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## Introduction: The Liberal Script at the Beginning of the 21st Century

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# Introduction

## The Liberal Script at the Beginning of the 21st Century

*Tanja A. Börzel, Johannes Gerschewski, and Michael Zürn*

### 1 Introduction

Around the globe, liberal ideas and institutions are under pressure. Authoritarian regimes claim superiority of their developmental models referring to their seemingly higher efficiency and effectiveness in fighting pandemics, reducing social inequality, or controlling migration. Likewise, populists of various colors attack liberal elites for their failure to address these societal challenges, accusing them of moral bankruptcy. Postcolonial critics refer to the implicit complicity, if not the root cause of colonial structures, arguing that liberalism has served as justification for violence, exploitation, exclusion, and injustice. Criticism is also voiced by supporters of liberalism. They denounce the liberal hypocrisy of using double standards, highlighting the blatant discrepancy between liberal principles and illiberal practices, as showcased by the border regimes of liberal democracies. In a similar vein, progressive liberals deplore the societal rift and rising inequality produced by neoliberal policies. Liberal ideas, institutions and practices are contested both from within and outside liberalism.

Contestations are nothing new for liberalism. To the contrary, they are the essence of liberal politics. Competing values and understandings of what is good, desirable, and appropriate for a society give rise to permanent contestations within liberalism. Moreover, liberalism has always competed with alternative social models for relevance and dominance. In fact, liberal ideas and institutions have evolved through disapproval and resistance, both from within and outside liberal societies. Yet, the current contestations have attained a new quality. They converge in a polyphonic criticism of what liberalism today stands for putting it on the defensive. Contemporary liberal societies face a loss of confidence in the ability of their core institutions to provide solutions to an array of challenges, which lie at the heart of prominent domestic and international conflicts in the early 21st century. In some respects, the current situation of liberal democracies resembles the 1930s more than any other period since then, e.g., with regard to the varieties of contestations. Another historical reference point is the late 1960s when liberal democracies were confronted with

a sense of systemic failure, expressed by crisis theories from the left and the right (Crozier et al. 1975; Offe 1972).

Contestations of liberal ideas and institutions also shape international conflicts. Putin's war of aggression against Ukraine violates fundamental principles of the liberal international order, including the sovereign equality of states, territorial integrity, and humanitarian standards in warfare. Russia denies Ukraine the right to collective self-determination, and its military has engaged in massive violations of human rights of Ukrainian citizens. China, together with several countries of the Global South, refuses to join the sanctions imposed by Western liberal democracies on Russia, accusing the US and Europe of double standards and rejecting the Western hegemony in interpreting and applying international law (Saul 2022).

Analyses of these contestations within liberal democracies and on the international level abound. Postcolonial critiques of liberalism, the rise of BRICS and China, and the growing electoral support for authoritarian populism have been intensively studied; each of these fields has turned into an academic growth industry. This edited volume contributes to these debates but takes a step back. It offers a fresh look at these different contestations by providing a better understanding of their common target. To make sense of the current attacks against liberal ideas and institutions, we introduce the concept of "liberal script."

We define a script as "shared understandings about the organization of society that are expressed in normative statements on how society ought to be (*Sollen*)" as well as "empirical statements on how it is (*Sein*)" (Börzel and Zürn 2020). A script is a generic concept. It refers to the underlying normative ideas about the organization of society. The contemporary variety of the liberal script is characterized by some central and abstract principles, such as self-determination and equal moral worth, which translate into political (rule of law and democracy), societal (tolerance and plurality), economic (markets and property rights), and cross-cutting (progress and openness) components (see Zürn and Gerschewski 2021). These components are reflected in different subscripts, such as borders defining who belongs to a society, orders setting rules for collective decision-making, allocation referring to the distribution of goods and life chances within society (including reallocation), and temporality specifying shared understandings of time scales.

The liberal script treats specific ideas and institutions such as freedom and a market economy as parts of a comprehensive model for organizing societies. None of these ideas and institutions is necessarily exclusive to the liberal script. Some states that are considered as not liberal claim to be democracies with market economies, seeking to reduce social inequality and solve global problems by international collaboration. China, the so-called "systemic rival" of liberal democracies, is a case in point. The meaning of the liberal script becomes distinctive by relating such concepts to a normative core and linking them through a particular grammar.

A scripts approach enables a discussion of the normative strengths of liberalism but also its internal weaknesses, particularly related to the tensions within and between its different subscripts and components. Societies have resolved the tensions between freedom and equality or market efficiency and social justice in different ways at

different times in history. This explains why the liberal script comes in historical and spatial varieties. At the same time, these tensions are the primary target of contestations directed against liberalism.

To chart the liberal script with its components, the edited volume integrates theoretical and methodological perspectives from different disciplines, including political science, sociology, law, history, philosophy, postcolonial studies, and educational science. The diverse contributions explore the usefulness of “liberal script” in analyzing, but also problematizing liberalism and its different components, their linkages, and the tensions they produce. In demonstrating the theoretical and empirical added value of using “liberal script,” the volume presents a multifaceted and nuanced picture of what is at stake in the crisis of liberalism at the beginning of the 21st century.

This introduction to the volume proceeds in the following steps. We start with a discussion of the added value of using “script” as a heuristic and an analytical concept over alternatives, such as ideology, order, practices, or institutions. We then identify four central themes that structure this volume. First, we ask what the liberal script actually is and how we can approach it from different viewpoints. Second, we inquire how the liberal script varies over time and space. Third, we distinguish subscripts and major components of the liberal script. Fourth, we identify tensions that emerge within the liberal script and possible resolutions. In each of the sections, we introduce individual contributions and show how they deal with and fit into the four central themes.

## 2 Why Script?

In its literal meaning, a script is nothing more than something written. In everyday language, a script is used most often in the context of movies and theaters referring to the written document that details the dialogue and stages directions. In this sense, a script provides a structure that constrains action: scripted action is remotely guided action. The social sciences have developed a variety of approaches to specify this understanding of a script at different levels of analysis. One may distinguish between the micro-, meso-, and macro-level of using the concept (see also Börzel and Zürn 2020).

At the micro-level, Schank and Abelson (1977) define scripts as stereotypical knowledge structures that allow us to understand and act appropriately in a familiar situation, sometimes referred to as “schemes” or “frames” (Mandler 1984). In psychology, scripts enable individuals to “handle stylized everyday situations” (Schank and Abelson 1977, p. 41). Often, they comprise not only a one-time reaction but refer to a sequence of actions. A script is a temporally ordered, sequential action stereotype. In a similar vein, organizational sociology has defined script as a “schematic knowledge structure held in memory that specifies behavior or event sequences that are appropriate for specific situations” (Gioia and Poole 1984, p. 449). Both the sequential action stereotype and the schematic knowledge structure highlight that scripts contain a set of different statements that stand in a given relationship to each other.

Borrowing from sociological role theory (Goffman 1956; Mead 1934), the concept accounts for actions on the individual level. Individuals read and internalize scripts that guide their actions.

At the meso-level, scripts guide and constitute organizations and groups. Marketing, management, and organizational studies, for instance, have focused on particular action stereotypes. Scripts provide behavioral guidelines, explicating how to diversify products, how enterprises should grow, how employees should be trained, or what mindsets are needed when starting new ventures (Haley and Haley 2016; Harris et al. 2003; Lord and Kernan 1987). Cultural studies have a looser, less rigid, and less specified understanding of scripts. They focus more on the construction of dominant narratives as orientations for social groups. Prominent examples concern the construction of race or gender (Jackson 2006) or “blackness” (Godreau 2015), leaving more room for the interpretation of what a script entails as well as for actors’ improvisation.

One of the most prominent applications of script at the macro-level has been developed by the so-called Stanford School in its research on world society (Boli and Thomas 1999; Meyer et al. 1997). John Meyer and his collaborators argue that there is a “Western Script,” which consists of dominant cultural systems and practices of organizing society. It is defined as

culture of world society, comprising norms and knowledge shared across state boundaries, rooted in nineteenth-century Western culture but since globalized, promoted by non-governmental as well as for-profit corporations, intimately tied to the rationalizations of institutions, enacted on particular occasions that generate global awareness, carried by infrastructure of world society, spurred by market forces, driven by tension and contradiction, and expressed in the multitude ways particular groups relate to universal ideas. (Lechner and Boli 2005, p. 6)

The understanding of scripts in this volume is also located on the macro-level. Unlike the Stanford School, however, we adopt a generic concept that we dissociate from the specific content of a given script. According to the Stanford School, there is one Western Script that structures world society. Competitors are missing. Behavioral deviations from the script are considered as decoupling rather than the following of an alternative script. Against this background, we define script as shared understandings about the organization of society, expressed in prescriptive and descriptive statements on how a society ought to be (*sollen*) and how it is (*sein*). These statements are linked by a grammar that integrates them into a coherent set. A script also contains action repertoires for how to arrive from *sein* to *sollen*, and vice versa.

Script is a multifaceted concept that contains features that are of particular interest to us. First, it brings together normative, cognitive, and behavioral dimensions. Second, it can work on the level of society as a whole so that it helps identify a knowledge structure about how society is organized and how it should be organized, also reflecting on the relationship between these two dimensions. Third, scripts are in a

permanent contest with each other. They can change and adapt to specific circumstances to succeed in the competition, leaving sufficient analytical room for tracing developments over time and space. Fourth, scripts speak to the most fundamental questions of organizing society: how a society defines its legitimate order, how it draws boundaries including and excluding members, how a society (re)allocates its resources, and what understandings of temporalities it relies upon. Thus, the concept of script comes with a structure. It can be broken down into subscripts about borders, orders, (re)allocation and temporalities (Börzel and Zürn 2020).

A script is recurrent over time; it is shared by significant groups to become part of the public discourse; it competes with other scripts about the appropriateness of politics, political, and policies; and a script justifies political arrangements, political processes, and political programs. To the extent that a script becomes dominant, it gets materialized in social practices (Althusser 2014). However, script needs to be kept analytically separate from practice. Different scripts exist in parallel, while greed and other selfish motivations may be reflected in practices. Our understanding of script thus upholds the distinction between ideas and action, also to capture the social dynamics that can arise from gaps between the two. At the same time, script as a concept is meant to be analytically descriptive, even if we refer to its normative elements. This makes it a generic concept which can describe a liberal and a fascist script, irrespective of our own normativity.

Script relates to several rivaling concepts in the social sciences. *Practices, institutions, orders, and ideologies* equally refer to a set of norms and injunctions for social processes; they are all about societal structures that guide action for actors on different levels. At the same time, there are some major differences that give script a comparative advantage when studying the organization of society (see also Zürn and Gerschewski 2021).

To begin with, neither *institutions* nor *practices* capture the macro-level of societies. *Practices* emphasize an action-centered micro- or meso-perspective, highlighting instantiations of patterned actions of individuals and organizations (Reckwitz 2002; Schatzki 2001). As such, practices can be seen as “socially meaningful patterns of action which, in being performed more or less competently, simultaneously embody, act out, or reify background knowledge in and on the material world” (Adler and Pouliot 2011, p. 6).

*Practices* are “much more closely tied to individuals than are orders and order-establishing phenomena of much macro social thought” (Schatzki 2001, p. 5). Practices gain their distinctive take, specifically by emphasizing that they “never possess the *sui generis* existence and near omnipotence sometimes attributed to structural and holist phenomena” (ibid., p. 5). This is the criticism of the macro-systemic nature of a concept of “script” as an order-instituting entity that motivates practice theory.

While practice theory starts with patterned activities, institutionalist theories focus on constraints on these activities. *Institutions* embody “the rules of the game” and “the humanly devised constraints that shape human interaction,” as the famous definition of Douglass North postulates (North 1990, p. 3). Institutionalists share an interest in (mostly formal) “rules, compliance procedures, and standard operating

practices that structure the relationship between individuals” (Hall 1986, p. 19). Institutions only develop independent explanatory “bite” (Capoccia 2016) or a “distorting effect” (Immergut 2006, p. 240) when they become more than mere epiphenomenal intermediaries between actors’ strategies and the aggregation of their preferences to macro-outcomes. It is safe to say that institutions operate on a meso-level. This also applies to a more sociological understanding of institutions as not only constraining the behavior of actors but constituting their interests and identities (March and Olsen 1989).

*Order* is a term that social scientists often use to describe the interplay of institutions on the macro-level. The global order consists of different institutions and practices (Hurrell 2007). A constitutional order is one in which foundational and limitational institutions interact with each other (Krisch 2010). Order—as much as script—thus works on the macro-level. The notion of order, however, includes an element of dominance. An existing order prevails over imaginations of alternative orders. At any given time and social space, there can be only one order—or none, e.g., in the case of civil wars. While there may be struggles about the right order, only one is present according to the logic of the concept. You may aim for a socialist order while living in a capitalist world, but the socialist order is not present in this case. Since the concept of order includes an element of dominance, proponents of the order concept often talk about a hybrid order to describe situations in which different ideas about the right order not only compete but also fuse. Different scripts, in contrast, may and are expected to compete with each other at the same time in the same social space. A script does not need to be dominant to exist. Scripts are “imagined orders.” Moreover, it is possible to describe a merely factual order without capturing the meaning of its underlying norms and rules. For instance, an extraterrestrial person may describe an American football game as an order in which people alternate between a movement of contraction and expansion (Kratochwil 1989). In contrast, it is impossible to describe a script without understanding the meaning of its norms and rules.

*Ideology*, finally, also covers macro-structural features, focusing mostly on explaining, repressing, integrating, motivating, or legitimating the power position of social classes, the people, or any other social group acting out of a situation of dominance and subordination. Ideologies provide cohesion to social groups and often work with rhetorical means and distortions of reality. While we acknowledge this understanding of ideology, we favor a different one, which follows the recent approach to the study of political ideologies by Michael Freeden. It does not invoke the traditional and often pejorative understanding of ideology as losing touch with reality or blurring real-world experiences in order to justify the (excessive) use of political power, but sees it as the ubiquitous and inevitable study of political thinking more generally. Freeden defines political ideologies as condensed and semantically frozen assortments of concatenated concepts that structure political thinking and that generally serve justificatory purposes (Freeden 1996; 2003; 2006; see also Müller 2011, p. 92). We share with this understanding of political ideologies, its explicit

openness for comparative research and its dedication to ideological morphology, i.e., the relationship between different elements (Freeden 1994). While some ideologies—like communism—have formulated a detailed action program, usually ruling out any deviations from a preset orthodoxy, others—like nationalism—tend to avoid particular reference to concrete actors and actions, allowing for more internal variations. Ideologies are, therefore, also open for varieties across space and time.

Significant similarities notwithstanding, we prefer to use the concept of scripts for three reasons. First, the traditional concept of ideology is still more prevalent (cf. Gerring 1997). Ideologies are often too abstract and vague, “something concocted by spinners of dreams, otherworldly intellectuals, or machinators of totalitarian design” (Freeden 2006, p. 4). In modern political thought, the study of totalitarian regimes particularly contributed to the negative image of political ideologies (Arendt 1966; Friedrich and Brzezinski 1956). Due to its pejorative normative ballast, ideology is often used as a polemic *Kampfbegriff* (battle term). Second, the concept of script emphasizes its epistemological underpinnings. Most descriptions of ideologies overlook this dimension in the organization of society. Scripts have an inbuilt semantic that points to particular action repertoires for becoming knowledgeable. Third, our concept of script provides a heuristic tool that allows fruitful comparisons as it contains implicit or explicit statements about subscripts—the borders, the order, the reallocation of goods, and the inscribed temporality of a society.

### 3 Capturing the Liberal Script(s)

Our endeavor aims to better grasp the *liberal script* as the common target of current contestations of liberal ideas and institutions. Defining and distinguishing the concept of script is only the first step. Identifying the “liberal” in the liberal script is even more challenging. Part I of this volume contains three approaches to charting the liberal script. Section 3.1 below discusses how the contributions to this volume take up the methodological challenge. A related question concerns variation. Does it make sense to refer to one liberal script, or is it more appropriate to speak about liberal scripts in the plural? Is there a common core or only variations? We discuss this issue in section 3.2 of this introduction. A script contains chapters and paragraphs; it is thus composed of different elements and subscripts. Parts II and III of this volume are dedicated to them. These contributions refrain from capturing the liberal script in an encompassing way but identify key issues and components. Section 3.3 will introduce these points and will outline how they are addressed in this book. Lastly, the different components of the liberal script often stand in a relationship of tension. Different ways in which these tensions are resolved give rise to different varieties of the liberal script. Part IV of the book will deal with these questions that we summarize in section 3.4.



### 3.1 How to Approach the Liberal Script?

How can we grasp the liberal script in methodological terms, given its enormous variation in time and space? Duncan Bell (2014, p. 683) identifies three methodological approaches to delimit constitutive characteristics of the liberal script (see also Zürn and Gerschewski 2021). First, a *philosophical approach* aims at uncovering the inner architecture of liberal thinking and its justifications, distinguishing different components and their relationship to each other. Such interpretations come usually in the form of a rational reconstruction refining liberal thinking in normative terms (see Habermas 1998; Rawls 1979). Such rational reconstructions underemphasize variations in space and time and tend to neglect the dark sides of liberalism in practice.

Second, a *historical approach* looks at the genealogy of liberal ideas over time and space. It often comes in the form of canonical approaches that distill liberalism from exemplary writings by thinkers considered liberal, including John Locke, Immanuel Kant, and John Stuart Mill. The selection of canonical writers begs the question of how representative they are of liberal thinking in a particular place at a particular time. Moreover, it seems to neglect the global entanglements of liberal thinking (Conrad 2016; Sachsenmaier 2018).

The liberal script consists of a complex set of prescriptive and descriptive statements that vary over time and space. In order to escape an essentialist definition, a *sociological approach* seems more appropriate. It focuses on what liberals and illiberals think, say, or do. In this view, “the liberal tradition is constituted by the sum of the arguments that have been classified as liberal, and recognized as such by other self-proclaimed liberals, across time and space” (Bell 2014, p. 686). Such a sociological approach is sufficiently focused to capture core characteristics of the liberal script that remain constant over time and space while being open enough to recognize tensions and contradictions between them. It also allows for capturing temporal and spatial varieties of the liberal script. The challenge for such a social constructivist reconstruction is that if liberalism is what actors make of it, liberalism can attain a meaning that self-proclaimed liberals reject. For instance, illiberals or anti-liberals like to equate liberalism with communism or fascism, seeking to denigrate liberalism or subvert its meaning. There needs to be a threshold for including liberal statements. Similar to the other two approaches, the sociological approach has to be selective concerning whose statements about the liberal are included in the reconstruction of the liberal script. Still, the liberal script is what liberals and illiberals make of it.

The three contributions in Part I of this volume advance different versions of the sociological approach of how to capture the liberal script. Zürn and Gerschewski develop a sociological reconstruction of the contemporary liberal script. They focus on what those who are more or less consensually considered liberals by others describe as liberal. If one focuses on acknowledged contemporary liberal speakers in determining the liberal script, then—like any relevant social script of significance—it may also contain normatively reprehensible elements, at least in certain times and regions. There were, for example, recognized liberals in the United Kingdom who

advocated colonialism wholeheartedly. Likewise, the compatibility of liberalism and slavery in the 18th century is a necessary part of a sociological approach to the liberal script in historical perspective. A more contemporary example of contested varieties of the liberal script is neoliberalism, given that most neoliberal speakers are considered liberals. At the same time, focusing on spokespersons considered liberals by others avoids mischaracterization as part of a political strategy. On this basis, Zürn and Gerschewski introduce first- and second-layer principles of the liberal script, distinguishing between justificatory principles, such as individual self-determination and equal moral worth, and institutional principles, such as the rule of law. This distinction leads them to expect four varieties of nuclear families of the liberal script. All four evolve around different tensions between different components of the liberal script.

In line with the sociological approach, *Kuntz* develops a practice-oriented perspective focusing on how instructional texts write into action the liberal script. Scripts are programs for practice. Rather than revealing itself in overlapping statements and justifications, as suggested by Zürn and Gerschewski, the liberal script is produced by practices of material assembling and inscription through instructional texts. The exploration of 19th-century dictionaries, manuals, and textbooks demonstrates how the government of liberty is scripted and sheds light on the liberal meaning of governing and being governed.

A third sociological approach focuses on the contestants rather than the protagonists of liberal ideas and institutions. Post-, anti-, and decolonial theories present some of the most radical contestation of the liberal script. Focusing on the relationship between colonialism, racism, and liberalism, they offer alternative ways of reading and interpreting the liberal script. The domination, exploitation, exclusion, and violence by colonial powers as blatant violation of the liberal principles they practiced at home has been rationalized by the necessity, if not moral obligation, to discipline, educate, and “civilize” people considered to follow illiberal or nonliberal scripts (Fanon 1963; Pitts 2009). Identifying illiberal practices of coercion and exclusion and the liberal principles that have produced and legitimized them provides a critical reading of the liberal script and its contemporary varieties. *Kerner* adopts such a critical, postcolonial perspective, exploring the damaging effects of the liberal script, partly produced by the tensions Zürn and Gerschewski make out in their account. She delineates three post- and decolonial positions. They equally reject the colonality of the liberal script but approach its illiberal sides differently. Mignolo dismisses the liberal script altogether because of the totalizing effect of its normative universalism and epistemological imperialism. Spivak is more ambivalent as she sees a liberating potential in the liberal script that can be used to “righting wrongs.” In a similar vein, Mbembe advocates a rereading of the liberal script and its universalism to transgress colonial lines of differentiation altogether.

In sum, the contributions in Part I of this volume take a (broadly understood) sociological approach to the study of the liberal script. They focus on what different social actors consider as the liberal script, looking at the speech-acts and practices of both proponents and critics of liberal ideas, institutions and practices when discussing

appropriate ways of organizing society. The different approaches lead to different perspectives on the liberal script. While they converge on certain key principles and components, they diverge on the dark sides of the liberal script. For many post-colonialist thinkers, illiberal practices are not merely temporal aberrations to be overcome but constitutive features of liberal script. At the same time, each approach sheds light on the interaction between liberal claims and their contestation. On the one hand, contestations are a way of identifying the target of contestations, i.e. the liberal script; on the other hand, the components of the liberal script help to classify different contestations (Zürn et al. 2024).

### 3.2 Script or Scripts

“Liberal” has meant different things to different people at different times. There is ancient liberalism, classical liberalism, neoliberalism, social liberalism, modern liberalism, to name but a few traditions discussed in the literature (cf. Freedman 2015; Rosenblatt 2018). Moreover, early proponents of the liberal script supported ideas and institutions and engaged in practices that are considered illiberal today. Several authors of the US Constitution were slave owners, including George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and James Madison. The “founding fathers” (*sic*) also denied women any political rights. The liberal script today is not the same as it was 250 years ago. Likewise, the liberal script in the United States differs from the liberal script in India. This leads to the question of whether there is a liberal script (in the singular) with many varieties or many different liberal scripts (in the plural). The notion of a liberal script is closely associated with the idea of a core that is common to all varieties of the liberal script; the notion of liberal scripts refers to certain similarities, leading to a multitude rather than varieties of liberal scripts.

To avoid the risk of turning the liberal script into an empty signifier or “all-purpose word” (Shklar 1989, p. 21), we might want to think of liberal scripts in the plural rather than one liberal script (Katzenstein 2022). Different liberal scripts could be distinguished from each other and might form a family, defined by similar, overlapping features, of which none may exist in all of them. Moreover, the set of identifying components would be open-ended. Sharing a common ancestry, certain defining attributes would get lost over time and others be added. While there has to be a sufficient overlap to constitute a family resemblance, members do not necessarily share core attributes of the liberal script. By invoking Wittgenstein’s notion of family resemblance, Zürn and Gerschewski (2024, this volume) identify four families, each consisting of individual members. The crucial concept here is “overlap.” Since the overlaps may change over time, the meaning of the liberal script in earlier times could have nothing in common with its meaning today.

Alternatively, liberalism might entail enduring principles and components without which no community at any time could imagine the liberal script. Depending on their particular relationship with each other, these principles and components form temporal and spatial varieties of the liberal script rather than different liberal

scripts. The crucial concept here is an “ineliminable core” (Bell 2014, p. 684). Without this core, it would accordingly make little sense to speak of the liberal script. The closest candidate for such a transhistorical core of the liberal script that is constitutive for any temporal and spatial variety would be individual self-determination, also understood as individual autonomy or freedom (Freeden 2015). Some argue that individual self-determination is not the only core principle of the liberal script but put collective self-determination on par. Habermas’s (1998) principle of co-constitutionality of democracy and rights probably is the best-known argument in this respect. Along this line, Börzel and Risse (2023) maintain that individual and collective self-determination are co-constitutive and form the core of any liberal script. From this philosophical take, the grammar that links the two core principles is that they are individually necessary and jointly sufficient for a script to be liberal. On the one hand, if individual freedom and self-determination always come first in any social setting, human coexistence is impossible. Individual rights are socially embedded. On the other hand, if collective decision-making and self-determination always trump individual freedom, it amounts to what de Tocqueville called the “tyranny of the masses” (Tocqueville 1994 [1835/1840]). Conceptualizing individual and collective self-determination as the two core components of the liberal script thus allows for a clear delineation of the boundaries of the liberal script. Any attempt to have either individual self-determination or collective self-determination claiming prime of place would be inherently illiberal. Scripts that do not recognize one and the other are nonliberal. This demarcation of the liberal script from illiberal and nonliberal alternatives still captures a wide range of varieties of the liberal script, including neoliberalism and social liberalism, depending on how the tension between individual and collective self-determination is resolved. At the same time, it excludes extreme versions of communitarianism and libertarianism.

While Zürn and Gerschewski (2024, this volume) theoretically allow for a family-approach and avoid the term core, they empirically see that all family types build on notions of “freedom” and acknowledge the mutual interdependence of individual and collective self-determination. As Michael Frieden puts it: “It is simply unimaginable to entertain, and empirically impossible to find, a variant of liberalism that dispenses with the concept of liberty” (Freeden 2015, p. 58). Yet, they distinguish between *justificatory first-layer principles* (instead of a core), and institutional second-layer principles. In this perspective, individual self-determination and the absence of dominance are often used as the justificatory foil for liberal democracy as the appropriate form of collective self-determination. They regularly come together with the idea of equal moral weight and a separation of the private and the public sphere. In this view, the liberal script gives justificatory priority to individual self-determination. While this sociological approach does not deny that liberals in different times, including Mill and Habermas, advanced an understanding that added collective self-determination to the core, it argues that individual self-determination serves justificatory purposes in any variety of the liberal script. In this view, democracy is justified by the need to avoid dominance, whereas individual self-determination is usually not justified in terms of democracy.

Irrespective of whether we speak of a core or a first layer and of whether collective self-determination forms part of the core or not, there is a built-in tension with individual self-determination and other components of the liberal script. The various contributions to this volume focus on subscripts and components and the tensions between them.

In sum, we analyze a liberal script that knows many varieties while rejecting the endless plurality of scripts for either conceptual (core approach) or empirical reasons (layer approach). There are somewhat different understandings of what exactly forms the core or the first layer of the liberal script. At the same time, there is broad agreement that individual self-determination belongs to the core of any variety of the liberal script. Likewise, no liberal script remains unchanged in different times, different social contexts, or different regions of the world. The liberal script describes a socially contextualized combination of ideas and patterns of action or social practices that give life to those ideas. Such combinations present themselves differently in different societies and at other times (Katzenstein 2022).

### 3.3 Subscripts and Components

Scripts have to find answers to the requirements of organizing a society (most famously Parsons 1949). While we reject the Parsonian notion of functional necessity, scripts contain prescriptions and collective understandings on core issues of the organization of society. They are essential for the architecture of institutions, their legitimacy, and social functioning. There are four of these core issues we consider as important to any script (see Börzel and Zürn 2020): borders define who belongs to a society and who can be legitimately excluded; orders set the rules of the game and determine collective decision-making for a society; allocation refers to the rules and goals for the distribution of goods and life chances within society (including reallocation); and temporality specifies shared understandings of time scales, eternity and the reproduction of social structure within a society. The contributions in Part II of the volume cover all four subscripts.

*Drewski and Gerhards* focus on the liberal script for organizing borders. They argue that the liberal border script is characterized by an inherent tension between individual and collective self-determination. State border controls are limited by the universal right of individuals to communicate, trade, invest, and move across borders. Varieties of the liberal border script differ in how they weigh individual self-determination against collective self-determination. The question of resolving the tension between the two gives rise to major contestations of the liberal border script over how much the state shall be allowed to interfere with cross-border interactions of citizens, traders, investors, migrants, and refugees.

*Risse* delves deeper in the question of political order at the international level and analyzes how the liberal script for the international order has evolved after the end of World War II. The chapter challenges the dominant narrative of the United States and its Western allies as the sole authors of the liberal international order (LIO) script. It

shows how newly independent and de-colonized states as well as transnational social movements and organizations, have written and rewritten the LIO script through their struggles for human rights, global justice and against climate change.

*Schmidt* examines how liberal societies organize the allocation and distribution of wealth. She focuses on the resilience of neoliberalism, which replaced Keynesianism as the dominant liberal allocation script in the 1980s. The chapter argues that the ability of neoliberalism to bounce back amid growing social inequality and financial crisis rests on the selective borrowing of Keynesian “patches” to compensate for the failure to deliver on its promises. It remains to be seen whether the management of the Covid-19 pandemic only led to a suspension or rather the actual replacement of neoliberalism by a progressive-liberal or anti-liberal allocation script.

*Paulin-Booth*, finally, focuses on the temporality and the temporal structures that are inherent in the liberal script. Her chapter shows how liberal thinkers in the 19th century invoked ideas about time to explain and justify their attempts to moderate the rapid and profound changes that came with modernity. Their vision of progress imagined an endless horizon of improvement into the distant future. The liberal temporality script also served as a justification of colonialism whereby both colonizers and “backwards” peoples were offered the promise of future improvement (cf. Menzel, this volume). At the same time, critics of this time-based hierarchy advanced their own civilizational timelines, emphasizing indigenous liberal traditions that were degraded by colonization and would open a path toward a long-term future of a society organized by the liberal script via an immediate future of more responsible colonization (cf. Dann, this volume).

One can disaggregate the liberal script further and focus on specific components. In their contribution, *Zürn and Gerschewski* argue that institutional components of the liberal script are derivatives from its core principles. While the first layer refers to an abstract ideal that comes without any institutional connotation and serves as the justificatory foil, the secondary components describe more concrete features that—in varying intensity—belong to the liberal script. Among the most prominent of these secondary components are rule of law, the respect for civil, political, and social rights in the political sphere, the temporal idea of progress, societal tolerance, as well as markets and merit in the economic sphere. These key components will be taken up in Part III of the volume.

*Müller* opens the section on key components of the liberal script by his reasoning on the “twin promises” of the liberal script to promote publicity and protect privacy. After tracing the historical relationship between publicity, privacy, and secrecy, he focuses on the challenges of digital technologies restructuring the public sphere. While platform capitalist corporations guard their public engagement as private, states claim secrecy to protect the security of their citizens, who, in turn, mistake private reasons for public reasons. The chapter closes with considerations on how to rewrite the liberal script to promote publicity and protect privacy when the division between public and private gets increasingly blurred.

*Kumm* then assesses the role of the rule of law in the liberal script from a constitutionalist perspective. In his view, the rule of law gives a political order legitimacy.

This move leads to a “thin” understanding of rule of law, which focuses on legality. As a key concept of the liberal script, rule of law brings together individual rights, the form of law, and democratic decision-making. It is this thick understanding of the rule of law which allows its embedding in an open international order.

*Dann* also dives into constitutional theory and history to explore how time and temporality have shaped the thinking about liberal constitutions. Constitutionalism uses the past to legitimize and safeguard liberal principles and turns them into instruments for utopian ideas about creating a better society (or preventing future disaster). Sequence relates non-Western experiences of constitutionalism to Western constitutionalism and its evolution. Pace concerns acceleration and the challenges it poses to constitutional law. The chapter shows how these dimensions of time contest or confirm liberal constitutional doctrine and constitutional thinking.

*Lerch and Ramirez* analyze the rise of women’s rights. They focus on the role of global institutions in promoting women’s rights and participation as integral parts of the broader liberal script of progress and justice that has spread globally after World War II. To delineate what is distinctly liberal about gender equality, the liberal script of women’s rights is contrasted with its socialist alternative. The latter does not consider women as individuals in their own right but as a collective or as members of a social group. Rather than being equal persons and citizens, women are imagined as equal to men because both are productive workers. Women’s liberation depends not so much on civil and political rights and legal equality but on their inclusion into the workforce. This also implies a greater emphasis of the socialist script on women’s empowerment in the private sphere with the state supporting them to combine their working and reproduction duties. While the two scripts have been competing with each other, the chapter shows that the global women’s regime has always had clear liberal underpinnings.

*Caruso and Waldow* explore the relationship between education and the liberal script. This is a challenge not only because mass schooling and higher education are central to both liberal and nonliberal modernities. Compulsory mass schooling seemingly contradicts the core liberal principle of individual self-determination. Yet, liberal orders require educated citizens. Therefore, the right to education is a fundamental human right that individuals have no freedom to forgo. Like women’s rights (Lerch and Ramirez, this volume), compulsory mass schooling has been part of the liberal script that international institutions have helped spread globally. Yet, it is not unique to the liberal script either. The chapter argues that what makes education liberal is its role in justifying the allocation of differing life chances and social inequality in the liberal script.

*Gosepath* concludes the section by challenging the rationality of differences in merit as the core justification of income and wealth inequality in the liberal script. He contends that neither effort nor contribution can determine the value of individual merit. Both are unable to distinguish between responsible and unaccountable bases of merit. Using personal talent, qualifications, and achievements as the basis for recognition, payment or remuneration, therefore, does not provide a good normative reason for the unequal distribution of income, wealth, positions, and offices

in liberal societies. One of the implications is that efforts and achievements should be decoupled from economic rewards.

The analysis of subscripts and components brings depth to our attempt to capture the liberal script. Moreover, the discussion shows that subscripts bear certain tensions as the case of borders exemplifies. These tensions often provide the target of contestations about how to resolve them. Similarly, each of the components may lead to tensions and inconsistencies with other principles of the script when put into practice, as the discussion of merit has shown. Alternatively, different versions of resolving the tensions may lead to different varieties of, or even alternative to the liberal script as in the case of woman's rights. Finally, historical and technological changes as in the case of publicity require readjustments that create new tensions and potential for contestations. Overall, even if the grammar of the liberal script integrates different subscripts and components into a coherent whole, the tensions within and between them are likely to become contested the moment they are turned into practices in changing circumstances.

### 3.4 Tensions and Contestations

A crucial feature of the liberal script is tensions between different components. In this view, varieties of the liberal script arise from the different ways of handling tensions rather than because of different sets of components. Part IV of the book examines tensions inherent to the liberal script, produced by internal inconsistencies, contradictions, fissures, construction errors or in-built structures of power and domination. Tensions are conceived as different from a mechanistic (non-Hegelian) understanding of contradictions (Zürn and Gerschewski 2024, this volume). While a zero-sum logic takes effect in the case of mechanistic contradictions, and one side can ultimately prevail, tensions can be productively reduced only by considering both aspects. In the case of tensions—and this is crucial—a unilateral resolution is not possible without calling the whole into question. A legal absolutization of negative freedom rights is just as incompatible with the concept of the liberal script as undermining individual fundamental rights through majority decisions. While the focus on tensions differs from contestations, it can help understand contestations of the liberal script as they tend to target tensions.

*Axe, Rupperecht, and Trinkle* deal with the tension between collective regulation and liberal market economy principles, putting into question the widely held belief that the latter originated only in the West and were simply transferred to the East after the end of the Cold War. They introduce the term “peripheral liberalism” for a range of ideas on a market- and individual rights-based transformation that emerged in Eastern Europe, the Soviet Union, and East Asia long before 1989. In response to the broken promise of “actually existing socialism” to deliver socioeconomic development, some economists and social scientists advocated the allocation of goods by markets rather than by central planning and emphasized individual responsibility and labor discipline over collective rights. The chapter argues that these principles



of peripheral liberalism paved the way for economic reforms and political change in socialist and postsocialist countries. Such local intellectual traditions and domestic powerplay were eventually more influential than Western advisory and political pressure, although the latter have become a major target of current contestations of the liberal script especially in Eastern Europe.

*Menzel* tackles the epistemological foundation of the liberal script analyzing the tension between the idea and practice of rationality and the underlying but often unacknowledged normativity and positionality of the liberal script. She starts by exploring the tension in Max Weber's work on objectivity in the social sciences, which has informed liberal epistemology. Recognizing that knowledge is context-bound, Weber insisted that knowledge claims had to be objective and intersubjectively valid. Drawing on examples of peacebuilding and development cooperation for the Global South, the chapter moves on to expose unacknowledged commitments and political agendas in allegedly objective knowledge production and rational policy-making. Professionals devise and implement policies and projects based on their own knowledge, experiences, and commitment to the existing system of international peacebuilding and development cooperation rather than prioritizing the knowledge, experiences, needs, and demands of the nominal beneficiaries of their policies and projects. The chapter links this knowledge hierarchy to postcolonial contestations of the "coloniality of power" (Kerner, this volume), which defines rationality as liberal, linking it to Western education and science (Caruso and Waldow 2024, this volume).

*Müller and do Monte* use Brazil's peacekeeping script to demonstrate the complicity of liberal interventionism and elite liberalism. Brazil used its leading role in the United Nations Stabilization Mission to Haiti to promote an "alternative," explicitly "Southern," peacekeeping approach as a less coercive and more developmental alternative to the Western interventionism of the 1990s. In a similar vein, Brazil contested the international community's invocation of the Responsibility to Protect to justify the intervention in Libya by advancing the idea of Responsibility while Protecting as a (really) liberal alternative. The chapter, however, deconstructs this postcolonial peacebuilding script as the externalization of a violent and exclusionary form of governing security developed by Brazilian elites claiming to enact a better version of the liberal script. Rather than constraining the exercise of coercive state power to protect individual freedom, the Brazilian approach molded coercive and legal powers to uphold the sociopolitical status quo. In this way, the chapter points to the strong tension between universal claims and the need to enforce and enact those claims locally, which is a major point of contestation of the liberal script, particularly by postcolonialism (Mehta, 1999; Kerner 2024, this volume; Menzel 2024, this volume).

*Prakash*, finally, studies the rise of populism and illiberal democracy in India. He starts by exploring the relationship between populism and the liberal script. Presenting itself as a democratic corrective to (neo)liberal politics, populism claims to solve the tension between liberty, individual rights, and the rule of law, on the one hand, and equality, effective representation, and popular sovereignty, on the other, by separating the liberal from the democratic thread of the liberal script. To restore

the aspirations of popular sovereignty, populism subordinates the liberal individual to the democratic collective. Using India as an example, the chapter shows how populism feeds on the broken promises of the liberal script, particularly regarding economic equality, cultural recognition, and political representation. Constructing the trope of a homogenous popular will that knows no opposition, populism claims to be able to deliver on these promises. The chapter thus points to the eternal tension between individual rights and collective self-determination in the liberal script and discusses a case in which the tension is currently resolved so one-sidedly that it arguably turns into an external contestation of the liberal script.

It becomes evident that besides the problems of inconsistencies of specific components of the liberal script, tensions between different components also turn into the target of major contestations. While Zürn and Gerschewski (2024, this volume) aim to capture four tensions inscribed in the liberal script more systematically, the chapters in this section show that there are real-world tensions that fit the typology but turn out to be more complicated.

## 4 Conclusion

The book advances the *concept of the liberal script* and its *contestation* as a way to shed new light on the current wave of attacks against liberal ideas, institutions, and practices. The sociological notion of the liberal script, with its different layers and components, highlights the built-in tensions. It avoids the normative refinement of liberal theories based on a rational reconstruction. The tensions allow for an understanding of both the varieties and the contestations of the liberal script. Varieties of the liberal script differ on how they resolve inherent tensions. At the same time, they can only claim to be liberal as long as they do not give one side absolute priority over the other. Denying foreigners the right to claim asylum is not a liberal means to control borders. Placing these tensions at the center of the analysis of contestation of the liberal script leads to an improved understanding of their endogenous sources of contestation. Scholars of International Relations, for instance, seem to agree that the current contestations are mainly produced by tensions inherent in the international order and global governance structures rather than by exogenous factors, such as power transitions, pandemics, or wars (Börzel and Zürn 2021; Goddard et al. 2024; Zürn 2018). Making national sovereignty conditional upon the protection of basic human rights has given rise to major contestations, not least because of the use of double standards by liberal states. The concept of liberal script allows to analyze these tensions in their varieties and their effects on contestations across different times and spaces. By delving deep into the subscripts, components, and tensions, our sociological conception of the liberal script provides the raw material for explaining its contestations.

The *notion of subscripts and components* allows for a more concrete and issue-specific elaboration of the tensions within the liberal script. For instance, the tension between individual and collective self-determination plays out in the order subscript

differently than in the border subscript. The latter case concerns the tension between the right of the individual to move across borders and the right of the collective to control them. The former touches on issues of minority rights and the over- or under-constitutionalization of political majorities. Each subscript has been at the origin of at least one of multiple crises the world has been facing since the turn of the 21st century: borders and mass migration, orders and democratic regression, allocation and financial crisis, temporality and climate change are the catchwords here. At the same time, the liberal script appears to be contested at all fronts from both sides of the liberal spectrum, but not by a nonliberal or illiberal alternative. Rather, contestations are often selective and negative, rejecting certain components of the liberal script while accepting or adopting others.

Finally, the concept points to the *mutual entanglement* of the script and its contestations. On the one hand, contestations can be grouped according to which components or tensions of the liberal script are targeted. On the other hand, the liberal script can be captured by analyzing its contestations. Liberal is what is contested as liberal or not liberal enough. While religious fundamentalism attacks the liberal script for its extreme individualism, radical libertarianism denies collectives the right to interfere with their individual freedom.

Our journey into charting the liberal script ends at its starting point: the current contestations of the liberal script. This journey has shown that a broad distinction between internal and external contestations can be drawn (cf. Börzel and Zürn, 2020). Internal contestations focus on the implementation of specific liberal ideas and principles and the concrete working of institutions. They do not question the liberal principles as such, but challenge how these principles are interpreted or applied. Often this entails demands for their application to an extended group of addressees. Fitting examples can be the demand for the plurality of lifestyles (e.g., same-sex marriage) or criticizing the implementation of rule of law in a given country (e.g., Hungary). Internal contestations can also denounce extreme interpretations and applications of liberal principles. Communitarianism, for instance, opposes extreme individualism and (neo-)liberal policies that undermine the social bonds of a community and the commitment to shared values and norms (Avineri and De-Shalit 1992; Bell 1993; Schmidt and Thatcher 2013). External contestations do not aim to strengthen the implementation of liberal principles but reject them altogether. These contestations would see sexual minority rights or judicial checks on popular sovereignty as part of liberal decadence. Or they would repudiate the universalism of human rights as a means of Western dominance.

The issues discussed in section 3 of this introduction structure the book as a whole. The contributions of Part II focus on methodological issues and questions about the core of the liberal script and its varieties. Part III zooms into liberal subscripts, while Part IV goes deeper still and is dedicated to components of liberalism. It also opens the discussion on tensions and contestations, which is the central focus of Part IV. In the last chapter of the book, *Freedem* synthesizes and evaluates the multidisciplinary insights offered by the various contributions, developing avenues for future research.

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