

## - Contestations of the Liberal Script -

# How to Bridge Social and Political Division: Opportunities & Challenges in the Arts and Humanities

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### Introduction

Some of the most severe challenges liberal societies are facing today emanate from non-liberal and illiberal regimes as well as thinkers and activists outside as well as inside liberal societies. The Cluster of Excellence “Contestations of the Liberal Script (SCRIPTS)” is an interdisciplinary research center funded by the German Excellence Initiative. It puts these contestations of the liberal script in a broader historical, global, and comparative perspective. We investigate how current contestations of the liberal script differ from earlier contestations, what their major drivers are, and which consequences they have for the liberal script as well as for the global challenges of our time.

#### *Box 1: The liberal script*

##### *What is a script?*

A script is a coherent set of shared understandings about the organization of society, expressed in prescriptive and descriptive statements on how a society ought to be (*sollen*) and is (*sein*). These statements are linked by a (liberal) grammar that integrates them into a coherent set. Scripts also contain action repertoires for arriving from *sein* to *sollen*, and *vice versa*.

Scripts justify and legitimize political rule. They compete with each other over relevance and dominance.

##### *What is a liberal script?*

Script is a generic concept. What makes it liberal, are the underlying normative liberal ideas about the organization of society. Since the meaning of liberal varies across time and space, there are temporal and spatial varieties of the liberal script. All varieties share a trans-historical core constituted by the right to individual and collective self-determination; they differ in the ways in which the tensions between these two co-constitutive core principles are resolved. Libertarian varieties prioritize individual self-determination, while their communitarian counterparts emphasize collective self-determination. Scripts that deny both individual and collective self-determination are non-liberal (e.g., authoritarianism). Illiberal scripts resolve the tension between the two by making one fully subordinate to the other (e.g., fascism, socialism, religious fundamentalism, radical libertarianism).

### The Deepening of Contestations

Contestations are normal and constitutive for the liberal script. As Michael J. Abramowitz, president of Freedom House, reminds us, “democracy is something that must be struggled over continuously”.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, the liberal script has always competed with alternative social models for relevance and

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.americanpurpose.com/podcasts/michael-j-abramowitz-on-the-future-of-democracy/>, last access August 12, 2023.

dominance. In fact, liberal ideas and institutions have evolved through disapproval and resistance both from within and outside liberal societies.

*Box 2: Contestations*

Contestations are social practices that are intended to express disapproval of liberal ideas and institutions or their implementation (directional), are publicly justified or recognized by others (intersubjective), and come with a minimum of social mobilization (consequential).

Not any criticism qualifies as contestation. Moreover, contestation requires agency.

*Internal* contestations invoke the liberal script to justify disapproval of how liberal ideas and institutions are interpreted (e.g., sexual minority rights) or applied (e.g., double standards).

*External* contestations reject core principles of the liberal script seeking to abolish or replace the liberal script by an alternative (e.g., religious fundamentalism).

The liberal script relies on the contestations for its legitimacy. Contestations are crucial for the internalization of liberal principles and norms and their social acceptance. The liberal script prescribes the right to as well as the rules and procedures for challenging the status quo. For their legitimizing function, however, contestations need to remain internal. Norms, rules and procedures of inclusiveness shall ensure that political competition does not fundamentally challenge the liberal script. Attacking and rejecting the liberal script as such or proposing to replace it by non- or illiberal alternatives is illegal and illegitimate.

Current varieties of the liberal script seem to lose their effectiveness in tempering and constraining contestations. Our Cluster observes a trend towards the deepening of contestations, which is global but particularly affects liberal societies. *Internal* contestations increasingly turn into *external* contestations of the liberal script. Relatedly, contestations of particular *policies* regarding migration, sexual self-determination, or climate change morph into *polity* contestations attacking the political system that adopts and enforces these policies. Fundamental criticism and rejection come with a *growing level of social mobilization* and involve *violent forms* of protest. Finally, contestations are “*severely*” (Carothers and O’Donohue, 2019) or “*perniciously*” (McCoy and Somer, 2018) *polarized*. A single cleavage overrides other cleavages and divides politics and society in two irreconcilable opposing camps. The binary division is persistent, has a strong affective dimension, and is rooted in social identities based on ideology, ethnicity, or religion.

The deepening of contestations of the liberal script is not confined to a particular region but appears to be a global and transregional trend, with external contestants of the liberal script from outside liberal societies fueling external contestations within liberal societies.

Countervailing forces within liberal societies seek to defend the liberal script. The “backlash against the backlash” may be a sign of the robustness of the liberal script. However, it may also exacerbate the polarization of liberal societies.

The first funding period of the Cluster (2019-2025) focuses on mapping and explaining the deepening of contestations of the liberal script, particularly within liberal societies.

In the second funding period (2026-2032), we will investigate the consequences of deep contestations for liberal orders and the liberal script as such. Based on our findings, we also seek to identify effective ways to overcome political and social division.

### **The Bridging of Divides**

Unlike normal contestations, deep contestations constitute a potential threat to liberal orders and the liberal script. They have resulted in democratic erosion, democratic backsliding, and even democratic breakdown.

Social science research has focused initiatives of religious organizations, multiethnic and multipartisan civic groups, or universities aimed at fostering dialogue and greater understanding across political and social divide. While many initiatives aim at elites, some also target society more broadly. The latter include the teaching of tolerance through civic education and facilitating conversations on polarizing local and national issues among citizens, representatives of different civic and community organizations, journalists, and others in the search for common ground.

Cultural initiatives, including theater plays, movie shows, and art exhibits, that address polarizing issues, have been less studied in the social sciences. Moreover, they tend to be perceived as deepening rather than bridging political and social divides. We lack research that maps the variety of arts and humanities activities and evaluates their potential to reach out “to the other side” rather deepening the trenches by “preaching to the choir”.