

Contestations of the Liberal Script

Summary of the overall concept of the Cluster of Excellence



Summary

The Liberal Script under Pressure: The liberal model for organising politics and society is under pressure, both internationally and domestically. Rising powers dispute the liberal international order for being dominated by and biased towards the “West”. Authoritarian state leaders characterise liberal societies as weak, decadent, and indecisive. Likewise, fundamentalist religious thinkers and activists criticise the secularism, materialism, and moral corruption of liberal societies. The election of Donald Trump as President of the United States, Brexit, and the growing power of populist movements indicate that challenges to liberal ideas and institutions also come from within liberal societies. Many liberal democracies face a loss of confidence by parts of their citizens. Globalisation has created economic, social, and cultural insecurities. Growing inequalities, fears about social exclusion, and the fluidity of value orientations have nurtured the rise of nationalist movements and populist parties. Where authoritarian populists have seized power, they seek to limit individual freedoms and undermine the independence of the judiciary to consolidate their power.

These challenges involve contestations of what the Cluster refers to as the *liberal script*, which we define as ideas and institutional prescriptions about the organisation of politics and society based on the core principle of individual self-determination. Our understanding of scripts is located at the macro-level. We adopt a generic concept of scripts disassociating the concept from a specific (modern or Western) script. Distinguishing plot, actorhood, scenery, and decoupling allows us to analyse liberal ideas about the organisation of societies and changes therein, on the one hand, and alternative concepts of social and political order, on the other. The development of the liberal script was shaped and redefined through interactions with alternative scripts, i.e. contestation, rejection, and resistance both from within and outside liberal societies. Despite these entanglements of scripts, we maintain the notion of a liberal core. The *plot* of the liberal script is defined by the objective of freeing humanity from the shackles of ignorance (enlightenment), the protection of self-determination, tolerance for differences, progress, and growth. Individuals and public institutions are the constituent *actors* in politics and society, which bear rights and obligations, while societal organisations serve as intermediaries between individuals and public institutions. Regarding the *scenery*, societies are organised in bounded communities and political orders, such as nation states, which have a monopoly on the legitimate use of force and the ability to effectively enforce central decisions. The coercive power of nation states is constrained by the rule of law and participatory institutions as well as international institutions providing collective goods beyond the nation state. Since the liberal

script is based on individual self-determination, which includes the legitimacy of “interpreting” rules in a new way, it allows for some *decoupling* between norms and prescriptions, on the one hand, and actual behaviour, on the other.

This description is compatible with a denaturalised understanding of the liberal script, which considers it as *one* cultural enactment rather than *the* instrumental response to functional necessities of modernity. The liberal script thus competes with *alternative scripts* for organising societies, such as fascism, communism, or Islamic fundamentalism. Contestations of the liberal script are not unprecedented. However, current contestations are puzzling in historical comparison when measured against the broad developments in world society over the past twenty-five years. There have been few interstate wars, enormous growth rates, poverty reduction in some fast-growing countries in the global South, modest, average unemployment rates in the consolidated economies of the global North, and a significant improvement of the Human Development Index over time, including remarkable advances in health and life expectancy.

Research Questions: The Cluster aims at answering three sets of research questions. First, to what extent do current challengers target the core of the liberal script? Are alternative concepts of political and social order, such as nationalist populism or Chinese state capitalism, on the rise or are these varieties of existing liberal ideas? If they are genuine alternatives to the liberal script, are they gaining in appeal both inside and outside liberal societies? How do the current contestations compare to earlier contestations in history? To *identify contestations*, we aim at delimiting the core content of the contemporary liberal script by contrasting it to recent historical internal and external competitors (e.g. communism in the last century) and current challengers (e.g. nationalist populism). We will explore whether and to what extent challengers to the liberal script draw on similar normative sources for criticising the liberal script and for developing alternatives.

Second, what are the causes of the contestations of the liberal script? Under what conditions does the liberal script lose or gain attractiveness, and what drives the rise of alternative scripts? To what extent are the causes of current contestations different from previous ones? To explore *causes of contestations*, we inquire about why and how the diffusion of the liberal script, which started in the late 18th century, was strongly contested in the first half of the 20th century and why it is now again. We distinguish between ideational configurations (including perceptions of functionality and legitimacy) and material structures as causes for contestations. Both can be endogenous or exogenous. Endogenous causes relate to basic tensions inherent in the different components of the script, which cannot be fully resolved in practice. Market dynamics weaken the idea of meritocracy by creating growing levels of inequality; they may also undermine the sustainability of the planetary resources. Exogenous forces, such as the success of a market economy with a non-liberal political system in China, the presence of

cultures and religions which reject liberal ideas or any external shocks, the financial crisis, or recent migration flows relate to factors that are not caused by the liberal script itself.

Third, what are the consequences of the intensified contestations of the liberal script and the potential rise of alternatives for the challenges the world is facing in the 21st century, such as climate change, migration, nuclear proliferation, and transnational terrorism? Is this merely another backlash against the ongoing spread of liberalism, or are we dealing with powerful new ideas and scripts that will shape conflicts and create cleavages over how to organise societies at the domestic and international levels for a long time to come? Or, will we even see the beginning of the end of the dominance of the liberal script? To investigate the *consequences of contestations*, we will focus on the effects at the domestic, regional, and global level. We distinguish between three possible outcomes. (1) The liberal script prevails by adapting its scenery and actor constellation. (2) It survives but not without substantially transforming its plot. (3) The liberal script declines, losing relevance to alternative scripts.

SCRIPTS addresses fundamental questions about the development of politics and society and offers several advantages over existing approaches. First, we want to find out why the liberal script has come under pressure despite its remarkable achievements since World War II and again after 1990. Second, in doing so, we analyse external and internal contestations of the liberal script and their interrelationships. The concept of scripts enables us to see the liberal script not as a constitutive component of modernisation, but as one that has always been competing with other scripts. Moreover, we can identify these alternatives in their own right rather than as mere deviations or dissents from the liberal script. Third, our approach facilitates the analysis of developments across time and space by incorporating the specific perspectives and insights from history and area studies into the social sciences. Historical comparisons allow us to put current challenges in context. Area studies help us avoid a Eurocentric bias thereby enabling analyses of varieties of the liberal script, its alternatives, and their entanglements from a global perspective. Last but not least, the incorporation of different theoretical and methodological perspectives ensures what we refer to as double reflexivity. Reflexivity, in a broader meaning, is part of the social sciences' more general self-critique about the relationship between power and knowledge production. Double reflexivity involves a double recognition. On the one hand, generalising social scientists need to acknowledge the impossibility of analysing global processes with absolute impartiality because their perspectives are always contextualised. On the other hand, localising area studies scholars need to recognise that academic scholarship has developed methods and mechanisms that allow moving towards generalisations. We emphasise the interdependence between these two perspectives: without generalising concepts, there is little to deconstruct; without critical reflection and contextualisation, there can be no (social) sciences.

Research Programme and Cluster Structure: We aim at studying contestations, their causes, and their consequences by putting together four *Research Units* (RU) focussing on specific issues each script has to address: borders, orders, re-allocation, and temporality. *Borders* determine who belongs to a group or society and who can be legitimately excluded. *Orders* refer to core ideas about the institutionalised rules of the game, which allow for political and social coordination within a given society. For the *(re-)allocation of goods and life chances*, scripts involve rules and goals in the face of social and material scarcities. Understandings of *temporality* and progress, finally, provide information on time scales, imaginations of transience and eternity, and the reproduction of social structure. The four RUs will investigate who is contesting what, which factors drive these contestations, and what the effects of the contestations are. Each RU will consist of multidisciplinary research teams, systematically cutting across disciplinary and epistemic boundaries. At the same time, the four RUs will overlap to avoid the segmentation of the Cluster. With this goal in mind, we will build three core *Cross-Cutting Work Units* (CCWU) that bind the four RUs systematically together: a *Theory Network*, a *Methodology and Data Center*, and a *Knowledge Exchange Lab*.

The *Theory Network* will provide for an exchange of theoretical concepts, bridging different epistemological perspectives, and theoretical traditions. It will facilitate the integration of theoretical concepts and conceptions, hypotheses, and findings across the RUs. The *Methodology and Data Center* will serve as a central hub for innovative methodology development and training across the Cluster (and beyond) as well as for data management. The *Knowledge Exchange Lab* will engage researchers with policy-makers, business representatives, media, non-governmental organisations, and the general public (both German and international), establishing a dialogue about research questions, research practices, and research findings. Beside the CCWUs, a collective data collection project and a project on the historical varieties of the liberal script cut across the different RUs. Finally, each RU will also reflect on its findings on the interactions between contestations of the liberal script and its response to them in light of global challenges the world faces in the early 21st century. This will enable the Cluster, as a whole, to contribute to some of the big contemporary debates in the social sciences on the crisis of borders, the crisis of democracy, the crisis of capitalism, and the crisis of sustainability.

Supporting Structures and Environment: The Cluster generates synergies by bringing together the leading researchers in the social sciences and area studies across various institutions in Berlin. Guidance and governance for all activities of the Cluster will be primarily provided by four bodies of the Cluster: The *Spokespersons*, the *Executive Board*, the *SCRIPTS Plenary*, and the *International Advisory Board*. They will ensure quality management in terms of academic excellence, gender equality, and diversity. As an innovative measure, we will institutionalise the Cluster's efforts under one roof by fostering international cooperation and early career development in the *Berlin International College for Research and Graduate*

Training (BIRT). By bringing together international cooperation and graduate training, BIRT will provide a hub for doctoral researchers, postdoctoral fellows, and international visiting scholars to exchange views and develop ideas, thereby promoting early career development and advancing gender equality and diversity. BIRT will closely cooperate with existing graduate schools and programmes in the social sciences and area studies and help to implement the Cluster's concepts of *strategic and research-oriented teaching*. Cluster PIs and AIs will remain associated with the bachelor and master programmes at their universities so that students have a chance to interact closely with all researchers involved in the Cluster. Doctoral researchers and postdoctoral fellows will acquire teaching experience and knowledge by practising innovative training methods (such as active learning, case study teaching, role play, etc.) supported by didactic training, with a particular focus on the employment of new technology.

Milestones: The Cluster considers two general objectives as particularly relevant for the evaluation of its success at the end of the first funding period. On the substantive side, the Cluster will have identified the contemporary contestations of the liberal script that go against its very core and that differ from previous ones. We will also have developed an empirically grounded theory of the causes of contemporary contestations. On the institutional side, SCRIPTS will have expanded the existing network of international partnerships established by its participating institutions, particularly in the global South. The Cluster will also have institutionalised the knowledge exchange relationships with selected political and societal partners in Berlin. SCRIPTS will have increased the diversity of the researchers involved in the Cluster and ensured the placement of our postdoctoral fellows in leading research institutions. In addition, the Cluster will have created four permanent professorships to strengthen the structures for global and regional studies in Berlin.