

CHECKS & BALANCES

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Overcrowding

Emptiness



**Fabian
Rosie**
Editor-in-Chief

Chair of Clio Board



Dear reader,

A warm welcome to this new edition of the Checks & Balances magazine. The second semester has begun, marking the halfway point of the academic year. As IR students, we often find ourselves immersed in political scandals, global crises, and conflicting narratives. The world feels crowded—endlessly full of stories demanding our attention and analysis.

Yet, amidst the chaos of our daily lives, there is a stark contrast that often goes unnoticed: the vast emptiness of the universe. This summer, I had the privilege of experiencing the Milky Way in its full glory while visiting the Namib Desert. With no city lights to obscure the view, the night sky revealed clear stars, reminding me of the gigantic universe that exists beyond our crowded planet. It was an incredible experience, one that made me pause and reflect on the duality of our existence: the overcrowded nature of human life on Earth versus the unimaginable void that surrounds us.

In a world where our daily lives focus on the small things around us, such as having to reserve a seat in the cramped UB, it's easy to lose sight of this cosmic perspective. We often feel overwhelmed by our responsibilities, deadlines, and ambitions. However, as Neil deGrasse Tyson so beautifully conveys in *Cosmos: A Spacetime Odyssey*, looking up at the stars can remind us of our place in the universe. So, next time life feels too crowded, I encourage you to take a moment to step outside, look up, and ponder for a bit. Sometimes, it's in the emptiness that we find the clarity and space we need.

Lastly, I want to extend my heartfelt gratitude to the Checks & Balances Editorial Staff for their dedication to creating this beautiful edition. Have fun reading!

On behalf of the 37th Board of Clio and with much love,

Fabian Rosielo
Chair of the 37th Board of Clio

**Sam Holm
van Donk**
Editor-in-Chief



This issue is about identity.

Think of all that the human race has achieved. Some say we mastered nature, others dare not go so far. We went to the moon, we built the atomic bomb and we molded and transformed the very environment that birthed us into existence from primordial nothingness. Despite this, we remain but a race of sentient apes on a grain of sand in the meaningless infinity that is the universe. As individuals, we still find ourselves utterly crowded on this tiny green pebble that we call home. So surrounded, yet so alone in the grand scheme of things.

This is the tragedy that is overcrowded emptiness. Just as the constellations in the sky above remind us of our own incomprehensibly minuscule corner of the universe, the constellations of identity that we form among us have, in our more than 8 billion realities, become unfathomably vast and complex, placing us in ever-changing social groupings more layered than could possibly be imagined. This is what we want to explore.

In this issue, we talk to several IR students who, while in exchange in South Korea, find themselves under martial law from one day to the next. We also sit down with Sander des Tombe, editor-in-chief of Checks & Balances in 2014, who discusses Checks' own identity. RUG lecturer Steven van Bockstael sheds some light on West African resource mining in *Diary of IR*. In our feature Political Pulse, we debate the creation of ever-narrowing social labels, and what lies behind it. Conference joins us in their Committee Collaboration, where they discuss the phenomenon of silence (take a look at their advert under the table of contents!). We also dedicate particular attention to the environment, be it social or physical, and our own place in it.

This issue is about identity. About our place in the cosmos, and about our own existence as individuals in humanity's social universe.

On behalf of the entire Editorial Staff of 2024-2025,

Enjoy this second issue of Checks & Balances

Sam Holm van Donk
Editor-in-Chief

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Echoes of the Past

Mythology and its Modern Reflection

STEFAN SZEKELY NAGY

Who am I? This question is central to existence as individuals, shaping one's personal journey within society. Identity is the foundation of modern human existence, without which it would be impossible to define how to see ourselves in connection with the external world. With rapid societal advancement, it is easier than ever before for an individual to create, shape or borrow an identity as they see fit. I believe it may just fracture humanity more. For countless individuals have chased these personas which do not align with their real self. They are driven by the desperate need to stand out, to belong, or to meet shifting expectations, losing track of their identity along the way. One striking example is Australian influencer, Essena O'Neill, who, despite her seemingly perfect life online, quit social media in 2015. She exposed the illusion behind her staged and filtered posts by admitting to chasing validation. She shaped her persona to meet expectations, but offline, she felt empty and disconnected from her individuality. This conflict is not a struggle unique to our modern times.

Throughout all history, myths have appeared warning us about the dangers of living between two worlds. About the strain of constantly changing masks until your true face has faded in the memory of time.

One such legend is that of the Scottish selkies: mysterious beings caught between land and sea, between forms considered both a beauty and a curse.

Analysis of the Myth

In Scottish folklore, selkies are magical beings that have a dual persona: mysterious beings which are caught between land and sea, between forms considered both a beauty and a curse. In water, they have the identity of a seal, and on land they can shed their cloak, taking the form of a beautiful human. While this transformation grants them the ability to fall in love and experience human life, it comes with a tragic vulnerability. Should their skin be stolen and hidden away, the selkies lose their power to return to their true self in the sea confined forever to their human form. This myth presents a powerful metaphor for the duality of identity. Like that of the selkies, we shed our cloaks online. By denying our offline personalities' vulnerability, of who we truly are. We pursue something new to define us and



lose track of our identity. Where we too, live a life of endless pretences, stuck between worlds that never feel like home. Such is emphasized in numerous versions of this legend where selkies, trapped in human form, gaze longingly at the sea, yearning for a return which cannot be.

Modern Parallels: Identity and Self-Reclamation

The myth of the selkie resonates profoundly with the contemporary struggle for identity. Today, social media allows individuals to inhibit multiple "selves" as they see fit. By carefully crafting an online persona, and presenting an idealized version of who one aspires to be. As such, stripped of the imperfections rooted in their origins. Just as selkies shed their skin whenever they arrive on land, individuals put on their newly created mask to hide who they truly are. Having the goal of experiencing something they could have not done otherwise. For example, a shy, reserved person may curate a bold and confident online persona, so as to appear more outgoing. As to experience a sense of attention and validation they would not receive otherwise and suppressing their true nature. Outside of social media, I have seen people who reinvent themselves, to join a popular group to gain a sense of belonging or just to reap the benefits that come with living in a collective. Where, like the selkies, they juggle a personal self and an idealized self to maintain the facade or risk oblivion. The myth of the selkies also offers an important lesson: identity is something that must be protected. Unlike the selkies who long to return to their true form, modern individuals can actively seek ways to reconnect with their authentic identity. By resisting societal pressures that demand constant reinvention, embracing self-awareness, and recognizing when an identity has been constructed out of external validation rather than genuine self-discovery.

Conclusion: Myths Role in Shaping Identity

The myth of selkies reminds us that in seeking to adapt, we risk forgetting who we are. In a world that constantly demands reinvention, we must ask ourselves; Are we transforming, or losing something essential? The past is whispering its warnings—may we have the wisdom to listen.

The Death of Empathy

Why We Stopped Caring and How to Restore The Glue of Humanity

LEILA RIZKALLAH

Empathy, the ability to understand and share another's feelings, is the invisible thread that ties societies together. Lately, we've transitioned from tight-knit communities to isolated lives, where neighbors are strangers, family bonds grow weaker, and friendships feel transactional. The result? A world where we scroll past suffering, shame instead of support, and prioritize convenience over compassion.

When Community Was Survival

For most of human history, community wasn't optional, it was essential for survival. Early tribes relied on one another to fend off predators and share resources. During the agricultural revolution, villages thrived on collective labor, where every individual had a role to play. Even as recently as the 1950s, most children grew up in two-parent households, and neighborhoods were regarded as extended families where they would babysit for one another, sugar was borrowed, and conversations happened on front porches. Today, the shift and focus on nuclear families, especially in the West, has eroded the "village" that once raised children and cared for elders. We've prioritized independence and privacy, but at a cost: rising loneliness, especially among younger generations. Without built-in support systems, many struggle to find a sense of belonging. Rebuilding this empathy means rethinking the way we connect in everyday life outside of our phones and when we're not paying attention.

The Silent Killers of Empathy

Empathy is quietly fading from our society, specifically due to certain factors. Firstly, technology, while connecting us globally, has disconnected us locally. Online interactions lack nonverbal cues like tone and body language, making genuine connections hard to achieve. Social media lowers the empathy of the individual and feeds into their narcissism as they prioritize self-presentation and trap themselves in an echo chamber. The rise of dismissive phrases like "and the world kept spinning" or "cry about it" shows how desensitized we've become to others' pain and struggles. In addition, relationships have become increasingly transactional. Acts of kindness like checking up on your family members or friends feel like burdens, and interactions are often driven by personal gain rather than care. Lastly, shared struggles like death or natural disasters historically united communities, yet now, even suffering has

been privatized. We grieve alone, celebrate milestones via Instagram likes, and judge others' struggles instead of relating to them.

When we stop caring about each other, everyone suffers.

Moreover, the loss of empathy isn't just an emotional issue, it's a serious problem for our health and society. Loneliness can be as harmful as smoking a pack of cigarettes a day, as it increases the risk of heart disease, depression, and even early death. It also deepens political divides, making people more extreme and less willing to listen to others. In everyday life, it leaves us feeling isolated and distrustful. Even at work, a lack of empathy leads to more burnout, less teamwork, and lower productivity. When we stop caring about each other, everyone suffers.

Lessons From the Past, Hope for the Future

Rebuilding empathy means relearning what past generations knew. In tribal societies, survival depended on small acts of kindness such as sharing food or providing shelter to those in need. These types of simple gestures can still strengthen our communities today. Another important lesson is learning to embrace imperfection in our relationships. In the past, relationships weren't curated but they thrived through messy, unplanned moments. True empathy means showing up, listening without needing to fix, and forgiving mistakes. Empathy isn't lost, it's just buried under modern distractions. Even babies cry when they hear others in distress, proving that we're wired to connect. The challenge is to build a world that nurtures this instinct with stronger relationships, slower technology, and communities where vulnerability is seen as strength. As The Smiths put it, "It's so easy to laugh, it's so easy to hate. It takes strength to be gentle and kind."





Interview with Steven van Bockstaal

Blood Diamonds: a Never-Ending Cycle of Violence?

RUBEN ARDELEAN

Steven van Bockstaal is an Assistant Professor of Globalisation Studies and Humanitarian Action here at the University of Groningen. He has vast experience in research & policy analysis regarding how natural resources fund armed conflict, and is an expert in artisanal and small-scale mining of precious minerals such as diamonds and gold. This is what we will be discussing with him today.



How do diamonds and other natural resources wind up funding armed conflicts in places like West and Central Africa, and who exactly are the key players behind all this?

Let's stick with diamonds, because that's the perfect example to show how natural resources impact conflict. You've got two types: primary deposits (the big mines with massive machines, run by big, often multinational companies like De Beers or Russian state diamond miners) and secondary deposits (the same exact diamonds, but washed away over millions of years by erosion, scattered all over riverbeds and broader terrains). The primary deposits are relatively easy for these big companies to secure: they've got fences, patrols, and a whole workforce monitored so nobody can just walk off with a bag of diamonds. That's a classical setup.

But the conflict side really shows up with secondary deposits. Because all those diamonds are spread out, large corporations don't bother with them—too little reward, too much dirt to move, too much cost. So who steps in? That's where you see regular people—dirt poor farmers, subsistence miners—digging around for these stones; and in a civil war context (like Angola, Sierra Leone, Liberia, or the Central African Republic), the presence of diamonds can be a quick way for rebels, warlords, or even regular folks with a gun to make money. They sell these diamonds on the black market, earn hard cash, and fund their armed groups. Next thing you know, they're buying weapons, food, paying soldiers, and the entire conflict keeps rolling. This is why they're often called "conflict diamonds" (or blood diamonds).

How would you assess the impact of outside governance initiatives—NGOs, international certification schemes, or foreign governmental interventions—on breaking this vicious cycle between conflict and resource exploitation?

I'm not fully convinced that "if we just remove diamonds or any resource, the conflict magically disappears." That can be dangerously simplistic, right? A lot of conflicts—like the Rwandan genocide—had nothing to do with diamond money. People mostly died from machetes, which don't require elaborate funding from minerals. So it's crucial to remember that while resources do fuel conflicts, they aren't always the root cause. There are also political, historical, ethnic, and social issues at play.

Yes, we've seen attempts at cutting off conflict resources. Think about the Kimberley Process (for diamonds) or those 20-year-old efforts in the Democratic Republic of Congo to label and trace so-called "conflict minerals." The logic goes: if you can set up certification mechanisms and refuse to buy "rebel diamonds," you can reduce the money going into war. But the wars in countries like the DRC or Central African Republic are still ongoing in various forms—some areas see new insurgencies, new rebel groups pop up, or the same old groups rebrand (like M23 in eastern Congo). That suggests that while these governance initiatives might do some good, they don't solve everything. They're not a silver bullet. The reasons behind the conflict are too numerous: old colonial legacies, dysfunctional regimes,



disenfranchised populations, and the personal interest of warlords or even foreign powers who benefit from a chaotic environment. Foreign military interventions can complicate things further. Look at France in Mali or in the Central African Republic. They initially stepped in to "help" with anti-terror operations or to stabilize the region, but eventually you run into accusations of neocolonialism, or frustration from local people who say, "Look, we haven't advanced economically in decades, so maybe France is part of the problem." Then you get new players like Russia's Wagner Group stepping in, which might lead to even more brutal outcomes, or at least some new mass graves. So, yes, these outside initiatives try to regulate the trade and calm the conflict, but I would argue the complexity on the ground can easily derail all those good intentions.

With the shifting geopolitical alliances, like the reduced French military presence and the entry of Russian-backed groups, what does that mean for long-term stability and the future of governance in these regions?

In recent years, you see military coups in places like Burkina Faso or Mali, and they're telling the French, "We want you out. We can handle our own affairs" (France dégage!). But in truth, these are often states with weak apparatuses that might not effectively hold their own territory. So what happens when foreign troops leave? Sometimes, groups like Wagner come into the picture. Then the gloves come off: if the local authorities and these mercenaries are less worried about human rights or the press watching over them, we can see spikes in violence, as we did in Mali where

all of a sudden mass graves started popping up. Or you see bizarre attempts to pin atrocities on the departing French, which backfired when a French military drone literally filmed the staging of a "mass grave discovery."

Meanwhile, there's the bigger strategic game: Russia might not get billions in gold or diamonds out of somewhere like the Central African Republic, because, frankly, the deposits there aren't that big, but if they can destabilize a French ally or poke at Western influence, that's worth plenty to them politically. So "exploiting resources" can go beyond the literal gold or diamonds: it's also about gaining a strategic foothold, be it in Mali or the CAR, scoring points in the global arena. The question is, does that help local governance? Probably not—government institutions remain shaky, you get more warlords popping up, and local populations see these foreign forces (French, Russian, whoever) as just new management running the same old system.

This dynamic is frustrating for the youth in these countries who aren't seeing meaningful economic growth. Many are fed up with political elites who hop on a plane to Paris weekly or stash their money abroad. They hear rumors and conspiracy theories on social media about "the French are still controlling everything" or "the Russians will fix it," and all this stuff intensifies the malaise. If the underlying political and economic problems remain the same, just swapping one external power for another might not deliver lasting stability. There's a real risk that new alliances won't solve structural issues like disenfranchisement, poverty, or a lack of economic diversification. So, yes, you can have a new government come in, proclaim "sovereignty" or sign a deal with a different foreign backer, but if you haven't addressed the deeper reasons folks picked up guns in the first place, the cycle can simply continue.

TikTok is not the Only Clock Ticking

Unpacking the Negative Impact of Time Wasted on Social Media

MIGLĖ GIRDIAUSKAITĖ

6 hours 58 minutes. This is the global daily average screen time that Gen Z spends on their mobile devices. That is almost a third of the waking hours. To contrast this number, only 35% of Gen Z get more than seven hours of sleep at night and 93% of the same generation have lost rest by staying up to be on social media. While this data may seem like mere numbers, it reveals alarming trends of sacrificing vital parts of the day to prioritize existence in cyberspace. On the surface, social media might aid in combating loneliness by providing a sense of belonging and connection. Yet, the ugly underbelly of social media is inevitable (or at least heavily ignored). The constant exposure to excessive negativity, comparison and distraction could seriously harm one's mental health, making the sacrifice of living



The rise of cyberbullying and harassment on social media is both a consequence and a catalyst for further negativity. The obsessive use of the Internet can make the users addicted to online communication. This dependence, combined with high involvement in digital interactions and anonymity, heightens vulnerability to cyberbullying and its detrimental effects on mental health. The detachment from reality that online spaces create provokes neurotic behaviors, characterised by aggression, a lack of empathy and desire for power. In addition, cyberbullies frequently have deficient online communication skills, which fuels fear-based content, as misleading narratives tend to prevail and go viral more rapidly than factual information. This agility ele-

ment also facilitates cancel culture, where large groups of social activists publicly shame certain figures, sometimes without complete or right facts, in an attempt to frame their actions as morally wrong. Although the ultimate goal of cancel culture may be rooted in justice, such as when Balenciaga was called out in 2022 for its ignorant campaign that appeared to condone child pornography and exploitation, the execution of the cancelling itself is often unproductive. Instead of encouraging a healthy discussion, accountability and opportunities for growth, it takes the easy, more engaging and controversial route, fostering outrage rather than progress.

The inescapable presence of negative content, cyberbullying and cancel culture on social media can have great psychological effects, which can be responsible for the development of anxiety, depression and low self-esteem. Twenge and Campbell's study has found that Gen Z individuals with a daily screen time of over 7 hours are twice as likely to experience the symptoms of anxiety. One potential contributor to this disorder could be doomscrolling – a term I ironically would not have learned without doom scrolling myself. This concept entails the excessive exposure to all forms of content or distressing news, trapping users in a polarizing cycle of unease about what they have seen while simultaneously feeling committed to continue scrolling in the fear of missing out (FOMO). Besides the direct link between doom scrolling, FOMO and psychological problems, prolonged screen time may also heighten anxiety as a response to blue light exposure, which keeps users alert and awake, as opposed to the drowsiness they'd feel as nighttime sparks melatonin release. This artificial stimulation enslaves individuals to their devices and weakens the ability to concentrate or unwind. In addition to the anxious streaming, excessive social media use contributes to isolation by detaching individuals from real, meaningful relationships in exchange for shallow simplified abundance of emojis. The curated portrayal of unattainable lifestyles further exacerbates loneliness, leading to diminished self-esteem and negative body image perceptions.

But users are not the only problem here. The hostile environment stems from the very structure of social media platforms, which act as breeding grounds for pessimism. Considering that online communications are driven by algorithms, content that generates the most interaction is prioritized, as emotional reactions

in cyberspace function as a form of currency. Negative and controversial news tend to be more captivating, making them highly distributable. Thus, algorithms are designed to keep the users engaged by continuously suggesting similar content, reinforcing the cycle of negativity. Confirmation bias only further worsens the problem, as individuals are exposed to content that supports their existing beliefs, making them more susceptible to negative narratives. In addition, the faceless feature provides confidence for users to act completely guilt-free. For example to express contestable opinions publicly or access unfavorable information. Lastly, the dopamine cycle is also partially responsible, as surfers become dependent on the rush that the "feel-good chemical" provides through social media interactions. The constant scrolling of 15 second videos, reading of 2200 characters per post, and swiping between a 20 photo carousel slide feeds the brain with entertainment. Over time, users become hungry for more, turning into digital junkies to the cycle of negative and captivating content.

So how do we doom ourselves with doom-scrolling? The simplest solution might be to stop consuming, interacting with or creating content on social media altogether. However, it is an addiction that is more difficult to break free from than it seems. While negativity prevails in the online space, it can also provide some valuable insight on managing our presence, regulating our emotions and preserving our sanity. Essentially, it is important to practise mindful and intentional social media use, through the observance of emotions and reasons for the use of it. By setting positive objectives, such as improving communication skills or building confidence, individuals could reduce the negative influence on platforms. Another effective strategy to minimize that would be to unfollow harmful profiles and only engage with positive or inspirational content. Setting screen time limits could also help prevent overindulgence and promote a healthier balance. It is essential to recognize that real-life interactions and activities can be just as rewarding (if not more), often providing the same dopamine boost without the passive ease of scrolling. Genuine connections require effort, but they lead to deeper and more fulfilling relationships. Social media should only serve as a subsidiary source of contact, not be the primary means.

Social media, such as Instagram is like instant soup – it is easy to consume and provides momentary happiness, yet in the long term, it does not have the necessary nutrients for a healthy and fulfilled life.

In times where online content dominates daily life, it is crucial to evaluate the impact that social media has on mental health. Despite these platforms offering connection, entertainment, and information, they notoriously foster negativity, addiction, and detachment from reality. The alarming screen time statistics, rise of cyberbullying, and prevalence of cancel culture present the pessimistic consequences of an unbalanced and idle approach to social media use. The algorithm-driven cyberspaces thrive on engagement, often prioritizing controversial or negative content, reinforcing harmful cycles of doom scrolling. This, in turn, contributes to anxiety, depression, and deteriorating self-esteem. Social media, such as Instagram is like instant soup – it is easy to consume and provides momentary happiness, yet in the long term, it does not have the necessary nutrients for a healthy and fulfilled life. Therefore, it is the obligation of the users to assess and redefine their digital experiences. By curating a positive online space, setting boundaries, and prioritizing real-life interactions, individuals can mitigate the adverse effects of excessive social media use. Practicing mindfulness, engaging in meaningful offline activities, and seeking professional support when necessary could be the vital steps toward maintaining a healthier relationship with technology.

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Labels and Identity

Empowering or Restrictive?

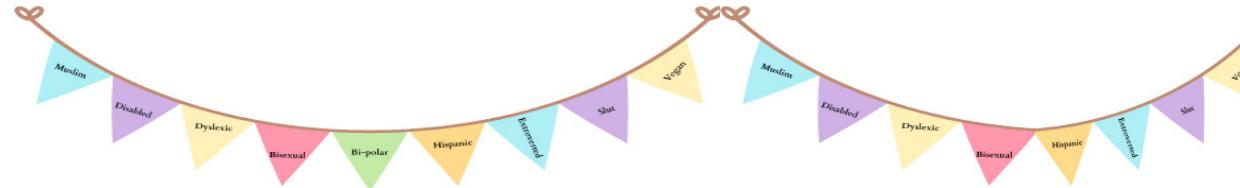
STEFAN SZEKEY NAGY & LEILA RIZKALLAH

In the past decade, there has been growing pressure for individuals to define their identities with increasing specificity, often leading to the creation of new labels that place them into fixed categories. This discussion will explore whether labels serve as tools for self-affirmation or as constraints that confine individuals within predefined boundaries.

The fluidity paradox

Leila: The issue is that labels often oversimplify the complexity of human identity, and they reduce individuals to narrow categories that fail to capture their full essence. What this can lead to is a loss of individuality and self-expression. Once someone adopts a label, it may act as a self-fulfilling prophecy that restricts their personal growth and ability to express themselves in many different ways. For example, someone who identifies as non-binary might feel pressured to conform to certain expectations about how they should dress or behave, even though their identity is meant to reject rigid gender norms in the first place. Moreover, rigid adherence to labels can prevent people from exploring other dimensions of their identity as they evolve over time. This lack of curiosity and adaptability limits personal development and creativity. It's also important to note that labels are inherently imperfect and ever-changing, therefore subscribing to them as fixed traits can lead to stagnation rather than growth of who you are.

Stefan: I disagree with the statement you've made, as labels are anything but narrowing. I believe they are empowering by providing people with options to choose from to describe and make sense of their own authenticity. For many people around the world, labels provide a means of self-expression for personal identity that allows them to connect to other people who are going through the same thing that they are, fostering a sense of community among people who otherwise might be forsaken by the world. Furthermore, beyond personal identities, the creation of labels has been proven beneficial in raising awareness of marginalized communities and advocating for their rights, serving as a means of amplifying the voices that might be unheard otherwise in modern society. Additionally, labels are not something rigid. Instead, they are fluid and flexible, their meaning changing over time just as individuals do. People are free to redefine themselves, as their per-



sonalities are ever-changing through the course of their lives. What is true today is not necessarily the same tomorrow. Rather than being restrictive, labels provide a starting point for exploration and self-discovery, making them essential to our identity.

Psychological impact

Leila: I understand your perspective on labels helping individuals connect with their identity, but we should also acknowledge their significant impact in shaping self-perception and mental well-being, often influencing how people see themselves and interact with the world. For instance, when someone is labeled "depressed" or "anxious," they may start to internalize these terms as core aspects of their identity rather than temporary states of being. Instead of viewing their struggles as challenges that can be managed or overcome, they might see them as fixed, unchangeable traits. This mindset fosters thoughts like "I'm broken" or "I'll never recover," which can create a cycle of helplessness and inaction. Moreover, labels can become self-fulfilling prophecies. Once someone is given a label, they may unknowingly adjust their behavior to fit that identity, reinforcing the very stereotype they were assigned. This is especially evident in childhood, for example, if parents frequently refer to a child as "shy," that child may unconsciously adopt behaviors that align with that expectation, withdrawing in social situations even if they aren't naturally reserved. A study by the University of Nevada supports this idea, demonstrating that labeling children can significantly shape their self-perception and behavior. Over time, these labels become deeply ingrained, influencing personality development and self-confidence in adulthood.

Stefan: While I do understand where you are coming from, we must recognize that when someone is labeled as "depressed" or "anxious," this does not necessarily mean they are stuck with that identity. I would rather argue that having those labels offers a framework to the individuals in question, which they can use to recognize that their experiences are real, and not just something in their head. Furthermore, the addition of labels shines a ray of light on their struggles, making it easier for them to seek support from their loved ones, taking action against their problem at hand, or seeking treatments if they can't deal with their struggle on their

Labels as a Means of Self-Definition and Authenticity

Stefan: Labels should exist because they allow people to define their own persona in their chosen manner without being forced into a specific category by society. Through labels, people are allowed to define their own persona as they see fit or perceive themselves without needing to conform to any external universal norms of what it means to be a human being. Labels could be interpreted as a form of self-agency. Where one chooses the way that the world sees and understands them, rather than being ridiculed through the creation of stereotypes because they fail to understand them for who they really are. Labels thus exist to eliminate such problems. . Beyond personal introspection, labels also enhance social interactions by allowing people to communicate their needs and boundaries more efficiently. For example, in the agencies providing services or even in your own workplace, the existence of labels ensures that individuals receive the rights and the accommodations they deserve. Without those labels, people struggle to have an united front and articulate their necessities or experiences giving in and allowing themselves to be influenced by society. They erect a wall consisting of a fake "them" which would align with the values promoted by society while their true "self" is forgotten behind it.

Leila: While I see your point about labels offering individuals the freedom to define themselves, this apparent autonomy is largely an illusion and potentially harmful. Labels may seem empowering, but they often create restrictive categories rather than true self-definition. Research shows that labels reinforce stereotypes, as people process labeled individuals 37% faster through biases than through deeper understanding. This limits empathy and oversimplifies identities. In an interview, Margaret Atwood relates our identities to nature and

explains that nature itself does not operate in closed boxes and if it did, evolution would be impossible.

Human traits and identities exist on a spectrum, much like a bell curve. This diversity makes it difficult to categorize individuals into distinct, non-overlapping groups, and they often fail to capture the value and beauty of nuanced identities.

Nature itself does not operate in closed boxes and if it did, evolution would be impossible.

Conclusion

In the end, both perspectives and arguments about identity labels are compelling. While labels can provide language, community, and validation, they also risk limiting self-expression and reinforcing societal expectations. The balance lies in using them as flexible tools rather than rigid definitions.



Indigenous Voices on Climate Change

Discovery of Fundamental Knowledge?

ROBYNE KERVER



It is common knowledge that indigenous communities are often marginalized by national governments and other actors of authority on their lands. They often have a close relationship with nature which is why these communities are among the first to face the direct consequences of climate change. In Sweden, Norway and Finland, the increasingly warm winters have led to food scarcity among reindeers, which are vital to the culture, subsistence and economies of the Saami populations in the northern region of these countries. Throughout the years, indigenous communities have increasingly been seen as the victims of this debate, which is hard to argue against. However, it might be useful to tilt this perspective slightly. Not only are many indigenous communities more interconnected with nature than the rest of the population of the countries they live in, but they also adapt well to their ecological environments, which comes in handy when temperatures are rising. The Maori word 'kaitiakitanga' means 'guarding and protecting the environment in order to respect the ancestors and secure the future'. Indigenous communities have been able to survive for millennia without explicitly damaging the environment around them, living sustainably and together with nature, instead of merely perceiving nature as a means for profit. What can be learned from them?

We should definitely not underestimate the value of these cultures to mitigating climate change. According to the World Bank, "The territories of the world's 370 million indigenous peoples cover 24% of land worldwide, and contain 80% of the world's biodiversity". Indigenous communities have also had a significant impact in resisting resource exploitation, such as the destruction of the Amazon rainforest. Linda Etchart, who has written insightful pieces on indigenous contributions to the climate debate, has argued that indigenous communities are actively resisting the occupation and deforestation of lands that they have lived in for so long. In the Amazon River basin situated in South America, there are about 385 indigenous communities that live on around 2.4 million square kilometers of Amazonia. These groups have been defending these

lands against deforestation. This indicates that they are opposing harmful change in a more intensive way than the rest of the world, which is something that we all should try to adopt if we want to save the environment.

It is not only the actions of indigenous peoples that we need in order to mitigate climate change, it also includes the knowledge and their view on environment and nature that attributes so much value to these communities in tackling climate issues. According to the United Nations, "Indigenous Peoples are custodians of unique knowledge systems, innovations and practices that have been passed down through generations and have allowed different cultures and communities in many parts of the world to live sustainably, emphasizing the balance between humans and the natural world." The way that these groups interpret and interact with nature is also significantly different from the way the majority of the world population views it. In the Western world, economic growth and profit are prioritized, which often leads to chasing after the resources necessary to facilitate growth.

Especially in the context of profit, firms tend to aim for the cheapest way to produce, often ignoring the external costs inherent to the extraction processes of certain resources.

Looking at the problems this has caused in terms of environmental change, the indigenous perspective offers a promising view of a better way that we should look and appreciate nature. Even by merely putting nature into consideration when taking from it, we take an important step toward a brighter future.

All in all, it surely has been insightful to dive deeper into discovering the indigenous ways of approaching climate change and to recognise the importance of incorporating their voices more into international negotiations, which is already increasingly done. We should not underestimate what we can learn from groups that are often silenced in our society, because it is very possible that we become astonished of what we hear.

A Home Without Walls

When Identity Escapes Its Borders

ANNIKA KOCH

Home is said to be where you are at peace. A sense of peace unique to a place. A place that matches no other in the world. Yet, as the world becomes more globalised, immigration has increased. Immigration translates to families moving abroad and children no longer being brought up in one location. This process has led to the appearance of a new identity called "Third Culture Kids".

According to the dictionary, third-culture kids are children who have spent a significant part of their developmental years outside their parents' culture. They are often characterized as individuals with a "confused" identity. The confusion can be traced back to the idea that by growing up outside their native culture, they are detached from their heritage and cultural roots. However, in this confusion lies freedom. The freedom of becoming exposed to new cultures and languages allows them to be open-minded. The freedom of not being confined to what is expected of their nationality. The freedom to explore what the world has in store for them. A freedom the media and politics tend to squish.

While we are told being a third culture kid (TCK) means they are out of touch with their culture, their nationality, and their "identity". They are not lost. They simply do not fit into the labels and boxes that society tries to place them under.

Their identity can not be answered with a simple "I'm Dutch". Their identity often is encompassed more in "I was born in Qatar, my dad is Dutch and my mum is Indonesian, but now I study in Belgium." Even though the TCK is being influenced by 4 cultures, the key idea is that they have been influenced by a culture distinct from that of their parents' in their developmental years. This influence can lead to a unique thought process occurring whenever TCKs are asked "Where are you from?"

A question so ordinary that the person staging it would never believe it could cause an "identity crisis". Yet, that simple question is a TCK's worst fear. The fear results from not knowing what to answer.

Should they answer by stating the nationality/s their passports outline? Should they answer by explaining where their family heritage can be traced back? Or should they simply be truthful and reply with "Nowhere and everywhere."

But unsurprisingly, we as a society shy away from stating the truth because it is seen as "wrong" not to know or feel as though you belong somewhere.

It is seen as wrong because if they don't know where they belong, they are seen as stateless, essentially without an identity. But surely is that not only since we rely on our nationality to form our identity?

Nationalities in our society have certain connotations. If someone is Dutch, foreigners see them as someone who communicates very directly which is often interpreted as emotionless. Similarly, if someone is German, their language gives foreigners the impression that they are rude. Though nationalities forming our identity does not always have to be negative. It can also mean that an identity can be tied to pride. For example, if someone is Danish, their identity may be tied to the fact that their country has been ranked number 1 for quality of life. But you see, this idea of "your country" does not exist for TCKs. Hence, they cannot claim pride or guilt for the historical or present actions of the country in which they were born, live or where their parents are from. Instead, they are entrusted with a near to impossible task.

The ultimate task for a third culture kid is to rid themselves of the pressure of labels, expectations and nationalities, their parents, birthplace or passport impose on them. Alternatively, they have to

They have to construct an independent identity. An identity where home is within themselves.



South Korean Martial Law through the Eyes of RUG Students

The Different Realities Experienced in Six Hours

VALENTINA TUERO FAJARDO

On December 3rd, 2024, emergency martial law was declared in the Republic of Korea for the first time in 40 years and was lifted again the following day at 2.30 am after around 4 hours of having effect. This emergency legislation is intended to fulfil military necessity and maintain public security & order when there are enough disturbances of the social order. This considerably hinders the performance of the administrative and judicial functions of the state in times of war or other incidents. In this case, the imposition was due to “anti-state activities plotting rebellion”. What is important about this law is that its powers include suspending civil rights and temporarily limiting the powers of the courts and government agencies.

In order to get some testimonies of this situation, I contacted some of the RUG students who were there for their exchange semester to see how they experienced it.

Chris' experience:

At the time, I was working on a paper in a café with some of my Korean friends. My friends had playfully said something like “Chris, I think you should leave the country”. I thought it was funny but didn’t understand what they meant, so they showed me what they meant; a Korean news article that they translated, “there wasn’t any Western media reporting on it until a good 30 minutes after the announcement.”

So I decided to leave the café to go home, there wasn’t much of a difference in the city, “I feel like things got a bit more serious as people realized what was happening.”

Throughout Chris’s experiences, he started to feel a bit more worried after he got home and started reading more and more articles about the whole issue. “I vividly remember reading about the army entering the city, protesters gathering at the National Assembly building, and those members trying to organize the assembly.”

The people who were in the army at the time were quite reluctant to act against the citizens but simply had to follow military orders.



“I remember hearing a lot of helicopters going around the city. My friends in Korea were also panicking because they didn’t know what was happening. Meanwhile, my friends from Groningen were also asking what was going on.”

The answer Chris gave to those who inquired was: “I felt quite worried about the situation, but reading more and more about it, I calmed down and realized that this would pass quickly.”

The whole martial law episode lasted for around 3 hours until the National Assembly agreed to move away from it with a whopping 190/190 in favour of ending it.

“A few days later, there were still protests happening in the city. There were also student meetings going on the campus of the university. It felt as if this whole event woke up a lot of Koreans to reality, who then took to the streets to protest against the controversial President Yoon Suk Yeol.”

Chris believes they were quite disappointed when the first impeachment failed.

“It was quite a crazy night with a lot of things going on, but I feel that it never really affected me as a foreigner. Of course, if things deteriorated much more it could’ve been quite a concerning situation, but otherwise, everything just went back to normal for my day-to-day life after that. I also had quite a lot of friends who just slept throughout the entire incident and were quite astonished when they found out what happened in the morning.”

Rocio's experience:

It was the night of the 3rd of February.

Having just come back from a shooting range that a friend wanted to try out, ironically enough, I sat with some friends in the common room of Pusan National University’s girl’s dormitory. As we had dinner and laughed together, someone rushed in and broke the news of what had just occurred in the capital of the country. “Martial law has been declared!”. Most of the girls in the room looked around, confused at first, since they had heard the term before but did not fully understand its implications.

As I tried my best to explain what this meant I noticed the room grow tense and afraid, whilst also feeling uncertainty growing inside of me. “How had this happened? More importantly, what is going to happen from now on? Are we in danger as foreign students?” We all immediately pulled out our phones and started searching for any news that would show what the situation in Seoul was. We got hit with terrifying videos of tanks and other military equipment, phones ring as families get the news, and it’s very hard to distinguish the truth from fear-mongering narratives.

Periodically more and more girls rush in to discuss, but as the clock ticks, and with the consideration of still having to attend class at 8 a.m. the next morning, we all decide to break the gathering and head to bed.

“The next morning we woke up to the news that the martial law had been lifted during the night.” They were parliament members climbing fences to vote against this anti-constitutional movement by President Yoon, and citizens fighting for their democracy in a country that has had a dark past when concerning these matters, one that is not far behind. In comparison to Seoul, Busan (where Rocio was on exchange) is relatively quiet.

The differences within Korea were very noticeable as there were some protesters on the streets, but the amount of protesters in the capital were not to compare with any cities. Everywhere, there are cries to impeach or incarcerate the president.

As the hours turned to days, and justice was served, what started as a terrifying sequence thankfully morphed into a tale of a nation that came together to protect something that they hold very close to their heart, leading us all to slowly go back to our everyday lives.



Kian's experience:

I had a 9 am flight to Tokyo booked for what turned out to be the morning after martial law was declared. Because of my early departure, I went to bed around 11 pm, totally unaware of the events unfolding.

When I woke up at 5 am, I was met with a flood of messages from friends and family in Europe, who had been following the events live, along with a lot of BBC news alerts. For us exchange students—and even our Korean friends—this came out of nowhere.

Korea University quickly sent an email condemning the president’s actions as illegal, while the RUG took over a week to ask how I was doing. My landlord messaged me, saying that the president and first lady would be arrested, which turned out to not be entirely accurate.

In my Constitutions and Legislatures class, our professor began giving weekly updates on the aftermath. Protests erupted near Parliament and Gyeongbokgung Palace, but as foreigners, we were warned not to attend—protesting was a violation of our visas.



The aftermath:

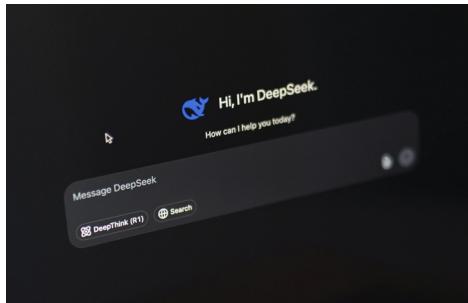
Even though the crisis was short-lived, it led to President Yoon’s impeachment, as the Constitutional Court ordered his removal from office, and he was arrested for the martial law declaration. As we can see through the testimonies, the rapid action of the Korean National Assembly, the vast use of social media and the active action taken by citizens made possible the quick restoration of democracy.



An Ethical Version of AI?

Comparing AI Models

RUBEN ARDELEAN



pay to increase their visibility, making Big Tech firms function as **digital landlords**. Their revenue isn't just from advertisements but from the everyday activities of users—liking posts, scrolling, commenting, and interacting with content. What's more, these companies evolve daily, using freely provided user data to refine their AI models and further their profits.

To put things into perspective, let's compare DeepSeek, ChatGPT, and Alexa:

DeepSeek is open-source, meaning anyone can access, modify, and integrate it into their software.

Alexa is Amazon's proprietary virtual assistant, built for user convenience but also for Amazon's ecosystem dominance.

GPT functions as a rent-based commodity, where access comes at a cost.

Now imagine having to pay rent just to browse the web. In many ways, you're already doing that. While internet access is provided by multiple infrastructure companies, Big Tech has turned online services into a form of digital rent extraction.

*American tech giants have largely trained their LLMs using private (**stolen**) data— your data, my data, your family's data*

Recent reports revealed that Meta **illegally** downloaded 82 terabytes of digital books to train its AI model, reaping billions in profit afterwards. Despite these alarming ethical violations, there seems to be little regulatory action against AI developers. Meanwhile, DeepSeek offers a promising alternative with its open-source model. However, it isn't without controversy—criticism has emerged over its censorship of topics sensitive to China, such as Taiwan, Tibet, and the Tiananmen Massacre.

As AI development accelerates, the battle between proprietary and open-source models will shape the future of digital power. The question remains: will Big Tech's cloud capital continue to dominate, or is a new era of decentralized AI on the horizon?

We've all seen it over the past few months—the rapid rise of a new LLM (large language model) challenging GPT's dominance: DeepSeek, the latest AI chat model from the CCP. Unlike OpenAI, DeepSeek operates on a different revenue model, offering services at a fraction of GPT's cost. This shift has sent shockwaves through Silicon Valley, leading to a staggering \$1 trillion in losses on the New York Stock Exchange and NASDAQ. Puzzlingly, DeepSeek's performance is strikingly close to that of OpenAI's GPT, matching it in most key parameters. So then how did a privately owned commodity like GPT suddenly face competition from an open-source LLM produced at a fraction of the cost?

American tech giants have largely trained their LLMs using private (**stolen**) data— your data, my data, your family's data

This term was coined by Yanis Varoufakis in his book *Technofeudalism: What Killed Capitalism* (2023). It refers to the vast, algorithm-driven digital infrastructure controlled by **Big Tech**. Unlike traditional forms of capital, Cloud Capital is intangible and decentralized.

Instead of owning factories, modern businesses now rely on digital platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Google Search, and Safari to market and advertise their products. Thanks to algorithms, companies can

Destination: Morocco

Between Desert and Mountain

LORIS HAMIOT



Every year the Travel Committee of our beloved Study Association Clio organizes an international trip. After Turkey last year, the Travel Committee surprised us again this year with a fabulous video teasing this year's destination: Morocco. The program includes 2 cities: the famous Marrakesh, well known to regular travelers, and Casablanca, the country's economic capital and largest city in the Maghreb with a population of over 4 million. In the context of this voyage, I had the opportunity to talk to Steffan Culafic, chair of Travel, and ask him more about what we will be doing.

"We wanted to give people the opportunity to discover a new cultural environment which is different from what most of us know"

Steffan Culafic
Chair of Travel Committee



That is what Steffan answered when I asked him about how this destination was chosen. Indeed, Morocco is a territory historically influenced by many peoples, including Arabs, Africans, Berbers and Europeans. To better discover this unique culture, the Travel Committee plans to introduce us to 3 international organizations. Two of them cannot yet be revealed, but Stefan has agreed to tell me about the third. The High Atlas Foundation aims to help Moroccan agricultural communities with sustainable development in several fields, including traditional handicrafts. The Moroccan state has put in place a number of plans to accelerate sustainable development. This primarily involves the development of infrastructure, increased use of renewable energies, the protection of endemic ecosystems, the introduction of sustainable and organic agriculture, as well as community programs based on equity and social responsibility.

Morocco has a lot of traditions, among them carpet making. It is a tradition deeply rooted in the country's culture, and each region has its own particular technique. Wool cotton and silk hand weaving techniques are frequently used to create the carpets. In recent years, with the growing phenomenon of tourism, carpets have become one of Morocco's most popular exports. This poses problems for sustainable development, both in terms of materials and the preservation of traditional weaving techniques, as cheaper factory production increasingly becomes the norm. This is why, during our trip, we will have the opportunity to observe a traditional carpet making site. During this tour, travelers will have the opportunity to visit the organization's premises, a tree nursery and a women's carpet-making cooperative that aims to preserve traditional carpet-making techniques.

In other words, Morocco is a fantastic destination that encompasses both mountains and desert, with a wonderful and engaging culture. It is a country that offers something to intrepid travellers with a thirst for adventure, as well as for those who appreciate leisure and relaxation. Quad biking expeditions into the desert are easily available, and, if you prefer a more leisurely day, Marrakesh is also full of spas and other relaxing sites.

Enjoy your trip to Morocco!

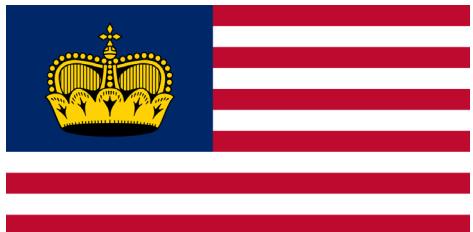




Morning in America

One Nation's Flirt with Monarchism

SAM HOLM VAN DONK



Paul Emerson Washington is a retired regional manager for a building supply company in San Antonio, Texas. He is also the only descendant of George Washington that could claim the title of Monarch of America, based on genealogical research produced by Ancestry.com.

But- American monarchism? The very idea screams oxymoron. Did Thomas Jefferson not decree freedom from the tyrannical monarchical rule in the Declaration of Independence? Was the very concept of America not built on the unwavering rejection of monarchism? Certainly, but history shows that this is not always a given, and that monarchism, despite seeming absurd to the conception of America, has been alive and well in certain circles, both today, and from the very birth of the nation.

From the very beginning, 'loyalists' were the term given to those who supported the British crown in the colonies. The term was functionally synonymous for supporters of the monarchy, but since they supported the rule of King George III, they can hardly be described as American monarchists. Loyalists', however, were not the only group who supported monarchical rule. From within the ranks of the continental army, talk began to arise of a new monarchy, separate from the British line, who were to rule the American people through a constitutional monarchy, as opposed to a generally-accepted republican government. And of course there can be no other candidate than the father of the nation- George Washington himself. This marks the pivotal moment in history that, had it only gone slightly differently, could have seen the United States ruled over by the House of Washington, hammering in monarchical rule on both sides of the Atlantic.

Despite the eagerness of some high military officers, Washington himself was not so enthusiastic. In response to a 1782 letter from Lewis Nicola, a naval officer, Washington swiftly affirms that the republican

form of government is most effective in realising the aims of the Declaration of Independence- life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. In doing so, he rejected Nicola's belief that America was best-placed with Washington as its monarch.

Yet American monarchism did not die with this setback. The Prussian scheme is a name given to the plan orchestrated by a small group of officers and politicians in the newly-formed Continental Congress and Army. A letter was sent to the Prussian Prince Henry, quite simply offering him kingship over the United States. As with Washington, Henry politely declined the offer, purporting that Americans were likely not yet ready to accept another king's rule over them.

Then in 1787, while hammering out the details of the new constitution at the Constitutional Convention, founding father Alexander Hamilton himself suggested that the President be appointed and serve for life as an elective monarch, with the powers that come with it. His proposal was resoundingly ignored, cementing republicanism as the way forward for the young democracy. Hamilton, it would later be claimed, would personally lament that America never became a monarchy. Thus ended the early fringe monarchist movements, and democratic ideals became inseparable with America. But... not quite.



Since revolutionary times, it has been true that support for monarchism suffers from low popularity, yet it seems that this may be changing. In 1950, only 3% of Americans said it would be good for the country to be ruled by a royal family. In 1999, that same statistic stood at 11%. Finally, in 2023, a YouGov poll indicated that 12% of Americans favored monarchy in the United States. Clearly, monarchism has not entirely faded into the realm of obscurity for some Americans, and this form of political rule is indeed often linked with traditionalist Catholic circles, where sympathies for monarchy remain. These groups, which often emphasize pre-Vatican II teachings, view monarchy as a divinely ordained form of governance that aligns with the hierarchical structure of the Church. They often admire Catholic monarchs from history, such as Louis IX of France or the Habsburg emperors, as the epitome of just rule. Monarchism is thus constructed as a counterpoint to modern secularism and liberal democracy, reflecting a longing for a perceived era of Christendom in which faith and politics were integrated under a sovereign guided by Catholic principles.

Furthermore, a romanticized view of monarchism can be said to have been crafted by Disney since the 1940s, and fairy-tale narratives rooted in European folklore have embedded the virtues of royalty in popular culture. From Cinderella to The Lion King, Disney has consistently depicted monarchs and their kingdoms as realms of magic, beauty, and moral rule, presenting kings, queens, princes, and princesses as noble, virtuous figures, and creating an idealized image of monarchy that glosses over its practical implications. This portrayal feeds a collective American fascination with royal life, detached from the realities of hereditary rule, such as the budget needed to sustain this (in Denmark this institution costs taxpayers just about 19 million euros yearly). Disney's comprehensive existence has made it a cornerstone of American cultural imagination, creating an idea of monarchy rooted more in the magical realm of talking mice and fairy godmothers than any sober evaluation of society today.

More recently, perhaps even thanks to a childhood pervaded by Disney, monarchism has seen a surprising resurgence in popularity on platforms like Reddit, particularly among niche American communities exploring alternative political ideologies. Subreddits dedicated to monarchism often attract individuals disillusioned with the instability and divisiveness of modern democratic systems. These users romanticize monarchy, as is a trend in much of American cultural life, as a more stable, unifying form of governance, drawing inspiration from historical examples and glorifying the idea of a sovereign as a non-partisan figure above all forms of political strife. For some it surely is deeply satirical, using it simply as a tool to critique modern political life, but the abundance of serious (to the point of

irony) manifestos and deeply sober discussion makes it clear that some users live with the genuine belief that monarchy is best suited for America. This online monarchist revival is a unique and, perhaps unfortunately, growing community in America's digital landscape.

If a monarchy could not be avoided, possible contenders for the throne include several 'dynasties' of the Americas, significant in their political or industrial contributions to the young nation. These families are typically politically active over multiple generations, often occupying important roles in business and social life as well. One is the Adams family of eastern Massachusetts, directly descended from founding father John Adams. A well-known example is the Kennedy family, having produced a President, an attorney general, several senators, and most recently, a potential presidential candidate in the 2024 election. Then there are 'the Bushes'; famously spawning a presidential father-son legacy, and the Dutch-descended Roosevelts, who have also had multiple members in the presidential office. The list goes on- Clinton, Long, Lincoln, Lee, not to mention the families famous for their business & industrial exploits- the Vanderbilt & Rockefeller families of New York. After all, is ruthless economic savvy not the most American trait of all? If an American royal lineage could reflect that, perhaps this would suggest that a meritocratic quality has pervaded even the most elitist and arbitrary system of all.

Many of these families are directly traceable to the early settler populations of the thirteen colonies. Discussing American genealogy thus inevitably leads to discussions of 'old stock' Americans, many of whom are protestant families originating from northwestern Europe, rendering any real mention of an American monarchial family one that is tinged with elitism, even racism.

Monarchism is thus antithetical to America. Equality before the law, freedom of speech & religion and meritocracy were all foundational to conceiving the United States, and any real, albeit it uncommon, talk of monarchism truly holds no place in the world of today, save for in the minds of a few online delusionals.





Interview with Sander des Tombe

From International Relations & Affairs to Environmental Policy

VALENTINA TUERO FAJARDO

Sander des Tombe is a previous International Relations and Affairs student at the RUG from 2010 to 2016, where he did both his bachelor's and master's. Aside from that, he was a reporter and eventual Editor-in-Chief for Checks & Balances. Now, he works in the Dutch Marine Energy Center, which focuses on ocean energy and the future impact of this renewable resource. Sander himself gives policy updates and advice for engineers to integrate policies within their work, as well as explaining all technical matters to those who support the project.



Tell us about your time at the university and Checks

I studied International Relations and did a master's in International Political Economy. I was first a reporter in Checks (2012 to 2014); after that, I became the Chief editor (2014 to 2015). Something that I want to highlight happened in one of the Clio events; a speaker, who was an expert in negotiations came, which really fascinated me- I have some articles about it. The speaker mentioned how he wanted to publish all of his work and turn it into a book. Having this in mind, I decided to approach him and make a suggestion: If I write the

glossary of the book, can you offer me an internship in your company, The Clingendael Institute. This eventually succeeded. When I came back to RUG for my masters, I needed another internship so I became the first intern at the Dutch embassy of Yangon, Myanmar.

How did being in Checks & Balances help you professionally?

I really enjoyed working for Checks as it connected me with some of the people that I interviewed, such as diplomats. I feel it's a really good way to get your foot in the door, I recommend everyone make use of this as much as you can. As I already mentioned before, I was able to get an internship in The Clingendael Institute, which was dedicated to training diplomats and contributing to work on relevant topics such as Eastern Europe and the Balkans.

How was your experience working at the embassy in Yangon?

It was right after the elections (2016), so it was a time when we thought the country was going to be rebuilt, and we were going to learn from all of our mistakes. Also, it was very interesting as there was a small Dutch community in that country- a few companies like Heineken, and we were looking at what roles these companies can have. In addition, this country was disconnected from the outside world in terms of the free press, all the newspapers were filled with propaganda and the internet was basically cut off for a decade. Then, right after the election, everyone was able to get information from cheap manufactured phones from China, their only reliable source being Facebook. I believe this was used as a tool to spark some nationalism and xenophobia. My personal highlight from this experience was connecting with the Dutch head coach of the women's national football team, which was their main pride in terms of sport. We were able to set up a collaboration where they empowered a lot of young people who did not have a role model. On the other hand, one of the downsides of being there was that I completely forgot to apply for jobs in the Netherlands haha...

How did you end up working in this field?

After leaving the internship in Myanmar, I decided to reach out to some people that I knew had several connections. One of them was a Dutch lobbyist who convinced me - as lobbyists do haha - to bring my skills closer to what lobbyists do. He informed me of the large gap between policy and the market. With this idea in mind, I landed a job in the Netherlands focusing on EU law and the interpretation of Dutch law for companies, as they were not aware of how law comes to be, or the process afterwards. I guided them and showed them what sort of implications it can have for them. I also worked with many multinational companies as well; I was in a lot of boardrooms, which makes you learn a lot and improve your confidence. One of the highlights that inspired me to work where I am now was when the company turned 20. To celebrate this, I decided to pitch an idea to support 20 start-ups by giving them 20 hours of free advice; this inspired me and convinced me that start-ups have a mission to change things.

What attracted you to climate change?

Well, I was a vegetarian for 10 years haha. I was also part of the "Klimaatakkoord", the Young Climate Movement in the National Climate Agreement talks, which all the youth political parties were part of. Everyone was collaborating to establish "how 2050 will look like" so the youth was to be included. We all had similar ideas but different backgrounds. I was working as an active lobbyist, sort of like a bridge between companies and them. For me, it was a personal ambition to make an impact in this area, as it is a topic that unites people.

Did you always plan to work in this field?

I never really had everything planned out, but I think it really started when I chose the type of policies I would like to see created. I had a professional interest in policymaking and international negotiations. But during my time in university, I was not very focused on climate change per se, instead I was very interested in peace-making. I wanted to do something to change things. But it could have gone in different directions, like if I hadn't talked to the lobbyist, my life would have been completely different. In conclusion, I did not figure it all out in my first years of university, I had many paths and different decisions.

What would you like to do in the future?

Everything that I'm doing at the moment will take a long time to be successful, and I want to see more progress before I leave this sector. I think climate change is something that I personally would like to keep focusing on.

Finally, do you have any advice for those reading, or specifically for members of Checks?

There is a very big chance you will end up working in a corporate sector, as companies need to think and act globally, in a fragmented manner. Don't feel like it's a bad thing; it can be very inspiring as you work with different minds, and it can give you flexibility if you choose to move to the public sector later on. Be open-minded to opportunities. Think outside the box. Don't think there is only one way to make a career. If an opportunity arises, take it; you never know where you will end up.



From Subcultures to Mainstream

How Fashion Alternatives lost their Edge

ANNIKA KOCH



With the beginning of a new year, new year resolutions are bound to follow. Resolutions to quit drinking alcohol for January. Resolutions to start going to the gym. Resolutions to be vegetarian. However, some of us have decided it is about time to quit fast fashion. But what even is fast fashion? And do fashion subcultures diversify our identity or have even they become too mainstream?

Fast fashion is the idea of companies like Shein and H&M to replicate recent catwalk trends and designs by high-fashion design houses in a way that they can keep their production at a low cost and still make them available to the masses. Now while this of course allows lower-income households to afford the newest looks, it also means that on the flipside, children work 48-hour shifts in unsafe conditions in polluted factories in Bangladesh. Once this was exposed, a section of society collectively decided to attempt to avoid fast fashion. Often this meant promoting thrifting or joining fashion subcultures that were so niche their clothing was produced locally. Nonetheless, how niche are these subcultures really?

Fashion subcultures were historically seen as a vital way to express yourself "against" the masses. Essentially, those who were part of the hippies were advocates

for non-violence, love and peace. They used fashion to reflect their beliefs. With their flowers and bright colours, their fashion sense automatically positioned themselves against the masses who preferred darker tones such as olive green and black. Hence, fashion subcultures have always been seen as a crystal clear way to showcase to others who you are; and your identity.

Nonetheless, this is no longer the case. Fashion subcultures have become somewhat generalised. In the pursuit of being "different," we have made alternative clothing styles become mainstream. For instance, the goth, punk and biker subcultures that existed in the 1970s and 1980s share a love for the iconic leather jacket. An item that if you step into the bustling streets of any major city today you will see countless people wear. Hence, while subcultures may disrupt the mainstream fashion industry for a short while, they also influence and shape it for the future.

Subcultures even shape future generations because they act as a sort of alternative source of inspiration. Especially when teens are in their "angst" phase, subcultures are an attractive alternative. The allure of the alternative lies in the fact that they provide a sense of belonging that allows individuals to resist the consumer-driven world and equally reclaim their identity. By "reclaiming" their identity, individuals often tend to just start dressing or acting in accordance with a new aesthetic that they resolute with. Moreover, these identities shaped by all these influences seem to morph into one, as each subculture attempts to broaden its scope and diversify to include more sectors of society.

Now, does influencing the mainstream fashion industry mean subcultures have become too generalised? Not necessarily. The inherent nature of subcultures has reformed. Since there is now a way for the fashion industry to reproduce any fashion trends in milliseconds in order to mass-produce them, subcultures have lost their original rebellious touch. Nevertheless, subcultures still have maintained their ability to provide individuals with the opportunity to claim space and assert their identity in a world where they feel overlooked.



Sweden

Mystic Country of the Trolls, or a Place to lose your Sanity?

ROBYNE KERVER

Having spent all of my summers and winters in Sweden since I was only a few months old, I grew up with the many tales that my Swedish family told me about nature. Walking through the forest was never dull, as my grandmother recounted tales of trolls and elves. Many different Swedish children's programmes that I used to look at on TV often mentioned tales of these creatures, and reinforced their presence in my life. When visiting amusement parks, these myths became real, with trollstigar and the little houses of tomtenissar. All these memories about Sweden and their myths have made me curious about investigating more about them and their origins. In this article I will explain two important mythological creatures that are still very prominent in Swedish culture.

Tomtenissar are always present around Christmas in Sweden. It is difficult to miss these creatures in the run up to the winter holidays, as there are many Christmas decorations dedicated to them. Small doors in the wall with a ladder and a small Christmas tree indicate the home of a tomtenisse. Folklore claims that the tomte is a guardian spirit, tasked with ensuring the well-being of the household and its inhabitants. The household in return is supposed to put down a bowl of porridge on Christmas eve. During this time, the Swedes often sing the song "Tomtarnas Julnatt", which is about the tomtenissar that roam around this time. This song is still very popular in Swedish families around Christmas time.

Whereas tomtenissar were seen as agreeable for humans, trolls were to be feared. The word 'troll' comes from the Swedish word 'trolla', which means to enchant. Trolls were to be found in the Scandinavian mountains. This is also where famous trollstigar could be found, trails where the troll has walked previously. Trolls could also live under bridges and in forests, although that was less common. To this day, there are still many trails called "trollstigen" to be found throughout Scandinavia, which shows the presence of these mythical creatures in the region's culture. Trolls were perceived

to be mischievous, threatening and annoying to humans. They would even steal babies to eat them, and here are still many objects that can be found relating to the trolls in Sweden. At several spots, statues of them indicate a certain hiking path with a story on a sign next to it, explaining which particular troll lives nearby. In certain touristy places you could hear the voice of a troll under a bridge, warning you not to get too close. It shows that although Swedish mythology is a part of the past, its presence can still be felt throughout certain places in the country.

Sweden still has its mythological past on the surface of its culture. Tales of trolls and other stories are still told to many children, and the mystic ambiance of the forests only make those tales more believable. Being steeped in nature, the Swedish people that lived in historical woods for centuries held on to these beliefs and, with that, show their great connection with nature.





The Sound of Silence

A Word from Conference

CONFERENCE COMMITTEE

Talking is instilled in us as being central to all areas of life, public and private. And in many ways it is. At the same time, we are easily able to filter out much of the discourse around us at any point, forcing the question of whether it is all meaningful.

There is great value placed on speaking, especially public speaking. Growing up, emphasis is placed on being brave enough to open your mouth and contribute to the discourse. We are encouraged to talk to show engagement and understanding. There is an obligation, sometimes explicit and sometimes implied, to talk so as to signal to those around you that what they are saying is valid, or at least coherent enough to warrant a response. A social process of verbal legitimisation, reassuring each other that we are understanding and understood. It is then the act of speaking, and not its content, which is important.

A similar phenomenon can be observed in speeches, especially ones made by highly esteemed individuals in the public eye. The speeches often come across as formulaic, like talking without saying much. They may confirm what is expected, what is the status quo, and what would have been assumed without any additional talking being done at all. Or, rather than trusting the audience to understand the meaning of what is being said from a few sentences, they ramble on in an attempt to assert authority—a presence—and control the narrative. Still, no matter how much talking goes on, it can

remain void of meaning. The idea of talking without saying anything is not new. It can be cleverly done, for example by politicians trying to thread the thin line of diplomacy, but more often it is terribly transparent, coming across as insecurity or even ignorance. Sometimes the sound of silence is not silent, but rather loud and obnoxious.

It is not always the loudest voices which say the most. Rather, silence can speak volumes. Silence should never be assumed to equal absence of opinion or thought. A silence forces the listener to reflect on the character of the non-speaker, and to listen to their own assumptions and preconceptions about what should be said. Thus, silence is not only the sound of reflection, but also forces introspection in others. A silent speaker is one who trusts their audience to find answers within themselves.

Maybe talking is overrated and silence is underappreciated. Our need to talk, as much as—if not more than—our avoidance of it, often comes from a place of insecurity. Insecurity of those talking over not being understood by their listeners. Insecurity of those talking over showing that they do not understand. Insecurity of those talking over not being in control of their own narrative, over having unfounded assumptions be made. If we can be silent and still understood we have found a trustworthy audience.



The American Empire is Falling

How Trump's 2nd presidency is the end of American Hegemony

NICOLAS LARKIN DAMM



The title for this article might be a tad bit melodramatic, but unless you still hold onto the principle that history ended following the fall of the Soviet Union, then it is certainly no stretch of logic to say that we are currently living through the rapid decline of the American Empire.

Since the blatant display of fascist rhetoric and symbology at the inauguration of the man whose speech motivated a seditious assault on the heart of American democracy, Trump and his owner Musk have severely crippled the American government's capacity to render aid around the world through the elimination of USAID, shredded through the autonomy granted to the treasury and has turned his gaze to the Department of Education. Finally with executive order 14215 'Ensuring Accountability for All Agencies', the administration centralises power once again in the President, only this time the difference between a president and a king are non-existent.

The fall of American Empire has certainly not been quiet and it has already been violent

The rhetoric and propaganda currently employed by the Republican Party against activist students, LGBTQ persons and immigrants of all kinds in America is no longer eerily similar to the Nazi propaganda that vilified Jewish people, Communists and host of other people; it is the same. An instigation of moral panic and framing groups as the enemy within. Never mind their support for the continued bombing and occupation of Palestine by the Israeli regime, or calls for America to take ownership of Gaza and 'relocate' its inhabitants.

Trump's aggressive threatening and use of tariffs results in people hurting all around the world. But those who will hurt the most will surely be the American people, as the price of food and goods only continues to rise, not because of inflation, but thanks to the insatiable thirst for profit that American oligarchs have acquired. But when families can no longer afford bread, and all that is left to prevent revolt is the circus, how long can the despots and oligarchs keep the starving masses fighting each other along lines of race, culture and politics before another moment of class consciousness extends itself, as happened following the shooting of Brian Thompson?

Some people, perhaps even some readers, will say I am living in a fantasy, that American Empire is not falling, that this is simply a readjustment and that Kamala will be elected in the next elections. But everything I have written about here, besides the assassination of Brian Thompson, has occurred in less than a month's span. If this is the chaos and disorder that one month of Trump and outright oligarchic rule in America causes, what will four more years bring?

One of the core reasons why the Roman Empire fell was internal decay, as the rich hoarded masses of wealth and engaged in blatant corruption while the poor were forced into cramped housing rampant with diseases. But when the bread and circuses were available, they were placated. Now with the Trump administration working at lightning speed to dismantle social welfare & education, and jacking prices up, how long until history repeats itself and people are out on the streets?

From the fall of the Soviet-Union up until the outbreak of Covid-19 we lived in a world without any of the madness in national and international politics that we see today. It was a quiet time. However, in the short span of 5 years, this emptiness has certainly become overcrowded and we as IR scholars will carry the burden of both understanding it and having to navigate this mess throughout our careers.



About Us

Overcrowding Emptiness is undoubtedly a contradiction. How can emptiness be overcrowded? Would it not, then, cease to be recognized as emptiness when it is filled with other elements? We don't necessarily have the answer, but we feel that this puzzle simultaneously allows us to explore both inside the mind of the individual, and to examine their role in their social surroundings. We, the Editorial Staff, often experience that our day-to-day lives tend to be overcrowded. There's always work to be done- be it committee deadlines, uni assignments, social life, sports or any number of other responsibilities. Therefore, we reflect today on the following question; *Where would you go to disconnect from your daily life?*



Sam Holm van Donk
Editor-in-Chief



I'd love to visit primordial nature. Whether that means being deep in a Swedish forest or out on an African savannah, being isolated in untouched nature always helps me shed the worries of my day-to-day, and focus on my most basic needs and wants- food, water, rest and good company.

Stefan Szekely Nagy
Secretary



If I could, I would drift weightlessly through space, far from the noise of the world. Wrapped in the stillness of the cosmos, I would watch Earth glow like a distant memory, its worries too small to reach me. The stars flicker, distant and eternal, there is no expectation, only the quiet hum of existence. In that nothingness I am free.

Loris Hamiot
Treasurer, Lay-out Editor



I would be horseback riding on the Eurasian steppe between Mongolia and Kazakhstan, with the wind at my back and the eagles soaring above me. Sleeping in a yurt, eating grapes and taking a step back from civilization

Annika Koch
Lay-out Editor



If I could, I would float in the Mediterranean ocean. While the sun's rays make the water around me glisten, all I want to hear is the sound of waves rolling against the nearby shore and the faraway shrieks of seagulls as they span the horizon.

Robyne Kerver

Lay-out Editor



I have always been able to escape my daily life in the countryside of Sweden. The forests and streams of water fade out the hectic and pressing sounds from the city, allowing me to finally take a breath and put my mind at ease. After a long semester of university and work there is nothing better than that.

Leila Rizkallah

Public Relations



Back home, floating in the ocean on Egypt's north coast at sunset, the water wrapping around me like a second skin. As the sun starts to disappear, the slow rhythm of the waves reminds me just how vast the world truly is beyond myself.

Ruben Ardelean

Reporter



For me nature is the answer. I love spending my time trekking, camping and climbing rocks. If that's not possible, I put on my headphones and go for a run or a swim!

Valentina Tuero Fajardo
Reporter



I would go to the beach near my house in Spain. I will sit down, read a book and listen to music. I will wait until it gets dark so I will be able to lay down and see the stars. Breathing fresh air and relaxing having no toughts, enjoying the music and the book.

Nicolas Lar- kin Damm
Board Representative



I usually go to a cafe with an upstairs section and nice chairs. Order a coffee and maybe something to eat, turn off whatsapp and watch a movie, series or read a book.

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