

# CHECKS & BALANCES

Volume 25, Issue 3



## PURSUING SYNERGY

*Making Sense of Connection*

**Lune Gros***Chair of Clio*

Dear reader,

A very warm welcome to the third and final edition of this year's Checks & Balances. Summer is now really around the corner, however, many of you will still find yourselves stuck in the library; the final stretch before the holiday break. Hopefully, the prospect of long warm days on the beach, accompanied with Aperols on the terrace, might keep you going!

Oh, how did this academic year fly by! It seems like only yesterday entering Pakhuis for the Opening of the Year Party, or getting to know (what-were-then-new) students at the Introduction Camp - of which many are now friends and committee members. Now we have reached the last weeks of class, the final exams, and the closing Clio parties of this academic year. And also the farewell to our Board, and with that, my last time to have the honour to write this editorial.

And what an honour it is indeed. This edition's theme, Pursuing Synergy - Making Sense of Connection, hits the nail right on the head. Whether you are new to the city since this year, or you have lived here for years, it's the bonds we form - the helping hands during moving, the hugs during setbacks - that make our student times worthwhile. In the absence of our families, Groningen becomes our home away from home, a sentiment that Clio endeavours to cultivate. So, as we prepare to return to our families this summer, let's not forget to cherish the new family we've found here.

This edition of the Checks & Balances Magazine will show you many new patterns of synergy and insights into connection within the world around us. A final thank you to the Editorial Staff of the Checks & Balances magazine for their outstanding hard work and dedication in the past year, leading to the creation of another beautiful new edition; you can be very proud. Have fun reading, and I wish you all a lovely summer break!

On behalf of the 36th Board of Clio and with much love, goodbye!

**Lune Gros***Chair of Clio*

**Anna Aragoncillo**  
*Editor-in-Chief*



Dearest reader,

I cannot believe this will be the last time I will have the pleasure of addressing you. For the entirety of the past academic year, time has felt like it was slipping through my fingers, but not without precious memories and tearful reminiscences tangling themselves in the nooks and crannies of my hands.

Last week, for the first time in the year I swam freely at the Dot. It was early, not a single person in sight, but as I emerged from the water, I turned around to find a mama duck followed by five little ducklings calmly swimming. And, in that corner of sweet water in the locality of Groningen that we proudly call the Stadsstrand, the drops that wet my hair and rode my face felt like the so-familiar beach of the place I used to call my home. For a second, I closed my eyes, and that single drop of water contained the ocean; it smelt salty, tasted moire and felt thrilling, it was home. Every drop of water has seen the ferocious blood-filled jaws of a white shark, touched the bumpy ridges that run down the fins of a humpback whale and brushed against the feet of a little four year-old learning to swim.

In the same way that every drop of the water contains the essence of the ocean, inside every human is the essence of all humanity. We live as humans, we perform our identity, with its faults and expectations. We talk, we think, we do. It's precisely due to that human desire to connect that, on behalf of the Editorial Staff of 2023-2024, I would like to present you our last edition:

*Pursuing Synergy:  
Making Sense of Connection*

We actively pursue synergy, striving to find our place in the system, like the roots of a maple tree extending underground and providing home to small cottontail bunnies that burrow themselves in the midst of the cold winter. Our constant search for belonging is a never-ending battle in which, rather than fighting against the storm, we need to adjust the sails and continue existing, coexisting and pursuing synergy.

Lots of love,

**Anna Aragoncillo Barceló**  
*Editor-in-Chief*



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# The Ties that Make Us Human

## *And the Value of Connection across Time and Space*

ESTHER LÁINEZ CARBALLO

Looking at the stars, the sea, or the horizon: no matter who we are or where we come from, it is a commonly shared experience among humans to wonder at the immensity surrounding us. We all have our own lives, where we are the main characters: and still, in the occasional moments where we remember the greatness of the world and the magnitude of time, it becomes easy to feel like a grain of sand on the beach—so small, so insignificant.

What we often overlook is that, no matter how small, we are still part of that beach, as are all the other grains. As Thomas Merton put it, “No man is an island”. We all exist in correlation to others, connected by invisible threads that range from the tightness that connects a mother and her baby to the kilometres separating us from our favourite singer, sports player, or that one YouTuber saving our lives before an exam with a maths tutorial.

While globalisation has certainly multiplied the number of threads tying people across the world, those connections have always existed, as they are at the core of what we are: humans. Even before our brains were fully developed, even before we created complex languages or wore sewn clothes, our ancestors already relied fully on each other, creating strong relations of interdependence with one goal in mind: staying alive. The question is: are we really so different from what we were back then? Obviously, we still get our basic needs, like food and shelter, thanks to the actions of other humans, whether it is the farmers or the supermarket cashiers. But if we move one step beyond that, how much do we need human connection? Well, several studies have proved it to be directly related to overall happiness and health. Looking at countries with comparatively high and low life expectancies, researchers have found that high degrees of social connection significantly reduce the risk of several health conditions, while the odds of mortality can increase up to a 91% among those who live socially isolated, making it as harmful as smoking and more dangerous than obesity or physical inactivity.

But living within a supportive community is not about bare survival anymore: it's about finding meaning, purpose; being part of something big-

ger than ourselves. It's about developing a sense of belonging not only vital for overall well-being, but about developing one's own identity. It's about solidarity and empathy, which ultimately make human connection a driving force of social change. This could not be any other way. We are social animals; we care about each other, we care about the world, and we often hope to make it a better place. But how can we do this, when the world is so big, and we are so small? Well, this is where we ought to remember the phrase, “Think globally, act locally”. Yes, the world is a big place, but we are still part of it, as so are many other tiny worlds, like the city where you study or even the small park behind your house.

It does not matter who we are. Each of the thousand leaves of a tree are as important to it as the trunk or the roots, because it is the connection between all the tiny elements what makes them bigger than themselves. No, we are not insignificant, and neither are our actions. So let us nurture our connections, take care of those around us, tend to our environment and act with love and kindness, for our existence was never meant to be a lonely one, and it is only drop by drop that the sea can become so.



# From Zero to Hero?

## *Who is Progressive Taxation Truly Unfair towards?*

ROCÍO MARTEL MEDRANO

Picture this. It is a lovely Monday morning and, checking your social media, you sigh in disappointment and disbelief at Elon Musk's newest tweet, filled with controversial and just plain untrue facts. As you voice your thoughts, that one person speaks up to bravely defend the poor billionaire, and right there and then, Musk himself enters the room and gives him a hug filled with gratitude and a billion euro check, effectively solving his life forever. This is a true story! Or, at least, I am certain that it is what many “average Joes” believe is inevitably going to happen to them one day.

This is a fascinating phenomenon that many people encounter in their daily lives. There is a shocking amount of citizens who truthfully believe that billionaires have amassed that gargantuan amount of wealth by simply working hard and investing here and there. Furthermore, they believe that this 1% of the population is paying enough and should not be taxed more than the regular person with a mundane salary, because that is unfair to them. As if these people care about what is fair.

Now, many countries have implemented the system of progressive taxation, one that is at first glance much more equitable for the general public than that of a regressive tax, for instance. In simple terms, what this implies is that the higher your taxable income is, the more taxes you owe to the government of your country. Simple enough, right? Curiously, I would argue that the biggest opponents to this kind of taxation aren't even the rich, but the people who somehow have deluded themselves into believing that by a stroke of luck they will one day transform from rags to riches, conquering the slim odds that exist of one of us becoming a millionaire, or even better, a billionaire.

And what these people are ignoring, is that the system of progressive taxation, even in its attempt to be fair, is deeply flawed. The minority who has reached the peak of wealth is oftentimes not paying any civil taxes at all. This is an insane, but true, statement, and the reason for it is that they fall below the income threshold required to pay these taxes. And that is the catch, the magic key word related to progressive taxes is taxable income. In this income, returns from investments are not accounted for, and this is in fact where most of a billionaire's capital resides.



In addition, there are numerous techniques that can be used for money not to be counted as income, or to simply avoid paying these taxes. One technique often used to reduce them is that of donating to a self-established “charity organisation”, since donations are tax deductible and very loosely regulated. In a nutshell, if your money exists in the form of assets instead of cash, you are good to go. It is due to this, that during the Covid-19 crisis in the United States, 18 billionaires received a stimulus check, stolen from the hands of those who were struggling to make their money last until the following month.

It is time to put things into perspective, and realise that the vast majority of people are closer to a homeless person on the street than they will ever be to a billionaire. Their wealth will never trickle down to our pockets, and while we fight and work to make ends meet and save the environment, that 1% of the world's population will continue to avoid paying what constitutes an insignificant sum in their bank account and parading their private jets around, simply because they can. After all, who is going to stop them?

# Bearing the Great Burden

## Low-Income Countries as the Victims of the Climate Crisis

ROCÍO MARTEL MEDRANO

The vast majority of people know of climate change. Although climate sceptics are not scarce, a person can ask any individual around them and receive responses full of resentment, indifference or even disbelief, but rarely absolute ignorance. The threats that accompany it come as no surprise, as we hear about them over and over again when looking at our phones or TVs. Another unsurprising fact is that 82% of the pollution and greenhouse gas emissions in the world is caused by 20 countries, with the biggest offenders being China, the United States and, collectively, the European Union. Large climate polluters tend to equal large-income countries, but where do the low-income countries stand in this equation?

*It is no lie that climate change is a global challenge, but it is easy to forget that not all states are affected equally by exposure to this catastrophe. Countries with a lower-income suffer the numerous negative effects of global warming to an abysmally deeper degree than those who are in effect contributing the most to it. Although fallacious, it is certainly easier to forget about the worries of our planet slowly dying when you have a built-in air conditioner and an economy that is non-dependent on climate sensitive factors.*

The economic importance of agriculture or fisheries in countries such as the Federal Republic of Somalia or the Central African Republic makes them particularly vulnerable. Climate change leads to food insecurity, with a decrease in agricultural productivity and higher consumption prices that can be brought about either by the slower, long-term climate trends or by the more abrupt and disruptive natural disasters. Crop yield failures are expected to be 25 times higher by 2050, forecasting a period of longer and more frequent famines. Unfortunately, these countries have limited human, institutional and financial capabilities to address the detrimental effects of extreme climate change.

One of the biggest threats to agriculture comes in the form of droughts. We do not have to look into the future for this, as the International Rescue Committee expects that more than eight million Somalis could suffer from famine during the year due to an ongoing period of droughts. In addition to agricultural problems, these droughts, accompanied by changes in rainfall patterns and increased evaporation due to high temperatures,

majorly increase the amount of water scarcity in our planet, and decrease the water quality. By 2025, it is expected that an appalling 5 billion people on the planet will be affected by water scarcity.

The climate crisis has, and will continue to have, disastrous effects on global health efforts in a multitude of ways. The aforementioned lack of clean water brings with it the increase of sicknesses like diarrhoea, an affliction that is deadly when left untreated, especially for children who are more susceptible to dehydration. Additionally, a warming of 2-3°C can result in more than 150 million additional cases of malaria all around the globe. When a person's livelihood and living conditions are irreversibly affected, their only option might be migration. 216 million climate refugees will have been displaced in six world regions by the year 2050, with the most affected being sub-Saharan Africa, East Asia and the Pacific, and South Asia.

And the most unfair truth is that reports by The World Bank communicate that *only one-tenth of the world's greenhouse gases are emitted by the 74 lowest income countries*. The very lowest contributors to this crisis, and those least equipped to tackle it, are alone in truly dealing with its deadliness, with little to no aid from those who brought the situation upon them. The question now is, will the true culprits of the catastrophe ever deal with the devastating consequences of their actions?



# Can One State Carry an Economic Community?

## The Latest Challenge to Nigeria's Regional Leadership

SAM HOLM VAN DONK

Nigerian President Bola Tinubu looks tired as he steps up to the podium. Being merely two weeks into his appointment as chairman of the Economic Community of West Africa (ECOWAS), he was not expecting to be faced with what is likely the organisation's most existential crisis to date. Under the watchful gaze of the Nigerian parliament, and journalists from around the African continent and beyond, Tinubu announces on behalf of ECOWAS that if the newly-installed military junta of neighbouring Niger does not reinstate the ousted President Mohamed Bazoum, the Nigerian military will spearhead a military intervention with the explicit aim to restore democracy. He continued; "We must stand firm on democracy... We will not accept coup after coup in West Africa again". He is known for previously criticising ECOWAS' seeming inaction on matters of democracy, describing the organisation as being made up of "toothless bulldogs". Not only would the world hold its breath on whether Tinubu would follow through on these grand remarks, commentators noted the profound sense of responsibility that permeated his statements as chairman of ECOWAS, only strengthening the widespread belief in Nigeria as not only a regional power, but the backbone behind the entirety of ECOWAS.

*Nigeria's persistent involvement in ECOWAS has in fact been noted since the bloc's founding in 1975. For starters, the country accounts for more than half of the region's population and GDP, thus making up by far the most dominant single power in the bloc. With that, the country has strategically dominated previous ECOWAS military interventions, taking place in various countries in the region, most recently the Gambia in 2017. For each of these operations, which include objectives like ensuring a smooth transition of power, fighting insurgency groups, peacekeeping and enforcing ceasefires, their military personnel made up the vast majority of deployed ECOWAS forces, with Nigerian politicians frequently spearheading the calls for interventions, stressing the need for West African solidarity for upholding democratic values and humane treatment in war.*

It has been suggested, however, that Nigeria utilises ECOWAS as a tool for expanding their sphere of influence. Being the largest export economy of the region, any trade liberalisation measures (those being a primary goal of the union) disproportionately benefits them, and thus incentivises inducing functional 'spillover'



into other sectors, such as peacekeeping, self-sufficiency and humanitarian development. So while President Tinubu certainly has grand things to say on the importance of West African democracy, it must be somewhat cynically noted that any collective action undertaken as a regional organisation does serve to strengthen Nigeria's influence on its neighbouring states.

But then, following Tinubu's condemnation, the member states of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger would announce their departure from the community, and the formation of a new mutual defence pact- the Alliance of Sahel States. This organisation, while not explicitly claiming it, is largely seen as a direct counterpart to ECOWAS, embodying and promoting military rule and authoritarian government as opposed to the former's apparent dedication to democratic traditions. But what does this mean to Nigeria? With this departure, ECOWAS lost approximately half of its landmass, and now has a seemingly hostile neighbouring faction to the north. As a result, Nigeria's sphere of influence has been significantly reduced, and its potential as a normative power could seem to have been vanquished completely. And yet, the country would demonstrate its dedication to democratic ideals when it coerced an unstable Senegal into a peaceful and successful transition of power, after many months of uncertainty, violence and political tension.

*It remains to be seen whether Nigeria can carry a struggling ECOWAS into the future, and whether the Alliance of Sahel States should be viewed as a powerful, antithetical adversary, or merely a contrarian fad in the broader context of African democratisation.*

# Empowering our Voices

## *The Cornerstone for Global Democracy in 2024*

MATEI CIOCAN

This year has been called one of, if not the biggest year for elections in modern history, with more than 60 nations calling their citizens to the polls, representing nearly half of the global population. And while this is without a doubt a moment of celebration for democracy around the world, such an eventful year will decide the trajectory of global politics as the international community faces an increasingly active authoritarian threat from extremist and illiberal regimes.

Recent history has proven that a decade sprinkled with crisis and uncertainty would most likely lead to a growth of anti-system establishments such as extremist parties or serve as justification for authoritarian regimes to strengthen their leash on national freedom even more. Events such as the war in Ukraine, the Coronavirus pandemic or the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians have created an expansion platform for authoritarian threats. The rise of the extreme right in many liberal democratic countries such as The Netherlands, France or Argentina is a valuable indicator of the consequences that recent world events have created. Economic inequality and disparity has inevitably pushed people to look beyond the traditional political scope towards new, radical forces that promise to alleviate their scarcities.

That is why now, in 2024, when a marathon of elections coincided, it is more vital than ever before for people to go and vote to preserve the legitimacy of liberal democracy in order to prevent the aggravation of the spread of extremism.

Looking through a more enhanced lens, a few political races will determine how the balance of world power will unfold for the next decade or so. The Indian general elections will for instance determine how the world's largest democracy will position itself in the face of growing Chinese and Russian influence on the Asian continent, and will settle if the growing nationalistic wave will capture Indian political power in such a way to distort its alignment on the global stage. Fast forward, in November the American citizens will face again the choice between the incumbent Biden administration, plundered with criticism regarding the management of recent international crisis, and

the former president Donald Trump, a political figure-head of populism and extremism, who threatened in his speeches the integrity of NATO and is facing as of now multiple trials regarding his integrity. With these specs in sight, the citizens of the United States will face a difficult yet crucial choice that will once again shape the American foreign policy for the next decade.

The European Parliament Elections are coming closer, which should not be looked down on. Europe is arguably the largest stage of recent populism and extremism growth, with many nations such as France, Germany and a number of Eastern nations facing a troublesome increase in extremist parties. Therefore, taking into account the geopolitical sensibility of the European continent since 2022, EU citizens must come together to send a signal of unity against these kinds of forces that resemble too much of the interwar 1930' political agendas.

And in the end, as the current marathon of elections is unfolding, it is the role of the responsible and proactive citizens to devote our will towards coming together and decisively making our voices heard, as silence and indifference do nothing but immerse the already troublesome political spectrum into an even darker, extremist and harmful electoral plague. And the question remains if after 2024 the world will finally focus its efforts on the existential issues that plague it, or if it will rather close itself even more into instability and populism.



# Decoupling and Disconnecting

## *How Globalisation Seems to Be on Its Way Back*

CASPAR LEMMENS

The medicines we take? From China. The gas that warms our houses? From Russia, still. The oil that fuels our cars? Crosses various unpredictable authoritarian regimes on its way to the Netherlands. In recent years, it seems to have become an increasingly risky endeavour to have critical supply lines overseas. The need to control or domestically facilitate production of certain essential commodities seems to have also been noted by policymakers across the world. Seeing how for example the US launched initiatives to domestically produce computer chips, it does not seem unfair to say that, after decades of globalisation, we might be on the way back.

This recent surge in de-globalisation trends, catalysed by phenomena like the COVID-19 pandemic and escalating geopolitical tensions, has significantly reshaped the global landscape, particularly in terms of security and economy. Security concerns have become more pronounced as countries reassess their reliance on global supply chains, especially in critical sectors like healthcare, technology, and defence.

Governments worldwide are increasingly prioritising national security over economic interdependence, leading to measures such as reshoring (the return of production chains to a country) key industries, bolstering domestic manufacturing capabilities, and imposing stricter regulations on foreign investments and technology transfers. These efforts aim to reduce vulnerabilities to disruptions and potential security threats originating from other nations. Economically, de-globalisation provides a stark contrast, and a shift away from the long-standing trend of liberalisation and free trade. Protectionist policies, trade barriers, and tariffs have become more common. This trend has led to a slowdown in global trade growth and heightened uncertainty for multinational corporations operating across borders.

Moreover, the decoupling of major economies, particularly between the United States and China, has added fuel to the de-globalization fire. Escalating trade tensions, technological and geopolitical rivalries have contributed to a growing demarcation of the global economy into separate spheres of influence. This fragmentation not only undermines economic integration but also exacerbates geopoliti-



cal tensions and raises the risk of conflicts: think of the possibility of an escalation around Taiwan.

However, while de-globalization may offer short-term security and economic benefits for some countries, it also poses significant challenges and risks. Fragmentation and protectionism can hinder innovation, limit access to markets and resources, and impede economic growth. Moreover, increased nationalism and isolationism could strain diplomatic relations, escalate geopolitical tensions, and undermine international cooperation in addressing important global challenges such as climate change, pandemics, and terrorism. The dilemma between reshoring production for enhanced domestic security and fostering global cooperation on issues like climate change epitomises a complex issue. Reshoring promises bolstered national resilience, curtailing dependencies on external supply chains, thus fortifying domestic security. Conversely, global collaboration on climate change and other shared challenges requires interdependence and collective action. Yet, it may entail compromises in national autonomy and economic interests. Balancing these imperatives requires nuanced policy frameworks that reconcile national security imperatives with the use of global cooperation, fostering resilience without undermining interconnectedness. For policymakers, this will be a very fine line to walk.

This dilemma has profound implications for security and the economy. While efforts to prioritise national interests and reduce vulnerabilities are understandable, policymakers should carefully balance these objectives with the broader benefits of global integration and cooperation. Finding the right equilibrium between autarky and openness will be essential to navigate the challenges of an increasingly complex world.

# Conflict as Entertainment

## *The Phenomenon of Livestreamed Warfare, and How We Reached It*

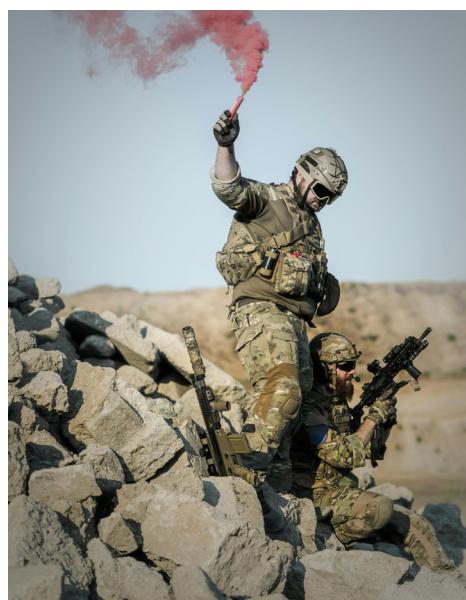
SAM HOLM VAN DONK

Back in February of 2022, I happened to walk into my high school maths class to find my friends huddled around a computer, intently watching the video that was playing. I could hear faint sounds of combat coming from the computer, and based on my classmates' intrigued faces, I figured it was some kind of video game content. I approached them, but upon looking closer, I remember thinking that it really didn't look very animated at all. And that's because it wasn't.

That morning on February 24th, we were watching, in real-time, as Russian armed forces almost 1500 kilometres away attacked the Ukrainian troops stationed on the eastern front. And to be honest, it was intriguing. We watched through the crappy live CCTV footage as Ukrainian soldiers shielded themselves behind makeshift barriers, peering out only to exchange gunfire with the onslaught of projectiles they were facing. The last thing I remember seeing was a Ukrainian soldier falling to the ground, a dark pool forming around him on the shattered concrete. He was dead, and we had seen it all happen. And with that, we shut off the livestream. Not because we were disgusted, but because it was time for class to start.

It certainly prompted some discussion on how we view global conflict today. But this wasn't the first time we'd seen something like this. When, in the year before, the Guardian covered the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan, they too had a running upload of images and video footage that spared us none of the extreme violence that occurred in the few days it took for Kabul to fall. Furthermore, it had been accompanied by a little map of the country, showing in red the live advances of Taliban troops, and their unyielding march towards the capital. All of this honestly felt more like watching a game of Hearts of Iron than any real conflict, and it was almost satisfying to see the red smother the previously-white map. This too, would occur some years later in late 2023, as reddit users posted daily updates of the Israeli ground invasion of the Gaza strip, showing blue cartoon tanks rolling through the dense street network of Gaza city. It became a daily ritual for some, as you followed the Is-

raeli battalions taking over street by street, completely sidelining the real, senseless brutality of these attacks. But are livestreaming and instantaneous updates then the current state of war broadcasting, or a sinister reflection of how humanity views suffering? Hasn't spreading news of sites of conflict been a thing for as long as conflict has (NB: always)? In truth, both of these questions are hard to answer. The first journalistic war reports stem from the Crimean war, 160 years ago, where British newspapers regularly kept the public updated with news from the British camps thanks to faster and wider-reaching networks of trains and telegraphs. War photographs also became prominent in this period, but it would take some decades before these were regularly printed in the newspapers. In the second Anglo-Boer war starting in 1899, Winston Churchill famously reported on this conflict as a young journalist just beginning his career. In the next decades, photographs and footage would be increasingly used to garner war support from the public, rather than to report factually on the lives of the soldiers.



But the Vietnam war would revolutionise the use of video in war reporting, as life in the US bases were meticulously recorded and broadcasted on a massive scale to millions of homes across America from 1965 onwards. This brought the war into the forefront of public awareness, as even combat footage could be viewed comfortably from your armchair back home. It would become known as the "first televised war", as it had a fundamental role in shaping the course of the war, with some suggesting negative coverage to be the decisive factor in the decision to pull out. Not quite classical war broadcasting, but from 1983 the international news coverage of the Ethiopian famine would expose the world to the sheer magnitude of this disaster, and led to the famous Live Aid charity concert in 1985, where profits went towards mitigating the famine's effects. This type of reporting, spearheaded by BBC journalist Michael Buerk, would be a landmark in what kind of news Western audiences would receive, and in how we hear about suffering far removed from our own lives. Even today, images and video clips from humanitarian disasters circulate the internet only moments after occurring, a standard set by Buerk's frank and direct reporting.

But how about some more subversive kind of content? Violent and gory video clips, originating from groups like ISIS or Mexican cartels, seem to have acquired a stranglehold on the darker parts of the internet, and I sincerely believe that this suggests that it's no

longer simply about staying informed about what's going on in the world. This kind of content is, after all, brutally unapologetic about its purpose- we watch it only to see people suffer and die. It's entertainment, whether or not we view it as such, and I think that it speaks to a darker side of humanity that these kinds of videos flourish as they do online.

I'd like to end this piece with a brief moment of reflection on global interconnectedness. For as long as humans have engaged in conflict, we have wanted to hear about it. Today, technological advances allow us to broadcast this more efficiently, instantaneously and with less risk to our own selves. But is this a good thing? On the one hand it spreads awareness about other peoples' lives, and can be the start of aid to people

who are clearly suffering. But on the other hand, we need to think about why we are doing this. Is it to satisfy our own morbid desires, of seeing people suffer while we sit comfortably in our maths classes? It does, after all, appear eerily close to entertainment, and in my mind, it comes across almost as a sort of Hunger Games. At what point do WE begin placing bets on which Ukrainian soldier will live, and who won't? Are we, even if we claim not to, rooting for the little cartoon tanks rolling over a virtual map of the gaza strip? I don't know the answer to any of these questions. Just remember that this is real, and not just not some work of fiction that fades as soon as we turn off our television.

# Part of the Bigger Picture

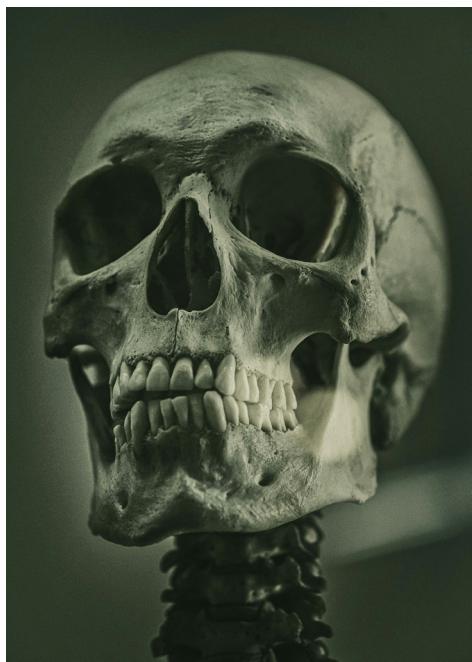
## Conversations on Human Nature

BRIANA STEFANA AGRICI & EMMA ANDREAE

Ever since men could theorise, human nature has been a topic of contention across multiple fields of study, from social sciences such as philosophy and sociology, to more natural ones such as biology. In trying to understand their own behaviour, people have resorted (in very broad terms) to two perspectives that could potentially explain what makes us navigate our experiences in such different ways — nature vs nurture. In short, nature refers to our genetics, with the main assumption that biology and hereditary factors are primary in shaping us as individuals, while nurture considers circumstances such as family, friends and cultural environment to be more important.

### Briana

Navigating the debate of nature vs nurture always poses the difficult burden of “looking” deep into yourself. Why at 20 years old, when certain behavioural expectations are already hanging heavy upon you, in some situations your first instinct is to react like the child that was first scolded in school by their teacher? Although taking responsibility for shortcomings that



sometimes are not even your fault is a tiresome and (honestly) irritating process, I do not think any other approach besides the nurture one can fully explain the convoluted nature of humans.

*While biological factors have an undeniable role in assigning distinctive traits, the environment in which we first developed followed by other circumstances in our lives are decisive in understanding what we are and what we are not – essentially, a product of society. The triad of the “isms” – social, cultural and geographical determinism underline that we, as members of communities, cannot be displaced and studied outside of the spaces in which we carry our day to day lives.*

### Emma

Whilst the environment does factor a lot into how we are shaped, I do not think nurture should be the main approach to explain the nature of humans. Take twin studies for example: these studies involve comparing data from identical and fraternal twins to apprehend the role of genes and environment on numerous traits. Fraternal twins share about 50% of their genetic material, while identical twins share almost all of it. This allows for a comparison highlighting genetic influences. Studies like these have proven that genetics play a very important role in the structural development of different regions of the brain. On the topic of development, several twin studies have also shown that in the study of language acquisition, genetics play a huge part. E.g. Even though a set of identical twins were raised apart, they still showed linguistic similarities (despite different environments). This exemplifies one of the many cases of a strong genetic influence.

### Briana

I do agree that the set of studies done on twins provide interesting insights in the topic and highlight the importance of nature in talking about the scientific development of skills. However, I also believe that the most important take-away from these studies should be that genes act like a foundational layer for who we have the potential to be, while the environment is the one that decides how these genes are going to manifest. I believe this is particularly relevant when referring to the personality of a person – a child raised by a violent

person can grow up to be a violent person, but not because they inherited the personality from their parents, but rather because they internalised this type of behaviour as being the norm. Moreover, studies in the field of epigenetics have shown that external factors such as sleep, trauma, ageing, stress etc. can modify a person’s DNA, which further implies that our genetic code is the one that adapts to our environment and not the other way around. I think an essential point to bring up here is that by assigning nature as a prime way to understand humans, we can also run into the risk of classifying others in terms of absolute categories (eg. bad vs good, strong vs weak), by reducing them to a set of traits that we think are inherent. On a larger scale, this can be deeply problematic, as it has historically been the case with theories such as Social Darwinism.

### Emma

Despite the fact that I do agree with the fact that lots of external factors can cause a change in our genetic code, I would argue that the basis of our genetic code stays (roughly) the same. *Genetic studies have shown that certain mental illnesses, like major depressive disorder, are way more likely to appear in individuals with specific genes*, which indicates a ‘genetic component’ to it. I would also want to bring attention to the point that arises when talking about the risk of classification with absolute categories. On the other hand, by assigning nature as a prime way to understand humans, I would argue that we can understand the personality of humans on their own much better by looking at their ‘inherent’ personality traits than by only looking at the environment they grew up with. As people tend to keep most traits they were born with, I would argue looking at those would be far more effective than only looking at the environment. I do agree that if we reduce others to a set of traits, it can be seriously problematic, but we do not necessarily have to classify them into absolute categories, as people will always have ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ traits. People are born with ‘inherent’ traits, but some of these traits can change with age. I am, however, a believer of the fact that a couple of traits can and will always stay with someone.

All in all, the issue of human nature remains one open to interpretation, as it is difficult to affirm for sure that one side of the nature vs nurture debate possesses the absolute truth of the matter, especially considering how much of the human mind and body we still have yet failed to understand. However, one thing is clear — if we want to have productive debates in fields such as politics or sociology, we have to remember that one side does not exclude the other. We are biology just as much as we are a product of our environment and our culture.



# Seeking Stillness In Motion

## *Can We Walk Backwards When the World Is Sprinting Forwards?*

FABIA MIELCAREK

A huge laugh on my face as I sit in the middle of my friends on a blanket in the park. The sun is shining. I turn the page: me hugging my dad at the airport, about to go on a big adventure but sad to leave my loved ones behind. I take a look at the next picture and see me standing in front of the Eiffel tower next to a group of new found friends but sad to leave my loved ones behind. The upcoming photo depicts the sea meeting the sky, the transition barely visible.

I slowly close my photobook with a smile on my face and all of the memories circling through my mind.

I go on Instagram.

Like. Like. Comment. Like.

*What was that first post about?*

*Let me look if I can find the picture of my dog among the thousands of pictures I took last week.*

Technology is advancing, it makes it so easy to find the song you just heard in the clothing store in a second and put it in your playlist. Did you look at the artist? Did you listen to the lyrics? Or was it just the beat that caught you?

It has become an upwards trend amongst people, and especially young adults, to draw back to old habits, old ways of taking pictures and listening to music. They take out their disposable camera in a lovely moment to actively decide to invest one of the scarce pictures for the memory of it. They turn around the vinyl of their favourite artist to actively listen to the next song. It is an urge to live in the moment. To actively experience the sounds and feelings and capture the emotions.

We want our life to have importance. We want to show all of the pictures from our youth to our grandchildren when we are old and grey. It is so easy, too easy to capture every second of our day and post it into the world and to forget about it a day later. I walk around with music in my ear the whole day, every day, just to hear the sound of it but not actively listening to what the lyrics say anymore.

We find ourselves in a paradox dilemma between advanced possibilities, improved productivity and the fast pace of life, constant urge to use technology. At the same time, we are happy to not have that much of an importance and also want to be meaningful because

otherwise: what do we live for? We want to show ourselves on social media and share the amazing things we are doing but if we take a second on top of that mountain we just climbed and breathe, we question if we just took that picture to impress others or for our own memory.

Don't get me wrong, the interconnectedness between cultures and people through new technologies unleashes knowledge and contacts which are a privilege but, at the same time, the fast pace of life washes away what we produce. A hundred thousand tracks are uploaded every day to music platforms like Spotify. How are artists supposed to stick out when there are not only 999.999 other songs competing for attention the same day but a hundred thousand new ones every day afterwards? However, with vinyls, it is all about the artist and the album again.

Taking a picture with a vintage disposable camera or looking through the old and slightly cracked vinyls at the flea market helps people to actively experience the moment again in a world which is all about the advancement of production and productivity. Too many influences and possibilities can be overwhelming, so perhaps we shall take small items to appreciate the tiny joys of life again and feel the importance of our being between all of the other individuals.



# It's not You, it's Us

## *Addressing Statelessness as an Us Problem, not a Them Problem*

ANNA ARAGONCILLO BARCELÓ

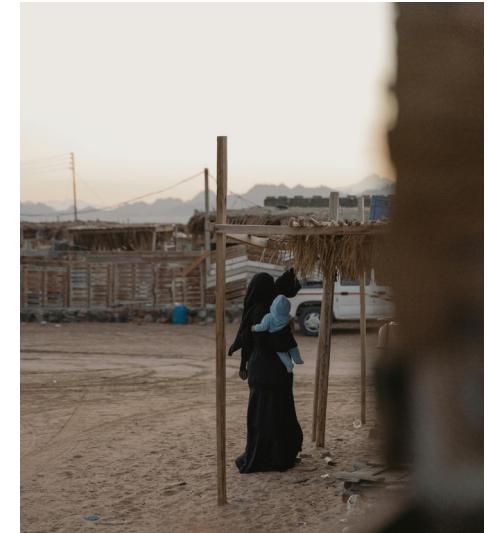
How must it feel, waking up in a place that should possess the utmost liminality but that has become cemented into your existence? How must it feel, for your basic human rights to be violated in a systematic and constant manner by precluding you from your right to a nationality? How must it feel, to belong, but to not belong? That is what statelessness is like. Stateless persons live in an illicit world, one that treats them as second-class beings, not due to them having committed crimes, but due to a surrounding that regards their existence as the crime itself.

*How must it feel to belong,  
but to not belong?*

Statelessness is usually categorised through the use of an imprecise taxonomy, which bears issues and implications in the operationalisation of solutions. The first type is de jure statelessness, which comes into place when a person cannot claim citizenship or nationality to any recognised state, such as when a state ceases to exist and no other state succeeds it. This is the type of statelessness status that is formally recognized by international conventions.

The second category has led to the creation of a grey area, the so-called de facto statelessness, those whose state does exist, but they might possess certain motives that preclude them from achieving an effective nationality, although it must be considered that de facto stateless persons are different from people possessing the status of refugees. The reason why statelessness presents an issue for international law is due to this second category not being recognised by international conventions, as the locus of measures taken in the name of reducing statelessness in reality have only been capable of influencing one sector of statelessness. In fact, while it is true that the measures taken have reduced the number of formally considered stateless persons, they have not been able to reduce the number of unprotected subjects, those considered de facto stateless.

Sure, the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness played (and still does play) a crucial role in the creation of a collective imaginary that precludes the arbitrary privation of a nationality by States, but its actual and tangible dimension has proven to be lacking. This can be greatly attributed to a conceptualisation of stateless persons that greatly sustains itself on the



concept of citizenship, which fails to capture the nuances of the core stateless issue. Citizenship is defined through three dimensions: the legal, the political and the identity. However, rather than just a status, it can be considered as a practice, as the way in which we unconsciously operationalise it highlights its contingent and constructed character. By basing statelessness definitions on outdated notions of citizenship, we are actively failing to capture the struggles of stateless persons, thus making it impossible to mend such systematic issues.

Statelessness pushes vulnerable individuals to the junctures of the social system, until they fall through the cracks of a crumbling pyramid. However, the only reason why they are capable of falling is because we, as humans, have built a social order that allows for that. It's not a them issue, it's an us issue. We are the ones that have built and allowed for the continuation of a precarious and predatory societal system, one that has excluded certain persons from being part of the system without a justification. The environment that bore us is nothing more than another piece of the puzzle, a puzzle in which privilege has allowed for the weaponization of citizenship.

It is the role of the State to protect and care for its citizens, so what happens when your state does not love you back?

# Passport Stamp to Exploitation

## *Crossing Borders or Crossing Lines? An Objection to Western "High-Value" Masculinity*

BRIANA STEFANA AGRICI

**A** Reddit post reads “Instead of having an apoplexy about it, women should simply do what they’ve been telling men to do for the last 40 years, and that’s simply to do better. Get better. The market dynamics are changing, and they’re simply going to have to step their game up if they want to land high-value Western men. Passport bros exist because the standard of Western has declined. Western women have created that market.”

This idea summarises the general sentiment of online forums of self-titled Passport Bros, a community of men formed on social media around the common practice of preying on (young) women with (usually) an impoverished background, promising a strong passport in exchange for unconditional servitude in the household. Men from the United States or other Western Countries seek wives in other parts of the world such as South America, Southeast Asia and Eastern Europe, in search of a “traditional” and “submissive” woman.

Defenders of the cause will tell you: “there is nothing wrong with marrying abroad”. However, this assumption implies that men can just consult a catalogue and disregard the women they find to be either “too progressive”, or not having ideals and lifestyles “worthy” of considering in a wife. This way of perceiving women is not only questionable, but also deeply dehumanising, as it reduces an entire group to a set of stereotypes and assumptions—Eastern European women are poor and in search of a financial provider, but they are also compliant enough to not question any male authority. A shared idea amongst the community of Passport Bros pins feminism as a means of “corruption” of the Western woman, distancing her from the initial purpose of supporting the household and essentially converting her body and mind into a currency of exchange. A symptom of being constantly engaged in an economic market mostly centred around competition and privatisation is translating the same views in one’s personal life: finding a partner is no longer about building meaningful connections, but rather is a hunt for maximising one’s profits. The commodification of social relations, especially when it comes to the body

and contribution of women in a couple has long been a point of pride in Toxic-Masculinity circles, further emphasising an underlying component of viewing women as only adjacent to a masculine figure. Placing men and women as participants of a “market” implies a relational power, that inevitably transforms the former into the “consumer” and the later into the “product”.

Another Reddit user notes: “All of them (women) turned out to be feminists, don’t want kids, hate their skin, culture, religion, country and will publicly state it on social media, control their partners, are unhappy, some have destroyed their lives, and all came from happy families. All of them think they are oppressed. They scoff at making men happy.” The Passport Bros subreddit is just one example of an online community of men feeling like the blame of social injustice is shifted onto them—women are trying to “dismantle” the traditional role of the man—but where do men fit into this scenario? Women are self-centred and refuse to take accountability for their own wrongdoings (most of the time these men fail to mention what mistakes they are referring to, so one can only assume it invokes a general outrage and indignation towards any feminist movement that suggests equating women to more than their husbands and their households).



Community should be understood as an essential tool in trying to navigate the individualism imposed by our current social and economic system. When the system does not try by any means to accommodate your basic needs and requirements, the only option left is to try on your own to accommodate the system. Hence, feelings of frustration and inadequacy have now started to be poured into online spaces, where men sharing the same experience of feeling replaced and uprooted from their “expected” place in society can talk freely about their experience without having to be concerned about Political Correctness, Cancel Culture, and other imaginary boogymen created to evade taking accountability. However, one question prevails: does this means of community building prove to be healthy and sustainable if we keep in mind the ultimate goal of creating safe spaces grounded in mutual respect and understanding?

Men who feel threatened by the mere concept of feminism—which most of the time proves to be a flawed and inaccurate interpretation of what this movement implies and its undeniable historical influence—are in a sense victims, but also evidence of how we are shaped and we become products of our environment. In this regard, it is, however, crucial to acknowledge how existing systems of power interact with each other and create structures of oppression deeply entrenched in the way in which we give meaning to the world around us. While men have been in turn let down by the unjust weight of being constrained to behave according to gender norms, there is still a layer of privilege that enables the othering of those who do not fit in the desired category (most of the time this being the case for minorities).

A paradox of modernity emerges: how can we explain the prevalence of such othering in a 2024 context, when most would agree that feminism and the fight for

equality has reached its peak? One possible explanation is given by Mark Fisher in the book “Capitalism Realism: Is there no alternative?”. One of the virtues of Capitalism is transforming beliefs into aesthetics. Even if communities such as Passport Bros might seem inconsequential compared to other similar instances such as the cult-like following of Andrew Tate, in reality when internalised as a de facto set of ideas and values they are a danger to real women that engage with these men. Although Mark Fisher does not directly refer to cases where ideologies or theoretical approaches (such as feminism) are translated in palpable cases, an overarching idea is that Capitalism as a “final goal” has driven us into a point where we cannot even fathom a reality where the norm is not individualism. He makes the case that unless we stop privatising certain issues and we start placing them in a wider context of social systemic causation we will further push ourselves into alienation. In the same way, misogynistic men are not born. They are taught. Social determinism relies on factors such as cultural and geographical background, political climate, family, friends or any interaction significant enough to shape an individual. Hence, movements such as Passport Bros should not be viewed as a problem of an individual man that deflects from what is “socially tolerable”, but as a depiction of how inappropriately women are treated in our society. And more importantly, of how we witness and tolerate it.

Misogyny has been an integral enabling element of Capitalism since its formation, but “high-value” Western men have the shared responsibility of reflecting on the way in which their past experiences and patterns of behaviour are harming others. Passport Bros and Toxic Masculinity forums should be replaced by safe spaces amongst men that preach empathy and compassion, while also advocating for taking accountability and self-reflection.

# “She’s Just Being Dramatic”

## Inside Hospitals, Misogyny Kills as Much as Sickness

ESTHER LÁINEZ CARBALLO

Did you know that if you are a woman, you are between 50 and 91% more likely to die in a car crash than a man? This is because most security tests are made using male-shaped dummies, leading to security mechanisms that are considerably less likely to work on a smaller or lighter body. Or did you know that, if you get a C-section while giving birth, you may not be entitled to medical leave? Sure, you probably can have maternity leave; however, if the baby is stillborn or dies shortly after the surgery, in many countries you would not have the right for a medical leave.

As in many other often-forgotten areas, the medical field is infested with misogyny, both in structural and practical terms. Women suffer this on both sides: whether they are a medical professional or a patient. First of all, when it comes to research, most medical advances come from research done on male biology, leading to serious knowledge gaps, misdiagnosis and the development of harmful stereotypes over time. For instance, it has only been a few decades ago, in 1980 specifically, that the concept of “hysteria” (a term coming from the Greek word “hystera”, uterus, which basically meant being crazy and emotionally unstable) was removed from the DSM (Manual of Mental Disorders). Another similar example would be the fact that women with AD(H)D (Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder) or ASC (Autism spectrum Condition) are very likely to be misdiagnosed, if diagnosed at all. This is partly due to the lack of research on women, as well as the fact that societal expectations and norms often teach women how to “mask” certain symptoms in order to fit in and gain a kind of approval that does not apply to men.

Coming back to surgery rooms, women not only are also more likely to die or suffer serious and avoidable complications if they are treated by male doctors: they are also forced to endure higher levels of unnecessary pain, whether it is because doctors believe they are exaggerating (even though, statistically, women have higher pain endurance than men) or because they believe some pain is normal and natural, especially during childbirth. Particularly terrible practices occur during the latter, like “the husband stitch”—an extra stitch often done after childbirth in order to make a woman’s uterus “tighter” and more enjoyable for her husband.

On the other hand, moving on from patients, female

medical staff themselves—while proved to provide more successful care to their patients—have to face challenges like lower salaries, less recognition (and therefore more difficulty obtaining better jobs), less professional fulfilment and more burnout, and, probably worst of all, high rates of sexual harassment in the workplace. Some people still think, however, that this is normal, as sustained by a controversial letter sent by retired Dr Peter Hilton to The Times in 2023, claiming that a study proving high rates of sexual harassment and even rape in hospitals in the UK was not a serious issue and that the current “snowflake” generation of women in the medical field should toughen up and “endure what is normal”.

Whether some people still struggle to understand it, misogyny does not consist of “independent” anomalies: there is an underlying structure in our society and our institutions that shapes how the world functions, how power is distributed, and who benefits from it while others suffer. While there is a spectre between an unconscious bias—when people don’t even realise they’re being misogynistic—and actual aggressions, both rest on the same normative structure. It is therefore not enough to change legislation, policies, and guidelines to ensure there is no misogyny in them, but also work towards eliminating misogyny in the workplace, research centres, and, most importantly, our own heads.



# Caught in the Web

## Our Society's Modern Addiction to Phones

FABIA MIELCAREK

In the aeroplane, I watch as the guy sitting across from me pulls out his phone, which is in aeroplane mode, 10 times in 5 minutes. There were certainly no new messages, because he was not even able to receive any. This addictive behaviour is no rarity. While I am writing this article my phone is lying next to me. None of us leave the house without it and if we do, we feel like we are missing something, disoriented. Our whole life is on our phone and so many areas of our daily experiences work over the device, from our alarm in the morning, to finding out the way to work, or even the online menu in the restaurant.

The interconnectivity that can be gained from the new technologies opens up paths and allows us to meet people from all over the world, exchange ideas, information and study and work in other countries. It immensely increases communication possibilities and allows us to keep in touch. But it also can also depict the opposite effects. In the bus everyone is looking down to their phone and making new personal connections has become so rare due to our current urge to keep in touch with our online friendships.

*Even though we are connected with the world constantly, we seem disconnected from reality.*

The average American adult uses their phone for around 4 or 5 hours daily. Considering the amount of days in a year, this equates to around two and a half months we spend on our phones yearly. And the time we sleep is not even considered in this equation, which would increase the time loss we get from scrolling on our phones even more. We could have 2,5 months more to laugh with friends, travel, read a book, write down our thoughts and do something we desire.

A huge problem is that phone time gets associated with relaxation. If we finish a task we might allow ourselves some time on Instagram to “come down”. Consequently, it leaves us with the opposite result, since due to the constant information influx on our brain it does not get to take a break. Research examining the brain scans of people that tend to be always in a rush and immersed in many topics at the same time, revealed that their brains remain in a heightened state of alertness all the time, stressed by the constant distraction of new messages and the influence of dopamine when on the phone.



Michael Rich, director of the Centre on Media and Child Health in Boston, points out the fact that: “Boredom is the space in which creativity and imagination happen”. And we are never bored anymore. The influence of phones and other small and portable devices have left us with shorter concentration spans and a way smaller amount of rest, since it also leads to a lack of the deep REM sleep, essential for processing and storing information while sleeping. And by having a look at the new messages received first thing in the morning we skip important waking up stages and go straight to being wide awake and alert, which sets a negative and stressed tone for the whole day.

“We have to be flexible enough to evolve with the technology but choose how to use it right. Fire was a great discovery to cook our food, but we had to learn it could hurt and kill as well” (Michael Rich). So let us not be burned by the attraction of the warmth of likes and messages. Let us learn how to take breaks and disconnect from our virtual reality and take a book into our hands again or just leave our brain to be bored once in a while. And let us make new in person connections and feel the warmth of personal contact again.

# Losing our Nuance

## How Social Media Has Made Us Less Social

CASPAR LEMMENS

The lights go out, the screen stays on: to many of us, this should not be an unfamiliar phenomenon. Being honest, nightly scrolling sessions often take way longer than we intend beforehand. While you and I might not be too pressed about the lost thirty minutes of our nightly rest, we should be about the algorithms that keep us hooked. The algorithms of social media wield immense power, shaping what we see, hear, and ultimately believe. Yet, as these invisible hands manage our online experiences, they inadvertently cause the growing trend of polarisation that permeates our societies.

At its core, social media algorithms are designed to maximise user engagement. By analysing our preferences, behaviours, and interactions, they serve us a personalised feed tailored to keep us scrolling and clicking. Ultimately, and unsurprisingly, this engagement is a way of practising big tech companies' favourite hobby: making money. The longer you spend mindlessly watching content, the more ads can be sold, the more money will be made. However, this pursuit of engagement often prioritises sensationalism over substance, amplifying divisive content that elicits strong emotional responses.

In this algorithmically fueled ecosystem, users are trapped in a bubble, an echo chamber of their own. Confirmation bias runs rampant as people are fed a continuous diet of content that aligns with their pre-existing beliefs, while dissenting voices are systematically silenced and filtered out. This reinforcement of ideological bubbles cultivates an environment where alternative viewpoints are not only dismissed, but actively antagonised.

The consequences of this polarisation are far-reaching, permeating both online discourse and real-world interactions. On social media platforms, heated debates descend into cage fights, where opposing sides spew insults and misinformation recklessly at each other. Civil discourse becomes increasingly elusive as nuance is sacrificed at the will of the algorithm. Beyond the digital realm, the effects of polarisation manifest themselves in our communities and politics. As individuals retreat further into their ideological bubbles, the common ground becomes in-

creasingly scarce. Compromise and cooperation give way to entrenched positions and hostile gridlock. In a sense, we have been led to information trench warfare: two dug-in sides firing barrages of polarised discourse at the other, with the middle ground becoming an increasingly desolate no-man's land. All of this is hindering consensus and progress on pressing issues ranging from climate change to social inequality, for example the divide that currently exists between feminism and its counter movements. Moreover, the spread of misinformation is amplified in polarised environments, as users are more likely to uncritically accept and share content that aligns with their worldview. Falsehoods and half-truths proliferate unchecked, eroding trust in institutions and undermining democracy.

Addressing the polarising impact of algorithms on social media is crucial to us all. Platforms must be encouraged, or even forced, to prioritise transparency and accountability, providing users with greater insight into how their feeds are curated and the algorithms that govern them. Perhaps more importantly, efforts to diversify content and foster meaningful dialogue across ideological divides are essential in combating the divide in our societies. Ultimately, the challenge of algorithmic polarisation is not just a technological one, but a societal one. It demands introspection and collective action to bridge the gaping divides that threaten to tear us apart. Only by recognising the power of algorithms to shape our perceptions and actively working to mitigate their polarising effects can we hope to build a more united and resilient digital society.



# Interview with Stefan Schwarz

## Peace by Peace

FABIA MIELCAREK

Stefan Schwarz has been a German police officer for circa 40 years, a profession that, 17 years ago, led him towards peacekeeping with the United Nations. He participated in two field missions, in Kosovo and South Sudan, and also completed 2 terms at the United Nations New York headquarters as a police training officer (DPO/DPET/ITS). The Checks & Balances Editorial Staff greatly appreciates his valuable insights into the United Nations peace operations.



### *How do the United Nations' peacekeeping trainings work?*

Well, firstly, to make sure that all UN personnel have the same skills, there are standardised training packages developed. That was my unit. We developed curricula for standards, and we spread the UN training standards all over the world by running trainings of such courses. Through this, we can make sure that all peacekeeping personnel coming from a hundred countries deliver their mandate in a streamlined way. We have generic trainings, which support Member States before they deploy; induction trainings, which are mission specific; and we also have in-mission training programs.

### *Would you say it is always possible to keep the principle of impartiality in peacekeeping missions?*

I would say that from a New York perspective, on a strategic level, impartiality is one of the 3 main principles of peacekeeping. On a technical level, however, it is a part of reality that there is some national or regional interest in doing their job. Actually, there is nothing bad about it, as it is well known that even our country, Germany, has its own interests in terms of refugees coming from African countries and therefore emphasises diverse measures to strengthen this zone.

### *Do you perceive certain patterns that might explain why peacekeeping efforts were ineffective in certain instances and successful in others?*

There are many attempts to measure the root causes for failed missions. I think the political impact might

be one, meaning, whether the Member States contributing to peace operations decide at one point to run their own agenda. Clarity in mandate is also important, because stakeholders all have their own interests and consequently mandates are not realistic anymore, they might not be specific enough. Funding might be an issue but also simply a ramification of political interests. I would say that it's partly due to failed planning from the UN side why missions do not succeed, but it can also be unforeseen developments on the political side since there are many political developments going on.

### *Looking towards the future of peacekeeping, what do you think will be challenges and tasks?*

Looking at the current world politics, it is maybe not the best time for multilateral operations and peacekeeping. The numbers of military and police peacekeepers are going down. Funding is an issue and the world is getting more and more divided. We see the Western so-called free world and China and Russia on the other side with their interests. Furthermore, we have some countries like the BRICS, India, South Africa or Brazil who participate case by case. There are no big missions in sight. I could imagine that the way in which the United Nations is doing its business regarding peace and security could change, with them advocating for smaller missions or providing support and capacity building beyond peacekeeping operations. Perhaps they will send teams before a crisis breaks out to warn them before it becomes a crisis or civil war. I don't see a particular urge in the political world for big peacekeeping operations in the foreseeable future.

# Interview with Elizaveta Gaufmann

## *The Interplay between System and Individual in Russia*

CASPAR LEMMENS

Elizaveta Gaufmann is an assistant professor of Russian Discourse and Politics at the University of Groningen. Before she started in Groningen in 2019, she did her post-doctorate at the University of Bremen and her PhD at the State University of Tübingen after doing a BA in International Relations at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO).

*Given the time you spent in Russia, do you have any anecdotes of moments that were insightful to you about Russians' mentality towards government?*

I do not like the word mentality from a scholarly point of view. The term implies a perspective that people do not change and still believe the same things over the course of centuries. What is interesting though, is a similar political culture across groups in Russian society. For instance, hardly any of the students at the MGIMO, from whatever societal background, were actually interested in politics, even in a political science program. This is reflective of modern Russian society as a whole; people keep busy with their careers, their networks, their everyday life but really do not want to get involved in politics. Some researchers believe that Russian society holds a sort of social contract where people will let their authoritarian leader do their thing in politics, as long as they have relative prosperity.

*Would you say ordinary individuals in Russia have any possibility to influence the system?*

I am not sure the system is very moveable or changeable. In Russian society many people live by a belief called "The Theory of Small Deeds" which says the way to change things is to improve small things in your own life. However to really change the system you would need a large scale mobilisation of people for a cause. Political Science does not have a clear answer on how to mobilise many people, and especially in a country that is so big and heavily policed that it is very hard to get things moving.

*Do you think the structure of Russian society heavily influences or perhaps restricts Putin's decision-making, or has his authoritarianism progressed to such an extent that he can do as he pleases?*

Mostly the latter, Russia does not have a functioning system of checks and balances and Putin is surrounded by a circle of 'yes-men'. Advisors are afraid of telling

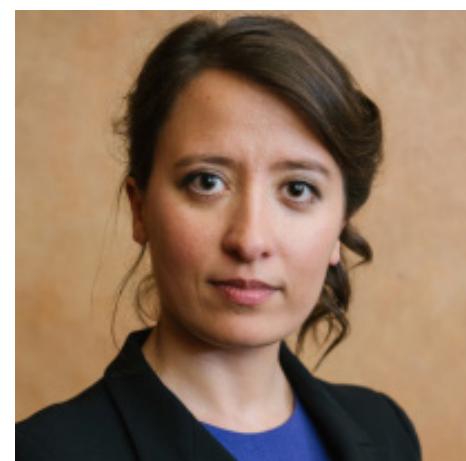
the truth and will tell their leader the news they would like to hear. As far as public opinion is concerned, this might slightly influence government policy, but not enough to really change it. Of course it will be a concern of Putin how much he is loved, but in the end he will pursue his own goals.<sup>2</sup> Yes, we can. Even if other actors such as institutions or expertise groups are consulted, they will change their findings according to what Putin wants to hear based on his personal experiences and beliefs.

*Despite the lack of democratic participation, would you say the Russian form of government is a reflection or result of Russian culture?*

Many scholars try to do this thing where they treat cultures as monoliths, for example Huntington. I do not believe you can deduct what is happening in Russia now, by studying for example 17th century Russian culture. Cultures and public discourse can change drastically within decades. On top of that, culture can also be honed and promoted by the government itself.

*Now, what might happen if the centre of this system, Putin, dies?*

Putin has no appointed successor so it will lead to some form of power struggle, which we cannot predict the outcome of. There might be instability, there might be a transition to a president who is the same or more extreme, or a candidate who has a very different course, which for example happened after Stalin died.



# Finding Comfort in Chaos

## *Navigating Identity and Belonging*

NANDITA ROMEL

What's your name? Where were you born? What languages do you speak? What would you say your nationality is? If you just joined university or recently started working in a new environment, these are probably questions you are very accustomed to. Questions that you can almost reflexively answer because of how common sense they seem. Questions that are simply innocuous inquiries into one's identity. Because identity, in its most basic form, consists of the characteristics and experiences that make up an individual.

Identity, in the context of nations and individuals alike, serve as foundational and transformative elements upon which decisions, alliances and conflicts are constructed. Elements that can be categorised on the basis of nationality, ethnicity, religion, ideology and so on. Elements that ultimately inform one's perceptions, beliefs and interactions with others. Considering this foundational understanding, why then, does identity, a seemingly familiar and recurring term, blur the very framework around which global politics and international relations are built? Why does identity, in its most basic form, ravage the geopolitical tapestry of the world as we know it?

Coined by Edward Lorenz, Chaos Theory, offers a lens through which we might be able to explain (if not offer a slight insight into) the complex dynamics of identity formation in a post-conflict world order. The theory essentially underscores the heightened sensitivity inherent in complex systems; that a small change in one state can make a deterministic change in another state. How a butterfly flapping its wings in one country could possibly cause a tornado in another country. At the heart of the chaos theory, therefore, is the concept of interconnectedness.



How might this be related to identity? For individuals with multicultural backgrounds, such as myself, questions of identity and belonging are perpetual quandaries. Born in Qatar, raised in Singapore, with ancestral roots in India, the question of "where are you from?" elicits a complex response that defies singular categorisation. Instead, my identity emerges as a product of the intricate connections between these diverse locales—a testament to the fluidity and complexity inherent in identity formation. Therefore, much like the metaphorical butterfly effect, identity for me, operates as a catalyst for transformative change across borders. It is complex, dynamic and constantly changing. It is not just representative of the place you were born or brought up in but also all the interactions you've had in such places.

*The connection we make and the identities we inhabit have a vastly transformative potential*

That is why identity has become one of the most challenging concepts that the IR field has to offer and has transcended the conventional understanding of the term. One's identity is now a response to an array of social, cultural, and historical influences. The connections we make and the identities we inhabit have a vastly transformative potential to not only change the borders and landscapes of the world, but also to create a shared capacity for understanding and empathy. It is amidst this collaborative capacity that we might ultimately find some comfort in the chaos.

# Blooming Facades

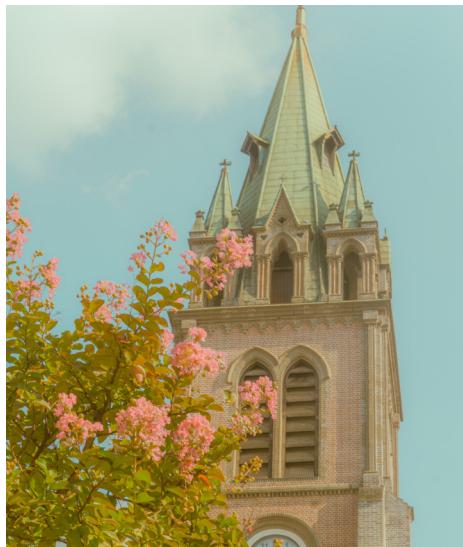
## A Symphony of Nature and Architecture

PHOTO COMMITTEE

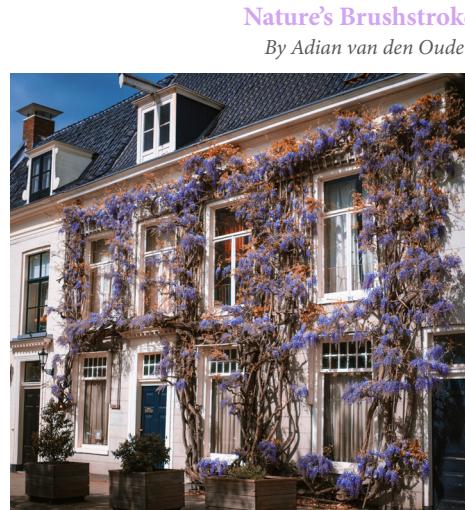
Embark on a visual odyssey where the timeless dance of nature intertwines with the rigid lines of architecture, creating a mesmerising fusion of colour and form. This photographic journey celebrates the harmonious coexistence of man-made creations and the natural world, where every petal and leaf synergistically amplifies the architectural beauty, evoking a sense of wonder and awe in the viewer's heart.

### Blossoms in Time

By Adian van den Ouden



Beneath the watchful gaze of the cathedral tower, nature unveils its timeless charm as delicate pink blooms adorn the scene, weaving a colourful tapestry where history and nature harmonise.



Ivy blooms gracefully transforming the white facade into a living painting, where every leaf serves as a stroke on the canvas.

### Petals & Pathway

By Emma Heuven



As flowers cascade around the doorway, it transforms into a mystical portal, offering glimpses into the enchanting embrace of tranquillity beyond.

# Farewell to the 36th Clio Board!

## Paradise Getaways and Opulent Holidays, the Clio Board Retreats to Secluded Bays!

As we all look forward to the sun, warmth, picnics outside, days at the beach and long summer evenings, we are slowly closing up another year full of laughter, stress, and new-found friends and memories. The Editorial Staff of 2023-2024 would like to express their gratitude to our wonderful Clio Board, as we are extremely thankful for their energy and patience, for all the Clio events, newsletters, excursions and travels that we have embarked together. As this magazine is all about the puzzle pieces that make up a whole, we, the Clio Community, would also not be whole without our lovely Board. Let's full-heartedly dive into the summer as we explore the planning process for each Board member for what would be their perfect Board vacation after such a stressful and hard-working year.

Jane

The perfect destination would be a place like Mallorca. Besides chilling and going out there would be quite some gossiping about either Clio members, other boards or the new board. There is a chance of me getting too drunk, Lune forgetting the time or Lars insisting on an all inclusive hotel, but it would all work out because we really fit together as a group.

Lune

I'd love to go somewhere with a beach so we can just chill, hang out, drink wine and eat lots of baguettes and aioli, because otherwise someone might get hangry ;). We definitely need a couch for Jane to crash on after a night of wine and karaoke and for Lars to sleep on

when his snoring annoys us. In the end it doesn't matter where we go or if it rains.

Wynona

An activity which has to be included are the Bozu trays! We have done it before. You have to finish a whole tray on your own and can only go to the bathroom after you are finished. Afterwards we can go out, but we have to be careful to not lose Lune. Furthermore we have to take Lars shopping, like in Istanbul, because that was cute.

Lars

We would probably end up going somewhere in the Netherlands. It would be best to combine both chilling and doing cultural things, because Wynona likes museums and I'm more of a 'feet in the sand, cocktail in the hand' person. In the end it would all work out because, although we're different people, we complement each other.

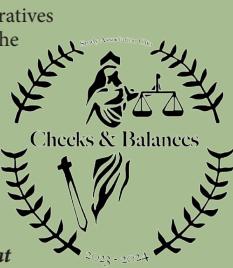
Judith

I would say a place with a lot of variety, like Istanbul. It has everything a diverse group of people need. Jane would be the mommy of the group, Wynona would show us the must-sees, and Lune would be there for vibes and money spending (thank god she's not the treasurer). This trip would show each of our specialties and personalities working well together.



# About Us

We, as humans, are always connected one to another. We all play roles in narratives of which we are not aware of, for it is impossible to know everything that the universe holds. We sing the songs that someone else composed, we read the books that someone else wrote, we fix what someone else broke and we break what we know we can't fix. Words exit mouths in one part of the world and fly incommensurable distances to reach the other side of the globe, where said words enter ears that listen to them. We are in constant connection and co-constitution with the rest of the world, as it is our collection of little actions that conform the whole, but it is not always that we are aware of the synergy game that we play with our surroundings. Thus, the Editorial Staff of 2023-2024 wants to reflect upon that exact thought, as we ask ourselves *"What was a time in which you felt connected?"*



## Anna Aragoncillo Barceló

*Editor-in-Chief*



I feel connected every time I hug a friend whom I love, and I feel that warmth in my chest, one that can only be described as pure adoration; I feel connected everytime I say goodbye to them, and sadness fills me up, because they haven't left and I already miss them, because that's my little family.

## Sam Holm van Donk

*Secretary*



In March, the committee had met early one morning to travel to Denmark. I got a brief moment of reflection, and I suddenly felt a connection that touched my heart with a sudden and profound sense of sentimentality and appreciation. I now knew that we were here, together, not only as colleagues, but as genuine friends.

## Judith de Bruijn

*Board Representative*



The moment where I feel like I'm connected is not tied to a place or geographical spot. It is a person or a group of people, the ones with which there is no insecurity to be who you are, and there is full comfort in your expression.

## Matei Ciocan

*Treasurer & Layout Editor*



After an incredible dinner prepared with my friends to celebrate Easter, we went to a small Orthodox church as tradition taught us back home. Having got there, I was impressed by the sheer number of people present, which reminded me that even 2000km away from home, people do come together to celebrate what unites them.

## Rocío Martel Medrano

*Layout Editor*



The smell of freshly baked cookies filling the house rousing us from the couch, our laughter as we realised how badly they had turned out, but still enjoying them like little kids nonetheless. Sometimes it's through the most mundane of memories that you are able to see how lucky you truly are.

## Esther Láinez Carballo

*Layout Editor*



For me it was while staring at the sea in Denmark. It was one of the most beautiful things I had ever seen, and I remember thinking; how unbelievably big is the world, and how lucky I am to see this image with these wonderful persons around me. I felt very grateful then.

## Briana Stefana Agrici

*Public Relations*



The clock turned 6:00—another sunrise spent on the balcony of one of my friends. Two empty packs of cigarettes and our laughter were the only confirmation that for a brief moment in time we became eternal, untouchable. To be loved is to be seen—and the world had shown me so much love!

## Emma Andreea

*Public Relations*



I was sitting in the grass at Hoornseplas with one of my dearest friends. We had spent hours catching up about our lives and were now just enjoying each other's company in silence with the beautiful nature. I value the connection and love that friendship gives you so much and this moment reflected that beautifully.

## Caspar Lemmens

*Reporter*



On a rainy November evening, I found myself in a gloomy bus going from the Aletta Jacobs hall. Outside, the wind blew ceaselessly as multiple students just stared down at their phones. It was at this, although somewhat grim, moment that I felt connected to all of them because we were all in the same situation, experiencing the same thing.

## Fabia Mielcarek

*Reporter*



On one of the very rare sunny afternoons in Groningen I was sitting in between a group of laughing, playing and chatting wonderful people in the Noorderplantsoen. Looking at the now so familiar faces of my friends that I didn't even know a year ago I am grateful to call this city my second home now.



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