UTS UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY SYDNEY

Multistable Political Becomings: A Postphenomenological Study of How Social Media Shape the Political Experiences of Young Brazilians

by Patricia Ferreira-Alves

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Doctor of Philosophy

under the supervision of

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CERTIFICATE OR ORIGINAL AUTHORSHIP

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This thesis is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

This document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

This research is supported by the Australian Government Research Training Program.

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Dedicatory

To Maria and Maria, and all the women who walked with me.

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Com a fúria da beleza do sol!

Te vejo no pódio.

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Abstract

In 2018, Brazil experienced a turn to the far-Right, after a few years of political crises. One recurring discussion about this phenomenon was the role of social media in shaping political discussions and individuals' political identifications. This setting motivated this research to ask: *How do social media shape young Brazilians' political becomings?* Political becomings are conceptualised as processes involving the identification with political discourses and the practices which both inform and are informed by these identifications in iterative experiences. The study is primarily informed by postphenomenology, more precisely the mediation theory, which supports the analysis of how social media transform the perception and action part of political becomings. The empirical material is constructed with in-depth interviews with 16 young Brazilians who demonstrate varying levels of political engagement. By focusing on individual experiences, this research attends to a central characteristic of contemporary political processes: the heavy personalisation of political participation, which owes a great deal to the influence of social media. The purpose is two-fold: to contribute to media and political participation studies, demonstrating that postphenomenology can be an addition to the array of theories and methodologies employed in the investigations of human relations with contemporary (and future) media technologies, such as social media; and to further recent discussions on the significance of postphenomenology to the investigation of political processes happening in an increasingly technologically textured world.

This study finds that the highly multistable character of social media contributes to turning political becomings into multistable experiences, allowing individuals to get involved with the political in multiple non-exclusive ways, some more expressive, others more silent, some more public, others more private. Moreover, social media tend to amplify the significance of the individual, who enjoys increased autonomy in the engagement with the political: the individual searching for meanings,

the individual who chooses to engage in political clashes or comfort bubbles, the individual expressing collective identifications and projects, the individual who constructs collective identifications from their private sphere. At the same time, political becomings are experienced as a search for belonging and perceiving oneself as part of a group with a shared understanding of the world, even if this feeling of belonging emerges from private screens. Although, as the result of a phenomenological investigation, these findings cannot be generalised to the Brazilian population, it illuminates some of the complexities involved in political becomings assisting in the understanding of how these experiences might be lived.

Technologies transform our experience of the world and our perceptions and interpretations of our world, and we in turn become transformed in this process. Transformations are non-neutral.

—Don Ihde, 2009