



Jessica Gienow-Hecht, Tobias Klee, Marlene Ritter,
and Lesar Yurtsever

Welcome to the Liberal State! Place Branding as a Historical Practice

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Cluster of Excellence
“Contestations of the Liberal Script (SCRIPTS)”
Freie Universität Berlin
Edwin-Redslob-Straße 29
14195 Berlin
Germany

+49 30 838 58502
office@scripts-berlin.eu

www.scripts-berlin.eu
Twitter: [@scriptsberlin](https://twitter.com/scriptsberlin)



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AUTHORS



Jessica Gienow-Hecht is chair of the Department of History at the John F. Kennedy Institute of North American Studies at Freie Universität Berlin. Her expertise is the interplay of international relations and culture, notably music. A Principal Investigator at SCRIPTS since 2019, she is involved with a variety of individual projects, above all, “Gender, Borders, Memory” alongside Gülay Caglar. She is the author of 12 SCRIPTS blogs on topics ranging from K-Pop to US foreign relations and has just published “Visions of Humanity. Historical and Cultural Practises since 1850” (2023) with Sönke Kunkel and Sebastian Jobs. Her particular research interest at the Cluster centres on the extent to which liberal and illiberal regimes historically and actually project and compare themselves to their opponents: is there an (il) liberal script for place and nation branding?

j.gienow@fu-berlin.de



Tobias Klee is a Project Doctoral Researcher at the Cluster of Excellence “Contestations of the Liberal Script” (SCRIPTS) for the Research Project “Gender, Borders, Memory”. He earned an MA degree in Global History from the Ruprecht-Karls Universität Heidelberg and an MA degree in Citizenship and Human Rights: Ethics and Politics from the Universitat de Barcelona. In his dissertation project, he analyses the historical emergence of Catalan nationalism between 1898 and 1936 through the analytical category of gender.

t.klee@fu-berlin.de



Marlene Ritter is a Doctoral Researcher at the Cluster of Excellence “Contestations of the Liberal Script” (SCRIPTS), holding a BA in Cultural History and Theory and Business Administration from Humboldt University in Berlin and an MA in Cultural Policy, Diplomacy, and Relations from Goldsmiths College in London. She is currently writing her dissertation on Western European image politics in the post-war years. Based on both textual and visual archival material, she analyses how early Western European organisations like the European Coal and Steel Community and the Council of Europe tried to establish and legitimise themselves, and why they had such a hard time doing so.

marlene.ritter@fu-berlin.de



Lesar Yurtsever is a Doctoral Researcher at the Cluster of Excellence “Contestations of the Liberal Script” (SCRIPTS). He did his BA and MA degrees in History and Musicology at the University of Cologne. Additionally, he holds a BA in Piano Education from the Music Conservatory in Cologne, Germany. He is a second-year doctoral researcher at the Graduate school SCRIPTS in Berlin. In his dissertation, he focuses on how Turkish and US state and non-state actors used music between 1930 and 1960 to create an image of Turkey as a modern and liberal state.

lesar.yurtsever@fu-berlin.de

Welcome to the Liberal State!

Place Branding as a Historical Practice

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ABSTRACT

This paper assembles a diverse set of case studies to address an unresolved puzzle: why do self-proclaimed liberals have such a hard time marketing themselves and their values? To this end, we consider three historical case studies: Catalan separatists in the 1930s, Turkish diplomats under Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, and early Western European organisations in the 1950s. We establish a series of criteria, showing that, on the one hand, they pursued diverse political agendas, and, on the other, they all strove to project a liberal image of themselves. This paper thus aims to shed new light on the liberal script and its contestations. What do we learn from liberal image management campaigns in the past? We establish a set of criteria and argue that liberal states often fail to market themselves efficiently for reasons less related to campaign *intentions* and more to *legitimacy*, *temporality*, and the *role of audiences*.

1 INTRODUCTION

The Cluster of Excellence “Contestations of the Liberal Script” (SCRIPTS) is dedicated to the question whether the idea of liberalism (liberty, self-determination, free speech, division of power etc.) is indeed a good idea, and why it has come under such pressure, both internally (e.g. right-wing extremists) and externally (the rise and expansion of illiberal states, such as Russia or China). We translate that question thus: why is the liberal script such a hard sell? This is an important question because for all we know, liberalism and democracy are not doing well in recent times. If you check the relevant surveys and assessments such as the Bertelsmann Transformations Index (BTI), the number of liberal states is receding. In 2022, for the first time since 2004, the BTI counted more autocratically governed states than democracies in the world. 67 out of

137 countries studied are democracies vs 70 autocracies (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2022).

The four members contributing to this working paper approach the cluster’s central contention from a historical perspective, but each coupled with an additional focus: musicology, business, global and regional studies, and others. What we wanted to know, in our project and when we put together this working paper, is how and why in the past, states and proto-state-like entities legitimized their quality as liberal, when their history has been anything but liberal. In other words, our concern is not what liberalism is. We wanted to know why and how historical actors perceive and then pitch their region as liberal; where they succeed and where they fail. The contributors examine the following case studies – Catalonia, Turkey, and Europe – in detail. This enables them to explore the processes and mechanisms by which their respective actors in each region struggled to create an image of a liberal entity.

2 LIBERALISM ON TRIAL. FRANCESC MACIÀ’S CAMPAIGN TO MARKET CATALONIA IN FRANCE IN THE 1920S

Our first case study concerns the region of Catalonia in northern Spain in the 1920s. To many foreign observers, Catalonia only became a place on the map in October 2017, when the Autonomous Region declared its independence from Spain. Only when Catalan representatives appeared all over European news broadcasts lamenting the state of their nation, many people became aware

that Barcelona was more than just a Spanish city where one could enjoy the beach, nightclubs, and the Sagrada Familia.

Immediately after the referendum, two narratives emerged. On the one hand, the Spanish government maintained that it fought an illegal rebellion. On the other hand, Catalan politicians and Catalan civil society denounced Spanish actions as the brutal repression of liberal democratic processes.¹ On social media, Catalans spread images of how the Spanish state, represented by police officers with batons and rubber bullets, tried to stifle their right to self-determination. The goal was quite simple: convince European audiences that Catalonia was a distinctly liberal democratic nation, oppressed by Spanish authoritarianism.

Catalan nationalism did not suddenly appear out of nowhere in the 21st century. Instead, it originated in the 19th century. In the early twentieth century, activists began to associate regional nationalism with liberal self-representation, not only within Catalonia but also when pitching their image to international audiences. This section will examine the trial against the separatist, Francesc Macià, and his paramilitary group, in Paris in 1926, as a case study for a Catalan para-diplomatic effort at nation branding. To gain support for their movement they sought to prove that Catalonia, unlike Spain, belonged to the illustrious club of civilised European nations. In this subsection, we will proceed in three steps: first, using Catalonia as an example, we will highlight that nation branding is an essential tool for sub-state nationalities to put themselves on the map. Second, we will show that these nationalities need to brand themselves against the foil of the state they belong to. Catalonia can only appear liberal by portraying Spain as illiberal. Third, we will

¹ See the declaration by then Catalan president Carles Puigdemont (2017), who declared: “It is the first time in the history of the European democracies that an election day takes place under violent police attacks against voters”.

demonstrate that Catalonia’s strategy of nation branding not only served them externally but also internally. We understand nation branding according to the definition established by Carolin Viktorin, Jessica Gienow-Hecht, Annika Estner, and Marcel K. Will (2018: 1) as the “deliberate, collective effort by multiple constituencies to generate a viable representation of a geographical-political-economic-social entity”.

Catalan nationalism evolved from a cultural movement starting in the 1830s. Members of the movement had originally set out to collect and canonize Catalan folklore and revive the usage of Catalan as a literary language (Vargas 2018: 96). By the end of the 19th century, this movement found a translation into political nationalism, in the form of the *Lliga Regionalista*, a conservative party of the Catalan economic and intellectual elite (for the rise of the *Lliga*’s political dominance in Catalonia, see Ehrlich 1998: 399–405). Right from the beginning, Catalan nationalism invoked and promoted the idea that Catalans were inherently more civilised and liberal than Spaniards. Important nationalist thinkers like Valenti Almirall or Enric Prat de la Riba declared that Spain was unable to exist in civilised Europe, due to the Muslim presence on the Iberian Peninsula during the Middle Ages (Heß/Klee 2024; see also Prat de la Riba 1898: 1f.).

After becoming a strong political force in Catalonia, the *Lliga Regionalista* founded the autonomous self-administration *Mancomunitat de Catalunya* in 1914. The *Mancomunitat* would steer Catalan internal affairs, mainly in the area of infrastructure, administration, and education until 1925, when Spanish dictator Primo de Rivera abolished it. He ushered in a series of laws repressing the usage of the Catalan language and the expression of Catalan identity.

Primo de Rivera’s dictatorship was the result of various crises that shook the Spanish state. In

1898, Spain lost its last colonial possessions to the United States (US). Spaniards saw their identity and their membership among the civilised people of Europe under threat (Aresti 2017: 21). To combat this impression, the government engaged in disastrous colonial campaigns in Morocco, which put the king's capacity to rule under further scrutiny (Archilés 2017: 68). Additionally, between 1917 and 1923, social unrest due to economic inequalities led to violent clashes between anarchist unions and Catalan industrialists (Bernecker/Pietschmann 2005: 304–306, 311).

In September 1918, a crisis for the integrity of Catalonia and the Spanish state struck: inspired by President Wilson's Fourteen Points the *Comitè Pro Catalunya* appealed to the Entente for Catalonia's right to national self-determination. During the peace negotiations in Versailles, members of the group handed out pamphlets, detailing how Catalans had resisted Spanish absolutism and centralism throughout the centuries. They argued that 12.000 Catalans (in reality there were only 1000 volunteers) had fought against the Central Powers and that it was now upon the Entente to return the favour, by supporting Catalan sovereignty (Dalmau 2023: 133–137).

The Entente, in turn, had a more explicit interest in a stable Spanish state than in an independent Catalonia and ignored the plea. Nevertheless, separatist groups continued in their struggle for international recognition. Most noteworthy in that regard is *Estat Català*. Founded in 1922 by Francesc Macià, former member of the *Lliga Regionalista* it advocated for Catalan independence. After Primo de Rivera dissolved the *Mancomunitat* and forced *Estat Català* to flee Spain, the group became a hegemonic force in promoting Catalan nationalism, in exile.

Estat Català used France as its base of operations. They would use France as its base of operations. The French government though pursued

amicable relations with Spain, as both countries cooperated in colonising Morocco (Sueiro Seoane 1988: 222). By 1925, France increasingly surveyed the covert activities of the Catalans in Exile. Time was against Macià and his compatriots. However slim the chances of success though, the operation established “the Catalan question’ [as] front page news”, as Enrique Ucelay da Cal puts it, thus turning the cause of the region's separatism into an international affair (Sueiro Seoane 1988: 176). Even if the military action failed, they would gain valuable international attention for their message: the Primo de Rivera dictatorship was just another iteration of Spain's historic authoritarianism, acting against Catalan liberalism.

For their operation, Macià and his group had a simple plan: acquire money, volunteers, and military equipment, march into Catalonia, incite an insurrection, and liberate Catalonia. By the end of his preparations, Macià commanded between 400 and 500 insurrectionists. On October 30th, 1926, they began their march towards the Pyrenean village Prats de Molló at the Spanish-French border. And trying is the key word, as none other than the French police detained the group. As a recent study by Joan Esculies Serrat (2023: 200–204) demonstrates, French officials had been aware of the insurrectionary plans at least since February of the same year. Macià and his closest followers were put on trial in Paris in January 1927. He too took full responsibility for the proceedings and was sentenced to 6 months in prison and later exiled from France.

Estat Català used this trial to argue the case of Catalan independence to the French and international public. Macià and his compatriots did not only present their arguments in court. Instead, the group would publish the book “La Catalogne Rebelle” in February 1927. The book delivered a short history of Catalonia, its supposedly democratic traditions, and its suffering at the hands of Spain, and it also included the protocols of the

trial against *Estat Català*. In short, it reiterated many of the points mentioned above: that Spain had always been racially tainted, brutish, and uncivilised, while Catalonia embodied the opposite and had, racially, culturally, and historically always belonged to Europe (*Estat Català* 1927).

To win the hearts and minds of the French public, *Estat Català* argued that Catalonia and France had deep historical and cultural ties. By virtue of being joined at the hip, in the Pyrenees, both countries shared a “spiritual connection”. Due to Catalonia’s location “in the centre of Latin Europe, the Catalan language is related to all the major Romance languages, especially French” (*Estat Català* 1927: 10). This was why “a Catalan can speak French more easily than Spanish” (*Estat Català* 1927: 10). What was more, history had aligned Catalonia and France as well. While the Islamic presence on the Iberian Peninsula during the Middle Ages had had a profound influence on Spaniards, it was “almost non-existent in larger Catalonia” (*Estat Català* 1927: 14). Catalans had in fact borne the brunt of the fight against the Muslims, maintaining close “political, cultural, and ecclesiastical” relations with the Frankish Empire, all the while forming a well-defined national identity of their own (*Estat Català* 1927: 14).

In doing so, *Estat Català* evoked an image that was popular in Europe and Catalan nationalism at the time: thanks to centuries of Muslim presence, Spaniards were different from other European peoples. They were neither capable of rational thought nor of establishing stable, consensual structures of government. Their character was inherently barbarian and violent. Therefore, Spain was more akin to Africans than to European nations.

In that regard, “La Catalogne Rebelle” (1927), juxtaposed despotic Spanish imperialism with Catalonia’s own imperial history. While the Crown of Aragon had made conquests all throughout the

Mediterranean, in Sicily, Greece, or North Africa, the Crown of Castille had remained on the peninsula. In turn, Catalans had continuously developed “the Catalan soul, an accentuation of the enterprising character of this people and of its commercial knowledge” (*Estat Català* 1927: 15). Spaniards had only fought the same enemy, the Muslims, in the same environment and therefore developed “a closed mind, with an insatiable desire for domination” (*Estat Català* 1927: 15).

Estat Català presented French citizens a Catalonia that fit well into the community of progressive, capitalist, and liberal European republics, while Spain was inherently feudalistic and unable to adapt to modernity. As they further claimed, Robespierre and Napoleon both had promised Catalans their own state. Accordingly, Catalonia had historically been a liberal, democratic state, with close ties to French Republicanism. Since they shared a democratic and civilised history, it was now up to the French people to finally make good on their promises and support the cause of Catalan separatism (*Estat Català* 1927: 13).

“La Catalogne Rebelle” (1927) also included the protocols of the court sessions and hearings. The centrepiece is a monologue by Francesc Macià from November 19th explaining his motivations for organizing the invasion against Spain. Here, he proclaimed that “it is absolutely impossible for Catalonia to live with Spain, from which it has such opposite characteristics. [...] The liberal spirit”, he goes on, “can never fraternize with despotism, nor the democratic spirit with inquisitorial reactionism” (*Estat Català* 1927: 38). This antagonism had led him towards insurrection. Choosing France, the “cradle of liberty” and Catalonia’s “Sister in spirit”, as his base of operation, he hoped that Catalonia would one day “become a kind of Pyrenean Belgium which could warn France against the intrigues and the threats of Spanish fascism” (*Estat Català* 1927: 39).

Estat Català's appeal to French citizens, their intent to win public support for their cause, and their attempt to brand Catalonia and Catalans as inherently democratic and liberal, were ultimately unsuccessful. Just as the paradiplomatic efforts at Versailles had not borne fruit, Macià's public diplomacy also proved ineffective.

While their attempts to gather international support had failed, Macià's and *Estat Català*'s popularity in Catalonia grew all the more. He and his movement became key figures in ending the Spanish Monarchy in 1931. Macià merged his movement with other left-wing republican and Catalan nationalist groups and negotiated a Statute of Autonomy for Catalonia with the new Republican Government in Spain. This statute gave Catalonia far-ranging autonomous rights. Macià's party would dominate Catalan politics until the Spanish Civil War. Until this day, Catalans celebrate and commemorate his actions.

Similar to *Estat Català*, modern-day separatism in Catalonia has few international supporters. Catalonia though would not be able to change its situation without a strong network of international allies. This makes its need for a powerful national brand all the more necessary. Today, just like a hundred years ago, the foil to this image is Spain, which supposedly oppresses Catalonia's liberal character.

And just like Macià, the modern-day leaders of the independence movement, persecuted by the Spanish state for their involvement in the 2017 referendum, enjoyed vast popularity within Catalan society leading up to the referendum and until the Covid-19 pandemic and recent shifts in Spanish politics. In both cases, a key factor might be their efforts in public diplomacy and nation branding. While they could not convince the European public of Catalan virtues, these representatives strengthened Catalonia's self-perception as a liberal, progressive, democratic nation fighting

against injustice. Catalans got to bask in the feeling of having always been on the right side of history. And in that sense, nation branding serves a double function: marketing the nation to an international audience but just as much or even more so reassuring the populace at home of how wonderful and unique it is.

3 A LIBERAL ISLAND FOR JAZZ ENTHUSIASTS. THE TURKISH EMBASSY IN THE UNITED STATES IN THE 1930S AND 1940S

Our second sample takes us to Washington, DC, in the 1930s and 1940s. Individuals strolling in the vicinity of Sheridan Circle in Washington, DC, in those years, would often catch melodious jazz sounds coming from a non-conventional venue: the Turkish Embassy and Residency of the Turkish ambassador. Located at 1606 23rd St., the building was, then, the hotspot of liberal unfolding for African American jazz musicians during a time of highly segregated politics in the capital of the US. We know now that the sons of the Turkish ambassador Münir Ertegün, Nesuhi and Ahmet, both broke down racial barriers by inviting African American jazz musicians to jam together freely both among each other and together with white musicians (Jackson 2018: 16). In doing so, consciously or not, the brothers – sons of a governmental official – sent a political message to citizens of DC and beyond: they showcased Turkey's liberal values and contrasted them with discriminatory practices in the US.

The origins of that story are to be found after the fall of the Ottoman Empire in 1923, when Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, a politician and military leader, sought to revolutionize the political, economic, social, and cultural life in Turkey. Atatürk based his reforms on Western liberal values and implemented these across every sector of life. The most important were the secularism of state power, the

elimination of Islamic-Sharia law, the adoption of the European law system, a new education system, as well as active and passive voting rights for women. A significant cultural reform also concerned music.

The Turkish government believed that Western music constituted the hub of civilization and modernity. Therefore, their nation had to adopt Western musical styles to join the civilised world. As a result, the government tasked Turkish musicians with developing their own classical music style based on Western compositional techniques by incorporating traditional folk songs. Officials dubbed this merger of Western and Turkish music as “true modern Turkish music”. This music contributed to the establishment of the Turkish Republic after 1923 as a Westernized and modern state (Erol 2012: 49).

The push for modernity came at a heavy cost. Atatürk and his entourage established an authoritarian one-party rule in Turkey that lasted until 1950 and oppressed those who did not conform to the government’s vision of modernization. As to music, officials banned all forms of other musical styles, including those formerly played at the Ottoman courts, because these were now considered “primitive”. Moreover, they willingly failed to integrate minorities into the new Turkish Republic, such as Armenians and Kurds. Instead, the government persecuted, killed, and forced them to abandon their traditional music and culture. At the same time, Turkish politicians and intellectuals sought to convince both its own population and the world that the new Republic of Turkey was legitimate, modern, and utterly liberal.

One of the foremost foreign targets of the new Turkish government was the US. Atatürk wanted to convince the US – perhaps more than any other country – that New Turkey was modern and liberal. Turkish politicians aimed to establish positive economic relations with the US in the aftermath

of World War I and the loss of Ottoman territory. Although the country remained cautious towards Europe, the US appeared to be a promising partner because it had not participated in efforts to divide the Ottoman Empire after World War One (Yilmaz 2006: 231).

At the same time, the US presented a particular challenge due to the prevalence of negative stereotypes about Turks in the American imagination. At the beginning of the 20th century, the “Terrible Turk” was a common stereotype in the US, depicting Turks as bearded, hook-nosed barbarians who kept white women captive in harems (Lippe 1997: 41). To combat this bias, Turkish politicians turned to cultural diplomacy, and musical diplomacy in particular, as a way to improve the nation’s reputation in the US, and musical diplomacy. In 1927, the establishment of the first Turkish embassy in Washington, DC, provided an opportunity to showcase Turkey’s new image to the American public. One of the most noteworthy attempts at this was the Erteğün brothers’ invitation of African American jazz musicians to perform in the building.

From an early age, Nesuhi and Ahmet Erteğün developed a deep passion for jazz music. Their father’s appointment as ambassador to the US in 1934 allowed the brothers to travel to the birthplace of jazz music. Upon arriving in Washington, DC, the brothers were struck by what they felt constituted a surprising reality. Like many southern states at the time, Washington, DC, was still highly segregated in the 1930s and 1940s. Systemic and institutionalised racism led to discriminatory policies that prohibited African Americans from accessing many public spaces, such as restaurants, cinemas, and music clubs, which were reserved only for white audiences. These policies were rigorously enforced by the district’s government. A notable example of segregation at the time happened in 1939 when the “Daughters of the American Revolution” barred Marian Anderson, a

world-renowned African American alt-singer, from performing for an integrated audience, at Constitution Hall.

For the two brothers, this presented a paradox. They expected and had looked forward to attending local concerts given by some of the greatest jazz pioneers, without restrictions. Thus, despite the existing barriers, the Erteğün brothers remained determined to see and hear their idols, in DC. The Howard Theatre on U-Street became their go-to spot for jazz concerts. It was there that they would meet Black musicians such as Duke Ellington, Louis Armstrong, and Henry Red Allen backstage and, also, invite some of them to the Turkish embassy. At night, the brothers resorted to sneaking out of the embassy and attending these concerts incognito (Greenfield 2014: 31).

When their father became aware of their frequent absences, he intervened and devised a different way to meet with the famous jazz musicians of the day. He told his sons to bring the musicians to the embassy instead. Some of the musicians at the embassy even stood around a bust of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the “father of the Turks”, and jammed the whole night. In this safe and inclusive space, musicians of different races would often jam together until the late hours.

Two anecdotes shared by Ahmet Erteğün, exemplify the stark contrast between the welcoming atmosphere inside the embassy and the hostility outside. The Ambassador’s son recounts how once, white residents and a US congressman complained about Black musicians entering the embassy through the front door. In response, ambassador Münir Erteğün stated: “In my country, friends enter through the front door but if you wish to come to the embassy, you can enter from the back” (Greenfield 2014: 32). Ahmet Erteğün also remembers how members of the Romanian embassy across the street were disturbed by the music and called on the brothers to stop what

they called “their butlers” from playing. To this, the ambassador responded that his children are studying anthropology and that is why they are having all these people there (Atlantic Records 2007). This incident serves as a reminder that the negative attitudes towards Black musicians were not limited to white US Americans but extended to non-Americans as well. At the embassy, the brothers provided Black musicians through jazz as a musical genre a safe space from these racist attacks.

Most US Americans at the time, perceived the music played at those venues by racial lens, with sounds and rhythms often categorized as either “black” or “white” (Berish 2012: 14). At the same time, critics and reviewers considered jazz music in general as modern and progressive, due to its “urban” sound. This confirms contemporary music critic Eric Weisbard’s (2021: 341) contention that despite a variety of opinions on jazz, all authors shared the same notion: jazz was “modernism, modernity, and modernization”.

How did this happen? How did the audience arrive to such a diverse and yet similar conclusions when exposed to the music? Jazz music is a Janus-faced art form. From an internal perspective, the performance strategy of professional jazz bands can exhibit dictatorial and hierarchical structures. For instance, band leaders have the ultimate power within a band. They can set the agenda and decide which musicians belong to the group and how much everyone is paid. Band leaders can determine in which key musicians play; they can grant the solos; and they can also monitor each solo’s length. Thus, the performance practices of jazz do not necessarily embody the values that the music strives to express artistically. Looking from this perspective jazz is neither inclusive, egalitarian, or liberal. It is jazz (Givan 2021: 71).

Jazz's *social* function, on the other hand, is often emancipatory and democratic. The music's improvisational nature and the interplay between integrated musicians and styles can represent an artistic representation of freedom and equality. Through jazz music, African Americans could participate in the socio-cultural context in the US while living in a highly segregated state. In that case, jazz has the capacity to further the cause of racial equality.

At first glance, the brothers' activities seem to have had, a solely "private" character. The brothers had no official mandate, their somewhat defiant actions were, perhaps, typical of youngsters. Nevertheless, as sons of the Turkish ambassador, the jam sessions by African Americans at the Turkish embassy inevitably did have a political dimension. The brothers could reckon with political protection due to their status. And their father enjoyed Turkish political rights at the embassy building, which prevented racist congressmen and neighbours from interfering.

What did it mean for Turkey's image in the US that the two sons of the Turkish ambassador invited Black musicians into the embassy in the centre of segregated Washington DC? Five different perspectives can explain the intentions and receptions behind the Erteğün's transformation of the Embassy into a "liberal island". First, from the perspective of African American musicians, the Erteğün's played a crucial role in promoting liberalism. The embassy provided a safe platform, it became a hub for liberal unfolding for Black musicians to showcase their talents and be treated as equal human beings. Consciously or not, to African American musicians, the Erteğün's presented Turks as modern and liberal who prioritized minorities' voices. This is why Bill Gottlieb (1943: L2), an African American journalist at the Washington Post, wrote that the Turkish brothers' sincere and enthusiastic treatment of the music by Ellington and co. is "more typical of Europeans

than of Americans". Second, from a US governmental perspective, it was incomprehensible to treat African Americans as equal to white citizens. The Turkish ambassador could have risked Turkish-US relations. The complaints by US congressmen and other nations' embassy staff could undermine Turkish efforts to build good relations with the US.

Third, the Turkish ambassador could aim to engage with the goals of the Turkish government domestically. Atatürk and his associates were determined to not only convince the international community but also instil the belief domestically that Turkey is a modern and liberal nation. The ambassador's act of hosting a marginalised minority could have bolstered this ideology, despite the Turkish government's implementation of illiberal policies towards minority groups. In Turkey, both the Turkish government and its citizens could assert that they, the "Terrible Turks", were even more modern and liberal than the US. Fourth and on the other hand, the Erteğün's actions at the embassy were not reflective of the real political situation in Turkey at the time. While Atatürk's government did make strides in social liberalization, it also engaged in repressive measures against dissidents and minority groups. The Erteğün brothers' efforts in the US were, thus, a departure from the policies of their home country. And lastly, it is also possible that the situation stemmed from a purely personal effect. Perhaps the Turkish ambassador, in his role as a father, genuinely regarded the musicians as friends of his children and allowed them to perform there.

And yet, the Turkish government as well as the US highly appreciated Münir Erteğün's tenure as ambassador to the US. He served for 10 years as ambassador until his death in 1944. When he passed away, his remains were transported back to Turkey on the battleship USS Missouri. After World War II, both Turks and US Americans celebrated his legacy, with the media in both countries paying

tributes in their articles. The Ertegün brothers remained in the US and expanded their jazz records collection. Their actions culminated in the founding of “Atlantic Records”, a record company specializing, in its early years, in jazz, R&B, and soul by artists such as Aretha Franklin, Ray Charles, Wilson Pickett, Ruth Brown, Otis Redding, and others. Atlantic Records went on to become one of the world’s largest jazz record labels, still prominent in the record industry today, featuring artists such as Ed Sheeran, Bruno Mars, Coldplay, Lil Uzi Vert, Cardi B and others. Today, Atlantic Records Group LLC is an umbrella label owned by Warner Music Group and celebrated its 75th anniversary two years ago.

4 WELCOME TO THE CITY OF INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION. EUROPE AS A LIBERAL BRAND AT THE EXPO 58

Our final case study unfolds a little outside the city centre of Brussels in April 1958. There, and with much fanfare, the first post-war Expo opened its doors to visitors. The exhibition grounds were a bustling place, structured by Cold War conflict lines and post-war utopias of technological progress. The Expo was brimming with things to do and fascinating pavilions to explore. Yet the Belgian organizers of the Expo also invited a number of newly-founded international, and particularly European organisations. This was a win-win situation: to organisations like the Council of Europe, the Organisation for European Economic Co-Operation (OEEC), and the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC), the Expo 58 presented a rare multilateral forum to establish themselves on the political stage. To the Belgian government, on the other hand, the international section showed off its progressive political vision and its claim for leadership in the post-war world order.² Further,

² Host countries often used the chance to tailor exhibitions according to sectors and inventions with which they knew they could outdo other countries (see Storm/Leerssen 2022: 6).

it positioned Brussels in the “race for the capital of Europe” (Krumrey 2018: 154).

To be frank, international organisations were not the major attractions on the fairgrounds. And it was mostly government, union, or company representatives, pupils, teachers, or members of youth organisations choosing the so-called *Cité de la Coopération Internationale* over all the more fun stuff to do at the Expo 58. As they entered the international section, visitors probably took a look around: right behind them was the pavilion of the United Nations. To their right, they saw the pavilion shared by the OEEC and the Council of Europe – a rounded structure made of glass and labelled “EUROPA” in big capital letters (Council of Europe 1957a). To their left, they saw the angular glass construction of the ECSC with a big sign saying “European Community” next to the entrance. And whilst the Council of Europe decorated its pavilion with its 12-star flag, the ECSC used the occasion to present its own emblem: two stripes of black and blue as references to coal and steel, and six stars as symbols of its six member states. Hence, attentive visitors may have been confused: why were there two pavilions, both claiming to represent Europe? What was it that they saw there?

This peculiar set-up of the international section demonstrated three developments: firstly, this was a materialization of early Western European integration just after World War II. Secondly, the two European pavilions showed how the representation of Europe was embedded in the world fair as a strongly normed framework of place branding. And thirdly, what historical visitors witnessed was Europe as a liberal brand in the making, co-constructed by three different organisations in two separate pavilions.

Above all, the two European pavilions were a manifestation of the early, “experimental phase” (Trunk 2007: 7, own translation) of Western European integration: by the late 1950s, various

conceptions of Europe had taken different institutional shapes among them the organisations present in the international section. First, there was the Organisation for European Economic Co-operation (OEEC), originally founded to administer Marshall Plan money, with a clear focus on the economic reconstruction of Europe. Then, there was the Council of Europe, based in Strasbourg, founded as a highly idealistic project in 1949. And despite its limited political authority, it was still holding on to the claim to be *the* European organisation. Its fiercest, up-and-coming rival in this respect was the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC), the third European organisation present in the international section, and the first supranational organisation worldwide. For the moment, it represented only six member states. But in the eyes of the Eurocrats in charge, this would, of course, be only the beginning.

These three European exhibitions give us an idea of the complex and dynamic institutional landscape in Western Europe at the time. What policy-makers in the late 1940s/1950s had grievously realised was that Western European integration was not as self-evident as they had hoped. They had faced a number of setbacks and the present felt fragile. In response to this difficult situation, early Western European organisations hesitantly began to brand themselves, and Europe more generally. They tried to gain recognition, support, and ultimately legitimacy. And they tried to stabilise and propel Europe as a political project. At the same time, they also competed with each other, which arguably complicated matters. And for visitors at the Expo, it made the international section probably quite confusing.

The world fair provided a peculiar and highly normative framework for the branding of Europe: regulated by an international convention, the participants of the Expo 58 adhered to rather strict existing norms. Nation-states as well as crumbling empires, corporations, and newly founded

European organisations all crafted their brands within ritualised categories of the “world fair mould” (Storm/Leerssen 2022: 17). Plus, they all tried to be entertaining and fun (Gilbert 1994; Luscombe 2013; Reid 2017). To put it differently: every pavilion needed to *fit in*. At the same time, every pavilion was supposed to *stand out*.

And that was exactly what the three European organisations in the international section were trying to do: all of them operated within the framework of the world fair doing their best to *fit in*, trying hard to *stand out*. And they not only competed with each other. They also competed with all the other fun things to do at the world fair. To some extent they all appropriated a traditionally national toolbox of place branding: they built pavilions like states. Where states would put the state name, they wrote “EUROPE” or “European Community”. And all of them even celebrated so-called “Europe Days” like national holidays.

Again, the three organisations tried so hard to fit themselves in but, also, stand out. Visitors, in turn not only walked through two European pavilions and three European exhibitions. They also saw three varieties of Europe as a liberal brand.

Let us begin with the pavilion shared by the OEEC and the Council of Europe.³ The OEEC had accepted the invitation by the Belgian government to participate in the Expo. But it also kept its efforts relatively low: with a lot of writing on a lot of cardboard, it celebrated itself and the 10th anniversary of the Marshall Plan. And, as it turned out, the men in charge had great difficulties attracting visitors. One OEEC official reported back to his superior that he had not seen more than 4 or 5 people within the hour that he had been there “*nothing but dull panels*” (Huet 1958, own emphasis), as he put it. The OEEC’s exhibition may not have been

³ The OEEC even hosted another exhibition by the European Conference of Ministers of Transport (ECMT) to further reduce the costs (see OEEC 1956).

very entertaining. But in terms of contents, it presented one variety of Europe as a liberal brand, namely the promise of prosperity and happiness through economic growth and liberal markets.

The exhibition of the Council of Europe in the other half of the pavilion had a different focus: it was centred around a reproduction of the Assembly Hall in Strasbourg and therefore around the self-image as a democratic institution. It basically invited visitors to “play European politics”: you could sit down in the Assembly Hall and listen to historic speeches over headphones. Or you could take part in a so-called “mock-assembly” (Lévy 1957). And afterwards – if you had the stamina – you could go through an exhibition situating the Council of Europe in a long and pristine tradition of democracy and humanist ideals.

In this exhibition, you would have read spell-like slogans like “You are no longer a foreigner in Europe. You are a European” (Council of Europe 1957b). The Council of Europe really wanted you to imagine yourself as a European, and, as another variety of Europe as a liberal brand, it exhibited the search for a European cultural identity and its identification with democracy. Considering its actually very limited political authority, it is fair to say that the Council of Europe exhibited what it *aimed to be* rather than what it currently was. But the same could probably be said about every other pavilion on the Expo.

In contrast to the cultural, lofty vision of Europe represented by the Council of Europe, the pavilion of the European Coal and Steel Community exhibited a more technical approach to Europe as a brand. The exhibition was designed to make visitors *understand* the European Coal and Steel Community. But the commissioners in charge also wanted visitors to *feel* something: for example, when planning the exhibition, a high-ranking official instructed his team “to take in the ‘European’ spirit that must prevail in our pavilion” – even

though, as he admitted, “this spirit is difficult to capture” and “often disguised by coal and steel” (ECSC 1956b: 55).

Compared to the pavilion shared by the Council of Europe and the OEEC, the ECSC’s pavilion was much better equipped: whilst the Council of Europe struggled to typewrite all of their exhibition texts in several languages, the ECSC simply commissioned multilingual audio guides.⁴ The pavilion of the ECSC had a built-in cinema. As a visitor, you would have passed by machines, household appliances, and an entire model house made of steel. But the centrepiece of the pavilion – its “clou” (Fosty 1958) so to say – was an accessible model coal mine underneath the pavilion. Boldly, the ECSC presented its common assembly as “The European Parliament”. And it cleverly framed itself as “The European Community”. The exhibition of the ECSC presented another variety of Europe as a liberal brand. And it, too, exhibited what it aimed to be rather than what it currently was. It still very much focussed on coal and steel. But the exhibition also projected its surprisingly confident self-image as *the* European organisation.

With reference to the title of this paper, the question remains: what did it mean for these organisations to brand themselves as liberal? First of all, in terms of content, the three European organisations highlighted different aspects, for example, liberal markets, liberal values, or democracy. What they did *not* exhibit were the contradictions within the liberal tradition, be it the continuous colonial aspirations of European member states or the exclusive conception of Europe.

The exhibitions at the Expo showed how much they all struggled to translate the abstract cause of European integration into entertaining exhibitions. But in one way or another, they all conceived

⁴ The guides invisibles “spoke” 5 languages: the 4 official languages of the ECSC (French, German, Dutch, and Italian) and English (see ECSC 1956b).

of themselves as the spearheads of progress, and this allowed them to claim a moral high ground vis-à-vis several less liberal “others” – most importantly its own wartime past and the Soviet Union (Betts 2020). One recurring symptom of this was that the policy-makers behind the exhibitions all expressed a notable unease with the notion of manipulative “propaganda”. For them, “propaganda” served as a rhetorical marker to denounce the practices of illiberal regimes and therefore to signal their own “liberal-ness”. An ECSC official, for example, commented that the Soviet pavilion pursued “a goal of *real* propaganda in favour of a political idea” (ECSC 1956a: 83, own emphasis). With a view to his own pavilion, he insisted that “this is not propaganda. This is showing that the unity of Europe is necessary... and already in progress” (ECSC 1957: 12).

Devising their own practices as “non-propaganda”, these early European policy-makers faced an old dilemma of self-proclaimed liberals: they wanted to raise emotions but with the caveat that this should not be perceived as manipulative. All three European organisations therefore tried to navigate a fine line. And, evidently, they did not quite know how to address their audiences: as purely rational thinkers impressed by charts and numbers? As future European citizens to be educated? As consumers?

All in all, the Expo 58 was a many-faceted instance of branding Europe in the “experimental phase” (Trunk 2007: 7, own translation) of European integration: the three European organisations *fit themselves into* the architectural nationalism of the world fair. And they did their best to *stand out*. But, as we have seen, selling Europe was not an easy task. The curious arrangement of European pavilions in the international section gives us a glimpse into the complicated institutional landscape at the time. Both pavilions aimed to impart “European unity”. But they also captured

the many different visions of Europe that coexisted in the 1950s.

In sum, all three European organisations presented themselves as the right and most progressive thing to do. But, as we have seen, they also demonstrated the difficulty of translating a project as abstract as European integration into exhibitions that could compete with all the other fun things to do on the fairgrounds. The three organisations present here were evidently still searching for their “brand essence”. And their self-description as liberal made things even more complicated.

5 CONCLUSION

So, here we are: Turkey, Catalonia, and a host of European organisations. In this final section, we carve out commonalities among these stories in search of a more general answer to the question of how liberal states market themselves. To this end, we consider four different criteria: *campaign intentions; legitimacy, temporality, and audiences*.

First, campaign intentions: the three case studies introduced us to vastly different topics and different levels– separatism in Catalonia, a substate entity; Turkish diplomacy in the US, that is, a state targeting another state; and competitive self-invention in Europe, a supra-state structure. What unites the makers and shakers in all three scenarios, was a common observation: in each case, decision-makers realised that liberal entities never just “are” and that their existence could not be taken for granted. Liberal states and actors as diverse as Kemal Atatürk, Enric Prat de la Ribera, and the ECSC planners all believed the same thing: that liberal places need to invent and promote themselves, above all, by way of comparison with other, notably non-liberal states and actors. In this case, the Spanish state, US segregationists, and member states of the Warsaw Pact. In that aspiration, they did not differ much from, say,

premodern monarchies, military dictatorships or other illiberal regime forms. Those, too, had to invent and market themselves to win international recognition.

Stark differences between the ways in which liberal and illiberal states market themselves, are to be found elsewhere, notably in regard to the second, third, and fourth criteria mentioned above. Take *legitimacy*: liberal states display ambivalence in regard to any sort of organized self-representation. The case paper shows how European decision-makers wooed visitors at the Expo in Brussels, in 1958. However, they disagreed on how to convey the message and the extent of how far they could go. Likewise, in the case of the Turkish embassy, the sons did the work while their father, while encouraging, remained on the sidelines. In the case of Catalonia, there was no official authorization for the author of the treatise the delegation to Paris.

This is typical for liberal regimes. Liberal regimes tend to worry profoundly, all the time, about the extent to which they actually have a mandate to project any image, any value, any story. For whatever pick they take, it will invariably be unsatisfying to constituents. Points of critique typically relate to contents (messages) as being too radical, too socialist, nationalist, exclusive – or simply, too propagandistic. Image managers also lack a domestic lobby that explains information policies, and expenses. In contrast, illiberal regimes understand self-representation as the very essence of what they do. They do not have to deal with public criticism. What is more, illiberal states do not shy away from radicalism; radicalism is often part of their identity. During the Cold War, Soviet public diplomacy was a picture-book example of that attitude: Soviet policymakers displayed an uncontested, school-master-like top-down attitude preaching the revolution. They were able to control the message, however flawed that message was.

Moving on to the third criterion, *temporality*, this involves consideration of crisis moments and reactions to the same. Liberal states tend to be reactive rather than proactive, and defensive rather than offensive. They justify the status quo rather than envision a better future. As a result, liberal actors and states typically worry about image when there is a crisis such as a conflict, a war, a catastrophe, a trade deficit, or a declining GDP. Then, officials will move to “do” something. In these case studies, the crisis moments encompass the Catalan anxiety of Spanish oppression; the fear of Turkey being perceived as deficient and old; and the spectre of European integration falling apart. But when the crisis is over, the programs stop. Illiberal states, in contrast, tend to be pro-active, preventive, even offensive and occasionally aggressive, in short: corporate. They craft a product and a message and sell it, rigorously, in perpetuity. Take North Korea’s “Ten Principles of the One-Ideology-System”. That is not a reactive campaign but a quasi-religious program outlining ideology and self-reliance, part of everyday life, the principal staple of the nation’s image projection.

Finally, *audiences* in these three papers play surprisingly nuanced roles in representational politics: in liberal self-representation, audiences are diverse & have something to say. That something can be unexpected and surprising. At best, liberal self-representation is an unpredictable two-way conversation that lives to be open to transformation. In contrast, in illiberal propaganda, the audience’s job is to shut up and listen. Propaganda lives to target, getting to a particular objective. Illiberal states’ propaganda is looking to an audience to surrender, to agree, to accept. This is why any attempt to open a conversation by way of questioning must be oppressed. Think about activists demanding freedom in authoritarian states such as WeiWei in China, Mahsa Amini in Iran, or Alexei Navalny in Russia.

So, what do we see in these case studies? One thing we see is a surprising amount of vagueness, opaqueness, and nebulous implications when it comes to the contours of the liberal brand. Liberalism in Catalonia is *self-determination* – it is, above all, not being part of Spain. Apart from that, it is unclear what else it could be. In the case of the Turkish embassy in Washington, liberalism means *freedom of speech* and play but that is complicated because, as we have seen, jazz is originally less improvisatory than hierarchical. In the case of the European Expo, liberalism is a *place* where people cherish specific values, unlike other places where people live under authoritarianism.

One common attitude among liberal image managers is, then and now, the expectation that if you just drop specific keywords couched in dialogue – liberty, equality – people will get it. Liberalism's core values shine by example and who can argue with that? But the fact of the matter is that the number of fully democratic regimes is receding. Thus, something is not working out well and we need to ask ourselves why and what that is. Either there is something wrong with the product liberalism itself, or there is something wrong with the marketing of the product. The three case studies, along with the analyses outlined above, lead us to believe it is the latter. Liberal states fail to market themselves well for three reasons in the long run: first, the intentions of campaigns may be similar in most places – *love me tender*. But, and this is the second point, liberal image management needs legitimacy not required in non-liberal regions and states. Third, because of that need, liberal image management is often reactive and informed by moments of crisis. Finally, the outcomes – essential for the funding, indeed, the acceptability of image management campaigns – are hard to define in liberal states because success is contingent upon audiences and audiences cannot be predicted.

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