

Eliot Freidson: progression and constraints in the biography of an intellectual*

Eliot Freidson: progressão e condicionamentos na biografia de um intelectual

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Abstract

Eliot Freidson (1923-2005) is considered one of the founders of the sociology of medicine. Both his critics and admirers in the sociological and medical fields recognize his work as an international benchmark. This paper analyzes Freidson's intellectual biography without concentrating on his ideas or their transformation over the course of time. The emphasis is on the personal constraints that marked his intellectual career within a broader context, with the many different opportunities and choices. It establishes the intersection between the singular trajectory of an intellectual, and the structures, processes and events in which he was immersed and which he changed by his actions.

Keywords: Eliot Freidson (1923-2005); intellectual biography; medical sociology; sociology of professions; New York University; Jewish culture.

Resumo

Eliot Freidson (1923-2005) é considerado um dos fundadores da sociologia médica. Seus críticos e admiradores no campo médico e sociológico reconhecem que sua obra é de referência internacional. Este artigo analisa a biografia intelectual de Eliot Freidson (1923-2005), enfatizando não suas ideias e sua transformação ao longo do tempo, mas sim os constrangimentos particulares de sua carreira intelectual, inscritos em um amplo contexto, com diferentes oportunidades e escolhas. Estabelece a interseção entre a trajetória singular de um intelectual e as estruturas, processos e eventos nos quais ele estava imerso e que mudou com suas ações.

Palavras-chave: Eliot Freidson (1923-2005); biografia intelectual; sociologia médica; sociologia das profissões; New York University; cultura judaica.

A biography is a kind of historical study with the life of a single individual as the object of scrutiny. According to Roberts (2002) this type of analysis has undergone a renaissance and a major change in recent years. In the past, the purpose of biographies was generally to praise the subjects, while shedding light on their discoveries, actions and attitudes. These texts almost always valued subjective individual attributes like courage, virtue and intelligence, usually neglecting any economic or cultural constraints suffered by individuals in their social context. The biographical subject was usually male and portrayed as a martyr or a hero in his own country or society. This kind of biographical study served an underlying ideological purpose, later analyzed by contemporary social scientists. Many critics pointed out that their authors wrote as if the life story of a public man had already been written at his birth and his destiny determined from the cradle. For this reason, traditional biographical studies are superficial, anecdotal, chronological and unable to portray the broader historical meaning of an individual's life. While many of the traditional biographies adopted this descriptive formal style, structuralism excluded individual characteristics from historical explanation.

Over the past twenty years, historians and sociologists have reinvented and changed the forms of biography, rejecting the old heroic and linear modes and placing the actors in their full social and cultural context. Some authors chose unknown persons rather than important figures. This is the case, notably, of Ginzburg (1980), who resurrected the daily routine and the ideas of a peasant persecuted by the Inquisition. Understanding the individual was the way he chose to understand the society of the day. Other researchers have chosen well-known people, but analyzed them in a new way. This was the case, for example, with Norbert Elias's book about Mozart. Elias (1993) focused his work on the interrelationships between power, behavior, emotion and knowledge over time, without neglecting individual action. Interestingly, this book, which has been translated into several languages, restored Mozart's individual trajectory by inserting it into a broader social and cultural setting. When Elias analyses Mozart's life trajectory, he describes the interdependencies and social configurations that acted upon him, determined his opportunities, and affected the choices he made. And yet, in spite of this renewal, biographies written from a purely anecdotal and chronological perspective are still coming out and continue to attract readers. In this paper, I will attempt to propose a different way of writing a biography. The life history of an intellectual as complex as Eliot Freidson does not lend itself to a narrative with clearly-defined sequences.

The information presented here was obtained, initially, from Freidson's *curriculum vitae* in a typed and mimeographed text (Freidson, 1971). It features a commented list of facts in chronological order, which he considered landmarks in his life, from his only autobiographical article (Freidson, 1978) and from interviews conducted with his relatives and colleagues at New York University (NYU), where he worked for over thirty years.¹ The written documents and interviews with his colleagues and relatives were analyzed according to the oral history methodology (Ritchie, 2003).

I do not attempt to analyze the ideas or specific content of Freidson's works here. Several authors have for years undertaken this kind of salutary task making his ideas and works a privileged object of analysis. Other authors have concentrated on a specific aspect

of his work, bringing it into the center of theoretical discussions in the sociology of the professions (McKinlay, 1977; Larson, 1977; Coburn, 1992; Halpern, Anspach, 1993; Brint, 1993; Relman, 2003).

A recent article by Bosk (2006) analyzes different aspects of Freidson's literary work. His merit consists in enclosing a list of Freidson's bibliographical output, identifying an evolution in Freidson's thought, particularly in some of his books. The recent special issue of the journal *Knowledge, Work and Society* brings together different authors who analyze Freidson's contributions to the sociology of medicine (Giannini, Gadea, 2006). Conrad (2007) published his presentation given at the Eliot Freidson memorial session during the 2006 American Sociological Association meeting in Montreal. In this paper, he emphasizes the main role developed by the book *Profession of medicine* in the construction of the sociology of medicine. In Conrad's words: "This work fundamentally shifted the parameters of medical sociology, the sociological perspectives on medicine and the ways in which issues around health and illness could be sociologically explained" (p.142).

All these articles are important, but offer little on Freidson's biography and intellectual trajectory, which is the focus of this essay. Here, indeed, I want to explain how and why he was engaged in the construction of the sociology of medicine. I believe that the choices he made and the opportunities he was given all followed a certain progression with form and direction that gave meaning to his life. It is a type of immanent progression with decisive dates and moments, albeit limited by constraints.

These constraints limited the overall opportunities he was offered, and influenced directly or indirectly the choices he made or was led to make. As I will show, Freidson seldom made a choice because he had an inner reason to do so. From a symbolic interactionist standpoint (Blumer, 1989), we could say that Freidson acted as he did in each situation because he was in a position where this was one of the feasible alternatives that competed with others, which were followed by his colleagues and emulators instead.

First, let us consider the 'progression', and then, the 'constraints'.

Progression

The progression he made during his life was suggested to me by his sister Adele Feldman. She confided that Freidson, since childhood, had had a peculiar way of observing things, objects, and life. Like a screw boring into wood, when analyzing something, Freidson would go round the object and, at the same time, go deeper into it. In this sense, she said:

one particular thing I asked him, and he explained to me, whatever side of it I was telling him, he would take the opposite side and show me – that's when we were little. He would show me the other side. ... One thing about Eliot, he was full of knowledge. When I would ask him something about politics, for instance, and I would say, "Well, don't you think so-and-so?" he would see *around and through*. He would show you the whole picture. He could talk on anything. He had a vast knowledge. But it was interesting how Eliot could see all sides of the picture and give me all the different points. ... It's a gift [emphasis added].

Adele Feldman refers to a 'gift' because of her belief that since boyhood Freidson had had this curiosity and this way of observing things from different points of view. To this day, she does not really know if during their childhood he showed her the other side of the problem merely to be contrary. Nonetheless, she remembers that he manifested this way of analyzing things since their early years. Later, in his maturity, Freidson's knowledge expanded, but his way of looking at things remained the same. To her, the fact that he had "vast knowledge" and the power to "talk on anything" were only additions to his gift. His older sister's testimony and inherent and immanent characteristics thus seems to reveal a trait of his personality and his way of being and acting.

What Freidson's widow, Helen Giambruni, said about his approach to a subject or an issue as he wrote coincides to a great extent with Adele Feldman's view. Both as a child and as a mature writer one can see him following this progression that simultaneously goes "around and through."

Giambruni met Freidson in 1974 in California when Eliot Freidson, already separated from his second wife Judith Lorber, was a fellow of the Center for Advanced Study in Behavioral Science at Stanford University. At the time, he lived at his friend Howard Becker's home in San Francisco. Helen Giambruni was finishing her PhD. She is a highly cultured person who speaks easily in different languages.

For Giambruni, in each article he wrote and in each book he published, Freidson examined an aspect he had already analyzed in a previous publication in greater depth, or considered yet another facet of the same aspect. She emphasized that Freidson did not analyze different themes. Giambruni was not just his partner. Professionally, she worked as a reader and editor for academic journals. She read, and possibly revised, many articles and books that Freidson published from the 1970s onwards, when they started living together. Hence, her comment seems to be authoritative; it is, above all, extremely qualified. In her view, during his whole professional career, Freidson dealt with a single theme – the medical profession and professionalism – bringing more density to it with each new work. In this respect, she told me that:

I always read what he had just written, and I would read it and think, "Well, now he's done that. What's he going to do next? How is he going to find another subject?" I always thought, "Well, maybe he should find something totally different." But he always had something more, until maybe the very end, and that may have been growing old more than lack of subject. ... And Eliot Freidson just stayed there and *bored in* [emphasis added].

Giambruni considered that Freidson had a very distinctive way of working and of being. He pursued an idea further and wrote something else, and that in turn led to something different. In her understanding: "He always worked going deeper and with more complexity, or maybe simpler, but in any case always deeper on the same subject. ... He would take each theme of his research and turn it over, examining it from another direction, thinking how it would be if you looked at it from here instead of from there".

In other words, what Giambruni says about Freidson's approach to his subject of research coincides with Adele Feldman's point out about the way Freidson observed the things around him during his childhood in Boston. Even though she was referring to

Freidson's sociological approach, Helen Giambruni selected images that were similar to those proposed by Adele Feldman, like his way of turning things over. In my understanding, Freidson's intellectual career and trajectory followed this continuous progression that was representative of his personality and his style as a scholar.

However, a brief comment on this idea must be introduced here. If we look at the titles of the articles and books that Freidson published during the first years of his intellectual career, we sense that he experienced a change of direction in the late 1950s. Only after this moment did his career start to obey the progression mentioned by his wife and older sister. Prior to this moment, his career did not appear to follow a path. He had written, indeed, about a variety of subjects and worked in institutions that were very different both in purpose and location. His behavior does not seem to be sufficient explanation to justify the choices he was to make thereafter. Among all the historical contexts in which Freidson lived and reacted to, one must be highlighted: The Social Science Residency at Montefiori Hospital in New York between 1955 and 1956.

After World War II, sociology was not a secure profession and did not seem the best road to a secure and prosperous future in the United States. The opportunity to work as a sociologist in a large hospital in New York in 1955 seems to have been a turning point for Freidson, because both the city and the practice of medicine were improving enormously. On the one hand, the city was one of the most important in America. On the other hand, medicine progressively became the best way to alleviate pain and extend life. The circumstances offered obvious opportunities for a sociologist to think critically about professionalism. Thus, it was the historical context in which Freidson lived, its interdependencies and social configurations that to a great extent determined his choices. We must consider this juncture in more detail.

The turning point

Between 1946 and 1952, Freidson worked on his Master's thesis and PhD dissertation at the University of Chicago. These first academic works yielded three articles published in major American journals the year after he finished his PhD (Freidson, 1953a, 1953b, 1953c). Even though he had obtained his PhD from one of the most prestigious American universities and demonstrated his intellectual ability before the editorial boards of three different journals, Freidson, then thirty years of age, was unemployed. His situation was further complicated by virtue of the fact that he had been married to Marion Elizabeth Faciberg since 1950, and she became pregnant a year later. In other words, Freidson had a family to support and good reason to find a way to make a living. Early in his career, he did not have a clear objective as he had not chosen a specific topic around which his intellectual concerns would revolve. For this reason immediately after finishing his doctoral degree, he accepted a post-doctoral Ford fellowship from the Psychology Department of the University of Illinois at Urbana (1952-1954). As soon as he arrived in Urbana his daughter Jane was born on November 14, 1952. At that time he did not keep his doctoral research subject on his intellectual agenda as had to respond swiftly to the demands and commitments that the labor market imposed upon him. This happened both in Urbana

and Philadelphia, where he got his second job in 1954. This time, he went to work for the US National Student Association, directing a research survey on student organizations. Early in his career, Freidson was like a pilgrim looking for a job and an income. His social and economic circumstances were dictating his life.

Besides the articles related to his Master's and PhD works, between completing his PhD and the experience at Montefiore Hospital in New York, Freidson published one book (Freidson, 1955a) and five articles on issues that either interested him or were connected to the work opportunities he had found (Freidson, 1954a, 1954b, 1955b, 1956, 1957). For this reason, prior to September 1955 he seemed to be in search of a theme, but above all of a workplace where he could hang his hat. His first published works were neither about the sociology of medicine nor about professions. These issues were far from his thoughts at the time.

In the fall of 1955, Freidson was once again unemployed and his first son Oliver with Marion Faciberg had been born on January 4, 1954. He now had two children. His constraints as a sociologist were still worse than in 1952. He could have quit the intellectual arena and worked in business, such as the shoe business as his parents wanted. But, in an attempt to resist such alternatives, he had to accept an invitation to join an interdisciplinary team of researchers at the Russell Sage Foundation to participate in what was called the "social science residency" at Montefiore Hospital in New York. The wayfarer was going to work in his third position in a mere four years. From this moment on, Freidson and his family went to live in "a very tiny town just on the other side of the George Washington Bridge from New York," as Jane Freidson stated.

Freidson's experience at Montefiore Hospital changed his professional trajectory quite dramatically. From that moment onwards, he had found his own research niche, his theme, and his object of study. His subject was medicine, the profession around which he began making increasingly in-depth and delicate analyses. What he still lacked was a workplace in which to settle.

Levenson (1984), in her history of Montefiore Hospital, emphasizes the innovative and important role of the work that it conducted, part of which studied the causes and social consequences of diseases, while striving to offer health care to large numbers of people and at the same time provide sophisticated medical care. Montefiore had been founded in 1884 and was initially located in the Upper East Side of Harlem, and later in the Bronx. It was created by the Jewish community, as part of an international campaign to create charity institutions in different parts of the world to commemorate the centennial of Moses Montefiore.

According to Ed Lehman, who also did research there, the director of Montefiore was "the very progressive" doctor Martin Cherkasky (1951-1981). At that time American Medicine was predominantly traditional, conservative and anti-sociological. Freidson was allowed to develop his research with all the freedom and the director's full institutional support. As Ed Lehman said: "This group that Eliot was studying was a radical innovation in hospitals. It wouldn't have existed if Cherkasky hadn't introduced it. And Eliot wouldn't have been there, if doctor Cherkasky hadn't approved him and allowed him to go in and study this phenomenon. Certainly there was all kinds of opposition! The older doctors really hated this program."

Carrying out studies in the medical workplace by sociologists was a “radical innovation” in the 1950s and still remains uncommon today. According to Levenson (1984, p.201-202), Martin Cherkasky

constructed, on the foundation of an institution for care of long-term illness, a complex, powerful and medical center. ... He saw a hospital as a place in which to treat the sick but, also, in which to formulate methods of improving the public health and to nurture other innovations. ... He succeeded in his aims through his power of persuasion, his ability to enlist other people in his projects, his talent as a salesman of ideas.

Montefiore can be seen as part of a medical counter-culture. Freidson was not, therefore, in just any hospital. He participated intensively and wholeheartedly in this venture, even though his cultural and religious background was essentially conservative, as we shall see below. In his first book about Montefiore’s studies, Freidson (1961b) thanked the director and the head of the Social Medicine Division for providing “an unusually free and stimulating context in which to do research, think and write” (p.2). Although his work at Montefiore lasted for only one year, it left permanent marks on Freidson’s career. The experience influenced him to put down his academic roots in New York, where he started his life as a university professor and where he remained for the following years.

Soon after he left Montefiore Hospital, Freidson started to work professionally in the classroom as assistant professor of sociology at the City College of New York, where he remained from 1956 until 1961. At this institution, he continued researching, reading, writing and publishing in the emerging field of the sociology of medicine and of professions. In the early 1960s, even in the United States, the field of sociology still had low levels of institutionalization. Jobs were not numerous and few were prestigious. The circumstances that led Freidson to City College of New York are not known. One aspect that does seem clear is that the sociology of medicine and the sociology of professions became increasingly important in his intellectual agenda.

Howard Becker, his colleague since graduate school days in Chicago, does not know exactly how Eliot Freidson chanced upon the study of professions. He admits, however, that when they received their PhDs and began looking for jobs, “we both had trouble finding the conventional teaching jobs we were supposed to get. There weren’t many and both of us drifted into getting fellowships.” Becker does not believe that the quest for jobs was something that only affected Freidson.

With respect to Freidson’s choice of the sociology of medicine Becker suggests that:

As far as I know, [Montefiore] led him into the study of professions, because he found the problems the doctors had regulating each others’ behavior fascinating, and that was always the core of his interest in the professions: professional organization as a way of regulating the behavior of members of an occupation. As he eventually came to put it, that was the third possibility, the other two being bureaucracy and the market. In other words, I think he drifted into that field and, once in it, became fascinated by the problems it posed and spent much of his life working on them.

The idea that he “drifted into that field” tallies with the core of my argument: namely that the opportunities life put in his path led Freidson to make some decisions that changed the course of his professional life.

However, it is not clear whether Freidson chose the subject based only on the observations during his residence at Montefiore Hospital, or because he realized that the sociology of medicine would become a promising research field. In fact, one has the impression that he was putting his cards on the table in a game that was already being played. The sociology of medicine was a flourishing world of knowledge to be mapped and charted (Becker, 2006). Whatever the case, in the early 1960s Freidson's career path after his residency in social sciences at Montefiore Hospital was coherent with the progression "around and through" suggested by his sister and wife. As we will observe in the following text, from this professional experience, Eliot Freidson began to dedicate his intellectual efforts to the sociological analysis of the medical profession and of professions in general.

In 1961, he was offered a position as assistant professor at NYU, where he taught the sociology of medicine for the first time. Like the still obscure reasons leading to his job at the City College of New York, the reason he was hired at NYU also seemed unclear. But his lifetime option for the sociology of medicine had already been taken. In this same year, he published *Patients' views of medical practice*, which brought together many of the ideas born out of his experience at Montefiore Hospital. Two years later, based on the same experiences, he published *The hospital in modern society* (Freidson, 1963). Between 1951 and 1961 Freidson also published seven articles, some of which as the main author. All deal, in one way or another, with the sociology of medicine (Freidson, Freidson, Feldman, 1958a, 1958b; Freidson, 1958, 1959, 1960a, 1960b, 1961a).

The publication of these books and papers quickly led Freidson to be recognized as a major scholar in the sociology of medicine. Signs of this recognition became increasingly visible during the early 1960s: one was the invitation to coordinate a wide-ranging national survey on doctors under a regime of pre-payment for the National Institutes of Health. He was also beginning to be recognized by his peers, having been elected chair of the Sociology of Medicine Section of the American Sociological Association (1963) and vice-chair of the Research Subcommittee on the Sociology of Medicine of the International Sociological Association (1964). As a researcher of renown, in 1961 he joined the editorial boards of two important academic journals: *Social Problems* and *Journal of Health and Human Behavior*. As a result of the years he worked at the City College of New York and his scientific production and engagement, Freidson became associate professor at NYU in 1964.

In the early 1960s, his personal life also underwent a deep change. Freidson separated from Marion Facinger after some ten years of marriage. According to his daughter Jane, "he left her because he was in an intellectual fervor in his field with his students that she was not part of." This "fervor" and this involvement with the students led Freidson to marry Judith Lorber, a former student of his. The marriage also lasted around ten years and was marked by the birth of his third child, Matthew, in September 1968. Freidson and Judith Lorber also jointly edited the book entitled *Medical men and their work* (Freidson, Lorber, 1972).

While I could not fail to mention some aspects of Freidson's private life, my emphasis is on the circumstances that directed his intellectual choices. Sociological problems raised by the medical profession seem to have grown in Eliot Freidson's mind after he analyzed the work and the power relations between health professionals and patients at Montefiore

Hospital. Then, at NYU he finally found a place to settle. From then onwards, with each article or book, he elaborated his ideas more and more, or “around and through” as his sister and his widow have suggested. The fieldwork that had so seduced him made him begin to observe more closely the range of medical practices and the multi-faceted nature of professional work. By 1964, he was a sociologist with his own field of expertise and his own position of professional authority.

Over the next thirty years, Eliot Freidson published his most important books and papers, and occupied some of the most important positions in academic and governmental institutions in the United States and abroad. For instance, he was director of studies and fellow of prestigious overseas academic institutions such as *École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales* (Paris, 1978-1979) and St. John’s College (Cambridge University, England, 1979-1980). Freidson was also admitted to the Institute of Medicine of the National Academy of Sciences in 1972.

In support of the argument introduced earlier regarding the key moment of Freidson’s professional trajectory, it should be emphasized that all the books and articles that Freidson published after his experience at Montefiore Hospital dealt with the medical profession or with the question of professionalism (Freidson, 1970a, 1970b, 1973, 1976, 1986, 1989, 1994, 2001).

The bibliographical data confirm the idea that, in the early 1960s, Freidson attained his intellectual maturity and a remarkable capacity to establish strong links between sociology, medicine and the professions. In this new field of research and interest, he established his reputation and authority.

The progression of an intellectual’s life manifests itself in the way he deals with his subject and in the key themes of his academic work. In Freidson’s case, it did not follow logic based strictly on intimate reasons. He opted for the sociology of medicine because this was one of the alternatives he could follow among several others that colleagues and competitors had followed. However, he did not only enter the movement at a specific time because of opportunities, as he also acted upon it with his ideas. Yet the progression that sustained Eliot Freidson’s career had a broader social and historical dimension, and was subjected to significant family, cultural and socio-economic constraints. The private, intimate life of an intellectual can also partly direct the choices he or she is led to take, or those consciously taken. This seems to have been the case with Freidson.

Private constraints

The Freidson family’s background does not have any links with the academic or scientific world. This is the first relevant feature in his genealogy. This characteristic created certain constraints in his professional opportunities that we will analyze below

Eliot Lazarus Freidson was born on February 20, 1923, in Boston, Massachusetts. He was the only son of a Russian Jewish family of four children. He had two older sisters (Bea and Adele) and one younger sister (Ruth). His father, Joseph Freidson, took refuge in Boston along with many other Jews from Czarist Russia.



Figure 1: Freidson (1925) aged 2, on Grace's lap with Bea, and Adele



Figure 3: Freidson (1942), 19 years old (with white suit)



Figure 2: Freidson (1938) aged 15



Figure 4: Freidson (1943), aged 20

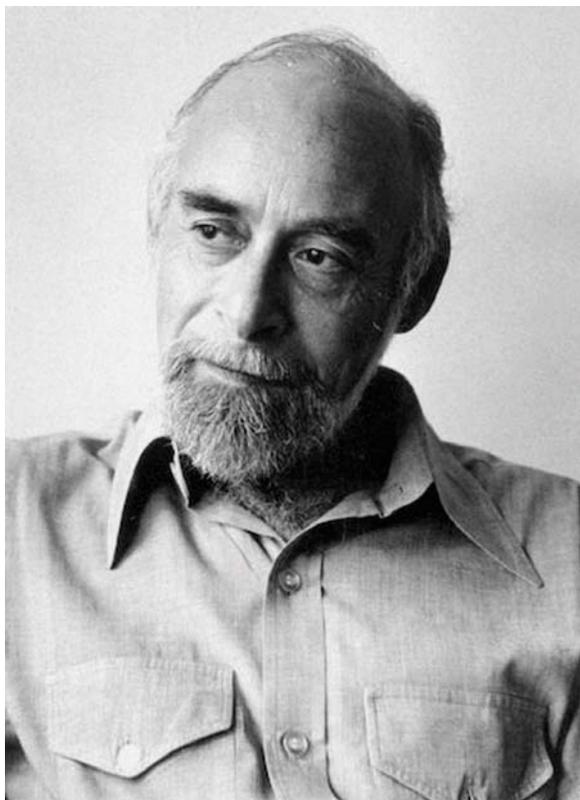


Figure 5: Freidson (1976), aged 53

When he arrived, Joseph was thirteen and could barely read or write. He began his life in the United States as a door-to-door shoe salesman. According to Ruth Kavesh, Freidson's younger sister,

my father tells the story that he escaped from tsarist Russia because, at the age of thirteen, he would have had to go into the tsar's army, and, as a Jew, he wouldn't have attained a very high position. And it's kind of a lifelong commitment. ... It was a very anti-Semitic environment, and there were periodic pogroms. I don't know how much they personally suffered, but many people at the time were emigrating from Russia. And, of course, America at that time needed labor and welcomed the Jews or all the immigrants to come. ... America was the Promised Land.

His mother, Grace Margaret Backer, came from a well-to-do family from an Orthodox Jewish community. Freidson's maternal grandfather came to the United States on his own, leaving his wife and three children in Russia. When he was able to afford it, he brought them to Boston. Later, the couple had other children. Freidson's maternal grandparents helped build the synagogue and the Jewish school in Dorchester, where they lived.

According to Ruth Kavesh, Grace was deeply involved with the Zionist cause. The Western world was living in an era of anti-Semitism and Grace, like all of her family, was active in combating the stigma attached to Jews. She never worked outside the home, but was active in Hadassah, an American Zionist women's organization that helped different organizations in Israel. She was also active in the American Jewish Congress, which had a more political character. According to her daughters, Grace had a stronger temperament than Joseph.

The reasons that induced a rich young Jewish lady to marry an impoverished shoe salesman remain unclear. This social distinction, however, was always present. When they married, Freidson's parents lived in Grace's parents' home. This condition of financial dependence on his father-in-law was undoubtedly a source of embarrassment to Joseph. During the first few years of his life, Eliot Freidson coexisted intimately, therefore, with his maternal grandparents in Dorchester. From this period, he remembered becoming one of the leaders of a juvenile street-gang and that he was sent to orthodox yeshiva after school, which he hated (Freidson, 1971). The constant quarrels with his sister Adele were also mentioned by Eliot Freidson. He also had another sister, Bea, who was older than Adele and died giving birth to twins when she was twenty. Relations between Eliot Freidson and Bea had been peaceful. When Ruth was born, an eight-year old Freidson ran to the bathroom to cry, as he had hoped for a brother. From that age, he started reading "fairly tales, romantic chivalric literature and fantasy like Poe" (p.3), as he put it.

Besides the social and economical differences between his mother's and father's backgrounds, there were two other important character traits stemming from this early upbringing, namely Eliot Freidson's resistance to abiding by the obligations of Jewish religious practice and his penchant for reading as a form of self-education outside the control and guidance of school. As soon as he started reading, he manifested his literary curiosity with markedly varied interests. His participation in the world of the street, with its gangs and fights, also caught his attention.

As mentioned before, during the first few years of his marriage, Eliot Freidson's father had to rely on his father-in-law's assistance. However, gradually, Joseph ceased to be a

door-to-door shoe salesman. He began to prosper in the shoe business and launched a line of children's shoes. This upward mobility enabled the family to move to their own home in Brookline in 1933. In this bourgeois suburb of Boston, far away from Grace's family, Freidson's parents gradually moved away from Orthodox Judaism and began attending a Reform synagogue. But, this change did not bring Freidson closer to Jewish cultural and religious practices: according to Giambruni, "Eliot refused to go at all. ... He felt himself to be a complete outsider."

His younger sister Ruth Kavesh described the socio-cultural environment in which Freidson grew up as follows: "We lived in a very conservative environment. In those days, the aim of American middle-class Jews was to just be very square, very proper, and conservative, not to offend anyone."

Ever since childhood, Freidson was not at all comfortable with his Jewishness. He stated that by the age of thirteen, after his bar mitzvah, he had "become a militant atheist." Giambruni remembers that Freidson always referred to the box of modern library books that one of his uncles had given him at his bar mitzvah. In his teenage years he was not a brilliant or motivated student, but, for him, reading was "a great deal." In spite of the glasses he was forced to wear from the age of five because he was cross-eyed, he would entertain himself by reading authors like Dostoyevsky. By adolescence, he was already as tall as he would ever be: 5ft 4½in. Like his father, Eliot Freidson was short and never weighed over one hundred and thirty five pounds. Helen says that his physique made him "suffer a lot, especially when he was in his teens." She thinks, "this is one of the things that made him feel an outsider as a teenager." However, his height did not stop him having girlfriends he loved and who loved him, even in his early youth. He himself mentions some of them.

At the age of thirteen, Freidson was invited by his father to get involved in the shoe business. In the summer, Eliot Freidson worked as a "stock boy, shipping clerk etc." He states simply that he "disliked it." He said that in his first year in high school, he would read on average a book a day "much trash, but also Russian novels." Due to his low grades, he could not finish high school. In his words: "by this time I was driving, and getting drunk with the boys often."

Giambruni did not get to meet Freidson's father in person, but did visit their Brookline home. One of the few things she remembers is that his mother: "had all these fancy silver plates and fancy dishes and wonderful heavy linens and things. So they were clearly some sort of upward mobility family. All of this, Eliot hated. He just hated the striving for position kind of aspect of his family's life."

His adolescence confirmed the tendencies of his childhood: his reticence toward his family's cultural and economic values, the ever-stronger eclectic and self-educational reading habit and his involvement in fights in the street, even in Brookline. As his sister Ruth Kavesh confided: "He was rebellious against middle-class Jewish values. He was rebellious against religion, not specifically, but just not practicing the religion, and, I guess, against the kinds of people that my parents knew in the community. ... He just wanted to live his own life."

His aggressive behavior in the streets and his weak performance at school forced his parents to send him to boarding school: The Kents Hill School, in Maine. Throughout these years, one particular image weighed on him. A photo of him as a child appeared on

the advertising material of his father's brand of children's shoes. This photo symbolized for him the family's intention of making him the heir to the business especially because he was the only son. He understood it as a sign of the social and cultural place that he was expected to occupy. Since his father had built the company from scratch, selling shoes door-to-door, it was expected that Eliot Freidson, given the great privilege of having this small empire placed in his hands, would make a similar effort to expand it. According to his sisters, Eliot Freidson was uneasy about this inheritance, which was both entrepreneurial and cultural. The pleasures of reading and writing seemed to seduce him more than the prospect of life as a businessman or the ritual observance of Jewish practices.

Upon leaving the Kents Hill School, Freidson entered the University of Maine (1941). When he was young, he wanted to be a writer or a poet. English was what he was interested in, but he did not want to teach it and he didn't want to be a professor of English. The University of Maine did not appeal much to him, so he decided to move to the University of Chicago (1942). There, entrance was based on an examination by the university itself and school grades were not taken into consideration in his application. For this reason, he got in. Otherwise, it would not have been possible, for his academic record was not good. The University of Chicago offered a liberal arts degree program, without any specific major. This led Freidson toward an unconventional education (Matthews, 1977).

In 1943, six months after attending courses, Freidson was drafted. He wanted to be a paratrooper, but ended up fixing refrigerators in Wyoming. Then, he went to a German language school in Michigan. The following year, he was sent to Florida to work at the Radio Intelligence School. In 1945, he went to Italy, near Bari, where he found "wine, fights, whores" and worked "with radio operator rather than quiz kid buddies." Ruth stresses the feeling of freedom he had, of being able to go into a Catholic church without feeling guilty or being bothered by anyone. During these years his job was of a routine kind, so he had free time to read, which he devoted to Greek philosophy and literature. Because Freidson had a working knowledge of German one of his main responsibilities was related to the interrogation of German prisoners of war.

At the end of World War II, Freidson was among the many former students returning from the war who attended college on the GI Bill relying on it for tuition and a monthly living allowance. According to Giambruni, when Freidson went back to the University of Chicago, "he certainly wasn't thinking about the social sciences. He was still thinking about literature." However, after attending classes with Everett Hughes, Herbert Blumer, Robert Redfield and W. Lloyd Warner, from whom he received a strong basis in sociology and anthropology, Freidson opted for sociology. To Giambruni, "he realized that this was something he was good at, and that, unlike literature, he wasn't writing about somebody else's work but he was producing the work." Judging himself neither creative enough for literature nor sufficiently encouraged to continue in it by his teachers, he moved into sociology. As Freidson (1978, p.132) states: "The only conscious decision I made was a negative one, which was that I would not take graduate training in English or comparative literature. ... I drifted into sociology. I did not choose it."

Freidson belonged to the generation of sociologists like Anselm Strauss, Erving Goffman and Howard Becker who concluded their PhDs after World War II at the University of Chicago.

His choice of sociology may have been influenced by his Jewish origin. Had he decided for medicine, for instance, he would have had to face a far more contentious environment. There were barriers limiting the acceptance of Jewish students into the best medical schools. Jewish doctors sometimes had difficulty entering local medical societies. They were often under a cloud of suspicion that they might be socialists or not fully committed to the dogma of fee-for-service medicine that the American Medical Association defended (Starr, 1982). Often, the choices made during a professional career are a function of opportunities given or denied.

Freidson's "negative decision," as he himself said, seems almost a double refusal of the entrepreneurial legacy that was to have been his fate. His professional dedication, chiefly after his experience at Montefiore Hospital and joining the faculty at NYU, seems to have been an answer to the challenge he had given himself, of making a living from sociology, to the detriment of the apparently easier and more financially promising route of managing his father's shoe company. In this sense, his socio-economic origin, and his Jewish cultural upbringing in times of anti-Semitism seem to have represented constraints that led Freidson to sociology. He had the opportunity of inheriting and running a successful shoe company, but he decided instead to build his own professional career. Intimate and subconscious motivations may have played a determining role at that moment. The freedom experienced in Italy and his intention to live his own life independently contributed to his choice. This was one of the great challenges of his life. According to his sisters, his parents died without understanding why he chose sociology.

Gaps and doubts

In conclusion, there remain many lacunae and doubts in the reconstruction of this man's trajectory. One of the lacunae refers to the fact that all the information obtained from interviews was used in this article. The craft of the historian involves making choices. By excluding certain interviews, some aspects of Eliot Freidson's personality and way of being ended up being neglected. Three testimonies must at least be mentioned.

One was the testimony of Freidson's daughter Jane and how she described him as a father. Despite his intellectual life and responsibilities, he would still find time to spend with his children, taking them to the zoo, or fishing or to a rock concert. These signs reveal fatherly behavior unusual during the 1960s.

Kathleen Gerson, his colleague from NYU, provided another insight into Freidson's way of dealing with people. She made a point of highlighting the human dimension of his conduct within the university. She recalled his efforts, when he was department chair, to obtain a maternity leave for her. This was at a time when such rights had not yet been granted, especially not for an assistant professor like her.

Lastly, Juan Corradi made a point of mentioning the prominent role played by Freidson in the process of change that NYU experienced from the 1960s to the 1980s, which transformed it into one of the largest and best universities in the United States. From the interviews with his colleagues, one clearly gathers that it was not enough for Freidson to be a researcher, professor, writer, supervisor and author. In the place he found to develop

his work, his dedication seems to have been exemplary. He was an integral part of the development of this institution and did his utmost for it. Freidson ran the NYU sociology department and participated intensely in its process of maturation, helping it to gain international recognition. This included the development of a large multi-year training grant from the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) to support doctoral students in sociology, and running an on-going seminar in conjunction with it. In this sense, his role as Chair cannot be overemphasized, even though the connections or networks that led him to NYU were not sufficiently analyzed here.

Another possibility for the analysis of the constraints Freidson faced throughout his intellectual career is associated with the history of the social and cultural formation of the United States. Eliot Freidson, with his Russian and Jewish ancestry, might have faced particular difficulties on his road to professional success in a wasp-dominated society (Blauner, 1972; Hollinger, 1996; Svonkin, 1997). In the same way, Freidson's career can be included in the whole gamut of histories of radical Jewish intellectuals who contributed in different ways to the development of sociology and the early days of sociological research in American universities (Brick, 1986).

The way the central argument of this essay is organized follows the suggestions Freidson himself gave about how one should write the history of one's own life. In his autobiographical article Freidson (1978, p.129) wrote: "In considering how my work in sociology developed, it seems to me that the only way I can make sense of it is by seeing it as a process by which I have responded to a series of historical accidents within the framework of the institutions to which I had become economically, socially and psychologically committed."

Following these words, I have emphasized the presentation of Freidson's biography as if it followed a probing progression simultaneously "around and through." This progression was identified by his sister in the way Freidson as a boy observed the objects and problems that surrounded him in Boston. His wife also noticed it, to the extent that he devoted practically all of his academic life to the development of a single theme that seemed pertinent, new and relevant to him, at a university where he managed to pitch his tent after a few years of wandering.

Freidson did this not only because he had to make a living from sociology, but also because he was propelled by constraints derived from his socio-economic and cultural origins. Or, as he put it, his progression may be seen as a response to a series of historical accidents within the framework of the institutions to which he had become economically, socially and psychologically committed. The legacy of his family weighed heavily on his shoulders. He had to be successful to prove to his parents and to himself that it was possible to build a professional alternative that was very different from the one that had been marked out for him. He built an alternative life in the world of letters, a world his parents did not know and, therefore, did not value.

Although the argument is solid and coherent, it raises some questions. First, not all of Freidson's intellectual contemporaries, who had similar academic prominence and constructed their own field of work, experienced the same social and cultural constraints. These intellectuals must have suffered constraints of a different order in their careers.

What is meant here is that the constraints Freidson suffered seem to have influenced his career but do not, on their own, explain his success or the sustained engagement he gave to his academic life. Second, we may say that not all the youngsters who pursued alternative careers to those which their families desired achieved the same level of success as Freidson in a field so different from that proposed by their parents. As a child growing up in Boston, Freidson seemed more likely to get involved in street gangs and fights than in becoming a prominent intellectual. After World War II, he could have chosen a different path and survived with dignity.

So the question remains: how can one explain his success? How can one justify his choices? This type of question is hard to answer. Common sense likes having one reason for things. Becker (1993) argues that people don't act because they have reasons to act as they do. They act as they do because they are in a situation in which they gradually build up a line of activity in response to what is going on around them, what others are doing and so on. This is basic to the idea of symbolic interactionism and, really, to all sociology.

Freidson was a complex intellectual and human being. Even Helen Giambruni, who shared his daily life and intimacy for some thirty years, admitted that she "never wholly understood him." He was a man of few words who did not like chatting about mundane things. On personal matters, he was very reserved and would not talk openly to most people. He did not like giving conferences. Public speaking was difficult for him. When lecturing, he would read his texts. He was more concerned with using the right words than with speaking well. He enjoyed being in the classroom very much, in direct and close contact with a small group of students. In general, students feared him at first, for he had the reputation of being strict, but when they eventually took classes with him, this impression would change. They came to see him in the light of his enormous generosity, friendliness and modesty. Besides reading and writing, what he really liked was being in the field conducting research. As a reader and analyst of other people's texts, he was severe in the sense of always saying what he believed, which was an admirable trait in many ways.

Freidson (1978, p.130) himself assures us: "Thus, some elements of my work – at least the substantive emphasis, or style – can be found only in my personal biography." The study of Freidson's career, as I presented it in this essay, allows for the understanding of the contradictions in which his private life and professional career were inscribed: they influenced each other throughout his life. This essay also tried to show the extent to which Freidson was passive, or otherwise, when faced with opportunities, and the conscious or unconscious choices he made.

My goal was to establish a relationship between Freidson's style of writing and his personal biography. I proposed some possible ways of understanding this process. I believe they are valid but not entirely satisfactory. Other researchers will have to make Freidson's professional trajectory and life story the topic of different investigations. Especially after the organization of his archives that contain the correspondence with publishers and colleagues who read chapter drafts and offered critiques, course materials, manuscripts, talks, lectures, speeches, drafts of books and papers that are open to research without restriction at the New York University Archives, Bobst Library, New York. He deserves this, and more.

NOTES

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¹ I interviewed his two sisters, Adele Feldman and Kavesky; his widow, Helen Giambruni; his ex-wife, Judith Lorber; his only daughter, Jane Freidson; and Howard Becker, his close friend since their university years. At New York University I interviewed professors Barbara Heyns, Ed Lehman, Juan Corradi and Kathleen Gerson, who shared his working space. Transcripts of the interviews were under the auspices of the Department of Social and Behavioral Sciences of the University of California, San Francisco (UCSF), and are available at Casa de Oswaldo Cruz, a technical sector of the Oswaldo Cruz Foundation (consulta@coc.fiocruz.br).

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