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A philosophical problem: why servitude?[1]

Um problema filosófico: por que a servidão?

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Abstract

The present article aims to discuss the conditions of possibility for the issue of human servitude to be inscribed in the history of thought as a philosophical problem. To that end, we will revisit the classic essay "The Discourse on Voluntary Servitude," by Étienne de La Boétie, since by daring to question not only the political fact of domination but also inverting the perspective and asking about its reverse: if command necessarily depends on its opposite, why do we obey?, the author not only changed the coordinates on which political thought was based but also decisively implicated human will in the production and reproduction of servitude. Therefore, it is voluntary servitude as a symptom of an era—born with the constitution of the political field—that emerges in La Boétie's discourse; hence, paradoxically, a trans-historical issue that continues to produce questions in the contemporary context.

Keywords: Voluntary servitude. Domination. Freedom. Desire. Imaginary.

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Resumo

O presente artigo objetiva discutir as condições de possibilidade para que a problemática da servidão humana pudesse se inscrever na história do pensamento como problema filosófico. Para tanto, retomaremos a leitura do clássico ensaio A servidão voluntária, de Étienne de La Boétie, uma vez que, ao ousar questionar não apenas o fato político da dominação, mas inverter a perspectiva e perguntar pelo seu avesso: se o mando depende necessariamente do seu contrário, por que obedecemos?, o autor não apenas mudou as coordenadas sobre as quais se assentava o pensamento político, mas implicou decisivamente a vontade humana na produção e reprodução da servidão. É, portanto, a servidão voluntária como sintoma de uma época – parida com a constituição do campo político – que se descortina no Discurso de La Boétie, por isso, paradoxalmente, uma problemática trans-histórico, a qual continua a produzir interpelações no contemporâneo.

Palavras-Chave: *Servidão voluntária. Dominação. Liberdade. Desejo. Imaginário.*

Introduction

Almost 500 years ago, a Portuguese poet, at the height of European colonization, wrote one of the most beautiful poems about love in the Portuguese language. Love is presented as a fire that lights up and burns; like a wound that aches yet is unfelt, as sad joy, as a conflict between desires; as winning when one loses. The poet tells us: "It is being enslaved of your own free will / It is counting your defeat a victory / It is staying loyal to who kills you." (Camões, s/d).

How is such a love possible "if so self-contradictory?" asks Luís Vaz de Camões (1524-1580) in the last stanza of his sonnet. The conclusion to the syllogism, whose premises are built on oxymorons, could only be a question, a surprise. Verse by verse, the conflict, the duality inherent in human feelings is exposed by Camões in perfect decasyllables, as if the metrics were used to tell what logic refuses. How possible is a servile love, a servitude for the sake of love?

A French poet contemporary of Camões, Étienne de La Boétie (1530-1563), equally moved by astonishment, also questioned the nature and connections between love and servitude. By shifting his object from love to servitude, La Boétie did not offer us a poem but a discourse, which, like Camões' beautiful sonnet, has spanned centuries and continues to instigate our thoughts around a problem that the "language refuses to name" (La Boétie, 2016, p. 20) and is only possible through an oxymoron[2]: voluntary servitude, or the love of servitude. His *Discourse on Voluntary Servitude*, written while still a teenager, is a milestone in political thought, as it places servitude in the field of the will to serve, in the fundamental bond that unites power and desire.

Although they share the same astonishment and figures of speech, one thing indelibly sets them apart: the Portuguese poet speaks of *love as servitude*, and metaphors abound, and the French essayist speaks of *servitude as love*; no metaphors here, but a dire reality that imposes itself in such a disconcerting way that it silences the language and forces it to fold in on itself.

How can we explain the domination of millions of men, of whole nations, and of thousands of cities by a single man who tyrannizes them and imposes his will as a force of law? Why are many dominated in the name of One? How can we explain the servitude of man, which even animals reject and which, under its mask, cannot be considered a life worth living? What misfortune is this, and what vice is this? People who do more than obey, they serve; reduced to a mass of servants, they work to be expropriated, miserably serving a tyrant who humiliates them like a "beast of burden" (La Boétie, 2016, p. 22), and whose distance from a truly free man pushes them towards anthropological degradation: a guy, Fabiano... a guy![3]; neither animal nor man, "denatured" (Clastres, 1999, p. 109), a guy, "unnameable" (p. 112), anthropologically degraded, socially alienated, separated from the most fundamental human value: freedom[4].

[2] Marilena Chauí (2013) draws attention to the presence of oxymorons in La Boétie's *Discourse.*

[3] Reference to the main character in the novel *Vidas secas*, by Graciliano Ramos. Fabiano, when pondering the servitude imposed on him by his bosses, comes to the conclusion that he would never be a man: "It was bad luck, but Fabiano wanted to fight it, to feel strong enough to fight it and defeat it. He didn't want to die. He was hiding in the woods like an armadillo. But one day he would come out of his den, walk with his head held high, and be a man.–A man, Fabiano. He scratched his hairy chin, stopped, and relit his cigarette. No, he probably wouldn't be a man: he would be just like that his whole life, a guy, ruled by the white men, almost like a cow on someone else's farm" (Ramos, 2003, p. 24).

[4] We understand that, in La Boétie, freedom is used as a synonym for the ability to resist the seduction of the name of the One. In this sense, it would be closer to the idea of emancipation from social power structures than to the liberal idea of freedom, anchored in the notion of autonomy. This reading is supported, among others, by this passage: "If in all things it has shown that it [nature] did not so much want to make us all united as to make us all one – there is no doubt that we are all naturally free since we are all companions." (La Boétie, 19874, p. 17).

A discourse on servitude

La Boétie's question ricochets through the pages of the *Discourse* as if indignation forced him to stutter in his own language, and he stutters in the personality that is only possible for someone who feels struck by horror:

> *I would just like to understand* how it is possible that so many villages, so many cities, and so many nations can sometimes support a single tyrant, who has the power that they themselves give him; whose power to harm them is the power that they themselves accept; who only knows how to do them harm because they themselves prefer to suffer this evil than to contradict the tyrant. A shocking situation... seeing *millions of men* serve miserably, with their necks under the yoke, without being constrained by a group of men more numerous and stronger but somehow *enchanted and bewitched by the name of a single man* (La Boétie, 2016, p. 17, our emphasis).

In fact, the fundamental problem raised by La Boétie does not refer to domination by force, the brutality of battles, and the horror of war, nor does he equate servitude with slavery, precisely because the latter is imposed by force. His astonishment has as its starting point the observation of the paradox intrinsic to the fact of domination in monarchical regimes: how only one person can dominate so many and how are these many dominated by just one, whose attributes inspire neither fear since there is only one, nor love since he is cruel and inhuman? A vice that cannot be found in nature, nor in numerical opposition one/many: a challenge to the human condition but also logic.

The first answer that La Boétie offers us is that men are dominated by coercion and illusion. It turns out that coercion is imposed by weapons and suppresses the possibility of choice, so it cannot be the cause of voluntary servitude. What remains is illusion as the origin of the love of servitude. However, the author emphasizes that this illusion does not arise from an external cause, it is not the result of deception, but rather the illusion that the people themselves construct for themselves. La Boétie chooses the example of the people of Syracuse, who, "pressed by the fear of war" and "imprudently concerned only with immediate dangers" (La Boétie, 2016, p. 34-35) gave themselves Dionysius as head of the army with unrestricted powers. From warlord, Dionysius became king, and, soon after, tyrant. Fear and concern for the immediate are like yeast that makes the illusion of a people grow in their security demands.

As soon as he announces illusion as the cause of servitude, La Boétie backtracks: "It is true that, in the beginning, the people are forced to serve, defeated by force" (La Boétie, 2016, p. 35). In this way, force is erected as the origin, the principle of servitude; indeed, it is not just any force but "a bad encounter", a force so great that it "denatured man" (La Boétie, 2016, p. 31) and made him lose his sensitivity, submitting himself to a degrading situation that not even animals accept it without a contrary reaction.

Now, if at the beginning the people are forced to serve by force, something remains incomprehensible: what explains why servitude becomes perennial, how does this "misfortune" last as if it had always existed and as if there were no other possibility? By habit, the philosopher answers: "Men behave according to the way they are brought up" (La Boétie, 2016, p. 39). Thus, voluntary servitude, La Boétie tells us, is, first of all, "the fruit of an acquired habit" (La Boétie, 2016, p. 44), of the constant work carried out by the tyrant to make his subjects even more vulnerable and coward, who remain in cowardice, impotence and submission, brutalized by treatment and habit[5].

[5] We will once again refer to Fabiano's reflections: "It was essential for the boys to get on the right path, to know how to harvest *mandacaru* for the cattle, to fix fences, to tame wild animals. They needed to be tough, to become armadillos" (Ramos, 2003, p. 25).

From playful games to religion, the "bait of servitude" (La Boétie, 2016, p. 44) is widely distributed by tyrants to dominate the people, who allow themselves to be dominated by deception, deluding themselves. Illusion returns, no longer as the cause and principle of servitude but as a possible articulation so that it remains not only as servitude but stitched together by a will. Servitude, therefore, can occur through a bad encounter, misfortune, and habit, but none of them explain why servitude perpetuates itself and becomes voluntary.

As for the cause of the servitude that denatured man, described by La Boétie as a misfortune–which plunged man into a borderline state: neither human nor animal–, Pierre Clastres (1999) formulates it as an event, a tragic accident that endures and produces effects by replacing the desire for freedom with the love of servitude. Hence the persistence of the fundamental question: how do we desire servitude? How did this inversion of desire occur? What misfortune was this, what tragic accident was this that, by affecting the present, erased the past and condemned the future to its eternal repetition?

According to Clastres, the argument used by La Boétie makes voluntary servitude an "invariant common to all societies" and necessarily entails its opposite, that is, "the logical possibility of a society that ignored voluntary servitude" (Clastres, 1999, p. 108). The French anthropologist resorts to primitive societies, without a State – in which the distinction between dominant and dominated is not made, and, therefore, there is a refusal of power and obedience–to support the hypothesis according to which the servitude problematized by La Boétie is an effect of the institution of the State[6]. From this, it follows that the birth of the State and, consequently, of History, is the condition of possibility for both the exercise of power and the exercise of submission since it produces a division in society, divided between dominant and dominated. This misfortune, for Clastres, is the encounter with the State, with social division, with History, and with the denaturation of man that caused "the before of freedom to collapse into the after of submission" (Clastres, 1999, p. 110). As a consequence, if the State is the ontological operator of servitude, tyranny is the necessary consequence of government, regardless of the form it takes; there would thus be no distinction between monarchy and republic, between the government of one or the government of many.

Although he points out the historical nature of societies of servitude, referring to power relations that produce divisions and inequalities, as well as emphasizes the denaturation of man that precipitates him into the immanence of the desire for power and the desire for submission, Pierre Clastres, despite the meticulous and seductive nature of his analysis, privileges the macropolitical dimension of domination by erecting the State as the center of power and the origin of servitude. We speak of seduction because one of the effects of this amalgam is the lack of responsibility of individuals, who, although subject to power, actively participate both in the construction of those who oppress them and in the mechanisms necessary for the continuation of the games of subjection.

This is because power only exists in exercise (Foucault, 1995) and, for the desire for power to be realized in its exercise, its correlate is necessary, that is, the desire for submission. This is what primitive societies, well presented by Clastres (1999), refuse: the elevation of a desire for power which, by placing itself above others, is effected as domination. From this derives the disjunction, observed in primitive tribes,

[6] The author emphasizes that such a reading, the misfortune as being related to the origin of the State, is only possible from a certain anachronism, as it requires that it be stated in modern terms, in the same way that it was not possible for La Boétie to formulate the functioning of primitive societies.

between leadership and power, as a refusal to concentrate power, which, ultimately, is the refusal to obey. Are we facing an "a priori deduction" (Clastres, 1999, p. 116) of so-called primitive societies?

As noted by the author, although the issue raised in the *Discourse* is trans-historical–which is why it is still possible for us to understand it today, five centuries later–one can infer the influence of the 16th century, the century of the Renaissance and the Great Navigations in the "conquest" of the New World, in La Boétie's address to a society that, obeying only reason, would be naturally free from the yoke of equals.

> But, by the way, if people were to be born who were completely different from those who exist today, entirely new peoples, neither accustomed to subjection nor attracted by freedom, people who did not even know the exact meaning of these words, "freedom" and "servitude"–and we presented them with the alternatives of living in servitude or being free, which of the two possibilities would they choose? Without the slightest doubt, they would prefer to obey reason alone rather than serve a man (La Boétie, 2016, p. 33).

Thus, Clastres supports the hypothesis of an explicit allusion to the "new" peoples of America made by La Boétie, since at the time the *Discourse* was written there was a wide circulation in Europe of material about the new peoples. Letters and reports were written, above all, by the Portuguese and Spanish but also by the French who ventured into the new continent. "How could he [La Boétie] not be impressed by the image (...) of these entirely new peoples, American savages without faith, without a king, without law (...) and where each one is master of himself?" (Clastres, 1999, p. 118), asks the author.

In addition to the discovery of "new peoples," the influences of the century can also be observed in the very constitution of La Boétie's object. Joel Birman (2017) speaks of the anthropological condition of the modern subject, which began with the Renaissance, as marked by servitude. This is because, from the servitude that was imposed as involuntary in Antiquity–in whose signs one saw the marks and figures of theology and religion as ordering the world–to servitude as a condition of modern man, whose signs no longer refer to theocracy but to reason and science, founded by man, a transformation was carried out that made servitude something voluntary. In line with Clastres (1999), Birman argues that the emergence of the Modern State and absolute power operated a modification in the world order, the consequence of which was its decentering from divine, transcendent, and absolute law to the immanence of the political field forged by men and mediated by their wills. Thus, with "the emergence of the political register, in its autonomy and individuation in the face of the religious register," (Birman, 2017, p. 22) the human will engaged in the production and reproduction of servitude, so "the human subject could no longer remain alien to its machinery and its infernal machinations". Furthermore, the author continues, "The human subject is inscribed in the new architecture of power, which by its will infallibly transforms the old condition of servitude, from involuntary to voluntary" (Birman, 2017, p. 22).

In this sense, when speaking about the past and present issue of tyranny, La Boétie reveals the eminently modern issue of politics and, thus, "forces the wall of time" (Lefort, 1999, p. 128). It is, therefore, voluntary servitude as a symptom of an era–born with the constitution of the political field–that is revealed in La Boétie's Discourse, and therefore, paradoxically, a trans-historical problem. Evidence that seems all the more reliable the closer we look at our two contemporary poets: the Portuguese, singing of love, romanticizes servitude; the French, questioning servitude, denounces love. What is the nature of this love of servitude, what is the brightness that overshadows and highlights it?

The love of servitude

In articulating a possible answer to this enigma, La Boétie inverts the direction of analysis. More than the cruelty and power of the sovereign, it is necessary to question the bond of solidarity that unites the tyrant and the servant since the tyrant's power is often granted not by force but by consent[7]. A situation so common, La Boétie tells us, that, more than astonishment, it deserves regret. Thus, La Boétie's questions do not fall on the one who governs–the tyrant, his violence and cruelty, since these are not the causes of servitude, only its effects–but on the one who cries out, as Ulysses did in *The Iliad*: *In having many masters I see no good. Let one alone rule, let there be only one king*. It is, therefore, the will to serve, the active collaboration of the subordinates in their own domination that runs through the rhetorical effort of the young French poet and philosopher.

The bond of solidarity between the tyrant and the tyrannized appears in the very constitution of the political body, actively produced by the dominator (Chaui, 2013), with multiple eyes that watch, multiple ears that listen, legs that trample, and arms that hurt: limbs and organs that become accomplices of tyranny. Now, these various bodies serve as if they were not losing their freedoms but gaining servitude (La Boétie, 2016), the tyrant elects them from among the people themselves, betrayed by themselves when they accept servitude.

> The inhabitants of a nation who allow themselves to be dominated, or rather, who make themselves dominated because if they stopped submitting, they would be free from oppression. It is the people who enslave themselves, who cut their own throats. It is they who, having the choice between being a slave and being free, give up their freedom and take on the yoke. It is the people who accept their own misery, or rather, it is they who pursue it (La Boétie, 2016, p. 22).

Why do men accept servitude, and why do they give themselves a master? The answer that La Boétie provides us is as simple as it is brutal: because they refuse freedom, they do not desire it, because if they did they would be free. Freedom and desire coincide at the very moment they are separated: yet another paradox that La Boétie offers us. Since desiring to be free and being free are one and the same thing (La Boétie, 2016; Lefort, 1999), man is not free because he does not desire, since it is too easy. Therefore, man does not desire freedom, although the act (desiring) institutes the subject (free).

The consequences of this paradox are divided into two others: the first, the possibility of a negative anthropogenesis in La Boétie, since the subject, as subjected, is constituted by the refusal of the act of desiring freedom. The second, derived from the first, marks the refusal of freedom as the origin of the will to serve and exposes another attribute of the human: we are desirous and unaware of the nature of our desires.

At this point, we need to be cautious and follow Lefort (1999) when he establishes some distinctions between the desire *of* freedom and the desire *for* freedom, as well as between the desire *of* servitude and the desire *for* servitude. Regarding the desire *of* freedom, this would be taken as the object of desire and, in this sense, it is shown to be impossible, since freedom cannot appear as the object of desire, since it is the very condition of possibility of desire; hence we cannot desire it, but rather reclaim it, reestablish it to the limit of a renaming: "of an animal becoming a man again" (Lefort, 1999, p. 13736). In this sense, we would have a desire *for* freedom, anthropogenesis that presupposes and combines desire and freedom; "being free and

[7] Claude Lefort will make the distinction between consent and will: while "consent" points to the antecedence of domination, a situation that would impose itself, leaving the subjugated to accept servitude, voluntary servitude, on the contrary, points to a work carried out by the will that, obstinately, does not cease to produce it.

desiring freedom are one and the same thing", echoes the *Discourse*, as if it wanted to say–and Lefort says– that "man only reveals himself free in what he chooses" (Lefort, 1999, p. 137), be it freedom or servitude.

In effect, the desire *of* servitude, whose object is servitude, also points to an impossibility, since desire asserts itself based on its primal condition, which is freedom. From the impossible desire *of* servitude, we move on to the unthinkable desire *for* servitude, in which a desire is articulated that seeks to restore the imaginary unity of the social body, subsumed around a name that makes it possible[8], and marks a disjunction between freedom and desire at the moment in which the desire for freedom is enunciated. Opposition, therefore, between the desire for freedom and the desire for servitude: the first, as a necessary conjunction; the second, as a possible disjunction between desire and freedom.

In other words, even the desire for servitude is affirmed by an act of will that is engendered in freedom itself, that is, the refusal of freedom, as an act, is the genesis of the will to serve. The desire for the negative, that is, in the search for non-being (free), would engender a radical heteronomy, which is based on the "insurmountable distance between desire and the desired, a distance that never ceases to create objects that should fulfill desire, and that cannot fulfill it, because the lack of an object is the illusion of the will itself" (Chaui, 2013, p. 17). From this illusion arises the fascination with the name of the *One*, as an imaginary spectrum of that which fulfills desire.

In this sense, heteronomy[9] would not be "the essence of servitude" (Chaui, 2013, p. 13), as Marilena Chaui argues in *Contra a Servidão Voluntária*, but rather its necessary consequence. It can be inferred, from reading La Boétie, that we are servants because we refuse freedom; in this fundamental refusal, we desire servitude, fascinated by the name of the one, which saturates the determinations of the will, of the desire for freedom: we are free, including to choose the forms of our servitude.

This is how we can understand Claude Lefort's (2005) commentary on La Boétie's text, according to which servitude would be a choice, a "sign of freedom":

> Voluntary servitude, this phenomenon that is at the limit of the conceivable, attests to the permanence of desire that is in some way inverted. If men are the only beings susceptible to denaturing themselves, it is precisely because their natural desire is something other than the instinct of preservation (Lefort, 2005, p. 121).

Desire is more than preserving existence; it is something distinct from instinct. According to Lefort (2005), the preservation of man would not be linked to a naturalness of the instinct of conservation, which, taken to its limit, would make servitude impossible, as in animals, which, under the yoke, cry and lament. On the contrary, the preservation of man presupposes his inscription in a common space as a political animal, endowed with language, articulated by a desire for naming: "desire to speak and to hear, to name and to be named" (Lefort, 2005, p. 121). What is affirmed is the very social dimension of human desire, which echoes, at the individual level, the functioning of social machines. Let us see what La Boétie tells us:

> [nature] has given us all the great gift of voice and speech so that we may live together and fraternize more, and through the common and mutual declaration of our thoughts, create a communion of our wills; and it

[8] Here we are faced with a problem that would haunt the entire 20th century and that haunts the present day like a specter, namely, the question of the Masses.

[9] Vladimir Safatle, following Derrida, argues that it is possible to sustain a "heteronomy without servitude" (Safatle, 2016, p. 31) based on the affirmation of helplessness as a fundamental political affect. Thus, helplessness would be the condition of possibility for the individual **to become** a subject, since its assumption is confused with the practice of freedom, which "consists in not being subject to the Other", that is, in the capacity to relate to that which, in the Other, dispossesses him, and not with that which makes him identical to himself.

> has tried by all means to tighten and tighten the knot of our alliance and society; if in all things it has shown that it did not so much want *to make us all united so much as to make us all one*–there must be no doubt that we are all naturally free since we are all companions (La Boétie, 1987[10], p. 17, our emphasis).

La Boétie bases the social bond on the construction of dialogic spaces, in the *in-between* that is produced in the exchange established by the speaker/listener, whose condition of possibility is the mutual recognition between the different individuals in their diverse discursive positions, "not so much all united but us all one". It turns out that in the desire for servitude, this inversion of desire occurs in which the naming of the many irreducibles in their differences, "all one", is precipitated in the naming of the *One*, as interposed between the desire for naming and the act of naming. Thus, the desire to speak and to listen is cut off by that which makes it possible, and the dialogic space fails in its attempt to establish itself, leaving the echo of the *One*, imposed as the voice of each and every one, "all united" in their silent cries, equalized by the name that sutures them.

Expanding the field of understanding proposed by Pierre Clastres, Claude Lefort (1987; 2005) affirms that the misfortune producing the division between dominant and dominated is the institution of the social, which operates the primordial encounter between desire and language. Thus, the origin of servitude would be the separation of a name from the numerous and indiscernible mass of subjects, placed above all, referring only to itself as a separate power; this name that embodies the image of the entire social body, fragmented and dissolved, now reunited and whole in a single organic identity: "division and indivision in the same image", the "absolutely Other" (Lefort, 1999, p. 141) whose image produces the rupture between the people and the sovereign, those "enchanted and bewitched by the name of a single man" (La Boétie, 2016, p. 17). A powerful formula since it simultaneously unravels the origin of domination and servitude: the former refers to power separated from the people; the latter refers to the illusion of desire, deceived in its own movement of desiring, betrayed by the strength of one's own will. Therefore, servitude as a desire that pursues the illusion of the *One*, "enraptured by the image of the whole, insisting on displaying itself as desire" (Lefort, 1999, p. 146). In this way, Lefort articulates that voluntary servitude is a "love of self", a "social narcissism" (Lefort, 1999, p. 146).

To speak of the separation of power as the origin of domination and the illusion of desire as the core of servitude, would this not still be insisting on the anteriority of power as the producer of servitude? Or, on the contrary, is it to bring into play the social dimension of human desire, its inseparability from social practices, producers of power, and modes of subjectivation? To which Lefort responds:

> To observe that subject men are enchanted and bewitched by the name of the One is already to reveal a lot, to deprive the reality of the One, that of the master, to allow precisely the name to subsist, to replace the visible relationship between master and slave with an invisible relationship that is tied with language (Lefort, 1999, p. 132).

[10] In this excerpt, we chose the translation by Laymert Garcia dos Santos, from Brasiliense Publisher, 1987 Edition, because there is an important divergence in the highlighted excerpt between this translation and the one we are using in our work, done by Gabriel Perissé, from Nós Publisher. Where we read, in the translation, "it (nature) did not so much want to make us all united so much as to make us all one" (p. 17), we have, in Perissé's translation, "it...demonstrating, in all things, a desire to unite us in such a way that we would become practically one being" (p. 29). In the French text, established by Pierre Léonard, from the manuscript recovered by Mesmes, we read, "si elle a monstré en toutes choses qu'elle ne vouloit pas tant nous faire tous unis que tous uns" (La Boétie, 1987, p. 46).

From Marilena Chaui's (2013) perspective, La Boétie reveals the origin of the link between language and power, more precisely, of discourse as an exercise in political domination and of politics as a "game of force and persuasion" (p. 18).

Brazilian social scientist Luis Felipe Miguel (2018) draws attention to La Boétie's pioneering work in identifying the productive nature of power, since more than limiting and restricting, the power of the *One*, embodied in the figure of the tyrant, promotes behaviors in those subjected to it, behaviors that maintain it. If this were not the case, it would be enough for the servants to stop acting for the tyranny to collapse, as La Boétie suggests; however, something drives them to obedience, something makes it impossible for them to oppose the passive "no" to power and, in this way, they perpetuate servitude and reaffirm it through obedient behavior at every moment.

The issue of *Discourse* is not limited to the *One* who occupies the position of power, to the tyrant who holds the will to power and domination but rather to the name of the *One*, as a function that articulates the imaginary with desire. Consequently, the tyrant does not become a tyrant by an act of will but responds to a formulated demand that summons him to a previously established place, arranged by those he dominates (Lefort, 1999). There would therefore be a "division within the will, split between the desire to be free and the desire to serve" (Chaui, 2013, p. 17). As if fascinated by the tyrant, more than obedience and servitude, the subjugated offer him adoration, dazzled by the reflection that returns to them in the form of identification. And they keep the tyrant in power and perpetuate him, "accomplices of his cruelties, companions of his pleasures, conniving with his voluptuousness, partners in his plundering. Half a dozen flatterers who add their own iniquitous behavior to the iniquities practiced by the tyrant" (La Boétie, 2016, p. 63).

Therefore, it is the desire of the dominated in their demands for illusion that calls us to reflect on the current situation of voluntary servitude, induced as we are to think, as Lefort explains, "that reflection on politics is linked to the political project; or that the strength of the search depends on the will to decipher what is, here and now, the work of desire" (Lefort, 1999, p. 163).

For La Boétie, it is clear that the key to domination lies in the active collaboration of the oppressed with those who oppress them, based on a distribution of power that is exercised all the more the more it is dismantled. We consent to power and the tyrant because we wish to exercise power over those who are below us in the social structure. We construct the illusion that to consent to power is to seize its power and exercise it over some, who, subject to many, will also exercise a portion of this power over many others. La Boétie constructs the pyramidal image of power in which the sovereign appears at the top and the mass of subjects constitutes the base: from top to bottom, a constant game with imagination, power, and fascination; from base to top, an effective work of identification, subjection, and consent.

The discourse of voluntary servitude is a denunciation of the domination of man by man, of some by others, but it is also a denunciation of the fascination with power; a cry of resistance to power, to the seduction of the name of the *One* that imposes on man the will to serve to extend servitude. In this sense, we agree with Frédéric Gros in his reading of the *Discourse*, for whom "freedom is, above all, an ethical disposition" (Gros, 2018, p. 55), which is based on the emancipation of the desire to obey. For the author, even in extreme situations of coercion and force, one can obey by objective imposition while emptying the meaning of obedience, reducing it to the minimum, "obedience *a minima*", based on a subjective choice not to serve. Obeying by imposition and force, but "at the limit of sabotage" (Gros, 2018, p. 57). About this ethical position, Gros will speak of an "objective submission in the context of subjective resistance" (Gros, 2018, p. 59), which marks a difference in status between obedience, rooted in the limit of coercion, and servitude, the latter assumed as a

position by desire. Voluntary servitude, this oxymoron that "nature denies having created and that language refuses to name" (La Boétie, 2016, p. 20), expresses precisely this position of desire, the fascination with power that places man in an imaginary relationship with it, as if he belonged to that place that is the object of fascination, worshiping his own desire put into action by another. In this sense, one must resist not power but the desire for obedience, "because it is precisely this desire and this adoration that sustain it" (Gros, 2018, p. 55).

Thus, freedom, as the desire to be free, marks the limits of ethical and subjective responsibility that calls for a position, whether that of wanting to be free or of desiring the forms assumed by our servitude, which imprison and accommodate us. In this way, power and subjection are not external to individuals, but constitutive of their ways of being. We are subjected, we serve voluntarily because we are seduced by the figures and structures of power, and, through identification with these specters, we desire power, its effects, and its catastrophes. A single thread runs through the entire social structure, which links tyrants, tyrannical, and the tyrannized, "submissive, one through the other" (La Boétie, 2016, p. 65), through advantages, flattery, and privileges, finished by the link between power, desire, and subjective constitution.

Final considerations

The escape from servitude, La Boétie tells us, is a simple act of will, which is based on renunciation: the refusal of power is the refusal of servitude, and, therefore, freedom is the no that opposes power. Against the mystified and mystifying discourse of power that subjugates and dominates, La Boétie opposes friendship, which is based on the horizontality of the bonds between equal individuals, who recognize each other as free and support each other in the exercise of a "fraternal affection"[11] (La Boétie, 2016, p. 28). The love of friendship, based on equality between companions, is the refusal to serve since it is fundamentally opposed to the love that is nourished by the hypnotic fascination of an object chosen and positioned above and beyond the subject, which remains vanished in the face of the other. In contrast to *being trapped by will*, the love that is based on the "*because it was him, because it was me*[12]", whose hallmark is the recognition of the irreducibility of the one to the one.

Data availability statement

The main focus of this article is contributions of a theoretical or methodological nature, without the use of empirical data sets. Therefore, in accordance with the journal's editorial guidelines, the article is exempt from being deposited in SciELO Data.

[11] Some authors point to the appropriation of the Discourse of Voluntary Servitude by the French revolutionaries of the 18th century, especially based on the idea of liberty, equality, and fraternity among men. For more information on the subject, see Marilena Chaui (2013).

[12] In the Book On Friendship, included in the Essays of Michel de Montaigne, the author speaks of his intense and lasting friendship with La Boétie, which lasted until the latter's death. This bond was so important that it allowed the author of Discourse on Voluntary Servitude to entrust it to Montaigne, who would publish it in his Essays. He did not do so, because the Huguenots anticipated and published a first version of the Discourse in 1574. Montaigne then chose the book On Friendship to talk about the Discourse and his friend La Boétie and, thus, confides the reason why they loved each other: "parce que c'estoit luy, parce que c'estoit moi". For a discussion on the friendship of philosophers, I refer the reader to the beautiful text by Marilena Chaui, Friendship, refusal to serve, originally published In La Boétie, E. de. Discourse on Voluntary Servitude. São Paulo: Brasiliense, 1987.

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