESQUITA, AND CURRALERO 2011; BICHIR 2011). Nevertheless, from a historical approach, it is possible to identify that some of its characteristics are susceptible to criticism, such as, for example, the profile of conditional cash transfers, the priority of benefit for women and the consequent reproduction of traditional gender roles (BLOFIELD AND FRANZONI 2014; COSTA ET AL. 2012), the influence of technical studies from international agencies on the formulation of the programme and its conditional focused character (SAAD-FILHO 2015).

Taking the model of historical-materialist political analysis, the analytical framework used to reinterpret the Bolsa Família program, one can therefore understand which projects of hegemony are in dispute for conceptions of the State. The HMPA consists of an approach that goes beyond the idea of overcoming problems, common in more managerial analyses of public policies in general. Research on the efficiency and on the details of policy implementation are fundamental (for example: AMARAL AND MONTEIRO 2013; NERI, VAZ, AND SOUZA 2013), but in some cases this type of studies naturalize the political aims of the analyzed measure. This kind of reading ends up becoming technocratic and empties the democratic debate on what the purposes should be pursued by the state and what are the

interests of the groups with decision-making power that shape the *political* direction of public policy.

Thus, the application of the HMPA for the analysis of the Bolsa Família program had the main objective of describing the actors, interests and strategies that form the constellation of relation of forces implied in the process of the political-legal institutionalization of the program. It also makes it possible to highlight the gains of an integrated analysis of the process of political mobilisation and its legal regulation, which are fundamental, both to the management of the programme and to its institutionalisation. In order to clarify the context, actors and processes leading to the hegemony of the Bolsa Família program, the research was conducted based on official documents and data produced by research and government agencies and collected in secondary literature review. Moreover interviews were conducted with the administrators of MDS<sup>19</sup>, MDA<sup>20</sup> and the MDS Ombudsman, that is, with public servants directly involved in the management of the program (These data are detailed in: Vestena 2017, p. 117ff).

The first step was the analysis of the regional context of expansion of conditional cash transfer policies in Latin America. Recent CEPAL studies on the social indicators in Latin America indicate that the positive results achieved in the first part of the 2000s presented a tendency of deceleration in the following years, despite the inclusive impact of this period (CEPAL 2015; 2016). To address these question, there are, as indicated by Lavinas (2013), two social assistance paradigms in the region: one focused on the universalization of social rights, and another focused on the access to basic services through the control of conditionalities and based on the mediation of the market. The expansion of conditional cash transfer programs in the region, the Brazilian case being an example of this process, is an implication of this process across the subcontinent (YAZBEK 2004).

Concerning the Brazilian context it is also necessary to analyse the history of social policies between the first employment-related measures of the 1930s and the social assistance model adopted after the enactment of the 1988 Constitution and in contemporary governments. The reconstitution of significant aspects starts with the PSDB<sup>21</sup> government, together with its transition at the end of the 1990s and beginning of the 2000s to the Workers' Party administration. This period was characterized by a concept of social assistance focused on the responsibility of civil society, which acted in a diffuse and philanthropical way

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<sup>19</sup> Ministério do Desenvolvimento Social (Ministry of Social Development).

<sup>20</sup> Ministério do Desenvolvimento Agrário (Ministry of Rural Development).

<sup>21</sup> Partido da Social Democracia Brasileira (Brazilian Social Democracy Party).

alongside companies – with social corporate responsibility –, accompanied by focal and low impact actions by the federal administration (CF. FAGNANI 2005). Furthermore, the first federal conditional cash transfer policy of Brazil, the Bolsa Escola program, was implemented during the second term of office of Fernando Henrique Cardoso in 2001, in a context of privatizations and control of the expenses of the State. The beginning of the Worker's Party administrations in 2003 is followed by the expectation and, afterwards, the effective adoption of a broader social assistance program based on the will of the active protagonisms of the State to deal with more urgent social problems related to poverty and hunger (Cf. FAGNANI 2011; CAMPELLO E NERI 2013; CAMPELLO, FALCÃO, E COSTA 2014).

Finally, the specific implementation and institutionalization process of Bolsa Família was reconstructed from the internal dispute for the definition of the agenda of the program, in which actors, interests and strategies that influenced its modeling become clear. Different interests influenced its final model, which crystallizes as a conditional cash transfer policy with a scope of mass beneficiary coverage (VESTENA 2017; CURRALERO 2012). In addition, the regulatory mechanisms inserted in the institutes that configure the program can be understood as resources mobilized by its managers to maintain a flexible structure, which can always be adapted to meet the purposes, expansion projects and reformulations brought by managers and actors from the political party field (CF. ANNENBERG 2014; VESTENA 2017).

In a nutshell, from a historical-materialistic analysis it is possible to verify that the centrality of the Bolsa Família Program in the scope of Brazilian social policies takes place in the context of the expansion of conditional cash transfer programs in Latin America. The BF-program had its specific implementation in Brazil and reinforced the social assistance paradigm centered on the access to services through the market with low potential of decommodification of social relations. Additionally, another fundamental characteristic of the program, the priority of the management of the family income by women, consists in a vision that normalizes social gender roles, granting women the exclusive responsibility for social reproduction (CF. COSTA ET AL. 2012). This aspect is certainly worthy of debate, since the very implementation of the program occurs in different ways in different regions of Brazil. Pinzani and Rego, for example, highlight the possibility of empowering women in impoverished regions of northeast Brazil. Still, they recognize, on the other hand, the risk of the crystallization of gender roles that this policy may imply (CF. REGO AND PINZANI 2014).

An analysis of public policies through theoretical and methodological historical-materialistic paths helps to follow the evidences of political problems from the reconstruction of their structuring processes. As argued above, the proposal of this approach is to observe public policies and especially the role of regulation within them in order to understand power relations, interest groups and political strategies that ultimately determine the political content printed in public policy: this consists not in mere bureaucratic management. This methodology has been applied and reelaborated in the field of researches on the constitution of the apparatuses of the European State, for the analysis of concrete measures of migratory control in this region, in addition to initiatives for the interpretation of the current moments of the European crisis (cf.: BUCKEL 2013; KANNANKULAM E GEORGI 2014; BUCKEL ET AL. 2014; FORSCHUNGSGRUPPE STAATSPROJEKT EUROPA ET AL. 2014; WISSEL 2015). Furthermore, it was applied for the analysis of a concrete social policy, the Bolsa Família program, adding up to the effort of discussing the parameters of the research approach in a different context, which is the current Brazilian political context (VESTENA, 2016; 2017). This article presents the outline of the HMPA to the discussion and offers a path for the conduction of critical researches on the regulation of public policies, and especially for a critical appraisal of its role in a broader political project. In the Brazilian case, it is impossible not to refer to the paradoxical continuity of a neoliberal accumulation model carried out by a grass-roots founded workers party and its questionable alliances, which had an impact in the new turns of the Brazilian history nowadays.

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