

CHECKS & BALANCES

Volume 25, Issue 1



THE ART OF BALANCING

Treading The Tightrope of Modern Life



Lune Gros

Chair of Clio



Anna Aragoncillo

Editor in Chief



Dear reader,

I am very excited to welcome you to the first edition of the Checks & Balances magazine. It feels as though the academic year has only just started, but the Editorial Staff has already managed to produce a brand-new edition with many interesting topics to discuss.

Today, more than ever, we encounter a global stage that demands the act of balancing — whether it be reconciling conflicting perspectives and diverse voices, or the navigating of international cooperation. Political conflicts abroad and within the country that we study in, define this current stage, requiring us to find common ground and seek collaborative solutions for a better future. As students of IRIO we are not merely observers, but active participants in shaping this political future. The “tightrope of modern-day life” challenges us to refine our cultural empathy and brings our study closer into our daily surroundings.

Understandably, this can cause pressure, certainly with the end of the year in sight and being faced with one of the busiest periods. For many of us, it remains a continuous struggle to balance deadlines, resits, and applications for minors while spending free time in committees, at parties, or at many events.

Fortunately, our lovely association will be there every step of the way. From the summaries and study sessions to the Exchange Buddy Programme and the Career Platform. Clio is there to help out and support her community. On top of all that, Clio presents many lovely activities and parties to celebrate all the festivities during this time of the year.

I hope that this edition of the Checks & Balances will show you many new patterns and insights into the world around us. I want to thank the Editorial Staff for their hard work and dedication which were essential to publishing this edition.

Enjoy reading!

Lune Gros

Chair of the Clio Board

Dear reader,

It's the most wonderful time of the year. The snow falls over the happy christmastide street vendors that carefully set up their stands while sipping on a warm mug of what seems to be recently brewed coffee. The students on the other side of the canal wear a tired expression, dragging their feet to the nearest lecture hall, complaining to their former self, who did not wake up on time to acquire another cup of that precious bean drink. Once again, another academic year has started at Groningen University, and the city, almost confused, does not know whether to lie with the calm or the storm. The beauty of life in the city, nascent in the tiny details that bring us joy, balances out the incredibly anarchic catastrophe that student life seems to be at times.

It is precisely because of this that the Editorial Staff of 2023-2024 would like to bring forth to you:

THE ART OF BALANCING

Treading the Tightrope of Modern Life

After much careful deliberation, we decided that we wanted to provide our readers with a comforting retreat that encapsulated as much gezellig-ness as possible to help combat the feeling of constant swinging and daunting fall from the tightrope of modern life. From the hard-working christmas vendors, the sleep-deprived students that have made of a house their home and even the most trivial fowl in Grote Markt, every entity in the city is both constitutive and constituted by the art of balancing that they perform, thus slowly allowing them to walk along the complicated tightrope of life without fear of falling to the abyss.

Once again, thank you for picking up an edition of the Checks & Balances magazine. You now possess in your hands a little piece of our hearts, that has been crafted for your utmost enjoyment. I hope you can all enjoy the first Checks & Balances edition of 2023-2024.

On behalf of the Editorial Staff of '23-'24,

Anna Aragoncillo Barceló

Editor-in-Chief



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Putting a Price On Empathy

What Makes Being Vegan So Expensive

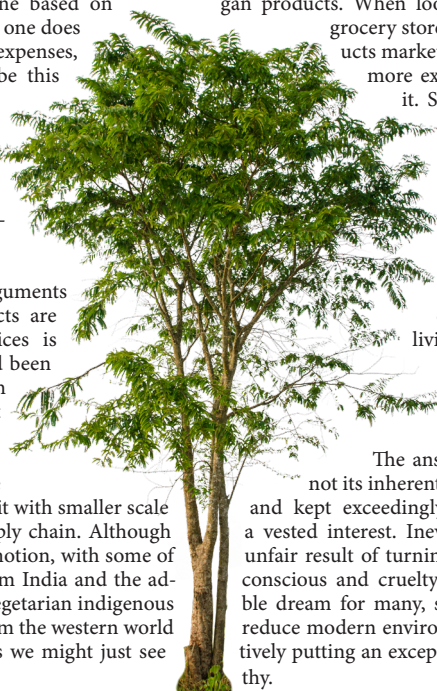
ROCÍO MARTEL MEDRANO

Past decades have witnessed the rise of alternatives to the standard omnivore diet, such as vegetarian or vegan diets. This upsurge has often been identified with a response to the escalation of environmental concerns and of grievances related to animal welfare, or on occasion spiritual and religious matters. However, it is quite a common assumption that being vegan tends to be more expensive than following an omnivore diet. One can wonder the exact reason why this occurs, with growing technology and methods to make food production cheaper, and even revisit the statement and ask if it is true at all.

Research has found that there is an over-consumption of meat worldwide, linked to various serious health issues. Therefore, it is no surprise that there are more and more individuals reaching for meat-substitutes, but there is one factor that stops them: the green tax. Meat-substitution products have prices up to 40% higher than their counterparts, and as such veganism has understandably become associated with having a high economic status.

However, studies have shown that a vegetarian diet is often less expensive than one based on meat and that, although a vegan one does normally bring about more expenses, it doesn't necessarily have to be this way. The basic elements of a plant-based diet are not that exclusive or expensive if we think about potatoes, rice, or beans. The true expense often comes from dairy and meat substitutes.

One of the more traditional arguments found as to why these products are being tagged with higher prices is that up until recently there had been a lower demand for them, with meat being the norm and not that many alternatives considered. The farming industry is very prominent, and it can be hard and costly to deviate from it with smaller scale production and a lack of a supply chain. Although vegetarianism is not a modern notion, with some of the oldest examples coming from India and the additional existence of plenty of vegetarian indigenous cultures, this rise in demand from the western world for plant-based products means we might just see this start to change.



Another argument is that these products contain more expensive ingredients or are harder to make. This has been denied by many green activists, who claim that the real reason vegetarian options are significantly more expensive in some countries than meat is due to government subsidies to the meat industry. In the public sphere of the US and EU, around 40 million euros went to the plant-based industry, a sum that pales in comparison to the approximate 36 billion euros reserved for the meat and dairy industry.

It has been found that without these very extensive economical aids to the industry, a pound of meat in the US might cost up to 30\$, a price that truly reflects its environmental impact.

The playing field is very clearly not levelled and it might be beneficial for governments to balance and divide these large investments between the more traditional industry and the rapidly growing green market, thus removing one of the largest perceived incentives to not become a vegetarian.

There is also the matter of specific marketing for vegan products. When looking at a large quantity of grocery stores, we find that a lot of products marketed towards vegan people are more expensive, just for the sake of it. Studies have found that with a higher demand for vegan products, simply slapping a vegan label on a product that originally contained no animal-based ingredients, inherently warrants a higher price point. This can be oversighted and can contribute to the expenses of living a more cruelty free life.

So, why is being vegan more expensive than following a meat-based diet?

The answer is that, although this is not its inherent nature, these diets are made and kept exceedingly expensive by actors with a vested interest. Inevitably, this comes with the unfair result of turning living an environmentally conscious and cruelty-free life into an unreachable dream for many, severely hindering efforts to reduce modern environmental concerns and effectively putting an exceptionally high price on empathy.

The Underlying Beauty in Little Steps

Exploring the Wonders of Slow Tourism

MATEI CIOCAN

In a world increasingly suffocated by desires of mass expansion and development, greed for capital and exploitation of already existent venues, there is a new, slow but steady way of approaching the domain of travelling, "Slow tourism". For so many of us, mainstream places such as the Eiffel Tower, The Big Ben, The Roman Colosseum or Times Square were the most desired destinations for summer vacations. Every single year, millions of tourists flock to these and many other famous sites just to get the perfect Instagram story or the best family photograph, whilst falling into the capitalistic trap of overconsumption. This has a big impact both on the quality of life of the locals, who are exhausted, and another one on the cities themselves, already congested enough.

Yet change is on the way in the tourism industry. An increasingly larger number of travel seeking enthusiasts want to escape the busy tourist traps. Less known destinations, rich in history and values are gaining popularity and being discovered. Consequently, local communities have the chance to benefit from the well-needed flow of capital, and new modes of sustainable developments in the tourism industry emerge.

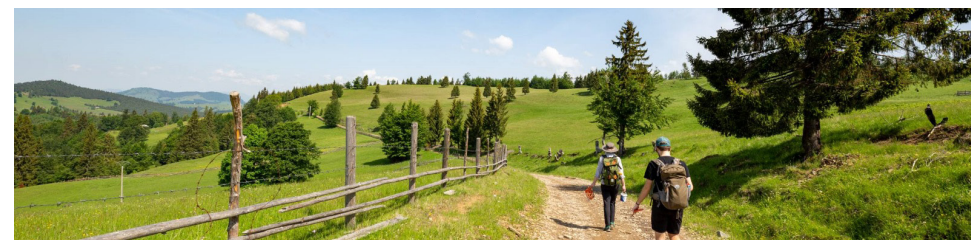
It is claimed that central to the meaning and concept of "slow tourism" is the shift in focus from achieving a quantity and volume of experiences, towards the quality of fewer and more meaningful experiences. Tourist experience could be defined as "slow" when the intention is to discover the particular characteristics of a place while respecting the locality and its inhabitants and to do so without falling into nostalgia for the past or into commercial kitsch.

A recent initiative has started to attract visitors' attention in Romania, where a team of inspiring young visionaries laid the foundations for a trail that leads tourists through the entirety of the Transylvania region.

Stretching over 1,000 kilometres, the Via Transilvanica is more than just a trail; it is a commitment to sustainable tourism. Meandering through charming villages, dense forests and rolling hills, this trail encapsulates the essence of slow-tourism by allowing visitors to immerse themselves in the unspoiled beauty of Transylvania. The track offers some of the best bio diverse sectors of nature, focusing on guiding those that travel through it to see beautifully preserved flora and fauna of the Carpathian Mountains.

However, slow-tourism is not just about nature. It is also about connecting with local communities and understanding their way of life. Along Via Transilvanica, travellers have the opportunity to engage with villagers, learn about traditional practices and crafts, and observe the different cultural influences from communities of Germans and Szekely peoples, besides the Romanian locals, while at the same time contributing to the local economy. And what is even more valuable is that along the 30 day long journey sustainable accommodations have sprouted. From eco-lodges powered by renewable energy sources to simple local families that open their doors to tourists, there are a plethora of options for a sustainable way of staying overnight. And just as the initiators of this beautiful project stated: 'the values by which Via Transilvanica is guided are: community, diversity, care for nature, celebration of Romania's rural heritage and love for the countryside.'

Therefore, as the world begins to struggle with mass tourism and chaotic development of the travel industry, prioritising quantity over quality, the concept of slow tourism emerges as a sustainable and more engaging alternative. It prioritises the relationship between the travellers and the communities they encounter, while focusing on maintaining the fragile environment and not disrupting the tranquillity of those places, embodying the idea of balance.



The Imparity of Fast Fashion

Can We Justify Balancing Convenience Against Morals?

ROCIO MARTEL MEDRANO

The fashion industry has always been characterised by intensive capital and labour. Nevertheless, the shift in intensity from the first pre-industrial instances of demand for ready to wear pieces, to the culture of overconsumption fueled by fast fashion and internet culture that is present today, is one that is worth mentioning.

During the last couple of decades, the world has witnessed the rise of fast fashion, which refers to the modern business model that produces and sells clothing for very low costs and increasing velocity. This has often been seen as a positive change that makes fashion available to people from all walks of life, especially middle or lower income individuals. However, this is overshadowed by the environmental and social issues that the fast fashion industry is actively creating to sustain itself. Is it possible, or even moral, to find a balance between the two?

In order for businesses to actually preserve this model, they outsource their production to low and middle-income countries, taking advantage of the conditions that are more frequently found in developing countries such as inexpensive labour, and laxer laws and regulations, both in the production process and the rights of workers. Nowadays, 90% of fashion items are produced in countries like these, notably India, China and Bangladesh.

The conditions found in many factories producing and supplying to fast fashion companies are grim, with workers reporting low wages in addition to employers often not remunerating in full or in the agreed upon time. This is only the beginning, with several health hazards appearing during the production process which leaves workers, often young women and occasionally children, with a risk of lung disease or cancer, due to poor ventilation, musculoskeletal problems, accidental injuries and even death. One of the most tragic instances of an absolute dismissal of human rights in the name of fast fashion was the collapse of the Rana Plaza building in Bangladesh. More than a

thousand fashion producers were killed and even more than double injured due to a factory manager ignoring the warnings of collapse and forcing the workers to continue their labour by using threats of wage withdrawal. *With plenty of similar situations, it would not be far-fetched to call this contemporary slavery, with the companies associated with these factories turning a completely blind-eye on the de-humanising situations they are causing.*

Within these factories, issues of environmental nature are also widespread due to the techniques used. One example of this is textile dying, since the wastewater originating from this process is then often released into the local water systems, harming not only the population but also the animals and vegetation native to the area. Moreover, the environmental costs brought about by the industry do not end when the final product is sold to the customer. Fast fashion items are not designed to last; every year, up to 90 million tons of clothing gets thrown away, saturating landfills all over the world. Less and less clothing items are being donated, and the ones that do often get exported to developing countries. Here they are presented in markets, but the items that fail to be sold become waste, clogging rivers or polluting nature.

Although corporate responsibility and accountability are essential to improve these inhumane conditions and environmental hazards, we must also keep in the front of our mind that we as consumers are the key pieces needed to change this awful situation. At the end of the day, the continued demand and consumption of fast and cheap clothing is what keeps these companies afloat and perpetuates the cycle of environmental and human rights violations. Inevitably, more production equals human rights violations and a rising destruction of the environment. This must never be forgotten. In order to break the cycle, those of us leading privileged lifestyles can invest in slow fashion, purchasing items of better quality that last longer, consider the more economically friendly options of thrift stores, and in general, consume responsibly.



The Double-Edged Sword of Bureaucracy

Overbureaucratism as a Hindrance to Problem-Solving

SAM HOLM VAN DONK

Bureaucracy: all states need it to some extent. The term refers to a structure of multi-layered processes and systems to ensure that decisions, such as legislative acts, are considered from every relevant angle before being put into practice. It ensures procedural correctness in such decisions, and attempts to cover loopholes or oversights in the process of developing new rules, legislation or decisions. Often, it takes the form of departments within government administration. Essentially, bureaucracy is crucial to the functioning of any state.

However, what happens when it begins taking too much time, resources and money to push solutions through the bureaucratic process? In brief, overbureaucratism becomes a hindrance to effective problem-solving, a fact often noted in criticisms of a democratic system.

Because decisions within a democracy must be taken through majority rule, this means that it must take into account a variety of wildly different, sometimes antithetical perspectives. Therefore, any decision must be debated thoroughly, to ensure that all aspects are defined and considered.

We see this explicitly in policies pursuing climate policies. A decision can be made by a national parliament to declare that a set number of windmills must be installed. Now, of course, an endless number of factors must be taken into account. Where are they to be built? Will it be a problem for the local population of this area? Where will the money come from? Will this damage other industries? Is it even our responsibility to pursue green energy? These questions were faced by Denmark when, in the 1990s, it began drafting plans for the at-the-time largest wind farm in the world. It would take almost 7 years for the plans to become a reality, and was frequently stalled due to individual or group concerns.

In an authoritarian state, these are all fairly easy decisions to be made. A central committee will decide on the specifics, without being burdened by opposing opinions, and implementation can proceed immediately. Such a scenario was specifically seen in El Salvador in 2020, when the country began its “war against the gang”, that, within years, incarcerated over 73,000 people thought to have gang affiliations. The operation was relatively unburdened by the bureaucratic process, as it was largely driven by the governmental elite wi-

thout much regard to Human Rights or international law. International organisations, such as the Human Rights Watch, have, however, been quick to denounce the arrests as arbitrary and excessive, and to criticise the deplorable state of the country’s overcrowded prisons. The fact still stands, that the operation is largely seen as a success, with many prominent gangs having been completely erased from public life. In a democracy, however, all these questions need to be discussed, in order to reach a solution that compromises all these different concerns. These questions are all very reasonable, but in practice it does mean that this kind of decision takes much longer than it needs to. The proposals and ideas are ricocheted from department to department for months, even years, in order to reach a consensus on how the decision should be implemented. This also entails much more money being thrown at it, as department staff must be salaried throughout the process, and resources must be dedicated towards maintaining their intensive administration.

Bureaucracy is essential for the functioning of democracy. It ensures that decisions undertaken are considered for their effects on Human Rights, the environment and the economy. However, the unfortunate fact is that intensive bureaucracy does slow down, hinder, and even cease the decision-making process, and is often a hindrance to effectively pursuing problem-solving. This is overbureaucratism, and is seen as a major flaw of liberal democracy. Like with many processes, a balance must be struck, limiting bureaucracy to the least possible factors, and ensuring that all superficial considerations are removed from the process. At the same time, we must not forget to value the significance of bureaucracy in maintaining democracy, and remember why it is in place at all; to ensure the humane and holistic implementation of decisions within a state.



Between Purgatory and Enlargement: The Future of European Expansion

While Some Encourage a “Return to Europe”, Others Question if Eastern European Countries Were Reserved a Place in the Union to begin with

BRIANA STEFANA AGRICI

Historically, Eastern Europe has known periods of uncertainty and instability, being for the most of the 20th century a pivotal pawn in maintaining the bipolar balance of power of the international system. Alongside the fall of the Iron Curtain and the end of the Cold War these countries have faced the urgency to conform to the demands of the liberal international system, by fostering political stability, social change and economic prosperity. Faced with these new challenges, the European Union established a policy of enlargement in the 1990s, membership of the EU becoming a driving force of structural change. However, the events of 2022 have put the Union in an unexpected position, underlining the importance of speeding up the process for countries such as Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova.

Relations between the East and the West of Europe are primarily important when considering the process undergone by countries that have already joined the Union such as Romania and Bulgaria. Their accession has provided an expanded market for many West European products and an increased supply of cheaper, often seasonal workers in sectors such as agriculture. In return, for these Eastern European states joining the Union also meant access to EU funds and dependency on the financial support of richer countries for strengthening internal deficits (such as infrastructure). Symbolically, joining the Union has been recognised as an emotional reunification with the West, in an attempt to surpass any still-standing relations with Russia. While joining the EU is also seen as a commitment towards democracy, issues arise when these commitments are only made inside the system, completely disregarding the social and political reality in candidate states.

The EU's push for multiculturalism in a region that lacks the natural growth and maturity of society to organically embed liberal and equality values makes the new wave of nationalistic reactions towards integration a compelling reactionary move.

However, the normative character of European integra-

tion has been more apparent in recent developments of the enlargement policy, which favours some Eastern countries, while leaving other candidates on the sidelines. In light of Russia's aggression towards Ukraine, the EU offered Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine a membership perspective in June 2022, marking a significant upgrade on the Union's previous position. Former practices have been referred to as purgatory, placing Western Balkan countries in a situation of relentless postponement. While steps towards integration have been made for meeting the EU's criteria, candidacy is still denied and in some cases (such as Albania) countries are being kept on the sidelines due to the laborious process of accession negotiations.

In Georgia's case, the Union followed its standard procedure of conditional offer. However, the fast-paced promise of integration for Moldova and Ukraine, which received the candidate position with no articulated condition for acceding to this status, asserts the urgency of assimilating Eastern Europe into the system. This raises the question: is the European enlargement policy a political instrument to alienate Russia or is it an organic advancement following an extended process of political association and economic integration? In this respect, we have to follow closely how the accession negotiations will be held in the shadow of Russian influence. While offering Ukraine membership status could be a decade-long process, it is still a commitment that the EU has not granted towards other Balkan countries. The current structure of the European Union shows little willingness to act upon a de facto policy of enlargement, which would call for sustained and consistent commitments and investments in the region. This would imply adopting a long-term approach with both candidate members - thus addressing the underlying causes of political instability and authoritarianism instead of focusing only on immediate security concerns - and states that do not wish to adhere.



Ukraine's situation however poses a new conundrum that the EU has not faced before - the accession would forever alter the Union's future security obligations. With Ukraine withstanding a full-scale military invasion without being a NATO member, the commitment towards integration and security might not be as easy to achieve. While the Union has been a great military and economic help to Ukraine, it is unclear how long this duty will be endorsed without any long-term contracts and strategies. Moreover, a future where Ukraine and the Eastern bloc would become part of the EU is also a future of political challenges, as some predict an economic shift towards the East and the creation of a new centre of gravity.

It is commonly said that Western countries resist enlargement due to its effects on the Union's functions, such as the need for consensus in certain fields and the outdated constraints on EU authority in defence and fiscal policy. In reality, it has been proven that states do not enter conflicts because of enlargement policies, but rather due to divergence in ideologies and inability to reach a compromise. However, this makes integration harder to achieve, creating an even more strained relationship with the Balkans, as there is no incentive for politicians to enact European policies, when there is no prospect of a membership. Recommendations for enlargement policy include making access to the budget conditional with respect to the rule of law, adding an institutional dimension (by gradually integrating the countries in the EU institutions instead of just waiting for the membership card) and the election of observer MEPs in respective countries affiliated with the European Parliament for the 2024 elections.

Moreover, the enlargement policy also implies harmo-

nisation on a national level, with the European Union being the supervision agent trying to regulate both political and social deficiencies and economic implications. While the EU has been helping non-members through crises (such as the Moldovan gas crisis or Georgia's 2021 political crisis), criticism is still amplified by the necessity of more resilient cooperation in the field of security and the commitment of the EU transcending its status of soft power. A challenge that the EU has to overcome is building energy resilience in this region to allow diversification from Russia and its economic power. While the enlargement policy has been a widely debated topic inside the Union, another important issue is left with little to no scrutiny - the effects on the domestic level of Eastern European countries receiving the membership. Would achieving this goal finally solve the purgatory dilemma? The rise of nationalistic discourses and illiberal democracy make the process more difficult and nuanced.

Even though popular opinion might be in favour of joining the EU, the close cultural and historical ties that countries such as Moldova or Georgia have with Russia are not to be ignored. Already perceived as the “outskirts” of Europe, these states would have to rely heavily on consistent and sustained EU support in order to avoid a deeper cost-of-living crisis than the one already caused by the war and gradually improve their domestic issues. Otherwise, the Union might have to handle increasing eurosceptic sentiments from the region.

Therefore, an increasingly important question emerges: What are the limits of Europe and the European Union?

Political pulse

Replacement or Reproduction: How Do We Adapt to Demo- graphic Decline?

BRIANA STEFANA AGRICI AND CASPAR LEMMENS

While some countries have to deal with so-called population booms, other countries nowadays experience the opposite. In mostly developed countries this can cause a variety of problems, most notably with regard to social services and communal facilities. What are the ways to reverse these trends, and what option is preferable?

Caspar

While, rightfully so, overpopulation is regarded as a pressing issue, mostly in terms of sustainability, its polar opposite is looming on the horizon, and it would not be far-fetched to say that in some cases it's already causing trouble.

Household name countries like Japan, South Korea or Italy all have birth rates far below the 2.1 children per woman threshold needed for stable demographics. In these severe cases, it is expected that the population will eventually fall to half of its size in mere generations. The consequences of this demographic decline are evident. The population gets older and older, creating negative effects on economic growth and the sustainability of social services. Albeit scary at first, fear not, because human ingenuity seems to have an obvious solution at hand: robots.

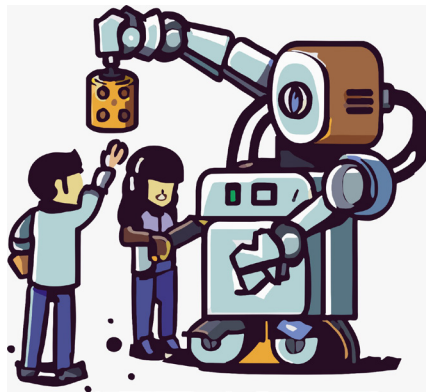
We can utilise new technologies to our advantage. By replacing parts of our economic system with robots, the declining population can still produce the same, if not more, economic output. This way robots form an excellent solution to keep our societies running, even with less people. While stimulating population growth has proven largely ineffective, robots are a reliable factor.

Briana

While you do have a point regarding the population decline consequences, it is also important to acknowledge that it relies on a more central issue surrounding Japanese society: the rigid working and social culture. Men are contracted to long working days, which leaves little to no time to attend to personal life. At the same time, women have fewer children and choose to either marry later in life or not at all. This behaviour is a di-

rect reflection of the cultural problems the country is facing. While technology might aim to solve the immediate economic problems, in reality it will not account for the generally low quality of community life and will only foster and deepen over time the culture of alienation and hyper-individuality.

This is why options such as immigration or providing conditions for people who want to have children would be a better alternative. One viable solution would be encouraging natality by helping couples that want to have children, through providing better childcare services (although advancements have been made in this field, statistics show they are not enough) and financial compensation for people moving to areas with sparse populations.



Caspar

The heavy burden of Japanese work culture is indeed a problem for the countries' fertility rate. However, this problem can also be solved through technological advancements. More so, if Japan does not utilise its salient position in the high tech industry, the burden for Japanese citizens will only increase, resulting in a downward spiral. If anything, letting robots do mundane, low paying work will allow Japanese citizens to spend more time in their own community. This is not a debate on either improving societal structures or investing heavily in technology, they rather go hand in hand. The reality now is that the trend has been solidified in Japanese demographic development, and we should put our efforts into adapting. Regardless of governmental efforts to stimulate fertility, no major advancements have been made. Furthermore, this problem also occurs in countries without such a heavy workload, like Italy. Should migration be the solution then? It admittedly provides for some short term relief, but in the long run will cause different problems, as migrants tend to adjust to the countries' birth rate within

one or two generations and the migration movements have been causing quite a lot of societal unrest in recent years.

Briana

While the efficacy of the tech industry in working towards a sustainable economic model cannot be denied, I would still argue that finding human-oriented solutions would contribute to growth and welfare in the long run. Some of the societal unrest that you mention is caused by the panic of immigration which arises due to the Government's lack of efforts to inform the public about immigration policies. Moreover, in a context where climate change has become an increasingly pressing issue to tackle on a transnational level, we should also take into account the role that automation plays in this process. While some technology relies on green energy and has been proven to reduce carbon emissions, we also have to take into account how energy-taxing they are. By acknowledging this, it is also important to consider that because Japan has such a well-developed tech industry, it ranks amongst the first users of the total stocks of robots in the world. Considering this issue on a broader scale, developing countries are left to endure the harsher side effects of climate change, while being exploited for natural resources. As numbers have shown, Japan is a big importer of cobalt and copper from countries such as Madagascar or Nigeria.

Caspar

With regard to the points you bring up, the funny thing is that robots are not as different from humans as one might think. While it is true that more robots would mean more extraction of resources, the same goes for humans. Robots consume electricity and raw materials, while humans consume electricity, food, clothing, the same materials as robots but for their phones, water and such. Why would we continue extracting resources, while having to work very hard to even get people to have children, if the possibility of creating a new, less demanding and more efficient workforce exists. Moreover, these are problems we can partially overcome by investing in the technology, so that technology be-

comes even more efficient and less consuming. As I see it, there are two options: either choose to implement inefficient methods to promote a system that will eventually fall back to the same problems we currently face, or invest in a promising new way of living that is actually different from our current one. Although there are indeed problems with using technology on such a scale, these what-if issues can only be overcome through actual field work and a spillover driven development of the infrastructure and industry.

Briana

While industry is crucial for the economy of a state, an important point to bring out is the way in which technologisation on the market would also transpose in the social and personal life. Automation inside the nuclear family structure would change the dynamics of the family members, especially the traditional social role of women as caregivers and childbearers. The Innovation 25 programme proposed by former Japanese prime minister Shinzō Abe is a robot-dependent alternative to the current structure of the household, where robots act as a surrogate for caretakers, allowing women to have more time to procreate and raise the birth rate. This perspective is not only dehumanising and reductionist, but it emphasises an alarming eagerness to accept and embrace the commodification of motherhood and the autonomy of the female body.

In addition, I think that increased technologisation creates a dystopic paradox - if you remove the human component of labour, then to what extent will robots still be serving the interests of people and not of corporations selling these products? While robots sound like a promising solution, in the absence of deeper social reform, sooner or later this technology will become counterproductive with no actual population to benefit from it.

However, this debate will have an increasing importance as the international system is changing, demanding more attention to be paid to the way in which new waves of migration will harmonise with more countries choosing the path of technology in the wake of critical demographic crises.



An Emerging Regional Power

Kenya's Increasingly Influential Role in Sub-Saharan Africa

SAM HOLM VAN DONK

It came as something of a shock to the international community when, in October of 2023, the security council authorised a military intervention of Haiti, voluntarily led by none other than the Republic of Kenya. The purpose of the security mission was stated to be the restoration of law and order in the country, after it has been plagued by lawlessness and comprehensive gang violence since 2021. This comes in response to a plea from the Haitian president Ariel Henry to the security council, to restore government control, which is currently confined only to certain areas of the capital, Port-au-Prince. The mission would entail sending a 1000-strong contingent of Kenyan police to the island republic, along with the equipment and logistical resources. Kenya is to be supported by the countries of Jamaica, the Bahamas, and Antigua and Barbuda.

Some have criticised Kenya heading this mission, as the country is known for issues of corruption and misconduct within its own police force. Smaller bribes given to police officers are commonplace in the nation, particularly regarding smaller violations such as those that are traffic-related. Furthermore, bribes are often seen as a way to 'get things done', and have in a sense been ingrained in the interactions with law enforcement. This does pose a problem with regards to its newfound responsibilities in Haiti. In response, the security council has stressed that an oversight mechanism is crucial in this operation, and that law enforcement officers down to the individual level would be scrutinised and held accountable to their actions within the framework of the mission. It therefore remains to be seen whether corruption presents a structural issue within this particular operation.

It is interesting to note that Kenya itself offered to lead this mission, an offer that could be made due to its current membership of the United Nations Security Council. Not many other African countries can boast to have done something similar. South Africa, for example, does have a longer history of foreign military intervention, with the South African defence force being active in peacekeeping operations in Lesotho, Mozambique, South Sudan and the DRC, but it does also hold the position of a regional superpower of sub-Saharan Africa. Kenya itself has also participated in transnational operations, when it invaded southern Somalia in 2011 in accordance with an international

mission to drive out the terrorist group al-Shabaab. But then, is this to say that Kenya is shaping up to take a leading role in East Africa?

Generally, a regional power must be said to possess a comparatively strong economy, military and political capabilities, as well as hold decisive influence over other countries in the region. Furthermore, it must self-identify, and thereby act, as a regional power in order to be considered as such. In addition to the planned Haiti mission, Kenya also stole the spotlight with its September 2023 hosting of the African Climate Summit, an ambitious conference co-hosted with the African Union with the aim of promoting sustainable development and green economic growth within Africa, without relying on support from the West. This falls in line with past decades, as the nation takes on an increasing variety of international responsibilities within sectors of security, environment, trade and more. This all does suggest that Kenya is taking responsibility as a leading nation in Africa, and points to an elevated regional status for the republic.



On the other hand, it can be difficult to argue the regional power status for Kenya, when one begins to question its internal sovereignty. This is most apparent when looking at its repeated issues with the jihadist group al-Shabaab, particularly in the north of the country. The terrorist group has been operating within Somalia and Kenya since 2004, committing attacks on the nations since its foundation. This culminated in the 2014 Westgate shopping centre terrorist attack in Nairobi, where al-Shabaab militants killed 67 civilians, in the deadliest terror attack in Kenya in the past 15 years. Despite repeated deadly attacks on Kenyan citizens, the Kenyan military has consistently dealt harshly with the terrorist group, and it seems that it has today been largely driven out of the country, as seen by its minimal activity in recent years.

According to the World Bank, Kenya has experienced sustained economic growth in the past decade, averaging 4.8% per year between 2015-2019. The country does, however, manage to evade classical economic models, with the agricultural sector making up over a third of the country's total GDP, without much in regards to industrialisation. It's a similar structure to other sub-Saharan economies, so it is almost baffling to see Kenya experience much higher rates of economic growth than its counterparts. But what's behind Kenya's unique situation? Much points to its long-term development, with the country pursuing its 'Kenya's Vision 2030', aiming to transform the coun-

try into a competitive economy, prioritising, most notably, agriculture, small/micro enterprises and digital economy. The economy is currently the 3rd largest in the African continent, surpassed only by those of Nigeria and South Africa. Yet this seems unlikely to hold, as the Kenyan economy experiences far higher growth rates than South Africa, since neighbouring countries such as Tanzania and Zambia increasingly turn to Kenya for trading and investment opportunities. So, one can easily see Kenya taking over the mantle of sub-Saharan superpower from South Africa.

At the same time, one must recognise that it still is a middle-lower income country, experiencing challenges such as a, albeit diminishing, high poverty, unemployment and inequality rates, further burdened by low accountability and transparency, something that becomes relevant in the case of intervention in Haiti. The question now is-

can Kenya balance its new international obligations with its desire for sustained economic growth, without overburdening its nascent achievements?

Whatever the case, the country must tread carefully, taking care not to overextend its limited, if growing, capabilities in pursuing international obligations, and flexing its increasing global power. Balance is key here, and should Kenya's endeavours with the international community go ahead effectively, this will mark the beginning of a new era for the nation, as it embraces its own status as a regional power in Africa.

Can Kenya balance its new international obligations with its desire for sustained economic growth without overburdening its nascent achievements?

The Fragile Balance Separating Self-Growth from Obsession

Where Do We Draw the Line When It Comes to Ambition?

ESTHER LÁINEZ CARBALLO

A dangerous rise of perfectionism among the youngest generations has led various professionals to talk about perfectionism as “a hidden pandemic” in the last decades. A 2019 study by Thomas Curran and Andrew Hill on college students concluded that perfectionism has been on the rise since 1989, sabotaging and threatening the quality of life of many. The consequences of this go beyond mere stress, worry, or high standards: perfectionism has been scientifically proven to be highly related with anxiety, depression, suicidal ideation, eating disorders, and obsessive-compulsive disorder.

But we do not need to go all the way to a psychology clinic to realise how the poison of perfectionism is draining the life out of the younger generations: we just need to go to a university campus. One could stand outside of a library for hours, asking every passing student if they felt satisfied with the work they did that day or the last grades they received, and most of them would say no. Asking for more details would not be necessary, as nothing could change the fact that it was not enough; because it never is. We are part of the most prepared and educated generations in history, and, ironically, the ones who most commonly feel like a failure.

We seem to be permanently out of breath, running towards an invisible line that stays unreachable because it keeps moving faster than we possibly could.

But how did we get to this point? Curran and Hill point to the economic, social, and cultural changes brought by neoliberalism: in the last fifty years, a market-based culture based on competitive individualism has taken over the world. Many young people today would rather spend time on self-growth or instrumental value activities rather than simply doing group activities for fun, and, interestingly, while a rise of post-materialism has caused us to see an increased interest in non-material goods, data shows that, compared to their parents, the more recent generations

spend a far bigger proportion of their income on status and image goods. While this may seem contradicting at first, it easily could be explained by the fact that people do not really want these goods themselves, but the social status related to them. At the end of the day, while still increasingly unhappy by what they have, individuals today are especially dissatisfied with who they are. This can explain the popularity of social media platforms where everyone can carefully plan and craft their public image. Nonetheless, these tend to do more harm than good, as proven by studies showing that a constant exposure to the seemingly perfect lives of others can intensify one's own social alienation and eventually lower self-esteem.

Overall, neoliberalism has succeeded in spreading irrational (yet desirable) ideals of the perfectible self. The idea that we ought to work towards achieving the greatest version of ourselves has become systemic, self-reinforcing through social media, help books, and contemporary language patterns: phrases like “no pain, no gain”, “you only live once”, “living my best life”, and other toxic ideas spread around by hustle culture. Logically so, it is no coincidence that a rise of competitive behaviour and presentational anxieties has come along with these. The process of identity-construction among young people is currently shaped by a focus on flaws and deficiencies on one hand, and a pathological fear of criticism and failure on the other.



the last decades, we as a society have internalised that the perfect life is available to anyone who works hard enough for it. Those who go through a top education are supposed to be rewarded by wealth and social status because they worked hard for it, and those who do not achieve this were simply not good enough. The result of this harsh doctrine is that academic and professional achievements are now closely related to our personal innate value. Additionally, the purpose of receiving an education has been redefined in terms of a market price: what good do knowledge and skills do if they cannot be monetized? The extremely tight relation between education, personal innate value and economic value has greatly increased the number of people who want (and get) university degrees, which, ironically, has actually deflated their value. Our current society is flooded with more university graduates than jobs available to them. In fact, the wage associated with university degrees has stagnated in the last 20 years, meaning that the higher salary that used to come with a college degree is now almost entirely seen amongst people who also have post-graduate degrees.

For many young people, it is common to list being too much of a perfectionist as one of their main flaws. It is definitely an easy problem to recognize, as the price for being a perfectionist is not cheap: it comes with hours and hours of procrastination, too many sleepless nights, and a disproportionate amount of suffering for not doing enough; not being enough. Now, while it is easy to do a run-down of all the problems associated with current societal expectations and to be aware of them, it is fairly difficult to come up with a solution, as

it is not only a common individual issue, but a societal problem. At the end of the day, how are we, as individuals, ever supposed to stop aiming towards more, when our whole environment encourages and rewards excessively high achievement standards and the attainment of perfection? How are we supposed to stop running towards the finish line in the middle of a race? Well, perhaps the answer is in slowing down and looking around, in order to realise that, in fact, there is not a finish line. Our parents, our friends, society as a whole, and even us, like to pretend that there is, but truth is, there is not.

At the end of the day, how are we, as individuals, ever supposed to stop aiming towards more, when our whole environment encourages and rewards excessively high achievement standards and the attainment of perfection?

This does not mean, of course, that aiming towards growth and improvement is necessarily something bad. But where do we draw the line? At some point, we must stop and ask ourselves what pursuing certain goals is doing to us. This ought to go further than thinking if they make us happy, or, rather, if carrying them like a chain and ball is making us miserable. Instead, we might consider if our identity is being entirely shaped by what we have or what we do: could we define who we are without mentioning our skills, our achievements, and our goals? And would we think of ourselves as being worthy even if we never reached our ideal self? Could we ever forgive

our past-self for their mistakes, and come to terms with the fact that that person is us, and not an embarrassing third person who doesn't exist anymore? Indeed, we can, but only if we take the first step: accepting that our existence is not a project, or a prototype to be fixed. And when we come to terms with this, then, perhaps, we will be able to reach an equilibrium.

Deconstructing the Prison of Consumerism

The Art of Living With Less: How a Declutter of Our Space Can Help Us Declutter Our Mind.

FABIA MIELCAREK

I consider myself to have no sense of geographical orientation. Luckily, I have google maps on my phone. I cannot imagine going somewhere that I have not been before without my phone in my hand and Google Maps telling me where to go. Without my phone I would not wake up in the morning. I would not know how to make lasagna in the evening for dinner and I would not remember when I am supposed to go to my doctor's appointment anymore. Even though it is really helpful, the question is should we be so dependent on an object? Next to the omnipresence of smartphones in our lives we also find ourselves standing in front of at least 30 different options of cereal in the supermarket or 50 different scents of shampoo in the drugstore. Is it really helpful and beneficial for us and our mental health that we are surrounded by so many options and have the permanent urge to buy the best smartphone, newest t-shirt or nicest smelling shampoo? How are we overwhelmed by the entirety of options we have? Are we too attached to the objects in our lives and forget to care about the little things?

We have become accustomed to the capitalist system that shapes our society and its flow of advertisements that reaches us every day as soon as we open a social media app on our phone or step out of our house. The average consumer nowadays is surrounded by five thousand advertisements per day. More and more people take the broad choice of cheap products for granted without questioning what the price means for the production conditions and the environmental consequences that follow. Consuming within a click on our phone on a daily basis is normal for most people and our houses are stocked with different objects that often do not really have a purpose for us anymore. Everything is commercialised by companies so that it is more about buying and trying the new product than finding the right one. Being used to new offers we wish for new products constantly, that the thought of buying a wanted item releases chemicals like

dopamine and endorphins. People can become used to this feeling, which can result in a constant circle of wanting new products.

On top of that, the fact that advertising is perfectly adapted to us through algorithms supports this constant cycle even further, only being intensified by our tendency to compare ourselves with other people. Wellbeing studies show that materialism is linked to a decrease in life satisfaction. So, the question arises: is our lifestyle really that good and healthy for not only the general environment but also our own personal environment and well-being? Would a minimalistic lifestyle be a positive influence on one's mental health?

The Waorani tribe, an indigenous tribe living in the Amazonian region in eastern Ecuador, provide quite a good example of what following a minimalist model is. They live in areas where oil drilling activities are conducted and feel the threat of losing parts of the environment to the oil business. Moi Enomena, a Waorani told the inter press service "There are two uncontacted communities near my home but there is the threat of oil exploration. They don't want this. For them, taking the oil out of the ground is like taking blood out of their bodies." The community's deep knowledge about its geography and nature allows its people to organise their living around the forest and develop for example medicine using what nature provides them with in a sustainable way.



Albeit not a new name for most of us, a woman who developed a method around living in a more minimalistic way is Marie Kondo. The KonMari method, which is used by many people contemporarily, is a tidying method in which the person chooses what to throw out by self-reflection. If the object brings joy, it stays. Behind the system stands the goal to re-organise living, surrounded by the things and people that you love the most. To be successful and reach life goals tidying gets rid of the clutter. Through living with fewer objects and focusing on quality rather than quantity, an increased feeling of independence and individuality is intended to be attained in which the owner can identify with the objects he or she possesses and know their meaning and place. Purchases are more carefully considered and should be a conscious decision of the buyer.

Minimalism became a contemporary trend which companies use to sell new products like "tiny houses" in the market. We see new advertisements that promise calmness and happiness through the purchase of a new "minimalistic" item and read articles about how minimalism increases our productivity and therefore makes us happy. Connecting productivity and happiness with each other as direct consequence of a minimalist lifestyle, brings up a question: should an increased productivity be the main goal behind a minimalist lifestyle, or is this constant craving for the increase of our productivity also a consequence of the capitalist system? It should not be about following this new trend, and consuming more but different advertised products that promise to increase one's productivity, but about actually slowing down our own overconsumption to disconnect from the alienation that comes with advertisements and always being under the imperative of "owning".

The organisation of belongings should be connected with the evaluation of one's own thoughts and goals and is meant to be a process to find happiness and joy in one's own living situation. Important are not only the belongings and the productivity they bring us, but also the spaces in between that leave room for development and bring calmness and a room to breathe.

A Japanese philosophy rooted in Zen Buddhism calls the celebration of space in between things, which is considered as valuable as the things "Ma". Connect-



If the object brings us joy, it stays.

ed with the phrase "Mottainai", which means "waste nothing", people should make the conscious decision to withdraw from a consumerist mindset: "Danshari". "Danshari" not only means to declutter from material possessions, but also from mental and emotional clutter. The result is to have the space, time and freedom to live more fully. In the USA for example the patterns of consumption are revealing of the general well-being of the citizens: the average person possessed more televisions in their own house than people in 2010 and in 2013 an average of 64 new clothing articles per person was purchased. At the same time the general social survey shows us that a general decline in happiness has happened between 1972 and 2014 and that anxiety and depression symptoms in the United States, especially when looking at young people increase. Therefore a general increase in material purchases did not mean a general increase in happiness but the opposite.

It is important for us and our mental health to declutter from time to time. To organise our environment in a way that it provides us with an overview over our surroundings and tasks which enables us to reach our goals and take time to concentrate on relationships and focus on ourselves. So, put away the phone, which was probably useful to find the restaurant, and concentrate on the in person relationship. It should not be about getting rid of everything and living as minimalistic as possible. Living minimalistic is gaining popularity and new products connected to minimalism appear on the market, so that Capitalism profits off an idea, which initially should be against its core concepts. It is not about following this new "trend", because the advertisement tells us that it will make us happier so that the system uses its own critique and transforms it into marketable products. Minimalism instead should be about what feels right for our own life and especially our mental well being and happiness. It should be about being conscious of our own behaviour and reasoning to connect with ourselves, our consumption and our mental health.

Confronting Cultural Isolation

Increased Globalisation's Dangers to Cultural Self-Preservation

EMMA ANDREAE

In a globalised world where travel and technology constantly connect people like never before, the concept of cultural isolation may seem paradoxical. However, it remains a lasting issue that affects individuals and communities in various ways due to its cultural, socioeconomic, developmental and moral ramifications.

For immigrants or expatriates, cultural isolation can be a very overwhelming experience, as they find themselves disconnected from their ethnic or cultural roots, while simultaneously struggling to adapt to a new cultural environment.

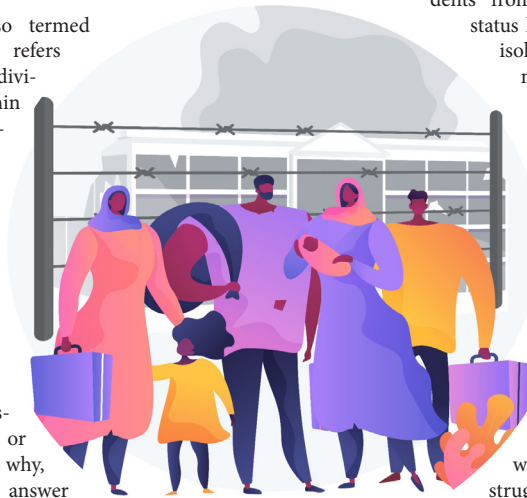
Cultural isolation, also termed as cultural loneliness, refers to the inability of individuals to integrate within a society due to cultural differences, which leaves one feeling not understood. Like in many other anthropological phenomena, the processes can be long and difficult and vary ad hoc, considering the background, environmental circumstances and privileges, or lack thereof. That is why, when striving for an answer to avoid this, there is no set one.

The search for a way for people who migrate to celebrate and preserve their own cultural heritage in a seemingly unwelcoming environment requires a great degree of identity and introspection. A strong sense of identity showcasing itself through language, religious practices, traditional customs, or even gastronomy. The tiniest details make the most difference, with a simple dish being able to provide comfort in times of social discomfort. However, it is precisely this great degree of importance that makes cultural isolation a frail concept. The smallest change can make the biggest difference, both for good and bad, like a swing that could break at any point because of the amount of weight on it. Opening themselves to new opportunities and mee-

ting new people with different backgrounds and cultures can mitigate these feelings of loneliness by uniting people with similar interests. Nevertheless, none of these efforts can actually be effective unless there is a deeper understanding of the role of the native communities in receiving countries. There needs to be further efforts on a sociological level to appreciate and learn from diverse cultural perspectives, encouraging mutual understanding and acceptance.

To exemplify this, we can look at a study from 2021 which discussed the fact that black male students from a lower socioeconomic status had experienced feelings of isolation and cultural dissonance as a consequence of their race and their socioeconomic status. As white male students are the most privileged people, students of a different race have to work at least double as hard to achieve the same thing white students can achieve with a lot less effort.

Cultural isolation is a complex phenomenon which a lot of immigrants struggle with. From language barriers to religious differences, international students have a lot to deal with when they move to the other side of the continent to study. There is no possible way to completely solve this, but people who are already settled in the community can be of help to make immigrants feel a bit more welcomed in their totally new environment. It is very difficult for immigrants to settle and it can take a very long time, so people who are settled should be more open to helping them and making sure that the obstacles that immigrants face in a foreign country can be tackled easier. In an increasingly interconnected world, the introspection gained from cultural isolation calls for a profound reflection on our collective responsibility to preserve our different cultures and the interconnection between them.



The Consequences of Overqualification

The Beginning of the End of the Primary Sector Workforce

MATEI CIOCAN

These days, more and more people are opting for a university degree due to both better accessibility to higher education as well as the perceived status that this qualification could bring. Although most people view having a highly educated and trained workforce as a benefit, the unintended effect of over qualification is coming to light, especially in the primary sector. And while this trend has undeniably contributed to advancements in various fields, such as research or healthcare, it has also given rise to a situation where a significant portion of the workforce is deemed overqualified for their jobs, neglecting essential labour sectors that are often underestimated yet crucial for the functioning of today's society.

The primary sector, encompassing agriculture, mining, forestry, fishing and other forms of labour plays a fundamental role in sustaining economies. However, this sector often requires a different set of skills than those acquired through extensive education. Professional schools had been often unattended in the EU for the better part of the last decade, and this is primarily due to a plethora of factors which surround the issue. Firstly, we can consider the stigma about primary sector jobs. There is a societal perception that primary sector jobs are less prestigious or desirable compared to white-collar professions. This stigma discourages qualified individuals from considering careers in the primary sector, contributing to the shortage of workers.

There is also the issue of ongoing urbanisation. People in search of better opportunities have the desire to escape from rural communities and work in the cities. While the promising job prospects are at first tempting, it leads to a clear shortage of people working in agriculture, one of the most important areas of labour in the primary sector. In turn, the lack of primary sector workers leads to an increase of food prices because there are simply less people willing to work in that area.

On the opposite side of the spectrum, the overly saturated highly-qualified workforce is struggling to obtain a job even after they finish their studies. This leads to situations in which freshly graduated young people who have spent considerable amounts of money in their

university education end up in primary sector jobs, underperforming because of their disappointment, lack of motivation and qualification, which could ultimately lead to early quitting. This crisis is evident in The Netherlands, where between the months of April and June, there were an average of 122 job vacancies for every 100 people that were looking for work.



So, what can be done in order to solve this employment crisis? Well, we have seen increasing government incentives for people to redirect to primary sector jobs such as construction or agriculture by raising the minimum wage and trying to convince young adults to choose this path. However, the ultimate goal should be to change the general perception about primary sector jobs by promoting the concept of dignity and respect, but also to emphasise the importance that those jobs represent. This process is however a precarious one, and could only begin from our educational roots.

Therefore, a multifaceted strategy is needed to address the over-qualification dilemma and its impact on the primary sector labour shortage. To achieve a more sustainable and balanced workforce, it is imperative that we support vocational education and encourage a change in social views regarding the worth of primary sector jobs, contributing to a shift towards a more balanced way of life and a more balanced distribution of workers over the labour sectors.

Swipe Left to Save the Planet, Swipe Right to Kill It

Computing Centres as a Two-Faced Coin in Modern Society

ANNA ARAGONCILLO BARCELÓ

Tinder, Shopify, Microsoft, Airbnb, Meta (and its multiple umbrella companies) are all examples of major household technology-based firms that have thrived under harsh competition in the market, and seemingly emerged victorious. They all share a common axis: companies that grow exponentially by providing vertically integrated services for their customers through the Internet of Things, utilising high-radix computing centres to sustain their softwares throughout the whole globe.

Last statistics, at the time of writing, state that Tinder has around 75 million active users, while the Meta group amasses more than 3.71 billion monthly active users. Although impressive, numbers are nothing without a meaning attached to them. The fact that these companies rack up so many users is translated into the need to establish computing infrastructures that possess the tangible hardware that is needed to support the vast amount of data being received, processed and sent back again.

Computing infrastructures, as their name suggests, are massive frameworks, composed by both the hardware, such as building, powering and cooling elements, and software, such as web servers, cloud storage subsystems and operating systems, that are needed to power and handle networks with massive workload in the Internet. Such computing data centres play a pivotal role in the widespread digitalization of the world, and are crucial for ensuring the functioning of our favourite apps and IT features. Digitalisation is commonly described as a panacea to the imminent issue that environmental security poses for our current society, by arguing that a more digitised society will reduce its waste output by decreasing the amount of paper and resources utilised and fostering further innovation. Nevertheless, it is by no means a flawless solution, and the underlying implications of said process might be more pressing than what we originally thought.

Digitalisation implies a massive energy consumption, needed for the construction, powering and cooling of computing centres, whose demand for energy is more often than not extracted from fossil fuels.

The scarcity and exhaustion of rare earth metals will not withstand the vertiginous speed of innovation, and, added to the challenges posed by the weaponised inability or unwillingness to ensure a proper disposal of the highly-toxic used materials, exponentially measures up to a significant degree of environmental damage.



Where does the issue lie? Is it a matter of the corporations that push for such a large-scale technological innovation to achieve further financial gain? Is it a matter of the users of such technological platforms that, unknowingly, push for further features? Or is it a matter of the power relations that enable a socio-economic structure in which security issues can be greatly endangered for the sake of further capitalist wishes?

Looking further, we must hold accountable the causes, ramifications and procedural structures of the issue. Users need to understand that digitalization is not a blank slate for humanity in what concerns the environment, and the consequences cannot be undone that easily. Corporations, on the other hand, need to realise that it is not enough with striving for further recycling, but that there has to be a significant reduction in pollution for it to actually be called “innovation”.

We don't want thoughts, we want results.

Otherwise, how can we walk the fine line between technological innovation and environmental exhaustion? Technological innovation, computing centres and fancy softwares can only be called proper progress if they do not endanger the fall of our already unstable environmental security from the tightrope of collective consumerism in our current society, because once we fall, we will not be able to get up.

Diary of Viktor Szép

Is the EU Ready for More Institutional Cooperation?

CASPAR LEMMENS

Viktor Szép is an Assistant Professor at the University of Groningen. He specialises in research on EU foreign and security policy and, in particular, the EU's sanctions policy. In 2021 he completed his PhD on the EU's 2014 sanctions against Russia, and currently teaches several subjects that are all in some way related to the European Union. As part of the Checks and Balances Editorial Staff of 2023/2024, we are very grateful for his precious time and interesting insights.

Professor Szép, does the EU have a natural tendency towards further integration?

For a long time, indeed, we may have believed that there is a ‘spill-over effect’ in the EU whereby integration in one policy area can lead to integration in other policy areas. However, I do not believe that this would be the case, especially nowadays. Therefore, I do not believe there is a “natural tendency” towards further integration. For example, Brexit, which is a clear sign of disintegration. Also, today's political dynamics point out to the fact that there are several actors that question the competences enjoyed by the EU. These things do not exclude the possibility, however, we should be careful in saying that integration tendencies will “naturally” happen: they will only happen if Member States agree.

Where do the biggest challenges lie, currently and in the future, for the EU?

It is clear that we are moving towards a multipolar world where actors seek to (re-)position themselves, sometimes with aggressive means. The question is how the EU and its Member States can defend themselves and how they can shape the environment in a way that suits their interests. One of today's questions from the perspective of how the EU functions is whether the EU will move away from unanimity to qualified majority voting, for example in the field of EU foreign and security policy. That question is partly related to expected future enlargement, implying that there could be easily 30+ Member States in the medium term that may further paralyse decision-making. No one should expect abolishment of unanimity in the short term, but it is possible to open the door for more qualified majority voting.

Would you argue that further EU integration always means handing over more sovereignty or competences by Member States?

Further integration can occur even if the Treaties are

not modified. A defining feature of the EU has been the so-called “differentiated integration” whereby only a group of Member States move forward in a specific segment. These differentiations are obviously sub-optimal solutions because they create fragmentations within a ‘single Union’ but they also offer the possibility to further integrate some fields. In other words, Member States can activate some unused or underused Treaty provisions to move forward integration. If they want to further increase the existing catalogue of competences, they may need to revise the Treaties; but that takes quite a long time, and there is no obvious willingness to change the Lisbon Treaty.



What are the main arguments for and against further EU integration, and what do you think about them?

In the light of (external) crises, the most compelling argument for further integration -or at least for working together intensively- is strengthening the voice and the bargaining power of each Member State at the international stage. However, free movement of people creates some tensions in the EU: while many people would gain from travelling around Europe, some others would see limited resources. If the general perception is that a growing number of people fight for the same resources, that might be a recipe for social tensions which are of direct concern for the EU. The EU and its Member States must manage and somehow anticipate these tensions and work together collectively to solve these problems. We have been observing the fact that the local elite is often blaming the EU but this is not about problem solving; rather, it is often about gaining public support, which is often detrimental to the EU project while the EU remains, let's not forget, an avenue for the promotion of national interests. The EU thus offers the possibility to reconcile different national interests and to come up with collective answers in the face of old and new challenges.

Life in IR: Interview with Anbæk

Diplomacy: A Fulfilling and Simultaneously Challenging Job

FABIA MIEL CAREK

Tine Anbæk is a Danish Diplomat, currently working for the Danish embassy in South Africa. She studied two years of her masters in Denmark, doing French Language and Culture Studies, and afterwards three years in Paris, Political Science. After working as a diplomat for more than twenty years, and spending sixteen to seventeen of those residing and exercising her practice in Africa, she now works in South Africa in the field of climate policy. She has previously worked in Congo, Burkina Faso, Benin, Mali, Mozambique and South Africa. Her partner is a French diplomat, who she met while living in Africa.

Was there any point in your career that made you realise that you wished to become a diplomat?

Well, that was very much a coincidence, I would say. When I studied in Denmark I had a part time job parallel to my studies as a student assistant in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. At the time I found it uninteresting, and I thought that I was never going to work there again. But then, when we came to Burkina Faso, I started working for the Danish embassy and becoming a mother I wanted to become more attached to Denmark again. When I joined the Ministry of Foreign Affairs I saw that it was interesting and that I could work with the topics I care about.

Which topics do you personally care about the most in your work as a diplomat?

That is very much Africa. As a diplomat you often work as a generalist, which means you often work across many topics. I have always had my main focus on political relations and development. I am someone who likes to know what I talk about, so my way of specialising has been by working a lot with Africa. At some point it has been about political development, at another more about how to integrate Danish companies to make sure that they can contribute to development through business cases. I have worked a lot with political development, electoral systems. Now, in South Africa, my focus is very much on climate policy and the water sector. Adaptation to climate change in the water sector because that is a huge challenge in South Africa. Before going to South Africa I have been working for the past four years with climate policy and in particular adaptation to climate change.

For you, personally, what has been the most challenging, while working in developing countries?

There are two things I would say that have been the



most challenging. One is really at a personal level. I tend to get very absorbed in my work. There is so much to do, because there are so many opportunities not to change the world, but to start processes and to put processes into motion that eventually can change things. So it has been very meaningful to me to work in developing countries. But that also means that finding the balance between work and private life and family has been challenging throughout the years. On a context level, it is really when I have worked in countries with conflict, emergency situations, or natural catastrophes. That has been stressful. When we lived in Congo last year, there was a civil war starting. When we came to Mali it was a very peaceful, amazing country with amazing people. But the last year in Mali was challenging, because the Al-Qaeda started to kidnap people, and at the embassy we needed to prevent Danes from being kidnapped. We never felt a risk ourselves, but it was hard work and took a lot of extra hours. Right now, although South Africa is a fairly peaceful country, there is a lot of crime, because it is a country with huge inequalities. That means we need to be careful.

What does the Diplomacy department do to secure that the diplomats are safe in those kinds of situations?

I have just been this week at a mandatory security training in Denmark with colleagues from Mali, Ukraine, Iran and I could just feel for them, because for

me taking that training was very useful and I learned a lot, but for them it is something they need to get by in their daily lives. But you can be a diplomat and never be in any of those settings if you just stay in countries that are peaceful. The world is what it is and there are places in the world that are quite insecure, which is terrible for the people who live there. As visitors, being a diplomat or business person, we have the luxury that we can leave when it gets too dangerous or we can choose not to go there. In our system you are never in a country with that kind of danger for more than two years. And in most of those countries as a Danish diplomat, you are there for six weeks and then you travel out for a week or two to sort of decompress and then you go back.

You can be a diplomat in many ways. You can stay in Paris and London and Washington and stay in nice offices and have a lot of pressure there as well, but it is not threatening for your personal safety and you do not necessarily get dirty. It is as important and as meaningful as working in Africa has been for me. We need all of those engagements, and it is a matter of your personal preference and where you feel you can fulfil yourself and make a difference.

What would be your recommendation or advice for us as students, if we would like to go into the diplomatic business after our study? What would make it easier for us?

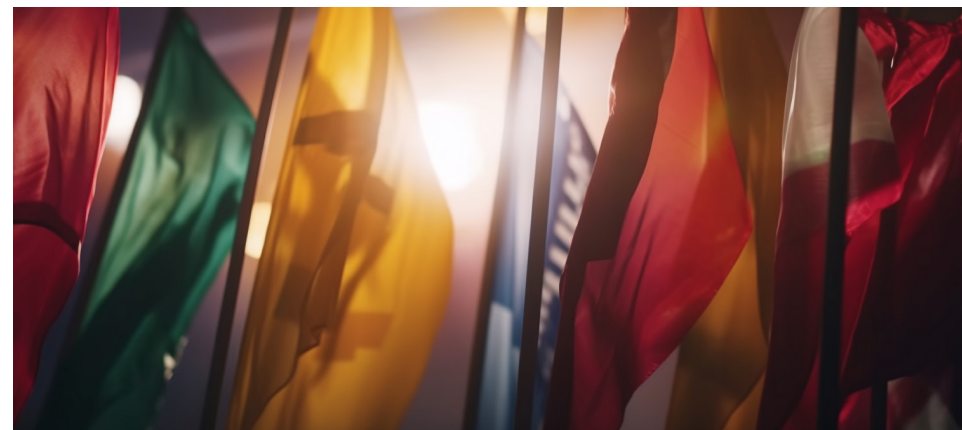
I think you must first of all follow your sense of interest. Because if you are interested, and really passionate about what you do than where you do it, how and what rank does not matter that much.

I mean, when I was a student and even four years after I graduated, I never thought I was going to be a diplomat, so that was not my driving engine. By following my set of interests and the fact that I wanted to do something that I found interesting and that I felt was worth for me to get skills in, I came into the embassy.

You can design a very specific path and find the best options to become a diplomat. In Denmark for instance, when you have your Bachelors degree you can become an intern at a Danish embassy somewhere. If that is possible in the system in your country I would definitely recommend that, because that gives you an impression of what the work is about. I mean, there can be very big sacrifices in international careers and that is just how it is, because, for instance, you have to combine two different careers with a partner.

For you, as students, it can also be interesting to look for Junior professional officer positions once you graduate. It is something you have in the UN system, for example, according to political priorities. Because you are a junior, you are not expected to come with loads of experiences. And you will typically work in developing countries. And internships; whatever internships you can find. That is an interesting way to see what that would look like and if it is a work for you.

From my point of view, your words are really helpful to get a better impression of what the work as a diplomat can look like. I also think it is impressive that you put yourself in challenging situations sometimes to work on the topic you care about and help the development of the African countries. In the name of Checks and Balances, we thank you for your time and input.



Night at the Museum

Exploring the Legitimacy of Museums in Light of the Calls for the Repatriation of Artefacts to Their Homeland.

JUDITH DE BRUIJN

Museums - buildings in which objects of historical, scientific, artistic, or cultural interest are stored and exhibited. All in the purpose of showcasing and therewith educating its visitors. Historical and cultural themed museums all over the world have been showered with criticism. How did those artefacts end up there, and is the ownership legitimate?

The countries where the artefacts stem from have repeatedly demanded the return of such valuable artefacts. One of the most recent and profound examples is the dispute between Britain and Greece on the Elgin Marbles. Her goddess body resides in the British Museum, but her head is held 1,500 miles away in Athens. The debate surrounding the repatriation of cultural artefacts to their countries of origin versus their display in museums is a nuanced discourse, balancing the preservation of heritage with the accessibility of knowledge.

In the early 19th century, Lord Elgin got permission from the Ottoman Empire to transport a significant amount of sculptures from the Acropolis in Athens to England. He later sold them to the British Museum. Greece has demanded the marbles back, as they wish to restore the Parthenon to its full glory and reunify the statues.

Advocates for museum display assert that these institutions serve as cultural bridges, facilitating global understanding and appreciation, arguing that museums provide a curated space for the public to engage with artefacts, offering educational opportunities that transcend geographical and cultural boundaries. In the case of the Elgin marbles, the marbles are showcased in



the National Museum, which has free entrance to the public and received between 6 and 7 million visitors per year, in the years before COVID-19. This further proves the wide reach and thus degree of impact the statues can have on people when they reside there.

Museums often invest in conservation efforts, ensuring the longevity of artefacts that might be vulnerable to damage or deterioration in their countries of origin. In the past, the Ottoman Empire did not value or appreciate the statues, and the Parthenon itself was used for different, practical purposes. Contrasting with the British civilisation, where appreciation for the Ancient Greek works reached Western apogee. Thus, the British ownership of the marbles might have assured its conservation or even existence. However, the Ottoman reign ended in Greece and Greek civilisation has regained its appreciation of Ancient Greek artefacts. It is clear from the story of art as a living thing, that any artefact is always in motion. The place of residence holds a story in itself and tells the tale of change and movement.

The calls for the repatriation of artefacts to its motherland have been continuous, ever since the increase of countries gaining independence after Western occupation and influence all through the second half of the 20th century. In motivation to return the artefacts they insist on retrieving the artefacts to their homeland.

The unification of the body and the head of the statues is priority, returning the marbles to their full glory. Both for the descendants of the Greeks and the tourists interested in the Parthenon, and its full history including cultural heritage, it makes most sense to have them close to its original site, in Greece. It would be charming of the Brits to make this happen, by returning the marbles to its other half, restoring the balance of the marbles.

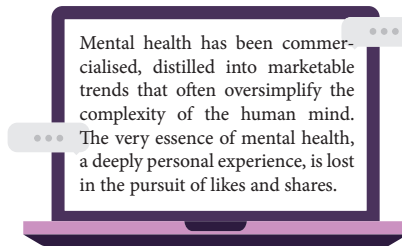
However, in light of the general debate, it would be a shame if all artefacts were returned to their original place, as there would be no purpose for a museum and no possibility of education about different cultures in your own country. Thus, a balance should be found in returning artefacts with great sentimental value to the homeland requesting it, as well as, continuing museum ownership of foreign artefacts.

Beyond the Hashtags

The Fine Line Between Awareness and Glamorisation

SUPPORT COMMITTEE

In a world dominated by hashtags and clickbait headlines, mental health has become a buzzword. It's a term that gets casually thrown into conversations, articles, and social media posts. However, we are walking a fine line between the growing banalisation of mental health in the media, where profound issues are reduced to mere clichés, hashtags, and lifestyles - diluting the gravity of the struggles individuals face and raising awareness and destigmatising mental health.



The commercialisation of mental health extends beyond influencers to the broader media landscape. Headlines and articles often promise quick fixes and one-size-fits-all solutions, perpetuating the notion that mental health challenges can be easily overcome. This oversimplification can lead individuals to underestimate the depth and individuality of their struggles, discouraging them from seeking the necessary help.

As the media blurs the line between awareness and banality, we risk a society that misunderstands and lacks empathy for mental health struggles.

Social media platforms, in particular, have become a double-edged sword in the conversation around mental health. On the one hand, these platforms provide a safe space for individuals to share their experiences and foster a sense of community, in turn reducing the isolation that can accompany mental health challenges. On the other hand, the pressure to conform to popular trends and portray an idealised version of one's life can contribute to the trivialisation of mental health.

Casual jokes and memes about anxiety and depression, once a coping mechanism, now contribute to

a desensitisation that trivialises genuine challenges. Consider, for instance, the 'satisfying' imagery of Khloe Kardashian's perfectly stacked cookies, an aesthetic pursuit that some strived for. Interestingly, Khloe has been candid about her own struggle with OCD. Images of influencers practising self-care rituals, whether it's indulging in spa days or sipping on a trendy wellness and weight loss beverage, flood our feeds. While these visuals may appear harmless, they risk oversimplifying the complexities of mental health. The commodification of self-care can create a distorted perception, suggesting that a face mask or a cup of herbal tea is a cure-all for deeper mental health issues. In reality, mental well-being is an intricate journey that often requires professional intervention and personalised strategies.

The media's role in shaping societal attitudes is undeniable, and the current trend of banalising mental health may contribute to a lack of understanding and empathy. When issues like anxiety, depression, and ADHD are reduced to trending topics, the urgency of addressing mental health as a public health concern can be lost. As consumers and creators of content, it is our responsibility to approach mental health with the gravity and respect it deserves. By fostering a culture that prioritises empathy, genuine support, and a comprehensive understanding of mental health, we can contribute to a society that treats mental health with the seriousness it deserves. Understanding the difference between idealisation and destigmatisation is crucial because it empowers us to approach mental health discussions with nuance, ensuring that we not only break down harmful stigmas but also avoid oversimplified portrayals that may inadvertently romanticise or trivialise complex issues.



About Us

Introducing the Editorial Staff 2023-2024

Checks & Balances is the official magazine of the Study Association Clio, the biggest association in any faculty of Arts in the Netherlands. We are completely student-run and focus on a wide array of topics, some of which include, politics, technology, environment, conflict, security, economics and human rights throughout a global scope. We strive to bring forth to our readers insights on topics that are often undervalued or lack more multidisciplinary perspectives. We publish a total of three print editions per year, and this is the first edition. We also have an online webpage where we publish on a biweekly basis. The Checks & Balances Editorial Staff of 2023-2024 hopes that you enjoy our first edition as much as we have enjoyed writing it (and its adjacent activities) for you!



Anna Aragoncillo Barceló

Editor-in-Chief



Hello there! I'm Anna, the Editor-in-Chief! I'm from Mallorca, Spain and although I love reading comforting books and building cosy IKEA furniture, I also enjoy adventures with friends. Academically, I love the study of underlying power structures in international society and feminist theory.

Sam van Donk

Secretary



Hi, my name is Sam, and I'm the secretary of this year's Checks & Balances Committee. I am interested in International Relations and politics, and motivated to write about it in this magazine. Outside of my work in the committee, I enjoy hanging out with friends, doing sports and learning languages.

Judith de Bruijn

Board Representative



Hi everyone! I'm Judith, a third-year from the Netherlands. I'm also the Board Representative of the Checks & Balances Committee. As a boardmember, I am the link between the editorial staff and the Clio Board. I'm a 100% sure this year's editorial staff is going to do amazing <3

Matei Ciocan

Treasurer & Layout Editor



Hello! My name is Matei, a layouter for this year's Checks & Balances Committee. I love politics and global initiatives, and enjoy spending my free time hanging out with friends and exploring as much as possible. I love skiing, playing tennis, but I'm also a foodie. I hope the magazine impresses you!

Rocío Martel Medrano

Layout Editor



Hi! I'm Rocío, one of the layouters for Checks & Balances! I love hanging out with friends, having nice cozy nights in, reading, fairy lights, traveling, plants and playing piano! I am so excited to bring the first edition of this year's magazine to you and hope you love it as much as we do!

Esther Láinez Carballo

Layout Editor



Hi, I'm Esther, and I'm a layouter! I got into Checks & Balances because of my passion for writing: in fact, I hope I can be a published novelist some day! Apart from that, I am a big fan of plants, animals, Taylor Swift, IKEA, and fairy tales. I hope you enjoy the magazine!

Briana Stefana Agrici

Public Relations



Hi! I am Briana, one of the PRs for Checks & Balances this year! I occupy my free time with meeting friends, listening to music (anything goes, but my cup of tea is indie rock), reading and complaining about having to bike. I hope the first edition will be as meaningful to you as it is to us! <3

Emma Andreae

Public Relations



Hi! I'm Emma, also one of the PR representatives of Checks & Balances! I enjoy history, politics, culture & languages. I like to hang out with my friends, read, go for runs or listen to my favourite music. I'm very excited to contribute to this year's magazine and I hope you're as excited as we are!

Caspar Lemmens

Reporter



Hi, my name is Caspar and I am one of the reporters. I am really excited about the magazine, as I am fascinated by global politics. I like to take it slow by listening to music or playing guitar, but I also enjoy playing tennis. I hope I can contribute to making this year's magazines very interesting!

Fabia Mielcarek

Reporter



Hey everyone, my name is Fabia and I am one of the Reporters in this year's amazing Checks & Balances team. I love to travel and to get to know new people, cultures and places all over the world. I am looking forward to interviewing interesting people and bringing their stories to you.

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