

THE PROCESSES OF DISMANTLING AND CHANGING DIRECTIONS IN SPORTS AND LEISURE POLICIES: WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM THIS?

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ABSTRACT: The objective of this reflection is to share literature that has focused on experiences of the dismantling of public policies with the aim of highlighting under which conditions public policies become more resistant and resilient in the face of extremist governments. This is a reflective study, theoretically supported by references from political science and the field of public policy. Results. Dismantling does not have a similar impact on all actors, policy areas/sectors and audiences. In the case of sports and leisure policy, an active dismantling at the national level is identified, as well as a failed attempt to change the arena. Final considerations. This literature helps us understand the institutional and political arrangements that result in greater robustness in the configuration of public policies and that must be problematized and sought after in the area of sport and leisure.

KEYWORDS: Public policies. Dismantle. Political change. Institutional and political arrangements.

OS PROCESSOS DE DESMONTES E MUDANÇAS DE RUMOS NAS POLÍTICAS DE ESPORTE E LAZER: O QUE APRENDER COM ISTO?

RESUMO: O objetivo dessa reflexão é compartilhar uma literatura que tem se debruçado nas experiências de desmontes das políticas públicas com o intuito de evidenciar em quais condições as políticas públicas tornam-se mais resistentes e resilientes frente a governos extremistas. Trata-se de um estudo de reflexão, sustentado teoricamente a partir de referências da ciência política e do campo de públicas. Resultados. Os desmontes não impactam de forma similar todos os atores, áreas/setores de política e públicos. No caso da política de esporte e lazer identifica-se um desmonte ativo na esfera nacional bem como uma tentativa fracassada de mudança de arena. Considerações finais. Essa literatura nos auxilia na compreensão dos arranjos institucionais e políticos que resultam em maior robustez na configuração de políticas públicas e que devem ser problematizados e almejados na área do esporte e lazer.

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PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Políticas públicas. Desmonte. Mudança política. Arranjos institucionais e políticos.

Introduction

I would like to thank the organizers of the event for the invitation and to express my satisfaction in participating, for the first time, in Conbrace, an event of such magnitude for the field of physical education, sport, and leisure science in Brazil and Latin America. I leave convinced that CBCE is a relevant political and activist actor in strengthening the institutionalization of the field (by proposing policies, ensuring social control, and ventilating politics that occur outside the State, including minimizing the bureaucratic fragility of the industry). It reminds me of the role played by the Brazilian Association of Collective Health – Abrasco – in public health. I also emphasize the importance of this meeting at a time of reaffirmation of the democratic state and of the reconstruction of progressive trajectories for social policies in Brazil.

Considering the theme of this panel, I chose to focus on the processes of dismantling in Brazilian social policies, with emphasis on sports and leisure policy, which took place during the last administration, and subsequently on the resumption of a progressive line in light of the reaffirmation of a democratic state. The purpose of this reflection is not to dwell on the recent past of destruction of public policies, but to share literature that has focused on these harmful experiences for our social protection system, with the aim of highlighting under which conditions public policies become more resistant and resilient in the face of extremist and reactionary governments.

I begin by drawing attention to the fact that, from the second half of the 1990s and throughout the first decade of the 2000s, we achieved undeniable advances in social policies through their expansion, especially regarding the broadening of access to

health, social assistance, and income transfer programs (Pitombeira; Oliveira, 2019). Additionally, throughout the 1990s, important progress was made focusing on the federative dimension of social policies, particularly through the inclusion of municipalities as crucial implementing actors of these actions (Arretche, 2015). Beyond the challenges brought by the processes of decentralization of social policies, national and subnational administrations faced and continue to face, throughout the 2000s, structural issues in the operationalization of social policies linked to technical, budgetary, or managerial limitations.

It is known that the role of states and municipalities varies among governmental departments, not only among those constitutionally regulated, but especially in areas with less defined federative arrangements, such as the environment, human rights agendas, and, to this list, I add the area of sport and leisure. Despite this, there are many situations in which, in the absence of coordination by the federal sphere, states and municipalities have taken the lead and shown protagonism in times of crisis.

The most recent crisis of the Brazilian government began in 2013 and deepened in 2016 with the impeachment process of President Dilma Rousseff, which culminated in the election of Jair Bolsonaro, a far-right candidate who unleashed a setback in the Brazilian social protection system, dismantling social achievements and launching successive attacks on social policies, further weakening the living and health conditions of the population. From 2019 to 2022, we witnessed in the country a political project in opposition to democratic achievements and moving toward an ultraconservative and reactionary liberal state, with a public defense of the military dictatorship (Avritzer, 2020; Costa, 2019).

It is important to emphasize that public policies have never been immune to political, social, and economic dynamics. Issues related to the institutional environment, changes in the correlation of forces, the occurrence of external

events, and the configuration of conflicts among different actors operating in the public policy arena directly impact the conditions of stability or change in governmental action (Mello, 2023, p. 414).

However, it is worth noting that, since the Federal Constitution of 1988 (CF/1988), changes in social policies have followed a trend of expansion, structuring, institutionalization, consolidation, and improvement over time (Menicucci and Gomes, 2018; Mello, 2023). When it comes to social policies, this process is identified in the areas of health, education, and social assistance; however, some remained with little relevance in terms of structuring and institutionalization, and here we are particularly interested in sports and leisure policy. This explains why public policy studies know more about policy expansion than about the causes of dismantling (Bauer *et al.*, 2012).

The sport and leisure policy has dealt with low institutionalization since the emergence of the field associated with the expansion of social rights after the constitutional convention. On the one hand, the national sport and leisure policy gained institutional momentum through its inclusion as a social right in the CF/88, on the other, this achievement did not overcome the absence of a clear definition of responsibilities, funding, and obligations among the federative entities.

The fragilities of the sports area are evident in the little attention devoted to the topic, from the Constitutional Convention to the current management of the national policy. The normative confusion, mainly due to the absence of a definition of the roles of federative entities in implementing the policy, is largely reflected in decentralized initiatives encompassing numerous possibilities for intervention in the area of sport and leisure (Costa *et al.*, 2023).

Considering the matter at hand, this is the first dilemma presented regarding how the Government has been acting (or has acted) to guarantee the right to sport and leisure in the country. Given the low institutionalization of the sport and leisure policy

across all federative spheres, it seems that the Bolsonaro government faced little resistance or veto power in its dismantling and delegitimization efforts, especially concerning national policy.

To contribute to this reflection — that is, to contextualize the emptying of sport and leisure programs and its relationship with the dismantling of democratic institutions — I sought references from political science and public policy literature that analyze the effects of this administration on the Brazilian social protection system across different social policies. This discussion is grounded in the book *Desmontes e Reconfigurações das políticas públicas* (Gomide, Silva, and Leopoldi, 2023), in *Dismantling: Public Policy: Preferences, Strategies, and Effects* from Bauer *et al.* (2012) and in national and international political science authors who address this topic (Avritzer, Mello, Pierson, among others).

First, it is worth emphasizing that dismantling should not be understood as

a cohesive, single, and one-dimensional phenomenon but rather as processes of dismantling, given the heterogeneity with which dismantling processes have occurred and the differences in their degrees of intensity and density among governmental areas that vary according to policy type and the institutional context in which they are embedded and with which they interact (Bauer *et al.*, 2012; Mello, 2023, p. 413).

This is important for us to understand that the effects of the government's intentions have affected different policies differently. Which brings us to the idea that the “type of policy influences the dismantling policy” (Lowi, 1964, *apud* Bauer *et al.*, 2012, p. 7). And it makes us wonder how sports and leisure policy, given its historical institutional fragility at different levels of government, influenced and was impacted by the dismantling process under the Bolsonaro government.

In other words, dismantling processes do not impact all actors, policy areas/sectors, and audiences in a similar way. The capacity for influence and action of

actors, and their perception and response to the impacts produced by these initiatives will result in different reactions from groups and actors to the dismantling strategies. Who wins and who loses from the dismantling is an important factor in considering the conditions that make these processes possible and the level of engagement of governments in these strategies (Bauer *et al.*, 2012; Mello, 2023). Who were the political actors with the greatest capacity for influence and veto in the area, and how did they act in the face of the dismantling processes? In some more institutionalized policies, federal bureaucrats (public servants) played a fundamental role of resistance in different ministries (Bauer *et al.*, 2012).

Still in relation to the concept of dismantling, we can think of at least two perceptions of dismantling (Bauer *et al.*, 2012):

First, the dismantling processes can be perceived from a perspective linked to periods of crisis and economic restriction, when budget cuts are necessary, public programs or the scope of state action are reduced, and even beneficiaries are excluded from actions and services.

And the second perception, which attributes an active character to the dismantling process. It ceases to be the result of an unfavorable economic and fiscal environment and becomes a strategy for reorganizing or changing existing policies, aiming at their reduction, extinction, subordination or paralysis (Mello, 2023). In these cases, as provided by Bauer *et al.* (2012), dismantling can take different forms, but would be centrally characterized by the intention of governments to change the way in which certain policies or sectors of public policies are organized, in order to obtain political gains, meet commitments made to the electorate or align with the worldviews and interests of their support base.

The active nature of the dismantling process, evident in the last government, was intentionally set. According to Avritzer (2020), Bolsonaro “came to the presidency not as a political leader, but as someone willing to destroy policies and politicians” (p. 5). This anti-political modus was expressed and reiterated daily in the dismantling of the Ministries of Education, Environment, and Human Rights, and, above all, by the disregard for life and for alterity amid the coronavirus pandemic. We can include the Ministry of Sport and Leisure as a target of this action.

Reiterating this argument, Gomide, Silva e Leopoldi, (2023) highlight that, contrary to what is usually observed, where the ruler prefers to conceal their dismantling actions due to political wear, the Bolsonaro government wanted to be recognized for them, as they were evaluated by decision-makers as bringing political benefits. By using reactionary populist rhetoric, Bolsonaro managed to tie together support coalitions for which the active and explicit dismantling of certain policies was materially or symbolically beneficial.

Bringing this to the context of sport and leisure, the dismantling of the area initially occurred with the extinction of the Ministry and its transfer to the Ministry of Citizenship and Social Action, downgrading the handling of sports policy to a Special Secretariat, thus occupying a more than secondary position, causing an inertia in national sports policy (Guirra, Carneiro and Castellani Filho, 2021).

Added to the internal political conflicts within the portfolio, which saw several secretaries in a short period, the most structured federal programs were inactivated, and investments were reduced and shifted from programs to other actions outside the area's scope—clear intentional draining directed at the industry. There was, in fact, an abandonment in this government of an area that already suffered from little projection in

previous governments.

To help understanding of the processes of dismantling Brazilian social policies, Bauer *et al.* (2012) propose a categorization of dismantling into four strategies: i) by default (inaction); ii) by arena shifting; iii) by symbolic action; and iv) active.

Strategies for "dismantling by default" are marked by inaction or non-decision, which are in themselves actions. This type of dismantling is generally barely noticeable, although it directly impacts the level of activities and services offered, due to the stagnation of actions and programs or the non-fulfillment of planned steps in policy execution. It is associated with the idea of "*letting a policy die*" (Mello, 2023).

An example of this in the recent period can be observed in the area of food security, where in addition to the extinction, reconfiguration, and paralysis of the main deliberative bodies that made up the industry—the Council for Food and Nutritional Security (Consea) and the Interministerial Chamber for Food and Nutritional Security (Caisan)—the edition of the National Plan for Food and Nutritional Security (Plansan) scheduled for 2020-2023 was not drawn up (Mello, 2023, p. 419).

Another dismantling strategy occurs through "arena shifting", defined by changes in the institutional position of the policy's own decision-making arena or in its operating rules and procedures, with an impact on forms of deliberation (themes, agendas, and mechanisms) and participation (actors and bodies) (Bauer *et al.*, 2012). This type of strategy involves transferring a policy or portfolio to a different body, agency, or sphere of government. The national environmental policy was a clear example of this arena shift, that is, a change in decision-making position and its operating rules (Mello, 2023).

A third format of dismantling would occur through "symbolic action". In this case, there is a clear intention to associate dismantling with the political decision of the rulers, without this necessarily implying the effective decision to reduce or extinguish a certain policy (Bauer *et al.*, 2012). There is a declaration of intent to dismantle existing

policies to gain political advantage from this narrative, either aiming to meet the demands and interests of their support base or to respond to campaign promises.

Finally, there is the type of “active dismantling”, characterized by the deliberate and explicit action of reducing, suspending, or extinguishing the policy, its instruments, and supporting arrangements. These are changes that generate high visibility and mobilize efforts to alter the normative-legal, administrative, and procedural scope (Bauer *et al.*, 2012; Mello, 2023). When not characterized by the revocation of a specific policy or the extinction of a thematic area itself, this strategy tends to rely on measures of defunding and resource reduction, as well as the de-structuring of teams, processes, and structures and routines for executing actions, leading to the paralysis and stagnation of certain policies and agendas (Mello, 2023, p. 220).

According to this argumentative line of Bauer *et al.* (2012), in general, dismantling strategies will depend on the political conditions to be faced. In a context of little opposition, direct dismantling can be expected to attack the core of a certain policy. However, facing widespread resistance, the most likely strategy is dismantling by inaction or arena shifting. Nevertheless, if the dismantling aims to achieve something else (for example, appealing to a certain electorate that something is being done), then symbolic dismantling is likely the most appropriate choice (Bauer *et al.*, 2012). Still according to the author, there is a tendency for strategies to be used in combination with each other rather than in isolation (Bauer *et al.*, 2012).

In the case of sport and leisure policy, we could speak of an active dismantling in the national sphere, as well as a failed attempt at arena shifting, by defending the idea of militarization of sport, without simultaneously fostering programs with this structure.

Given this scenario, which demonstrates how much the government managed to demobilize and collapse an entire preceding trajectory of Brazilian social policies while maintaining significant political capital from supporters, the literature has sought to discuss not only the need for the reconfiguration of social policies, but especially which conditions and characteristics of public policies would facilitate or resist dismantling attempts. This is an extremely important reflection for this moment of resumption. Some conditions of policy have shown greater vulnerability and risk regarding dismantling strategies, namely:

- 1) Policy formulation and implementation arrangements centralized at the federal level and, consequently, marked by a low degree of involvement of subnational entities and societal actors (private initiative and organized civil society) would be less resilient to changes operated through dismantling strategies articulated by the central government. On the other hand, more decentralized arrangements have execution logics that are more dispersed and diversified, with simultaneous routines in different bodies or the staggering and hierarchization of the decision-making process with the participation of more actors, which also increases the number of veto players with the capacity to influence the design and operation of policies (Mello, 2023).

In the exercise of bringing this to the sports area, given the institutional fragility, in this case, of the federal sphere, to act in the coordination of the formulation and implementation of sport and leisure policies (except in specific programs), a transfer of responsibility to municipalities is observed in the area, in a model of “autarkic decentralization”, as occurred in several social policies at the beginning of the decentralization process, which suggests that the dismantling at

the central level had little effect on policy implementation in subnational spheres. Therefore, we know that the risk of local governments' inaction regarding actions in the area remains.

- 2) Low degree of consolidation and institutionalization of operationalization processes, execution logics, and normative-legal instruments.
- 3) Policy targeting strategies centered on serving the individual or families without connection and convergence with territorial, regional, or collective dynamics. That is, policies articulated with strategies focused on the territory or collective bodies would have greater resilience against dismantling efforts.

Again, sport and leisure policy, especially those of a community, participatory, and educational nature, suffer from this fragility, given the reduced number of civil society participation in the area that defends the legitimacy of sport and leisure as a right, coupled with the low permanence of programs and projects.

Also in the sense of understanding the factors that tend to create resilience in public policies, Gomide, Silva and Leopoldi, (2023) highlight: the costs incurred in building organizational capacities; the physical structure and human capital for policy execution; the expectations created among the actors involved, increasing the political cost of change; and finally, the beneficiaries of the policies who have an interest in maintaining the status quo.

More generally, actions and programs that rely on a legal, constitutional framework or are linked to public policy systems could have greater resilience than isolated actions or those that are not related to consolidated national policies or programs in a given policy area (Mello, 2023). In this regard, it is possible to state that areas such as human rights, environment, productive inclusion, rural development, and I

would include, sport and leisure, among others, would be more vulnerable to dismantling processes due to the lower degree of institutionalization of these policies (Mello, 2023).

The involvement of different bodies and organizations, from a multilevel arrangement perspective, in the management of public policies, combined with institutionalization mechanisms and implementation strategies based on territorial dynamics, would tend not only to increase the political cost of dismantling but also to make the state structure more immersed in different groups to decentralize the functioning of the State (Mello, 2023).

Studies on institutional arrangements and municipal state capacities can bring important elements to understand the configuration and resilience of sports and leisure policy, given a precarious condition of national coordination (historical) and a lack of professionalized federal bureaucracy that restricts the ministry from acting with greater potential to induce public policies.

Recent research conducted between UFMG and UEM, about the state capacities of approximately 1,200 municipalities in Minas Gerais and Paraná, still in an exploratory phase, highlights that the organizational structure of municipal sports policy, materialized in the presence of administrative bodies and regulation, is present in most analyzed municipalities, noting that the majority are small-sized. This finding signals a potential for boosting sports and leisure policy, given that it has a certain institutionalization at the local level (Costa *et al.*, 2023).

One of the main mechanisms for social participation in public policies, which are the municipal councils, is present in a large part of the municipalities in Minas Gerais, which is not verified in the state of Paraná, due to a state inducing mechanism

(Fiscal Law) in the state of Minas, which could be a replicable strategy for other states (Costa *et al.*, 2023).

The variables of committed expenditure and the bureaucratic staff prove to be the main bottlenecks in relation to the state capacity of the municipalities. Considering again the population size of the majority of municipalities (about 78% of them) (up to 20 thousand inhabitants), this finding highlights the relevance of a coordinated and intergovernmental action (with more presence from states and the federal government), in order to foster the policy through the transfer of resources and guidelines, given that the municipalities already have the minimum structure to execute sports and leisure actions (Costa *et al.*, 2023).

Considering the statement that the nature of the policy defines the character of the dismantling suffered, especially in light of the institutional approach, it is possible to infer that the process of dismantling sports and leisure policy at the federal level, intentionally provoked with the extinction of the ministry and demobilization of existing programs, had little effect on execution at the local level, given this prior lack of articulation, low coordination capacity, and the existing autarkic decentralization in the area.

It is a fact that some Brazilian state governors, aligned with the federal government's policy, followed the sequence of the ministry's extinction and dissolved state secretariats for sports and leisure; however, according to the literature, the very lack of coordination of the policy prevented the creation of a favorable scenario for a cascade effect of dismantling down to the municipal levels. For this assertion, new studies are required to prove not only the existing organizational structures but, above all, the local arrangements for implementing programs and projects in the area, the

actors involved in the policy, as well as the territorialization of the area, to verify how much the provision and guarantee of this right has been met, recognized, and legitimized by the public, which is the driving force of any public policy. According to Avritzer (2020), state capacity is not the only determining factor for policy performance, as the political dimension matters. In this case, the tensions between political coalitions (linked to the distribution of veto power among policy defenders) and state capacities are fundamental mechanisms in the results of dismantling and reconfiguring public policies.

Dismantling efforts are only one aspect of a much broader political game that actors interpret. According to Andrew, Bauer, and Green-Pedersen (2013), they can involve precisely the same activities that stand out in the everyday politics of policy expansion, such as: coalition building; framing of political problems; articulation across multiple levels of governance; concealing costs; and bribing opponents. This means that policy expansion and dismantling can be read as two sides of the same coin and should be studied accordingly (Andrew, Bauer e Green-Pedersen, 2013).

At the end of 2022, new promising perspectives arose with the election of President Luis Inácio Lula da Silva, of *Partido dos Trabalhadores* [Worker's Party] (PT), a government that began in 2023, marking the political defeat of a far-right government, despite the societal strengthening of the ultraconservative movement in the country, and putting back on the agenda the precepts of a democratic state in defense of the reconstruction of social policies and mechanisms of social participation.

The sports and leisure portfolio has been reconstituted, with the recreation of the ministry and previously suspended programs, the approval of the general sports law, which can be read as a regulatory framework with clear intentions to build a national

sports system, as well as creating legal conditions for the organization of the policy to occur within the federative system.

In recent weeks, the portfolio was the target of political bargaining for the accommodation of the *Centrão* (central block) with the replacement of the current minister by the representative of *Partido Progressista* [Progressive Party] (PP), André Fufuca, giving us discouraging signs, including reiterating the political place of the industry, highlighting the meager budget of the area compared to other social policies and the justifications for the budget increase being restricted to partisan interests and not linked to the design of the public policy. On the other hand, we have a fruitful field of study to think about how to reconstruct, build, and recreate resilient policies against dismantling attempts.

More than understanding the processes of dismantling public policies, this literature helps us understand the institutional and political arrangements that corroborate greater robustness in the configuration of public policies that must be problematized and aimed for in the area of sports and leisure. It is expected that, in this government, these advances will indeed materialize in the expansion of the offer of sports and leisure actions, in the definition of the administrative and financial duties and responsibilities of the federated entities, as well as in the perennialization of projects that can, in fact, transform into public policies in the area.

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