Jamie Peck and Nik Theodore


Introduction: Globalizing Post-Welfare States

The period since the declaration of the Millennium Development Goals has been marked by an unprecedented attempt to build, advance, and consolidate a new hegemonic front in the field of social-welfare policy. Conditional cash transfer (CCT) programs have been in the vanguard of this effort. CCTs provide modest cash payments only to those low-income households that “play by the rules,” enrolling children in school, attending to domestic hygiene and appropriate healthcare, and building the human capital of the next generation. The CCT model encapsulates a new logic of social assistance quite different to the welfare-state rationalities of needs-based entitlement and universal coverage: it emphasizes socioeconomic promotion over social protection and long-term human-capital investment over temporary relief; it advances the principles of reciprocal obligation and “co-responsibility” over universal human rights or top-down forms of social responsibility; it privileges targeted interventions over generalized entitlements; and it inculcates active engagement over passive benefit receipt, an approach captured in the phrase often associated with these programs: “paying for good behavior.”

Often styled as a Latin American “invention,” the operational principles and programming practices of CCTs have been actively co-produced, almost since their inception, by multilateral development agencies like the World Bank. They have since spread throughout South America, and indeed to every continent, at a prolific rate. The “onward march of conditional cash transfer [programs],” Anthony Hall (2012: 26) has noted, “is an increasingly global phenomenon.” In less than a decade, what began as a pair of isolated experiments (in Mexico and Brazil) has become established, in effect, as the default setting for anti-poverty reform: “the international development community has clearly defined CCTs as the new norm” (Sugiyma, 2011: 264).

But what Lawrence Aber and Laura Rawlings describe, writing for the World Bank, as the “remarkable global expansion” (Aber and Rawlings, 2011: 1) of CCTs has not been achieved by way of heavy-handed coercion;

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these widely emulated programs have been subject to a distinctive form of best-practice contagion, fueled by expensively marshaled evaluation evidence and guided by expert networks: “CCTs have been closely studied and well evaluated, creating both a strong evidence base from which to inform policy decisions and an active global community of practice.” Classically modeled on Progresa-Oportunidades in Mexico, CCTs are now found in approaching fifty countries. They have been trumpeted by the Economist (2010: 10) as “the world’s favourite anti-poverty device,” while for Nancy Birdsall, president of the Center for Global Development, they are “as close as you can come to a magic bullet” (quoted in Dugger, 2004: A1).

CCTs seek to be both pro-poor and pro-market by incentivizing those human-capital building behaviors, like regular school attendance and preventative healthcare, determined to benefit the children of low-income households. As such, they borrow concepts from behavioral economics and motivational psychology, melding these with the pragmatic, best-practice style characteristic of the “new” Washington Consensus, in service of building a post-welfare rationale for “safety net” spending. Conditioning cash transfers is the crucial maneuver here, for this transforms what might be seen as an ameliorative “hand out” into an instrumentalist “hand up,” while enabling a form of social targeting actively linked to human-capital investment. According to the World Bank’s logic, “by supporting minimum levels of consumption, helping credit-constrained poor people to be productive, and providing incentives for long-term investments in human capital, safety nets have a potentially important role in compensating for the market failures that help perpetuate poverty, particularly in high inequality settings” (Aber and Rawlings, 2011: 4).

The global CCT wave has been enabled, bankrolled, and steered by the World Bank and its allies in the multilateral community (in concert with a small army of policy entrepreneurs, consultants, evaluation scientists, and practitioner-advocates), both through established channels like policy-based lending and, no less consequentially, through the increasingly isomorphic fields of expert knowledge and technocratic practice. The World Bank, the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB), and other multilateral development agencies often underwrite the operating costs of CCT programs—this having become, in effect, their authorized mode of social-policy intervention—but they have also actively fostered an explicitly experimental ethos around these programs, supporting the deployment of randomized control trials and the extensive dissemination of impact-evaluation studies. Echoing the way in which CCT programs incentivize “appropriate” behaviors amongst poor families, the multilateral development agencies have been “paying for
good behaviour” in policymaking communities themselves, insisting that elaborate evaluation strategies must accompany all new interventions, and that the policy-development process must be rigorously evidence-based. This speaks to a new style of transnational policy development, the terms and the terrain of which are preemptively shaped by fast-traveling models like CCTs. But where do these models come from?

Immaculate Invention: Making the CCT Model in Mexico

It is no exaggeration to say that Mexico’s CCT program (Progresa, as it was originally called) was born as a model. But the “iconic” status that it would eventually achieve, to borrow the World Bank’s munificent phrase (Fiszbein et al., 2009: 36), would need to be secured through a combination of astute technocratic design and enduring political will. The case for radical reform of the Mexican social-assistance system was pressed in the midst of the Peso crisis of 1994-1995, when it was championed by Santiago Levy (a US-trained economist and senior official in the Ministry of Finance, previously a World Bank consultant on poverty issues) and José Gómez de León (a demographer, director of the National Population Council, and confidant of then-President Zedillo). Fulsome reconstructions of the rationale, justification, and decisive steps that were taken at the time to build and secure Mexico’s pioneering CCT program have since been published by Levy (now Vice President for Sectors and Knowledge at the IADB). Levy’s (2006) book, *Progress against poverty*, is effectively presented as a model-making manual.

On Levy’s (re)telling, there were three circumstances of the Mexican reform process that were decisive. First, the new approach was theoretically grounded, being predicated on the latest “analytical advances” concerning the multi-dimensional determinants of poverty achieved by economists, sociologists, and nutritionists, which together established the “analytical backbone” for Progresa (Levy, 2006: 10, 11). Rendered in technical terms, these concerned the management of risk aversion, the containment of dependency, and the active engagement of beneficiaries. Second, deliberate attention was paid to the “lessons” from previous Mexican experiences, most of which were deemed to be negative. Previous interventions were judged to have inadequately targeted extreme poverty; they were prone to bureaucratic corruption and political manipulation; and a wide range of inefficiencies was associated with the use of food subsidies. And third, key decision-makers at the time knowingly “used[d] the crisis as a motivation for change,” (see above reference: 13) as an opportunity for systemic reform, sold as a single, bold leap to
world best practice, and designed to bring costs under control in anticipation of long-run budgetary pressure (see above reference: 10, 14, 15).

Here, the refinement of a rigorous conceptual definition of the CCT model preceded not only practical but even political considerations:

[The] challenge […] was to bring academic researchers’ analytical insights and [an] individual nation’s best practices together in a unified conceptual framework in order to incorporate that knowledge systematically in the design of the poverty program […] While the economic crisis created the immediate motivation for change—and the beginning of a new administration naturally created a political climate that facilitated change—the accumulation of empirical evidence, administrative experience, and analytical arguments was fundamental in gradually persuading the members of the Cabinet to make substantive adjustments to the existing food subsidy and related poverty programs. (above reference: 13-14)

This amounted to an extreme form of technocratic policymaking, prosecuted in the teeth of opposition not only from civil-society groups but also from the leadership of the federal government’s own social-policy ministry (Teichman, 2009). Exaggerated faith was placed in the kind of economistic technoscience favored by the World Bank, for whom Levy had worked as a professional economist-cum-policy analyst, an organization later credited for “generously provid[ing] technical advice” (Levy, 2006: 114) during the design, piloting, and startup phases of the program. Crucially, however, the involvement of the multilateral development agencies (in particular, the World Bank and the IADB), while formative, was not to be rendered politically legible in the form of a large-scale loan, notwithstanding the severe financial pressures under which the Mexican government was operating at the time. In an instance of mandarin-class bureaucratic understatement, Levy would later explain that, “it was not deemed convenient to obtain international funding for the program [in] 1996-97 [because] such financing would have added yet one more controversial aspect to what was already a fairly significant change in poverty policy, perhaps giving the impression that the program was the result of a mandate or an adjustment program agreed upon with international financial institutions” (Levy, 2006: 114; see also Teichman, 2007; Dion, 2010).

This said, Progresa was in many respects a World Bank/IADB-style project in all but name, since in its basic rationale and fundamental design the program reflected ascendant currents in expert opinion across the multilateral agencies, albeit mostly at the level of conceptual principle rather than (as yet) actually existing practice. In as far as Progresa really was a bold experiment, this was because it sought to capture, and then to act decisively on, a still-emergent expert consensus—what might be called “pre-best practice.” Retrospective accounts, however, continue to position the experiment out in front
of global best practice, which not coincidentally confers leadership status on an inner circle of elite decision-makers in Mexico City. According to one of those closely involved,

[The Progresa] proposal was received with great skepticism and opposition by some Mexican policy makers as well as by international agencies. In Mexico, some policy makers saw the proposal as a ‘neo-liberal attempt to eliminate subsidies for the poor’ and as ‘an imposition by international agencies.’ Political parties were concerned about a federal program that would ‘give out money,’ presumably with electoral and political motives. International agencies thought it operationally and politically unfeasible. (Rodriguez, 2008: 288)

The international agencies, one can perhaps conclude, did not however find the Progresa proposal to be conceptually incoherent. Its model-like rationality would not have been questioned by policy experts in Washington, DC, and indeed the robustness of this rationality—that “analytical backbone”—was the basis on which the audacious experiment was defended during the protracted debate around the program’s rationale and design in Mexico City (Levy, 2006; Rodriguez, 2008).

A key strategy of those championing Progresa had been to focus “discussions as much as possible on objective and technical elements,” bringing in “well-known national and international experts” where necessary to bolster the case for controversial aspects of the plan, in order to technocratically settle matters “where there had been differences of opinion” (Rodriguez, 2008: 297). Decisively, it would later transpire, a state-of-the-art evaluation framework was built into the program at the design stage, based on a randomized control-group methodology and managed by the well-regarded Washington, DC evaluation house, IFPRI.2 Program-design components such as the development of an index of marginality and the specification of targeting and (random) assignment procedures were designed and enacted with nothing short of scientific rigor, even as “[c]ritics, particularly leaders of civil society organizations, expressed moral revulsion at a program evaluation process that involved the use of a control group (10 million Mexicans) who received no Progresa support [on the basis of a purely statistical rationale, so that their] progress could be compared with those who did” (Teichman, 2009: 79). The denial of aid to millions of the rural poor in the midst of a macroeconomic crisis, whose extreme poverty had been meticulously verified as a prelude to assignment to the off-program control group, was deemed a price worth paying, evidently, “to test whether the design hypothesis was correct […] to quantify the impacts of the programme [and] to determine whether design

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2 The International Food Policy Research Institute (see Adato and Hoddinott, 2010).
guidelines were being followed and identify if observed outcomes were attributable to implementation or design aspects” (Rodriguez, 2008: 293).

Some would no doubt argue that the greater good was in fact served, since the first results of the IFPRI evaluation—which were interpreted in largely positive terms—became available on the eve of the transition from the Zedillo to the Fox presidency in 2000. The newly elected President Fox was persuaded (by Santiago Levy, whose services he was to retain) not only to preserve the program, but to expand it. Rebranded as Oportunidades, what would become the country’s flagship social program was extended to the cities and to other rural regions, eventually reaching one-fourth of the Mexican population and becoming a celebrated test case-cum-lesson for “scaling up success” (Cohen and Easterly, 2009; see also UNDP, 2011). The IADB initiated large-scale funding for the expanded program in 2001, which was soon the object of lavish praise in nearly every quarter of the multilateral policy community.

When James Wolfensohn finished his term as president of the World Bank, in July 2006, one of his first acts as eponymous head of the Brookings Institution’s new Center for Development was to commission Santiago Levy to write the definitive account of the Progresa/Oportunidades story. In the foreword to the book, Wolfensohn (2006: vii) rather generously—but certainly not innocently—chose to characterize the Mexican CCT as a “homegrown program, based on solid economic and social analysis,” indeed one premised on an arrestingly “simple idea,” generously (but again not innocently) credited to Levy himself. Wolfensohn’s hope was that “this volume can serve […] as a model of effective design of large-scale sustainable poverty reduction programs,” since the Progresa/Oportunidades story amply demonstrated that, “in addition to the technical aspects of a poverty program, institutional elements that can ensure adequate scale and continuity are equally indispensable for effective poverty alleviation” (Wolfensohn, 2006: ix-x, emphasis added). As an experiment that worked, the Mexican experience stood as a shining example of rigorous model building, but model building with a purpose. The scientific rationales and rigorous evaluations that had defined this experiment, and which have since sustained it through several transfers of presidential power, were the means to end of a form of technocratic (re)production effectively “insulated” from politics.
Transnationalizing the CCT Model: a More-than Washington Consensus

“The widespread distribution of published reports of PROGRESA’s outcomes,” Sugiyama (2011: 254) notes, “furthered the notion that Mexico had developed a model social program.” The model had apparently found its moment. But nothing about this was accidental, of course. The IABD had discreetly funded the IFPRI evaluation program in Mexico from the start, further cementing close relationships between the project’s technocratic leadership and the bank (Teichman, 2007), and the evaluation itself had been addressed as much to external audiences as to internal policymaking constituencies. Even though the IFPRI evaluation team relocated to Mexico for three years to manage the project there, the first presentation of the evaluation results took place not in Mexico City, but in Washington, DC.

Little wonder, then, that Aber and Rawlings (2011) credit the ascendancy of evaluation-driven and evidence-based policymaking—especially involving randomized trials—as one of three decisive factors behind the globalization of CCTs. Long maligned as “gray” literature, destined for the back drawers of ministry filing cabinets, evaluation research has been propelled from the shadows to the spotlight in this process, emerging as a significant model-building arena in its own right. Positive evaluation results, especially where these meet the stern tests of statistical validity, have become an international currency of sorts. Progresa’s state-of-the-art evaluation not only ensured the program’s longevity (especially at the vulnerable moment when the incoming Fox administration had both a clear mandate and a presentation need to break with the Zedillo inheritance), it effectively secured international-model status for the rebadged Oportunidades program, which was (re)born as a validated best practice.

A rigorous evaluation design, based on experimental principles, was literally embedded into Progresa-Oportunidades, initially as a way to insulate the program from the threat of political “interference.” (Note that this maneuver positions the imperatives of social-policy technoscience ‘above’ domestic politics.) Its longer-term impact, though, has been to propel the Mexican program into the center of international debates over social protection, while also contributing to the “culture of evaluation” (Fiszbein et al, 2009: 94) that has enveloped the design and implementation of CCTs worldwide (see above reference: 94-5). Aber and Rawlings state that CCTs “are now arguably the best evaluated development initiative in the Global South,” their rapid global spread having been
fueled by [the] compelling design features [of the paradigmatic programs], their promising evaluation results and the emphasis on knowledge sharing within the CCT and welfare reform community. This experience provides an example of the speed with which innovation can be adopted and scaled up, following a dynamic demonstration effect, with a solid grounding in evidence. (2011: 7, 10)

As randomized control trials have become the common currency in international policy debates, their high implementation costs impose implicit entry barriers for participation in the global social-protection debate. Since it costs, in effect, several million dollars to ask a question using a randomized-control methodology, only the institutions with the deepest pockets get to determine the questions. This creates a macro selection bias in favor of orthodox interests, issues, and lines of policy development. Evaluations without a significant experimental-design component are also prone to be treated as “softer” and “less scientific,” being seen as potentially subject to political manipulation or overselling, and suspect in terms of innate evaluative rigor. The World Bank, other multilateral development agencies, and the leading evaluation houses, on the other hand, enthusiastically promote those programs that have been evaluated using randomized-control procedures, to external audiences as best-practice models with papers.

Not only does this tend to naturalize certain forms (and directions) of technocratic reproduction, it further contributes to the sense that the “big questions” concerning the philosophy and design of CCT programs are firmly settled. The biggest of these concern the efficacy and ethics of conditionality themselves which are systematically bracketed out in a situation in which the experimental universe is dominated by different kinds of conditional programs and only a few unconditional programs.

If the rise of evaluation science is the first of the drivers of transformation in social-welfare policy identified by Aber and Rawlings, the second concerns the use of incentives in program design, a trend that reflects both the behavioral turn in economic thinking and the political embrace of approaches that “responsibilize” the poor. And just as the behavioral turn has played a part in unifying economic theory, breaking down—in tandem with neoliberalization—some of the old distinctions between a “mainstream” economics ostensibly applicable in the Global North and “development” economics for the South (see Naim, 2000), so too have the policymaking boundaries between different “welfare worlds” (see Esping-Andersen, 1990) become increasingly porous, as policy discourses and debates associated with the Global North and South have become increasingly interrelated, combined, and mutually referential. It has become commonplace to position developments in, say, US social and labor-market policy (like the transition to the Tempo-
rary Assistance for Needy Families program or the rise of Earned Income Tax Credits) as part of the same “movement” as CCTs, with the Latin American experiments assuming the vanguard, as a moderately disruptive technology. The unifying “focus on a ‘hand-up and not a hand-out’ has broad political appeal,” note Aber and Rawlings (2011: 5), one that has “crossed traditional party lines and is reflected in political discussions and popular debate in both the North and South calling for an emphasis on work, on investing in human capital, on temporary assistance and on co-responsibility between the state and its citizens.”

Not coincidentally, such interventions also invoke, hail, and work upon an ostensibly universal economic subject, a rational actor duly enabled to act on her/his own to escape poverty, once appropriate adjustments have been made to the structure of opportunity costs, the patterning of incentives, and the calibration of risk and rewards. Amongst the notable features of the rise of CCTs, in this context, has been a certain leveling of the experimental playing field, as the Global South is reimagined as a potential site of positive programming lessons, and not simply as a location of wicked problems or a “receiving region” for made-in-Washington solutions. The agencies of the Washington Consensus remain deeply involved, of course, but in a situation in which the hubris of unilateral imposition has given way to a more facilitative posture, one that emphasizes the coproduction of expertise with governmental and nongovernmental actors in the South, the enabling of “horizontal” learning across sites and policy fields, and studied deference to well-documented impact evaluations and evidence of “what works.”

In this era of (supposedly) “pro-poor” policymaking, moreover, the language of the incentives paradigm yields obvious presentational advantages: what defines incentive-based programs like CCTs is that they pay for good behavior, in contrast to the negative undertones of workfare-style programs (with their penalties or “sanctions” for “noncompliance”). This said, both negative sanctions and positive incentives work on a behavioralist, “deficiency model” of the poor, since both seek to adjust inappropriate behaviors (dependency, underinvestment in schooling, poor hygiene, etc.) in order to mold more productive and more responsible subjects. CCTs, though, represent the positive side of this coin.

The third driver of transformation in globalizing social policy identified by Aber and Rawlings (2011), in addition to the turns towards behavioralism and evaluation scientism, is the shift in policy thinking and program design towards human-capital focused approaches. This involves what they portray as an historic reconciliation of the imperatives of humanitarian aid and short-term assistance on the one hand with the goals of long-term economic growth
on the other, which had previously involved tradeoffs and tensions. CCTs are held to achieve this by fusing cash assistance with future-oriented investments in the children of the poor (see Jenson, 2010). It is recognized that “CCTs are highly ambitious,” seeking as they do to “foster human capital accumulation among the young as a means to breaking the inter-generational cycle of poverty” (Aber and Rawlings, 2011: 6), and conceptualizing this as a multidimensional problem and endeavoring to mobilize positive synergies between education, nutrition, and health. With their distinctive emphasis on experimental practice, however, CCTs are credited with “pushing the boundaries of new thinking,” (Aber and Rawlings, 2011: 7) as a programming technology positioned at “the threshold of the global policy debate” (see above reference: 1). These boundaries are being pushed in such a way, however, as to consolidate new social-policy orthodoxies, certainly not to upend them.

CCTs, in this respect, can be seen as carriers of a new policy rationality, one that is understood to be continuously in the making in the style of an emergent form of deliberative technocracy. They not only encapsulate the “new thinking” on safety-net policy (see Table 1), which emphasizes social promotion over social protection, responsibilities over rights, and long-term investment over short-term amelioration, but they proactively substantiate an aspirational project located seductively on the threshold of leading-edge realization. This means that while the new generation of social-policy programs are globally diffused technologies, they are far from mature technologies. It is here, for all the uninterrupted soft sell of the best-practice industry, for all the debilitating barriers to entry and selection biases created by the “big science” evaluation regime, for all this paradigm-building momentum, unscripted surprises continue to occur, new mutations appear in the wild, and alternative or vernacular models find their way into the limelight.

Table 1 Conceptions of social assistance, before and after CCTs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Temporality</th>
<th>Philosophy</th>
<th>Tools</th>
<th>Barriers</th>
<th>Goals</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Welfare</td>
<td>Assistance in</td>
<td>Entitlement:</td>
<td>Dependency</td>
<td>Poverty alleviation; social redistribution</td>
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<td></td>
<td>times of need</td>
<td>entitlement-based transfers</td>
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<td>“handouts”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Post-Welfare</td>
<td>Activation through</td>
<td>Reciprocity</td>
<td>Access to</td>
<td>Exits from poverty, economic growth and human capital</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>targeted interventions</td>
<td>partnership with the poor; “hand up”</td>
<td>incentive based transfers</td>
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Source: developed from Aber and Rawlings (2011)
Multilateral Agencies, Message Control, and its Limits

In its multiple roles as a funder, evaluator, and technical assistance provider, the World Bank has been directly engaged the purposeful pump-priming and rapid diffusion of the CCT model, and it has been intimately involved in not only steering the course but managing the population of "experiments." In supporting CCT experiments in more than 45 countries, including the provision of $5.4 billion since FY 2001 for the development and scaling up of 39 CCT initiatives in 22 nations (Grosh, 2011), the World Bank is positioned de facto as the principal global broker of CCT “best practice,” even as (for understandable ideological reasons) this is typically represented in terms of an enabling, facilitating or clearing-house function. In this role, as an especially proactive intermediary, the Bank not only finances preferred lines of policy experimentation, it hosts international conferences; it funds and facilitates practitioner networks such as the South-to-South learning network, the “International CCT Community of Practice,” and others for midlevel and senior program managers (Fiszbein et al, 2009); and has published countless programming briefs, technical reports, policy presentations, and blogs advising governments on matters pertaining to CCT policy design, implementation, and evaluation.

Across these many channels, the World Bank’s policy advice has tended to coagulate around three poles of CCT practice, which effectively define the preapproved reform universe as well as the field of experimentation with CCTs: First (and foremost) the Mexican Oportunidades program, with its sophisticated targeting mechanisms, reliance on unambiguous conditionalities, and inbuilt evaluation infrastructure; second, the newer and relatively small-scale Chile Solidario program, which provides time-limited, highly targeted, and intensive interventions that are strictly contractualized and closely managed by social workers; and third, Brazil’s Bolsa Familia, which despite being the largest CCT program in the world credited for measurable reductions in both poverty and economic inequality, has a rather more questionable reputation—in orthodox circles—for having adopted a “softer” approach to conditionalities and targeting. World Bank researchers summarize the relative merits of these three CCT models as follows:

What really makes Mexico’s program iconic is the successive waves of data collected to evaluate its impact, the placement of these data in the public domain, and the hundreds of papers and thousands of references to them that this easy access has generated […] Brazil’s CCT provides something of an interesting contrast to the Mexican case in various respects. [It] takes a softer, more gradual tack on conditions [and] puts a shade more emphasis on redistribution than on human cap-
itial formation. Also, unlike the Mexican program, the Brazilian programs did not explicitly incorporate impact evaluations in their design [...] Chile Solidario [...] differs notably from classic CCT programs by customizing its conditions. Families initially work intensely with social workers to understand actions that could help them get out of extreme poverty, and then they commit to action plans that become the household-specific conditions of the benefit [...] Chile Solidario is thus far a model unto itself, although other programs are moving to emulate it to a degree. (Fiszbein et al, 2009: 36-39)

It is Oportunidades and Chile Solidario, two “model programs” that stress strong conditionalities and social obligations, that are most frequently promoted as appropriate for emulation. In a sense, Bolsa Familia is too large to ignore, but the paucity of officially sanctioned evaluation evidence, the decentralized administration of the program, and what is seen as a “loose” approach to conditionalities combine to deny the program favored model status in World Bank circles. The Bank’s definitive report on Bolsa Familia aptly travels under the unassuming title of The nuts and bolts of Brazil's Bolsa Familia program (Lindert et al, 2007). As a leading figure on the international CCT evaluation scene later reflected, “Nuts and bolts” was kind of self-effacing. “We're just putting the thing together, and this is how it basically works. There was no Model, capital-M, selling of it.” Crucially, what the Brazilian government chose to do with their “non-model” would depart from World Bank orthodoxy on the definitive terrain of conditionalities. In Brazil, the first C of CCTs has a rather different meaning: A member of the World Bank team in Brasilia explained it this way: “[Here], the poor are poor because of a historical process of social exclusion, and we owe them a debt. That’s fundamental in Brazilian thinking: They have citizens’ rights [but] have not always had access to those rights, and we have to pay this debt back to the poor [...] If I have a child not attending school [but on the] program, are we going to take it [the Bolsa allowance] away? Is my first response a penalty or a punishment? No, our response should be to go and investigate, to use it as a flag—use it as a flag for more care. For them, they would say that the C, as in CCT, is for care. [The idea is] not condition right away, it’s not a contract right away.”

While it may not meet with the approval of World Bank economists-evaluators, Brazil’s approach of combining soft conditionalities with social rights has resonated with program planners in sub-Saharan Africa, where large segments of the population live in abject poverty and where service de-

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4 Senior manager #1, World Bank Brasilia team, interviewed by Jamie Peck and Nik Theodore, May 2009.
livery systems are, by and large, inadequate. Here, capacities for targeting and monitoring are likewise underdeveloped. Correspondingly, CCT programs are less likely to stress conditionalities—partly out of choice, partly out of necessity—and there is often no penalty for noncompliance (Garcia and Moore, 2012). Across Africa’s emerging CCT frontier, the centralized and tightly managed Oportunidades program has notably less traction. Instead, Brazil has proved to be a source of more prosaic and practical lessons, as well as a different kind of model for what might involve into less conditional, rights-based CCTs. As a relatively late adopter of CCTs, Africa could potentially be a proving ground for alternative approaches, approaches that are not simply “suboptimal” in relation to the preferred models from Latin America, but which effectively redefine cash-transfer practice en route (see Ferguson, 2010).

Faced with extraordinarily high levels of poverty and social distress, a coalition of civil society organizations in Namibia sought to develop an alternative model of social protection centered on unconditional cash transfers. In the spirit of a citizen’s income approach, the Basic Income Grant (BIG) program provides 100 Namibian dollars ($11.90 US) per month to all residents of the settlement of Otvjero, where unemployment exceeds 70 percent and more than four in ten children are malnourished (Krahe, 2009). While a randomized trial was ruled out as “ethically problematic,” a non-randomized evaluation of the two-year BIG pilot project nevertheless revealed promising results: malnutrition plummeted, school attendance and health clinic visits rose, and residents increasingly sought employment opportunities in outlying areas—outcomes that were achieved without the requirements imposed by conditionalities. Yet the findings from this program have garnered little attention from the World Bank and other multilateral development agencies, and the Namibian program remains something of an anomaly, if not an ideological orphan, in international debates regarding the future of social-protection policy. Largely overlooked in orthodox circles, the BIG stands as a case of largely unprecedented model building, the relative isolation of which stems not from inferior performance but because it challenges the expert consensus in cash-transfer policy, which remains rooted in technocratic approaches to policy design predicated on means-testing, targeting, and, of course, conditionalities.

Countercultural experiments in unconditional cash transfers, such as the Namibian BIG program, may indeed be exceptions that underscore the more

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5 Civil society representative, Windhoek, Namibia, interviewed by Nik Theodore, October 2009; senior manager, think tank, Windhoek, Namibia, interviewed by Nik Theodore, October 2009.
general rule. But it would be premature to foreclose the possibility of mutation beyond the CCT consensus. In fact, the International Labour Office (ILO) has been taking up this cause in its evolving campaign around the "social protection floor." This relatively progressive current in the multilateral policy debate diverges from the "liberal-residualist" approach of the World Bank, where targeting and conditionality remain axiomatic (if not dogmatic) principles, while at the same time transcending the accommodationalist approach to "capabilities" and "social investment" paradigm favored by the OECD (Jenson, 2010). The Bachelet report on the social protection floor diplomatically acknowledges the achievements of the mainstream CCT programs, but more assertively insists that the debate around conditionality is "ongoing" (ILO, 2011: 82). Its conclusion that the conditionality "debate remains open" is a position that is echoed on the progressive flank of OECD deliberations on social assistance (see above reference). The more unvarnished articulation of this principle on the Global Social Protection floor website is that "human rights are unconditional," and as social security is a human right, it is therefore unacceptable to deny it through the enforcement of conditions.6

Thanks to these and other interventions, there may yet be surprising twists and turns in the global pathways of CCT experimentation. Despite the fact that only a tiny fraction of the massive global "experiment" in cash-transfer programming has been devoted to testing the viability and effectiveness of progressive others to the dominant CCT model—such as unconditional social transfers and basic-income initiatives—a perverse consequence of the single-minded focus on conditionality may have been to beg, by exclusion, questions around heterodox alternatives. Whatever the long-term fate of the ILO’s social-protection initiative, this underscores the fact that policy development via model building remains a somewhat uncertain and inescapably political process. Heavily resourced attempts at technocratic (fore)closure will doubtless continue, and they will also continue to shape both reform and the formation of social-policy norms, but all such attempts at formatting, templating, and prescription are destined to remain incomplete and contradictory, no matter how asymmetrical the accompanying power relations. Model power may be formidable, but it is not limitless.

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Conclusion: Post-Political Social Policy?

Conditional cash transfers are a prime example of especially fast-traveling, if not hypermobile, policies. Realized through an international infrastructure of purposive experimentation and technocratic persuasion, buttressed by the favored evaluation technology of the randomized control trial, the status of CCTs as programs “that work” has been firmly secured in global debates on social safety nets. Sophisticated (and costly) experimental designs have facilitated the construction of a “post-political” veneer around CCTs, the bipartisan appeal of which can be traced to their intriguingly kaleidoscopic character: conservatives see in them a rejection of the something-for-nothing welfare ethos, while liberals place value on progress in realizing social rights for marginalized populations. As a result, CCT models have come to define the innovative frontier in social policy across much of the Global South and in parts of the Global North (Peck and Theodore, 2010), foreshortening policy-development phases and often preempting meaningful debate at the same time. These political valences, coupled with the formidable resources (in both dollars and expertise) of the multilateral organizations, mean that the CCT wave has had the benefit of a strong institutional and ideological tailwind, meeting relatively few serious obstacles in its rapid transnational diffusion. Needless to say, the CCT “experiment” would never have been likely to surge from just two or three to nearly fifty countries in the space of a little more than a decade had it been ideologically countercultural or seriously disruptive in political or macroeconomic terms. Quick to implement and badged with expert approval, this model was made to travel.

Through the global diffusion of CCTs, the principle of behaviorally focused interventions, which at least at some level presumes that “corrective” action is both required and legitimate, has been consolidated as a post-welfare axiom across the political mainstream. In this context, fast-moving policy models also exert more subtle forms of normative influence, by establishing parameters around “acceptable” policy options. In some cases, the propensity of best-practice models to arrive on the scene, almost fully formed, as policies that work (albeit somewhere else), can have the effect of forestalling, foreshortening, or completely circumventing processes of local deliberation, debate, and consensus-building around policy reform efforts. Indeed, even in those cases where imported policy models do not directly “format” local responses, they will often exert indirect effects by canalizing and prefiguring the terms of debate. Brazil may have been pursuing a relatively autonomous course as the architect and manager of its own regime of not-really-conditional cash transfers, but at the same time its
approach is being increasingly "relativized," not least by the purveyors of authorized CCT expertise at the World Bank. Bolsa Familia duly becomes the least-loved corner of a triangular reform universe, with the "iconic" Oportunidades and the "compelling" Chile Solidario occupying the more favored corners (see Fiszbein et al, 2009). The effect of this triangulation strategy is not simply to lift the relatively modest Solidario program into a status of implied equivalence with the big-league players in Mexico and Brazil, it also tilts the field in favor of the two more strictly conditional schemes favored by the Bank. In orthodox circles, there has been no squaring of the triangle through the elevation of Namibia’s BIG or other unconditional cash transfer programs, despite their potential applicability elsewhere, although the ILO and others have more recently attempted to destabilize this premature consensus.

Despite the undeniable influence of these best-practice models, backed by the multilateral development agencies and promoted through their distended networks of policy expertise, it would be incorrect to conclude that CCTs have been completely remaking the social-policy world in their own image. The CCT wave seems to be generating its own undertow, and the stubborn question of unconditional cash assistance has refused to go away. Countercultural alternatives to the CCT status quo persist, even as they remain largely sidelined within global policy debates. Meanwhile, unmet, real, and urgent needs in low-income communities around the world demand alternatives that go beyond the new-found orthodoxy of targeted, temporary, and conditional social assistance, which has so clearly failed to reverse decades of immiseration. Sustaining the case for such alternatives will surely necessitate, however, quite different forms of model power.

References


