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## The Liberal Script: A Reconstruction

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# The Liberal Script: A Reconstruction

*Michael Zürn and Johannes Gerschewski*

## 1 Introduction

Liberalism has come under pressure in recent years. Especially, authoritarian populists of various colour have either subtly undermined or openly attacked key liberal values, even declaring—like Hungarian president Viktor Orbán—“illiberal democracy” as the new political ideal. For some Arab theocrats, as well as Russian President Putin, liberalism even is the declared enemy. Liberalism is also the target of contestation in scholarly discourse. Critical voices from the Global South point, for example, to its complicity with centuries-old structures of domination. In this view, liberalism is closely associated with colonialism and racist stratification in world society (Chakrabarty 2000; Pitts 2005). Not least, a current critique of liberalism equates it with neoliberalism and points to a coalition between neoliberals and new conservatives that dismantled structures of solidarity (Slobodian 2018). Not to forget those voices that declare the end of liberal democracy since it has proven to be inferior to the effectiveness of an autocratic Chinese model (Bell 2015).

The various criticisms target different facets of liberalism. For some, liberalism has become a scapegoat for “postmodern” values, equating them often with a “leftist” and cosmopolitan project detached from the experience of “normal” people. Others point to the weakness of the liberal model by slowing down necessary decisions by offering too many opportunities for participation. Liberalism is also considered as the ideology that made domination over the wretched of the earth possible (Fanon 1963). At the same time, neoliberalism is criticized by many who consider themselves real liberals (e.g. Schmidt and Thatcher 2013). Practices of domination and exploitation by liberal societies are criticized not only by postcolonial voices but also liberals (Hobhouse 1911). Contestants of the liberal script target not only liberal principles as such, but they also challenge practices in seemingly liberal societies from the point of view of liberal principles. Without doubt, liberalism today is an essentially contested concept (Gallie 1956) that “resists easy descriptions” (Wall 2015, p. 1).

How do we know that the critics from Orbán to Hobhouse contest the liberal script? The seemingly obvious needs to be made transparent by providing the reasons behind such a judgment. This requires the conceptualization of what the liberal script actually is. This is the primary goal of our contribution: We submit a specific

description of the contemporary liberal script based on a sociological reconstruction. A script consists of a complex set of prescriptive and descriptive statements, and a grammar or morphology that points to the relationship between them. It, therefore, is impossible to find a definition of the liberal script in the strict meaning of the term. The liberal script cannot be captured in a one-sentence definition that distinctly identifies what is in and out.

Moreover, the semantics of the script varies depending on the concrete context. There is not one invariant liberal script that remains unmodified in different times, societal contexts, or different areas worldwide. As Michael Freeden (2015, p. 22) puts it: “There is no single, unambiguous thing called liberalism.” The liberal script in 19th-century England is different from the liberal script in late 20th century in South Korea. We argue, however, that these differences do not preclude but rather suggest thinking systematically about the commonalities. We propose thinking more thoroughly about varieties of one liberal script, i.e. a class with a differing set of ideas that show significant commonalities and overlaps. This seems to us a better solution than proposing distinct liberal scripts in the plural (e.g. Katzenstein 2022), which does not free us from the task of looking for the common features that qualify a script as liberal.

The contribution is organized as follows. We start section 2 by discussing the method for sketching the liberal script. We suggest a sociological reconstruction. Section 3 then aims to describe the contemporary liberal script by looking at the statements of thinkers who are considered by others as liberal. We start by identifying the first layer of the liberal script, understood as the justificatory basis for developing additional components. This first layer is based on individual self-determination and its derivatives. Then we discuss additional components that speak to societal, economic, political, and cross-cutting issues of a liberal script. Finally, we approach the variety of liberal scripts on the one hand as a set of concepts that share a family resemblance, as described by Wittgenstein (1984). On the other hand, we carve out the most critical tensions between these concepts, demonstrating how and why the liberal script changes dynamically over time and can come in wide varieties as a result of resolving these tensions.

## 2 How to Study the 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*) and empirical statements on how it is (*Sein*) (Börzel and Zürn 2020). Scripts also contain a grammar and action repertoires for arriving from *Sein* to *Sollen*, and vice versa. A script and its subscripts are recurrent over time. It is held by influential groups so that it becomes part of the public discourse. Different scripts compete with each other about relevance and dominance and the appropriate organization of society. Especially dominant scripts also justify and legitimize the exercise of political rule, i.e. polity, politics, and policies.

While it is relatively easy to define the concepts of scripts, it is more difficult to grasp the content of the liberal script given the enormous variance in time and space (Bell 2014). It needs to be captured by identifying both its important components and the particular relationship in which they stand with each other. The liberal script does not lie as a maintained and unchanging work in a library, where it can be consulted in case of need or dispute. There is no one, stable liberal script that remains unchanged in different times, different social contexts, or different regions of the world. Instead, 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 times. The liberal script ultimately exists only in its many variations, which differ according to time and place (Fukuyama 2022). The attempt to identify an original script is therefore doomed to failure. Rather, to quote Timothy Garton Ash, there is “an extended family of historical practices, ideological clusters and philosophical writings that can be considered legitimately liberal” (Ash 2020).

The liberal script and its varieties can, therefore, not be determined by a rational reconstruction of social practices of liberal societies alone, as political philosophy likes to do. This approach is suitable for elaborating a normative theory, as Jürgen Habermas, for example, did in “Between Facts and Norms” (1998)—not least to provide a foil for criticizing prevailing practices. Through rational construction on the part of the philosopher, the liberal script undergoes a refinement that is indispensable for normative theory formation. However, such a refined and normative theory is unsuitable for empirical research into the problems and challenges of the liberal script, because it pushes the weak and offensive points of real existing societies into the background and ends up with *one* script that can be justified very well.

We opt for a sociological, i.e. descriptive, reconstruction of the liberal script.<sup>1</sup> In doing so, we consider what those who are regarded by others as liberals describe as liberal. The point, then, is to analyze the claims and practices of liberal speakers with a view to the organization of society.

If one focuses on liberal speakers in determining the liberal script, then—like any relevant social script of significance—it may also contain normatively reprehensible script elements, at least in certain times and regions. There were, for example, recognized liberals in Britain who advocated colonialism and, especially in the United States, those who supported slavery. Thomas Jefferson, for many observers of the time, perhaps, the most progressive founding father of the United States, owned over 600 slaves over the course of time. The compatibility of liberalism and slavery in this period is a necessary part of a sociological reconstruction of the liberal script in the United States in the early 19th century. At the same time, focusing only on such speakers, who are considered liberals by others, avoids political instrumentalization of liberalism. For if one were to take primarily self-proclaimed liberals into the picture, Jörg Haider of *Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs* (FPÖ) would of course be a liberal, but Willy Brandt would not. The liberal script is not about the liberals as a

<sup>1</sup> For different methodological approaches, see Börzel et al. 2024, this volume.

party or self-proclaimed liberals, it is not about the capital L, it is about the small l, which expresses itself in terms such as liberal democracies, liberal attitudes, liberal convictions (cf. Ash 2020).

This approach allows us to systematically compare scripts with each other. By identifying a source based on which we can identify a script, we point to the raw material from which any script needs to be reconstructed. This source should not be biased toward specific varieties of the script nor conflate the desirable with the descriptive (Rector 2020). At the same time, the source comes with context. We can thus distinguish between speakers from different historical periods and different regions. Since we focus in the remainder on the contemporary liberal script, we mainly use late 20th-century and contemporary liberal writers as source material. A similar reconstruction of 18th- and 19th-century liberalism would have to have a closer look at the classics like Locke, Kant, or Mill.

### **3 The Liberal Script—Architecture, Varieties, and Inner Tensions**

In the previous sections, we defined a script as shared statements on how to organize society and laid out a strategy on how to determine a script to be liberal. Scripts are not alphabet soups, but they are ordered. We propose distinguishing between first-layer principles and secondary ones. First-layer principles are components of the liberal script that fulfill a double function: On the one hand, they are claimed as desirable ideals, and, on the other hand, they serve as justificatory reference points for additional aspects of the liberal script. The reference to individual rights in the Declaration of Independence is an example: “We hold these Truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness [. . .].” Because “these Truths” are “self-evident,” there seems to be no need for further justification. They fulfill a similar function to an assumption in deductive theorizing. The self-evident rights are used as normative reference points to justify other aspects of the liberal script. The outcome of collective self-determination, for instance, shall not violate individual rights, and it has to follow a procedure that provides each individual with a voice. Assumptions thus often serve as a justification for other components of the script. As such, we argue that the first-layer principles come close to an understanding of a necessary core of the liberal script. On the one hand, it is empirically rare to see liberalism realized without these principles. On the other hand, liberalism has per se an inherent tendency to refer to justifications for their actions and beliefs, making the very existence of justificatory core principles likely. Second-layer components, in turn, are those that are strongly associated with the liberal script and provide the institutional infrastructure. Thus, in the configuration with the second-layer concepts, varieties of the liberal script gain traction and become more concrete. The liberal script links together and bundles first and second-layer components, creating space for potential overlaps and interdependencies.

### 3.1 The First Layer

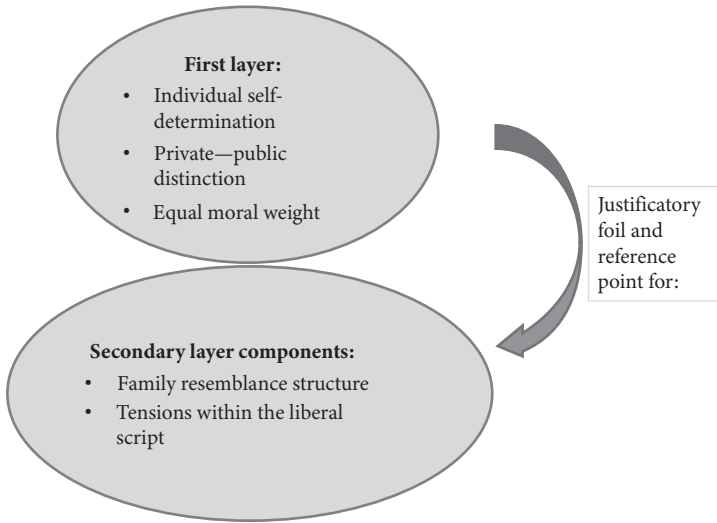
The first layer of the liberal script points to an abstract ideal that comes without any institutional connotation and serves as the justificatory foil for the secondary concepts.

In a review article, Steven Wall (2015) posits that individual liberty might be the closest candidate for a core principle of liberalism. To think of a liberal script without thinking of liberty is meaningless to him. In a similar attempt, Michael Freedman (2015, pp. 55–70) distills the essence of liberal thought and argues that it consists of seven principles: liberty, rationality, individuality, progress, sociability, the general interest, and limited and accountable power. In his assessment, liberty inhabits a special status in this list since “if we were to remove the idea of liberty from any such version [of liberalism], liberalism would forfeit an absolutely crucial distinguishing element. It is simply unimaginable to entertain, and empirically impossible to find, a variant of liberalism that dispenses with the concept of liberty” (*ibid.*, p. 58).

Liberty is a political value. It should not be equated with what Bernard Williams (2005, p. 78) calls “primitive freedom,” i.e. the “simple idea of being unobstructed in doing what you want by some form of humanly imposed coercion.” Primitive freedom is a “proto-political” value. The political can be equated with collective choice and the way one deals with mutual disagreements and political opposition. Liberty thus refers not only to private freedom but to authoritative limitations to liberty to protect the liberty of others (*ibid.*, p. 83). This authoritative source needs to be legitimized.

The key question for liberty as the first-layer principle of liberalism thus is how far a person’s freedom should be extended or protected, which in turn must be determined collectively. This is based on an anthropological belief in the autonomy of individuals, which translates into the right of self-determination. According to the late David Held (1995, p. 147), one underlying principle of liberalism is the idea that “persons [. . .] should be free and equal in the determination of the conditions of their own lives, so long as they do not employ this framework to negate the rights of others.”

The idea that individual self-determination depends on legitimate infringements on personal freedom has two implications that lead us to two additional components of the first layer (similar Fukuyama 2022). On the one hand, this understanding presupposes a distinction between a private and a public realm. The dividing line between private and public can be subject to change, can shift over time, and depends on political decisions (Rössler 2001). However, the presence of a private realm that needs to be substantially protected is part of the package. On the other hand, the value of liberty for each individual presupposes the assumption of the equal moral worth of those individuals considered liberal subjects, a group which, of course, has become more inclusive only over time. If there were not this a priori form of quality, privacy could not be protected consistently. Even politically curtailed personal freedom may negatively affect the personal freedom of others. The “art” of the



**Figure 2.1** First-Layer Principles

political lies, therefore, in legitimating the right cost of liberty, presuming that the moral worth of one individual should not be placed above others. Yet, it should be noted that the equal moral worth of all at the same time serves as a justification for many different forms of inequality within a liberal system as well. Figure 2.1 summarizes the content of the first layer and its justificatory function for the second layer.

## 3.2 Second-Layer Components

We order the second-layer principles along political, economic, and societal principles. Second-layer components describe features that belong to liberalism, but do so in varying intensity and changing composition. In *political terms*, we consider civil, political, and social rights, the rule of law, and collective self-determination as second-layer features. This view strongly resonates with the historical development of liberalism as political thought and political praxis. Liberalism first turned against arbitrary power exercised by monarchs or the church (Fawcett 2018; Rosenblatt 2018) to establish fundamental civil rights. It is often claimed that in 1814 the *liberales* in Spain were the first to adopt the word for their political struggle in reviving the constitution and re-establishing principles of freedom, criticizing the *serviles* for their blind obedience to the crown. Later on, liberals demanded more political participation and social inclusion (Marshall 1950). With the advent of “new liberalism” in the 19th century, liberals like J.A. Hobson, Leonard Hobhouse, and later John Maynard Keynes considered questions of social progress more thoroughly. Rethinking justifications for state interventions into the market, social rights, ranging from social

welfare to education, became an integral part of the liberal script (Rosenblatt 2018, pp. 100–115, 184–207). We perceive civil, political, and social rights as important second-layer political components.

The refusal of an arbitrary external intervention lies at the heart of Judith Shklar's (1989) work on "liberalism of fear." Advancing Isaiah Berlin's discussion of "negative liberty" (Berlin 1969), Shklar forcefully argues that the overriding aim of liberalism is "to secure the political conditions that are necessary for the exercise of personal freedom." To her, "every adult should be able to make as many effective decisions without fear or favor about as many aspects of her or his life as is compatible with the like freedom of every other adult" (Shklar 1989, p. 21). The political conditions that secure the absence of fear of arbitrary rule are the rule of law and the separation of power. Governments need to be both limited and constitutional. This becomes obvious when contrasted with illiberal and autocratic rule (Linz 1975). It is not by coincidence that liberalism gained prominence and strength in the 20th century by sharply delineating and demarcating itself from autocratic alternative scripts, whether in their communist or fascist version (Müller 2011). These competing scripts had no inbuilt institutionalized guarantee for respecting individual and minority rights, but rather start from group identities and imagined futures that are rendered in terms of absolutes. Repression of deviant behavior is both definiers for autocratic rule and explanans for its stability. Liberals, instead, "share a distrust in power—be it the power of the state, of wealth or of the social community" (Fawcett 2018, p. 2).

Since liberty requires the authoritative limitations to liberty to protect the liberty of others, liberals derive the right to collective self-determination. This right is based on the idea of self-legislation. Alien, foreign, or otherwise imposed rule needs to be discarded. Instead, it must be the prerogative of the individual members of the collective to negotiate among themselves to what extent liberty is expanded or contracted. Collective self-determination in turn is limited by the rule of law and the respect for civil, political and social rights.

Over time, the liberal script increasingly translates collective self-determination with the concept of democratic self-determination. To use the words of the state theorist Hans Kelsen (1945): the addressees of laws must be identical with their authors. This is in sharp contrast to autocratic rule, in which the addressee and author fall apart. The liberal script in the 21st century thus includes the notion of liberal democracy as co-constitutive (Habermas 1992), while this association has been much weaker in earlier times.

In *economic terms*, the second-layer components we propose are property rights, market exchange, and a broad notion of a principle of merit. These components resonate with the rich tradition of classic economic liberalism. The right to private property can be directly derived from individual self-determination and belongs to the private sphere. Some belongings and the right to control them are seen as a necessary condition for a life of liberty. When it comes to the generalized right of private property, a classic philosophical distinction is drawn between a Lockean justification of property rights as inherent natural rights (though with limits), and, in contrast,



proponents like Benjamin Constant and Jean-Baptiste Say who perceived property rights as a useful social convention. The latter view is closer to the contemporary understanding of economic liberty with a political bent. Limits to private properties are reached in any case when others are harmed. Irrespective of the philosophical justification, we expect property to play a significant role in today's liberal script that should be mirrored in today's liberal claims.

Markets are seen as the location which allows trading entitlements of capital. In some understandings, free markets have a deontic quality. Most defend markets in consequentialist terms, as the best way of producing growth and wealth. Large parts of the thinking of Adam Smith, John Stewart Mill, and David Ricardo were adopted by the contemporary liberal script. In some versions of liberalism, markets are seen as a natural and emergent place of economic transactions, self-regulated by an efficient price mechanism. In most understandings of the liberal script, however, markets depend on a political and legal environment that protects exchanges from arbitrary interventions (Pistor 2019). Indeed, the vast majority of 19th-century liberalism did not argue in favor of *laissez-faire* (Rosenblatt 2018, pp. 80–86). Instead, the government had a right to regulate any industry. *Laissez-faire* pairs best with primitive freedom. As a suitable second-layer principle, we thus suggest a market economy that foresees and justifies government intervention, beyond neoclassical arguments about market failures and external effects. To what extent this intervention into the market is seen as necessary is as contested as the expansion and contraction of liberty. The most extreme examples of the expansion of liberty and minimal intervention that are either borderline to the liberal script or even perceived as an *aliud* to it, are libertarian thinkers like Robert Nozick (1974).

Markets as a platform of exchange for property entitlements come with the notion that the allocation of goods and wealth is determined by market performance. Rewards and merits from economic activities must be deserved by performance. It should be clear, however, that the underlying concept “deservedness” has no clear-cut specification within the liberal script. One extreme conception is built on a 1:1 relationship between market success and deservedness. It includes the right to pass on wealth to future generations and redistributed to whomever the owner favors (e.g. tax exemptions for foundations). Other conceptions consider redistributive corrections of market outcomes as necessary for other reasons like solidarity and social rights and justify it with undeserved inequalities produced by markets. In these cases, high tax rates with no exemptions and high inheritance tax rates are seen as necessary to uphold the principle of merit.

For the *societal sphere*, we consider the belief in the diversity of lifestyles as an essential second-layer component. The proponents of illiberal democracy and authoritarian populism especially target this societal value of the liberal script. For them, liberal means multiculturalism, open borders, and modern family arrangements. The plurality of liberal lifestyles is perceived as threatening tradition, prompting them to call for an illiberal state. This criticism reveals an important dimension of today's liberal script. Indeed, in the 20th century, “alternative categories based on gender, ethnicity, religion, and sexual orientation slowly worked their

way into mainstream liberal consciousness” (Freeden 2015, p. 50). Identity politics have gained a prominent place in today’s liberal script. Connected through experiences of suppression, discrimination, and injustice, minority groups aspire to raise greater awareness of their situation, seeking to actively expand their right to self-determination. As such, they point to the first layer principles of what is liberal. It derives from the idea that every person has equal moral worth and that no person, including their chosen lifestyle, should be placed above others. As such, tolerance of difference is a tenet of liberal societies. At the same time, the emphasis on group equality may lead to illiberal demands. This ambivalence points to the tension within the liberal script (see section 3.3.2).

In most varieties of the liberal script, the principle of tolerance toward different lifestyles not only applies to all known parts of society but also unknown parts. Openness to new ideas, newcomers, and insights points to a second element of the liberal script in the societal sphere. Open societies let other people and cultures in as long as they accept the liberal script. They are open to new insights as well as the emergence of new identities. In this sense, liberal societies are open societies. As Karl Popper (2013, p. 203) has put it:

Arresting political change is not the remedy; it cannot bring happiness. We can never return to the alleged innocence and beauty of the closed society. Our dream of heaven cannot be realized on earth. Once we begin to rely upon our reason, and to use our powers of criticism, once we feel the call of personal responsibilities and with it, the responsibility of helping to advance knowledge, we cannot return to a state of implicit submission to tribal magic.

Popper’s juxtaposition of a closed and open society finally leads us to a *cross-cutting sphere* of the liberal script. In this cross-cutting sphere, the idea of progress, and the growing control of nature via human reasoning coexist with an epistemology that emphasizes the permanent need to question existing insights and ask for rational procedures to produce knowledge. On the one hand, this epistemology involves an element of humility and thus acknowledges the limits of rationality and planning. On the other hand, the major promise of liberalism is progress in the long term in both material and moral terms.

Material progress is the outcome of competition of private interests and rights within a politically protected market environment. Accordingly, free competition in unbiased markets produces the most efficient outcome, i.e. most aggregate wealth, for each given state of technology. Free markets, in addition, are seen as the best driver for the development and diffusion of new technologies. Since the industrial revolution, the liberal promise of wealth had an almost uncontested appeal. To be wealthy and to access as many consumer goods as possible, you need to live in a liberal society. It has been the rise of the developmental states in the age of globalization, most recently the Chinese economy, which has placed into question the supremacy of the liberal model in securing unrivalled economic growth. The production of wealth and technology may also lead to control over nature. Self-aware and self-confident

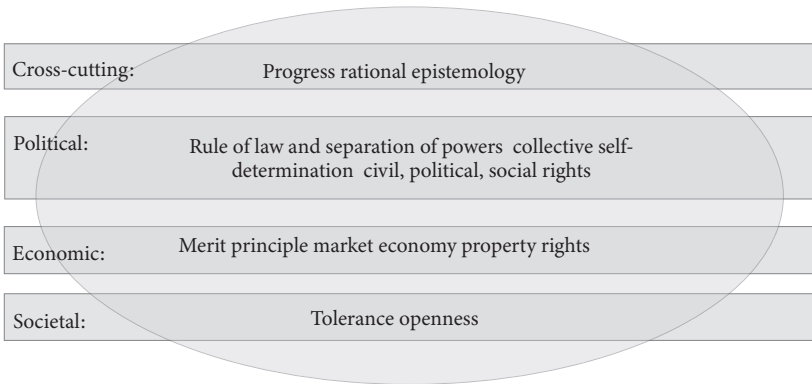
people and societies are not subject to the destinies controlled by God and nature. Liberal societies may even exploit natural resources for wealth and progress. It is only more recently that this “right” of liberal societies has been qualified. At least in some variants, it now reads that natural exploitation is possible to the extent that the further development of technology promises to repair it without damage for future generations (Fücks 2015).

The liberal script also promises moral progress. Systematic knowledge production in liberal societies is dependent upon an idea of social progress (Forst 2019) and most likely leads to moral progress over time. Liberals perceive human nature as rational and widely share an optimistic future outlook that includes a notion of progress as a “movement from less desirable to more desirable states—‘the idea of moving onward’ as Mill puts it” (Freeden 1996, p. 145). This notion is so strong that it was even used to deny the right to collective self-determination (Mehta 1999), though only as a temporary measure. As such, liberals place heavy emphasis on free education and trust in the general principles of Enlightenment (Wall 2015, pp. 4–6). Moral progress depends on the absence of closed rule, demanding instead an epistemic structure that is open and achieves progress through competition for innovation. Liberals share a deep distrust in fixed, comprehensive, and absolute truths, seeing knowledge as preliminary and in a state of permanent revision, and acknowledging epistemic uncertainty. Moral progress in this sense is part and parcel of a critical and rationalist epistemology. It does not refer to deities, authorities, or ideologies to solve problems, instead acknowledging, as John Dewey (1935, p. 32) has put it, “the central role of free intelligence in inquiry, discussion and expression.”

In sum, we distinguish four spheres of the second-layer components of the liberal script. The societal, economic, and political spheres contain elements that are quite distinct from each other. The political sphere refers to the liberal’s mistrust of power concentration, demanding the rule of law and separation of power, the universality of human rights, and the basal right to collective organization. The economic sphere emphasizes not *laissez-faire* and freedom at all costs but a market principle in which the government has a right to intervene, to a greater or lesser extent. Relatedly, the economic sphere underlines the right of private property and the merit principle. In the societal sphere, we refer to the toleration of different lifestyles and openness to the unknown as the hallmark of liberal societies. The fourth cross-cutting realm adds second-layer components that are more general and reflected in at least one of the three other realms. Figure 2.2 provides an overview.

### 3.3 Varieties of the Liberal Script

The liberal script displays more variation in the second than in the first layer. The second layer components point to regularly converging components in accounts of those considered liberals by others. Conceptually, we use the family resemblance approach to capture these. We acknowledge a general fuzziness (“*Unschärfe*”) of



**Figure 2.2** Second-Layer Components

concepts and argue, based on Wittgenstein (1984, p. 278), that the second-layer components constitute a “complicated net of similarities that overlap and cross.” While we argue that the first layer remains the major gravitation center, the secondary components stand in a family resemblance relationship. Family resemblance means that we do not demand that all of these secondary components be present to qualify a certain figuration of components as liberal. Instead, family resemblance argues that a certain number of components suffices to qualify as liberal. If the overlaps are sufficiently numerous, we talk about a family resemblance between all the different varieties of the contemporary liberal script. Moreover, the varieties that come close to full congruence make one branch (the nuclear family) within the larger family or tribe. The family resemblance approach thus also allows drawing a line between liberal and non-liberal scripts (a sufficient amount of overlap), and between different varieties of the liberal script.

### 3.3.1 Family Resemblance

At least in the Western world, we see four nuclear families within the contemporary liberal script. First, we find a *neoliberal nuclear family* starting from the assumption that freedom needs to be considerably expanded in the economic realm. At the same time, the protection of the market needs to be depoliticized and locked in institutionally. Despite its rich conceptual history, liberalism as of today is often reduced to these economic ideas of neoliberalism, as exemplified in the Vienna School with proponents like Ludwig von Mises, Wilhelm Röpke, and Friedrich von Hayek and its “heir” the Chicago School (Slobodian 2018). Yet, neoliberals constitute only one family within the larger tribe of the liberal script.

A neoliberal understanding accentuates, above all, the economic principles that we outlined above. It aims at deregulation, extending the market principle to most areas of social life and reducing the welfare state. Yet, it is important to note that it should not be equated with *laissez-faire* and complete state abstention from markets. Even historically, classic liberals did not uniformly subscribe to these practices. The idea of the state as the mere “night watchman” was, from early on, heavily contested

(Rosenblatt 2018, pp. 105–108). Neoliberals of today perceive the market as a social and political product that needs to be protected and held operational. In this sense, state intervention and neoliberalism are not polar contradictions, but the role of the political is to “oppose any action that might frustrate the operation of competition between private interests” (Dardot and Laval 2013, p. 47).

The neoliberal variety does not abstain from political intervention but includes the function of the rule of law in maintaining a competitive market that embodies innovation potential. As such, it shares the cross-cutting liberal optimism for material and moral progress. This liberal family does not only emphasize competition as a driver for technological innovation but also has an elective affinity to an open and rational epistemology for solving problems and questioning authoritative answers. Neoliberalism is heavily criticized and pejoratively used—due to its atomistic notions of individuals and exaggeration of efficiency, among other reasons—for being a powerful tool of repression, domination, and exploitation in the hands of the wealthy and powerful, for dictating policies of national governments and international organizations, and for producing and widening social inequality (Saad-Filho and Johnston 2005).

Second, we expect to find an *open society interpretation* of the liberal script. This nuclear family shares the heavy emphasis on the first-layer principle of liberty with the neoliberal variety. However, it is somewhat depoliticized. Personal freedom should be expanded as much as possible. While the neoliberal variety is characterized by economic concerns, the open society understanding is driven by societal tolerance and openness toward different lifestyles. Marking a strong delineation between the private and the public realm and taking individual’s equal moral worth seriously, it highlights a multicultural society, open borders, and fair chances for immigration, diversity of sexual orientation, and an emphasis on LGBTQ rights to modern family configurations.

Open society liberals demand a society that is generally open to difference and the unknown, with a strong focus on civil rights. Will Kymlicka (1996) has coined the term of “group-differentiated rights” that goes beyond a mere toleration of minorities, but argues in favor of an active accommodation and entitlement for external protection of minority groups. Highlighting the value of one’s own cultural membership, the right to collective self-determination, even below the national level, is stressed in this understanding of the liberal script. Open society family resemblance revolves around secondary components of societal tolerance and openness, augmented by a heavy emphasis on the political dimensions of civil rights and collective self-determination.

Third, we expect to find a *social-liberal interpretation* of the liberal script. As opposed to the two other nuclear families, the social-liberal variety emphasizes the dependence of freedom on a conducive political environment. This means that the general role of the political in making freedom possible is increased. Historically, this understanding of the liberal script has its roots in the new liberalism that emerged in the 19th century as a reaction to the “social question” (Rosenblatt 2018, pp. 220–233). Ironically, the new liberalism was an opposed answer to the shortcomings of then-liberal thought compared to the similarly named neoliberal answer a century later.

Both were responses to a perceived crisis of liberalism. Yet, they fundamentally differ regarding the role that markets should play.

New liberals—like later social democrats—justify the state’s active role in curbing individual freedom to better protect collective interests only to ultimately “guarantee the real conditions for achieving individual goals” (Dardot and Laval 2013, p. 47). Welfare, labor protection, progressive income tax, unemployment benefits, social insurance policies, health systems, and access to education are only some of the major policy areas of the social-liberal understanding of the liberal script. At the end of the 19th century, “most people now realized that the state was morally obliged to step in on behalf of the helpless and oppressed” (Rosenblatt 2018, p. 228). This social-liberal tradition plays a key role until today. Social and political rights serve as the backbone of this variety of the liberal script. It also emphasizes collective self-determination and sees it in the Polanyian countermovement of social protection.

Fourth, we identify a nuclear family with deeper nationalist and conservative roots. In the history of ideas, nationalism and conservatism are often depicted as the ideological antipodes to liberalism. Yet especially in the first half of the 19th century, liberalism and nationalism often came together. Similar to socialism and the incorporation of socialist ideas into the social-liberal nuclear family, liberal ideas have merged with nationalist and conservative thought, producing a distinct right-wing family. This liberal family does not come along with enigmatic figures as the other three, but it is of historical relevance. Yet, it should be noted that the premise of nationalism is that groups have intrinsic value in themselves as well as having value to their members (Kelly 2015, p. 329; Rosenblatt 2018). In contrast, in liberal thought, the individual always comes first, the group second. “National liberalism” is therefore only reconcilable with the liberal script to the extent that it does acknowledge the prioritization of the individual over the nation.

All varieties of liberalism akin to nationalism need to acknowledge individuals as right bearers but emphasize the value of a national identity based on shared language, descent, geography, and political history. Liberal key thinkers from Mill to Berlin saw nationality as a “way of taming the more dangerous and destabilizing tendencies of a democratic order” (Kelly 2015, p. 338) as it ties together individuals into a political entity. This legacy of viewing nations as consolidators of power and stabilizers of liberal government is stressed here. As such, this family particularly underscores the political value of collective self-determination—sometimes even to the detriment of human rights and democratic procedures. Moreover, the conservative perspective emphasizes tradition, status quo orientation, a sense of hierarchy, and continuity, making it thus skeptical about the intrinsic value of progress (Skorupski 2015). In societal terms, this nuclear family starkly contrasts the cosmopolitan worldview and downplays the societal dimensions of tolerance and openness (Fawcett 2018, pp. 459–460).

These four nuclear families are not mutually exclusive. In empirical reality, we might find political positions that combine aspects of the four families. While we acknowledge that parts of these families can complement each other, we maintain that the four nuclear families outlined above are inherently coherent and empirically

frequent. It is no coincidence that political party formations have crystallized along these lines in many countries in the Western hemisphere.

### 3.3.2 Tensions

The fact that we can identify different liberal families is related to the particular role that tensions play in the liberal script. Such tensions probably play a role in and across every script. In the remainder we focus on the tensions within the liberal script since this helps to grasp its varieties. Still, they experience an exceptional meaning in the liberal script, since challenges and struggles over the meaning of existing concepts are a necessary part of liberalism. The internal contestations of the current liberal script often revolve around the tensions between the outlined liberal families in particular. The more we move away from liberal first-order principles, the more tensions between different components of the liberal script become apparent. We will use four significant tensions and consider different ways of resolving them to trace the varieties of the liberal script. For instance, the tension between economic markets and social solidarity is resolved differently in the Scandinavian version of the liberal script than in the US version. This move also helps to establish additional outside borders. Since the tensions are endogenous to liberal thinking, an utterly one-sided resolution falls outside the liberal script. A script that dissolves markets entirely in favor of a fully equal distribution of goods falls outside the liberal script as well as radical libertarianism in which the individual freedom of the strong trumps solidarity concerns.

In our understanding, social tensions are different from outright contradictions. Tensions describe a relationship between two or more items that do not have a zero-sum relationship. They rather describe a relationship between two or more forces that compete with but also balance each other. Tensions can be socially productive by allowing the creation of new equilibriums that improve both components in parallel. Thus, they refer to variable-sum games. It follows that a one-sided resolution of a tension built into a script leads us beyond its borders since the tension is a necessary part of the script. For instance, if the tension between economic market competition and societal solidarity leads to a completely one-sided resolution in favor of the latter, it may factor out competition completely. If the tension is resolved completely one-sidedly in favor of the former, it may entirely destroy the vision of equality and also move it outside of what can be described as the liberal script.

We consider four tensions to be the most important. Each of them points to different variants of balancing individual rights and collective goals. Each of these tensions can be loosely associated with one of the spheres discussed above.

*Rights versus majority:* In current varieties of the liberal script, the notion of collective self-determination is closely associated with the democratic principle. Democratic practices are conceived as participatory and egalitarian. But giving a voice to all does not ensure that it is a liberal voice. Those with civil and political rights may favor policies that work against these rights (e.g. Avramovska et al. 2022). In democratic theory, non-majoritarian institutions are the solution. Non-majoritarian institutions are defined as entities that exercise some level of public

authority separate from that of other institutions and are neither directly elected by the people nor directly managed by elected officials (see also Thatcher and Stone Sweet 2002, p. 2). These institutions are expected to protect the democratic process and the civil, political, and social rights of institutions by trumping majority institutions. They protect the democratic process by controlling democratic decisions.

This tension comes in two versions. In the first version, it pits national institutions against each other, when, for instance, a constitutional court considers a parliamentary decision as unconstitutional or certain decisions about macro-economic policies are delegated to central banks. In terms of deliberative democracy, the tension concerns most generally the epistemic quality of decisions made by democratic institutions assuming that they are vulnerable to leaving the path of reason (Landwehr forthcoming). In this version, it is more generally the tension between expertise and the majority that is at stake. The tension runs through the history of collective self-determination. The theme dominated debates between British and American intellectuals during the American Revolution. While the Americans pointed to the will of the people, the British side emphasized the rule of law and individual rights. Today, many populist parties pit the will of the (silent) majority against the technocratic rule of liberal experts. The second version of this tension is more recent. It points to tensions between international and European norms on the one hand and popular sovereignty on the other. In this case, international institutions consider global agreements and norms as superior to national policies. Defenders of popular sovereignty often interpret this as just another form of the rule of liberal cosmopolitans via experts (Zürn 2022). The Brexit campaign is a textbook case of this.

The tension between rights and the majority mainly falls into the political realm. Both one-sided resolutions of the tension fall outside of the liberal script. A ruthless rule of the majority and unconditional nationalism violates individual rights and runs against the ideas of universalism and openness. At the same time, a technocratic rule based on the claim of epistemic and moral superiority undermines the whole concept of self-determination. There are, however, many different ways of balancing the tension that all point to different varieties of the liberal script. The difference between Westminster and consensual democracies is one of them (Lijphart 2004), different notions of multilevel governance another (Hooghe and Marks 2000).

*Markets versus solidarity:* Property rights and market competition are an integral part of the liberal script. In some understandings, liberalism cannot even be divorced from capitalism (see Kocka 2013 for discussion). In this view, a private economy based on capital entitlements and free exchange is necessary for freedom and the cause for dynamic innovations and wealth in liberal societies (Schumpeter 1942/2008; Weber 1956). At the same time, such an economy produces inequalities that may go beyond any reasonable notion of deservedness. Moreover, high levels of sustained inequality undermine the equality of opportunities in the economic realm (especially if wealth can be transferred within families) and even the first-layer concept of equal moral worth in the societal and political



realm. Economic wealth can be translated into undue cultural and political influence. Poverty may deprive people of the resources needed to exercise political rights and thus prevents participation in society (Dahl 1989). In short, a market economy may violate social rights with repercussions for civil and political rights.

Arguably, an entirely one-sided resolution of the tension falls outside the liberal script. A socialist economic order that thoroughly excludes competition and market exchange cannot be described as liberal. Accordingly, a version of capitalism that is fully protected from political interventions and that does not foresee any correction to the distributional outcome of markets strongly violates components of current varieties of the liberal script. This may be called neoliberalism but in extreme forms also falls outside the liberal script. It may be just another road to serfdom. There is still much variation in the handlings of this tension. For instance, on the basis of the framework of Hall and Soskice (2001), scholars have distinguished different varieties of capitalism, including coordinated, liberal, dependent, and hierarchical forms of market economies. Similarly, Esping-Andersen (1990) has distinguished different types of welfare regimes.

*Competing interests versus common good:* A somewhat less obvious tension within the liberal script concerns the self-understanding of the society the script addresses. It thus emerges in the societal realm but also has political repercussions. It plays out most vividly regarding temporality issues, especially regarding the tension between short-term interests and long-term interests of future generations.

The liberal script foresees autonomous individuals with the capacity to develop their own will and preferences. An individual that does not know their own interests comes close to a contradiction in terms within the liberal script. At the same, the liberal script makes a distinction between private and collective goods. In many instances, the long-term collective good can only be achieved if the immediate and short-term individual interests are subordinated to collective norms as the expression of the collective will. This tension leads to different understandings of the public realm. In one extreme variety, the public realm is the place in which competing interests come together to negotiate with each other. In this view, the political realm comes close to a market of predetermined interests. The outcome of this game is a more or less fair form of the aggregation of private interests. Theories of pluralism (including asymmetric pluralism) conceive the political realm in this way (Laski 1930). In another variety, the public is the space in which the collective strives for the common good. Individuals participate in a process of arguing and deliberation, leading in theory to an outcome that transforms prior interests (Habermas 1992).

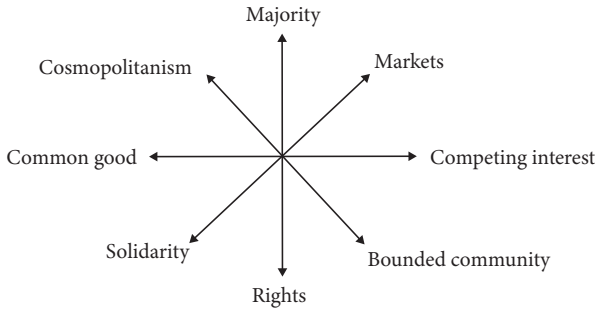
Again, any one-sided resolution of the tension seems incompatible with the liberal script. The common good cannot wholly dominate private interests. At the same time, collective norms should be more than just the mere aggregation of interests—different varieties of the liberal script balance this tension differently. While republican orientations emphasize the common good and the collective will,

pluralist versions emphasize the free interplay of interests. The tension plays out especially regarding issues of temporality. Any decision dominated by an aggregation of interests contains the potential of externalities, producing costs for those who could not participate. Within a given community, the interests of future generations are likely victims. Democratic decisions in the present may easily affect future generations' rights. Justice across generations requires deliberations that transform the private interests of existing actors.

*Cosmopolitanism vs bounded community:* The fourth manifestation of the tensions built into the liberal script leads to struggles over borders (de Wilde et al. 2019). A long-standing debate within liberal political philosophy has pitted those emphasizing universal responsibility to humanity (Caney 2005; Singer 2002) against those emphasizing that there are "limits to justice" (Sandel 1998) in geographical, institutional, or cultural terms (see also Walzer 1994). On the one hand, cosmopolitanism is seen as the necessary implication of liberal and universal thinking in a globalized world (Beitz et al. 1979). In this view, the growing density of transactions across borders leads to a global community of fate (Held 1995), suggesting similar moral obligations to all people, irrespective of national borders. In response, others have pointed to the normative dignity of smaller human communities (Miller 1995) or the decisive institutional context of the state (Nagel 2005). The proper development of the community may even trump an absolutist version of individual rights. The positions can be subsumed under the notion of communitarianism.

This debate, at its core, is one about the status of communities and their relationship to individuals. At stake are two border issues. One is about the constitution of orders. While liberal societies need some borders, there is no democratic way to decide about borders in the first place. The liberal script depends on the existence of communities, although the constitution of communities and the associated act of exclusion runs against the liberal idea of equal moral worth. The other issue at stake is the management of existing borders. While some universal rights of individuals require the freedom to move and to exit, any community claims the right to control its borders.

Any one-sided resolution of the tension moves outside of the liberal script (Merkel and Zürn 2019). A world consisting of billions of individuals with humanity as a whole as the only communal bond can hardly develop notions of solidarity or organize democracy. On the contrary, a closed community that produces externalities without taking any responsibility for them is normatively as deficient as primitive freedom is. In the current world, we see different ways of balancing the tension. One is related to the notion of open society. Open societies often have a long tradition of immigration and less developed welfare regimes. The Swedish *folkshemmet* interpretation has a much more fixed notion of a given community and usually much more developed welfare regimes. Currently, the Schengen area within the EU may be considered as a regionally limited but very open interpretation of this tension. Figure 2.3 summarizes our reasoning.



**Figure 2.3** Tensions within the Liberal Script

## 4 Conclusion

In this contribution, we develop an approach to determining the content of the current liberal script. In the first step, we outline a sociological reconstruction of the contemporary liberal script by looking at authors and speakers that are considered by others as liberals. We propose a conceptual architecture that comprises two layers, leaving enough internal flexibility to account for variety via a family resemblance structure and highlighting internal tensions. We maintain that the different varieties of the liberal script are all anchored in the principles of liberty, a private–public distinction, and equal moral worth. We depict second-layer components and order them along political, economic, societal, and cross-cutting spheres.

Our sociological reconstruction aims at avoiding two fallacies. Normative refinement occurs when “we select and order definitional components based on their moral desirability or attractiveness, or impose an artificial form of consistence on them” (Rector 2020, p. 7). While we consider some consistency as necessary in the liberal script, we aim to identify all the central components of the liberal script, including the tensions built into them. The social struggle over handling these tensions may lead to outcomes that we consider morally indefensible. Because of these tensions, the varieties of the liberal script have some downsides. Moreover, we identify components of the liberal script that may produce morally problematic repercussions if unchecked: markets, strong individualism, and exclusive community-building with the inherent goal to dominate others are among them. The normative deficiencies are one of the primary sources for the contestation of the liberal script. It is necessary to account for these weaknesses of the liberal script when studying its contestations. This does not prevent us from expressing sympathies for the liberal script.

Our sociological reconstruction also provides a broad understanding of the liberal script that distinguishes it from that of various classical political theorists. By focusing on the varieties and families of the liberal script, we want to go beyond a “narrow set of arguments, texts, and historical examples, privileging some standpoints over others in a way that is epistemologically invalid” (ibid.). In principle, our sociological

reconstruction encompasses all liberal speakers and, therefore, is an attempt to be inclusive. While any actual effort includes operational decisions that exclude some actors to some extent, it is principally an open approach. Yet, we do not bring it to an end in this chapter. It is instead an effort to create a set of statements about the liberal script that can be corroborated, rejected, or developed further with the help of empirical analysis. In sum, further research about the liberal script will undoubtedly lead to changes and adaptations of our account.

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