

The Cluster of Excellence “Contestations of the Liberal Script (SCRIPTS)” Summary of the Research Programme

The Cluster of Excellence “Contestations of the Liberal Script (SCRIPTS)” is a research consortium that analyses the contemporary controversies about the model of liberal democracy and the market economy. The term “liberal script” relates to a set of ideas and institutional prescriptions about how society is organized based on the core principle of individual self-determination. The main purpose of SCRIPTS is to understand why the liberal model of order has fallen into crisis despite its political, economic, and social achievements.

SCRIPTS has been operating since 2019 and is funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG) until the end of 2025. The Cluster is hosted by the Freie Universität Berlin and unites eight major Berlin-based research institutions. Cluster research teams are made up of doctoral researchers, postdoctoral researchers, and professors from social and area studies. SCRIPTS is well connected with research institutions and knowledge exchange partners throughout the world, including political and cultural organisations, as well as civil society actors. In addition, SCRIPTS brings renowned visiting scholars from all over the world to Berlin.

Directors

[Prof. Dr. Tanja A. Börzel](#) (Professor of Political Science, Freie Universität Berlin)

[Prof. Dr. Michael Zürn](#) (Professor of International Relations, Freie Universität Berlin, and Director of the Global Governance Unit at the WZB Berlin Social Science Center)

The Research Programme

RESEARCH SUBJECT: THE LIBERAL SCRIPT UNDER PRESSURE

The world has experienced a series of political shocks in the last two decades, among which are transnational terrorism, unexpected right-wing populist electoral gains, a rise of fundamentalist religious movements, and the success of state capitalism in China. Nation-states that are committed to what we call the “liberal script” – that is, liberal models of political and social order – are challenged both internationally and domestically. Internationally, rising powers dispute the liberal international order, fundamentalist thinkers and activists criticise the secularism, materialism, and moral corruption of liberal societies and around the world, and authoritarian state leaders gain influence. Domestically, the contested United States election, Brexit, the growing power of populist movements as well as a loss of confidence in established political parties indicate that challenges to liberal ideas and institutions also come from within liberal societies. Astonishingly, this has happened despite huge economic and social achievements that range from a decreasing number of interstate wars to a decline of absolute poverty in many parts of the world. SCRIPTS was established to investigate the puzzle of

an increasing number and frequency of contestations of the liberal script.

→ Read further in Working Paper No. 1 “Contestations of the Liberal Script: A Research Program”

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

SCRIPTS aspires to answer the following three sets of research questions:

1. Contestations
To what extent do current challengers target the liberal script? Are alternative concepts of political and social order that claim universal validity on the rise, or are they varieties of existing liberal ideas?
2. Causes
What are the causes of these contestations? Under what conditions does the liberal script lose or gain attractiveness, and what are the drivers of the rise of alternative scripts? To what extent are the causes of current contestations different from earlier ones?
3. Consequences
What are the consequences of the intensified contestations of the liberal script and the potential rise of alternatives?

THE LIBERAL SCRIPT

The term “script” originates from the theatre playbook as a terminological concept for “social order” or “social system” and allows for describing liberal as well as alternative and competing scripts. Our understanding of the liberal script is located at the macro-level and dissociated from a specific (modern or Western) script. We define the liberal script as *ideas and institutional prescriptions about the organisation of society based on the core principle of individual self-determination*. We consider the liberal script as one cultural enactment rather than the instrumental response to functional necessities of modernity. The foundation of the liberal script rests upon implied universal values such as freedom, equality, justice, progress, and tolerance. Its manifestations range from human rights and the rule of law to free market capitalism. Since the liberal script is based on individual self-determination, which includes the legitimacy of “interpreting” rules in a new way, it allows for some decoupling among norms, prescriptions, and actual behaviour. It has been competing with alternative scripts for organising societies, such as fascism, communism, authoritarianism, or religious fundamentalism, and therefore has been shaped and redefined through these interactions.

→ Find a conceptualisation of the term in Working Paper No. 10 “Sketching the Liberal Script. A Target of Contestations”

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

SCRIPTS is designed as a platform and space of interaction between researchers from seventeen different disciplines and with different regional expertise trained in quantitative and qualitative methods. As such, it fosters multi-perspective approaches and collaboration in interdisciplinary research projects.

DOUBLE REFLEXIVITY

The concept of “double reflexivity” connects the SCRIPTS members’ different perspectives. Reflexivity in the social sciences refers to a self-critical perspective that acknowledges the positionality of the researcher and the relationship between power and knowledge production. Scholars in area studies correctly point out that social scientists cannot make assertions about global processes with impartiality because their perspective is already contextualized (reflexivity). On the other hand, when localising area studies, scholars need to recognise that academic scholarship has developed methods that allow moving towards generalisations. The extension to “double reflexivity”, which draws on Anthony Giddens’ concept of the “double hermeneutic”, avoids setting certain concepts like positionality as absolute. SCRIPTS emphasises the interdependence between these two perspectives. This allows generalisable knowledge to be produced, which is however subject to the relativity of knowledge production.

RESEARCH PROJECTS

- General Research Projects run over three years, tackle topics cutting across SCRIPTS Research Units, and involve principal investigators, junior researchers, and external partners.
→ [General Research Projects](#)
 - Short-Term Research Projects run from two months up to a year, address topical issues, and emerge from projects or researchers’ interests.
→ [Short-Term Research Projects](#)
- Affiliated Research Projects are not funded by SCRIPTS but complement the research agenda by bringing in external expertise.
→ [Affiliated Research Projects](#)

RESEARCH GOALS

Intended goals by the end of the first funding period in 2025:

- On the substantive side, SCRIPTS will have identified the contemporary contestations of the liberal script compared to previous contestations;
- SCRIPTS will have developed an empirically grounded theory of the causes of contemporary contestations;
- On the institutional side, SCRIPTS will have expanded the existing network of international partnerships established by its participating institutions, particularly in the global South;
- SCRIPTS will also have institutionalised the knowledge exchange relationships with selected political and societal partners in Berlin;
- SCRIPTS will have increased the diversity of the researchers involved in SCRIPTS and ensured the placement of our postdoctoral fellows in leading research institutions;
- SCRIPTS will have created four permanent professorships to strengthen the structures for global and regional studies in Berlin.

Research Structure

RESEARCH PARTNERS

The SCRIPTS Cluster unites eight major Berlin-based research institutions: Freie Universität Berlin (FU Berlin), the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin (HU Berlin), the WZB Berlin Social Science Center, the Hertie School, the German Institute for Economic Research (DIW), the Berlin branch of the German Institute of Global and Area Studies (GIGA), the Centre for East European and International Studies (ZOiS), and the Leibniz-Zentrum Moderner Orient (ZMO). The partner institutions share responsibilities in managing projects and resources in the SCRIPTS.

INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION PARTNERS

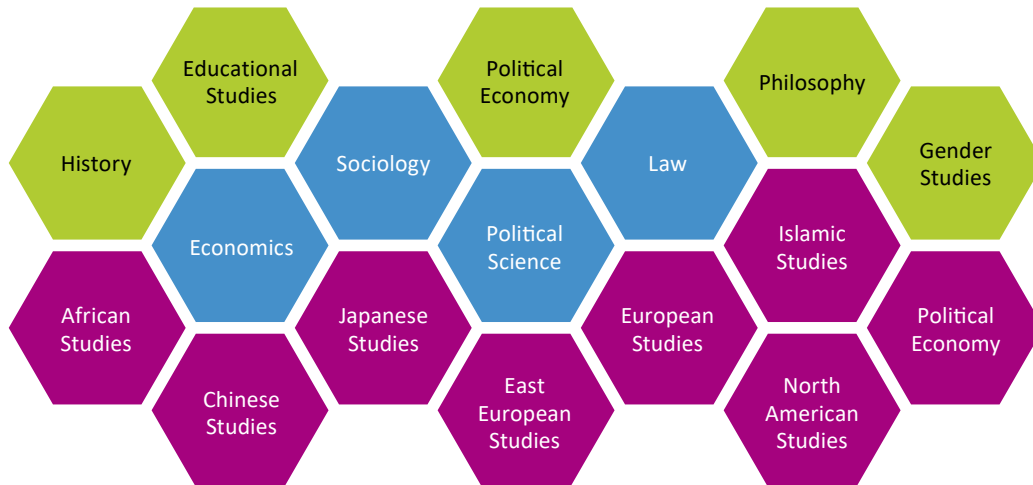
SCRIPTS and its twenty international cooperation partners collaborate for joint projects and workshops as well as visiting fellowships:

1. [American University in Cairo](#)
2. [Berkeley, University of California](#)
3. [Bilkent University \(Ankara\)](#)
4. [Chinese University of Hong Kong](#)
5. [El Colégio de México](#)
6. [Fudan University \(Shanghai\)](#)
7. [Hebrew University of Jerusalem](#)
8. [Ilia State University Tbilisi](#)
9. [Institut d'Études Politiques de Paris \(Sciences Po\)](#)
10. [Jawaharlal Nehru University \(New Delhi\)](#)
11. [National University of Singapore](#)
12. [Nuffield College, University of Oxford](#)
13. [Princeton University](#)
14. [Stanford University](#)
15. [Université Cheikh Anta Diop de Dakar](#)
16. [Universidade de São Paulo](#)
17. [University of Sydney](#)
18. [University of Cape Town](#)
19. [University of Tokyo](#)
20. [University of Wyoming \(Laramie\)](#)

National Research University Higher School of Economics
(Moscow) (cooperation suspended)

RESEARCH DISCIPLINES

There are seventeen research disciplines (see below). Of SCRIPTS researchers, 85% have a background in social sciences, law, and economics, and 13% in humanities.



SCRIPTS STRUCTURE

SCRIPTS is designed as a platform and space for interaction between researchers from different disciplines and with regional expertise, trained in quantitative and qualitative methods. As such, it fosters multi-perspective approaches and research designs.

Overall, the [Directors](#), the [Executive Board](#), the SCRIPTS Plenary, and the [International Advisory Board](#) are the main decision makers and advise on the activities of SCRIPTS.

RESEARCH UNITS

Each Research Unit (RU) consists of multidisciplinary research teams. They systematically cut across disciplinary and epistemic boundaries, and promote joint publication and diffusion of research results.

- The RU “Borders” asks who belongs to a certain group and who can legitimately be excluded.
→ [RU Borders](#)
- The RU “Orders” asks which core ideas about institutional frameworks are constitutive of political and social coordination with a society.
→ [RU Orders](#)
- The RU “(Re-)Allocation” asks which rules and goals are key for the (re-)allocation of goods and life opportunities in the face of social and material scarcities.
→ [RU \(Re-\)Allocation](#)
- The RU “Temporality” asks how the understanding of progress and temporality informs our understanding of the historical (re)production of structure and provides information on time scales and ideas of transience and eternity.
→ [RU Temporality](#)

JUNIOR RESEARCH GROUPS

The two Junior Research Groups (JRG) at SCRIPTS are dedicated to helping young scholars make their way toward a tenured position in the long term. Each JRG is headed by a postdoctoral leader who leads the respective project and recruits two doctoral researchers.

- JRG “Peripheral Liberalism”: This group assesses the intellectual genesis and political impact of liberal ideas before and during the marketisation of (formerly) state socialist countries. Thereby, both the local intellectual roots and the non-Western exchange of ideas of political economy are examined within the socialist world, but also in exchanges with developing dictatorships from Chile to South Korea.
→ [JRG “Peripheral Liberalism”](#)
- JRG “Comparative Survey”: In cooperation with the Research Units and the “PALS – Public Attitudes of the Liberal Script” in more than 25 countries from all world regions. Key questions are the extent to which the liberal script is embraced or contested by individuals and why the perception and evaluation of the liberal script differs between and within countries.
→ [JRG “Comparative Survey”](#)

CROSS-CUTTING WORK UNITS

Given the need for overlap among the Research Units to avoid segmentation, SCRIPTS designed three core Cross-Cutting Work Units (CCWU) that closely bind the four Research Units together.

- Theory Network (TN): Its overall responsibility lies in strengthening the ties between the four aforementioned Research Units. First, it provides a platform for exchange between researchers; second, it constitutes a space for comparing empirical findings; and third, it enables the integration of theoretical concepts, hypotheses, and findings into a theory of contemporary contestations of the liberal script, its causes, and consequences.
→ [More about the TN](#)
- Data and Methodology Center (DMC): It answers to the methodological pluralism in the SCRIPTS by providing training on methodological innovations, establishing a central data portal to make the collected data broadly available, and fostering critical reflection about data collection and methods.
→ [More about the DMC](#)
- Knowledge Exchange Lab (KEL): By establishing public discussion forums with partners from arts and culture, as well as maintaining a close exchange with the German Federal Foreign Office, it works as an interface among research, policy making, and public discourse.
→ [More about the KEL](#)

BERLIN INTERNATIONAL COLLEGE OF RESEARCH AND GRADUATE TRAINING

The Berlin International College of Research and Graduate Training (BIRT) is a union between the Berlin Graduate School for Global and Transregional Studies (BGTS) and the International Research College (IRC). The BGTS hosts the SCRIPTS doctoral programme and offers three-year doctoral positions (65% position). The IRC is the hub for the postdoctoral fellows and international visiting scholars. Overall, the BIRT combines early career training for graduates with the integration of all doctoral researchers, postdoctoral fellows, and the visiting scholars. Furthermore, it invites senior scholars from SCRIPTS international partner universities from all world regions to Berlin.

→ [More about the BIRT](#)

→ [More about the BGTS](#)

→ [More about the IRC](#)

→ [Affiliation as a Guest Researcher](#)

DIVERSITY

Following an inclusive and emancipatory vision of collaborative knowledge production, SCRIPTS promotes diversity and equal opportunities. Diversity is part of the selection process for fellows and researchers, and it determines research topics and projects, as outlined by our [Rules & Guidelines](#). A dedicated [Quality Management & Equal Opportunities unit](#) Quality Management & Equal Opportunities unit ensures that this diversity approach is implemented in SCRIPTS.

→ [Diversity Guidelines](#)

Contact

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