

Welcome to the (II)Liberal Script: An Introduction

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“Liberalism is deeply rooted in American soil,” sociologist Paul Starr observed in 2007, “so much so that in the years after World War II, many historians and social scientists regarded the liberal project and the American civic creed as more or less the same”.¹⁾ Starr’s resulting book, *Freedom’s Power: The True Force of Liberalism*,²⁾ today assumes the pertinence of dancing on the volcano, blissfully unaware of what the next ten years had in store for us: For all we know, worldwide, liberalism and democracy are in decline. Relevant surveys, indices, and assessments such as the Bertelsmann Transformation Index (BTI), indicate that 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 the 137 countries studied were democracies, compared with 70 autocracies.³⁾

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1) Paul Starr, “Why Liberalism Works,” *The American Prospect*, April 2007, 34.

2) Paul Starr, *Freedom’s Power: The True Force of Liberalism* (New York: Basic Books, 2007).

3) “Trend toward Authoritarian Governance Continues. Democracy under Pressure Worldwide,” *Bertelsmann Stiftung*, 2022, <https://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/en/topics/latest-news/2022/february/democracy-under-pressure-worldwide>.

The Theme

It is this diagnosis that lays at the heart of the present volume. “Welcome to the (II) Liberal State,” brings together contributions of historical nation and place branding in the context of the Berlin research consortium, “Contestations of the Liberal Script” (SCRIPTS).⁴⁾ The cluster, since 2019, is preoccupied with a single question: if the idea of liberalism (liberty, self-determination, free speech, division of power etc.) was and is such a cool one, why has it recently come under such pressure, both internally (e.g., from right-wing extremists) and externally (the rise and expansion of illiberal states, such as Russia or China)? When we, in turn, put together this special issue, we asked ourselves how and why in the past, states and proto-state like entities legitimized their status as liberal, oftentimes when their histories were or have been anything but liberal? Put differently, our concern was and is not what liberalism is. Instead, we inquire why and how historical actors perceive and then pitch their region as liberal or illiberal, and to what extent their efforts may be deemed a “success.” The publication at hand examines the questions through the lens of a total of six case studies of nation and place branding. We borrow the concept of branding from the world of marketing and advertising, which, in the last dozen years, has found its way the study of history, political science, and communication studies as well. Nation or place branding encompasses attempts to control the image of state or region, similar to that of a star or a consumer product. As such, it reflects the desire to craft, enhance or improve the reputation of a state and, in any case, mitigate negative perceptions, ideally the world over, in whatever form and for whatever purpose.⁵⁾

Structure of the Special Issue

In the first section, we look at regions struggling to craft a brand for liberal democracy, in the twentieth century: Catalonia, Turkey, and a host of European organizations. Tobias Klee kicks off the conversation by looking at Catalan nationalists’ efforts during the dictatorship of Primo de Rivera in the 1920s to unite Catalans behind a common identity and, thus, leverage their political and economic capacities to garner more autonomy within Spain. Klee singles out the 1926 Paris trial of Francesc Macià, a nationalist activist who began to promote a “Catalan brand” of industriousness, rationality, and masculinity, after he and his paramilitary group had tried to invade Spain. How, Klee asks, did Francesc Maci use notions of gender to brand Catalonia as civilised and European in the context of his trial? To this end, he links nation branding to gender, then proceeds to outline the construction of Catalan identity along

4) “SCRIPTS – Contestations of the Liberal Script, Cluster of Excellence,” 2026, <https://www.scripts-berlin.eu/>.

5) Melissa Aronczyk, *Branding the Nation: The Global Business of National Identity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Jessica C. E. Gienow-Hecht, “Nation Branding: A Useful Category for International History,” *Diplomacy and Statecraft* 30, no. 4 (2019): 755-79.

notions of masculinity in the context of Maci's defense in Paris.

Lesar Yurtsever, in turn, examines how the sons of the Turkish ambassador Münir Ertegün sought to turn the mission in Washington D.C. into a "liberal island" by inviting African American jazz musicians. As he shows, their initiative was not merely a private endeavor but, intentionally or not, a political effort to brand Turkey musically as a bastion of equality and free expression. As such, it stood in sharp contrast to common discriminatory practices against African Americans in town – but also to Turkish domestic policies marginalizing minorities. Like the stories outlined by Klee (and Ritter), Yurtsever's story is thus one of a desire for a new, and altogether better image: he retraces how Turkish politicians and intellectuals sought to convince both their own population and the world of the new Turkey's legitimate claim to being a modern and western-oriented state in the United States, so different from the "Terrible Turk" stereotypes reigning at the time in Hollywood and elsewhere. In tune with such desire, the Erteguins sought to create a safe, inclusive venue for African American jazz musicians at the Turkish embassy in Washington, branding Turkey as a liberal state.

The last contributor in the first section, Marlene Ritter, pitches the 1958 Expo in Brussels as a spectacular display of the post-war world order, complete with European visions of future grandeur. Expo 58, she argues, presented a rare multilateral forum to establish 'Europe' on the international stage, yet also the fierce tensions among interests, national and pro-European, as well as competing organisations. Still, if there was one thing everyone present agreed upon, it was the participating organizers' dedication to a common ideological canvas: 'Europe' was to be a liberal brand. Ritter explores what it meant for these organisations to brand 'Europe' (and themselves) as liberal in the specific context of the early Cold War – and how, vice versa, they branded liberalism in the process.

Part two, in turn, addresses specifically regimes and states that followed an antiliberal path and did not mince words about it: imperial Japan, the Soviet Union, and North Korea. Jessamyn Abel considers three examples of place branding by the wartime Japanese state in cooperation with nonstate actors. After Japan's 1933 withdrawal from the League of Nations, a group of Japanese internationalists formed the semi-governmental Society for International Cultural Relations, aiming to use cultural exchange to foster global views of their nation as cultured and cooperative. Around the same time, the alliance of leaders from the diplomatic and sports worlds preparing for the 1940 Tokyo Olympics considered the need to show foreign visitors a clean, modern capital city appropriate to a world power. In Japan's puppet state in Manchuria, leaders hoped that giving foreign visitors a ride on the new high-speed luxury train "Asia Express" would showcase Manchukuo as an exemplar of successful colonial development. Echoes of each of these examples in post-World War II Japan, Abel

holds, suggest that liberal and illiberal states may not differ so widely in their place branding practices.

Rósa Magnúsdóttir, in turn, discusses Soviet strategies to secure support and recruit followers to the socialist project from the 1920s and through the duration of the Cold War. Wherever involved, the Soviet party-state, she shows, relied on a complicated network of international actors to spread propaganda about the accomplishments of Soviet socialism, both at home and abroad. Magnúsdóttir focuses particularly on the cases of Iceland and the United States, to draw out the global web of state and nonstate actors, with examples from the 1930s and the Cold War, to make a case for the intricately woven and seemingly “legitimate” nation brand, crafted by Soviet officials. Seung Hwan Ryu, last but not least, takes a close look at the meaning of “Juche” in North Korea’s nation branding efforts toward Africa. Unlike its image of the “hermit kingdom” in the liberal world, North Korea, he argues, constantly endeavored to establish close ties with African countries during and after the Cold War. To this end, the Kim leadership utilized the state ideology of “Juche” for international audiences in African countries to gain recognition and exert influence. “Juche,” curiously, did – and does – not simply seek to indoctrinate; instead, it demanded that people master their own fates, notably in the anticolonial and anti-imperialist struggles against the Cold War superpowers. As such, it served as a peculiar brand of legitimizing North Korean engagement with African people, at an unofficial level. Ryu closely looks at the activities of the friendship associations established between North Korea and Tanzania, and Juche Study Centers established across African countries, all of which shaped, first, North Korea’s image as a revolutionary state and a leader of global anti-imperialist struggle and, long past 1989, even the international sanctions for denuclearization in the 2010s.

A final critique, provided by Tobias Rupprecht, assesses the collective meaning of the individual contributions. Rupprecht offers a specific view of both the theoretical implications of the case studies presented, diverse as they are, and their meaning in the context of the contemporary recession of liberal democracies, the world over. The articles in this issue, to quote Rupprecht, carve out the “profound sociocultural nature of nation and place branding”. It is much more than a mere marketing tool. In fact, for regimes, governments, leaders, and organizations, it functions as a “diplomacy of appearance”, relying on credibility on the one hand and consistency on the other. Fusing “aesthetics and ideology”, nation and place branding therefore go right to the heart of debates about identity construction, governance, and legitimacy.

The Appetizer

In the remaining paragraphs of this preface, I will carve out commonalities and differences among these stories in search of a more general answer to the question how liberal and illiberal states market themselves – and where they differ. To this end, I establish a framework considering four different criteria: campaign intentions, legitimacy, temporality, and audiences. First, campaign intentions: The essays introduce us to vastly different topics and different levels. First, Klee's assessment of separatism in Catalonia addresses a substate entity. Second, Yurtsever's review of Turkish diplomacy in the US deals with the case of a relatively new sovereign state targeting another sovereign state. Third, Ritter's examination of competitive self-invention in Europe invokes, most notably, a comparison of various European organizations laying claim to legitimate supra-state structure. What unites the makers and shakers in all three scenarios is one common observation: in their view, liberal entities never just "are" or "exist." Which is another way of saying that their existence could not and should not be taken for granted. Liberal states, along with actors as diverse as Kemal Atatürk, Enric Prat de la Riba, and the ECSC planners all held beliefs along similar lines: all of them were convinced that liberal places needed to invent and promote themselves, above all, by way of comparison with other, notably non-liberal states and actors. In this case, these "negative canvasses" concerned the Spanish state, segregationists in the U.S. American South as well as member states of the Warsaw Pact, respectively.

In that aspiration, actors and organizations did not differ much from other organizers we meet in this forum, including the Japanese cultural elite that worked so hard to convince foreigners that despite its military posture, Japan remained a viable and interesting partner, or the Kims that strove so hard to find friends in Africa. The search for love as a driving force for nation branding has remained in place since the premodern Italian city states or the Ottoman Empire. These, too, had to invent, and market themselves. And they did so to win international recognition, contacts, trade relations, knowledge exchange and most of all, political alliances, be this North Korean trade and exchange in Tanzania or political recognition, in client states stuck between the two superpowers, such as Iceland. Stark differences between the ways in which liberal and illiberal states market themselves, are to be found elsewhere and they concern the second criterion mentioned above: legitimacy. Liberal states display ambivalence in regard to any sort of organized self-representation. Ritter's paper shows how European decision makers wooed visitors at the Expo in Brussels, in 1958. At the same time – and this constitutes the gist of the story – they disagreed on, first, how to convey the message and, second, how far they could go to mitigate their cultural and information campaigns. Likewise, as Yurtsever points out, in the case of the Turkish embassy, the sons of the Turkish ambassador did most of the work meeting, connecting with, and inviting U.S. African American artists. Meanwhile their father, the Turkish ambassador to Washington, Mehmet

Münir Erteğün, while encouraging, remained on the sidelines for the entire show (in fact, in the worst-case scenario, he could probably have pretended not to have known about the embassy concerts). In the case of Catalonia, there simply did not exist any official authorization for the author of the treatise the delegation to Paris. This may have been the case for more than one regional aspiring participant at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919: Nguyễn Tất Thành alias Ho Chi Minh also did not have permission to petition, yet went on to establish the Democratic Republic of Vietnam in 1945.⁶⁾ Still, such absence of endorsement confirms a central point: in all of these cases, that is, official support for cultural venues remained either conflicted, reserved, or simply missing – in any case, contested. Such contestation of liberal self-representation represents a typical character trait of liberal regimes. Decision makers and their civil assistants in liberal regimes worry, continually, about the extent to which they actually have a mandate to project any image, any value, any story. Their concern materializes for good reasons: 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, too nationalist, too exclusive or sometimes simply too indulgent. In 1946, the House Rules Committee chairman Eugene Cox (D-GA) stuck a knife into the State Department's cultural and information activities because the department, so he said, was “chock full of Reds,” really “the lousiest outfit in town”.⁷⁾ Such statements echo contemporary criticisms of governmentally-sponsored cultural and information politics, notably among far-right leaders. Furthermore, image managers lack a domestic lobby that explains information policies, expenses to domestic voters. As a result, cultural and information politics geared toward foreign audiences are rarely popular but frequently under pressure, so much so that, as we shall see below, programs, personnel and institutions typically only last for a limited amount of time.

In contrast, and this is what the second section shows, illiberal regimes characteristically understand self-representation as the very essence of what they do. In fact, one can make a good argument that perpetual, uninterrupted and systematic state branding has been invented by fascist regimes in the interwar period.⁸⁾ Authoritarian regimes in interwar Japan, the Soviet Kremlin or in Pyongyang, did and do not have to deal with nor address public criticism. Leaders devise slogans, jingles, monuments, and storylines swiftly and without much criticism. They also swiftly have the opposition squelched. What is more, illiberal states do not shy away from radicalism; in fact, revolutionary radicalism is often part of their identity. During the Cold War, Soviet public diplomacy amounted to a textbook example of such attitude: as David Caute has shown, Soviet policymakers displayed an uncontested, schoolmaster-like top-down attitude preaching the revolution and every sacrifice the revolution, complete with

6) Pierre Brocheux, *Ho Chi Minh: A Biography*, trans. Claire Duiker (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2007).

7) Frank. A. Ninkovich, *The Diplomacy of Ideas. U.S. Foreign Policy and Cultural Relations, 1938-1950* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 122.

8) Jessica C. E. Gienow-Hecht, *Vom Staat zur Marke. Die Geschichte des Nation Branding* (Ditzingen: Reclam, 2025), chapter 6.

the socialist “New Man,” required.⁹⁾ In doing so, the Central Committee was able to control the message, however flawed that message was. Moving on to the third criterion mentioned above, temporality relates to the mechanism of crisis and reaction: Liberal states, we may detect in the stories at hand, tend to be reactive rather than pro-active, defensive rather than offensive. They justify the status quo rather than envision a better future. As a result, liberal actors and states typically only worry about image when there is a conflict, a war, a natural catastrophe, a trade deficit, or a declining GDP. When crisis or concern hits, liberal governments often decide to “do” something, if only in response to constituents’ pressure or concern.¹⁰⁾ In the papers at hand, such moves are triggered by the Catalan anxiety of Spanish oppression; the fear in Turkey of being perceived as deficient and old; the specter of European integration falling apart. But equally typical for liberal states and those striving to be such, when the crisis (read: e.g. the Cold War) is over, the program stops.

Illiberal states, in contrast, tend to be proactive, preventive, even offensive and occasionally aggressive in their organization of self-representation. To cast this into the language of business: they tend to be corporate. Often without any crisis moment, authoritarian states adhere to continuous self-representation at home and abroad by definition. They continually craft a product and a message and sell it, rigorously, in perpetuity. Take the string of powerful Soviet rallying cries, “Peace, Bread, and Land,” “Dictatorship of the proletariat” or “We will catch up and surpass the West”, designed to foster ideological unity and anti-capitalist sentiment, all coupled with an superhuman personality cult. Or consider North Korea’s “Ten Principles for the Establishment of the Party’s Single Leadership System,” revised and renamed in 2013. That system accentuates the never-ending strife and dedication of “the people” for a better world, to arrive in the future and serves as a manual for governance and individual behavior. Number Ten of the Principles, for example, reads “We must pass down the great achievement of the Juche revolution and the Songun revolution, pioneered by the great Comrade Kim Il Sung and led by Comrades Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il, from generation to generation, inheriting and completing it to the end.”¹¹⁾ The Ten Principles, then, do not form part of a reactive campaign but a proto-religious program outlining ideology and self-reliance. As such, the entire system is designed to become part of everyday life, the principal staple of the nation’s image projection, at home and abroad.

A final criterium of comparison for the self-representation mentioned above relates to the function and (re)actions of audiences. In these three papers, audiences play surprisingly varied and nuanced roles in representational politics: in liberal self-representation, at concerts, trials,

9) David Caute, *The Dancer Defects: The Struggle for Cultural Supremacy during the Cold War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

10) Gareth Davies, “The Historical Presidency: Lyndon Johnson and Disaster Politics,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 47, no. 3 (2017): 529-51.

11) “What Are the ‘Ten Principles’?,” *Daily NK*, August 9, 2013, <https://www.dailynk.com/english/what-are-the-ten-principles/>.

or exhibitions, audiences are, most of all, diverse and, hence, unpredictable. Their selection may be specific or arbitrary; in any case, target audiences, in the best-case scenario, perform active roles: they do have something to say. That something can be unexpected and surprising. In fact, it can contradict the plans and intentions of the original sender but that does not need to form a hurdle; quite the contrary, it can yield additional benefits. At best, liberal self-representation is an unpredictable two-way conversation that lives to be open to transformation.

In contrast, in illiberal nation branding, whether we consider Japanese educational programs, Soviet networking, or the North Korean “charm offensive to African people”, the audience’s job is primarily to form a silent crowd on the receiving end. Put differently, audiences are required to listen and only act on instruction and demand. Propaganda, understood as state-driven indoctrination, lives to target; its goal is getting to a particular objective. Even in the case of the Juche centers, target listeners were expected to follow the new light. Illiberal states’ nation branding is continually looking to, and contingent upon, an audience to surrender, to agree, to accept. That is why any attempt to open a conversation or voice dissent, by way of questioning must be suppressed. The most prominent historical examples of such repression comprised the Marxist scholar Hajime Kawakami in Japan in the late 1920s and 30s, authors Boris Pasternak in the 1950s, Alexander Solzhenitsyn in the 1960s in the USSR, and, most recently, artist Ai Weiwei in China, student Mahsa Amini in Iran, and corporate lawyer Alexei Navalny in Russia.

Conclusion

So, what do these papers tell us regarding our original question – how and why do and did states and proto-state-like entities legitimize their quality as liberal – or illiberal? In the papers at hand, we see, first of all, a surprising amount of vagueness, opaqueness, and nebulous implication when it comes to the contours of the liberal brand. Liberal projection in Catalonia, as Tobias Klee has shown, posed, for the most part, as self-determination. Catalans protesting in Paris desired not to be part of Spain. Beyond such statement, however, it is not clear what else liberal Catalonia was going to be or show. In the case of the Turkish embassy in Washington, the liberal brand encompassed, clearly, freedom of speech and sound. But this was also a complicated, since jazz is, in essence, no good example for liberal predisposition. Most of all, it is originally less improvisatory than hierarchical. And in the case of the European Expo, the liberal brand remained even more uncertain: given the variety of competing approaches, in 1958, liberal Europe represented a place where people cherished specific – liberal – values. One common attitude among liberal image managers and scholars was and remains to this day, a common conviction that if just dropping specific key words

couched in dialogue – liberty, equality, self-determination – would encourage people to understand and prefer the ideology and its pertinence on site.

Liberalism's core values shine by example, so the story went, and who could argue with that? But this is not so; instead, such fallacy brings us back to the beginning of this essay along with the four criteria outlined above. To repeat, the fact of the matter is that the number of fully democratic regimes is receding. This, in turn, indicates that at least parts of the liberal brand are not working out well here and we need to ask ourselves why and where the failure may be. Two options offer themselves, and they are related to the product and the message. Either there is something wrong with the product liberalism itself; in that case, the ideology has failed the citizen. Or, there is something wrong with the marketing of the product; then we need to ponder the query whether and, if so, how to change branding strategies.

The papers at hand lead me to believe that the latter may be true. In the long run, liberal states fail to market themselves well for four reasons: while, first, the essence of campaigns may be the same everywhere – attractiveness, stability, beauty, safety – secondly, liberal image management needs legitimacy and with that, a powerful motivational argument for resilience. Because of that need, often not or only partially fulfilled, liberal image management is frequently, third, reactive and informed by moments of crisis rather than consistent. Finally, and this is the fourth point, outcomes – notably success – are hard to define, precisely because audiences cannot be predicted or controlled; their versatility, indeed, empowerment, plays a contributing role in the crafting of the nation brand – as they should.

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