Georg Simmerl

Liberalism and Critique. Why it is Unviable to Analytically Position a Liberal Script in Opposition to its Contestations

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Liberalism and Critique

Why it is Unviable to Analytically Position a Liberal Script in Opposition to its Contestations

Georg Simmerl

ABSTRACT

Instead of starting solely from the claims of self-identified liberals, this paper investigates past and present critiques of liberalism to grasp what liberalism might be. The first part engages with the earliest practices of criticising "liberalism" that developed until the mid-1870s. The second part provides an in-depth analysis of very recent critiques of liberalism by Victor Orbán, Vladimir Putin, and Aleksandr Dugin. As all these critiques of liberalism, irrespective of the self-identification of the speaker and just like positive applications of the term, invariably make strategic use of liberal ideals and follow the same discursive rules of demarcation and universalisation, this paper argues for conceptualising liberalism as an encompassing language game that constitutes the discursive environment of modernity. Showing how even the most ardent critics cannot escape this discursive environment is a way of upholding liberalism's universality even after the „end of history" has ended.

1 INTRODUCTION

To put the current challenges to liberalism, emanating from inside and outside liberal societies, into analytical perspective, the SCRIPTS Cluster works with a research program that rests on two key concepts – the "liberal script" and its "contestations" (Börzel/Zürn 2020). [1] Over the last few years, research at the Cluster has refined these key concepts and put them into practice without overcoming, as I argue, the built-in tendency of this research program to place the "liberal script" in opposition to its "contestations".

Recently, Michael Zürn and Johannes Gerschewski put forth the most advanced attempt to outline what the liberal script is (Zürn/Gerschewski 2021). Drawing on a generalised understanding of a script as "a set of (…) empirical and (…) normative statements about the organization of society", they argue for a two-step "reconstructive approach" (Zürn/Gerschewski 2021: 6, 12). First, they suggest an analysis of the claims about the organisation of society by self-proclaimed liberals and those considered liberals by others over time. Second, they confront the results of this analysis with a "philosophical filter", which fulfils various functions. It checks whether "the component claims can be reasonably defended as part of a more or less coherent liberal script" and excludes claims by "pseudo-liberals" contradicting this inner logic (Zürn/Gerschewski 2021: 12). In this way, the "philosophical filter" also ensures that the ideational core of the liberal script is in line with a basic assumption of the Cluster's research agenda, individual self-determination. According to Zürn and Gerschewski, this liberal script is the "target" (2021: 1) of various contestations, which are generally grouped into two categories at the Cluster. On the one hand, *internal* contestations which "invoke core components of the liberal script to justify criticisms of given practices, including how liberal norms are interpreted and applied", and, on the other hand, *external* contestations that "attack the liberal norms as such, and that possibly present alternatives to the liberal script" (Gosepath/Zürn 2021: 10). Internal contestations are also

1 I would like to thank the doctoral students and post-doctoral fellows at the BIRT colloquium, Stefan Gosepath, Michael Zürn and Michael Freeden for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this working paper.

dubbed "liberal" (Gosepath/Zürn 2021: 10) or "contestations within the liberal script" (Acosta et al. 2021: 2) since they draw on its norms. External contestations, in contrast, amount to a – by definition – discursive and/or practical rejection of the liberal script and its norms and thus are sometimes referred to as "illiberal contestations" (Gosepath/Zürn 2021: 10). As indicators for the existence of alternative scripts, which the SCRIPTS research program assumes *a priori*, external contestations, embodied by autocratic regimes like China or Russia, merit the label "contestations of the liberal script" (Acosta et al. 2021: 2) properly so called.

By relying on claims of self-identified liberals and those considered liberals by others and at the same time filtering them through a set of philosophically pre-defined ideals, Zürn and Gerschewski's approach combines what Samuel Moyn has in a recent lecture identified as the two dominant strands in the burgeoning historiography of liberalism (Moyn 2022: min. 19:35-22:06). While "nominalist approaches" draw on conceptual history and start from the historical uses of the term "liberalism", which was coined in the first third of the 19th century, "conceptualist approaches" stipulate definitions of liberalism mostly by constructing a tradition of liberal ideals formulated by thinkers that might not have used the term themselves, such as John Locke or Thomas Hobbes. In joining both sides of this divide, Zürn and Gerschewski follow the lead of Duncan Bell's widely cited article "What is Liberalism?" (Bell 2014). Although Bell's starting point is clearly a variant of conceptual history, he provides a definition of liberalism that also captures the process of grouping thinkers whom themselves had not used the term into the liberal canon. To Bell, liberalism is "*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: 689-690, original italics). However, by relying on the judgements about liberalism by persons widely considered as liberals, this definition works around one of the most fundamental insights of the conceptual history of liberalism: It was Spanish traditionalists, i.e. people who considered themselves adversaries of liberalism, who coined the term in 1813 (Freeden/Fernández-Sebastián 2019: 11; see also Rosenblatt 2018: 63).

In this paper, I turn the fact that liberalism was coined as a derogatory term into an analytical premise in order to devise an alternative route towards grasping what liberalism might be. Critique is – and has always been – a defining practice of liberalism, both in the general sense of critical engagement in public debate and in the specific sense of criticising liberalism, on which I will focus in this paper.[2] Taking my cues from post-critical thought in literary and cultural studies (Anker/Felski 2017; Noys 2019: 31), I want to show that critique can never escape that which it criticises, in this case, liberalism, and that critique, even in its negative, accusative, and at times denigrating orientations has productive effects. Namely, by criticising liberalism, self-proclaimed anti-liberals have, from the beginning, contributed to our shared understanding of liberalism. Self-proclaimed liberals, on the other hand, would learn to rival them in this genre soon after the term had formed by what is known as "liberal self-critique". My hypothesis is that practices of criticising liberalism succumb, irrespective of how the critic self-identifies, to certain discursive rules, i.e. these practices resort recurrently to the same form of arguments and position liberalism in a particular relationship to associated concepts. Determining the existence of such discursive rules and whether they were, as a structural feature of the discourse on liberalism, invariable over time can open a new path towards understanding what

2 Critique has, like the term crisis, etymological roots in the Greek verb krī́nō - to "separate", to "choose," to "judge," to "decide" (Koselleck/Richter 2006: 358-359) and acquired over the centuries the idiomatic meaning of a negative judgement. While keeping in mind that critique always tends to separate and distinguish, I use the term in this paper mostly in the idiomatic sense.

liberalism might be. To prove my hypothesis, I will take as an analytical starting point the earliest practices of criticising liberalism that emerged up until the mid-1870s and compare them to their present manifestations, exemplified by "external contestants" of liberalism that currently get a lot of public attention in liberal societies – Viktor Orbán, Vladimir Putin, and Aleksandr Dugin. In doing so, I draw on already established findings of conceptual history, extend them in batches, and systematise them anew via an analysis of practices of criticising liberalism methodologically inspired by Michel Foucault's structuralist discourse analysis (Foucault 2002).

This exercise is necessary because even the most erudite investigations into the conceptual history of liberalism exhibit an *idealist reductionism* in their answer to the question of what liberalism is – a reductionism which also characterises the answers of Duncan Bell and Zürn/Gerschewski. In their overview of the state of the art of the conceptual history of liberalism, Michael Freeden and Javier Fernández-Sebastián (2019: 11, 7) point to the derogatory coinage of the term and contend that liberalism has since provoked a steady stream of critique, attesting to its ability to "ignite public debate". Nonetheless, they take the "history of actually existing liberals" as their "starting point" as well (Freeden/Fernández-Sebastián 2019: 3). In their following elaborations, Freeden and Fernández-Sebastián find it hard not to conceive of liberalism as a nationally dispersed political movement held together by a more or less coherent ideology.[3] It thus seems as if starting solely from the history of actually existing liberals and their claims about liberalism – and this is also what Bell and Zürn/Gerschewski do – leads to identifying it with certain idea(l)s. This is what I call an idealist reductionism. Nevertheless, Freeden and Fernández-Sebastián (2019: 2, 1) at the same time point to a much more encompassing understanding of liberalism when they argue that it might be "not just one 'ism' among many, but the condition for all the others" and "a set of basic cultural postulates that opens the possibility of debate among all modern ideologies".

My contention is that analysing practices of liberalism leads exactly in this direction of an encompassing conception of liberalism as being fundamental to modernity, not to be mistaken with a simple ideology or a set of ideals. Mostly building on the seminal work of the conceptual historian Jörn Leonhard (2001), I will show that two discursive rules govern the practices of criticising liberalism that both self-proclaimed anti-liberals and liberals have historically resorted to – and still do: *universalisation* and *demarcation*. While demarcation means separating liberalism in a potentially antagonistic way from ideological competitors, universalisation refers to the act of ascribing to liberalism universal qualities potentially global in reach. Understanding how practices of critique exactly universalise liberalism requires a closer look at critical arguments made about liberalism. From the beginning, liberalism has been castigated above all for not living up to its ideals and hypocritically violating them (most importantly, the ideal of liberty and its derivative, non-intervention). In this way, however, the critique of liberalism implicitly made liberal ideals its standard of judgement and thus contributed to their dissemination. Furthermore, liberalism has been criticised prominently for turning into its "political other" (in the past: royalism/despotism; today: authoritarianism/totalitarianism), for giving birth to an excessive form of its political demands (revolutionary radicalism/democratisation), or for spawning its "economic other" (socialism/Marxism). Thus, practices of critique

3 Freeden (2019) identifies various ideological "layers" that are supposed to make up British liberalism. Fernández-Sebastián (2019: 102) even explicitly describes early Iberian liberalism as a "movement whose ideology (…) does not always conform to the conventional vision of nineteenth-century classical liberalism", which is certainly correct but at the same time limits our understanding of what liberalism was in Spain and Portugal to a political movement with a specific ideology.

accorded to liberalism, just like positive applications of the term, a unique position among modern ideologies and a foundational role for modernity as such. Together, they made liberalism an almost inescapable point of reference in public debate.

In this working paper, I can only allude to the encompassing understanding of liberalism this analysis is supposed to pave the way for. It conceives of liberalism as a critical language game whose discursive rules, as exemplified by practices of criticising liberalism, enforce themselves in public debate, where they both govern what can be said and allow for their creative application, effectively causing liberalism's *relative universalisation* in modernity. Hence, even the most convinced enemies of liberalism contribute to its relative universalisation when talking publicly about liberalism. Not least because, as we will see, even in practice of criticising liberalism, universalisation outruns demarcation. The first and foremost purpose of such an equally encompassing and formal understanding of liberalism is to overcome idealistic reductions, but only in a limited way. Rather than with a set of ideals, it identifies liberalism with the strategic application of these ideals in public debate for competing ends. Consequently, the analysis of practices of criticising liberalism is supposed to show that they strategically apply liberal ideals – and this is also why they cannot escape liberalism. Speaking in more general terms, the strategic application of liberal norms in public debate, as the form and essence of liberalism, is both rule-bound and open, leading at the same time to the universalisation of these norms and to their relativisation. It deals with their conflicts and limits, with necessary encroachments and exceptions to them, and yields potential consequences, which to idealistic conceptions have to appear as "illiberal".

Coming back to the SCRIPTS research agenda, the alternative I am suggesting to investigating contestations *of* the liberal script, identified with a set of ideals, is investigating the various relationships between liberalism *and* critique. This alternative analytic route can be framed itself as an immanent criticism of the SCRIPTS research program. By analysing practices of critique, I am engaging with a "higher level generic concept" (Gosepath/Zürn 2021: 3) compared to contestations, which refers to a discursive phenomenon without implying further that it elicits a degree of social mobilisation. And by taking practices of criticising "liberalism" as my starting point, I am dealing with a concept inevitably used as a synonym at the Cluster for "liberal script", a theoretical construct itself not used in everyday language.[4] In effect, I contribute to a major research desideratum identified by SCRIPTS, namely, to put current contestations into historical perspective (Börzel/Zürn 2020: 7–8). However, instead of placing a liberal script, defined as a set of ideals, in opposition to its contestations and thereby making their external variants the general template of analysis, as the *a priori* assumption of full-blown alternative scripts attests, I am arguing for approaching the SCRIPTS research program from the perspective of internal contestations as radically as possible. I hold this view for three reasons, two analytic and one strategic, which my analysis attempts to substantiate. First, identifying liberalism simply with a set of ideals comes with an incomplete understanding of liberalism. Such an understanding is incapable of capturing political processes, namely, how liberal norms are (and were first) established and enacted, processes that play and have always played out in public debate. The conceptualisation of "internal contestations" used at the Cluster indeed does reflect that liberal institutions require constant public critique (Gosepath/Zürn 2021: 10, 3). But in this way – and the alternative label "contestations

4 When discussing alternatives to their approach to sketching the liberal script, Zürn/Gerschewski (2021: 11, Fn. 7) explicitly mention that "one could analyze what liberalism consists of in the eyes of critiques". I am doing exactly that.

within the liberal script" is indicative – it also calls into question a strict opposition between script and contestations. Second, as long as the analysis of contestations remains on the argumentative level, i.e. on the level of public critique, it is hard to distinguish external from internal contestations, as, above all, the similar practices of criticising liberalism adopted by self-proclaimed liberals and anti-liberals presented in this paper will show. Third, opposing a liberal script to its contestations (and alternative scripts) runs the risk of corroborating the claims of those who consider themselves enemies of liberalism and giving up on what might be its essential ideational feature: universality. The maybe paradoxical gist of this argument is that the universality of liberal ideals is best defended today by advancing an understanding of liberalism that is capable of incorporating any critique and acknowledging that the constant critical engagement with these norms (and liberalism as such) and their strategic application in public debate are actually a peculiar vector of their universalisation.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows: In the first part, I will survey the literature on the conceptual history of liberalism to identify key practices of criticising liberalism that developed until the mid-1870s. In the second part, I will analyse the practices of criticising liberalism used by Orbán, Putin, and Dugin in the present. Drawing on the insights into the discursive rules of criticising liberalism acquired in these two sections, I will explain why it is unviable to analytically position a "liberal script" in opposition to its "contestations" in the conclusion.

2 CRITICISING LIBERALISM UP UNTIL THE MID-1870S

Since the political use of the term "liberal" preceded the critical coinage of the term "liberalism" in the early 19th century and already exhibited discursive tendencies of both demarcation and universalisation, I will describe this process in this section first. Afterwards, I will show how various practices of criticising liberalism conformed to these two discursive rules while responding to changing political circumstances up until the mid-1870s, using examples from Spain, Britain, Germany, and France. The mid-1870s are the end-point of this analysis because by then, many contemporaries perceived liberalism for the first time as triumphing "in nearly all European societies" and used the terms "'liberal' and 'liberalism' as both a universal trend of progressivism and a national narrative" (Leonhard 2019: 73). These constructions of liberalism's status in the mid-1870s resemble in some ways the thesis of the "end of history" (Fukuyama 1989), which is the intellectual backdrop of the current debate on the rising challenges to liberalism. In the following section, I will then show that the discursive rules that emerged in the 19th century also govern the practices of criticising liberalism, which self-proclaimed anti-liberals use in our present.

2.1 PRELUDE: THE POLITICISATION OF THE TERM "LIBERAL"

No matter whether it was applied to a citizen in the times of the Roman Republic or a French nobleman in the early 18th century, the term *liberal* and its derivative noun *liberality* (from Latin *liber*/*liberalitas*) denoted for hundreds of years "the laudable attributes of a member of a ruling elite" (Rosenblatt 2018: 42). Its semantic shades ranged from the moral virtue of generosity to a form of civic- or open-mindedness and a specific type of education (Leonhard 2001: 86–126). It became a thoroughly politicised term only after the French Revolution (Leonhard 2001: 127–257). From then on, the way one related to this world-shaking event became a defining moment for what it meant to be liberal. For example, in Britain, Edmund Burke, a member of the Whig Party who is today considered by many to be one of

the founding fathers of conservatism, openly refused to call the French revolutionaries “liberal” and instead denounced their attacks on aristocratic rule and religious order as “illiberal” and driven by a “swinish multitude” (Rosenblatt 2018: 44–47). In France, it was Napoleon Bonaparte who first propagated the so-called “ideés libérales” to justify his 1799 *coup de état* as a measure for defending the legacy of the revolution against political instability and the reemergence of the *terreur*.

For this reason, Möllers (2020: 31–32) correctly reminds us that liberalism had authoritarian beginnings. But soon, the “ideés libérales” were also translated by the anti-Napoleonic opposition of the *libéraux* into constitutionalist demands, effectively making liberal ideals a “universal concept” by 1815 (Leonhard 2019: 75–76, here: 76) that was put to use in public debates across the continent to justify means which others would immediately denounce as “illiberal”. Eventually, a group of reformist parliamentarians in Spain, both anti-Napoleonic and referring positively to the ideals of the French Revolution, formed in support of the new constitution of 1810. They were the first to call themselves *liberales* and would soon label their royalist opponents the *serviles* (Fernández-Sebastián 2019: 109; Rosenblatt 2018: 61–62).

However, as we have seen, before the politicisation of the term “liberal” provoked this dynamic of discursive demarcation (i.e. the first self-identified liberals coining an antagonistic counter-concept), it had already exhibited universalising tendencies, since liberal ideals had become a positive point of reference which all sides of the public debate found hard to dismiss. The discursive rules of this nascent language game – demarcation and universalisation, with the latter from the beginning outrunning the former – would then find their full expression in the first uses of the term “liberalism”.

2.2 DEMARCATION AND UNIVERSALISATION: THE CRITICAL COINAGE OF THE TERM “LIBERALISM”

The two earliest uses of the term “liberalism” in Spain and France that conceptual historians were able to identify show that it was liberalism’s adversaries who coined it, and exemplify the two discursive rules of demarcation and universalisation.

In Spain, it was a newspaper affiliated with to those labelled *serviles* by the first liberals, which, in principled accordance with them, described liberalism in a demarcative fashion as an “anti-monarchic, anti-Catholic” “system”, designated by the newspaper as the “new heresy of this age” in 1813 (as cited in Fernández-Sebastián 2019: 106). Similarly, in France, it was very likely a royalist, too, who first used the term “liberalism” in 1818 – however, in a slightly but significantly different manner. He stated that although liberalism is “supposed to signify all the generous sentiments, high-minded wishes, love of true liberty, independence, and nobility in the human heart” (as cited in Rosenblatt 2019: 166), self-titled “liberals” were actually “the least liberal of all, as their philosophy is nothing but ‘selfishness’, ‘ambitiousness’ and ‘perfidy’. If liberals gained power in France, the inevitable result would be ‘the most dreadful despotism’” (Rosenblatt 2019: 166). Here, we see that even though this second use of the term is just as derogatory as the first usage in Spain, it implicitly affirms liberal ideals since the French royalist accepts them as the standard for judging the behaviour of liberals by calling them “the least liberal of all”. To the same effect, this use of the term predicts the reversion of liberalism into its opposite – despotism. In this way, the critique of liberalism facilitated the establishment of liberalism and its ideals as a focal point of public debate in modernity. Even if the term “liberalism” was used only as a foil, completely antithetically to one’s own position, as in the very first usage,

this demarcative strategy established the term as a central axis of political conflict and thus contributed to its relative universalisation as well.

While it was practices of critique that created the term "liberalism" in the first place, not least because self-proclaimed anti-liberals "needed to encapsulate in a denigrating shorthand the whole set of 'liberal' people, doctrines and practices they were preparing to fight", self-proclaimed liberals soon adopted this term as a self-designation (Freeden/Fernández-Sebastián 2019: 11). It was quickly used by some of them for ordering "the vague 'liberal ideas' (…) into an initially relatively structured system of political thought", just as self-proclaimed anti-liberals increasingly portrayed liberalism not only as a nascent political movement but also as a supra-individual "acting subject" from the 1820s onwards (Freeden/Fernández-Sebastián 2019: 11–12). These similar practices show that the first critical uses of the term by self-proclaimed anti-liberals worked in the same direction as the uses of self-proclaimed liberals. At a moment when liberalism came to be understood, in a demarcative fashion, as a distinct political party, they emphasised even more that it actually was the universal progress of reason and an encompassing "system". This understanding was especially prevalent in Germany, although liberalism had become an opposition label there too, after the assassination of the conservative writer and diplomat August von Kotzebue by a liberal-nationalist student and the ensuing political conflict over the reactionary Carlsbad decrees enacted in response in 1819 (Leonhard 2019: 81). Self-proclaimed liberals then emphatically imbued the term "liberalism" with their established understanding of liberality as both an individual attitude and a universal capacity, integrating all interests in society for the common good and preventing a divide between state and society from emerging and potentially even informing a reform-oriented government (Leonhard 2001: 191–208, 282–300). Just as in France, where the "idées libérales" were a discursive strategy to overcome the conflict lines that had emerged during the revolution, the new political situation in Germany now led some liberals to jettison antagonistic demarcations from royalism to realise their overarching goal of constitutionalist reform. One German author in 1822 even went so far as to argue that "the one source of liberalism that never runs dry is – the monarchy" (as cited in Leonhard 2001: 296, my translation), illustrating the historical variance in liberal understandings about the proper organisation of society.

2.3 "FALSE" OR "PSEUDO-LIBERALISM": ARGUMENTATIVE STRATEGIES OF A CLASSICAL CRITIQUE

The political situation that the discursive constructions of "liberalism" had to handle became even more complex after the French July Revolution in 1830 when a constitutional monarchy was established, and a government dominated by liberals like François Guizot and Adolphe Thiers implemented various contentious policies in service of the middle classes. These policies culminated in the declaration of a state of siege in Paris in response to an anti-monarchist uprising in 1832 and a public ban of the term "republican" in 1834. While in Germany, the example of the July Revolution invigorated the liberal movement, the uses of the term "liberalism" now had to increasingly reflect that certain conflict lines could not be overcome. Since the German liberal movement still united various factions, the relationship of liberalism to radicalism, to the growing demands for democratisation and the nascent "social question", needed further clarification (Leonhard 2001: 361–388).[5] This situation provoked the dis-

5 Especially with regard to its relationship to "radicalism", the conceptual history of "liberal" and "liberalism" in Britain was different. While "radical" in the British context designated for most of the 19th century the reformist orientation that was only later associated with liberalism, "liberal" was initially mostly used in a negative sense, as it was seen as a foreign term imported from Spain and France in the 1820s and applied to denounce the re-

persion of specific practices of criticising liberalism among self-proclaimed liberals and anti-liberals alike.

The most telling examples in this regard are the charges of "false liberalism" or "pseudo-liberalism", which implicitly pose the question of what "true liberalism" is (Leonhard 2001: 366-380). These criticisms contributed to the proliferation of liberal ideals (whatever their content) as a positive point of reference and standard of judgment. Within the liberal movement, the charges of "false" or "pseudo-liberalism" were used to decry an overly compromising orientation or to debunk covert radicalism, but, in any case, a hypocritical attitude. Hence, these charges were applied both by moderates to attack members of the liberal movement they considered too radical and by radicals themselves.[6] So when Zürn/Gerschewski (2021: 12) argue for a "philosophical filter" that allows identifying the claims of "pseudo-liberals" like AfD or FPÖ representatives and also excluding them from a definition of the liberal script, they apply this old argumentative strategy, which, however, has never settled the question of what true liberalism is but rather has been an expression of its inherent contentiousness.

In the run-up to the mid-19th century, this critical question also became deeply wedded to economic considerations. Responding to Max Stirner (2017: 133, 144), who had labelled communism a "social liberalism" and demanded its transformation by way of self-criticism into a "critical or humane liberalism", Karl Marx, himself a former journalist of a liberal newspaper, speculated together with Friedrich Engels that Stirner wanted to provoke radicals with this label and declared his take on liberalism to be deeply ideological. "Real liberalism", they argued in *Die Deutsche Ideologie*, is always simply the "expression of the real interests of the bourgeoisie", and therefore German liberals would demand protectionist tariffs and constitutions in 1840, slowly catching up to the point where their French counterparts already had been in 1789 (Marx/Engels 2017: 259, 251–252, my translation). By identifying liberalism critically with the economic interests of the bourgeoisie, Marx and Engels not only answered the question of "true liberalism" that became widespread at that time. They also pointed out that, in economic terms, liberalism is not necessarily, as idealistic accounts would have it, about *laissez-faire* since its German representatives called for economic interventions like protective barriers. When Prince Metternich then denounced liberalism in 1847 as "a mere illusiveness", behind which the "truth of radicalism" hides, and later diagnosed that radicalism had found its heir in revolutionary socialism (as cited in Leonhard 2001: 290, my translation), he was also answering the question of "true liberalism" and applied structurally similar strategies of critique as the self-identified liberal Max Stirner, albeit with different political targets.

2.4 CRITICALLY PUTTING "LIBERALISM" CENTER STAGE

What was the structural similarity in the musings of Stirner and Metternich about the question of what liberalism really is? While the former assumed that liberalism "completes itself in self-criticising" as it transforms from political liberalism into communism (also known as social liberalism) and finally "humane liberalism" (Stirner 2017: 141), the latter considered liberalism a cover for radicalism, which would eventually give rise to revolutionary socialism. In this way, both ascribe to liberalism a central position among modern ideologies, not least because they assumed that it contained others (communism/socialism) as developmental potentialities. Although the history

forms propagated by British radicals (Freeden 2019: 304-305). From 1830 onwards, "liberal" was increasingly used in a positive sense, and its synonymity with "radical" was then affirmed (Leonhard 2001: 321-340, 400-411).

6 In Britain, too, the question of what "true liberalism" is discursively structured conflicts within the liberal movement among moderates, democrats, and proto-socialists (Mares 2002).

of the liberal movement did reflect this critical take on liberalism, as it indeed contained radical, democratic, and/or proto-socialist factions, this view, at the same time, promoted a universalising understanding of the term beyond a mere political movement.

In a prominent example of "liberal self-criticism", the German author Arnold Ruge (1988 [1843]) made another variant of this argument, which proliferated in the years leading up to the revolutions of 1848. Simultaneously affirming the unity of the liberal movement and attacking the anti-democratic dispositions of many of its members, Ruge portrayed current liberalism as "the liberty of a people stuck in theory", "devoid of a real will to liberty" and consequently demanded its "dissolution (…) into democratism" (as cited in Leonhard 2001: 452, 451, 453, my translation).

When a whole wave of European revolutions had finally broken loose in the year 1848, and the split within the liberal movements deepened, the Spaniard Juan Donoso Cortés, a former liberal and now ardent catholic monarchist, only went one step further than Ruge, though from a position that deemed itself anti-liberal. In his famous 1851 *Essay on Catholicism, Liberalism and Socialism*, Cortés (1879: 173) argued that liberalism disintegrates into two schools, "the democratic and the liberal properly so called; the latter more timid, the former more consistent". The democratic school would risk losing itself to socialism, an ideology which, according to the counter-revolutionary Cortés (1879: 180), takes rationalism beyond the point where the liberal school stops. While Ruge affirmed that liberalism needed to dissolve into democratism, Donoso Cortés (just like Metternich) assumed that this process would finally lead to the rise of socialism. Again, both of these critical practices accorded liberalism a unique and central, even foundational, position among modern ideologies, which was paralleled by the positive claim of moderates that liberalism occupied a "middle ground between the extremes of absolutism and democratic self-government" (Leonhard 2019: 85).

Together with the constant adoption of liberal ideals as a standard of judgement (for example, by denouncing liberals for illiberal behaviour or "false liberalism"), the practice of critically pointing to liberalism's developmental potentialities posited that liberalism was in actual fact not a modern ideology like any other. For many self-proclaimed conservatives or reactionaries like Donoso, liberalism "was ultimately the origin of all other political 'isms' (…) and responsible for all evils of modernity (Freeden/Fernández-Sebastián 2019: 3), just as self-proclaimed liberals universalised liberalism by arguing that it was the progressive fate of the West and their respective nations.

For this reason, however, Bell's (2014: 701-706) claim that the scope of the liberal tradition was only expanded during the middle decades of the twentieth century so that it finally came to be seen by many as the constitutive ideology of the West has to be qualified. Constitutive and universalising qualities were bestowed on liberalism already by the earliest uses of the term, both positive and critical. While it might certainly be the case that identifying liberalism with the West only became widespread during the mid-20th century when "totalitarianism" formed as its antagonistic counter-concept, these claims themselves played on discursive rules – universalisation and demarcation – which had governed the liberal language game since it emerged in the 19th century.[7]

7 Freeden/Fernández-Sebastián (2019: 8) remind us that at about the time when the liberal canon was expanded, the accusations of breeding all of modernity's ills that were initially levelled against liberalism reappeared "under very different circumstances, when some well-known authors – several of them German Jewish intellectuals who took refuge in the United States – blamed the Enlightenment and liberalism for incubating the serpent's egg of totalitarianism." These particular accusations are another case in point for my argument that positive applications of liberalism and its critiques tend to work in the same direction of universalising it.

2.5 CATHOLICS AND LIBERALISM – A CRITICAL RELATIONSHIP

Since the term "liberalism" formed, and not least due to the tendency of the associated language game to provoke antagonistic demarcations, Catholics were most active in criticising liberalism. The former liberal Donoso Cortés became one of the most renowned critics of liberalism and paved the way for an encompassing – and therefore universalising – critique of liberalism as a "comprehensive metaphysical system" put into practice by the "eternal competition of opinions" which Carl Schmitt (1988: 33) would eventually champion in the 1920s and 1930s.[8] Although Donoso had already blamed liberalism's focus on public discussion for its inability to confront socialism head-on and considered faithful Catholicism alone capable of defeating the revolutionary menace on the battlefield, he nonetheless identified some tacit points of contact between liberalism and Catholicism.[9]

Other Catholics at that time even argued from a perspective that fully identified with liberalism. This tendency was most pronounced – and most innovative – in France. That "liberalism" had become a concept denoting a decidedly anti-revolutionary order in the wake of the establishment of the July Monarchy allowed liberal Catholics there to revive attempts of overcoming its semantic opposition to "Catholicism"/"royalism" (Leonhard 2001: 356–358). However, this did not prevent them from subjecting the newly formed liberal government to a fierce critique. As it had immediately tried to roll back the expansion of Catholic influence during the preceding Restoration period, one of the most prominent representatives of liberal Catholicism, Félicité de Lamennais, accused the government in the newspaper *L'Avenir* of a "false liberalism" (Rosenblatt 2019: 175). He claimed it would commit illegal interventions into religious matters and violate the principles of a "real liberal", namely freedom of religion, freedom of teaching, freedom of the press and of association. As we have seen, the critical topos "false liberalism" and the arguments it engendered were, at that time, already well established.

Another author in the same newspaper even introduced an innovation when criticising the *laissez-faire* doctrines of liberal political economists prevalent among governmental officials, calling for a "new liberalism" that would not favour the rich over the poor and grant universal suffrage (Rosenblatt 2019: 175). Whereas both arguments made in *L'Avenir* show once again that within the language game of liberalism, it is possible to call upon liberal ideals to either criticise or demand governmental interventions, the innovative potential lay in naming the second option a "new liberalism". In Britain, this option was worked out into a full-blown doctrine by the end of the century (Freeden 1978; Vincent 1990), while the liberal language game would, up until today, see many variants of conceiving a new liberalism, which perfected or perverted its predecessors (see sections 3.2 and 3.3).

Moreover, the French liberal Catholic Charles de Montalembert was one of the first to ever use the term "liberal democracy" in 1863, as he called on liberals to stop resisting the irreversible trend of democratisation and fight to make it liberal instead (Rosenblatt 2018: 162–164). In the middle of the 20th century, this term would become ubiquitous, as it was instrumental for delineating a position in the competition with political systems

8 On the many facets of Carl Schmitt's critique of liberalism, see the contributions to Hansen/Lietzmann (1988).

9 Donoso, an advocate of a counter-revolutionary dictatorship, corresponded with the leading liberal minister of the French July Monarchy, Guizot, on the *Essay*, who claimed after reading that they had the same goals to which they tried to arrive not in the same way but in parallel ways (Cortés 2007: 380-381). Donoso obviously also had Guizot's "doctrinaires" and their support for a constitutional monarchy in mind when characterising liberalism, as he argued – and this is, in his view, its minimal point of contact with Catholicism – that liberalism was a deist system of thought and thus ultimately derived political sovereignty from God.

also claiming to be democracies (Bell 2014: 703-704). Even so, there remained the option of sharply distinguishing democracy from liberalism, as the Catholic Carl Schmitt (1988: 8-9, 15-16) did in the 1920s, and to argue that, as soon as it rises to power, "liberal democracy" must choose between its liberal and democratic elements (see section 3.1).

In 19th-century Germany, the semantic antagonism between Catholicism and liberalism was more pronounced than in France, culminating in the times of the *Kulturkampf* during the early and mid-1870s, and thus the "paradox of simultaneous semantic universalisation and contraction" (Leonhard 2003: 38, my translation) of the term "liberalism" was also most visible there. This paradox is exemplified by the fact that the political leaders of German Catholicism resorted to strategies of critique that followed the rules of the liberal language game. For example, already before German liberals supported Bismarck's anti-Catholic policies between 1871 and 1878, the bishop Baron Wilhelm Emmanuel von Ketteler had described modern liberalism as

> standing, due to its inner nature, wholly on the side of excessive government [Allregiererei] (…). It is the heir of the absolutist monarchy and bureaucracies of the preceding centuries. [Modern liberalism] distinguishes itself from it only by its outer appearance, by words, (…) but its actual being, which repeatedly breaks through this appearance, is intolerant, relentless centralization and omnipotence of the state, at the cost of individual and corporative freedom. (as cited in Leonhard 2001: 518, my translation).

Once again, we see that those who position themselves in an antagonistic conflict with liberalism tend to criticise it in a way, which may even affirm an orthodox interpretation of liberalism's ideals: defending individual freedom against governmental excesses.[10] In a time when liberal parties were dominating the German parliaments, the Catholic newspaper *Süddeutsche Reichspost* (Anon. 1874: 59) even openly claimed, after having criticised current liberalism for enabling selfishness and eroding folk culture, that "to the older liberalism, however, we owe a lot (…) in this respect, we are liberal, too". Here, a Catholic author construed an older liberalism as a positive point of identification that, unlike its current perversion, had stood true to its ideals. In the 1870s, liberalism might thus have been not only a dominant political movement in Germany but also an encompassing discursive system, which reproduced itself in public debate and to which even faithful Catholic believers had to succumb. Rather than reducing liberalism to a distinct ideology located in specific political parties, it seems much more advisable for this reason to conceive of liberalism as a discursive environment in which, due to its relative universalisation, all political movements have to manoeuvre in modernity.

In fact, by the mid-1870s, an "apparent triumph of liberalism" was perceived "in nearly all European societies", and the term itself implied in this way "both a universal trend of progressivism and a national narrative" (Leonhard 2019: 73). It might not come as a surprise that exactly in this situation, whose discursive construction foreshadowed the "end of history" (Fukuyama 1989) after the Cold War, the diagnosis of a "crisis of liberalism" formed as soon as the political and economic tides slightly changed and certain counter-movements to triumphant liberalism could be detected.[11] In the remainder of this paper, I

10 Due to its tactical reliance on liberal ideals in the *Kulturkampf*, some historians even consider the Catholic *Zentrum* party in Imperial Germany a liberal party (Anderson 1988: 418; Linsemann/Raasch 2015: 11).

11 In a second paper I worked on during my time at SCRIPTS, I investigate how these first diagnoses of a "crisis of liberalism" formed from the mid-1870s onwards to show that they drew on specific practices of criticising liberalism and tended to describe the crisis they were referring to as a dynamic immanent to liberalism.

want to show that when exemplary representatives of the self-stylised counter-movements to liberalism, which emerged after the "end of history", criticise liberalism, they still have to conform to the rules of the liberal language that emerged throughout the 19th century.

2.6 SUMMARY

To sum up my discourse-analytical description of this historical process up to this point: From the earliest derogatory uses of the term "liberalism" in the 1810s onwards, the critique of liberalism has been – just as positive applications of the term – governed by the discursive rules of demarcation (e.g. liberalism vs royalism/Catholicism) and universalisation. Together, these two discursive rules led to what I call the relative universalisation of liberalism as a language game in 19th-century European public debate because even self-identified anti-liberals used liberal ideals like individual liberty or its correlative non-intervention as a standard for judgment when criticising liberalism, thereby implicitly affirming these ideals and contributing to their dissemination. Or, to put it differently: Even self-identified anti-liberals tended to contest liberalism internally. Furthermore, the critique of liberalism – both "liberal self-criticism" and a critique articulated out of an anti-liberal self-understanding – accorded liberalism a central position among modern ideologies and sometimes even a constitutive role for modernity as such. From the beginning, critics castigated liberalism for turning into its political "other" (despotism) and soon for being a covert for revolutionary radicalism, for provoking demands for democratisation, or for giving rise to socialism. In their version of "liberal self-criticism", some members of the liberal movement even positively affirmed that liberalism's potential for full democratisation, in particular, needed to be realised. These practices exemplify the emergence of a language game throughout the 19th-century, centring on liberal principles as an almost inescapable point of reference in public debate, which was used both to criticise government policies and to extend the liberal agenda in a way that permits new interventions. This process of relative universalisation effectively accorded liberalism a completely unique status compared to any other modern ideology. For these reasons, I argue for conceiving liberalism not as a modern ideology among others but as the discursive environment of modernity from which no one can escape when engaging in public debate.

3 CRITICISING LIBERALISM IN THE PRESENT – ORBÁN, PUTIN, DUGIN

The *End of History*, indicated above all by "the total exhaustion of viable systemic alternatives to Western liberalism" (Fukuyama 1988: 3) after the Cold War, is both the intellectual backdrop and analytic bottom line against which the newly emerging contestations of liberalism can be discerned today. Although this thesis by now seems to lend itself to easy refutation, as the rise of populist movements within liberal societies, the challenge to the West by authoritarian regimes like China or Russia, and not least the latter's war against Ukraine suggest, it still directs our thinking about these developments. This is also the case for the SCRIPTS agenda research because it puts the liberal script centre stage, narratively positioning it as the formerly only game in town which eventually became the target of various contestations. Whether, as the SCRIPTS research agenda also assumes, alternative scripts, i.e. systemic alternatives to liberalism, have emerged is, however, still an open question.

In the previous section, I have shown that the earliest critical uses of the term "liberalism" in the 19th century were governed by two discursive rules. On the one hand, a potentially antagonistic *demarcation*, as in liberalism vs. royalism/despotism/Catholicism. On the other hand,

universalisation, as exemplified by critiques that charge liberalism of not living up to its ideals, of being a pseudo-liberalism, harbouring its ideological anti-theses, or that construct an older variant as point of positive identification and polemical leverage against its current perversions. In both ways, these critical uses of the term "liberalism" have contributed to making it the central axis of public conflict and to disseminating liberalism's ideals, which is what I call the relative universalisation of liberalism as a language game in modernity. Or, to put it more precisely: These critical practices contributed to making liberalism the discursive environment of modernity.

In this section, I will show that even some of the most renowned external contestants of liberalism today cannot escape this discursive environment when criticising liberalism and have to follow the discursive rules of the liberal language-game, which, of course, also means that they play strategically according to these rules to achieve their own ends. First, I will engage with Hungarian long-term Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, the spearhead of the global rise of populism, and compare his widely received proclamation of an "illiberal democracy" in 2014 with his 2022 speeches at events of the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC). Secondly, I will analyse the declaration of liberalism as obsolete in a *Financial Times* interview by Russian long-term President Vladimir Putin and his escalating polemics against liberalism and the West in his 2022 public justifications of the war against Ukraine. Thirdly and finally, I will deal with the 2021 attempts of Russian right-wing ideologue Aleksandr Dugin to arrive at a philosophical rejection of liberalism by way of its criticism, most of all because Dugin is one of the very few thinkers feeling capable of doing so today.

The purpose of this analysis is twofold. I do not only want to corroborate that the discursive rules identified in the previous section are still in effect today. Showing that even those considered external contestants of liberalism draw on its ideals and further its relative universalisation is also supposed to provide an immanent criticism of the SCRIPTS research agenda and to sketch an analytical alternative that is capable of upholding liberalism's universality after the "end of history" has ended. For this second reason, I will at times also discuss other analytical approaches in this section. Drawing on the findings of my analysis, I will then work out the immanent criticism of opposing a liberal script to its contestations in the conclusion.

3.1 VIKTOR ORBÁN: THE GREAT DEMARCATOR (2014/2022)

In at least one respect, Viktor Orbán followed the same trajectory as Juan Donoso Cortés. At the beginning of his political career, a card-carrying liberal, he transformed into an avowed anti-liberal critic of liberalism. However, Orbán remained a gifted polemicist from his early days as an eloquent opponent of the communist regime in Hungary, who, like many in the history of the liberal movement, emphasised the importance of the nation, and as a founding member of Fidesz, soon part of the Liberal International, up until the heights of his world fame as an increasingly autocratic Prime Minister from 2010 onwards (Becker 2022).

To the global commentariat, Orbán appeared in his latter starring role as a pioneer of the populist international supposedly challenging the liberal world order. I argue that Orbán may indeed be the exemplary populist, but for unexpected reasons. As a virtuoso of public debate, he plays the liberal language game exceptionally well without being able to break its rules. This adherence shows most prominently in the way Orbán criticises liberalism and liberals.

Let us first take a closer look at his 2014 speech at the 25th *Bálványos Summer Free University* in

Romanian Băile Tuşnad, in which Orbán first declared Hungary an "illiberal democracy", garnering exceptional attention in international media (Orbán 2014). Speaking after having already started to restructure the Hungarian state by curtailing the powers of the constitutional court, extending government control over the media, and crafting a new constitution, and having just won the two-thirds parliamentary majority necessary for such measures a second time, Orbán started by diagnosing cracks in the "liberal world view" caused by the financial crisis of 2007/08. Pointing to statements by US President Barack Obama on the rising cynicism in American society, his calls for proper taxation and economic patriotism, Orbán (2014) drew a simple conclusion. Things, also critical things, had become sayable in public, which could not have come up within the liberal worldview before 2007/08. What Orbán tried to prove was that even within the liberal worldview, the necessity "to develop a state that is capable of making a nation successful" in the face of heightened international competition after the financial crisis was accepted. The claim that liberal democracy, a type of regime Orbán considered to have been in place in Hungary up until the start of his second stint as Prime Minister in 2010, "will probably be incapable of maintaining [its] global competitiveness in the upcoming decades", then paved the way for announcing an alternative model. Building on the established perception of conflicts – or maybe even incompatibilities – between liberalism and democracy, Orbán gave shape to his illiberal vision of democracy by presenting it as an antithesis to liberal principles of societal organisation that would prevail in global competition. However – and irrespective of whether the build-up of interventionist state capacities for competitive purposes contradicts liberal principles – Orbán, in the end, chose a compromising formulation.[12] He conceded that he was about to construct "an illiberal state, a non-liberal state" that would nonetheless "not reject the fundamental principles of liberalism such as freedom, and I could list a few more, but it does not make this ideology the central element of state organization (…)" (Orbán 2014). Rather than a wholesale rejection of liberal ideals, this proclamation of an illiberal state comes down to a strategic and selective application of them. Thus, it is hard to tell whether this was, in the analytical language of SCRIPTS, an internal or external contestation of the liberal script.

What, then, made this speech provoke so much attention, most prominently in liberal societies? Very likely, it was Orbán's willingness to openly challenge the post-1989 wisdom that there are no systematic alternatives to Western liberalism, boldly declaring a member-state of the European Union an "illiberal democracy". What, above all, guaranteed attention in liberal societies – and what is thus a successful rhetorical strategy in liberal publics – was Orbán's antagonistic rhetoric as such. This rhetoric, however, of positing an antagonistic alternative to liberalism, did not only fully conform to the discursive rule of demarcation, which liberals, in their pronounced opposition against the *serviles*, royalism, or Catholicism, had firmly anchored within liberalism's critical language game in the 19th century. By simultaneously adopting selected liberal ideals, even this antagonistic formulation exhibits a remnant of their discursive universalisation.

Orbán went further along the road of antagonistic demarcation after 2015 when detecting migration as a public topic serving his purposes perfectly. In his speech at the 2018 *Bálványos Summer Free University*, he began to frame the Hungarian

12 More precise than most of the secondary literature, Rosenblatt (2018: 220-230) points out that in the late 19th century, it was the doctrines of German liberal economists, associated with the *Verein für Sozialpolitik* and keen to strengthen Germany's position in the global competition, which paved the way for the transnational development of a more interventionist "new liberalism". Besides the orthodox *laissez-faire* variant, this "new liberalism" makes up the second dominant strand of liberal thinking since then.

state as a "Christian democracy" (Orbán 2018). At a time when *Fidesz* was still part of the *European People`s Party*, this concept allowed more options for Orbán to strategically navigate within the ambiguous confines of the generally accepted than his previous adoption of selected liberal principles had. Thus, he could also develop the antagonistic logic more fully, for example, when stating that "Liberal democracy is pro-immigration, while Christian democracy is anti-immigration; this is again a genuinely illiberal concept" (Orbán 2018). Claiming that a European Commission dominated by liberal elites "is not a friend of freedom, because, instead of freedom, it is working towards building a European socialism", he was even reviving the critique of liberalism as a cover for socialist activities. Despite his increasingly demarcative rhetoric – and in line with the discursive rule of universalisation – Orbán was obviously still sticking to the ideal of freedom as a positive point of reference.[13]

While Orbán rose to world prominence as a polemical strategist who antagonistically demarcates himself from anything considered liberal, most academic approaches to "populism" have struggled to move beyond this very rhetoric. Acknowledging that "[e]mpirically, most relevant populist actors mobilize within a liberal democratic framework", Cas Mudde and Cristobal Rovira Kaltwasser define populism, for example, as "thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic camps, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite', (…)" (Mudde/Kaltwasser 2017: 2, 6). Similarly, Jan-Werner Müller (2016: 2–3) starts from "what populists say" and argues that they are critical of elites, decidedly anti-pluralist, and claim to represent "the people". This view runs down to a definition of populism as an exceptionally intensive form of exclusionary rhetoric (Manow 2019: 28). Conversely, in what is certainly the most perceptive contribution to this literature, Ivan Krastev and Stephen Holmes illustrate, in *The Light that Failed*, that to grasp "populism", liberalism has to take analytical precedence (Krastev/Holmes 2019). They argue that the post-1989 imperative to imitate liberalism and the ensuing re-organisation of Eastern European societies according to a liberal model was the precondition for authoritarian figures like Orbán, Jarosław Kaczyński, or even Vladimir Putin – themselves disgruntled imitators of liberalism – to emerge. In their analysis, however, Krastev and Holmes tend to reproduce exactly the critique of liberalism these figures articulate. In their usage of the term, "liberalism" is a singular acting subject, they expressively call on "Central Europe's most articulate critics of liberalism as (…) opening witnesses" to make their case and argue that "[p]opulists are rebelling (…) against the replacement of communist orthodoxy by liberal orthodoxy" (Krastev/Holmes 2019: 6, 5). Consequently, it seems as if academic accounts of "populism" reproduce either its attempts at antagonistic demarcation or its undifferentiated yet universalising attacks on liberalism (the analytics of "communitarianism" vs "cosmopolitanism" is another case in point). The actual task, though, would be a fine-grained analysis along the second line of how so-called populists *and* their analysts strategically manoeuvre within liberal publics and the liberal language game (Simmerl 2019).

In his most recent speeches at the 2022 conventions of the Conservative Political Action Committee in Budapest and Dallas, Viktor Orbán takes the arguments Krastev and Holmes reproduced only one step further. To him, today's "problem – if I am not mistaken, both in America and Western Europe – is the domination of public life by progressive liberals" (Orbán 2022a). As cynical as it may be, considering his largely successful elimination

13 Of course, freedom is a pre-political value not necessarily tied to liberalism. Nevertheless, it figures prominently in canonisations of liberal core principles, such as freedom of speech and opinion. In his 2014 speech, Orbán termed freedom a liberal principle himself.

of independent media in Hungary, Orbán (2022a) even purports to respect "the old ethos of Western democracy, according to which party politics and the press must be separated" (the West and Western history as such are now his central positive point of reference, under which he subsumes Christianity). However, the perceived dominance of progressive liberals in the media serves is his justification to establish an equally politicised counter-public. This is the case because to Orbán, liberal orthodoxy did not simply replace communist orthodoxy, as Kastev/Holmes have it. In line with a core claim of Alt-Right propaganda, which updates older criticisms of liberalism's developmental potentialities, Orbán argues that progressive liberals are actually communists: "[P]rogressive liberals and neo-Marxists" do not only have "unlimited unity" (Orbán 2022a). "[P]rogressive liberals and communists are the same" (Orbán 2022b). For the leader of the Hungarians, who "know how to defeat the enemies of freedom on the political battlefield", this now requires drawing an even more radical conclusion: "We cannot fight successfully by liberal means because our opponents use liberal institutions, concepts, and language to disguise their Marxist and hegemonist [sic] plans" (Orbán 2022b).

With this central conclusion of his speeches, in which Orbán did not talk anymore about liberalism but only about progressive liberals as political enemies, the Hungarian Prime Minister pushed his antagonistic rhetoric of demarcation from anything considered liberal to its extremes. Nonetheless, the simple fact that the Hungarian government has pledged to implement comprehensive anti-corruption measures in response to the European Commission's threat to suspend 7.5 billion euros of EU funds, indicates that Orbán will keep using liberal institutions, concepts, and languages if it suits his purposes. At least, as long as Hungary is part of the European Union. That is the analytical problem Orbán, as the exemplary populist, poses.

3.2 VLADIMIR PUTIN: MIRRORING LIBERALISM (2019/2022)

One of the few definitive proofs that Vladimir Putin is actively patronising the so-called "populist" movements in the West was his echoing of their critique of liberalism in an interview with the *Financial Times* in the run-up to the 2019 G-20 summit (Financial Times 2019). In this interview, the Russian president propagated a rather orthodox understanding of liberalism as a doctrine of *laissez-faire* and individual rights – the "liberal idea presupposes that nothing needs to be done. That migrants can kill, plunder and rape with impunity because their rights as migrants have to be protected" – and argued that this idea had "outlived its purpose" as immigration, open borders, and multiculturalism were increasingly challenged in Western publics (Financial Times 2019). "Every crime must have its punishment. The liberal idea has become obsolete. It has come into conflict with the interests of the overwhelming majority of the population" (Financial Times 2019).

Three years later, however, it was no other than Putin himself who, in the most unlikely situation, showed that this liberal idea was far from obsolete, as it still perfectly lent itself to his own strategic purposes. In July 2022, at a meeting in the Kremlin with State Duma leaders and the faction heads of various parties of the "systemic opposition" (among them the ultra-nationalist *Liberal Democratic Party of Russia*), Putin gave one of his most important speeches justifying the war against Ukraine, in which the critique of liberalism and the West took pride of place. In accordance with Orbán's laments about the hegemony of liberal elites in the public sphere, the Russian President claimed that

> [t]he ruling classes of the Western countries, which are supranational and globalist in nature, realised that their policies are increasingly detached from reality, common sense

> and the truth, and they have started resorting to openly despotic methods. The West, which once declared such principles of democracy as freedom of speech, pluralism and respect for dissenting opinions, has now degenerated into the opposite: totalitarianism. This includes censorship, media bans, and the arbitrary treatment of journalists and public figures (Putin 2022a).

Consequently, Putin labelled this new Western model "a model of totalitarian liberalism, including the notorious cancel culture of widespread bans" and argued that Western elites were not only applying it "to all spheres of public life in the Western countries", but were even trying to impose this totalitarian liberalism "on the world" (Putin 2022a).

We see here an exemplary critique of liberalism, as it draws on several tactics that are components of the liberal language game since the 19th century. Firstly, Putin constructs an older, true variant of liberalism – the former West with its declared principles of freedom of speech, pluralism, and respect for dissent. Secondly, he uses this construction of an older variant of liberalism as a contrasting foil to mark out its current perversions of a liberalism turning into its opposite – in the 19th century: despotism; today: totalitarianism. Finally, Putin negatively universalises this "totalitarian liberalism" – a phrase coined by the intellectual trailblazers of the New Left (Portis 1988: 20) and today also used by post-liberal right-wingers in the US (Schoenfeld 2022) – as he claims that liberal elites are about to project this model onto the whole world. However, the standards that allow Putin to judge current liberalism as despotic or even totalitarian are the ideals of old, true liberalism, which even the Russian president thereby implicitly affirms.

In *The Light that Failed,* Ivan Krastev and Stephen Holmes make the lucid argument that Putin is actually imitating Western liberalism in a specific way, which largely can also make sense of the way he criticises liberalism. From the Yeltsin era until Putin's return to the presidency in 2012 and the associated clampdown on the Russian opposition, Krastev/Holmes (2019: 14-15) claim that the Kremlin was mainly *simulating* liberalism in order to prevent attacks and criticism by the West. After "this democratic charade had outlived its usefulness", Putin would have switched to a strategy of *mirroring* liberalism, which, as "violent parody", is meant to point out the West's "defects and irksome hypocrisy" (Krastev/Holmes 2019: 15). In terms of strategic purpose, this is likely the aim of Putin's critique of liberalism, just as any critique of "pseudo-liberalism" since the 19th century has charged subsets of liberalism's representatives of hypocrisy and a failure to live up to liberal ideals (see sections 2.3 and 2.5). With regard to the Kremlin's most recent public tactics, it is even possible to extend the notion of "mirroring" since, in its disinformation campaigns both in the Russian public and abroad, any charge voiced against Russia is simply reversed and levelled back, such as committing genocidal crimes in the Ukraine war. Nevertheless, the specific act of critically mirroring liberalism comes at a price that Krastev and Holmes do not take into account. It not only comes at the price of an implicit affirmation of liberal ideals, as I have already shown. Even if this affirmation is only a "violent parody" that seems to have no consequence for governmental acts of the Russian regime (and its increasingly dictatorial turn suggests exactly that), Putin's critical focus on liberalism makes it, in any case, the central stage of political conflict and effectively suppresses the consistent formulation of an alternative model of societal organisation.

Furthermore, Putin's mention of "the notorious cancel culture of widespread bans" as a prime example of "totalitarian liberalism" also points to complex interconnections between the Western and Russian public beyond mere mockery, even after the beginning of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine. Emanating from the US debates

on campus politics, in which right-wing pundits bemoaned various public pressure by left-wing liberals, "cancel culture" has recently become a hot topic in many Western public forums (Daub 2022). A one-sided term to describe inevitable conflicts about freedom of opinion and its limits, debating "cancel culture" might still be more widespread in decidedly right-wing media (Bump 2020) – and consequently also an essential talking point for those "populists" who have ideological and likely even financial ties to Putin's Russia. Nevertheless, even those segments of the Western public describing themselves as liberal have in recent years become well-versed in discussing "cancel culture", not least due to the laws of the attention economy and the economic gains that topics favoured by social media algorithms promise (Daub 2022: 302–342).[14] In Russia's public social media kept exerting polarising pressure even after 2012 as well (Bodrunova 2021), while governmentally curated critique remained not only a risk for the regime but also a potential for giving credibility to its rhetorical aspirations of being a democracy (Litvinenko/Toepfl 2019). With the large-scale censorship enacted after the beginning of the war against Ukraine, public debate in Russia might have entered a new era. Nonetheless, Putin's rumblings about "cancel culture" in his July 2022 speech show that the Russian government keeps fanning practices of critique that are of Western descent and still prominent in the Western public, in spite of an increasingly antagonistic perception of world politics.

This tendency became even more pronounced in Putin's speech on the completed annexation of the partly occupied Ukrainian regions Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson, and Zaporizhia in September 2022. In this speech, Putin extended the framing of his war of aggression as a defensive measure against the intrusion of Western hegemony and spiced it up with the critical terms postcolonial and antiracist thinkers have recently made popular, especially among so-called progressive liberals. "The West", Putin argues, "does not have any moral right to weigh in" against the illegal referenda held in the Ukrainian territories "or even utter a word about freedom of democracy" since "Western elites not only deny national sovereignty and international law. Their hegemony has pronounced features of totalitarianism, despotism and apartheid" (Putin 2022b). Western elites use "[f]alse labels like 'rogue country' or 'authoritarian regime' (…) to stigmatise entire nations and states" and, as "the same colonisers" they have ever been, "discriminate and divide peoples into the top tier and the rest" (Putin 2022b). "What else, if not racism, is the Russophobia being spread around the world? What, if not racism, is the West's dogmatic conviction that its civilisation and neoliberal culture is an indisputable model for the entire world to follow?" (Putin 2022b). Putin's use of the term "neoliberal" here, still as essential an instrument of critique in the Western public as "totalitarianism", "apartheid", "colonialism", and "racism", is in this speech the only instance of him identifying the Western model as liberal. At the same time, the only justifications he addresses directly to the citizens of Russia for why defence against Western hegemony is necessary are anti-gender phrases.[15]

> Let's answer some very simple questions for ourselves (…): do we want to have here, in our country, in Russia, 'parent number one, parent number two and parent number three' (they have completely lost it!) instead of mother and father? Do we want our schools to impose on our children, from their earliest days in school, perversions that lead to degradation and extinction? Do we want to drum into their heads the

14 As social media algorithms, enacting the accumulation logic of information capitalism, tend to favor polarising communication strategies that voice the ressentiments which liberal-capitalistic societies necessarily produce, Joseph Vogl (2021: 143) ascribes to the current state of the public sphere a "structural populism".

15 On the strategic relevance of the „anti-gender ideology" for legitimising the Russian invasion in Ukraine, see Graff/Korolczuk (2022).

> ideas that certain other genders exist along with women and men and to offer them gender reassignment surgery? (Putin 2022b).

Since practices of critique prevalent in the liberal public function as Putin's justification for his war, it is also only consequential that, in a final act of universalisation, he also addresses them as his audience: "(…) the dictatorship of the Western elites targets all societies, including the citizens of Western countries themselves" (Putin 2022b).

This global circulation of critical practices could be considered an intermittent step towards the integration of national publics into a world public. An integrative step, it has to be admitted, that Jürgen Habermas hardly imagined: driven by strategic behaviour within market-based publics, in which even the harshest critics, not least because they mirror liberalism and can only demarcate themselves from it by making use of liberalism's ideals, play according to the rules of the liberal language game.

3.3 ALEKSANDR DUGIN: MOVING BEYOND LIBERALISM? (2021)

After a car bombing in Moscow on 20 August 2022, which, probably conducted by the Ukrainian secret service, killed his daughter Daria and might have been intended to kill Aleksandr Dugin himself, the intellectual profile of the Russian politician and political thinker became an issue of public interest in the West once again. A neo-fascist, who dreams of a Eurasian empire and has, in his former function as a university professor, publicly called for the killing of supporters of the Ukrainian government in 2014 (which caused a public outcry in Russia and his ousting from Moscow State University), Dugin is said to still have a considerable intellectual influence on Vladimir Putin. What seems to confirm this claim are striking similarities between the justifications the Russian president gave for the invasion of Ukraine in his July 2022 speech and the critique of liberalism Dugin articulated in texts dating from 2021 (Asheuer 2022). As it is my argument that criticising liberalism invariably follows certain discursive rules anyway, I will not delve deeply into the question of whether Dugin provided a concrete template for Putin. Rather, I am interested in two of Dugin's 2021 publications because, unlike the scattered remarks by Putin (or Orbán), he actually works out a sustained or at least comprehensive critique of liberalism in them. I will deal mostly with his book *The Great Awakening vs The Great Reset* (Dugin 2021a), which consolidated Dugin's status as a celebrity thinker of the international Alt-right movement. Additionally, I will, at times, refer to the essay "Liberalism 2.0" (Dugin 2021b) published online by the Russian ultranationalist think tank *Katehon*. As incoherent and rhetorically violent as some of Dugin's remarks may be, they actually open up striking insights into the workings of the liberal language game because his critique of liberalism shows how difficult it is to achieve, by this very practice, his stated aim: to move beyond liberalism. From a standpoint which is undoubtedly extreme, Dugin makes precise claims about what is at stake when engaging with liberalism. Claims, which even its most distinguished proponents may find hard to disagree with.

As the title *The Great Awakening vs The Great Reset* suggests, this book's primary audience is supporters of a far-right conspiracy theory formed in response to the plan for a *Great Reset* propagated by Klaus Schwab, founder of the *World Economic Forum*. To clarify how the formation of a globalist elite using the COVID pandemic as a pretext to take control of world politics became possible, as this conspiracy theory claims, Dugin (2021a: 21) sketches "a general history of liberalism" since, to him, the supposed Great Reset is simply the necessary outcome of this very history. Without explicitly naming them, Dugin's history of liberalism is an updated yet clumsier and cruder version of the critical narratives about liberalism's

emergence performed by Donoso Cortés and fully developed by Carl Schmitt, two Catholic anti-liberals. In Dugin's version of this narrative, liberalism is an all-encompassing system of thought, which already began to emerge in the Middle Ages in the scholastic dispute about universals (with the nominalists featuring as liberal forerunners), and caused "the successive liberation of the individual from all forms of collective identity", first of all from the Catholic Church (Dugin 2021a: 29). Triumphing in this process over its two later collectivist competitors, nationalism and communism, liberalism reigned since the 1990s without a coherent ideological alternative. As liberalism's "principles have been accepted by almost all", it has also, in Dugin's words, become a "universal language" (Dugin 2021a: 18, 68). This acknowledgement shows again that a critique of liberalism, which identifies it with modernity as a degenerative process, plays according to the same discursive rule of universalisation as positive applications and arrives at similar conclusions. Thus, Dugin (2021a: 21) can concede to Francis Fukuyama, with whom he met and engaged in a TV debate, that because the US political scientist was "strictly following the very logic of the liberal interpretation of history (...), with some adjustments, his analysis was generally correct."

Since the "present" denoted in the Great Reset is the culmination point of the general history of liberalism, the adjustments Dugin makes to Fukuyama's thesis are actually an extension of its logic to make sense of more recent developments. Firstly, he argues that after 1990, liberalism entered a phase of consequential radicalisation, as liberals, influenced by postmodernism, now even declared gender a question of individual choice (Dugin 2021a: 16). Foreshadowing Putin's later claims and echoing earlier critiques, Dugin argues that in this situation, liberals stopped to tolerate dissenters, increasingly declaring them "enemies of the open society" (2021a: 20), and turned liberalism into "liberalism 2.0", which

> has evolved little by little into something *totalitarian*. It wasn't such (...) when fighting against much more explicitly totalitarian ideologies – communism and fascism. But upon being left alone, liberalism came to manifest its unexpected feature. (...) From now on, nobody has the right not to be liberal (Dugin 2022b, original italics).

Secondly, Dugin reminds his readers – in line with the universalising logic of his interpretation and with some analytical merit – that the rising opposition within the West against liberalism 2.0,

> generically referred to as 'populism' (...), drew on the very same liberal ideology — capitalism and liberal democracy — but interpreted these 'values' and 'benchmarks' in the old rather than the new sense. Freedom was conceived here as the freedom to hold any views, not just those that conformed to the norms of political correctness. Democracy was interpreted as majority rule (Dugin 2021a: 22).

Consequently, Trump did not represent "an alternative ideology, but merely a desperate resistance to the latest conclusions drawn from the logic and even metaphysics of liberalism" (Dugin 2021a: 26). Completing this universalising reading of liberalism after the end of history ended, Dugin argues, thirdly, that even China and Russia have not yet fully moved beyond liberalism. "[S]ince Deng Xiaoping's rule", which to Fukuyama was a main indicator of liberalism's global triumph as well, "China has become partly embedded in the global political economy in an attempt to use such to the advantage of the country's strength while nevertheless accepting the main liberal rules and free market principles" (Dugin 2021b). While Dugin, the ethno-nationalist, grants to the Russian people at least the honour of having an affinity for collective identity and thus also a deep distrust of liberalism, he claimed in 2021 nevertheless that "even today's Russia does not have a complete and coherent ideology that could pose a serious challenge to the Great Reset. In addition, the liberal

elites entrenched at the top of society are still strong and influential in Russia (...)" (Dugin 2021a: 45). Putin, to Dugin, is "[l]ike Trump, (...) a ratings populist, and also like Trump, he is more of an opportunist with no interest in ideology" (Dugin 2021b). And Putin's latest speeches indeed confirm that, instead of articulating a coherent alternative to liberalism, he only criticises it harshly – with the effect of remaining stuck in a confrontation with liberalism.

Of course, the strategic purpose of Dugin's qualifying continuation of Fukuyama's thesis, according to which any current counter-movement starts, at least with one foot *within* liberalism, is meant to present his own "Fourth Political Theory" as the desperately needed attempt to eventually "form a theory *outside* of liberalism and Western political modernity" (Dugin 2021a: 86, italics added).[16] For this reason, he also knows very well that today "the real challenge is to be anti-liberal" (Dugin 2021a: 80), and the actual problem liberalism poses is the problem of universality. However, the advances he makes towards forming such an anti-liberal, anti-modern theory for the *Great Awakening* are modest, to say the least. He describes its formulation as a "process open to everybody", randomly summons "Christian, Islamic, Hinduist, Buddhist", and "all kinds of non-modern Western approaches" (Dugin 2021a: 81) for this endeavour, and even invites "liberals 1.0" to "join ranks. To do this, it is not necessary to become illiberal (...)" (Dugin 2021b). To achieve his integrative aim, Dugin is even capable of claiming at the same time that "freedom and justice are *universal values*" and posit as the first principle of a "post-liberal world order" that

> all civilisations can establish their own political systems outside any universal paradigm — above all, outside the modern Western political paradigm, accepted or imposed as something universal. Democracy, liberalism, human rights, LGBT+, robotisation, progress, digitalisation and cyberspace are optional. They are not universal values. (Dugin 2021a, 63, original italics; 73–74).

After progressive liberals had declared, under the sway of postmodernism, gender a matter of individual choice, it seems as if Dugin, the propagator of a post-liberal world order that invariably has liberal remnants, could have become, by eventually declaring liberalism itself optional, simply the most postmodern liberal of them all.

3.4 SUMMARY

The in-depth analysis of three present-day exemplary critiques of liberalism has shown that they still conform to the discursive rules of demarcation and universalisation, which had already governed the liberal language game in the 19th century. In fact, these three cases proved again that universalisation tends to outrun demarcation, rendering the relative universalisation of liberalism as the discursive environment of modernity. Even Victor Orbán, the great demarcator, stuck to selected liberal ideals in his propagation of an "illiberal democracy". Vladimir Putin used such ideals as standard of judgment when criticising the global expansion of Western "totalitarian liberalism". All his rhetorical engagements with liberalism effectively mirrored liberalism, as he constantly fanned various practices of critique prevalent in Western society without even attempting to formulate a coherent ideological

16 Interestingly, Fukuyama makes several similar arguments to Dugin in his *Liberalism and Its Discontents* (Fukuyama 2022a). Starting solely from an engagement with the challenges to liberalism emanating from within liberal societies, he argues that "discontents with liberalism" would fuel the current counter-movements of the populist right and the progressive left. Nonetheless, they "do not have to do with the essence of the doctrine, but rather with the way in which certain sound liberal ideals have been interpreted and pushed to the extremes" (Fukuyama 2022a: xi). With regard to identity politics, which is the second extreme interpretation of liberal ideals he identifies besides neoliberalism, Fukuyama (2022a: 65) even explicitly claims that it is an example of "liberalism turning against itself", i.e. an immanent counter-movement. While he considers the most radical versions of identity politics and right-wing populism "illiberal alternatives", Fukuyama (2022: xiii, 128) makes the case that they still do not constitute "realistic alternatives to liberalism" and rarely deals with China and Russia.

alternative. Aleksandr Dugin eventually claimed to formulate exactly such an anti-liberal theory, but universalised liberalism even more radically than Francis Fukuyama and could not provide an alternative beyond vague declarations of intent.

If someone feels irritated by the fact that this analysis pointed out similarities between Dugin's take on liberalism and that of Fukuyama and, at times, has appeared to make similar arguments as the Russian right-wing extremist, for example, by identifying liberalism as a problem antecedent to "populism", then a metaphor coined by Michael Freeden and Javier Fernández-Sebastián might be of help. They describe the conceptual history of liberalism as a "maze" (Freeden/Fernández-Sebastián 2019: 2). When you try to find your way through this maze, it is consequently not surprising that you cross Dugin's path from time to time. The question is simply at which points you do that deliberately. You can either, for example, identify liberalism with a set of ideals, with individualism at its core, and position liberalism in opposition to its alternatives, as the dominant interpretation of the SCRIPTS research agenda and Dugin do. Or you can identify liberalism with the strategic application of these ideals for competing purposes, which others might even deem "illiberal", "dictatorial", or "totalitarian", and uphold liberalism's universality, as Dugin does critically, but up to the point that Dugin, even if he tries, cannot escape it. The point here is not to claim that Dugin is a liberal – in the end, such third-party identifications are as irrelevant as self-identifications since they are both strategies within the liberal language game. The point is rather, and this is also the basic analytical premise that this paper tried to make comprehensible, that critique, as a discursive act, invariably remains tied to that which it criticises.

4 CONCLUSION: UPHOLDING LIBERALISM'S UNIVERSALITY AFTER "THE END OF HISTORY" HAS ENDED

Framed as a critique of the SCRIPTS research program, the findings of this analysis attempt to provide reasons why it is unviable to analytically position a "liberal script" in opposition to its "contestations". Or, to put it as an immanent criticism: The findings of this analysis suggest that rather than taking external contestations, the "contestations of the liberal script" (Acosta et al. 2021: 2) properly so-called as general template for thinking through this research agenda, one should start from internal contestations as radically as possible. For this, there are three main reasons this paper has made plausible, one strategic and two analytic. I will start to elaborate on the strategic reason first because by now – most importantly, after having dealt with Dugin's take on liberalism – the strategic problem posed by our present predicament and liberalism as such should have become clearer. However, we will see immediately that strategic and analytic considerations are interlinked here.

Unlike the *Stanford School's* world polity theory, which starts from the assumption that there is only one script, namely the Western script that governs world society, the SCRIPTS Cluster assumes *a priori* that several competing scripts exist. This move, however, not only gets the succession of analytical challenges in the present wrong (as I will argue below) but also threatens to relinquish prematurely what, maybe even more than individual self-determination, has to be located at the core of liberalism: its claim to universality. The whole thrust of Dugin's argument (and indirectly also Orbán's and Putin's) comes down to the point that the actual problem liberalism poses is universality – rightly so. You can think of the problem of liberalism's universality in a normative and factual way. The idealist argument that liberal norms are universalistic is, of course, always

readily available, i.e. that they constitute moral values that apply to every human being. The actual test of liberalism's universality, however, would be to show that liberal norms – or liberalism as a system of global domination, as some of its critics have it – are factually universal in reach. Even Francis Fukuyama, who in his *Liberalism and its Discontents* mainly addresses internal challenges to liberalism because he wants liberal systems to prevail in the global competition with autocratic systems (Fukuyama 2022a: 140), now denies that liberalism is, in fact, universal since liberal principles were not adopted all over the world after the end of history (Fukuyama 2022b).

Strategically, it seems as if there is again a rather demarcating and a rather universalising answer to the current crisis of liberalism. The demarcative and potentially antagonistic answer is to corroborate, like Fukuyama or the SCRIPTS research agenda, the claims of self-styled enemies of liberalism like Dugin and, irrespective of their actual achievements, confirm by assumption that they provide anti-liberal models of societal organisation, which prove liberalism's factual universality to be an illusion. Or you could look for ways to show in what respect the self-styled enemies of liberalism fail in their attempts to subvert its universality. I have chosen the second option since it is, strategically, a way to uphold this universality also in the strong, factual sense and since it is, analytically, a way to grasp how the rhetorical strategies the attempted subversions use work. My analysis of practices of criticising liberalism, both in the 19th century and in the present, addresses these two tasks.

With regard to the first task, it shows that these practices followed the discursive rules of demarcation and, most importantly, universalisation, as even those trying to set themselves apart from liberalism adopted its ideals as the standard of judgment and ascribed to liberalism a constitutive role for modernity. Furthermore, the very practice of criticising liberalism, of making it the target of political attacks, also makes liberalism the central site of political conflict and consequently prevents the autonomous formulation of alternatives. Cutting-edge research at SCRIPTS supports this argument from a different angle: In a report on its preliminary findings, the *Towards a Typology of Contestations* project states that at least contestants in the global north, such as populists, generally do not clearly articulate alternative scripts (TTC 2022: 19). Similarly, Ivan Krastev and Stephen Holmes argue, like Dugin, that self-proclaimed anti-liberals today lack "any broadly appealing ideological vision" and predict that even the competition between the US and China "will not involve a conflict between rival universal visions of the human future" since "[i]n today's international system, naked power asymmetries have already begun to replace alleged moral asymmetries (…)" (Krastev/Holmes 2019: 18, 17). What my analysis shows is that the very fact that the critique of liberalism is the central element of ideological struggle and tends to precede any formulation of alternative visions is also the reason why these alternatives hardly ever form. Acknowledging this centrality does not mean denying that, in the current situation, antagonistically demarcating systems embodying liberal ideals from their competitors can be an effective rhetorical strategy or that external contestations, i.e. wholesale rejections of these ideals, take place. On the contrary, I claim that to uphold liberalism's universality in the most encompassing sense, one has to ask in what way external contestations remain, maybe inadvertently, immanent to liberalism. On the level of argumentative strategies, as this paper shows, this is actually the case.

This leads me to my second, more analytical point why it is unviable to position a "liberal script" in opposition to its contestations. My focus on practices of critique allows me to show that on the argumentative level, external contestations are

hard to distinguish from internal contestations since the various critiques of liberalism I engage with make strategic use of liberal ideals and succumb to the same discursive rules. Both the critique articulated by self-proclaimed anti-liberals and the critique articulated by self-proclaimed liberals follow the discursive rules of demarcation and universalisation and make structurally similar arguments about liberalism. To the extent that the focus on practices of critique shifts the prerogative for thinking through the SCRIPTS research from external to internal contestations – away from assuming simple renunciations of liberal ideals towards the complex strategic uses made of them argumentatively – it also opens points of departure for a more fine-grained analysis of the main topics in which the Cluster engages. On the one hand, a focus on practices of critique allows grasping how certain contestations that emerged from a progressive self-understanding, most importantly post-colonial and anti-racist thinking, relate to liberal ideals and may even shape and expand them, lifting liberalism beyond the West. Based on the notion of "reverse tutelage", Priyamvada Gopal has, for example, already detailed how activists engaged in anti-colonial resistance had influenced critics of the Empire in Britain: "Challenging the 'pretended universality' and the pseudo humanism of the colonizer involved enriching and reconstituting universality through multiple strands of experience and engagement (…)" (Gopal 2019: 25). Gopal (2019: 6) even asks "whether the idea of Britain's uniquely liberal Empire, which was humanitarian in conception and had the liberation of its conquered subjects as its ultimate goal, might itself have been, at least in part, a response to the claims to humanity, freedom and self-determination made by those very subjects." In a similar vein, the intellectual development of Charles W. Mills, one of the most prominent representatives of the critical philosophy of race, shows how a relentless critique of liberalism can at the same time pursue the goal of realising its universalistic ambitions and lead to a "black radical liberalism" (Mills 2017) giving new life to radical traditions, which have historically been part of the liberal movement. On the other hand, a focus on practices of critique can also develop more sensitive analytics to grasp the emergence of actual threats to the realisation of liberal ideals. As the evolution of Victor Orbán's rhetorical tactics – exemplary for the life cycles of right-wing "populists" – suggests, they tend to start with a selective adoption of liberal ideals and give way to ever-intensifying antagonistic demarcations. Again, this is not to deny that external contestations and alternative scripts may exist. Rather, this hint is meant to get the succession of analytical challenges right, which is to first find a way of grasping that, on the argumentative level, even declared anti-liberals apply liberalism's ideals strategically and that also, for this reason, the existence of full-blown alternatives to the liberal script remains still to be proven after the end of history.

Of course, the analytic approach I apply to illustrate that external contestations are argumentatively rooted in internal contestations has severe limitations. Most importantly, my engagement with practices of critique could not determine how far these were consequential for other types of behaviour by the actors in consideration, such as Orbán's and Putin's governmental strategies. Nonetheless, I would argue that showing how even self-proclaimed anti-liberals remain entangled within a language game that emerged with the politicisation of the term "liberal" in the early 19th century, and as critics have to succumb to the same discursive rules like self-proclaimed liberals talking about liberalism, also has decisive merit. It opens a more than timely understanding of what liberalism might be. Idealist reductionisms, i.e. reducing liberalism to a set of ideals or an ideology only specific, self-proclaimed liberals hold, comes with a very limited conception of liberalism – and that is also the second analytic and final argument against placing a "liberal script"

in opposition to its contestations that I tried to make plausible. To identify liberalism primarily with individualism or individual self-determination, as also Dugin does, simply cannot capture the complex political processes these ideals engender, most importantly in liberal societies. Liberal ideals necessarily conflict with one another and provoke public debates on their limits, necessary encroachments, and interventions in concrete situations. The historical and contemporary critiques of liberalism investigated in this article provided illuminating examples of strategic uses that can be made of liberal ideals in these debates for purposes which others might immediately deem "illiberal". That, however, is exactly where the problem of liberalism and its current contestations start: Liberal ideals are claimed and used by competing actors. Just think of the libertarian "diagonal thinkers" that emphatically call on the ideal of individual self-determination to oppose COVID measures, which their supporters justify with reference to the individual self-determination of vulnerable members of the population (Amlinger/Nachtwey 2022).

Along this line, the analytic route via practices of critique this article chose also extends our understanding of liberalism in the sense that it might very well be inherently connected to interventionist policies, outright domination, or racism and colonialism. If liberalism is identified with a set of principles or ideals, it is always an option to claim that these are contingent phenomena in liberal societies and do not have anything to do with liberal principles as such (see Fukuyama 2022: 83). In contrast, I would argue that an encompassing and timely understanding of liberalism would need to incorporate and ponder any of its critiques, because they have strategic effects (which have to be determined analytically) in the public debate of liberal societies and because incorporating them, as self-criticism, is an actual path towards liberalism's universalisation. In this paper, I have already spelled out this logic with regard to the justifications Vladimir Putin gave for the invasion of Ukraine. The fact that the Russian president kept fanning critiques of a racist, colonialist, and world-dominating West, also prevalent in liberal societies, and used liberal ideals to attack its model of "totalitarian liberalism", I identified as a point of contact with the liberal language game, which might nonetheless be a step towards a world public and a vector of liberalism's universalisation. With the arguments developed in this section in mind, it is possible to arrive at two last conclusions. First, the military confrontation between Russia and a Western-assisted Ukraine may indeed prove that liberalism cannot be reduced to ideals, as it also involves active engagement to defend and protect them, even military activity. Second, that the Russian president keeps referencing liberal ideals, irrespective of whether it was just to cynically expose the hypocrisy of the West, means that even in an authoritarian public, these ideals are still positive points of reference upon which competing actors may find the right strategies to reclaim in the future. And this may finally be the point where the normative and factual universality of liberalism appears as the same.

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