



MONEY, AUTONOMY, CITIZENSHIP
EFFECTS OF THE *PROGRAMA BOLSA
FAMÍLIA* ON ITS PARTICIPANTS

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Alessandro Pinzani & Walquíria Domingues Leão Rêgo

How can we consider as truly free a man
who is hungry, who is living in severe poverty,
who has no job, who is humiliated
because he does not know
how to maintain and educate his children? This is no free man.
Sandro Pertini
(Former President of Italy)

This paper succinctly presents the main findings of a field research project carried out between 2006 and 2011 in some of the poorest regions of Brazil.¹ We investigated some effects of the social programme *Bolsa Família* (in the following: PBF) on the subjective experience and on the personality of its beneficiaries. We wanted to find out, particularly, whether it was possible to identify any moral or political transformations as a direct or indirect result of benefitting from the PBF.

In the following text we (I) briefly present the program and (II) explain why we chose to investigate subjective changes rather

¹ For a full report on the research see Walquíria Leão Rego and Alessandro Pinzani, *Vozes do Bolsa Família. Dinheiro, autonomia, cidadania* (São Paulo: UNESP, 2013).

than improvements in the material life of the beneficiaries.² We then briefly address methodology (III) before discussing and evaluating the interviews (IV). We go on to present the theoretical foundation of our beginning thesis (4.1 and 4.2), offer some general data (4.3) and proceed to what we call a “phenomenology of poverty in Brazil” (4.4). We are, of course, using “phenomenology” in its most basic meaning, that of the analysis of how poverty manifests itself, i.e. neither in reference to Phenomenology as a philosophical method nor to phenomenology in the Hegelian sense. In each section, interview excerpts appear to better illustrate our points. The names of the interviewed women have been changed, according to common practice.

I

The *Bolsa Família* programme

When Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva assumed the presidency of Brazil in 2002, one of the declared priorities of his government was fighting poverty, a problem that still affects a relevant percentage of the Brazilian population. Several programmes were launched or extended (Lula’s predecessor, Fernando Henrique Cardoso, had already taken steps in this direction), but none were as successful and as widely discussed (and criticised) as the PBF, which is, at present, the widest ranging social programme in Brazil (serving approximately 55 million out of a general

² Perhaps we should call them ‘fellows,’ since *Bolsa Família* means literally Family Grant. Why should not the recipients of a social grant be called ‘fellows’ in analogy with the recipients of academic or research grants?

population of 200 million people).³ Contrary to other programmes that distribute directly food to poor families (e.g. the *Banco de Alimentos*), the PBF is a CCT (Conditional Cash Transfer) programme, distributing money instead of goods.⁴

The Bolsa Família is neither a credit scheme nor a loan: its participants do not receive money in order to start an economic activity or their own business (even if they might use it for this purpose) and they do not have to repay anything. Its aim is not to increase economic inclusion nor economic development, even if it works in both directions. According to the Institute for Applied Economical Research (IPEA), every *real* paid by the government via PBF and spent by families in consumption contributes with 1.78 R\$ to the GDP (on the whole, the sum spent by the government with the PBF amounts to just at 0.48% of the

³ On the PBF and its economic impact on Brazilian society see among others: M. Medeiros, F. V. Soares, S. Soares, R. G. Osório, *Programas de transferência de renda no Brasil: Impactos sobre a desigualdade* (Brasília: IPEA, 2006); J. A. Castro, L. Modesto (orgs.), *Bolsa Família 2003-2010: Avanços e desafios* (Brasília: IPEA, 2010); M. O. S. Silva, V. F. Lima (orgs.), *Avaliando o Bolsa Família: unificação, focalização e impactos* (São Paulo: Cortez, 2011); G. Díaz Langou, “Validating one of the world’s largest conditional cash transfer programmes. A case study on how an impact evaluation of Brazil’s Bolsa Família Programme helped silence its critics and improve policy,” *Journal of Development Effectiveness*, 2013 (DOI: 10.1080/19439342.2013.861501).

⁴ In this sense, it would be incorrect to accuse it of being paternalistic or – to put it in Portuguese – of being merely *assistencialista* as opposed to *assistencial*: it is intended to aid in emergency situations (extreme poverty), even if such a situation might seem to be quite stable and likely to be long-term. In this context, we will not take up the criticism that the PBF runs the risk of simply shifting the kind of dependency from depending on private charity or on the interested help of the local elites (the so-called *coroneis*) towards depending on State assistance (which some consider to be a form of public “charity”). An analysis of this question would lead to a discussion of the nature of social policies in general, which is beyond the scope of this paper.

Brazilian GDP).⁵ It is a program of civic inclusion: it aims to help citizens face the most basic necessities and sometimes just to survive. Its goal is to create *citizenship*, not to merely train the entrepreneurial spirit.

At present, the allowance is granted to individuals or families (defined widely as a unit formed by one or two parents and their children, by one or two grandparents and their grandchildren, by an aunt or an uncle and her or his nephews etc.) whose per capita income is equal to or less than R\$ 77 (approximately US\$ 30 or EUR 26)⁶ per month. Brazilian average income per month in 2011 was R\$ 783 (US\$ 303 or EUR 267), whilst the minimum wage in the same year was R\$ 678 (US\$ 263 or EUR 231), increasing to R\$ 724 (US\$ 280 or EUR 247) in 2014. The PBF is a CCT program because the participants have to meet two conditions in order not to lose the allowance: if there are children in the family, they have to go regularly to school and to get regular vaccinations⁷.

As of January 2015 the basic allowance amount to R\$ 77. For school age children under fifteen there is a per capita

⁵ Camilla Veras Motta, “Valor Econômico (SP): Cada R\$ 1 gasto com o Bolsa Família adiciona R\$ 1,78 ao PIB, calcula IPEA,” accessed January 28th, 2015, www.ipea.gov.br/portal/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=20244&Itemid=75.

⁶ The exchange rates of the Brazilian Real x US Dollar and Real x Euro will be quoted herein based on the official exchange rates of the Brazilian Central Bank as of January 2015 (1 US\$ = 2.58 Brazilian *reais*, 1 EUR = 2.93 Brazilian *reais*).

⁷ Of course, participants would lose the allowance also in case their income rise above the aforementioned limits. In the ten years since the introduction of the PBF around 1,700,000 families left the program for this reason (Josie Jeronimo, “Eu sai do Bolsa Família,” *IstoÉ*. Accessed January 28th 2015. http://www.istoec.com.br/reportagens/333863_EU+SAI+DO+BOLSA+FAMILIA+).

“variable” allowance of R\$ 35 (US\$ 13.5 or EUR 12) for a maximum of five children. For teenagers under nineteen, there is a per capita “variable” allowance of R\$ 42 (US\$ 16.3 or EUR 14.3) for a maximum of two young people. In any case, a family will not receive more than five “variable” allowances. Therefore, the maximum allowance for a family with three children under fifteen years and two teenagers under nineteen years is R\$ 266 (US\$ 103 or EUR 90.6). There are also special allowances for pregnant women and for babies under six months, but they are granted for a limited amount of time, due to their very nature. When we carried out the interviews the allowance was significantly lower and the maximum number of children was just three.

II

Listening to the poor

We tried to listen to the voice of people who find themselves in the worst social position, since they are extremely poor and live in particularly disadvantaged regions which are historically among the most neglected by the Brazilian state. They can be considered as second-rate citizens, either because they do not receive any basic public services (such as health care, public transport, cultural events etc.) or have difficulty in accessing such services when offered. For example, schools may be very far from people’s homes and children may have to walk for hours to reach them, or the services are of very poor quality mostly owing to a lack of infrastructure and adequate training of the officials and personnel. This lack of interest on the part of public authorities on every level facilitates social atomism and the loss of political interest and participation. These people become secluded from

the rest of society and live in an environment truly incapable of stimulating their human development.

This kind of social exclusion can scarcely be identified by statistics and quantitative research. This is the main reason why we decided to investigate the effects of the PBF (more generally of CCT programs) on the *subjective experience* of its beneficiaries and to do so by means of *qualitative* research based on extended interviews. In order to better grasp such effects we often interviewed the same people with a time gap of one or two years, in order to try to capture features that are not easily accessible by other research methods (whose validity we do not question, of course). This is not tantamount to claiming that material or economic changes in the lives of the participants are not important or not as relevant as the “internal” or subjective changes we wanted to detect. On the contrary, the latter would be unthinkable without the former. It is *because* of the material changes in their economic situation that the participants experienced changes in their subjectivity, in their self-perceptions and in their self-esteem.

For many years, the State has been totally neglectful of the need to guarantee the rights of these people, creating a situation, in which a large number of individuals exist who have no right to have rights, to use Hannah Arendt’s expression⁸. In a sense, it was as if the Brazilian State had decreed their *civil* death. They were silenced, since their public voice remained (and basically still remains) unheard because of the lack of organised mechanisms for expressing their situation (as Georg Simmel put it: the poor disappear from our society not only because they are made

⁸ Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt & Brace, 1968 [1951]) 177.

invisible, but most of all because their voice goes unheeded).⁹ We are talking of millions of Brazilian citizens who have practically no formal education, no qualification for any kind of job that demands the ability to read and write or that of understanding and following even slightly sophisticated rules and commands. This shows the limits of a model of economic growth that does not make a priority of creating citizenship and fostering social inclusion (Brazil has experienced this kind of merely economic development in the 1960s and 1990s and even more recently). It further raises the issue of submitting economic processes to political control aiming at public utility, instead of leaving these citizens to the mercy of private interests.

III

Methodology

As we mentioned above, we chose to undertake qualitative research, using open-ended interviews instead of the questionnaires that are usually used by economists and by researchers interested in the quantifiable, material effects of the BPF (e.g. by the researchers of Brazilian governmental institutions such as the IPEA and the Ministry for Social Development).¹⁰ Two reasons justified our choice. Firstly, we

⁹ Georg Simmel, “The Poor,” translated by Claire Jacobson, *Social Problems*, 13/2 (1965), 118-140.

¹⁰ On the difficulties connected with qualitative interviews see among others Siegfried Lamnek, *Qualitative Sozialforschung. Band 2: Methoden und Techniken* (München: DVU, 1989); Rainer Strobl & Andreas Böttger (Hrsg.), *Wahre Geschichten? Zur Theorie und Praxis qualitativer Interviews* (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 1996) as well as Andreas Witzel, “Das problemzentrierte Interview,” *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung*, 1/1 (2000) (<http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/1132>).

realised almost immediately that the women interviewed found it difficult to answer direct questions about such objective questions as the amount of money they spent weekly or monthly for food, clothes etc. (We think that most individuals would have these difficulties, if they had to answer to such questions without going through their bills and bank statements – but these women do not receive bills and have no bank account). Questionnaires also tend to neglect or to overlook the peculiar language of the interviewed persons, but this is a necessary evil, if they want to obtain data that can be summed up, compared and treated statistically. On the other hand, by ignoring the linguistic problems faced by the interview participants as well as their particular view of things (which might not be translatable into numbers or into pre-formulated multiple options), questionnaires are prone to present contradictory results or distorted data. By way of example, in our very first interview, we asked a woman how much she typically spent on food in a month and the answer was simply unrealistic (hundreds of *reais*, she claimed). We then reformulated the question and asked her how often she bought food at the market or at the grocery and then what she would buy and in what quantity. Finally, by asking her and our local informants, we would ascertain the price of the items she purchased. This allowed us to come up with a sum that was much more realistic and probably closer to reality. We repeated the experiment several times and we always registered this discrepancy between the first answer to the more abstract questions and the following answers to the more detailed questions.

The second reason for using open interviews is that we consider it to be the only possibility for our kind of investigation, which aimed at reaching the participants' subjective experience at a deep level. We conducted long interviews (varying in length from fifteen minutes – when we realised that the woman was not

answering freely, but was motivated by a fear that we would use her answers to reduce her allowance or when other people would interfere and try to control her answers – to a whole afternoon), using a script containing certain groups of questions concerning such aspects as the family make up, the gender and age of its members, its income before and after the PBF, the way the allowance money was spent, the changes introduced by the PBF with regard to consumption, etc. Following our script, we invited the women to evaluate and even criticise the programme and to comment on the fact that the nominal beneficiaries of the allowance are almost in every case women rather than men. We asked them whether they thought that the PBF was a duty or a favour on the part of the Federal government. We inquired about their attitude towards elections and political participation. Of course, we did not ask all these questions directly and we avoided formulating them in a suggestive way that might signal any expected answer (also because we did *not* expect any special answer). The first precaution we had to take, though, was to gain their confidence (Bourdieu speaks of a “contract” of confidence between the interviewer and the interviewed persons).¹¹ We were assisted by local contacts (mostly social workers, often volunteers) who helped us to establish a relation of mutual confidence and acceptance. It was essential that our participants did not see us as government agents monitoring the way they used the money or surveying their satisfaction with the programme. Furthermore, the local contacts helped us to better understand certain linguist peculiarities, the social context of the families, the political situation of the town etc. We also interviewed mayors and city officials in charge of managing the PBF or local social affairs, academics etc. We prepared for every

¹¹ Bourdieu, Pierre, *La misère du monde* (Paris: Seuil 1993) 9 f.

field trip with both scientific and literary readings (writers such as Graciliano Ramos, Guimarães Rosa or João Cabral de Melo Neto helped us to better understand the world of the *sertão*) and long e-mail exchanges with local contacts.¹²

Since the debit card, through which the allowance can be cashed at the local branch of *Banco do Brasil* or *Caixa Federal*, is always in the name of the woman registered as head of the family (exceptions are done when there are no female adults in the family unit), we chose to interview women. More specifically, we interviewed rural women, in small towns in the inland regions of Brazil or in the outskirts of larger cities, since their situation is very different from that of the urban poor, who are already the subject of many studies. The rural poor face different problems, starting with geographical isolation which, in almost every case, makes it impossible to access basic public services. The regions targeted were: the *sertão*¹³ and the coast of Alagoas, the Jequitinhonha River Valley in Minas Gerais, the inland of the

¹² We approached 181 women; only 12 refused to be interviewed. We decided not to include another 15 interviews by women who did not respond freely. Some were evidently trying to give us the answers they thought we wished to hear, whilst other were influenced by their husbands who refused to leave, or they seemed scared despite the fact that we always were accompanied by local contacts in order to gain their trust, as described above. We selected the women according to family size and age, but we also carried out blind interviews (one or two for every place we visited, for a total of 21) in order to make sure that our contacts, who helped us select the persons to be interviewed, had not chosen people whom *they* judged to be likely to give us certain answers and not others.

¹³ The *sertão* is a semi-arid region that comprises parts of many Northeastern states far west of the Atlantic coast. It is characterised by very low levels of precipitations and is frequently plagued by draughts of biblical dimensions, depicted by many Brazilian writers (e.g. Graciliano Ramos in his powerful romance *Barren Lives*).

states of Piauí and Maranhão, and extremely poor neighbourhoods on the outskirts of the cities of São Luiz (Maranhão) and Recife (Pernambuco). In some cases, we did not succeed in reaching rural women due to a lack of roads (we should have used a horse). This geographical isolation increases their needs and at the same time makes it almost impossible to satisfy them. In this sense, they are more destitute than the urban poor and can be considered to be the worst off group in Brazilian society.

Any discussion of whether the implementation of the program was always successful is beyond the scope of this paper, since our interest was in analyzing the effects of the program on the subjectivity of its recipients, not in evaluating the program from an economic point of view. Some of the women we interviewed reported cases of unfair treatment by the officials charged with the implementation, others complained that they got a smaller allowance than they expected or that they had to wait a long time to get the money. While these are of course important aspects to be considered in evaluating the program, they were relevant to us only insofar as they affected the self-esteem of the participant in the PBF or their view of themselves as citizens to whom officials owed respect and attention. In this paper we shall briefly address certain political aspects of the PBF, connected to civic participation and to the construction of citizenship, but we will not be able to discuss them fully.

IV

Analysing interviews

It is very difficult to present the material collected in a single paper. We decided to include some of it in our presentation of the phenomenology of poverty in Brazil. First of all, however, we

shall discuss the theoretical foundation of our beginning hypothesis and offer some general data.

4.1 Money as a source of autonomy

In his *Philosophy of Money* (1900) Georg Simmel showed that money has a liberating dimension, since it affects the choices and wishes of individuals. It makes its owners “more determined persons”, who are more respectable and respected in a world that is dominated by mercantile relationships. It gives them a greater capacity to make decisions about their lives and, in doing so, it acquires a democratic character that makes individuals more equal, since it does not distinguish whether the person who uses it to buy a service or a good is rich or poor, noble or plebeian, male or female etc. Finally, it liberates individuals from the personal bonds of economic dependency (from one’s own family and/or from other individuals).¹⁴ Independence is defined, herein, not in the sense of a total lack of depending on anyone in order to reach one’s own goals (that is impossible, since we need their cooperation more often than we might think), but in the sense of being able to buy the assistance of others in service of said goals. Individuals are more autonomous, when they depend neither on the friendly inclination of others nor on their charity and benevolence in order to reach their goals. They are able to obtain help by paying for it, i.e. thanks to their money, just as any other person could expect to receive the same help by paying the same amount of money (as Adam Smith had already pondered, even if in a different context).¹⁵ When discussing the effects of

¹⁴ Georg Simmel. *The Philosophy of Money* (London: Routledge, 2004) 299 ff.

¹⁵ We are referring to the well-known page of *The Wealth of Nations*: “It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker that we expect

the PBF on everyday life, it was quite common for the women to describe their present situation by using the expression “sentir-se mais à vontade” (feeling more at ease) in comparison to the period in which they had no regular income. Dona Amelia, from Pasmadinho (Jequitinhonha River Valley) affirmed categorically: “There is more freedom in money, because with money you can buy what you want”. This might sound trivial for the reader, but not for her or the other beneficiaries.

According to Simmel, therefore, money guarantees a certain amount of individual autonomy perceived as independence from the will (including the goodwill) of others, whilst at the same time creating other forms of dependence, particularly on the existence of a labour market.¹⁶ Our hypothesis, however, was that regular monetary income would allow individuals to reach a level of autonomy that surpassed mere independence from personal ties. How do we define this kind of autonomy?

4.2 *Definition of autonomy*

Let us start with a very generic definition that enables us to classify the necessary different fields and different levels of autonomy. In a fundamental sense, to be autonomous means to be able to choose a certain strategy of action. This implies being

our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest,” in Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976) 26.

¹⁶ Of course, Simmel’s position is more complex than that presented here, but in this context, it is sufficient to stress money’s effect on individuals, without discussing the negative aspects of the process that leads to modern individualism (Simmel’s intention, in fact, was to neutrally *describe* these aspects rather than lament their effects on the social fabric and on the individuals themselves).

able to formulate goals, to have beliefs about which strategies are more likely to enable us to achieve those goals and therefore to understand, at least to a certain extent, which consequences may result for us from our actions. This first, basic autonomy level coincides with *freedom of action*. Yet, autonomy can be defined at a higher level as the capacity to take responsibility for our actions, that is, to justify them to ourselves or others, to be something more than a mere actor, to be an agent. This kind of autonomy, *agency*, is connected to further conditions such as: being conscious of oneself as an actor, being aware of at least the most immediate consequences of our actions for ourselves and others, being able to formulate reasons in language and to justify our actions. Freedom of action and agency constitute basic or fundamental forms of autonomy.

On a higher level people are considered to be autonomous when they try to live what they consider to be a good life (it does not matter, in this context, whether they choose to follow the tradition and dictates of their culture, or to flout them), i.e. when they are able to act according to a personal plan of good life and to consider themselves and others as capable of establishing mutual relations of moral and legal obligation (in other words, if they see themselves and others as bearers of rights and duties). This kind of autonomy can be called *moral autonomy* and can be developed at several degrees. A person becomes more autonomous (1) to the extent that she begins to determine her life plan not by simply accepting the models offered by her environment, both the narrow one – family, friends, restricted community – and the wider one – her culture, her religious creed etc., but by reflecting upon such models and possibly by distancing herself from them (for instance, a woman coming from a very chauvinistic and patriarchal family who decides to live alone, even at the price of moving to another city or to a faraway place). Furthermore, a person becomes more

autonomous (2) the more she establishes her rights and duties (for herself and for others) based on a personal examination (and possible rejection) of the principles and values learnt from her family or church or community (for instance, a brother of the afore-mentioned woman who comes to consider his sister's life model as morally legitimate and who starts to attribute to women – in general – rights that the other family members still denied based on their chauvinistic views).

We do not understand this kind of autonomy in a merely atomistic sense, but would like to stress the intersubjective dimension present, particularly in regards to the second aspect of mutual recognition as moral and legal subjects. The individuals we interviewed tend to see themselves as embedded in a wider net of moral relationships, particularly of duties connected to their roles as mother, wife, daughter etc. While the acceptance of these roles might be the consequence of an oppressive education, these persons consider the ability to perform their corresponding duties as a central facet of their individual freedom. As social researchers, we must not neglect this aspect just because we might have different ideals of autonomy (and particularly of feminine emancipation). Criticizing these women because they want to be good mothers or good wives instead of emancipated women would be tantamount to judging them on the basis of values they cannot possibly have autonomously developed and would constitute an act of cultural domination. We shall see however that things are changing in this sense and that some women are in fact starting to question their traditional roles.

Once we define autonomy in this very broad sense as a multi-layered concept, we can approach the question whether (a) receiving a regular monetary income can be seen as a material pre-condition for (b) improving one's level of autonomy. To show the relation between (a) and (b) we did utilise Amartya

Sen's capability approach.¹⁷ This approach has been widely used to evaluate social policies around the world, particularly policies aimed at fighting poverty,¹⁸ but it was not our intention to do the same with the PBF. Rather, we used categories such as "capabilities", "functionings" and "conversion factors" in order to better understand how the programme might affect its beneficiaries' autonomy. To guide our analysis we chose two normative criteria, which had to be fulfilled in order to claim that the PBF is actually creating opportunities for greater individual freedom: (1) a basic level of moral autonomy as defined above and (2) a perception of oneself as a member of a political community. In other words, we evaluated the effects of the PBF with regards to individual moral autonomy and to citizenship. Both are connected to certain fundamental valuable functionings, namely, with respect to (1): the perception of oneself as being able to make free choices without being subject to basic needs for food, lodging, minimal physical and psychological health; a sense of being (or increasingly becoming) master of one's own life; the

¹⁷ See among others: Amartya Sen, *Commodities and Capabilities* (New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1987) and *Inequality Reexamined* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), as well as Martha C. Nussbaum and Jonathan Glover (eds.), *Women, Culture, and Development. A Study on Human Capabilities* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995).

¹⁸ See for instance: Séverine Deneulin, Mathias Nebel and Nicholas Sagovsky (eds.), *Transforming Unjust Structures. The Capability Approach* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2006); Flavio Comim, Mozzafar Qizibash and Sabina Alkire (eds.), *The Capability Approach. Concepts, Measures and Applications* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Paul Anand, Cristina Santos and Ron Smith, "The Measurement of Capabilities," *Arguments for a Better World. Essays in Honor of Amartya Sen. Vol. I: Ethics, Welfare, and Measurement*, ed. Kaushik Basu and Ravi Kanbur (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) 283-310, and Séverine Deneulin and Lila Shahani (eds.), *An Introduction to the Human Development and Capability Approach. Freedom and Agency* (London: Earthscan, 2009).

capacity of taking responsibility for one's own actions without external material constraints by the nearest social environment (parents, brothers, other relatives, husband etc.); the ability to care for one's own family (i.e. independence in the sense described by Simmel); and with respect to (2): the feeling of being treated by the State as a real person whose needs cannot be met merely through individual action; the perception that the governmental policies aimed at oneself are not expression of the goodwill and charitable attitude of some politician or the government, but the consequence of the individual's rights as a citizen; the certainty that one's vote counts towards modifying the country's and the individual's own situation.

The basic idea behind using the capability approach to assess public policies is, firstly, to identify the capabilities required to reach the target functionings and, secondly, to determine which commodities should be distributed in order to achieve the desired capabilities. In the case of the PBF, there is a single commodity, namely money. Therefore, the question is whether receiving a regular monetary income can in fact be converted into capabilities leading to the functionings listed above. We also evaluated if and to what extent the social, economical and political environment of the BPF beneficiaries enabled this conversion. This required a description of the participants' general environment. We therefore began with what we call the phenomenology of poverty in Brazil (although many of the characteristics are not peculiar to Brazil). Firstly, however, some data needs presenting.

4.3 A general view

All the women interviewed claimed that the PBF had had a tremendous impact on their material life, even if a significant number of them complained about the limited amounts granted

by the *Bolsa* (many defined the allowance “a help”) and even if almost all of them stated that they would have preferred a regular job. This contradicts a widely held opinion (in the Brazilian public at least) that PBF recipients would prefer not to work in order to depend on the allowance. The preposterous nature of this claim can be countered by the fact that the minimum wage is much higher than the *Bolsa* (between three to nine times higher, depending on the amount of the allowance). The point is that many employers would never pay the minimum wage (R\$ 510 [US\$ 197.6 or EUR 173.7] in 2010 and currently R\$ 788 [US\$ 305 or EUR 268]) to unqualified workers like most of the PBF recipients. As a matter of fact, of the 154 women we interviewed, only two admitted having given up their former job when they started receiving the *Bolsa*. Both worked as housemaids for middle class families and got a monthly salary of R\$ 150 viz. 200 [US\$ 58 viz. 77.5 or EUR 51 viz. 68] for working weekly six and a half days.

Only about 10 % of the women said that it made no difference whether the allowance was received by the wife rather than the husband. All others claimed that women are better at spending the money wisely, knowing better what the family needed and understanding grocery prices better. Some alleged that men would use the money to drink, even if only a few admitted that her husband would do this or that they actually knew of such cases among their neighbours, relatives or friends. We were not able to ascertain whether this complaint was well grounded and we suspect that they were often reproducing a typical negative stereotype about poor males (without downplaying the evident fact of alcoholism amongst this population).

Most of the women (around 75%) considered the PBF to be a favour or a gift on the part of the government or saw it as a

consequence of the poor origins of President Lula himself. They felt he understood the suffering of the poor better than his predecessors (the women identified with the President who they said was ‘one of us’, while referring to other politicians as ‘they’ or as ‘the politicians out there’). A few women claimed that the government had a duty to help the poor and just five of them used the word “right” (only two of these five had an adequate notion of the concept, whilst the other three seemed not to have very clear ideas in this sense. One of them used in the same sentence this term and the term “favour”). A slight majority (52%) of the women claimed to vote out of obligation (voting is compulsory in Brazil), since ‘politicians are all corrupt’ and ‘nothing changes anyway’ (these were the most common explanations). Nevertheless, almost all of them admitted having voted for Lula in the 2001 election and that his victory had changed their life. It remains unclear, however, whether and to what extent they saw a direct connection between their voting and Lula’s support for governmental anti-poverty policies. They all expressed the fear that a different government would take the allowance away, but many were unsure whether subsequent presidents would continue the program (this was before the 2010 victory of Dilma Rousseff who has actually increased the allowance and increased the reach of the programme to more families).

This strict link between the implementation of the PBF and the presidency of Lula has been object of harsh criticism in Brazil. The program is accused by some of being as a not particularly well disguised populist attempt at ‘buying’ elections by granting the allowance to poor voters. While the latter have clearly an interest in voting for governments that guarantee continuity in the implementation of the PBF, we do not see this as a clear-cut case of vote selling or buying. Firstly, all candidates in the last presidential elections (2010 and 2014) vowed that they

would maintain the program, so that the identification of the PBF with a PT-lead government is no longer so obvious. Furthermore, even if the program participants voted for the PT because of the PBF, this would not be tantamount to selling their vote – no more at least than in the case of middle or high class voters who vote for candidates who promise them tax cuts, school vouchers or other financial and fiscal advantages. Either one accepts that voters may cast their ballot thinking first and foremost of their self interest – and then poor people are entitled to do this as much as richer people – or one condemns this attitude in general, independently of social class and the kind of promised advantage (be it the PBF or tax cuts for the rich). On the other hand, the social policies promoted by the PT governments (of which the PBF is just one, even if the most impactful and discussed) seem to have created a clear political gap in Brazilian society between the poorest parcel of the population (mostly participants in the PBF) and the middle class, as shown convincingly by some sociologists.¹⁹ This topic is outside the scope of this research, however.

The experience of having a regular income was new for almost all the women interviewed. This simple fact changed their life and gave them more freedom, as they consistently reported (often without having been asked). When asked to specify the kind of freedom, they pointed out different features representing different fields and levels of personal autonomy as outlined below.

¹⁹ In our opinion, the most convincing description of this process is offered by: André Singer, *Os sentidos do lulismo. Reforma gradual e pacto conservador* (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2012). See also: Marcos Nobre. A polarização voltou. *Piauí*, nº 98 (2014), 18-21.

4.4 *A phenomenology of poverty in Brazil*

A description of the most relevant characteristics of poverty in Brazil appears in this section. These characteristics have a direct influence on what the capability approach calls the “conversion factors” enabling the transformation of commodities into capabilities (and therefore, potentially, into functionings).

1. *Lack of basic requirements for a healthy life.* Under this heading we include bad nutrition (as a result both of lack of food and of an unhealthy diet), precarious lodging, poor or no basic medical assistance, scarce access to medical facilities and to medications etc. In the case of our participants, the difficulty of accessing health services often depend on geographical circumstances (e. g. for those living in isolated places), but also on political and economical factors (e. g. when the municipal government chooses not to hire sufficient doctors or if it has no resources available for doing so). Bad nutrition is often caused by a lack of nutritional information. These women and their families have a diet lacking in vitamins (vegetables and fruits) or of noble proteins (such as red meat), while feeding on edibles rich in calories but also in fats and carbohydrates (rice, pasta, sausages). Not only does bad nutrition threaten these people’s physical and mental health, making them more prone to illness, it also impairs their physical and mental capacities, affecting their work opportunities and condemning them to unemployment or underemployment²⁰. Empirical studies have already shown the direct connection between bad nutrition in infancy and poor

²⁰ Cf. Paulette Dieterlen. *La pobreza: un estudio filosófico*. México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2003, 34.

development of basic cognitive capacities and intelligence.²¹ In other words, bad nutrition results in many bad functionings since it impairs the development of certain capabilities.

However, bad nutrition is not merely due to insufficient nutritional information. Many women we interviewed did in fact know that eating vegetables is important, particularly for their children, but either were unable to find these products at an affordable price in the local commerce (since they had to be imported from some distant, more fertile region to the semi-arid *sertão*), or they were not able to grow them in gardens due to a lack of water or because they had to use drinking water to irrigate the plants and could not possibly pay the water bill. According to Dona Ines, from Demerval Lobão (Piauí), who used her allowance to buy rice, flour and *mistura* (i.e. products rich in protein that are then mixed with rice or pasta, such as: poultry meat, sausages, eggs, canned beef or canned sardines), vegetables are very expensive. There is a truck arriving weekly from Terezina (the state capital, approximately 30 kilometres to the north) selling remains from the vegetable market, but she cannot afford even that. And Dona Amélia from Pasmadinho, in the Jequetinhonha River Valley said, about the possibility of a vegetable garden: 'It's impossible. We have water just for two hours a day, only. Then you cannot water any plant. Having a garden is impossible, since it takes a lot of water. And now we

²¹ Larry Brown (ed.). *The Link Between Nutrition and Cognitive Development in Children* (Medford, MA: Center on Hunger, Poverty and Nutrition Policy, School of Nutrition, Tufts University, 1993).

have just drinking water, you can't wet the plants with drinking water, we can't pay for that'.²²

Some women described how they introduced new products in the diet of their family thanks to the PBF. Many of them mentioned cookies and yogurt, which they buy particularly for the children, but also meat (mostly chicken). Dona Claudineide, from the Povoado da Cruz (Alagoas *sertão*) was very proud of being able to buy “pasta by the package” (in very poor regions, the owners of groceries shop would open the 500 grams or 1 kilo packages of pasta or rice to sell the content in smaller quantities, since their customers could not afford to pay for the whole package). One can conclude, therefore, that the money from the PBF provided the women the chance to improve their family's nutrition. However, they did not always take advantage of the opportunity either because the money was not enough to buy valuable products such as vegetables, fruit and red meat, or because they lacked the nutritional education to do so.

As for improving the quality of their lodging, the money from the PBF is manifestly insufficient. While there are other federal programs intended to help the lowest social classes to obtain affordable housing (such as the programme called *Minha Casa Minha Vida*, i.e. *My House, My Life*), the *Bolsa Família* in itself is far too low. None of the women we interviewed used the allowance to improve the condition of their house.

Health assistance is free throughout Brazil, but there are huge differences in ease of access, according to local circumstances, as mentioned above. Theoretically, families do not

²² The situation is analogous to that of buying red meat or other sources of noble proteins, since the prices are incompatible with the income guaranteed by the PBF.

need to spend the money from the PBF to buy prescription drugs, but some women reported that they used part of the allowance (sometimes almost all of it) to this end.

A particularly tragic case was that of Dona Nilza, from Itinga (Jequitinhonha River Valley). She was a heart patient and diabetic and had, therefore, to take many medications daily but, being illiterate, was unable to read the information leaflets. She sometimes confused different drugs (with obvious health risks). This is a dramatic illustration of how illiteracy can impair someone's life.

But the most illustrative case was probably that of Dona Quitéria, from Araçuaí (Jequitinhonha River Valley), who was 44 when we interviewed her. She was a widow and lived with six children and a small granddaughter. She received us in one of the two rooms of her house: a plain structure of exposed brick, with a roof of corrugated aluminium. While the whole family slept in the backroom, the front room had just a stove, a table with some chairs and no window. The only air and light came in through the door, together with a cloud of dust raised by the constant wind blowing outside (most children in the neighbourhood have breathing conditions such as asthma or chronic bronchitis). Dona Quitéria wore an incredibly sad expression, her gaze lost in contemplation of something we could not grasp (perhaps a happy or at least less miserable past?). She would sit on her chair with the posture of someone who was unbearably tired and drained of any energy. She complained that they wanted to cut her allowance because one of the children was not going to school. She pointed at him and told us his story: 'He got a problem, since he was a small child, a problem with his hand, and when his hand swells... his hand swells with wounds, nobody never discovered why, the doctors here never discovered what it is. They think it's syphilis. They asked whether I had it while I was pregnant with him, I told

them I didn't know, then his hand swells and gets full of wounds and he cannot even hold a pencil, I did already speak with the [school] principal, and what happened is that she stared at me and said that I had to bring the paper from the doctor. I brought it to her, the... how do you call it?...the certificate, you know? She said she had crossed his name out of the *Bolsa Escola* [Dona Quitéria was still confusing the PBF with a former program, which granted a small allowance for children in school age], now it's only two of them in the *Bolsa Escola*. When he gets his hand that way, his hands and his feet, oh, it gets full of wounds and they start releasing water and when it gets dry, it smells real bad, and then the children at school laugh at him'. Therefore the boy stopped going to school in order not to be teased any more.

Sometimes she would use the money from the allowance to buy medication for the boy: an injection that costs R\$ 70. 'I stopped eating, myself, because I couldn't afford to buy it. The doctor says that in order to stop it [the disease], we have to buy the injection, to let it come from Belo Horizonte [the state capital] and give it to him here'.

Their water and electricity were cut almost one year ago, because she is not able to pay the bill, so that they get water and electricity from the neighbours, whose help is essential for the family's survival. She has no regular job because she cannot leave the children alone at home (there are not enough public crèches or kindergartens in the town, certainly not in her neighbourhood). She survives by doing odd jobs for neighbouring families: collecting firewood or transporting buckets of water on her head from the wells.

Dona Quitéria's case is illustrative of how different kinds of suffering are intertwined. The lack of public health service turns every disease into a sort of biblical plague with terrible effects on the life of the individual and the whole family. In this case, the

shame provoked by the disease and the humiliation inflicted by his schoolmates and by other adults drove the boy to leave school and therefore led to the loss of his allowance. At the same time, his mother could have gone to court either in order to force the health system to pay for the injections or to revert the suspension of the allowance, but being illiterate, she had no idea that she could do so and did not know whom she might ask for help (e.g. the Federal Public Advocacy, who would have helped her free of charge). This cascade effect ends up deepening the suffering.

2. *Lack of a regular job and very irregular income.* The women we interviewed, as well as their husbands, were either chronically unemployed or did very irregular, occasional jobs. Most women had never worked outside of their home (of course, we do not refer here to chores or activities connected to their status of wives and mothers, but to wage labour done for individuals outside the family), because they married and had children still very young. Sometimes they and their husbands would get what they call *bicos* or *beliscões*, i.e. odd jobs on a quite irregular basis, normally badly paid and physically demanding, such as working eight hours in the field for only R\$ 10 (US\$ 5 or EUR 3), as reported by women from Inhapi (Alagoas *sertão*). Sometime the men had seasonal jobs in other states, for instance harvesting sugar cane. In these cases, they had to leave their home and family for several months every year (this happens frequently in the Jequitinhonha River Valley). Generally speaking, this irregular and often informal labour does not guarantee sufficient income to support the family for the whole year and casts tremendous uncertainty for the future of the people involved. Almost all the women we interviewed expressed the desire for a regular job: officially registered, with benefits etc. When people manage to work autonomously (e.g. those who own small plots of land and dedicate themselves to subsistence farming), they often face insurmountable obstacles such as a shortage of material

resources, bad nutrition (and subsequent insufficient physical strength) as well as a lack of technical knowledge. The results of their efforts are disproportionately low compared to the human energy expended working the land. Furthermore, there is always the risk that natural phenomena (particularly draughts) would destroy or damage their crops.²³

Travelling through regions like the Jequitinhonha River Valley or the Alagoas *sertão*, we were constantly reminded that poverty and unemployment are not a contingent phenomenon, but have deep roots in geography, in Brazilian history and in political decisions. For instance, who would open a factory in the middle of nowhere, hundreds of miles from the nearest port or airport, with bad roads suffering from the continual temperature differential between hot days and chilly nights (when they are not just dirt roads that become almost impassable with rain)? And most of all, who would open a factory in a region whose inhabitants are mostly uneducated and unskilled, who probably would find it difficult to read security advice and machine operation instructions? There is a high-tech factory in Delmiro Gouveia (Alagoas *sertão*), producing high quality textiles, that employs some 800 people (mostly from other regions), but this exception merely highlights the difficulties in creating jobs in these regions for uneducated people, whom the Brazilian State has simply neglected for hundreds of years.

We would like to stress that the people we interviewed want more from life than mere survival. They want a regular income in order to improve their own and their families' situation. We heard often complaints like: 'I couldn't go to school because it was very

²³ Many women pointed out the importance of governmental programs such as the Crop Insurance Programme (*Seguro Safra*), which has improved the situation of small landowners.

far from my house' or 'Father took me out from school because he needed me to work'. The culture of our society, which is based on wage labour and on a work ethic epitomized by St. Paul's infamous aphorism 'He who does not work, neither shall he eat', penetrated deeply in their psyches, and they felt ashamed for not having a regular job and for being dependent on social programmes (on "public charity" as some of them said, echoing the prejudice of the Brazilian middle-class). On the other hand, they are aware that they have no chance on the job market because of their lack of skills and education, and they seemed resigned to the situation, whilst at the same time hoping that their children would have better possibilities thanks to formal education. We would like to mention two positive examples in this sense. In the town of Piri-Piri (Piauí) we met a family whose parents were completely illiterate, but the daughter was studying at the state university in Terezina thanks to a local programme aimed at preparing children coming from PBF families for college admission tests. On the outskirts of São Luis (Maranhão), we met a grandmother who used the allowance to pay for the daily bus ride to and from the city centre for her grandchild, who had remarkable artistic ability and was able to attend art school, from which he graduated successfully.

One of the most widespread prejudices against the PBF beneficiaries is that they would give up their jobs in order to live on the allowance. As we already mentioned, this is a preposterous accusation. Here is a statement on this topic, by Dona Palmira, from Araçuaí (Jequitinhonha River Valley). She claimed that without the PBF she and her children would have starved to death, 'because what we earn here is too little. I work three days a week and earn twenty-five *reais* [US\$ 12]. Three full days in order to get twenty-five *reais*'. We asked what kind of job it was and she answered: 'I work as a housemaid, doing everything'. 'And you just get twenty-five *reais*,' we asked? 'For three days. The lady

pays me. Three days without complaints. I do the washing, the cooking, all the three days, I do the ironing and the cleaning in the house. You can do the maths and see how much I'm earning a-day'. 'It is not even nine *reais* per day,' we reply. 'She said this is what she can pay, I said that I agree. So, it is twenty-five *reais*. So I said, well I'll go for it, since it's better than nothing. I don't like to laze about, no way.'²⁴ The boy gets up early in the morning, he wants some bread, how can I do? I cannot buy it. His father doesn't help. He slipped away, the father of these three boys. So, what can I do? I have to work to earn twenty-five *reais* or even ten *reais*, and if someone should say: I'll give you nine *reais* if you wash my clothes today, I'll go for it'.

Another example of hard work is that of Dona Joana, from Maragogi (Alagoas coast), a slim black woman in her early fifties (but appearing to be in her late sixties), with long curly hair braided in a thick tress, the tendons of her neck as thick as a rope, big eyes full of life and energy. She is a grandmother and receives the allowance because her grandchildren live with her. She claims emphatically: 'My entire worth lies in my molluscs in the tide', since she earns her living fishing for clams— a job most people in this town consider to be humiliating and shameful for some reason. 'When I come back, I am all to pieces. I can't endure it no longer. You have to stay on your knees the whole time till the bucket is full [of clams], a big bucket, on your back, when I arrive, this here [she indicates her back], my back can't take it no more. Today, I had to grab them, to wet them, and I came back shivering from cold, my back couldn't endure it'. She sells the clams for R\$ 10 per kilo (US\$ 5), a ridiculously low price.

²⁴ One can notice how the ideology of labour that characterises our society has been interiorised by this woman.

Among her customers are luxury resorts that will serve the clams in their restaurants for an astronomically high price.

One could claim that the allowance frees these people at least in part from the tyranny of slave labour imposed on them from the same middle class that accuses them of laziness when they refuse to work for starvation wages. On the other hand, they have interiorised so much of the ideology of work of our society that they normally feel ashamed for being unemployed even when there is no work available. In this sense, there is nothing the PBF can do to relieve them from this stigma, if they are not able to change their perspective and begin to see the allowance as a right they are entitled to as citizens (actually, Brazilian society at large should embrace this view).

3. *Child labour and school leaving.* The poor begin to participate in the economic life of their family very early. Children start working very young, both at home (caring for younger siblings, helping the mother with chores, collecting firewood for the stove, tending to domestic animals in the yard etc.) and outside. This very often means that they have to leave school, perpetuating the traditional lack of literacy and making it almost impossible to overcome poverty through education. Dona Luisa from Inhapi (Alagoas sertão) reported that she spent a short time at school, but 'I left immediately, because I came from the country', as if her rural origin had irremediably determined her fate. She never learnt to read and write. On the same note, Dona Palmira of Araçuaí (Jequitinhonha River Valley) told us that she was at school for three years, 'then my father took me out to work in the field'. For this reason, it is very important that the PBF, which is a CCT programme, require that the children be sent regularly to school. However, the main problem is the very poor quality of public schools in Brazil – and this is a consequence of political choices made by local powers (both at municipal and state levels),

since the constitution make them responsible for primary and secondary education.²⁵ The Federal government itself, however, tends to consider education merely as a form of professional or vocational training, rather than a way of widening one's personal horizons and knowledge. The lack of contact with realities other than those of their family and immediate neighbours, which is marked by destitution and dire need, makes it very difficult for the children of poor families to imagine that another kind of life is possible and to think that one day they would be able to leave that environment or to change it. Sometimes the only contact with another world is offered by TV and the omnipresent soap operas, which describe a reality that seems to come from another planet but confronts them with different lifestyles and models of behavior. In this sense, its omnipresence in the households we visited can have sometime the positive effect of widening the horizons of its watchers. In any case, the PBF does have the positive effect of forcing the families to keep their children in school, creating at least some potential future for them.

4. *High birth rate.* It is traditionally thought that poor families tend to have many children because they represent future sources of income and a possible help for the parents in their old age. At the same time, however, the presence of many children increases the economic demands on the family, particularly when they are still very young and cannot yet work or when the job market does not offer enough job possibilities. This leads to a vicious circle, as

²⁵ The federal government has limited jurisdiction regarding public school funding. At one point, an attempt was made to increase the quality of teaching by introducing a minimum wage for teachers. Some states (amongst the richest ones of the Union) filed a grievance against this law which was then rejected by the Constitutional Court. These states then decided to pay their teachers only the minimum wage without any further supplements (for qualification, seniority etc.), leading to a *de facto* salary reduction.

noted by Dieterlen.²⁶ Our research, however, showed that the high birth rate in the regions we visited is less due to this quite instrumental motivation but rather to a lack of information about birth control. Pregnancy occurs frequently with no former planning, due to misinformation, to the family situation and sometimes to religious faith. Women's part in an extremely patriarchal society deprives them of any control over their body. Some of the women referred to their frequent pregnancies and to the large number of children as 'presents from God' (such as Dona Luisa from Inhapí, mother of eight). On the other hand, we met women who had either undergone sterilisation or expressed a desire to do so. Dona Claudineide of Povoado da Cruz (Alagoas *sertão*) told us that she could not cope with birth control pills and was allergic to latex (therefore to condoms). So, last time she gave birth (by Caesarean section), she asked the doctor (a woman) to remove her ovaries. She smiled (for the first time during the several interviews we had with her) while she telling us: 'The doctor showed me my pulled out ovaries. Now I don't risk anymore getting pregnant. I told the doctor: for God's sake, help me, I can't have no children no more'.

The question of birth control is quite ambiguous and does not present any clear conclusions. In most cases, however, the women are not able to freely choose whether they want to become pregnant or not. They are, rather, victims of their husbands and family as well as of the priests of their church. This lack of freedom results in the impossibility of exercising such a basic functioning as the capacity to plan one's life or to be master of one's own body.

²⁶ Dieterlen, *La pobreza*, op. cit., p. 37.

5. *Accidents.* The poor are more prone to accidents due to the precarious nature of their lodgings and facilities (e.g. unsafe electrical wiring), due to the low quality of building materials (generally their houses are built from a mixture of adobe, metal sheets, wood planks, more rarely bricks), to the dangerous location of their houses (e.g. close to river banks or directly by the roadside). Furthermore, the roads and paths in the regions we visited are not adequately maintained, so that many family homes become quickly inaccessible during bad weather. The father of Dona Luana, from Peroba (Alagoas coast), suffered an accident when he worked as a sugar cane cutter: ‘He sat in the truck of the cane cutters and the truck tipped over and he was sitting on the top. So, he was injured. Nobody died, ok? But he got injured’. He broke one arm and a hand, and as a result he was no longer able to work. This greater tendency to accidents represents a loss of freedom and autonomy, and subsequently of many valuable functionings. In this case the PBF cannot do much, since the allowance is too low to permit the beneficiaries to improve the quality of their lodging, as mentioned above, or to buy adequate means of transportation, even if some newspapers have reported that beneficiaries would allegedly use the allowance to buy motorcycles by instalments (this would represent a form of increasing their mobility and safety on the road – as far as driving a motorcycle on unpaved or damaged roads can be considered to be safer than biking or walking on the roadside in the dark).

6. *Lack of credit.* Poor people do not receive credit, since they have nothing to offer as a guarantee and cannot easily find guarantors. Most Brazilian poor do not have access to bank services and therefore to many other services. But it is not only a matter of financial credit, rather of personal reliability and trustworthiness. Dona Ines from Demerval Lobão (Piauí) claimed that shop owners started selling to her on credit when she began receiving the PBF. ‘These persons trusted me, the [*Bolsa Família*]

card gave me credit. My card was the only thing that gave me credit in my whole life. Before, I did not have nothing. It is not enough, however, 'cause I'd like to have a better life. All you want to do in life has to be got by money, by paying for it. The allowance does not silence those who are in need. Being in need is not only when you don't have no food, no sir. It is when you want to eat something better and you haven't got it, you can't. It is when you want to have better clothes and can't, when you want to go to the ice cream parlour with your son and can't, when you see a toy in the shop and can't buy it for your child'. Here she broke down and cried.

Generally speaking, the women we spoke with had never had the experience of receiving a regular monetary income and the trustworthiness they gained among the shop owners in their towns after getting the PBF was a novelty for them. They felt this as a gain in respectability and consequently of self-respect, since being the object of mistrust provoked in them extremely negative feelings of shame and humiliation, causing personal suffering. The increase in credibility is one of most powerful effects of the PBF on their subjective experience and seems to confirm Simmel's idea of money as a source of freedom. In this case, the commodity represented by regular monetary income is converted immediately into a set of capabilities (reliability, trustworthiness, financial credit) leading to valuable functionings (perceiving oneself as trustworthy, getting credit from shop owners, developing self-respect, planning one's own future in term of consumption and expenditures).

7. *Invisibility and silence.* In urban areas the poor are often made invisible and cancelled from the city landscape. They generally live in slums at the outskirts or in segregated areas, far away from the elegant middle class neighbourhoods (Rio de Janeiro is quite an exception in this sense), in which

infrastructures are extremely precarious (no pavement, no playgrounds, poor street lighting, no sewage etc.). They use public transportation, if they can afford it at all, while the higher classes prefer to use the car. For all these reasons, their presence remains unnoticed in the everyday life of middle- and high-class people. In rural areas, poor people live in isolated houses or in villages situated normally quite far away from main or even from secondary roads. The great distance from the town hall and the other public offices often results in poor access to basic services such as health assistance, civil registry, banks, schools and etc. Sometimes they do not even have electricity, increasing their isolation, negatively affecting their quality of life, their health and even their subjectivity. Dona Bernardete, from Sítio Novo (Rio Grande do Norte), told us that she did not have electricity at home as a child, and that when the first street lamps were installed in the church square of a small village a few kilometres from her house, she went out every night to gaze at those distant and feeble lights, recalling that as ‘the most beautiful sight I had ever seen’.

As mentioned above, the voice of the poor remains often unheard and their suffering is not taken into account. During our research we received many complaints about communication difficulties with the local PBF officials. We frequently heard that local authorities would send letters written in stodgy, incomprehensible bureaucratic language to illiterate people who are unable to read and understand them. In many cases this leads to dramatic consequences, with families losing their allowance for missing a deadline or not providing certain documents. This demonstrates, of course, that illiteracy represents a *de facto* loss of a central human functioning, namely communication, but the damage is exacerbated by the attitude of the authorities, which

represents a form of disrespect for and humiliation of the poor.²⁷ The muteness of the poor operates in tandem with the deafness of politicians and bureaucrats. Increasing one's literacy and education at school becomes therefore a priority and the PBF is effectively managing to keep participating children in school (according to recent data, more than 95% fulfil the schooling requirements).²⁸

What is worse, the women told us that they scarcely communicate with each other (let us remember that we are talking about persons living in rural areas, often in isolated houses), not even when they queue to register for or receive their allowance at the local branch of the *Caixa Federal* or *Banco do Brasil*. It would be very helpful if local authorities would organise meetings, where the beneficiaries could discuss their problems with each other and with public officials. We once participated in a meeting of BPF recipients in Itinga (Jequitinhonha River Valley). It was not a regular meeting, rather an informal gathering organised by a local social worker on the occasion of our visit. Interestingly, at the beginning, most women just formulated their complaints, speaking of their individual problems. As the discussion went on, however, they started to discuss more general questions, like the political situation in Itinga and in the country at large. Finally they began to discuss questions of rights and citizenship, even if they did not use these terms. Our presence

²⁷ See Avishai Margalit, *The Decent Society* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996); Martha C. Nussbaum, *Hiding from Humanity. Disgust, Shame, and the Law* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004) and *Creating Capabilities. The Human Development Approach* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2011).

²⁸ The data refer to 2013 and are obtained from the Federal Ministry of Education's data-base (<http://frequenciaescolarpbf.mec.gov.br/presenca/controller/login/efetuarLogin.php>).

served as a catalyst, provoking the debate with our questions or mediating between different positions, helping them to see previously unrecognised similarities. In the end, it seemed to us that they had entered the meeting as isolated individuals and left it as a group – maybe not yet fully organised, but at least on their way to a certain unity of intention and goals.

8. *Internal inequality in the family.* In extremely poor families the inequality among men and women, adults and children, young and old is often amplified. In poor, economically underdeveloped regions of Brazil, women have as yet very few chances of emancipation from marital oppression, mostly because they are submitted to a tight net of control by way of other family members – not merely the males (father and husband, primarily, but also brothers, uncles, cousins, in-laws) but also females (particularly mothers-in-law).²⁹

Almost all of the women mentioned the positive benefits of having their name on the allowance card. The classical argument they used was that women are better at managing domestic expenditures, whilst men are incapable of using the money appropriately. They often accused the men of spending the money on drink. According to Dona Graciele of Inhapi, if her husband had received the money ‘then he would take it and go drink *cachaça* [a Brazilian rum]’, whilst Dona Neusa of Maragogi (Alagoas) claimed that if men received the allowance, ‘that would be fatal! They are cunning. But we are more independent since the card is in our name’. On the other hand, this accusation often proved to be grounded more on hearsay than real experience. This is another example of how the poor frequently internalise

²⁹ On the challenges faced by a critical theory of the condition of women see among others Brooke A. Ackerly, *Political Theory and Feminist Social Criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

certain common prejudices held against them by the middle class and the elites.

We registered quite often the presence of a “morality of spending,” to use Viviana Zelizer’s expression:³⁰ poor women would spend the money according to a relatively rigid hierarchy of priorities, with the family’s basic survival at the top, followed by the needs of the children (nutrition, health, school) and of the other family members according to age (with the youngest one having priority). When women admitted to having spent a couple of *reais* for a shampoo or a body cream, they often displayed a disproportionate and mostly unjustified sense of shame, since they only did this once the basic family needs were satisfied. This is another example of how the poor frequently internalise certain common prejudices held against them by the middle class and the elites, namely, that they do not know how to spend money and would waste it on useless shopping. At the same time, it also shows how poor women tend to assume unquestioningly the familiar role assigned them by their social environment.

Some women stated that the allowance provided the means for some women to free themselves from difficult marriages but, in fact, we met only one woman who separated from her husband, namely Dona Madalena of Inhapi (Alagoas). And by the following year she was once again living with him, although he had not given up drinking and was probably abusing her. It remains very difficult for these women to free themselves from marital oppression – for many reasons. First, the allowance is not generous enough to allow them to live alone with their children without economic help from the spouse or their parents (who

³⁰ On the ‘morality of spending’, particularly among poor people see Viviana Zelizer, “The Social Meaning of Money: ‘Special Monies’,” *American Journal of Sociology*, 95/ 2 (1989) 353.

often pressure them to stay with the husband). Secondly, they are subject to intense societal pressure, both from their family and from their environment (particularly from their church), to endure their marital ordeal. Finally, they are socialised not only to submit to men, but rather to *desire* such submission and subservience, as John Stuart Mill pointed out as early as 1869 in his essay *The Subjection of Women*.³¹ In this sense, the PBF might encourage them to end unsatisfactory relationships, not so much due to providing full economic independence from their husbands, rather to the extent that it offered them a sense of greater autonomy and mastery over their lives.

Generally speaking, the PBF contributes to the empowerment of its participants, since it gives them a certain level of independence (in the Simmelian sense) and increases their power in the family. At the same time, many young girls, who under “normal” circumstances, would leave school very early and whose school attendance is now enforced by the program, stated that they do not want to share the fate of her mothers or older sisters, who were more or less condemned to marry and have children very early, sometime at ten or eleven years of age.³² The schooling requirement educates these girls about other life styles and offers a potential emancipation from the traditional roles imposed on them by their social environment.

On the other hand, the situation of the husbands and fathers not only remains and will remain unchanged until definitive solutions to the problem of unemployment are found, but it might even worsen, since the allowance goes to the women,

³¹ John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty and The Subjection of Women* (London: Penguin, 2007).

³² See the short documentary *Severinas* by Eliza Capai (accessible under: <http://vimeo.com/73309361>).

threatening the masculine position as (alleged) bread winners and heads of family. They might feel and often do feel as if they have become useless. This aspect, namely the humiliation and loss of self-esteem among the men, should be object of further studies and of specific policies.

9. *Shame*. Poverty provokes feelings of shame and low self-esteem.³³ Poor people are often considered and consider themselves to be responsible for their situation, even when, objectively speaking, there is nothing they can do to circumvent the lack of education or chronic unemployment resulting from external circumstances over which they have no control. In the regions we visited, poverty was not a matter of a temporary set of economic problems but a structural problem (and this shows how CCTs such as the PBF cannot solve the problem alone, if they are not coordinated with other public programmes and policies aiming at structural changes, such as some current federal and local schemes).³⁴ While interviewing the women we frequently sensed how very strong their shame was. Sometimes it expressed itself directly, like when they felt evidently ashamed of their poor houses and kept apologizing for not having proper chairs or tables. Sometimes it surfaced in a nervous gesture of the hand, in an embarrassed expression, in a shake of the body when certain topics arose.

As long as they consider the PBF to be a government favour, i.e. a form of charity, they will not stop feeling ashamed of their poverty. Some of the women claimed that the government has a duty to help the poor, but few thought they have a right to this support (as mentioned above). However, by way of the PBF, the

³³ Cf. Nussbaum, *Hiding from Humanity*, 282 ff.

³⁴ There are more than fifty federal government social programmes, the PBF being just one of them, although the most important.

State is sending a signal, showing that it considers these people to be citizens and that it wants to include them fully in the political body. A stronger signal would be represented by the institutionalization of the PBF, which at present is just a governmental programme, subject to abandonment in the event of a political change of power.³⁵ The mostly negative attitude of public opinion (which in Brazil represents only a tiny minority, namely the so called middle class – actually just 10% of the population – and the elites) and of the media (owned by a few powerful economic groups) is probably the major obstacle to such institutionalization and exemplifies the absence of solidarity in Brazilian society. The middle class and the elites seem not to consider the poor majority to belong to the same political body: they have never shown any interest in the destiny of their poorest co-citizens and have regularly opposed any policy aimed at offering relief from misery (their backing of the military coup of 1964 is a good example of this attitude). This is why the PBF is considered by many women we interviewed as something completely unexpected, as a ‘gift from Lula’ or even as a ‘gift from God’. The internalization of the stigma of poverty and, particularly, an attitude of contempt against the beneficiaries of the PBF is however particularly strong amongst the urban poor, as proven by some studies revealing that families living in the *favelas* and receiving the allowance are met with hostility and disdain by their neighbours.³⁶ The situation is different in rural

³⁵ We shall not discuss here the possibility or necessity of introducing a universal, unconditional basic income. As a matter of fact, the Brazilian parliament has already passed a law in this sense, but it has yet to be implemented.

³⁶ Mani Tebet de Azevedo Marins “A construção de fronteiras simbólicas entre os “pobres”: o caso do programa Bolsa Família” (PhD diss., Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, 2013).

areas, where almost every family depends for its own survival on the PBF or on the old age pensions of some of its members.

10. *Culture of resignation.* During the interviews we frequently faced what is called traditionally the culture of resignation. It emerged not only in the women's words (sometimes an adverb, an interjection, an adjective sufficed to communicate it), but also in the gestures, in the tiredness of the face and of the body, in the clouded gaze, in the bent shoulders. They seem to accept their situation as an unavoidable or even natural destiny, from which there is no escape (even if they still hope that their children might be able to have a different fate). This resignation goes hand-in-hand with the tendency to significantly lower their expectations. This phenomenon is well known in the literature on poverty under the term of "adaptive preferences".³⁷ Individuals who are scarcely able to satisfy the most basic needs will unlikely develop wishes and preferences surpassing the fulfilment of such needs. These persons are deprived not only of material means, but also of hope, of the possibility of dreaming and wishing for a different kind of life. Economic deprivation is accompanied once more by psychological suffering. However, the PBF seems to be cracking the solid straightjacket of resignation that surrounds them like a cocoon. They know that they can rely on the allowance every month, at least as long as there are no political changes, and that their children do not need to leave school in order to work to help the family. Furthermore, they are getting used to being the object of social policies and to be taken into account by the State.

³⁷ See Amartya Sen, "Well-being, Agency, and Freedom. The Dewey Lectures 1984," *Journal of Philosophy*, 82 (1985), 191; Verónica Burstin et alii. *Preferencias adaptativas. Entre deseos, frustración y logros* (Montevideo: Fin de Siglo, 2010); Serene J. Khader. *Adaptive Preferences and Women's Empowerment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

They are aware that, for the first time in Brazilian history, they are stepping onto the political and social stage as leading actors and not just as extras.

11. *Exclusion from citizenship.* The poor are excluded from citizenship both in a formal and material sense. The material sense refers to the lack of employment and regular income, therefore of collective ties that go further than the family or the neighbourhood. Formal exclusion refers to the fact that many of them do not even have an identity card (and this make it impossible to register for the PBF). Being enrolled in the civil registry is a formal precondition to accessing basic services. Moves have been made to change this situation – both on part of the local and the federal authorities, but there is still a long way to go.

The same can be stated about political participation. As the above described meeting in Itinga shows, the programme participants may feel the urge to express to their opinions and claim improvements, but the PBF alone cannot help them to find their own voice as long as its management and implementation do not become more democratic (e.g. following the example of participatory budget, which is well known in Brazil).

V

Conclusion

As mentioned above, the poor have now taken centre stage in political discourse and public opinion in Brazil. The greatest challenge will be their transformation from mere objects of policies into political subjects. The first step has been taken by trying to include them more firmly in the political body and by freeing them from dire need. It would be desirable if this first

self-identification as citizens were followed by the development of a stronger sense of belonging to the national community. However, there are many obstacles to this development, with historical origins that cannot be reconstructed here. Generally speaking, one could claim that political participation among the poorest social classes in Brazil, particularly in rural regions, has historically been low, with the important exception of politically organized movements such as the *Movimento dos Sem Terra* (MST), whose impact may not be underestimated, but which did not manage to break with the status quo of land ownership in the country. In urban areas, there are phenomena of communal organization around specific issues, but no nationwide political movement fighting for social justice or redistribution. The PBF seem to have changed something in the political conscience of its recipients, since they finally have the impression that their vote counts in the sense that the PT-led government is taking them and their problems seriously, in contrast to the local and national governments that they helped to elect for decades.³⁸ We have often heard complaints about local politicians or politics in general: about corruption, inaction, lack of commitment, disrespect etc. But most women agreed that by voting for Lula things had changed for them and many expressed their intention of voting for those candidates who showed the intention to help them to come out of poverty. The behaviour of voters in the last presidential election (October 2014) seems to confirm that recipients of the PBF tend to support the PT and its allies, who champion their cause most directly, but it remains an open question whether this really represents a change in the political attitude of the poor or just a shift in their electoral favour.

³⁸ On the conservative or strict rightwing electoral behaviour of poor voters, particularly in North-East see Singer, *Os sentidos do lulismo*.

The most important effect of the PBF, however, was not one of its original goals, since it aims at fighting extreme poverty, not at modifying the personality of its beneficiaries. The PBF created opportunities for individual freedom and growing self-esteem, even if this phenomenon is still incipient and even if there is no mechanism leading automatically from receiving a regular monetary income to developing autonomy. We have tried to show in our research how this process appears to have started. We cannot yet foresee *how* it will continue, although we hope to have identified what Adorno called a social tendency³⁹ destined to go on and possibly to modify Brazilian society.

³⁹ Theodor W. Adorno, *Philosophische Elemente einer Theorie der Gesellschaft* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 2008) 43.