



CHECKS & BALANCES

Volume 27, Issue 1

Perception



**Laila Badran***Chair of Clio Board*

Dearest reader, Clio member,

A very warm welcome to the first edition of this year's Checks & Balances. We're thrilled about what the editorial staff has planned and hope you're just as excited!

We all like to think we know ourselves. We assume others know us too. But what if no one ever meets the same you twice? Are you what you believe about yourself, or what others believe about you? And who does that make you, really?

Every person you meet builds a picture of you from quick impressions, truths, lies, and assumptions. In one story, you are the hero. In another, just a background character. In someone else's, the villain. None of these are entirely wrong. We live in pieces across people, and perception does not only change reality, it makes it. The unsettling part is that you will never fully know the version of you that lives in someone else's mind.

Even in the same moment or the same conversation, two people do not leave with the same meaning. You can stand side by side, see the same thing, and still walk away with different stories. Perception is not the event itself; it is how the mind arranges it. Memory, emotion, bias, fear, and desire all lean on the facts, and there is no neutrality, no pure observation, only interpretation.

And when it comes to ourselves, it becomes even more complex. We are both the subject and the mirror, trying to catch our reflection, but there are things about us we will never see. Things too familiar, too painful or too beautiful to recognise. And maybe that's the best part. The mystery of being known in ways we cannot know ourselves. The idea that who we are is always slightly beyond our reach, only seen by others.

So with this edition, question what you see, and why you see it. Nietzsche wrote, "There are no facts, only interpretations." In a world built of perceptions, perhaps that is where truth begins.

Laila Badran*Chair of the 38th Clio Board***Annika Koch***Editor in Chief*

Dearest Reader,

As we begin the 27th year of publishing, we want to reemphasise the significance of the name of our magazine: Checks & Balances.

By hearing the name, we are associated with money and banking. In the first instance, we're a budgetary committee or at most a finance magazine. In reality, this is a misconception created by a lack of awareness of the varying interpretations of the term.

In politics, the idea of "Checks & Balances" illustrates the mechanisms that distribute power throughout a political system to prevent an institution or individual from obtaining absolute control. Checks ensure institutions limit each other's power. Meanwhile, Balances maintain a variety of interests that are represented in democratic processes. Therefore, our name reflects our mission: to create an inclusive journalistic space where new opinions innovate the discussions on current topics.

Our name inspired our first edition's theme: perception. As seen by C&B, even within a group of students with similar interests, one expression can have a thousand different explanations and meanings. Each explanation is distinctive to the person's background, opinions and personality. Each meaning is shaped by a person's language, nationality and memories. Our world is shaped by how we choose to view it.

Given the thousands of definitions for one expression, misconceptions arise. While these misconceptions can generate conflict, they can also bridge the gap between people. The more we don't understand, the more curious we are to learn about someone else's experience. Consequently, we hope that through this edition, you grow to understand that although no two people share the same lens through which they view the world, each of us has the opportunity to live a life that is uniquely ours.

Annika Koch*Editor-in-Chief*

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CAREER COMMITTEE 2025-2026

CAREER DAY

Date: February 13th, 2026

Location: Provinciehuis, Groningen

Duration: TBD

Offers the opportunity to explore future jobs, after the IR Bachelor, through speakers and stands

CAREER TRIP

Date: May 7th, 2026

Location: to be announced

Duration: one day

An in-house trip to visit organizations, offering a chance to explore different work cultures and professional environments



Any questions?
careerclio@gmail.com



CAREER

25/26

What It Means to Be a Young Adult Today

Finding balance in the chaos of modern adulthood

CHARLOTTE D'HARAMBURE

To be a young adult today is to live at the crossroads of possibility and uncertainty, in a time when the pace of change often outstrips your ability to process or adapt. You inhabit a global society where boundaries—between countries, between online and offline, between work and life—are increasingly blurred. It is both thrilling and daunting.

You face a dizzying array of choices: what to study, where to build a career, how to relate to the world and others. Far from the linear paths of previous generations, your route is winding. Educational opportuni-

In the end, being a young adult today means holding complexity: balancing ambition and acceptance, individuality and community, freedom and responsibility.

ties abound, but so do rising tuitions and an uncertain job market. The “gig economy” promises flexibility yet often brings instability. It can feel as though every decision is momentous, every wrong turn irreversible.

Yet in this uncertainty, you are learning adaptability. Each challenge—finding work, budgeting, moving to a new city—becomes a skill-building exercise, proof that resilience can be cultivated. You may discover that “success” has no single definition, and that inventing your own version is a form of strength.

You are one of the most digitally connected generations in history. Through your devices, you access the world’s knowledge, stay in touch across continents, and share your thoughts instantly. Social media lets you curate identity but also brings pressure: the sense you must always be “on” and progressing. There is comfort in connection—finding like-minded communities or organising for a cause—but also the anxiety of comparison. Navigating this space means learning when to engage and when to step away, when to share and when to guard your privacy.

Being a young adult is also about figuring out who you are—and who you want to be. For many, this process is shaped by experiences of difference: moving between countries, cultures, or languages. Questions of gender, faith, and values take centre stage. The world asks you to “define yourself,” even as its definitions shift. In this search, you often discover belonging not just with peers, but across generations and communities. You

learn that identity is forged through experience and empathy.

Education is both privilege and pressure. You balance lectures, deadlines, and jobs, sometimes questioning whether effort will “pay off.” Yet these years cultivate an ethic of curiosity and commitment. The search for meaningful work defines your generation: you value purpose over mere stability. Passion empowers but also risks insecurity. You learn that mastery grows from patience, and fulfilment from everyday contribution.

Amidst all this striving, mental health becomes central. The pressure to succeed or “keep up” can be overwhelming. Increasingly, you learn that self-care is a necessity, not an indulgence. Setting boundaries, seeking support, and taking rest become as vital as achievement. Your generation helps destigmatise mental health, building rituals—creative hobbies, walks, quiet moments—that sustain well-being.

To be a young adult now is to sense the weight and possibility of shaping the world. Climate change, social justice, and inequality are not abstract—they shape your choices and conscience. Activism and collective projects express hope and agency, even when progress feels slow.

In the end, being a young adult today means holding complexity: balancing ambition and acceptance, individuality and community, freedom and responsibility. You discover that resilience, empathy, and critical thinking will serve not only your life, but the collective life of a changing world.



The man as the breadwinner?

Redefining masculinity in an age of blurred gender norms

SAM TENGBERGEN



No longer is the traditional class divide the only big predictor of left versus right in the United States. Now gender, too, plays a big part. More than ever do young men vote right and young women vote left. A similar trend is happening in Europe. How come? Part of it is the lack of purpose and identity for men. What do you think of when you picture a “manly man”? If your brain is anything like mine, you’ll think of something resembling the first Google Images page after looking it up: beards, muscles, hairy chests, rolled-up sleeves. Are these things what make a man “manly” though? Not necessarily.

Manliness is largely a social construct. No one has a monopoly on what it means to “be a real man,” and rejecting traditional gender norms is entirely valid; whether that’s embracing vulnerability or defying stereotypes. Traditional is the key word here. Embracing vulnerability isn’t inherently feminine. Still, what is “manly” and “feminine” has become so blurred that they risk becoming empty signifiers. In one sense this is good; if we think too rigidly about masculinity or femininity, we fall into black-and-white thinking. On the other hand, rejecting traditional norms can be tricky; not because it’s wrong, but because a strong cultural idea of what makes a man manly still persists. We have to be mindful of this.

If we think too rigidly about masculinity or femininity, we fall into black-and-white thinking

One might “know” that a manly man is an arbitrary concept, yet it’s understandable one still pictures muscles, beards, and deep voices. These associations are ingrained; they don’t vanish just because we know they aren’t inherent. Beyond appearance, there are also associations about a man’s role. For much of modern

history, being a man meant being a provider. Economic stability defined not only a man’s success but his identity. His worth, both socially and romantically, was tied to earning and protecting. Today, that script has shifted. Women now outperform men in higher education and are increasingly financially independent. In many Western countries, women under 30 earn as much or more than their male peers. As a result, what women value in a partner has changed. Stability still matters, but so do reliability, kindness, and emotional maturity.

This is a good thing: it means a man now has to work on other qualities besides financial status. These traits were always important, but the emphasis is stronger now. Still, one can ask whether traditional norms can simply be rejected or neglected completely.

On the surface, it seems fine but there are consequences. A significant number of men still feel emasculated if they’re not the provider. That doesn’t mean we should cater to their expectations, but it does mean we should rethink how we interpret these norms. If society abandons them entirely, others will pick them up; and often twist them. The prime example is Andrew Tate. Many men feel uncertain about their role, and here comes a figure who embodies traditional masculinity telling them that their worth is defined by their ability to provide and protect. After all, “it’s always been like that.”

Although the hype around Tate has faded, remnants remain; one being the so-called “male loneliness epidemic.” It describes the rise in men reporting isolation, depression, and difficulty forming relationships. Look it up now and you’ll find either Tate wannabe’s claiming men must “get their money up” to be desirable, or memes mocking the idea entirely. Also a valid critique: The problem with calling loneliness an epidemic is that it makes it sound like something that simply happens to men, when in reality it often stems from a lack of direction and effort. That isn’t easy, but it begins with accountability, not victimhood.

This is where a reconceptualisation of the “manly man” can take place. Professor and author Scott Galloway makes a strong case by redefining what providing and protecting mean. Providing doesn’t have to mean earning the most money; it can mean being dependable, supportive, and emotionally steady. Protecting doesn’t require aggression or dominance; it can mean creating safety in relationships and standing up for others when it matters. If you make less than your girlfriend or wife? Fine. Then support them in the best way you can.

Under-Reported: The Children Of Bastis

The violence we don't think about.

TISHYA TIWARY

Hannah Arendt's Banality of Evil, unlike all previous theories of violence, ignited a disruptive fire in how we view our individual capacity to inflict harm. The text states that perhaps with enough distance, paperwork, hands, bureaucratic institutions, and de-humanised categorised language, the killing of men, women, and children could be translated into a single checklist. With systems of organisation and distribution becoming increasingly convoluted, the 19th and 20th centuries saw a great deal of philosophical contemplation about the humans residing in them as they ceased to become metrics.

John Parr became millions, killings ceded to casualties, commodities fetishised, depersonalisation, alienation, and dissociation gave way to existentialism, absurdism and nihilism. There is something mystifying about distance, something so transformative that individual culpability can so drastically change from a sword to a nuke. They make movies about Oppenheimer, not Colonel Paul Tibbets Jr. It's mundane, really, how mundane violence can be, with enough structures, enough time and enough separation, remorse and guilt are so easily tamed into complacency. Ideas old and new are twisted to cache the structural violence present in everyday living. Where meritocracy as justification fails, religious dogma such as fate or karma seeps in to fill the gaps.

With a booming economy brought on by heightened focus on privatisation and high-paying job opportunities concentrated in the cities, urbanisation in India has provided perhaps the most complex yet sophisticated web of institutional violence — slums. Not only have the residents living in slums been denied the promised benefits of high economic growth, but the festering cesspool of individualistic capitalism and the ever-present caste system has provided the ideal holistic guide to flatten these experiences of wealth inequality into individual lack. The inhabitants of slums are often scapegoated as thieves, addicts or thugs, and their children as unfortunate victims of circumstance until they are old enough to fit the previous categories. Often lacking formal forms of identification, primarily employed as informal workers, and living through the constant fear of demolition, slum residents remain one of the most vulnerable groups present in India.

Slums in India have existed since the 18th century, yet their rapid growth truly took off post-independence



during the 1950s as modern industrialisation and urbanisation rapidly grew. Despite concerted efforts by NGOs and activists raising awareness, as well as government schemes to address the lack of civil, political and social rights of slum citizens, it was the 2006 Nithari killings that brought national attention to the conditions of slums. Several children's and women's remains were discovered near a Noida slum, an event that started a domino effect on the public perception of the police. It exposed police incompetence and negligence, as well as the lack of rights of slum dwellers who still haven't received justice. Further investigations into the matter exposed that police had dismissed parents who had tried to report their children as missing, who were later revealed to be victims of the gruesome crime. Even more mishandling of the case by several Indian investigation bureaus, such as failing to follow the prominent organ trafficking lead, led to the acquittal of the perpetrators' death penalty by the Supreme Court.

While the sensationalised gruesomeness of cannibal killings took centre stage in TRP-driven news-media, the true horror of inadequate childcare and supervised security got lost in the spectacle. With sexual assaults and kidnappings becoming mainstays of slum living, several incidents go unreported, as many are written off as runaways by the Indian police. Stigma and shame around SA; India's victim-blaming culture keeps women and girls quiet. The most upsetting part is that many of these parents are domestic workers and nannies who take care of children living in more urban, posh areas of the city. In a quite literal sense, the life and safety of one child is traded for another.

Daycares, afterschool programmes, babysitters and housemaids are often undervalued and overlooked aspects of society. Household work and daycares becomes a two-fold structure of violence. One, due to the societal de-evaluation of feminised labour and the informal nature of the work- domestic maids end up working long hours for minimum pay. This situation is exacerbated by India's vast population where workers can be easily replaced hence hold little to no negotiation powers. Second, these caretakers can't afford the very daycares they work at, leaving their children unattended in dangerous slums. As slums are informal settlements often lacking even adequate door locks, much less proper fencing, these children are always at high risk vulnerable to incidents like the Noida killings. This is the true cost of daycares and cheap labour.

In Indian society, many of the domestic workers are uncontracted, often at the behest of their upper-middle-class and upper caste employers. Several domestic workers live in slums where the lower scheduled caste is often over-represented in the census. Socioeconomically, the dynamic of the lower caste serving the upper caste is still reinforced in modern Indian societies despite its illegality.

'There is something mystifying about distance, something so transformative that individual culpability can so drastically change from a sword to a nuke.'

A core aspect of maintaining caste relations has always been about property rights. For most of pre-colonial India, the upper Brahmin caste lived in superior isolated settlements away from the lower castes and functioned as landlords to the lower castes. In certain settlements, those of the especially lower caste were forbidden from even entering a Brahmin's sight of vision and therefore their movement was severely restricted. Whilst the caste system has been legally outlawed, one can't help but make comparisons to the BJP government covering slum settlements on the roadside with brick walls during Trump's visit. India's caste roots go deep and grow violent.

The promise of modern urbanisation and industrialisation being a tool for liberation for the lower caste has become yet another organ of oppression and inequality. It isn't uncommon to find slum settlements near high rise buildings, the most powerful mechanism of structural violence is how easily it has turned itself invisible, where naked emaciated children become mere backgrounds, an eyesore to be bulldozed over and a cheap five bucks to move heavy furniture. Contemporary India's response to its most vulnerable citizens remains a silence that ignores, assaults and eventually kills.



The death of minimalism

How a messy space sparks creativity

ILSE WESTENENG



“If a cluttered desk is a sign of a cluttered mind, of what, then, is an empty desk a sign?” This is what Einstein once asked himself, advocating for the benefits of a messy living space. Nowadays, a neat work and living space is the norm, while messiness is regarded as a sign of dysfunction. Even though cleanliness has its advantages, clutter and mess shouldn’t be disregarded.

The minimalist trend has turned many houses into empty spaces with streamlined interiors. Modern living rooms are defined by smooth surfaces, muted tones, and deliberate emptiness. Clutter and chaos are absent, and every object in the room has a purpose. Netflix’s ‘Tidying up with Marie Kondo’ has helped us declutter, only preserving the minimal objects needed in our houses. Next to the aesthetic pleasure gained from a house void of clutter, the minimalist trend aims to order our minds as well. The bullet journal, like a minimalist lifestyle, protects us from distractions. Omitting the unnecessary from houses enables us to pinpoint what is important, just like bullet journaling puts us on a direct path for reaching goals. The founder of the bullet journal Ryder Carroll explains that the dotted booklet helps to figure out priorities in life, by reflecting on tasks and managing time. However, the popularity of both the journal and the minimalist lifestyle seem to be in decline. Even Marie Kondo has given up tidying, explaining that her life has changed a lot since she started her career as a single woman in her twenties. The mother and wife has therefore decided to spend more time with her family. Many minimalist-turned influencers have since then also reverted to a messier life. Especially during the pandemic, many of them discovered that they missed the colour, clutter and creativity of decoration in their homes, where they had to spend most of their time.

While a growing number of influencers put down the bullet journal step away from minimalism, research increasingly suggests that clutter can have benefits. A study from the University of Minnesota in 2023 found that participants in a room with a desk crowded with pens, notebooks and crumpled post-its came up with more creative solutions. Just like a blank page, an empty desk can feel intimidating when trying to generate ideas. Surprisingly, the chaos of a cluttered desk can help us to think outside the box, not being restrained by requirements or expectations. An example of how messiness stimulates creativity is the 4 million worth artwork ‘My Bed’ by Tracey Emin. The object that is now perceived as art is the unmade bed of the artist, which she surrounded with a nasty collection of dirty clothes, crumpled tissues and empty bottles after spending several days in bed suffering from heartbreak. This form of assemblage art has gained a lot of critique, people referred to it as an ‘endlessly solipsistic, self-regarding homage’. On the other hand, one could argue that this is a perfect example of creativity arising from clutter, messiness and suffering. Without the mess of her heartbreak, this artwork would have never existed.

“Just like a blank page, an empty desk can feel intimidating when trying to generate ideas.”

While ‘My Bed’ by Tracey Emin falls in the category of gross junk, which can be easily fixed with the whisk of a broom, there is also the category for people who structurally collect clutter, called hoarders. These people have their houses filled to the brim with stuff that they don’t need, piles of trash making it impossible for people to live in the house. Being the far opposite of minimalists, hoarders also gain attention, but for entertainment rather than advice. The series ‘Hoarders’ by A&E Networks tries to help the hoarders and their family and friends to declutter the whole place and get rid of the unnecessary stuff. But throwing out the majority of the collected trash doesn’t help the owners of the house yet. Hoarding is caused by such severe mental problems that the root of the problem can only be dismantled through psychological assistance.

While few would advocate taking clutter to the extremes shown in ‘Hoarders’, still I would like to plead for a more positive view towards crowded desks and the contingency of living daily life without journaling every detail. Who knows, it might deliver you a 4 million dollar worth artwork!

Stale and Sullen

Communication skills in classic novels

LOEK RIKHOF

As much as I love reading classics, one thing consistently frustrates me: the total lack of emotional communication between characters. It’s like watching an old couple having settled on a quiet stalemate after years of little dissatisfactions and disagreements. Especially in those older novels, it seems to me that characters are plagued by a general stoic acceptance of their status quo, however miserable it may be. Of course, communication is hard; that is a certainty throughout the ages, but it does also feel like a relic of old, with our current societal focus on mental issues and emotions. In this article, I will highlight some of the novels that I think are most illustrative of this problem, to see what they can tell us about the past.

The first novel I want to highlight is *East of Eden*, John Steinbeck’s magnum opus from 1952, which is full of sullen, tragic figures suffering in silence. Such as Charles Trask, who lives a sad and lonely hermit life on his farm, until he tragically dies. The most aggravating, however, is Adam Trask, one of the main characters of the novel. Although he is framed as being a good person, most of the drama in the book would not exist if it weren’t for his egoistic self-pity. Although he can’t really help his complicated relationship with his half-brother Charles, who is by no means an easy character either, he does also fall in love with the psychopathic Cathy. She feels no love for him, but has nowhere else to go and thus no choice but accept his marriage. He did not consider the obvious signs of her discontent, and dared to enter a decade (!) long depression after she finally did leave him, neglecting his two children. Whether it is possible to detach yourself from the wrongdoings of your family, or if evil is something hereditary by blood, is an important theme in the novel. Charles, as well as Adam, are starkly formed by neglect from their father, perhaps leading to them being unable to deal with the loneliness of the broad and empty American plains.

Another book to draw attention to is *Stoner*, a 1965 novel by American author John Williams. It is about the life of an ordinary university teacher. A life plagued by an unhappy marriage, as he married a practically unknown woman, who quickly turns out not to be the person he imagined her to be. Despite that, they stay together their entire lives, without ever really acknowledging their problems but rather living in a constant state of quiet war. She deals some mean blows, from clearing out his office to alienating him from his daughter, while he drowns himself in work. Throughout the novel, you truly start to wonder what keeps the two together. The fact that the thought of divorce does not occur once, suggests that they maybe simply didn’t



think about it, or couldn’t imagine it. Here too both were implied to be affected by their upbringing. Their daughter, as well, is negatively impacted by their misery and turns out to be an alcoholic.

Both these novels portray a quiet, plagued archetype of man, who terrorises his loved ones by being distant and who internalises problems rather than really trying to solve them. I think that the causes of this attitude can in large part be attributed to the society that is portrayed in these novels. It is one with rigid norms and strong expectations, where women are expected to limit themselves to a life in service and men to be hard-working providers; where showing emotion is seen as a weakness. Both novels show the effect of such a society on the individual. Also important is how it reinforces and reinforces itself through upbringing. This society is no fiction however, it is our society, as it was not too long ago. Reading these books makes me appreciate present times more, where there is more freedom to be who you want to be and more acceptance towards people showing their emotions. But issues still persist and that is why, whenever I hear someone complain about the number of people who go to therapy nowadays, I think about these novels. Because every character that I have discussed here could desperately use it.

HOW WE SEE THE WORLD THROUGH MOVIES

The way cinema influences our perspectives.

LINE BIJLEVELD

In 2023, there were over 9500 movies produced. Genres of movies range from thrillers to romantic comedies and to many other categories. Of course, movies are not restricted to one genre; they can have as many genres as the producers want. It's different for every movie how many viewers it gets, whereas the new *Lilo and Stitch* has earned 1,037,933,218 US dollar from being watched, *Friendship*, which was released on the same day, has earned 16,519,430 US dollar, way less in comparison. Even though the popularity of movies differs, overall it's safe to say that movies find their way to a lot of people.

'Realism in cinema is crafted by people with their own ideas about the world and society, so even though cinema does not depict real life, you could, in a way, say it depicts a parallel realism.'

Different people like different movies; you can make a big differentiation between movies, like non-fiction and fiction, but also within fiction, like horror and drama. The way these movies are perceived differs as well, whereas documentaries are often seen as educational, fiction movies are not. Most people watch fiction movies for entertainment, not to learn something about them, or to spark some interesting thoughts. Movies are fake anyway, right? That is true; however, even though the plots in fiction movies are made up, they are still, in a way, a reflection of real-life society.

Some types of fiction movies are depicted in societies that are similar to societies existing outside of the movies. The way those movies portray people and their relations also seems similar to how we see people and experience relations in real life. These similarities give the feeling that what happens in those movies could actually happen in real life as well, and therefore portray realism. Even if movies seem realistic, they are still fic-

tion, because they are made up. However, they are not entirely separate from real life. The plots of movies are made up by people who have their own ideas about the world and whose values often reflect the society they live in. On the contrary, scenarios can also be made up by people who have different values and perspectives from the society they live in, a good example of this is the movie *The Matrix*. The movie, produced by Lana and Lilly Wachowski, puts forward the question of what reality is. The perspectives of the director influence every choice in movies.

Realism in cinema is crafted by people with their own ideas about the world and society, so even though cinema does not depict real life, you could, in a way, say it depicts a parallel realism. Even if the reality in movies is not the same as real life, there are aspects of movies that do reflect real life. The portrayal of women, for example. The well-known film series *James Bond* gave rise to the concept of Bond girls, sexy and young girls who are the love interests of the main character. In the early movies, those girls are often portrayed as dependent on men, particularly *James Bond*.

He uses those girls, who are often way younger than him, either to reach his goal or as a sex object, or even both. He uses them as a sex object, not as a sex partner, because the latter one suggests an equal relationship, which requires mutual respect and consent from both parties. And let's just say the relationships in the movies are lacking in both.

James does not love the girls because of their intelligence, and consent is not present in every movie. However, this portrayal of women changes throughout the years. A good example of this is Judi Dench. In the 90s, she came to play the role of M, the boss of 007, as the first woman. The switch in the portrayal of women cannot only be seen through Judi Dench, but also in the Bond girls. In the more recent movies, the Bond girls are portrayed less as objects and more as people who can think for themselves as well. They are not just in the movie to be used by James and as objects of lust for the watchers, but they have a role for themselves, which fits them way better. For the reason that women used to have a supportive role of men in society, they were portrayed in movies like this as well. However, due to feminist movements, women achieved more rights and got more room to express their opinions in society. Along with the change of perspective in real life, they also got a better portrayal in the movies.

This shows that the way women are treated in reality influences their roles in movies. This could also work the other way around. If women are portrayed as objects in movies, people who see this will think of this as normal and treat women like objects, whereas if women are treated as human beings in movies, that becomes normalised in society. Both ways demonstrate how real society and realism in movies influence each other.

If the movies you watch influence the way you think about certain things, it matters which movies you watch. If you would only watch old movies, the traditionalist ideas, which might be outdated, will influence your comprehension of how society works. Not only does the production date of the movies matter, but also their origin.

If a woman from a country that oppresses women only watches movies from that country, she will mostly agree with the values of her country. Whereas if she watches the new *Barbie* movie for example she might start thinking about how it would be like to live in a world where women are not oppressed. Watching movies made by other

countries than your own will lead to seeing different perspectives and different cultures. In America, a lot of people only watch American-produced movies because they like them better. The reason they like them better might be that the settings in the movies are familiar.

'Movies... a reflection of real life society'

These movies portray the same values as they have, and they don't feel the need to learn about other perspectives, or they think that reading subtitles is too much of a hazard and is not worth it. The fact that the American people prefer American movies suggests the perspective that they are superior and that other viewpoints matter less. People who only watch movies from their own country will stay in their bubble and will learn less and therefore care less about other perspectives than their own.

If you like watching movies, do try to watch movies from different countries and directors with different views as well, because it will expose your mind to new ideas. There is a choice to only watch movies as entertainment or also to watch them as an enrichment of perspectives.



Appearance is King

When a haircut becomes a statement of who you are

ANNIKA KOCH

One trip to the hairdresser, and the hours spent building your reputation are instantly rendered useless. With every snip of the scissor blades comes another judgmental look on the streets. With every strand of hair falling to the floor comes another snarky comment. A haircut is no longer reduced to its functional purpose, but is now seen as an expression of your identity. An expression of your personality, gender and sexuality. What could have been a simple fashion statement becomes a decision that alters your platonic and romantic interactions, all while causing nothing short of an identity crisis. A haircut in the 21st century perfectly reflects society's view: appearance is king.

A choice to appear in one way may lead to meeting a new friend, and another to a cheeky kiss on a night out.

According to the dictionary, appearance is defined as an "external show". Nonetheless, in reality, appearance is treated as a criterion on which to evaluate whether you're worth someone else's time. Although you may think that by wearing an all black outfit you come across as confident, certain people will see it as conveying the need for comfort in your emotionally unstable life. The idea of you being emotionally unstable does not serve as an incentive for someone to be friends with you. The opposite, it deters them from it. For some, the colour black symbolises power, and for others, grief. Hence, by one quick scan of your outfit, someone decides whether you're "their kind of person".

Though we know a person is not just what they wear, it is easier to judge them based on it. If they appear confident, they must be. However, that isn't true, is it? We humans have personalities, made up of numerous layers that, throughout any relationship, have to be explored and eventually peeled back like an onion. But what if that onion showcases that the person we thought we knew only existed in our mind?

As described, your appearance is now seen as a way to judge your personality. A choice to appear in one way may lead to meeting a new friend, and another to a cheeky kiss on a night out. Yet, a haircut is far more powerful than the textiles we dress ourselves in or the colours we choose, hoping to bring out our very best features. A haircut determines which community you belong to nowadays. Refusing to cut your hair, letting it grow wild and not combing it is seen as rebellious, perhaps even anarchistic and certainly hippie. In historic

times, wearing elaborate wigs meant you belonged to the upper class, the elite, as they reflected wealth.

To continue on that tradition, we try to sort people into groups based on their haircuts. What that has led to is the length and shape of your haircut alluding to your gender and sexuality. As a woman who donated her hair, a buzzcut made me appear brave and strange. Someone who did a good thing but gave up what should be dearest to them: my appearance. As soon as my hair started to grow, I was instantly confronted with "do you want to be a boy" or "whoa, today you look so gay". With the original intention of shaving my hair, long forgotten, friends and family began to look at me differently. Grandparents no longer saw their granddaughter, but a girl who doesn't know who she is. A girl who shouldn't come back to her conservative Bavarian village because the town would talk, as she doesn't reflect a "proper woman". The disappearance of my long hair, the buzzcut and now the short haircuts, while I grow it out, have led to a constant journey of trying to prove my femininity and sexuality to my surroundings. Now, while it all sounds outdated to lose a sense of femininity when shaving your hair, it remains that hair is seen as one of women's defining attributes. Changing your haircut means changing what people think of you.

And so, despite us knowing that a haircut does not need to reflect which sex someone is attracted to or whether someone struggles to identify with their gender, we allow the connotations of a haircut to define a person. We allow ourselves to reduce a person's personality to their appearance and categorise them as neatly as we do our clothes in our drawers.



^Before and after; only one day apart!

Be aware of what you wear

The thin line between cultural appreciation and cultural appropriation

LINE BIJLEVELD

Imagine you have a costume party to attend, and you decide it would be fun to dress up as a Native American. You go to the party, you might get some compliments on how good your outfit looks, and you have fun with your friends. At the end of the night, you go home, without thinking more of your night than just a fun night. Now imagine a Native American person going out in their traditional clothing, the same person who complimented you when you dressed up as a Native American, would probably think; Why are they wearing that? They should try to fit in with the rest and wear normal clothes. But most importantly, they're probably asking themselves why are they trying to stand out? So, whereas the person who dresses up as someone else gets compliments, the person who dresses up representing their culture suffers prejudices. Hypocritical behaviour, right?

The presence of prejudice in some cases and the absence of it in other cases is a reason why cultural appropriation should be taken seriously.

When you wear an ethnic outfit from a different culture, you take over the clothes, but you don't take over the stereotypes that those from the original culture experience when they wear it. It is good to realise that your position in society differs from people with varying cultures. The presence of prejudice in some cases and the absence of it in other cases is a reason why cultural appropriation should be taken seriously. Even if you think you just thought of a nice outfit and didn't think it would insult people. It is crucial to not only consider the fashion choices made but also the cultural connotations your outfit holds. Everyone should be aware of the existing stereotypes around certain cultural phenomena. A relevant example would be, wearing braids, which have their origin in African culture. Nowadays, you see a lot of people who are not black wearing them as well. They wear the hairstyle but not the prejudice against it. The prejudice that it is not professional to wear braids, because it is seen as ghetto, for example. This prejudice was seen against Treasure Roberts, a black woman, whose boss told her she would not get a job if she had braids. So if black people wear braids, they are seen as unprofessional, whereas if non-black people wear braids, they are seen as stylish. If white people start wearing exactly the same hairstyle as black people have been wearing



for years, for which they have been ridiculed, then suddenly it becomes just another hairstyle. In no reality can that seem unfair. Hence, it would be good to question yourself when you use clothing or hairstyles of other cultures, whether it might lead to a different interpretation of what the clothes mean and how they are perceived in their original environment.

Ask yourself whether you're using aspects of other cultures because you're interested in them in a respectful way, or because you just think it's nice and simply looks good. The lack of interest in a culture can lead to cultural appropriation; however, as can being overly invested in a culture. If you have so much interest in a culture and you start behaving in a way that you think is typical for that country, you are appropriating or misusing the culture as well. You can see this in the phenomenon Koreaboo. It entails people who often love K-dramas and K-Pop and act like they are Korean, in the way that they dress, the way they do their make-up, and the way they talk. Through K-dramas and K-pop, they come to think that that is how the country really is, which gives a really misplaced, idealised image. As soon as they see a hot Korean person, they immediately see them as perfect. It is remarkable how the overall image of East-Asian people has shifted. The stereotype of Asian guys being nerds, and how they were often made fun of, shifted into, following the rising popularity of East-Asian media forms, East-Asian men being attractive and cool, and them being fetishised often. This will make the real life of native Koreans be misunderstood.

The dividing line between cultural appropriation and cultural appreciation remains thin. Which makes it important, if you use parts of other cultures, to reflect on what the people from those cultures would say about you attempting to represent them. If people from different cultures respect each other, this society will become a better one.

Rethinking the Recovery of Peoples After Conflict

Art as a Compass for Reimagining Communities After Violence

CHARLOTTE D'HARAMBURE

When a conflict ends, societies must rebuild not only institutions and infrastructure but the shared sense of reality that binds people together. Perception—the way individuals and communities interpret events, assign blame, remember trauma, and imagine the future—shapes what reconciliation can become. Art operates at the level of perception, offering not merely messages or memories but experiences that reorganise how people see themselves, the other, and their common past.

Empathy can be taught by exposure to a world that otherness has made opaque—that is, to lives and experiences that feel hidden, unfamiliar, or difficult to understand.

Art provides controlled exposure: immersive installations, intimate portraits, or intimate stage performances that momentarily dissolve the borders between “us” and “them.” The perceptual shift is not merely emotional; it becomes ethical perception—recognising the dignity, vulnerability, and agency of others who were once demonised or erased. In post-conflict settings, such perceptual encounters contribute to a gradual normalisation of dialogue, where individuals who learned to fear one another can learn to listen, and where communities that once categorised enemies begin to see neighbours with unfinished stories of pain and hope.

The setting of art matters. When memorials, murals, and performances are embedded in public space, they invite ordinary people to encounter memory and meaning in everyday life. Public art can soften the semantic geography of a city that once embodied division—transmuting spaces of fear into spaces of reflection. The physical re-symbolisation—benches, squares, or fountains reimagined as places of gathering—helps recalibrate perception from threat to belonging. This spatial perceptual work is as important as any printed text or televised report in shaping what communities believe about each other.

Perception shifts more readily when it is earned collaboratively. Collaborative art projects—joint murals, theatre ensembles, and community-led oral history performances—create shared perceptual experiences that require participants to listen, adjust, and respond. The process itself models reconciliation: it teaches negotiation, patience, and mutual recognition. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, such as the Wings of Hope Theatre Project and the Visual Voices mural initiative have shown how people can inhabit multiple identities without erasing differences, gradually expanding the perceived space for coexistence. Similarly, cross-border initiatives like the Common Ground Project between Serbian and Kosovar artists, or Reunion exhibitions bringing together Israeli and Palestinian painters, reveal how art can turn dialogue into tangible creative acts. These

mixed-artistic collaborations have shown how people can inhabit multiple identities without erasing differences, gradually expanding the perceived space for coexistence. Such projects demonstrate that perception is not fixed; it can be expanded through deliberate, concrete forms of creative collaboration.

Conflict often reduces people to a single narrative—victim, perpetrator, or bystander. Art can deconstruct and recombine these roles, presenting overlapping stories that highlight shared vulnerabilities and aspirations. A novel might interweave survivors’ memories with former combatants’ reflections. A film could juxtapose different communities’ daily life with moments of communal celebration. A theatre piece could stage the collision and convergence of competing memories. The perceptual payoff is a more nuanced understanding of the moral landscape, one where “they” and “us” become complex, intersecting human experiences rather than monolithic opposites.

Perception is plastic but not instantaneous. Initial perceptual shifts may provoke discomfort, backlash, or scepticism. Some audiences may resist reframing because it threatens cherished identities or political stances. This resistance is not a failure; it is a sign that art is stirring deep perceptual structures. Effective reconciliation policies acknowledge these tensions, providing spaces for critique, dialogue, and gradual deepening of perception—not coercion or superficial consensus. The most durable reconciliation emerges from layers of perceptual understanding built over time, not from a single artwork or event.

Reconciliation requires a careful balance: the ethical obligation to remember with honesty, alongside the imaginative capacity to envision a shared future. Art that dwells only on trauma can loop societies in grievance; art that imagines forgiveness without acknowledging harm risks complacency. The most potent works navigate this balance by naming the wrongs clearly while proposing hopeful forms of relation. In doing so, they expand the perceptual range enough to include both accountability and human possibility.

Art’s perceptual power gains durability when paired with institutions, education, and inclusive civic processes. Museums, schools, contemporary art centres, and community theatres can sustain per-

ceptual work by curating programs that foreground dialogue, critical reflection, and reciprocal listening. Policy frameworks that encourage restorative justice, memory work, and cultural exchange reinforce the perceptual shifts initiated by art, translating private perception into public practice.

The path to reconciliation is not paved by coercion or calculation alone but by the gradual reshaping of perception—the way people see, interpret, and relate to one another. Art provides the experiential means by which perception can widen, soften, and diversify. It is through perceptual encounters—shared looking, listening, and imagining—that societies can move from resentment to recognition, from suspicion to trust, from symmetry of injury to symmetry of belonging. In this sense, perception is not a peripheral byproduct of art’s impact but its central mechanism: a compass guiding communities toward a future where peace is not merely the absence of war but the flourishing of mutual understanding and shared humanity.

A critical perspective on NATO

Interview with Professor Tom Sauer

SAM TENGBERGEN

With the war in Ukraine, discussions in the West about Europe's security have intensified. Many countries are now investing more in defence to meet NATO standards that they had previously neglected. But what is the perception of NATO? Can it be a force for good? Is it primarily defensive, or does it also risk provoking tensions? Last week, I spoke with Professor Tom Sauer, who teaches international politics at the University of Antwerp and was previously affiliated with Harvard University. He specialises in security issues and shares a view—considered controversial by

"Look at the world through two lenses, the realist and the idealist."

On the topic of NATO, there has been some discussion on whether its nature is defensive or offensive. What is your view?

That is not really important. What matters most is how the rest of the world perceives NATO. NATO describes itself as a defensive alliance, a defensive coalition, or an active defence organisation. But there are a number of caveats to this. Firstly, NATO was founded after the Second World War, primarily to counter the Soviet threat. This is not stated explicitly in the Washington Treaty—the Soviet Union is not mentioned anywhere—but everyone knows that this was the reality. So you could say: defensive.

But after the Cold War, NATO continued to exist, which is strange. An alliance usually exists against an external enemy. When that enemy disappeared, you would expect NATO to disband. NATO should have fit into that list. But that did not happen—and that in itself is remarkable. And it becomes almost perverse when an alliance without an enemy actively seeks a new enemy to maintain its *raison d'être*.

What do you mean by seeking new enemies? NATO is not a single actor, but an alliance, so how are new enemies found?

Look at what has happened between NATO and China. The United States sees China as an emerging power and therefore as a serious challenge—the number two versus the number one. And for years, they have been trying to convince Europe that Europe should also see China as an enemy. Europe initially said, "For us, China is not a problem." But if the US insists long enough



within NATO, sooner or later, terms such as "China" will find their way into official NATO documents. Today, China is even referred to as a serious challenge.

Do you think that in an ideal world, NATO could act as a truly just policeman?

No, not at all. Look at it from the perspective of others: Russia, China, Africa, the Middle East... They are not waiting for interventions from NATO.

Sure, but some might say if there is in fact a genocide—for example, in Srebrenica—we as the West have a duty to do something about it.

B*****t. All b*****t. Those interventions were not for humanitarian purposes. There were other strategic purposes behind them.

Yes, but that's why I'm trying to phrase my question: in a hypothetical ideal world.

That doesn't exist. And I can't answer it either. If you really want an ideal world... then you would have to create an army within the United Nations. A world government should have a world army. Something like that was theoretically created in the UN, but nothing came of it.

Still, in the West, we ask: do we have a duty to intervene if things go really wrong in other countries?

My first opinion dates back to Rwanda: yes, we must intervene. But I have reconsidered. Today, I am no longer a supporter because there are two sets of standards. Why intervene there and not elsewhere? If we intervene, we must ensure stability, not just leave like in Libya. These are conditions that cannot realistically be met.

Look at Libya. NATO should never have intervened there. The US or NATO should never have intervened in the first place, despite the threat of civil war and

Gaddafi. There was no major humanitarian catastrophe taking place. If we intervene in Libya, by now we should have intervened 25,000 times in Sudan, and in Gaza too. But we didn't then. It's not our role. Who are we to decide who gets what in the rest of the world?

In that context, would you describe yourself as a Realist?

I don't let myself be boxed in. That's far too simple. The world is complex. I always tell my students: look at the world through two lenses, the realist and the idealist. By nature, I am rather idealistic, but in the war between Ukraine and Russia, I learned to look realistically. From the West, we made major mistakes, without taking into account the essential interests of a regional great power like Russia. We thought—in an ideal world—that small countries would be welcomed by us and that Russia would accept it all. Look, we were blind. From a realpolitik perspective, a regional great power like Russia would never allow Ukraine to join NATO. And that's where we made huge, fatal, catastrophic mistakes.

Isn't the consequence that being mindful of Russia's concerns ignores Ukraine's will?

Ukraine is especially unlucky today because of the mistakes we've made. We could have avoided the biggest mistakes, but if we hadn't made mistakes in the past, there wouldn't have been a war. Then Ukraine would probably be facing far fewer problems today. If Ukraine wants to fight to the last man, that's their choice. But international politics is not an ideal world, and power is important. We've had a peaceful life in the EU for 80 years, and power has become much less important here. The rest of the world still operates according to power.

Russia is an equally large power. If they don't like something, and we step on their toes, the Russians will respond. That's what happened. From a realistic per-

spective, we should have seen it coming, and we should never have allowed Ukraine to join NATO. Then this war simply wouldn't have happened.

Wouldn't Ukraine have its own inclination to align with the West?

Before the war, the country was not fully pro-Western. It was divided, like Belgium. The West looked westward, the East looked eastward. Many of the presidents after the Cold War were not in favour of NATO. In the 1991 declaration of independence, Ukraine stated it would be neutral. That would have been perfect, like Switzerland or Austria—between two blocs. Then Ukraine could have traded economically and invested with both the West and the East.

Regarding concerns about NATO expansion, could it have backfired?

Yes, absolutely. I fully criticise that. I completely condemn Russia's attack—it goes against all legal norms. Originally, Putin's intention was only to replace the leader in Kiev, but that didn't succeed. He escalated the war, but originally, he probably only had 200,000 troops and assumed he would be received with open arms. He miscalculated—not unlike the US in Iraq, which wasn't received with open arms.

In the end, this conversation reminds us that security, ideals, and power are never simple. Echoing Professor Sauer's advice to view the world through both realist and idealist lenses, it encourages humility and awareness of differing perspectives so that more thoughtful, balanced choices can shape our shared future.





Interview with Zeynep Özharat

Inside Security Studies: Graduate life in Washington

İDİL ERKAN

Zeynep Ozharat is a Fulbright Scholar pursuing her master's in security studies at Georgetown University. She studied international relations at Bilkent University and graduated as valedictorian in 2024. Zeynep is Dr. Bruce Hoffman's research assistant, working on counterterrorism. Zeynep is also an associate editor for the Georgetown Security Studies Review and co-president of All Things Nukes. In addition to counterterrorism, her interests include space policy, nuclear deterrence, and transatlantic security.



How would you describe the role of security studies in shaping today's international relations?

Being in Washington, DC, the focal point of all of our discussions is security. For example, President Donald Trump has expressed at various conferences that he expects more commitment from European allies, and emphasises the idea of making the United States a secure state again. For me, security studies are the basis of international relations, because you need security to provide anything in other fields. However, security is not solely limited to the military aspect; there are multiple dimensions. You can be concerned about food and human security. Security has been with us for a long time; you can find it even in old philosophical works,

such as Leviathan, by Thomas Hobbes. Security affects us on a day-to-day basis, hence I think it is essential for everyone to understand why our states and people need to be secure.

From your perspective, what is the biggest misconception the public has about space security?

I have been hearing different and unexpected opinions about space security since I became interested in it. Some people say, "Oh, stop spending all that money on space exploration, while we do not know so many things about oceans!" I think that's a huge mistake and a big blunder to think about space like that. Another thing is that people see space warfare as a thing of the future, but it is not. We are exploring the idea of space as the final frontier, and we are living in the era of the final frontier now. Space-enabled warfare has been with us since the Gulf War because of the use of satellites. Basically, everything we depend on is being operated in space, like GPS systems. For example, if an adversary system shoots down a GPS satellite tomorrow, what would happen? What happens if an adversary takes out your nuclear command and communication satellites? No one wants to take that risk as it poses huge risks for nuclear escalation. So, space is the perfect domain for an escalation; anything can happen, and it is not always easy to understand why or how things happen. People dismiss space as an area of the future instead of understanding that what we are doing there right now shapes both the present and the future.

What are your long-term career goals in security and technology?

Security and technology together are rapidly evolving domains; I cannot certainly say in five years that I want to be in a specific position because it may have hugely changed compared to today's version of that position. Although it's hard to pinpoint a single job right now, I have always dreamed of joining NATO. I would love to work on the Allied Persistence Surveillance from Space initiative or contribute to NATO's nuclear policy-making. Also, working on non-proliferation at the International Atomic Energy Agency is another opportunity I would love to pursue. Ultimately, I would like to keep my versatility and consider both multilaterals and private firms. We are seeing new jobs every other day in these emerging fields. We shall see where life will take me!



What is the most important lesson you have learned in your master's studies?

That's a good question. Things don't go as planned. Do not be harsh on yourself. I did this a lot. I came to the US with lots of dreams. I imagined myself working in space security immediately, and I also thought many doors would open for me as soon as I started this journey, without knowing that most private space firms in the U.S. had a U.S. citizenship criterion. Many factors like this, that I had not accounted for, surfaced, and I had to adapt. In the meantime, I encountered other opportunities. I discovered other interests, like working as a research assistant on counterterrorism. I am still working on that job, and I love it. It is very interesting, and I would definitely consider a career in counterterrorism. Additionally, during my senior year in under graduate studies, I took a class on nuclear non-proliferation, and I became so passionate about it that I definitely want to be involved in nuclear-related studies wherever I am in my career, even if it's just as a hobby. It is vital to stop and ask yourself, "Do I really want to do this?". It does not make you any less accomplished or less successful. Life itself is a growing experience. Try to focus on all the good things you have done in your education and discover what you are passionate about.

Any advice to Bachelor students who want to do their Master's in security studies?

First of all, before starting your master's, be aware of what types of jobs are available in the field, research what is being done, and identify whether you could do that job or not. For example, I wanted to go for a job in

security in governmental or private sectors, but there is a citizenship requirement, which is a huge impediment for me. I didn't know the extent of this before starting my master's. Besides, you should ask, 'Is this job suitable for me?' because lifestyle, work hours, and travel are important factors to decide how you want to live your life. Those are crucial elements to consider before starting a master's degree, and security studies is a lot of effort, too. Also, don't neglect to check out whether this specialisation aligns with your ethical and moral values. You have to be precise in your choice because security studies is not necessarily a lovely field, and the grass is not always green.

Are there specific courses or areas of study you recommend focusing on?

Of course, even if you are not focusing on a specific study, I would recommend learning about space :). Ask what it can do for us, and what the opportunities are in space for future research. It doesn't have to be focused on space warfare per se. Just learn and explore space itself, and also how satellites work as strategic tools. As it is important in international politics, it also plays a huge role in our daily lives because we are facing the effects of space as a tool for signalling in the decision-making of national security establishments. It is very significant for young professionals and students to stay informed about the subject and to be updated about what is going on up there. Space is a huge part of politics, and we cannot ignore it. Although I love security studies, I recommend not forgetting about international development. Security and development go hand in hand. It is important to be informed about international development as a security studies professional, and we should strive to excel in all aspects of security.



Outside Religion

Are we shackled to organised religion?

LOEK RIKHOF & TISHYA TIWARY

Since time immemorial, the solid foundations of civilization have cast long shadows of religion, indeed from the river to the sun, ancient ruins to archaeological burial sites as we uncover humanity, we uncover religion. For thousands of years religion has been the torch around which humans have formed communities and protected themselves against the darkness of the unknown. Yet as social formation and scientific knowledge expands, what place should this fire hold in modern society, is it doomed to be inherently destructive or can we find the light?

Tishya: While I am not religious myself, I still think faith as a concept itself is not harmful to society. The simple belief in God or gods, for many, is often just a manifestation of hope. However, I would say I am against organised religion. My views align more closely with William Blake, who criticised the institutions of religion, such as the church. I think any form of decisive doctrine that makes a religion part of individual identity and automatically creates an in-group and out-group will always lead to violence against the latter. The "correct" way of worship not only alienates people who don't align with every aspect of religious teachings and practices but also creates a power relation that can fuel some very cult-like thinking and behaviour amongst its followers. In fact, I would go as far as saying that a more decentralised form of worship and faith would lead to less religious polarisation and violent religious conflict.

Loek: I would say that religion is not only a spiritual experience, but also, in great measure, a social one. We often look for confirmation of our beliefs in others and reinforce them through shared rituals like church services or praying. This makes me think that religion might be inherently organised, and that dogmas and knowing a 'higher truth' is unavoidable in any religion. Ultimately, I think that any philosophy that claims to know what is right is bound to cause harm to others. Even decentralised forms of worship, like you propose, would not escape that fate. The reason for this is that the dogmatization and othering that are so problematic in larger religions would, in most cases, still be there. Protestant churches, for example, which are often heavily decentralised, still tend to be conservative when it comes to topics like women's rights.

Tishya: I definitely agree that religion is a social experience and hence can only be developed through inter-relations that feed into our shared bias. However, I also believe that through reason and dialogue, our intrinsic cognitive biases can be overcome. This is in part due to the more personal relationship people have towards faith, and as a result, rather than using belief to ascertain superiority, new knowledge might encourage them to change their ontological view. The rising deconstruction movement in Christianity is an example of people questioning how their faith fits into religion. In certain cases, this leads to choosing to leave behind more toxic elements such as purity culture and homophobia. As religious identity overlaps with other identity markers and growing fields of science, I do believe there is a way for people to practice faith that is distanced from organised religion. I would like to take back my use of the word "decentralise" and rather use "individualistic", which is more fitting for the faith-based system I am proposing.

Loek: People indeed are getting more individual in their religious beliefs. As society gets increasingly secular, people are looking for other ways to achieve spiritual salvation. Sometimes this is done by combining ideas from multiple religions and spiritual philosophies. Another example is the Dutch term 'ietsisme', believing that there is some form of higher power, but not being sure what it is. This is all totally harmless, but in the end, they would not put an end to dogmas and intolerance in society. Political philosophies can have claims of exclusive knowledge, for example, and national identities just as well. Ultimately, only open dialogue and openness to other people's ideas can combat this, and I don't think that organised religion

inherently counteracts this. Although large religions, for instance, Christianity and Islam, have often actively worked against inclusion or societal progress, and yet at times they have also influenced great change. Many enlightened thinkers and artists thought through a Christian lens, and the 'Islamic golden age' too brought forth scientific insights we still use today.

The long decline of popularity of religion in the West seems to stagnate, see the growing number of Gen Zers who turn to religion. However, emancipation and secularisation have not missed their mark on religions around the world. They have notoriously diminished in power and, in many cases, had to give way to progressive developments in society. That might be the way forward for religion in society: a relatively minor role in people's lives, as givers of guidance in spiritual matters and societal connection, not as a strong voice in matters of ethics and social norms.

'As social animals our desire to conform is just as integral as our desire to rebel. I believe like all unjust social systems, the dissolution of organised religion is possible.'

Loek: I think you accurately pointed out where our division in opinion lies. Perhaps I am too pessimistic, but looking at history there are not a whole lot of examples of overthrown hierarchical systems that were not later replaced by some other form of oppression. I do appreciate your vision, because I think it is important to always keep on thinking about alternative ways to structure society and remain hopeful that it can be made better. And if it is not for a rigorous dismantling of existing organisations, then it might be through reforms within them. The main problem might be that the upsides of organised religion (security, community and tradition, for example), are so heavily interwoven with its downsides. Might it be possible to have the virtues of spiritual belief, without the negatives? I am skeptic, but let's not stop imagining ways it might be done.

Like all human forms of organization, religion remains an entangled mess of contradictions and harmonies. For many it's too integral an identity marker to doubt or change but as science and civilizations evolve and human curiosity questions fundamental truths, many are learning to embrace the absurdism of life. Whilst humanity has not quite left its religious shackles, it has loosened them significantly.

Get Your Brits Out

Political activism in Irish music over the years

ILSE WESTENENG



Irish music has been politically flavoured since the beginning of time. First troubadours, folk singers, and later pop stars used music as a political tool and a proclamation of national pride because it was one of the few ways of expression that wasn't restricted by British oppression. British rule has dominated Irish politics since the Anglo-Norman invasion, starting in the late 12th century. Losing authority to the British Empire, which banished the catholic religion and the Irish language, naturally turned their eastern neighbours into enemies.

Even decades after the Irish regained self-governance in 1922, the English seem to haunt songwriters in their lyrics. In Famine, Sinéad O'Connor ascribes the more recent troubles in her country to the Great Famine, which was caused and could have been prevented by the British. The mass starvation that occurred halfway through the 19th century killed a million people and led to the departure of another million Irishmen, leading to a deepening of the Irish hatred for the English.

O'Connor's discerning protest song also touches upon The Troubles, which has frequently been the main theme of Irish protest songs. The violent three-decade conflict between the protestant British and the catholic Irish involved so much bloodshed that it inspired artists like U2 and The Cranberries to speak up about the political situation. In Sunday Bloody Sunday U2 takes the perspective of an observer of the violence on that day, intensifying the message of the song with military-like sounding drum-beats. Similarly, in response to an attack by the IRA that killed two children, The Cranberries wrote Zombie as a protest against the violence used in the conflict. By taking a step back and portraying the conflict in the way an outsider might perceive it, these songs don't take a side but rather function as a device that fosters solidarity.

While Irish rock, led by U2 and The Cranberries, is known for its anti-war spirit, the new generation of protest songs doesn't shy away from siding with one camp and criticising the other. Following Sinéad O'Connor's footsteps, Kneecap and Fontaines DC expressed their support for Palestine early on by waving flags, starting chants and showing 'Israel is committing genocide' on big screens. Even though these artists take

risks by using their platform for activism, resulting in several festivals dropping them and even losing visas for the US and Canada, they hold their ground. The Northern Irish rappers that form Kneecap explain their support by drawing parallels between the oppression in Palestine and Ireland's history. Additionally, Kneecap also plays with controversy in the song Get Your Brits Out, in which they call for the withdrawal of British forces in Northern Ireland. Nonetheless, critics claim the song provokes antagonistic attitudes between defenders of the British presence in Northern Ireland and the supporters of an Irish unification.

Next to foreign politics, issues closer to home also gain the attention of Irish musicians, such as the economic crash that hit Ireland in 2008, which caused economic hardship for many citizens. CMAT, an Irish pop and country artist, sings about it in her song Euro-Country. She addresses the high numbers of suicide caused by the collapse of the estate-market and economy: "I was 12 when the das started killing themselves all around me," she sings. In the same song, she calls out Bertie Ahern, former Taoiseach (prime minister) who ruled the country during the years preceding the crash. Similarly, Fontaines DC confronts the centre-right ruling parties, Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil, in their song I Love You, singing: "the gall of Fine Gael and the fail of Fianna Fáil".

Though we have seen that politics have always been present in Irish music, explicitly criticising politicians and parties in lyrics is something that has been revived by this newer generation of musicians. Amidst The Troubles, U2 and The Cranberries remained more cautious about the political aspect of the conflict than subsequent artists like CMAT, Kneecap and Fontaines DC. However, accusing the older Irish rock bands of sitting on the fence might not be fair, since their cautiousness was aimed at avoiding division between the fans. Either way, whether the songs call for unification or express controversial standpoints, the politically flavoured lyrics remain a core characteristic of Irish culture.

Scan this QR-code for a playlist with all the listed songs!



The battle of perception

How language teaches us what we see

ARNE VAN LOO

Perception is a funny thing. It's the lens through which we build our reality, and it's always shifting. When I was studying in China, a Chinese friend told me that the rippling of water is called fei shui (肺俞), literally "fat water." At the time, I loved the idea that water isn't just "water," but something textured, alive, full. In Turkish, it's a similar situation for the sunset: there isn't just one word, but several for all its different moments and colours. Those words function in such a way that they make the scene more detailed in the mind.

What strikes me is this: when I look at water, I just see "water." A Chinese speaker might see fei shui. When I watch the sun go down, I see "sunset." A Turkish speaker can name each separate stage. By doing this, their language gives them more ways of grasping reality. Funny enough, I concluded that it was not just that we perceive and then name, but sometimes we name first, and perceive second.

This is basically what constructivists within our study argue: a lot of what we think is seen as "natural" or "just the way things are," when really it is built through shared meanings, categories, and language. Reality, at least the social and political parts of it, is not simply found; it is constructed through the terms we use, the narratives we repeat, and the labels we agree on.

We can observe this phenomenon within politics. Politics is, in large part, a struggle over the right to name things. If I call something "security," you'll tolerate measures, you wouldn't if I called it "surveillance." If I call people "illegal," you'll feel differently than if I call them "undocumented." Just like Turkish gives its speakers more cues to notice the phases of a sunset, political language gives citizens specific cues to notice problems, enemies, crises, or victims. The label comes



first, the perception follows. So the same event can appear necessary, dangerous, generous, or unjust not because it changed, but because the words used to describe it did.

A useful way to see this is through the idea of the Overton window. The window shows the range of policies and positions that are considered "thinkable" or "acceptable" in a society at a given moment. Language helps shift that window. If a government or media keeps describing something as a "crisis," "threat," or "reform," over time positions that once sounded extreme can start to feel reasonable. The reason for this is that the public familiarises itself with the terms. In other words, by renaming reality, actors don't just change how they see a single event; they slowly move the boundaries of what can be said, proposed, or done.

I've been lucky enough to see this in very different places: having traveled across the globe from the highest peaks in Tibet to the rough Jungles of Indonesia. What changed from place to place wasn't just the view, but the vocabulary: each context had its own words for what matters, for status, for beauty. That's when it became clear to me that people aren't living in different worlds, they simply tell different versions of the same one and once you see that, you also see how politics can steer those versions.

In the end, it leaves me with a simple but unsettling thought: if language can make us see ripples in water and layers in a sunset, it can just as easily make us see threats, strangers, or "problems". That means reality is not only out there it's also in how we talk about it and that makes paying attention to words not a linguistic hobby, but a civic responsibility.

Red or Blue

How a country shapes your view of the Cold War

ACADEMIC

The Cold War ended in 1989, but its effects are used to perceive contemporary politics. The mistrust that was cultivated during that period has been effective to the point that even now, the binary narratives it created still hold strength. But is the world truly divided into two strongholds, struggling for the upper hand? For this article, we have interviewed Jan de Vries from the Netherlands to get a Western European perspective and people from Venezuela to get the perspective from a South American side.

According to Jan, the biggest difference in the perception of the Soviet Union, between those who supported her and those who opposed her, is geography and history. Where and when we are born seem to be the most important factors in all we know of the world and what we make of it.

Jan had been taught about history from a Eurocentric point of view, and so have almost all Europeans. He was too young to fully comprehend the Cold War as a struggle between capitalism and communism. This, paired with a historical appreciation for the Americans for their perceived support with the Allied powers, the Marshall Plan and the Truman doctrine, led to an unconscious bias towards the United States. But not a complete hatred or fear towards the Soviet Union, as perhaps the older generations had.

Jan is against both capitalism and communism. Capitalism, with massive wealth gaps where CEOs earn 180x times the salary of their lowest-income workers, and communism, with its tendency to corrupt and its mismanagement in the historical attempts to implement it.

In Venezuela, almost the opposite can be seen. Once one of the richest Latin American countries, Venezuela 'thrived' in the military, capitalist juntas preceding the left-wing takeover. As one of the premier exporters of oil, it had a close trade relationship with the US. Jorge Ignacio Matamoros, a 45-year-old Venezuelan who has experienced different regimes, described a horde of American tourists, businessmen, and spokespeople flooding Venezuela. American and Venezuelan state interests were intertwined.

However, this relationship was also seen another way. Despite economic growth and development, Venezuelan inequality was more violently polarised than ever. In Venezuela, if one chooses to believe the ever-elusive



idea of a golden age, the people didn't thrive. It was capitalism's golden age, not of the common Venezuelan.

According to Jorge, Marxism provided Venezuelans an instrument through which they could question this 'prosperity', removing exploitation from its veil and revealing it to the nation. What was once Muskets and the cavalry charges of the Llaneros against the Spanish, became the plight of the proletariat against capitalism, the United States. Chávez's takeover used heavily charged rhetoric, one of revolution, a word that has had a grip on the Venezuelan national pride since independence. This seduced the Venezuelan working class, pivoting away from its close relationship with the US, into one of fundamental opposition.

Venezuela is in ruin, enduring herculean hardships to prevent itself from total collapse. Chávez's seduction is no longer there. Capitalism and Marxism in Venezuela have, for the most part, been put in the back of people's minds. Kleptocracy is the term that has conquered the Venezuelan psyche. Jorge doesn't think the average Venezuelan holds the same views as when Chávez took over. Views revolve around either a cult of personality following Maduro or a desire to end their prolonged misery. For most Venezuelans, Jorge wouldn't call them 'capitalist', 'marxist' or 'anti-imperial'. A better term is anti-establishment, which aligns with the regime change policy the Trump administration calls for. A new seduction by Trump, a new revolution for capital, not for the proletariat.

One isn't just "red" or "blue" anymore. The political continuum of left vs right never truly encapsulated politics. The perspectives in this article demonstrate how a binary view of world affairs is not accurate, even as a spectrum. It questions if events like the Cold War or the dynamics between Venezuela and the USA were painted by the parties involved as simply "red vs blue". We have all heard of the "us vs them" concept, but is that really the entire scope of political strategy, and could there be more groupings than just those two?

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Meet the crew!

Checks & Balances is the journalistic committee of the Student Association CLIO. We are a student-run magazine that discusses topics ranging from contemporary politics to technological development. As we begin our 27th year of publishing, our mission has become to make readers question their preexisting beliefs and evaluate arguments based on new perspectives provided. The 2025-2026 Editorial Staff wishes you a marvellous read, hoping we can provide you with new insights into discussions society shies away from.



Annika Koch

Editor-in-Chief



Hey hey! I'm Annika, last year's Layout Editor and this year's Editor-in-Chief. Although I was born in Germany, I grew up in Mexico and England. I can't go a day without listening to music or complaining about my hair having a personality of its own. If I'm in the UB, you'll see me go through 100 snacks- I swear it helps me study!

Line Bijleveld

Secretary



Heyy, I'm Line, the secretary this year. I'm a first-year student from Groningen. I love traveling, movies, reading, music, I could not tell you which genre though, because it changes every week:) I also love hanging out with my friends and swimming. I could spend the whole day at a swimming pool or at the beach!

Loek Rikhof

Treasurer, Layout Editor



Hi, I'm Loek, first-year IRIO student and treasurer as well as Layouter for C&B. I'm from the Netherlands, and I like literature, music and all things culture. I spend my free time running, playing guitar or running up against deadlines.

Ilse Westeneng

Layout Editor



Heey, I'm Ilse, and I'm one of the layout editors this year! I'm from Groningen, in my second year of IRIO, and I'm interested in history and cultures. Outside uni, I love spending my time playing bass guitar, listening to music (especially rock and jazz-funk) and reading books.

Tishya Tiwary

Layout Editor



Hi y'all (: I'm Tishya, a first-year student and one of the layouters of C&B this year. I'm from India, and I love movies, poetry, philosophy, sketching, cooking, politics, books, crocheting, singing, piano, cello and honestly just too many interests that my parents' wallets are still recovering from!

Charlotte d'Harambure

PR Editor



Hi! I'm Charlotte, a first-year student in IRIO. I'm French, but I've lived abroad my whole life, which has given me a deep appreciation for different cultures and global perspectives. I'm passionate about international affairs, diplomacy, and global cooperation, and I love engaging in meaningful conversations.

Sam Tengbergen

Reporter



Hello, I'm Sam. Born and raised in Groningen. I am now doing a Master's in the security track. I enjoy a good series, playing or watching football and chess.

İdil Erkan

Reporter



Hey, I'm İdil, I'm from Turkey, and one of the reporters of this year. I'm a first-year student in IRIO with a strong interest in development and economics. Besides university, I enjoy watching movies, learning about different cultures, listening to jazz and rock, reading books, swimming, and debating.

Esther Lainez

Board Representative



Hi everyone! My name is Esther, I am the PR of Clio and therefore the Board Representative of Checks and Balances. I love reading, spending time in nature, and doing creative or fun activities with the people that I love.

Contact us?

Do you wish to contribute in the next issue as a guest writer? Or have you read an article that you want to send a response letter to? Even in the event you'd like to contribute irregularly to C&B, we have a website where we publish weekly articles, do you want to be the next publication? No problem! Simply email: checksbalances.clio@gmail.com

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