



## Neoliberalism, governance, and the geographies of conditional cash transfers

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### ABSTRACT

This article considers the geographic effects of conditional cash transfer programs (CCTs), focusing specifically on the ways they rework space, modes of production, and State/society relationships. While CCTs appear linked to neoliberal development and biopolitical governance regimes (viz., governmentality), this article highlights the counterintuitive reasons for why CCTs sometimes fail to meet these broader State objectives. More directly, despite obvious tactics of Statecraft behind CCT initiatives, the effects of these programs can in fact undermine their intended governance outcomes. Drawing from case study research in rural northeastern Brazil – where an overwhelming majority of residents receive Bolsa Família CCT benefits – this article examines the political geographic changes induced by Bolsa Família in a region that has until recently seen very little State presence. By engaging a geographic perspective that focuses on the political and economic effects of CCT programs, this article sheds new light on processes of governance and development in a host of countries throughout the Global South.

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### Introduction

When it comes to ongoing territorial disputes, one of the world's largest lies tucked away in the *sertão* (backlands or hinterlands; often synonymous with desert or outback) of northeastern Brazil (Thomaz, 2011). Located along the Ibiapaba mountain range several kilometers inland from the coast (see Fig. 1), this disputed area – referred to in this article as *Ponta Fina*<sup>1</sup> – runs north-south along the shared border between the states<sup>2</sup> of Ceará and Piauí. According to a 2008 report conducted by the Cearense Institute of Research and Economic Strategy (IPECE), *Ponta Fina* encompasses 2821 square kilometers and has a population of roughly 10,000 people (Sena, 2013). Were *Ponta Fina* its own state, it would be nearly the size of the US state of Rhode Island. The dispute dates back well into the nineteenth century, when the imperial government of Dom Pedro II redrew the boundary between the two states but never generated precise cartographic coordinates. Since then there has never been a clear border between Ceará and Piauí, and while both states lay claim to much of the *Ponta Fina* region, neither one has provisioned very well for the local population. Both states appear to want territorial rights, but neither has seemed very interested in developing the region or providing services for the people.

In 2013 I made my first of two extended field visits to this region. The original purpose of this research was to consider 'Stateless' ter-

ritories and the populations that inhabit them (see for example, Hagmann & Korf, 2012; Jones, 2009; Steinberg & Chapman, 2009). What I found, however, was that very few *Ponta Fina* residents worried about the political or cartographic particularities of the territorial dispute: for example, whether they might be (re)classified as *cearense* or *piauiense*. Instead, what concerned most people was Brazil's *Programa Bolsa Família* (PBF) conditional cash transfer initiative and the security of this program in the *Ponta Fina* region. PBF is the primary income source for most families in the area, yet administration of the program is hindered by *Ponta Fina*'s geographic ambiguity. To address PBF and broader issues of food security, one must also address the territorial dispute, bringing to light a mess of geographical entanglements. More directly, conditional cash transfer programs (CCTs) in federative republics like Brazil are administered through state and municipal networks, and when these networks are complicated by ambiguities such as border disputes CCTs face administrative roadblocks. 'State' (i.e., federal) resources cannot be delivered to 'stateless' people. Even more to the point, CCTs produce a host of geographical effects, and in a poor region like *Ponta Fina* where: (a) nearly everyone receives PBF; and (b) the administration of PBF is particularly difficult, the myriad geographies of CCTs are laid especially bare. More than simply putting food on the table in millions of households worldwide, CCTs also have tremendous impacts on space, governance, cartographies, and political economic relationships.

The purpose of this article is to investigate the geographies of CCTs, and more specifically to consider how these programs rework relationships between people, space, economic activity, and the State. While there exists a growing literature on CCTs in the social

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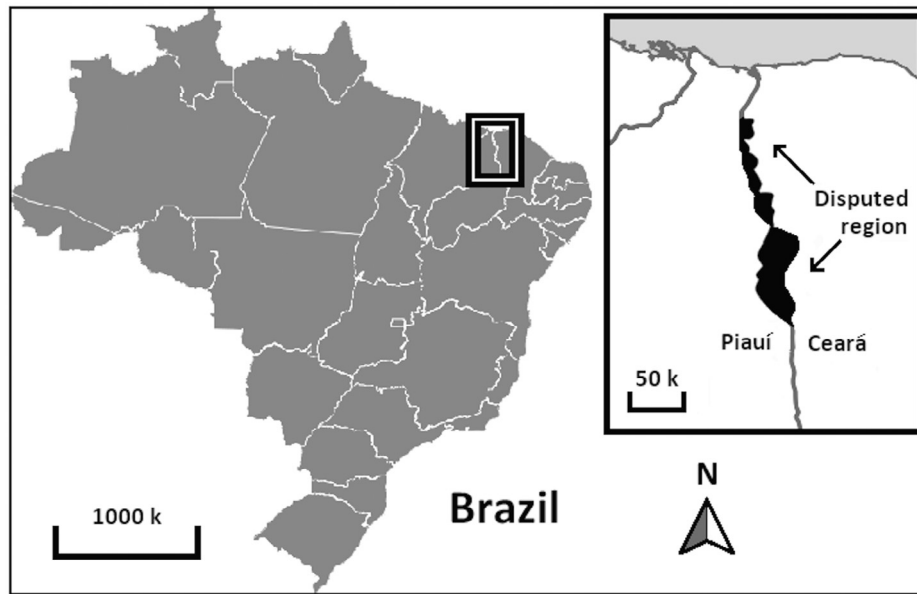


Fig. 1. Map of region highlighting the border dispute between the states of Ceará and Piauí.

sciences, relatively few geographers have weighed in on these debates. I attempt here to highlight the value of geographic perspectives in analyses of CCTs, arguing that spatially attuned analytical frameworks provide new insight to the ways CCTs change (and are changed by) processes like governance, neoliberalism, and even cartography. Beginning with an overview of critical research on CCTs, emergent debates connecting CCTs to governance and neoliberalism, and contributions from geographers, I then move on to consider my case study from Ponta Fina and the geographic effects of Bolsa Família. My findings contribute to existing research linking CCTs with governmentality and neoliberalism (e.g., Corboz, 2013; Ferguson, 2010; Hossain, 2010; Peck, 2011; Peck & Theodore, 2010; Saad-Filho, 2015; Sener, 2015), yet what I also argue is that CCTs induce a host of differentiated effects that undermine State efforts to govern space, implement formalized economies, and create neoliberal citizen-subjects. By interrogating the relationships between CCTs, space, and governance, my hope is that this article opens new pathways for critical geographic research into State-led development initiatives (e.g., Andolina, Radcliffe, & Laurie, 2005; Bebbington & McCourt, 2007; Peck & Theodore, 2015; Roy, 2010, 2012).

### Critical research of conditional cash transfer programs

In 1995, faced with economic decline and rising levels of hunger, the Mexican government piloted a new anti-poverty initiative aimed at addressing underdevelopment on multiple levels. Called *Progresas* – and later renamed *Oportunidades* – this program sought to address hunger through cash transfers to low-income families. The money, however, came with *conditional* requirements that recipient families make regular visits to health clinics (for checkups and education) and children maintain good attendance at school. Known today as a ‘Conditional Cash Transfer’ (CCT), such programs have since grown immensely popular and have been implemented in dozens of lesser-developed countries worldwide (Ballard, 2013). The world’s largest and perhaps best-known CCT program is Brazil’s *Programa Bolsa Família* (PBF), a merger of smaller and pre-existing CCTs rolled out under the PT (Worker’s Party) in 2003 (Saad-Filho, 2015). Today PBF reaches nearly 14 million households, meaning that more than one-quarter of Brazil’s population – roughly 50 million people – receives the benefit (Campello & Neri, 2013). Families become eligible if their

household income falls below R\$150 per capita per month (USD 55–60), and the amount of money they receive depends on the number of dependents living in the house relative to total household income (dos Santos, 2013). The program is widely considered one of the PT’s most successful (if not also controversial) anti-poverty initiatives, and PBF is credited with helping to significantly reduce income inequality in Brazil over the last decade (Pereira, 2015).

Published research considering the effects of PBF and other CCTs has grown steadily in recent years (Fenwick, 2009; Gupta, 2012; Hall, 2008; Seekings, 2012). The topics of this work range broadly, but general themes include poverty reduction (Fiszbein & Schady, 2009; Handa & Davis, 2006; Soares, Ribas, & Osório, 2010), gender equality (Corboz, 2013; Molyneux, 2007; Molyneux & Thomson, 2011), education and child welfare (Hanlon, Barrientos, & Hulme, 2010; Hossain, 2010; Leroy, Ruel, & Verhofstadt, 2009), and the political economic repercussions of CCT ‘conditionalities’ (Ballard, 2013; Hall, 2013; Taylor, 2009). In line with studies that examine the biopolitical implications of social spending programs in developing countries (Hickey, 2010; Li, 2007, 2009; Miller & Rose, 2008), researchers have also focused on the ways CCTs intertwine with neoliberal development strategies to create more ‘productive,’ market-savvy citizen-subjects (Ferguson, 2010; Peck, 2011; Peck & Theodore, 2010). Notes Tania Li, although the benefits of large-scale development projects should not be overlooked in the Global South (viz., reducing hunger, especially in rural areas), they are overwrought with neoliberal governance. She critically unpacks technocratic initiatives aimed at promoting development and environmental conservation in Southeast Asia, connecting them to Foucauldian notions of governmentality: highly technocratic methods of governance where specific interventions are made to improve the productive capacities of the population, finely tuning their practices “to achieve optimal [productive] results” (Li, 2007, p. 6).

Drawing from Li’s work, Naomi Hossain (2010) argues that like many State development initiatives, CCTs are designed to increase governmentality among poor populations. The poor are formally educated in ways that orient their practices and desires toward development goals, in addition to submitting to the State’s medical gaze and biopolitical strategies (e.g., registration and biometric capture, notification of household and residential change, reporting of income and school attendance, monthly visits to agencies to

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