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Through affections: university experience in the political trajectory of young liberals

Pela via dos afetos: experiência universitária na trajetória política de jovens liberais

Por la vía de los afectos: experiencia universitaria en la trayectoria política de jóvenes liberales

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Abstract

This paper deals with the impact of college experience regarding the identification of young students with political, economic, and social liberalism. The relevance of this experience in their paths is directly related to the affective dimension that links friendships to the construction of political affinities. The results we present here are part of an ethnographic investigation of two and a half years, and in-depth interviews with young liberals from Campina Grande, Paraíba, Brazil, that formed the *Luís Gama Collective* and showed how the arrival at the university allowed these young group of people to negotiate knowledge, dispositions and political preferences in a socio-political context of transition between the left-wing and extreme right-wing (2016-2018).

Keywords: Youth. Political socialization. Liberalism.

Resumo

Este artigo aborda o impacto da vivência universitária na trajetória de adesão de jovens estudantes até o liberalismo político, econômico e social. A importância que esta experiência assume em suas trajetórias está diretamente relacionada à dimensão afetiva que interconecta relações de amizade e construção de afinidades políticas. Os resultados aqui discutidos baseiam-se em dois anos e meio de pesquisa etnográfica e

entrevistas em profundidade junto a jovens liberais em Campina Grande, Paraíba, que compõem o coletivo Luis Gama, e mostram como a chegada à universidade permitiu aos jovens interlocutores negociarem saberes, disposições e preferências políticas em um contexto sócio-político de transição entre esquerda e extrema direita (2016-2018).

Palavras-chave: Juventude. Socialização política. Liberalismo.

Resumen

Este artículo discute el impacto de la vivencia universitaria en la trayectoria de identificación de jóvenes estudiantes al liberalismo político, económico y social. La importancia de esta experiencia en sus trayectorias se relaciona a la dimensión afectiva que interconecta relaciones de amistad y construcción de afinidades políticas. Los resultados son parte de una investigación etnográfica de dos años y medio de duración, y de entrevistas en profundidad a jóvenes liberales de Campina Grande, Paraíba, Brasil, que conforman el colectivo Luis Gama, y muestran como la llegada a la universidad les permitió negociar saberes, disposiciones y preferencias políticas, en un contexto socio-político de transición entre izquierda y extrema derecha (2016-2018).

Palabras clave: Juventud. Socialización política. Liberalismo.

The participation of affections in political socialization

The cultural and political plurality present today in Brazilian universities reinforces the perception of Abramo (2005), for whom the field of youth experiences, characterized as a free space for expression by young people, stimulates the articulation of these agents, thus creating collective actions that may trigger political mobilization processes (Abramo, 2005). In addition, today's youth have other types of resources compared to past generations, since, by the expansion of access to higher education and the possibility of internet access, a growing volume of young people can have contact with different ideologies, authors and influencers, as well as get able to edit content and share it with other group of people inside and outside the classroom. All of this configures, undoubtedly, an unprecedented moment in Brazil, one which requires a lot of effort on the part of those who propose to analyze it, in an attempt to apprehend the heterogeneity that currently exists in higher education institutions in the country, as well as its possible impact on youth political identifications and practices.

In this article, our analytical perspective is centered on the processes of political socialization, privileging, within these processes, the role of everyday relationships in the constitution of political identifications. We assume that politics defines a space of exchange and alterity, considering that political positions affect personal relationships, causing people to develop their political attitudes not only from rational analyses, but largely by emotional motivations, since their political convictions are capable of defining

them “deeply” (Muxel, 2014). Therefore, the social relations developed along the trajectory of each individual can influence the conception and character of their political positions and identities, but it can also influence the feelings they project towards politics itself. This socializing process begins in childhood and accompanies individuals throughout their whole life trajectory, being inseparable from the social relationships they had during their life paths. We understand that it is, above all, in dealing with social life, that is, in the relationships of family members and/or friends, that political identities, values and beliefs take form, considering that it is within these spaces that “the essence and the surroundings of the politicization of the individual are incarnated and negotiated” (Muxel, 2014, p. 2)¹.

If, throughout childhood, the family plays a central role in the political socialization of individuals, as it is in there that the subtle transmission of political values occurs; throughout emotions and affections aroused by parents in children (Muxel, 2014), youth is a time of life that can be particularly marked by the tension between a family political heritage and the influence of new contacts between the young ones, whether in spaces such as churches, schools, universities or the internet. In this sense, youth would consist in a “negotiation time” of old values (Tomizaki & Daniliauskas, 2018), acquired in their childhood and adolescence, and new ones, acquired by young people through relationships established in spaces such as the academic environment.

The concept of political socialization that we adopt here moves away from its functionalist roots, which tend to reduce youth political life to a preparation for the future (Castro, 2009), in favor to a more dynamic concept that considers the political practice of young people in the present time, and that takes into account the multiple inputs in which young people are politically informed and affected. We share with Giddens (2002) the perspective that, currently, individuals have an unprecedented reflective potential in the history of humanity and thus they start to reorient their behavior by reflecting on the reality in which they live, building it and experiencing it from new parameters that are no longer just local, but arising from the experiences and realities of social contexts, which are often far away from these individuals. Reflecting about the contemporary socialization process, Setton (2005) emphasizes that young people have at their disposal a “diverse and plural” cultural universe that inevitably influences the traditional instances of socialization, giving new arrangements to sociability in schools and families. Consequently, both access to informational content on the internet and the intensity of interaction on social media configure new dynamics of youth socialization (Setton, 2005; Novaes 2006) and, therefore, influence the construction of their political identities. These resources and possibilities make the political experience of young people very significant,

¹ All direct citations have been translated to English by the authors of this article.

both for them and for those who study youth itself and its various forms of political expression.

The information that will be exposed here was acquired through research for a doctoral thesis (Salles, 2020), developed in Campina Grande, Paraíba, from June 2016 to December 2018. The period in which the study was carried out lies between two important milestones in recent Brazilian democratic history: the removal of the left-wing from the executive power, as a result of the impeachment of President Dilma Rousseff, and the presidential elections in 2018, which elected the extreme right-wing, with Jair Bolsonaro. This period, marked by an emotional effervescence in the national political debate, coincides with the graduation of most of the young participants in academic research, this being the environment in which they began to identify with liberalism. Foucault (2008), in his incursions on the subject, described that liberalism is characterized as a political, economic, but above all cultural system, with roots on the left and right wings, and with a global, multiform and ambiguous perspective. This definition can help us understand the diversity of the so-called "new generation of Brazilian liberals", which emerged in the mid-2005s and which is characterized, among other aspects, by its decentralized way of organization, the intensive use of media and other resources offered by the internet and the use of forms of engagement close to the left-wing social movements (Rocha, 2017). Although arising in the midst of this movement, and sharing some of its characteristics, the liberalism defended by the young interlocutors of this research differs from a good part of the contemporary trends, in particular those that have become more visible, also leading itself away from conservative liberalism, which can be seen more often in Brazil's political history. The young interlocutors who will be here dealt with liberalism as a political, economic and social form of freedom. Therefore, liberalism is, for them, a political practice whose standard is the expansion/protection of the freedom to express themselves; to join, to act, to consume and to buy or sell, without the intervention, considered excessive by these young individuals, of a society that acts through State.

About the research methodology

To collect the data, an ethnographic research was developed, through which the first author joined a group of young liberals from Paraíba, that would later be called *Collective Luís Gama*. From June 2016 to December 2018, the first author followed the in-person events developed by the Collective, as well as actively participated in the group's dialogues via WhatsApp (message software). In addition to ethnography, in-depth interviews were conducted with nine youngsters; there were three interview sessions with each participant, totaling 36 in-depth interview sessions, each one just over an hour long,

generating more than 40 hours of recording, aside from the field diary records. Some issues relevant to the political socialization of young people were addressed in the interview sessions, which investigated religious and political aspects of their families, as well as their passage through schools and colleges, reaching the present moment, when entering university, and finishing by hearing their political identification and prospects for the future. All young liberals had access to the same research questions, since it was of the interest of this research finding patterns of political socialization that could have been important for the formation of the collective yet in university, which in fact was delivered, considering that they all had a background of progressive ideas, soon acquired in their families or later at schools and colleges. This provoked in them results in the perception that politics is also a space for exchanges, for passing on and acquiring political knowledge. With that in mind, they created the *Luis Gama Collective*, so that, among other attributions, it could also be the place to talk about politics in a "respectful" manner. Here, in this article, the reader will have access to a small part of this content. For a broader and more detailed understanding, we recommend reading the complete research carried out by Salles (2020).

The interlocutors of this study were nine young university students who self-identified as "liberals", being those three females and six males. Among these young people there was a group of six students from the Law at *State University of Paraíba* (UEPB), a young man who studied History at the *Federal University of Campina Grande* (UFCG), a young woman from Law at *University Maurício de Nassau* and, finally, a technical student from the *Federal Institute of Paraíba* (IFPB). We emphasize that the university was not the starting point of this research, nor the common link of the participants, who were accessed by the snowball technique based on the indication of a first young person linked to a liberal collective (Salles, 2020). However, the university space acquired a clear importance in the political trajectory of these juvenile identification with liberalism, allowing an intersection between friendship relations and the construction of political affinities. In this way, we consider that the construction of perceptions and convictions of the liberal political identity of these young interlocutors was strongly impacted by the affections and personal relationships that were developed within the university. However, such an event was only possible due to the almost daily interaction, which provided these young people with the construction of an affective and political space and time, in which they could both analyze the historical moment of transition between the left-wing and extreme right-wing, as well as attribute a meaning to their political convictions, constantly confronted by the political scenario, which, in their perception, was increasingly less liberal and more conservative (Salles, 2020). We emphasize, furthermore, the passage through university as an experience of expansion of social and political horizons, linked to a juvenile identity that, although not limited to this institutional space, finds an important reference in the university student's identity, which is also referenced by literature on the subject (Foracchi, 1965; Groppo, 2016). Finally, we highlight the role of

the university as a place for legitimizing students' autonomy and for building critical thinking, according to the research results that will be partially presented here.

University and political socialization: initial notes

Over the years, political socialization within Brazilian universities has been an interesting laboratory of social analysis regarding the construction of political identities and the political engagement of the young community, so that the passage through the university, in a sense, has been revealing itself as a significant phase in the lives of individuals that within it apprehend and expose their political convictions (Groppo, 2016; Sposito & Tarábola, 2016; Salles, 2020). Undoubtedly, the university is an instrument for exercising citizenship; an instrument for those who decide to acquire political and social knowledge, which is very present in the academic environment, as it is configured as a public and diverse space. At some level, it is a reflection of the society in which these young people live.

It is essential to mention the pioneering study by Foracchi (1965), which analyzes the role that university students played in the transformation of Brazilian society, at a time when the student condition imposed the definition of youth, necessarily restricted to privileged social classes. More recently, a historical study carried out by Cunha (2007) shows that university students engaged in different moments of national political history and helped in the reflection about higher education in Brazil, also promoting reforms within it. Nowadays, the university is still seen as a scenario for the social and political aspirations of the young community, although the youth condition is no longer the prerogative of young students. Since the 1980s, several analyzes have pointed out the expansion and diversification of what we can consider a youth identity, as well as the multiplicity, equally, of forms of political engagement, with progressive disinvestment in representative and institutionalized policies (among which is the university student movement itself), a tendency that Anne Muxel (1997) classified, in relation to French youths of the 1990s, as the search for a policy without labels – an expression that was equally considered to be the meaning of youthful attitudes towards politics in the same period in Brazil. In this scenario, new ways of doing politics and new definitions of politics gain relevance, which include identity struggles, cultural and intellectual movements and new organizational forms that also penetrate the university space.

By studying the dynamics between politics and young university students at a federal institution in the interior of Minas Gerais, Groppo (2016) observed that there were informal educational processes encouraging the cultivation of values and ideals in students, characterizing for him a “vibrant juvenile student culture”, in which it is possible to notice

new trends in political and cultural participation. In this sense, the university is perceived by the author as a space that can contribute to the (self) political formation of the young society (Groppo, 2016). In another study, carried out by twenty university students from São Paulo, Sposito and Tarábola (2016) realized that the relationship with the public sphere, the collective action and the political attitudes were spontaneously pointed out by the interviewees, being perceived by the authors as "different types of engagements", such as associations, collectives, movements and "other forms of collective action". The authors also add that young people's personal engagement occurs when their autonomy and identity are safeguarded. Also, according to the research by Sposito and Tarábola (2016), young people find in these political experiences within the university a way to expose and affirm identity dispositions that could have been avoided or hindered in the zone of their families or neighborhoods. The authors point out that these experiences appeared both in the speech of young people from the poor classes and middle classes. It is worth noticing the university's character: the one of being a space where young people are encouraged to develop opinions and political convictions in an autonomous way, far from their families and community backgrounds, as well as initiate a political conduct that was previously something very rare, due to the control of their family members or religious communities, for example. About the case that concerns us, of young people from Paraíba who identify with liberalism, the passage through university is fundamental in order to construct their individual political trajectories. This is what we will show below.

The Luis Gama Collective and "the ideas of freedom" at the university

In mid-2016, in the corridors of the Law at State University of Paraíba, the *Luis Gama Collective* appears, in the same year Dilma Rousseff is removed from the presidency, which paves the way for the later arrival of the extreme right-wing to power. At that time, new political factors labeled right-wing sided had taken to the streets, which, in a way, took social scientists by surprise (Fernandes & Messenberg, 2018). However, it is worth noting that an emerging phenomenon is always gelatinous, so its assessments are constantly provisional, as there is an unfinished process in progress (Marcon et al., 2020). In this context, young liberals were frequently identified with the movements of the "new right-wing", and assimilated to openly conservative and reactionary tendencies, which was favored by the political actions of national factors such as the *Movimento Brasil Livre* (MBL). For the young people in this research, who claim to be "liberals in their soul" or "liberals in their entirety", differentiating themselves from conservative movements, it becomes not only a challenge but also an opportunity to talk about what they believe and stand for as liberals (Salles, 2020), allowing them to occupy a space, even if of a minority one, in the spectrum of political identifications: as supporters of "economic

freedom", which connects them to the agenda of the right-wing (market deregulation, minimum state and privatization of state companies), and of individual and political freedom, which aligns them with leftist mottos, such as the decriminalization of abortion and drug use. The period in which this occurs is quite significant, since it politically ignited a group that owned discourses with conservative backgrounds and, at the same time, liberal ones. For these young students, it was the ideal moment for the "true liberalism" to come to surface, the one in which they believed and which in nothing or very little resembled what was emerging. So, the creation of the *Luis Gama Collective* had the main purpose of telling people that that political project that was rising and that would replace the left was not liberal, at least in their perception.

On Facebook (social network), the collective is presented as a "group of study originated in the city of Campina Grande, whose objective is to debate freedom ideals and which carries the name of the abolitionist Luis Gama, as a form of homage". In Woodward's (2014) perception, what may seem just an argument about the past and the reaffirmation of a supposed historical "truth" actually denotes a new "subject-position", which affirms a sense of distinction from its identity in the present time and not in the past. In this sense, the choice of a 19th century historical figure as the group's icon fulfills a doubly strategic role. On one hand, it seeks to rewrite the history of liberalism in Brazil, which at so many times was linked to authoritarianism and/or conservatism, taking into account an idea of "freedom" above suspicion, since it is anchored in strives for the end of slavery. On the other hand, the fact that we are dealing with an ancestor that is "radical liberal, abolitionist, self-learner and black" is important to overcome the plutocratic vision of liberalism, associated with a white economic elite. Knowing that, the main political activity of the collective was intellectual, as, in the practice field, it was a study group who discussed about the ideas of liberalism, using rooms provided by the university, at a time opposite to classes. They acted to mischaracterize the liberalism of Paulo Guedes and Jair Bolsonaro (Salles, 2020), and acted to show that, in their perception, liberalism was actually what Luis Gama had done, defending the enslaved people and acting so that freedom would prevail. It is important to realize that, in the absence of liberal leaders in their current time, these young people traveled in the past and found in the lawyer Luis Gama an indicator of what they, as young and liberals, believed in.

The university was certainly the space where young researchers could exercise their autonomy, by learning new content and incorporating ideas and convictions. However, this learning process did not take place in the classic socialization model – vertical, from teachers to students – but through social relationships established between peers, in a model of (self) training, similar to what Groppo (2016) had also identified. In fact, the university is a classic space for political socialization; in the specific case of this group of young people, it acquires a relevant importance regarding the character of the group's

performance, a more restricted and intellectualized group, and, therefore, divergent from other political movements that have its public performance focused on an agenda or at least a claimed agenda. So, for the Luis Gama collective, in a way, the university continued to be the main socializing vehicle, despite the agency's possibilities brought by contemporaneity, such as the internet, for example, which was not the main means of articulation for the group. However, the conversations and meetings took place in rooms provided by the university or in its corridors, in a horizontal and informal way. By the way, in relation to other liberal groups, the one in here discussed remains, for many people, unknown, resulting in an urge to highlight the circumscribed nature of its actions and liberal positions. Therefore, the university confirms itself as a favorable space for the (self) political education of these young people, since it offered, on a daily basis, opportunities for learning and exchanging political knowledge. The identification with political, economic and social liberalism grew each time they met, which increased the intellectual and political affinity among the students. All interlocutors are unanimous in attributing to the university the viability of becoming liberals, and this content was not passed on by professors, but rather learned in situations where the young person is the agent, during free time. That is, the youngsters themselves were responsible for their political capabilities and decided by their own which line to follow, as well as to which collective or group they would connect themselves to, which suggests the participation of affinities, attraction and empathy.

That is why we propose to think about the formation of the *Luis Gama Collective* through affections, in order to highlight the intertwining between friendship relationships and political affinities. Muxel (2014) highlights the role that affections and affinities will play a role in the political socialization of individuals, pointing out that, both in the public and private spheres, the ways of experiencing democracy can be renewed, considering the duty that some individuals feel to coexist with the different and, at times, unite with it. Therefore, the acknowledgement of the difference and the autonomy of the individual is important for a political socialization, since a political conformity or disagreement with friends and family are equations that are natural to modern life. The challenge is to give meaning to a political control that takes place within the individual and which monitors both the desire for similarity and the demand for difference, as well as the dream of harmony and respect for otherness (Muxel, 2014). However, it is important to draw attention to the fact that the knowledge that young people acquire in this space is also interconnected with other forms of socialization, and, we can say, of political recruitment, mostly through social media, setting a good example of "contemporary socialization" (Setton, 2005), in which different socializing agencies converge, with roles that can mix or overlap, as pointed out above. Descriptively, Salles (2020) presents how these ideas circulated and materialized in the daily life of the collective, thus presenting the protagonists of this plot and their place in this liberal network, which is presented as an opposition to a liberalism that is associated with conservatism.

In this article, we briefly present some points of this narrative, aiming to accentuate the university as a space for autonomy and legitimization of the political socialization of young people, this passage being very significant in the trajectory of their lives, a case which applies to young liberals in Campina Grande.

By making friends one makes politics and vice versa

These young liberal community entered the university in 2015, the same year as the strengthening, in the eyes of the public, of the *Lavajato Operation* and the increasing attacks on President Dilma Rousseff and the Workers' Party (PT). In addition to this "witch hunt" atmosphere, it was also a time of political upheaval, with new political statements and disputes between narratives, which became part of the daily lives of these young people when they entered the university. Therefore, young liberals are heirs of this moment, however, the kind of political position they represent is a minority one, which ended up becoming, for them, a reason to dedicate themselves to the exaltation of difference, since they did not see themselves on the right-wing, but were constantly associated with it.

It is important to highlight that all interlocutors in this research arrived at the university with some kind of political knowledge. However, out of nine interviewees, only two declared themselves "liberals" from the very beginning, the other seven interlocutors entered university life declaring themselves as "left-wing" individuals. The arrival at the university provided means for these young group to identify with a political side, sometimes reaffirming their previous ideology, sometimes migrating to liberalism. In their reports, they focus on the "freedom" that the university possess when compared to the educational institutions they originally came from, where the smallest movements were controlled by superiors: "You couldn't go to the bathroom without asking permission to the teacher, and suddenly one enters university and it's a completely different world" (Toni, 21, law student at State University of Paraíba). This lack of control, both by teachers and by the administration itself, allowed the young interlocutors to meet almost on a daily basis, causing their friendship to emerge through informal conversations about the national political scene, during free time or when they decided to "skip" classes. The political effervescence context caused politics to be at the center of many of their meetings. Nonetheless, the need to fit into an ideological conduct is, to a large extent, linked to the availability of time and the greater autonomy of university life: "If it wasn't for this free time, I would not have identified myself (with liberalism) in the way it happened" (Felipe, 20 years old, law student at State University of Paraíba).

Still considering Felipe's perspective, the university is a place where there is a distance between students and administration, which turns out to be a beneficial thing for the construction of social relationships and the acquisition of new knowledge: "At the times when I wasn't taking classes, I was probably outside, talking about politics or something I probably wouldn't have access to in the classroom only" (Felipe, 20, law student at State University of Paraíba). In addition to free time and everyday interaction, the expansion of the relational universe at the university presents young people to a more heterogeneous social world than that linked to school. All these factors, that compose the historical experience of these young university students, converged towards the construction of a friendship between them, but beyond that, a construction of political recognitions that was consolidating over time, caused by the constant practice students had of confronting ideas. This informal environment of conversations about politics in the university space is seen by interlocutors as a "positive" thing, as they consider that young people can come into contact with various political positions, beliefs and worldviews. A student called Nanda said in an interview that the university would be "very plural": "[...] while you had young people saying that impeachment was a coup, you had those who were in favor of it and also those who didn't want to give an opinion. It was very plural" (Nanda, 20, law student at State University of Paraíba). This same political plurality is perceived by the student Tiago, when he states that the public university "has many sides" and that it allows practices of debate and exchange of ideas. He also stated that the fact that students question the professors and the institution itself is "intense": "It's a political environment in which you have a certain freedom to form your opinion. I think this could be different if it were a private university" (Tiago, 21, Law student at State University of Paraíba). The perception that the university space is a public one strengthens the idea that it is possible to talk openly about what one wants, as well as question, defend a point of view and even change an opinion. When encouraged to reflect on the university's role in their political trajectories, young liberals argued that the "free" environment allowed them to identify themselves with an ideology. They extend this understanding to other young students who, like them, felt the need to build their own opinion about politics and, therefore, assume a posture, a political identity, not necessarily liberal, considering that there are young left-wing students as well conservatives ones at the university. The construction of an affective and non-threatening environment in the university space marks a before and an after in the lives of the young group surveyed in this research. Along this path, there is a process of recognition and also of identification with each other, which is responsible for consolidating their political transformation.

The importance of the group, as a space for exchanges and recognition between themselves shows that political experiences, convictions and beliefs are not free from the interference of affectivities, since friends, family and teachers are able to introduce knowledge and, therefore, cause both the approximation and the detachment of

certain political ideas. These elements are relevant and fundamental to understanding the political socialization and identity that young liberals built, denoting that political identity cannot be detached from the affective elements that helped to compose this identification. The central figure in this network of friendships and political affinities was Gabriel (22 years old, student of Law at State University of Paraíba). He arrives at the university expressing liberal opinions that were contrary to those of his friends, who considered them “radical ideas”. Felipe said in an interview that Toni and Gabriel used to debate during breaks and in vacant classes: “I would get between them, but at that time I was also a left-wing adept and thought of Gabriel as being naive (Felipe, 20 years old, student of Law School at State University of Paraíba). Nanda said in an interview that she arrived at the university without considering herself as someone from left or right wings: “I thought I was impartial” (Nanda, 20 years old, student of Law at State University of Paraíba). She also said that it was during her free time, overhearing conversations between Toni and Gabriel, that she began to be more interested in the subject: “... by talking to Gabriel, I realized that I was liberal and didn't know it” (Nanda, 20 years old, student of Law at State University of Paraíba). Felipe and Nanda remember that the discussions were always “respectful”, which made them continue to debate whenever there was an opportunity. “I think that it contributed for us to keep hanging out together”, (Felipe, 20 years old, student of Law at State University of Paraíba). In this group's perception, the debate was intense, since it dealt with issues that were central to these young people at that time. “[...] I think we kept hanging out together because we wanted to learn all about what Gabriel had been saying. It was something new for us; a taboo even” (Toni, 21 years old, student of Law at state University of Paraíba).

However, in addition to the tolerance and respect they cultivated, there was a defense of individual freedoms, which was common among all of them. Liberation of drug consumption, decriminalization of abortion and free immigration were agendas that, in a way, reduced the distances between them and Gabriel, and that seemed to find a favorable environment to be expressed at the university, due to its association with “freedom” itself. In other words, the progressive background that the interlocutors, in a way, already brought with them made them identify with Gabriel and, gradually, give in to his liberal ideas. “I became liberal much more because of the social side of everything, rather than the economic one. The economic side was a result of what I understand as being the values of a society” (Felipe, 20 years old, student of Law at State University of Paraíba).

As for Gabriel, his approach to liberalism was fundamentally through social media, and specifically from his insertion in the liberal network *Students for Liberty* (SFL), where he started working as a volunteer ambassador, then becoming a local marketing coordinator. It is important to clarify that the SFL network does not occupy a central role

in the activities of young liberals in Campina Grande, since not everyone is connected to it; however, it manages to create a form of perception in these young groups that they are not alone in their “entirely” liberal endeavor, considering that, locally, they constitute a minority community. In research, it was observed that the SFL network obtains financial and logistical support from the Atlas Network, an international institution with branches in several countries and which, apparently, has the sole objective of propagating liberalism through its bases around the world. The relationship between Atlas and the SFL does not pass through critical examination by young liberals: they agree to credit Atlas with a participation in financing specific activities, such as purchasing books, conducting exchanges between young liberals and even supporting events produced by these youngsters (Salles & Franch, 2019). Also, in the perception of young liberals, Atlas would have as its central and sole interest to promote “real” liberalism. Thus, there is no deepening, by students, of the Atlas' reasons and what would be its counterpart in practical terms, as well as what this global network would be favoring by promoting “freedom” in Brazil, what would be the consequences of these activities and the benefits for the youth engaged in them (Salles & Franch, 2019).

As we said, both Nanda and Felipe, as well as their classmates, Tiago and Toni, became liberals within the university, in conversations and exchanges of information with Gabriel about politics and economics during their free time. It is possible to read this process as a privileged factor regarding the strategic character of universities for the SFL. However, an ethnographic approach invites us to situate the process of bringing this group of young people closer to liberalism through affection, in a process of contemporary (self) socialization. According to the narrative of the young liberals interviewed in the survey, the conversations gradually consolidated the bonds of friendship. Because of that, “difference” was a socializing element, since there was, as Muxel (2014) points out, the dream of harmony and respect for otherness. Muxel (2014) also observes that the political debate between people who think differently is possible when, in the relationship, there are “democratic ingredients”, and that tolerance and respect enable coexistence, so that political disagreement does not break the affective bond. This observation may seem totally out of context in the face of the so-called “political polarization”, however, the “democratic ingredients” were decisive in strengthening the bond between young people and in the subsequent creation of the collective. From this perspective, Muxel (2014) highlights the role that affections and affinities will play in the political socialization of individuals, pointing out that ways of experiencing democracy can be renewed by the duty that some individuals feel to coexist with the different and, in some moments, unite with it. Something similar happened in the contact between the research interlocutors, who ended up uniting around liberalism from points of divergence and convergence. Therefore, the observation of the “difference” and the individual's autonomy are important for a political socialization, considering that a political conformity or disagreement with friends and/or family is a typical equation of modern life.

Final considerations

Muxel (2014) noted that politics engage differently in friendship circles. She believes that, in these cases, the difference of opinion can be an aggregating element, which can even lead to harmony and an inevitable attraction, as they discover each other's differences without the negative implications that could be triggered in family ties. Toni and Gabriel, for example, talked about politics, in their perception, in an "intense" way, due to the initial differences between them. Despite these differences, both assumed a friendship and this was indispensable for what came after. In reality, a friendship is better able to deal with disagreements, as friends act towards an affective bond; the construction of a relationship in which they feel they can be who they really are. Therefore, differences in political opinions become a kind of recognition of the diversity and autonomy of the other person (Muxel, 2014). On the other hand, the progressive affinities that both Toni and Gabriel had opened up a path which led to the construction of a solid friendship. The same situation happened to the others interlocutors of the research. It is interesting to realize the importance that this place of understanding has for the young interlocutors: the collective as a space for exchange and alterity is shown in the research as a non-threatening place, where this young people could express themselves, question each other and thereby acquire political knowledge. Because they were feeling part of a minority, as they did not resemble other liberal groups, it was in the collective that politics gained meaning for everyone, and the group, in a sort of way, protected them from the macro-political context. The importance of the group, as a space for exchanges and recognition of each other, shows that political experiences, convictions and beliefs are not isolated from the interference of affectivities, as friends are capable of introducing all sorts of knowledge. These elements proved to be relevant and significant to comprehend the political socialization and identity what young liberals built over time, denoting that their political identity cannot be detached from the affective elements that helped to compose this identification. The trajectories of the youngsters interviewed in this reasearch show that personal relationships influence political convictions as well as the way in which a fellowship lives political experiences. This was exactly the case of the young people who turned into liberals once they started a friendship with Gabriel.

By the last research contact, in December of 2018, Gabriel confided in an interview that the group's fear was to be "incorporated" by Jair Bolsonaro's government; in other words, to be incorporated by the conservative liberal movement. The young man also said that, unlike "brained" liberals, who know the content of books and ideas written by "real" liberals, people who now identify with the kind of liberalism they advocate would be "liberals in their souls": "because they founded the ideas of liberalism, they identified with liberal aesthetics without ever having read a liberal book" (Gabriel, 22, student of Law at

State University of Paraíba). Gabriel's association with the "liberals in their souls" leads us to a discussion promoted by Maffesoli (2014) about the aesthetics of contemporary groups, which he calls "tribes", in the sense that they create a feeling of sharing values, ideas and places that give meaning to sociability experiences. For Maffesoli (2014), it is necessary to understand aesthetics as an ability to feel and experience the world from a shared experience. Therefore, "aesthetics", in the perspective worked by this author, has to do with the capacity for a feeling of communion between people. This liberal aesthetic that Gabriel tells us about preserves the feelings in relation to the group's politics and ideas, which are shared among the members and also with other collectives across the country, which carry the same progressive feelings and the same ideas of what it means to be a "real" liberal or a "full" liberal (Salles, 2020). In this sense, the "real" liberalism would function as a form of identification among young liberals in Campina Grande, but also as a way of having a mutual experience of political identity, which, to a large extent, creates a localized feeling that gives meaning to these experiences, a feeling that was translated by Gabriel as an "aesthetic" one. Certainly, there are other types of political aesthetics, which connect the left-wing, right-wing, ultraliberal and conservative individuals, as each of these groups carries with them values, feelings and political ideals that impact the minds and souls of their members in a particular manner

On the other hand, this article seems to confirm that politics, as well as its principles and convictions, are experienced and built in the personal relationships, developed by individuals in the most diverse spheres of their lives. Political identities take form and acquire meaning in the personal relationship individuals develop (Muxel, 2014), so when Gabriel associates his way of feeling liberalism and practicing it as a "soul" liberalism, he draws attention to an aesthetic between himself and those who identify the same way as he does. Therefore, he emphasizes the emotional aspect of politics, a feeling that unites and labels this young community in their association with an ideology. At a great level, he acquires, at the university, the understanding of this major experience he had with his friends, who became liberals due to the daily contact at college and the progressive background that everyone already had, attained in previous processes of political socialization with their families or at their colleges and by the coexistence with other agents, from which they drew significant elements for their political convictions (Salles, 2020).

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