

**SCIENTIFIC ARTICLE**

# Gramsci and the Production of Knowledge in Brazilian Social Service

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**Abstract:** This article analyzes the production of knowledge of Brazilian social service from 2000 to 2015, based on Gramscian thinking. It is a theoretical and bibliographic study that is the result of a research project and was conducted with the following sources: the journals *Serviço Social e Sociedade*, *Katálisis* and *Temporalis* and the *Anais dos Encontros Nacionais de Pesquisadores em Serviço Social* (ENPESS). The main results indicate the deepening of studies related to the work of this Italian thinker, especially those about issues such as state, civil society and hegemony. They contribute to the formation of a critical professional culture, the problematization of contemporary social phenomenon and to mediations between professional project and social projects.

**Keywords:** Gramsci. Social Service. Production of knowledge.

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## Introduction

This article is the result of a portion of the research project *Gramsci's thinking and its presence in Brazilian social service – knowledge production and political-interventive indications*.<sup>1</sup> The main focus of this study is to identify the presence of the work of the Italian thinker in academic production in the field of social service between the years 2000 and 2015, specifically in journals and congresses, such as the periodicals *Serviço Social e Sociedade*, *Katálysis* and *Temporalis* and in the *Anais dos ENPESS* [Annals of the National Encounters of Researchers in Social Service]. The journals were chosen considering their ranking by the Coordination of Higher Education Personnel's (CAPES) *Webqualis* system (at levels A1 and B1), their relevance, circulation among professionals and online accessibility. In terms of the congress annals, the choice of those from ENPESS is justified because it is the most important academic event in the field of social service in Brazil, and is a privileged space for the communication and socialization of research about the profession.

The studies analyzed since the year 2000 reveal an interest in the study of Gramsci's writings, particularly the *Prison Notebooks* and *Selections from Political Writings*, as well as a range of recognized Brazilian and international interpreters of his work.<sup>2</sup> Gramscian categories such as state, civil society, hegemony, transformism, subaltern classes, ideology, philosophy of praxis and culture are addressed from both a theoretical perspective and to support analyses of macrosocial processes, the Brazilian conjunctural situation of the 1990s and 2000s, social policies and professional action. The formulations reveal the depth of the studies that address relations between economics and politics, structure and superstructure, the movement of social classes in the situation of the organic crisis of capital and the resulting social transformations.

The methodological procedures that guided the investigation first involved a survey of the research sources, to identify those studies that approximate Gramscian thinking, and in which 371 articles were selected. Through a "fluctuating reading" (BARDIN, 2011), this selection was made using the following criteria: 1) the identification in the abstracts of an interlocution with Gramsci's work; 2) identification of Gramscian categories in the keywords; and 3) identification in the bibliographic references of the presence of the works of Gramsci or his interpreters. A selective reading (BARDIN, 2011) was conducted of this previously selected total, identifying the studies to be analyzed: produced by social assistants; with references to Gramsci's work; and with direct and indirect quotes from Gramsci. Based on these criteria, 243 studies were identified, and a deeper reading was conducted of 22 articles from the *Revista Katálysis*, 43 from the *Revista Serviço Social e Sociedade* and 27 from *Revista Temporalis*, as well as 151 articles from the *Anais dos ENPESS*.

This article does not mention all of the studies selected, but presents a synthesis of the main formulations articulated in three lines: state, civil society and social policies; civil society and democracy; and hegemony and civil society, contemplating reflections in the theoretical field, macro-social analyses and mediations with particular social phenomenon and with the profession. It is important to highlight that the interlocution of social service with Gramscian thinking began in the late 1970s and early 1980s and that for nearly four decades it has been intensifying the theoretical-methodological bases of the profession. This is expressed in the formation of a critical culture, which is revealed in political and interventionist practices through a commitment to the struggles and demands of the working class (SIMIONATTO, 2011). It can also be seen in the social direction assumed by the profession, which is revealed in the main guidelines of the ethical-political professional project.<sup>3</sup>

## 1 State, civil society and social policies

The Gramscian concept of state has a strong presence in the studies identified, and is addressed from the reflections developed in the *Prison Notebooks*. The citations of Gramsci's writing indicate a growing intellectual maturity and the accumulation of knowledge that has been registered in recent years, particularly in graduate courses, revealing a concern for more in-depth theoretical research. The concept of the integral or expanded state, as developed by Gramsci (2002, p. 139), is considered as "the result of organic relations between [...] political society and 'civil society'". The first involves "state coercion", shaped by the apparatuses of repression and violence and the second refers to "private apparatuses of hegemony", that is, the organizations responsible for the elaboration or diffusion of ideologies.

The largest domain of the theoretical bibliography is also expressed in studies that address the relationship of continuity and rupture as understood by the concept of the state used by Marx and Gramsci and in polemics in the Marxist tradition. These studies relate to the interlocution between Marx, Lenin and Gramsci, and indicate the movement of conservation and overcoming in the development of Marxist theory of state, which is found in the perspective of the Italian thinker (PEREIRA; MARANHÃO, 2004;

BERTOLLO, 2012). The more expressive approaches, however, refer to the analysis of the organic crisis of capital on a global scale, with a focus on the Brazilian particularity and on conjunctural changes triggered by counter-reforms between the decades of 1990 and 2000 and the consequent changes in the relationships between state and society.

If the starting point of the studies analyzed focuses on the perspective of expansion of the state phenomenon or the expanded state, which according to the expression, coined by Buci-Gluksmann (1980), is constituted by political society and by civil society, the emphasis falls on the latter. Substantive formulations mark the polysemy of the concept and the countless meanings that are attributed to it in contemporary reality, linked to leftist, post-modern or neo-liberal rightist trends (SIMIONATTO, 2004). In the theoretical field, the studies address a range of thinkers from Bobbio, and pass through the broad “process of resignification of civil society”, in vogue in the 1970s with Habermas, and his *Theory of Communicative Action*, to “new civil society” coined by Cohen and Arato (SIMIONATTO, 2004; DURIGUETTO, 2005; ALMEIDA, 2008), and their consequences in the formulation of the Third Path by Giddens, and its condensation in neoliberal ideals. Critical analyses raise the debate about civil society, substantiated in the “Third sector”, in its ties with “voluntary associativism” and to “civic virtues”, indicating the currently “growing process of depoliticization and de-economization of this sphere” (ALMEIDA, 2004, 2008). The counter position to these perspectives is sought in the understanding of civil society in a Gramscian sense, as the “sphere of class struggle” (DURIGUETTO, 2005), spaces in “which social projects confront each other, in which the struggle for the construction of hegemonic projects of class take place” (DURIGUETTO; SOUZA; SILVA, 2009, p. 14).

The theoretical bases identified in the research material propitiate rich mediations with Brazil’s particular conditions, with authors reflecting on the relations between state and society in the governments of President Fernando Henrique Cardoso (1995-2002) and in those of the recent Working Party administrations (SIMIONATTO, 2006; CISNE, 2008; MOLLER 2012; SILVA, 2008; SILVEIRA; LEITE, 2012). With a Gramscian inspiration, the studies indicate that the Brazilian state operated a “transformist absorption of the antagonistic social forces in the state apparatus; a restriction of democratic political practices to institutional marks; a transformation of the struggle against poverty and inequality into an administrative problem” (SILVEIRA; LEITE, 2012, p. 3). Transformism, a category used by Gramsci, especially to analyze the formation of the bourgeois Italian state, is also a concept incorporated to the analyses of the government of President Luís Inácio Lula da Silva (2003-2010) and to the changes provoked in class identity and consciousness (AMARAL, 2002; VIEIRA, 2012), through the so-called “democracy of cooptation”, notably in relation to the Central Única dos Trabalhadores [Single Workers Center], CUT, the largest national union confederation (MARQUES, 2012).

The Gramscian category of the amplified state – political society plus civil society – stands out in the studies analyzed, as a mediation for understanding social policies in contemporary capitalist society based on three lines of focus. The first relates the analysis of social policy to the macro-social framework, in the realm of the economic, socio-political and cultural processes. In the texts analyzed, social policies are determined by the conflict between social classes and the distinct influences they have on the state apparatus (SILVA, 2008; FARAGE, 2012). In Gramsci’s line of thinking, the state “cannot be reduced to a mere will of the dominant as if the class contradictions (between classes and interclasses) did not exist and did not determine the direction of the forms of conducting politics” (DIAS, 2006, p. 23). Therefore, the incorporation of the demands of the subaltern classes is configured in the access to the rights of citizenship (MENDONÇA, 2008), solicited through the collective organization of workers and materialized through social policies.

The second focus with greater presence in the material analyzed addresses the contemporary conjuncture in which there is a redirecting of universal social policies that are pillars of the welfare state, towards a focus

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on the poor and vulnerable segments, based on the premises of the international agencies and the strategies used for the recomposition of the domination of class under the bourgeois ideology. These analyses refer to the structural relations of Brazilian social formation, and are supported by the Gramscian categories of “passive revolution” or “revolution from above”, that have marked Brazil’s transition to capitalist modernity (DURIGUETTO; SOUZA; SILVA, 2009, p. 14), the steering of social policies in the context of the processes of (counter) reform of the state and the focus on programs focused on fighting poverty. The emphasis falls on new models for administrating social policies through the reinvigoration of public-private relations and new philanthropies, with a highlight on social assistance policy. Critical analyses comment on the conservative and dominant elements present in its political-ideological base, their functionality to the demands of capital (PEIREIRA, MARANHÃO, 2004; MARQUES, 2012) and the forms of “intervention of the bourgeoisie” (PFEIFER, 2006; DELGADO, 2008), through “mechanisms of coercion and consensus”. The new logics that are intrinsic to it did not create space for the actions of resistance but led civil society to the “terrain of the economic-corporative struggles (SILVEIRA; LEITE, 2012, p. 3) and to the maintenance of the clientelistic relations between governments and governed (MENDONÇA, 2008).

The third line, related to the theme of the state, civil society and social policies, focuses on the analysis of the occupational spaces emerging for social assistants in the sphere of the third sector, encompassing various philanthropic institutions, including those of a religious or business character and non-governmental organizations working under the premises of volunteerism, social responsibility and entrepreneurship (ALONSO, 2010). The de-responsibilization of the state is problematized, as well as the outsourcing of social policies and participatory strategies (PAZ, 2012) based on “neoliberal utopias”, which have been incorporated to the discourse and practice of various civil society organizations, including unions and political parties. Taken as partners of the state, these organizations hide the contradictions, transforming the perspective of rights into questions of help and solidarity, precisely contrary to the premises of the professional ethical-political project (GUSMÃO, 2000). In regard to the new requirements placed on professional action, the theoretical elaborations refer to the essential and indispensable theoretical-methodological support, which is necessary for revealing the determinations and contradictions at a social level (BORDIN; ANZOLIN, 2012), their expression in professional spaces, the correlation of forces present and the potentialities for articulation around the collective struggle for the defense and strengthening of democracy and the quality of the services offered (GUIMARÃES, 2012).

In this direction stand out the analyses related to the political and interventionist dimension of professional work and its contribution to the development of a new hegemony from the bottom-up, based on the interests of the subaltern. In a Gramscian conceptual framework, the categories of hegemony and subalternity, which are dialectically interlinked by politics and expressed in the relationship between the state and civil society (YAZBEK, 2014), cast light on the elucidation of the “molecular ruptures as concrete and material expressions” of the “elevation of knowledge and the critical awareness and protagonism (...) of the subjects or groups with which social service works (LUIZ, 2008, p. 129). The interventionist character of the profession and the necessary mediations between the daily manifestations of the subaltern classes and the direction assumed in the professional ethical-political project become the theme of academic studies. The “pedagogic dimension” of professional practice, systematized by Abreu (2004) based on the Gramscian premise that “any relation of hegemony is necessarily a pedagogic relationship” (GRAMSCI, 1999, p. 44), supports the discussion around the subalternizing and emancipatory pedagogic profiles, related to the action of subjects involved and to the potential fronts in the formation of new individual and collective subjectivities. In this context are highlighted the formative experiences exercised by private apparatuses of hegemony, such as universities, through the socialization and democratization of knowledge produced, its contribution to the strengthening and qualification of the social subjects, for the construction “of a counter-hegemonic project” based on the “reorganization of the subaltern forces” (MARRO, 2010, p. 1), from the perspective of a materialization of the professional ethical-political project.

As a whole, the production analyzed thus reveals the unequivocal relevance of the Gramscian category of expanded state for understanding the contemporary capitalist state, the relations between political society and civil society as articulated units that are permeated by coercion and consensus and by class struggles. This perspective is, therefore, different from the liberal perspective that marks contemporary capitalist society, which denies class antagonisms. This argumentation reinforces the analytical foci already present in the production of social service, pointing to the new possibilities for investigation, such as the transformation between state, society and market in the context of contemporary capitalist crisis, the reorientation of social policies, the complex relations between public and private, the conflicts between the social classes, the organization of the working class and the demands and challenges presented to social service in the theoretical, political and practical-interventionist realms.



## 2 Civil society and democracy

Since the constitution of 1988, the revalorization of civil society has gained prominence in the Brazilian reality through the expansion of democratic processes that create new institutional mechanisms for participation in the public sphere. This new institutionality guarantees civil society's participation in the formulation of policies and in the control of public actions at the three levels of government. The emergence of councils, the possibilities opened to the participation of civil society in the state sphere through organized citizens and the impulses to the formation of a democratic culture for the defense of rights supported significant theoretical production in various fields of knowledge. In the realm of social service, studies of the councils with citizen participation in the fields of healthcare, social assistance and children and adolescents receive greater emphasis. Various organized spaces, such as conferences held at the three levels of government, healthcare forums, participatory municipal budget processes and others for urban planning and the National Front against Healthcare Privatization (BRAVO; CORREIA, 2012), are also analyzed, revealing the organizational capacity of civil society to intervene and interact with the state in the definition and preparation of social policies (CRISTO, 2012).

One approach of great relevance present in the texts analyzed is the need to define a concept of state and civil society to understand social control, with an emphasis on the Gramscian perspective. Gramsci become the main theoretical reference, chosen "because of the fact he is a Marxist author and has contributed in an indelible way to the understanding of the category of civil society, understood as part of the state" (CABRAL, 2012, p. 3). Even if the contemporary state seeks to establish its control over the whole of society and guarantee the maintenance of the interests of the dominant class, it is in this contradictory terrain that civil society organizations and participatory spaces aimed at the exercise of democracy and deliberation about the public sphere stand out (CORREIA, 2004; DELGADO, 2008). These spaces, understood as fields of disputes of interests and of a correlation of forces, are supported by Gramscian concepts, especially those concerning civil society, the sphere where hegemony and the confrontation of class projects is constructed (CORREIA, 2004). The administrative councils are considered to be important "trenches" in the "dispute for hegemony" (CAVALCANTE, 2008), which requires "reviving the concept of civil society (...) as a space of organized and articulated struggle of the subaltern classes in the search for edification of a new counter-hegemonic project" (DURIGUETTO, 2008, p. 99), capable of overcoming capitalist rationality (BRAVO; CORREIA, 2012) and confronting "big politics".

The themes of civil society and of democracy also relate to the analysis of the actions of social service in the field of social control, whether as an executor of social policies or as one of the new mechanisms for the participation of civil society. The professional actions stand out in councils, conferences, forums, plenary sessions and participatory budgets, as "legitimate spaces for professional intervention", that are essential to the "strengthening of semi-direct democracy and for the creation of resistances to the dismantling of public policies caused by the neoliberal wave underway in Brazil" (CORREIA; SOUZA; CAVALCANTE, 2002, p. 3). In this line there are studies of current trends towards the mercantilization, privatization and focalization of social policies, in consonance with the project of large capital, and the challenges faced by professional exercise to meet the demands of users and guarantee their rights. In this sense, the articles problematize the administrative processes, the forces present and the way that they influence decision making, given that the instances for social control are spaces charged with disputes, and therefore, facilitate the legitimatization of institutional interests. In the same direction, the articles warn of the obstacles created to the participation of civil society by the state structure by bureaucratization and a weak commitment to processes to democratize actions (CRISTO, 2012). In this analytical line, the productions signal the forms of cooptation of the institutes that organize the subaltern classes, which are needed for the maintenance of the political and ideological direction of the bourgeois class (DELGADO, 2008), synthesizing what Gramsci denominates as transformism. From this process stems a growing "depoliticization and weakening of social control, mainly in small municipalities (...) which suffer interferences of conservative administrators, adept at clientelistic and assistentialist practices" (FAVARO, 2010, p. 7).

Far from presenting an idyllic view of social control, the articles point to the challenges that councils have been facing in the creation of a participative culture that is necessary for the formulation and implementation of social policies that are pertinent to the interests of the subaltern classes, which "demand an investment in strategies that may be slow, but that are absolutely fundamental for the construction of a new society based on radically democratic principles" (CARVALHO, 2010, p. 7). The formulations emphatically emphasize the commitment of social workers to guaranteeing the rights of the user population, their contribution to the consolidation of citizenship, and to the defense and deepening of democracy (SCHREIDER, 2010), according to the principles of the Professional Code of Ethics. It should be emphasized, however, that while the expansion of the spaces of democratic participation unequivocally contributes to learning about and exercising political

practices, also certainly requires mechanisms for universalization, which are essential to confronting “big politics”, according to the Gramscian concept of civil society.

### 3 Hegemony and civil society

Upon analyzing the transformations of capitalist society of his time and the expressions of the state, and thus, civil society, Gramsci, begins from Lenin and (re)elaborates the category of hegemony, in relation to the treatment and critical examination of concrete historic phenomenon of the first half of the twentieth century. The Gramscian concept of hegemony is used as a historical-political criterion, which allows him to analyze the movement of social classes and disputes over power. In this process, coercion and consensus coexist in time and space and correspond to the supremacy of a certain social class over society as a whole, serving as the foundation of a heuristic analysis of civil society and political society, according to the indications of the Italian thinker.

The examination of the formulations of social service in the period analyzed allow identifying the different foci conferred to the hegemony. The first focus highlights the productions related to the analysis of hegemony in a wide variety of problems and questions related to contemporary reality, encompassing the expressions of the state, society and ideology. The formulations analyzed reveal the study of categories correlated to the hegemony from concepts found in the *Prison Notebooks*, such as: ideology, historic block, intellectuals, political party, common sense, good sense, intellectual and moral reform, subaltern classes, culture, national popular, relations between national and international, and philosophy of praxis, which offered valuable support to the discussion of the disputes over social projects (SIMIONATTO, 2009; BEZERRA, 2010; SILVEIRA, 2014; DURIGUETTO, 2014).

In the conceptual field, hegemony is understood as intellectual and moral reform, given that it suppresses the formation of a new culture, which makes the cultural battle a decisive factor in the conquest of consensus and of political-ideological direction by the subaltern classes (SOUZA; LUCENA, 2002). The theme of culture appears to be linked to the role of organic intellectuals and their function in the critical reconstruction of common sense and in the formation of citizen groups with a new subjectivity (BERTOLLO, 2012), such as the Landless Farmworkers Movement (MST) and its protagonism in the articulation of the subaltern classes in the dispute for hegemony (AZEVEDO, 2012, p. 5). Nevertheless, “although the privileged space of the struggle for hegemony is in the superstructure, it must necessarily involve a struggle for an alternative production model” (CABRAL, 2012, p. 5), given that, in Gramscian thinking, “while hegemony is ethical-political, it cannot also fail to be economic, it cannot fail to have its foundation in the decisive function that the leading group exercises in the decisive nucleus of the economic activity” (GRAMSCI, 2000, p. 48).

The second focus with greater highlight in the studies is linked to the study of the relationship between hegemony and civil society, with the later considered the “material carrier of hegemony” (ALMEIDA, 2004, p. 103). This highlights the “clearly political dimension” of the concept of civil society and its dialectical articulation “in the struggle for hegemony and for the conquest of power by the part of the subaltern classes”. In this perspective, hegemony is based on the “consensus of the allied social groups”, which are necessary to the “progressive conquest of a political-ideological unity, of a class direction, and the broadening and articulation of their interests and needs” (DURIGUETTO; SOUZA; SILVA, 2009, p. 14). This approach is completed by the studies about social movements and forms of popular organization and of resistance constructed in the realm of the class struggle, whose capacity to conduct politics has in the formation of alliances, the “fundamental condition – perhaps the decisive one – for the conquest of hegemony” (GUIMARÃES, 2015).

The fundamental terrain of the constitution of hegemony is civil society, which is thus linked to the expressions of the class movements and their antagonisms. Considering that the construction of hegemony occurs in the conflict between social classes, the articles refer to the study not only of the possibilities for elaboration of a counter-hegemony by the part of the subaltern classes, but also to the forms of domination used by the bourgeoisie in the construction of a consensus (active and passive) together with the subaltern groups (SIMIONATTO; COSTA, 2014), demobilizing their initiatives, deorganizing them in relation to themselves and reorganizing them according to bourgeois interests. Within this analytical line stand out studies of the ideological-political apparatus that shape a homogenizing, acritical and classless conception of civil society, which are pillars of the neoliberal hegemony, and of the ideals of the international agencies (AMARAL, 2002; MOTTA, 2008; CUNHA; LOUREIRO, 2012). To escape from this ideological command of another class, to break with these modes of thinking are necessary but not sufficient conditions for the construction of hegemony. In addition, according to Gramscian indications, this requires the creation of intellectuals, organizers and leaders to form a political consciousness, and recover a unity between theory and practice, which is at the base of the “political development of the concept of hegemony” (DURIGUETTO, 2014, p. 273).

Finally, the studies that refer to the professional exercise of social assistants in relation with social movements also stand out, with an emphasis on the processes of popular mobilization and organization and the possibilities to contribute to the strengthening of the struggles aimed at the construction of hegemony of the subaltern classes. This refers to the professional political-ethical project, given that its hegemony requires dispute, a confrontation of conservatism and the ability to articulate forces for the construction of “concrete responses (on the theoretical, philosophical, practical-interventionist, ethical-political plane) to the dilemmas found in social service today” (MARRO, 2006, p. 213).

## Conclusions

The study conducted reveals that the approximation of social service with the Gramscian reference has been contributing to the expansion of theoretical studies and to a more critical understanding of reality, through a significant range of categories sought in the original sources and in Brazilian and other interpreters. There is a growing number of studies about the state, civil society, hegemony and correlated concepts such as ideology, common sense, transformism, subaltern classes, intellectuals and consequently of politics.

Gramsci's theoretical reflections and concepts permeate the formulations of social service, allowing a strengthening of the production of knowledge and the formation of a critical culture based on theoretical-methodological and ethical-political principles, which are expressed in the deciphering of the new determinations present in social reality and in their mediations with professional exercise. Moreover, in times of a strong advance of neoconservatism, of anti-Marxist and anti-intellectual postures (MOTA; AMARAL, 2014) which riddle the professional environment, it is essential to intensify the production of critical knowledge. This requires readings of reality that are impregnated by historicity and reveal the determinations and contradictions. They must simultaneously construct mediations that decipher the demands and requisitions that confront the daily work of the profession. In this light, “the approximation of social service with Gramscian thinking has provided social service a better interpretation of reality and understanding of the totality of the social being in a historic and critical form” (ÁVILA, 2010, p. 5).

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## Notas

- 1 This research project in progress is supported by a research productivity grant from CNPq.
- 2 Some of those most cited in Brazil include: Carlos Nelson Coutinho, Edmundo F. Dias, Giovanni Semeraro, Marco A. Nogueira, Mauro Iasi, Álvaro Bianchi, Marcos Del Roio, Marina M. Abreu, Franci G. Cardoso, Ivete Simionatto, Maria L. Duriguetto and the foreign writers: Luciano Gruppi, Guido Liguori, Domênico Losurdo, Giorgio Barata, Fábio Frosini, Hugues Portelli, Cristine Buci-Gluksmann.
- 3 Important texts elucidate the use of the term “ethical-political” which has a Gramscian inspiration and its approach in the realm of the profession’s ethical-political project. In Gramsci, the category is correctly linked to a social project when it overcomes individual and corporative interests, the passage from the sphere of structure to the sphere of complex superstructures, reaching the ethical-political moment. In this direction stand out important indications about the understanding of the ethical-political moment that “cannot be mechanically transposed to a profession”, which “cannot be responsible for the construction of a hegemony capable of articulating the forces of all of society”, given that professional forces are participants in this process (RAMOS, 2002, p. 4).

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