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?
There must be few notions more difficult to define than 'liberalism.' The elasticity of its meaning seems enormous. There are those who called themselves classical liberals, other called libertarian liberals, egalitarian liberals, republican liberals, progressive liberals, neoliberalists, and even that sort of oxymoron: socialist liberals. 'Liberal' in the United States smells of progressivism, while in the United Kingdom – the cradle of the distinguished Scottish Enlightenment – the same expression is in the antipodes.

This is an issue: the greater the amplitude of a concept, the lower its denotative capacity. The more it bites off, the less it can semantically chew. In what follows, a few coordinates that, in my opinion, serve so as not to shipwreck in this semantic ocean.

Let's start with the idea that liberalism is part of that worldview called modernity. And that is intimately related to another key element: the State. The original idea of State is a classical one, but ours – for about three centuries now – is modern. It is a concentration of power unparalleled in the history of humanity, which claims for itself the legitimate exercise of force and, in addition, expropriates from individuals the solution of their differences (the reason why today self-defense is exceptionally accepted).

There is a thread, thus, that interweaves modernity, State and liberalism. Historically, liberalism developed as a way to protect individuals from the growing power of the State, which Hobbes portrayed as a Leviathan. The original mistrust for this formidable concentration of political power has expanded into economy and other ramifications (symbolic power, cultural power, and so on).

Liberalism values private property, as a defense of individuality, but is suspicious of monopolies and dominant positions that enable abuse. In other words, it distrusts concentrated power.

It is also a notion of the political and, for that matter, of the public sphere. As contemporary societies are extensive and complex, those of us who inhabit them do not know each other. We are united by the condition of being citizens, but not by much else. Liberalism suggests an order to mediate between strangers. That is why its emphasis is on procedures rather than on values or goods. As a result, it asks the State for as much neutrality as possible regarding people’s ‘life plans.’ That is, the possibility that individuals deploy their autonomy to the greatest extent. Is it unlimited?
Of course not. The task of liberalism, like that of any attempt to regulate human relations, is to establish reciprocal limits. Hence, liberalism, which originated against the State and which tries to protect individuals from its power, also needs the State. It is the State, through law, who allows limits to be drawn in a general and stable way among those individuals who are unknown to each other. On what criteria?

There seems to be no criterion more liberal than that proposed by John Stuart Mill 160 years ago in his essay On Liberty: the "harm principle." According to this precept, it is allowed to limit a person's autonomy only to prevent damage to a third party. If one were to harm oneself, the community, politically organized through the State, should not intervene. It's that simple (and complex).

The harm principle also accounts for the recently stated idea that liberalism belongs to the public sphere. The possibility of applying it in spaces that are not public, like those of families or couples, is limited. An exception is violence inside families, however, this is justified by its particular gravity.

In accordance with the above mentioned, it is also difficult to expand the implementation of the harm principle to private life. No matter how old a daughter is, her mother will hardly tolerate her voluntary alcoholism, and we would not be surprised if the mother tried to rehabilitate her, even against her daughter's will. Liberalism has little to say here. The case of the State regarding an alcoholic citizen is different. By principle, the State should hold back from acting like that mother.

In short, liberalism is modern, inseparable from the also modern State. It originates on a distrust of the State's concentrated political power. Although it values private property as a safeguard for individuality, it also mistrusts its concentration: liberalism promotes both freedom of expression and anti-monopoly regulation. And likewise, this explains its need for the State and the law that it produces. Because law is the bond between strangers, it is the general and stable way of establishing reciprocal limits. And to draw these limits, there is the harm principle. ARQ

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