Cities are not only the place where we encounter with difference, but also the one that allows exchange (of goods, knowledge, or work). Both conditions have been key to the liberal project of spreading reason and reducing esotericism. Since mid last century, however, the ideal of freedom was equated with the withdrawal from the city, whether to utopian communities, suburbs or enclaves aimed at minimizing friction, weakening the virtues of the urban life. At the beginning of this century – after the attack on the Twin Towers – another anti-urban discourse was installed: the fear of difference and the restriction of liberties.
as a way to provide security. Thus, with globalization as a backdrop, a drastic contrast between the capital’s freedom of movement and the restriction of people’s freedom of movement was generalized.

Recently, under the freedom of expression argument, the public sphere has been occupied by discourses that further exacerbate the fear of difference and cast doubt on the model of liberal democracy. Curiously, however, episodes such as the promises of walls (U.S.A.) or the army on the streets (Brazil) seem to enthuse those who advocate for economic liberalism. Thus, if liberalism developed hand in hand with the Enlightenment project as a way to reduce fear to the unknown through knowledge and rationality, we may ask: where is the concept of freedom left in an environment that promotes its restrictions? How do we explain the current dissociation between political and economic liberalism?
One way of looking at liberalism is as a doctrine, that is, as a set of assessments and approaches on what constitutes the best type of society we could live in and the means to achieve it. The best type of society, we said, but also, the most favorable conditions for each individual to be free, autonomous, and able to develop and express in a better way his/her personality and life projects. Liberalism emphasizes the individual (which does not mean to deny or regret that we live in a society) and by doing so, it supports individuality – not individualism, and even less, the selfish and possessive individualism that characterizes our current times.

As a political doctrine, liberalism limits the power of the State in the name of individuals’ rights – which some liberals consider natural, that is, prior and superior to the State, while others see as historical, that is, as rights that have been conquered and sometimes even seized from those who have resisted to consider them as universal prerogatives. As an ethical doctrine, liberalism postulates the moral autonomy of subjects to decide for themselves (i.e., without the authority or pressure of any kind of tutor) what is their idea of a good life – both good for themselves as for others – and the behaviors necessary to follow in order to make it real. Finally, as an economic doctrine, liberalism supports individuals and organizations’ free initiatives to undertake legal economic activities for the benefit of those who decide to do so.

From such perspective, liberalism is not only a complex doctrine, since it has the three dimensions mentioned above, but is also quite demanding: it requires its supporters, the liberals, to assume it in those same three aspects. A ‘full liberal’ – let’s say – should endorse the liberal doctrine in these three dimensions, although in fact there are liberals who place greater emphasis on one or two of them and not all three in an even manner. Thus, for instance, that version of liberalism that we call ‘neoliberalism’ – without assigning it a pejorative but merely descriptive sense – emphasizes the economic dimension of liberalism, taking it to an extreme, while it is much less sensitive to the political aspect of the liberal doctrine.

As a political doctrine, liberalism declares, protects and promotes a set of freedoms: freedom of thought, of conscience, of expression, of the press, of movement, of assembly, of association, of individual endeavor or in partnerships, of lawful activities of any kind. Regarding freedom of movement, that is, the
possibility of moving freely through a State’s territory, and entering and leaving it, liberalism has a lot to do with the possibility of getting to know and appreciate the places we are in and those we would like to go to. Without freedom of movement, without the possibility of moving free of interference, we would have a very partial knowledge of the city, the region, the country and the continent we live in. We would also know much less about the planet we inhabit and our view of things and people in the world would be remarkably impoverished; likewise, the possibilities of exchange, collaboration, and solidarity with other individuals would be diminished.

The three dimensions of liberalism described above constitute the core of this doctrine, and depending on the emphasis placed on one or various of them, lead to the observation that what we actually have are liberalisms – in plural – that can in turn be seen as branches of the liberal trunk from which they derive, or, if preferred, as different trunks that emerge from the same liberal root. Thus, liberalism resembles those trees whose root offers more than one trunk – two, three, and sometimes four, five or more – a phenomenon frequently found in the plant world.

There is diversity in liberalism. Diversity and, therefore, fortune. No liberalism should be introduced thus as ‘the’ liberalism or the ‘only’ liberalism. However, all liberalisms must respond to the single and common root from which they emerge, without betraying any of its three dimensions. One thing is to emphasize one or more of these aspects and quite another to dispense with some or several of them.

Finally – and given that what we have are liberalisms, not liberalism – what is happening today is a debate between the various branches: for example, between neoliberalism and egalitarian or social liberalism. Already in its origin, there were also differences between the classic liberals themselves, such as John Stuart Mill and Adam Smith. Wrong or not, the former believed to have replaced with his economic theory what Smith had argued for in The Wealth of Nations.

The liberal scene is open, and the various characters of the liberal play are on stage trying to capture the public’s attention and preferences.

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Agustín Squella
<asquella@vtr.net>

Lawyer, 1973. Doctor in Law, Universidad Complutense de Madrid, 1976. Between 1990 and 1998 was rector at Universidad de Valparaíso. In 2009, obtained the National Award of Humanities and Social Sciences of Chile. He is currently Professor of Philosophy of Law at Universidad de Valparaíso.