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ARTICLE

Reading Freedom from the Theme of Oppression***Maria Ligia Ganacim Granado Rodrigues Elias**

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This paper explores a theoretical and political approach to discuss the idea (and ideal) of freedom. This approach is built through a dialogue between different theoretical views, especially Isaiah Berlin's concept of freedom as non-interference, Philip Pettit's idea of freedom as non-domination, and Nancy Hirschmann's constructivist freedom. It sustains that the idea of 'non-oppression' is a useful approach to consider freedom in its complexity. Reading freedom from the 'key' of oppression allows us to think of not only 'spaces' of freedom, but also *who* is free. This 'key' relates freedom to freedom of choice and, at the same time, indicates the necessity of non-domination and attention to the construction of choosing subjects. This paper intends to emphasize that the choices take place in contexts, and these contexts involve relationships, emotions and values. They can be understood as a subjective aspect linked to choice; however, we want to highlight that social standards, structures of power and social meanings are what shape this subjectivity. The social construction happens constantly, quietly and every day, and must be considered whenever we discuss freedom.

Keywords: Freedom; liberalism; republicanism; feminism; choice.

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In "Two Concepts of Liberty", Isaiah Berlin (2002) develops the approach that deals with freedom in a dichotomous way. It is important to remember that Berlin is not conducting a linguistic or semantic analysis of the two concepts of freedom.

Berlin's two contrasting notions are freedom in its positive sense, characterized as 'self-control', and freedom in its negative sense, conceived as 'non-interference'. Initially, we could summarise the differences between the two concepts as follows: negative freedom corresponds to *liberty from* while positive freedom corresponds to *liberty for* (BERLIN, 2002, pp. 233-236). While the negative notion concerns avoiding interference in the actions of individuals and groups, the positive notion is concerned with issues related to the nature and exercise of power. Berlin (2002) describes the negative freedom as follows:

Political liberty in this sense is simply the area within which a man can act unobstructed by others. [...] If I am prevented by others from doing what I could otherwise do, I am to that degree unfree. Coercion implies the deliberate interference of other human beings within the area in which I could otherwise act. You lack political liberty or freedom only if you are prevented from attaining a goal by other human beings (BERLIN, 2002, p. 229).

Even more directly, Berlin (2002) says that the defence of liberty consists in the "negative goal of preventing interference" (BERLIN, 2002, p. 234). Thus, negative freedom is characterized by the *absence* of something – the interference; while positive freedom is characterized by the *presence* – of action, of participation in decision-making and self-determination: "The 'positive' sense of the word 'liberty' is derived from the wish on the part of the individual to be his own master" (BERLIN, 2002, p. 236).

A more political than semantic interpretation about the idea and the defence of freedom as non-interference takes into account the importance of the pluralism of values for the author's thought, and, from this perspective, Berlin's (2002) negative freedom does not consist of "*just do what you want*". The value of freedom is in the possibility (and act) of making a choice between different, equally valuable and often irreconcilable purposes. By choosing a value or an end instead of another, we realise what can be called self-creation.

For Philip Pettit (1997b), a reference author to Roman neo-republicanism, Berlin's separation of freedom is flawed. He argues that the dichotomy between positive and negative freedom is inaccurate and neglects a third possibility of understanding freedom: the Republican possibility. "Berlin's taxonomy of positive and negative liberty forecloses a more or less salient third possibility" (PETTIT, 1997b, p. 21).

The neo-republican freedom, defined as non-domination, should not be seen only as an intermediate option between the formulations of non-interference and self-control, but as an ideal to be followed. Pettit (1997b) emphasises that the concept of freedom as non-domination comes from an ancient tradition which means not being dominated or subjugated by anyone¹.

The ideal of freedom as non-domination has its own conceptual *status*; it is a negative one, however, different from the liberal concept of freedom as non-interference. What makes Pettit (1997b) claim that his concept of freedom, although negative, differs from the concept of liberal negative freedom defined by Berlin is the content of absence that is required in each concept.

The two concepts evoke the notion of interference. Interference constitutes an intentional act by which the agents are responsible. Acts of interference can be both coercion of the body and of the will, or just a kind of manipulation. It includes acts that reduce the alternatives of choice or which increase the cost associated with a choice. Therefore, interference can reduce choice or increase the cost of opting for one of the alternatives (PETTIT, 1997b, pp. 114-115).

According to Pettit (1997b), given that the ideal of negative freedom offered by Berlin(2002) sees all kinds of interference as an impediment for freedom, the law, although necessary, is considered a limitation of freedom. Pettit's negative ideal of freedom is not concerned with all forms of interference, but with *arbitrary* interference. All arbitrary interference is a form of domination.

The arbitrariness happens when an individual has the ability to act according to his will, to his *arbitrium*, without taking into account those who will be

¹ According to Pettit (2007, p. 307), the tradition of associating freedom with non-domination was important in Ancient Rome, and there was a revival of those ideas in Renaissance Italy, England Civil War, the war for American independence and in the course of the French Revolution . Pettit claims to belong to this tradition (PETTIT, 1996, 1997a, 1997b).

affected by their actions. Thus, "someone dominates or subjugates another to the extent that (1) they have the capacity to interfere (2) with impunity and at will (3) in certain choices that the other is in a position to make" (PETTIT, 1996 , p. 578). Pettit (1997b) explains what arbitrary acts are: "... what makes an act of interference arbitrary, then – arbitrary in the sense of being perpetrated on an arbitrary basis? An act is perpetrated on an arbitrary basis, we can say, if it is subject just to the *arbitrium*, the decision or judgment, of the agent; the agent was in a position to choose it or not choose it, at their pleasure" (PETTIT, 1997b, p. 55).

Since republican freedom's concern is with the absence of arbitrary interference, that is, absence of domination, it will mainly differ in two aspects from freedom as non-interference. The first, according to the republican concept, is that it is possible to have domination without actual interference; the second indicates that someone can be free even suffering interference.

These differences reveal Pettit's (1997b) effort to point out the distance between his conception of freedom and the liberal view of freedom as non-interference. The first reason is that, for the Republican authors, there may be domination even without an effective interference. This happens when someone has the power to interfere, even if in fact they do not. Pettit (1997a) refers to the republican tradition to claim that a person, while living at the mercy of another, is being dominated: "He is a slave who serves the best and gentlest man in the world, as well as who serves the worst" (SYDNEY cited in PETTIT, 1997a, p. 63) or "Individuals in private life, while held under the power of masters, cannot be denominated free, however equitably and kindly they may be treated" (PRICE cited in PETTIT, idem). The fact that the idea of freedom as non-interference does not imply that there is nothing inherently oppressive when some have power over others as long as they are not effectively exercising such power, makes, according to Pettit (1997b), liberalism tolerant with domination relations at home², at work or to the electorate.

... liberalism has been associated over the two hundred years of its development, and in most of its influential varieties, with the negative

² The theme of domestic life is a frequent example in the writings of Pettit, and in his latest book, *Just Freedom* (2014), Pettit uses precisely the domestic example to establish the differences between the Republican and Liberal idea of freedom.

conception of freedom as absence of interference, and with the assumption that there is nothing inherently oppressive about some people having dominating power over others, provided they do not exercise that power and are not likely to exercise it (PETTIT, 1997b, pp. 08-09).

The second difference highlighted by Pettit (1997b) is that republicanism acknowledges freedom where liberalism considers it compromised. This is directly connected to the understanding of the law. In the sense of freedom as non-interference, the fact of being subject to laws consists of a loss of freedom. To republicanism, laws that correspond to the thoughts and general interests can even be considered as a form of interference, but do not constitute a form of domination; therefore, they do not compromise the republican liberty. The great condition for the law not to constitute arbitrary interference is that it takes into account all those who will be affected by it, i.e., representing a fair rule.

Pettit and Lovett (2009, p. 12) summarise in three points the main ideas of neo-republican literature. The first and most important idea is the conception of a free person as someone who does not live under the domain of others. In this view, free is the one who does not live under the arbitrary desire or domination of others. The second idea is the concept of a free state as one that promotes the freedom of its citizens and is not a source of domination. This is most easily achieved through the mixed constitution and the 'rule of law', which limit the power of the ruler. The third idea is the design of good citizenship as a constant and vigilant commitment to preserve the State in its distinctive role, which is to protect against domination and not be, by itself, an agent of domination.

In view of Berlin's (2002) and Pettit's (1997b) elaborations, we are faced with the following picture: on the one hand, liberalism's negative freedom, expressed here by Berlin's (2002) formulation, exposes us to question the choices in the context of pluralism. On the other hand, Philip Pettit's (1997b) republican freedom as non-domination shows the importance of considering the contexts of domination, calling attention to the possibility of not being free, even without actual interference. Thus, Pettit (1997b) offers us a tool to think about a number of relationships that wouldn't receive the same kind of attention if we only used Berlin's (2002) theory. Although Berlin's (2002) and Pettit's (1997b) idea of freedom focuses on the free subjects, my argument is that they lack a stronger

question about *who* makes the choices and *who* is dominated; lacking in their approaches is an emphasis on the life of the subjects and the complexities of their relationships in a social context.

The argument that Pettit's (1997b) formulation lacks a greater attention to the subjects who suffers domination does not ignore Pettit's (1997b) efforts to dialogue with different theoretical perspectives, and particularly with feminism. In *Republicanism* the author states that "Not only can republicanism offer persuasive articulation of the central feminist claims, it also provides an articulation that has had a continuous history within the ranks of feminists themselves" (PETTIT, 1997b, p. 140). More recently, in his book *Just Freedom moral compass in a complex world* (2014) the author replaces the classic example of the slave who does not suffer real interference, but suffers domination, with the example of a woman, the character Nora from the play *A Doll's House* (HENRIK IBSEN, 1879).

Certainly, the choice of illustrating the idea of domination with an example of a woman's situation in the domestic sphere is not random, and it somehow demonstrates Pettit's (2014) concern to dialogue with feminist political theory. It was precisely with similar examples as the character of Nora that feminists such as Nancy Hirschmann (2003) and Marilyn Friedman (2008) demonstrate their reservations to the scope of the idea of freedom as non-domination developed by the author. It is worth noting that these, as well as other feminist authors, recognize the relevance and importance of Pettit's (1997) formulations. After all, the author's theory raises the question of domination as a key issue for the contemporary political thinking and, therefore, there are meeting points with different feminist approaches. In this paper, I want to draw attention to Hirschmann's (2003) critique to Pettit (1997), especially the question that he neglects the social context in his formulation about freedom.

The feminist theories show that different characteristics, such as gender, have fundamental impact on position the different individuals in the society's structure³. Issues as gender, race and class unequally distribute the individuals in social positions, and different positions in the social structure provide advantages

³ Flavia Biroli is an important Brazilian reference that has demonstrated how social structures position individuals differently and how it is reflected in the question of autonomy. See, especially, the Chapter 'Autonomia e relações de poder' in *Autonomia e Desigualdades de Gênero* (2013).

and disadvantages, incentives and disincentives to different choices and life opportunities.

In view of the importance of social context to consider the situations of domination, and therefore of freedom, questions about who is free and who is the subject of freedom are central to Nancy Hirschmann's (2003) feminist concept of freedom, which is developed in a direct critical dialogue with different theoretical perspectives, therefore offering us an opportunity to observe the challenges that the feminist perspective poses for political theory in general.

Hirschmann's (2003) feminist perspective is similar to the concept of negative liberty and the idea that *to be free is to be able to choose*. However – and this is the point –, for her, the theories on which freedom are based, the ability to make choices, neglect, invariably, the conditions under which these choices are made.

This concern extends our sight beyond 'freedom itself', and leaves us to think about the processes and situations involved with the very formation of desires, choices and will of the choosing subjects. After all, as put by Hirschmann (2003), choices are made in social contexts and a context can act in different ways, putting constraints or incentives on the subjects. Nevertheless, more than considering the restraints and incentives, it is necessary to think that the contexts are fundamental to the formation of the subject that will choose.

Therefore, the notion of 'social construction' is fundamental to the feminist vision of freedom developed by Hirschmann (2003). According to her words, "Freedom consists in the Power of the self to make choices and act on them, but the self that make choices, including her desires and self-understanding, is socially constructed ..." (HIRSCHMANN, 2003, p. 32).

An understanding of freedom that includes the experience of women, highlighting women as a subject of this freedom, a subject who makes a choice, should be aware of situations of domination that women experience. Thus, Hirschmann's (2003) feminist approach defines freedom in terms of choices, but incorporates the idea that the formation of these choices involves both the material conditions in which these choices are made as the internal conditions of identity and the self-concept that originates the will and desires of those who choose. From this standpoint, my question is: under what conditions is it possible to speak of freedom

and *free choice*, taking into account that there is a set of incentives and constraints that affect different people in different social positions?

Given the concern to contextualise the formation of preferences and choices, the concept of freedom proposed by Hirschmann (2003) seeks to establish that the wishes, preferences and individual actions are also social constructions in the same way that the external conditions are, which work as barriers (external) to these wishes and preferences (internal). This position does not involve undervaluing the dimension of individual choice, which is vital to issues such as reproductive freedom, sexual harassment, and employment disadvantage. However, individual choices are related to the context, and it is important in two ways: the first and most direct one corresponds to understanding the barriers, the disadvantages or advantages and the high or low cost of certain choices for different individuals in different social positions. The second way is considering the context as an important element in the formation of identity and self-individual conceptions, that is, its influence on the formation of identities, preferences and choices of individuals.

Non oppression as a reading "key"

My proposal on reading freedom largely follows the scheme proposed by Nancy Hirschmann (2003), although they are not identical. Before exploring this reading about freedom, it is productive to look upon some theoretical considerations about power developed by Amy Allen (1998), since such considerations go towards the articulation among concepts and offer some subsidies to the approach I intend to offer in this paper.

Amy Allen (1998) focuses on a different, more complete and all-encompassing thinking of power, drawing on the experiences of women. According to the author, feminist approaches, when mobilising the theme of power, usually give emphasis to only one dimension of the concept of power. In others, the emphasis is on power as domination, that is, power is understood as power over something or someone. When power is understood from this perspective, the feminist analyses that share it usually prioritise discussing masculine or patriarchal domination. However, in the other approach, power is understood as a way of resistance and creative force, that is, it is seen from the perspective of

empowerment, as *power to* do something. Such theories usually have a reference to women's experiences of care, and understand power as a capacity for transformation and empowerment.

The two ways of addressing the issue target different observations made by feminists themselves, and, for this reason, Amy Allen (1998) makes an integrative analysis of power, which not only relates the two aspects mentioned (domination and empowerment), but also incorporates a third aspect, important for a feminist view on the subject.

The first aspect to be integrated is, as we have seen, linked to systems of domination. A conception of power should be useful to illuminate the various systems of domination (*power over*) – including sexism, racism, heteronormativity and class oppression (ALLEN, 1998, p. 32). The second aspect, which follows the idea of an integrative view of power, must include a perception of *power to* do something: it is a vision of power that allows theories about the power that women have despite male domination, that is, although women are the subject of domination, there are moments in their lives, situations and social settings that give them power. The third aspect of a multi-faceted and feminist conception of power encompasses a perception of the collective exercise of power. This is a vision of power that draws attention to the possibility of building coalitions in the struggle for social equality, understood as *power with*. The author summarises her propositions as follows: "In sum, feminists need an account of power that can make sense of masculine domination; feminine empowerment and its more specific form, resistance; and feminist solidarity and coalition building" (ALLEN, 1998, p. 32).

I share with Amy Allen's (1998) power analysis the view that: people's experiences are multifaceted and have nuances, so the concepts that seek to reflect on these experiences must address its different facets. My argument is that the concept of freedom as the notion of power presented by Allen will be a theoretical and political tool if we are able to mobilize it in different situations.

I believe, as well as Pettit (1997), that the idea of domination is essential when considering freedom. The approach to the subject of freedom that I am proposing owes to the argument developed by the author that to be free is not to suffer domination. Pettit (1997b) believes that domination is characterized by arbitrary interference. I understand that arbitrariness is an essential point in the

characterization of domination; however, I agree with the feminist critique that the neo-republican concept neglects the care relationships, which assume an asymmetry of power between those who care and those who are being cared for or neglected, and Pettit's (1997b) formulation especially neglects large systems of domination, such as patriarchy⁴. For this reason, I argue in favour of an interpretation of freedom as non-domination, and this interpretation consists in formulating freedom as *not oppression*. In order, to develop this reading about freedom, I will use the concept of structure proposed by Jennifer Einspahr (2010). She develops a *structural theory of freedom*, and her proposition is that this *structural freedom*:

... helps us make judgments about these different kinds of enabling and constraining effects, where freedom would describe the material as well as the symbolic condition of non-domination. Domination, a structural concept describing power relations, focuses on the ability of some groups to systematically interfere in the lives of other groups, whether or not such power is exercised by all individuals so capable. Further, I argue that understanding patriarchy as a structure of domination helps us recapture the insights of radical feminists while avoiding the problematic need to ground feminist theorizing in a unitary category woman (EINSPAHR, 2010, p. 04).

Einspahr (2010, p. 12) takes Pettit's (1997b) concept of freedom as non-domination and highlights its relevance to feminist thought, since this formulation draws attention to the non-neutral nature of being in certain social positions. Resulting from her understanding of freedom as non-domination, Einspahr (2010) places emphasis on the relevance of patriarchal power thinking as a male-dominated structure and its complex interactions with other domination structures.

Patriarchy as a structure of domination systematically reproduces unequal gender power and therefore systematically favours men as a group over women as a group. The patriarchal power as a domination structure is independent on whether individual men exercise this power or not, but is also independent from the fact that there are women who individually do not experience the most obvious forms of domination in their lives (EINSPAHR, 2010, p. 12).

⁴ See Almeida e Elias, 2014; Elias, 2014; Friedman, 2008; Hirschmann, 2003; Markell, 2008.

I am aware that there is not a universal expression of domination, and there isn't a *universal woman*; nevertheless, I defend a strategic use of women as a category. In other words, we should mobilize the idea of women as a group towards a purposeful political theory⁵. In this way, thinking of women as a group is important to reflect on the social and structural issues related to lack of freedom. At the same time, it is interesting to note that the perspective that I am developing in this article assigns an important role to individual and collective subject, referring to the possibility of making a choice as essential to freedom. The relevance of the individual dimension in the reading about freedom I am proposing distances us from Einspahr's (2010) proposal. However, to compose her structural perspective on freedom, the author draws attention to patriarchal domination and reflects on the idea of the structure and its interconnection with the action (agency). These considerations about patriarchy, as well as about structure and agency, assist us in the development of reading freedom from the idea of non-oppression.

First, it is important to consider the structure not as something fixed, firm, which causally determines human action. Second, in that sense, structure and agency are not opposites, but rather interdependent; the author defines structure:

... as a set of socially constructed frameworks, patterns, and material conditions that frame our collective lives and that can be understood only in relation to 'agency', or a human being's 'socioculturally mediated capacity to act'. ... the relationship between structure and agency is not oppositional or mutually exclusive, as is often assumed, but rather the mutual constitution of structure and agency over time and space results in the production, reproduction, and transformation of social life. ... thus, agency must always be understood to exist in dynamic interdependence with the contexts that both created and are created by human action: structure is both the precondition and the outcome of action (EINSPAHR, 2010, p. 05).

The understanding of the structure as something dynamic, related to the capacity for action, contributes to my interpretation of freedom, since I am linking the two elements present in the structural concept seen above: the action and the context. My argument is that, when we think about freedom, we must take into account that the subject who chose her (his) possibility (and own interpretation to that possibility) to choose; however, at the same time, we must recognise that

⁵ About the idea of woman as a political group we recommend Young (1994).

choices are made in contexts and these contexts are not only important to consider the number of available choices, but also play an important role in the formation of choice and even in the formation of the subject who chooses.

Iris Young (2005) gives us an important reflection about oppression in contemporary society. In her words:

Oppression designates the disadvantage and injustice some people suffer not because tyrannical power coerces them, but because [of] every day practices of well-intentioned liberal society ... oppression also refers to systemic constraints on groups that are not necessarily the result of intentions of tyrant. Oppression in this sense is structural rather than the result of a few people's choice or policies. (YOUNG, 2005, p. 044).

Thinking freedom by the 'key' of *not oppression* makes it possible to reflect on how the 'free' choices are made, which involves at least two equally important and coexistent dimensions – the social and the individual. These dimensions can be explored (politically and normatively) in different ways. What my interpretation seeks to highlight is that we need to see the idea of freedom as a normative as well as a political tool. Due to this, depending on the situation and the intents of the analysis, we can, in certain situations, focus on a less general domination relationship, looking for considerations of the arbitrariness perpetrated by individuals, groups or institutions; and, at other times, we can emphasise the social and structural elements of oppression. By interpreting the concept of freedom from this perspective, this article aims to illuminate the complexity of the idea of freedom as freedom to choose.

It is important to note that, when we speak of a broader plan – a plan of structures of oppression – we must be clear that such structures involve everyone: those who at some point may be considered dominant, as well as those who can be considered dominated or oppressed. To think in broad structures of domination is to think that such structures place people in society, putting someone in a privileged position while some others in subordinate and vulnerable situations.

Patricia Hill Collins (1990) points out a fundamental element to the thought process of the structures of oppression. Oppression is marked by contradictions; domination systems have few 'pure' victims or oppressors. "Each individual derives varying amounts of penalty and privilege from the multiple systems of oppression

which frame everyone's lives" (COLLINS, 1990, p. 228). The author also notes the fact that most people have little difficulty in identifying their own victimisation within a system of oppression, such as race, class, religion, physical ability, sexual orientation, age and gender. However, it is much more difficult to realize how their thoughts and actions uphold someone else's subordination.

Thus, Patricia Collins (1990) shows the interconnected nature of oppression, structured at multiple levels from an individual level to a structural level, which are part of a wide array of domination. For this reason, the same person can be both a member of multiple dominant groups and also a member of multiple subordinate groups. Collins (1990) argues that in order to understand domination, we should investigate how it is structured along certain axes, such as race, class and gender, among others, and thus analyse that different systems of oppression depend on different mechanisms of domination.

Returning to the particular reading of freedom, what I am offering in this article is that we could understand freedom as *freedom from oppression*, which means to say that to be free is not to suffer domination. However, in this case, the domination is not configured just as an arbitrary interference perpetrated by something or someone, but the very notion of freedom would demand attention to the structures of oppression – structures involving the construction of choice and those who choose – as domination sources.

Being free, in this sense, is to be able to choose, taking into account the construction of choices by people and the perception that people have about their own choices and what each one understands about what a choice is and which ones are available. This should be made in a context of non-domination (or, as little domination as possible). In some sense, this formulation could be viewed as an emphasis on the positive dimension of freedom; it is useful to clarify that it is possible in the sense that we understand that Berlin's (2002) view of freedom as absence of non-interference has in the possibility of choice an important dimension. Berlin's (2002) negative freedom is defended in the context of value pluralism and its consequent emphasis in the choice between different, equal and incommensurable goods. The value of freedom is connected to the fact that we have to choose between different, and sometimes equally valuable and conflicting goods. The defense of negative freedom and the critique to the positive formulations does

not focus on the possibility and ability to choose, but the critique of positive formulations rests in the monist critique. The problem is not to choose, but the perfectionist views that elect an ideal or supreme good.

Flavia Biroli (2013, p. 89) points out that the theme of the formation of preferences is central in the feminist discussion of autonomy and that this debate is marked by ambiguity. Such ambiguities are very similar to those appearing in Hirschmann's (2003) reflections on the choices and the formation of choices. On the one side is the appreciation of the ability of individuals to independently express their preferences and, on the other, the criticism that such preferences are offshoots of power relations. Our intent is to offer a discussion about being free and to make a dialogue between different theoretical perspectives. We have a commitment with moral pluralism and we believe that, for the purpose of this paper, the idea of oppression provides a link between freedom as non-domination (PETTIT, 1997b) and constructivist freedom (HIRSCHMANN, 2003), remembering that both are theoretical constructions supported in Isaiah Berlin's (2002) dichotomy between positive and negative freedom.

Taking into account Berlin's (2002) construction, how could we think of freedom being understood as *oppression*? Before I explore an answer to this question, we could also reflect about the relevance or irrelevance of maintaining the distinction between positive and negative freedom. I endorse that maintaining such a dichotomy, with the purpose of making a clash between concepts, would undermine the joint purpose that I am offering with a reading 'key'. Moreover, I believe that we can use the dichotomy proposed by Berlin as a 'map', a compass or a navigation instrument. When I propose a reading that adds distinct elements from distinct understandings about freedom around the idea of *oppression*, I am mobilising different traditions and views. Thus, highlighting which are (or could be) the positive and negative elements, as elaborated by Isaiah Berlin (2002), can facilitate both the understanding of my proposal and its use as a normative tool.

In view of the distinction between 'liberty from' and 'liberty for', the idea of treating freedom as non-oppression, although formulated negatively (freedom as absence of oppression), is largely concerned with the nature and exercise of power. Here it is worth summarizing the notion that power should be understood in both dimensions, as *power over* and as *power to*. Exploring freedom as the idea

of *non-oppression* would be a way to bring together, under the same statement, the different views of different authors, believing that together they can contribute to a normative and political understanding of freedom.

Under the 'key' of non-oppression we can keep Berlin (2002) and Hirschmann's (2003) views that freedom is connected to the possibility and ability to choose, but at the same time such formulation would indicate that it is not enough to propose a notion of freedom as freedom to choose. It is necessary that the formulation of freedom heeds the conditions of those choices. Therefore, freedom, if articulated by the theme of oppression, represents the following: *to be free is to be free to choose in conditions in which these choices are not constrained by arbitrary interference or social structures of submission and oppression*.

Furthermore, for the concept of freedom as non-interference to have its political content well understood, it should be read in conjunction with the idea of value pluralism; the value of freedom, in this case, is in the fact that, when making a choice among a plurality of values – values which are sometimes irreconcilable – people create themselves. This is because the value of freedom of choice lies in the fact that in the face of equally valuable goals and values, often irreconcilable, the choice of an end or value would inevitably lead to the sacrifice of another purpose or value and, therefore, in the process of choice between ends and values, the self-creation takes place. Thus, I understand that the negative freedom of Berlin is not about 'just doing what you want'.

Following this reading, the idea of *freedom as non-oppression* must be understood taking into account the considerations of republican *freedom as non-domination* and feminist considerations of *constructivist freedom*. The first emphasises arbitrariness as the characteristic of dominant situations, and the second claims attention to the fact that the choices are limited by structural and structuring situations that touch everyone's lives. Therefore, we can say that freedom taken as *non-oppression* has its negative element when sharing Berlin's (2002) view that being free is making choices, and has positive elements when, from the constructivist elaborations, it reflects on the conditions under which the choices are made.

Hirschmann (2006) weighs the usefulness of her constructivist idea of freedom, and her conclusions are not only relevant with regard to constructivist

freedom, but also help us to think through the reading proposal that I am using. Hirschmann (2006) asks herself the following question: given the demands constructivist freedom (feminist freedom) puts on the table, would achievable freedom be thought of in these terms? To answer, Hirschmann (2006) states that "... the goal of conceptual analysis is to define the concept to say what is necessary for 'freedom' in the full abstract ideal to be achieved" (HIRSCHMANN, 2006, p. 209). In addition, the author takes up the fact that freedom is a matter of degree and that "... the theoretical ideal serves as a yardstick for measuring the degree of freedom we have" (idem). This guide is also a tool for carrying out the concrete changes to increase freedom. Another important observation made by Hirschmann (2006) is similar to the considerations made by Berlin (2002): freedom is not the greatest of all the important and necessary goods, there is not a defence that this is an absolute good.

Thinking of freedom as the 'key' of oppression is quite a demanding consideration of the conditions of freedom and of free choices. While I have tried to avoid paternalistic positions, or the problems of 'second guessing', distancing myself from assessments on what would be the 'true free choices', my reading on freedom requires a critical posture about the production and reproduction of structures of power asymmetry. Surely, it would be implausible to establish that there is only freedom where there is no inequality of power. I would like to emphasise that I do not intend to establish a criteria or formulas that somehow establish where to start and where to end the (true) freedom; yet, I believe that my reading of freedom is a useful tool.

I want to draw attention to the complexity of relationships, feelings, situations and structures in which choices are made, and for this complexity, I believe it is impossible to formulate *a priori* a list of conditions that could be mobilized to establish that in a given situation *there is or there is not freedom, there is or there is not free choice or a free person*. The idea of the reading 'key' is useful because it gives us a framework for thinking about the different situations we face, as well as about choices and freedoms, and thus, can serve as a parameter for analysis, reflection and proposition.

Why do we need a reading 'key' for freedom?

Why do we need a reading 'key' for freedom, or, why do we need a feminist approach to think about freedom? I want to conclude this article offering a reflection about the questions above. First of all, it is important to remember that "... the adjective 'feminist' does not designate an exclusive concern with inequality between men and women, but the fact that this concern joins with others in a theoretical framework that is deeply tributary of the discussions within the feminist traditions" (BIROLI and MIGUEL, 2012, p. 09).

Under the statement 'the personal is political', we find an important feminist critique of the dichotomous way of understanding social relations, and especially a critique of the rigid separation between public and private space. This dichotomy naturalizes the social division and devalues the private sphere, relegating women to the domestic sphere, which leads to an economic subordination of women, as well as a restricted political participation. Such separation fosters apparently neutral discourses of privacy and publicity, but which is led by male standards of interest. Thus, feminists point out that what happens in the domestic sphere and the public sphere are, in fact, related and cannot be isolated, especially when we focus on the power relations that both spheres create and perpetuate.

This paper looks to emphasize that the choices take place in contexts, and these contexts involve relationships, emotions and values. They can be understood as a subjective aspect linked to choice; however, (and here is a very important feature of this reading key), we want to highlight that social standards, structures of power and social meanings are what shape this subjectivity. The social construction happens constantly, quietly and every day. Seemingly innocent standards and actions build, reproduce and locate the subject in power relations.

The idea of reading freedom from the theme of oppression articulates the concern with the notion of plurality of choices, non-domination and the construction of the subject who chooses. This is not a new concept of freedom; it results largely from Hirschmann's (1996,2003) freedom formulation, at the same time it highlights the idea of non-domination and contestability offered by Pettit (1997b) while maintaining that freedom is linked to the choices. This articulation makes freedom a quite demanding idea; it immediately refers to the complexity of the real

experiences of the people. As we have seen, the choices are embedded in complex relationships, and the concept of freedom as non-oppression is a normative tool alert to important political aspects of these choices.

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