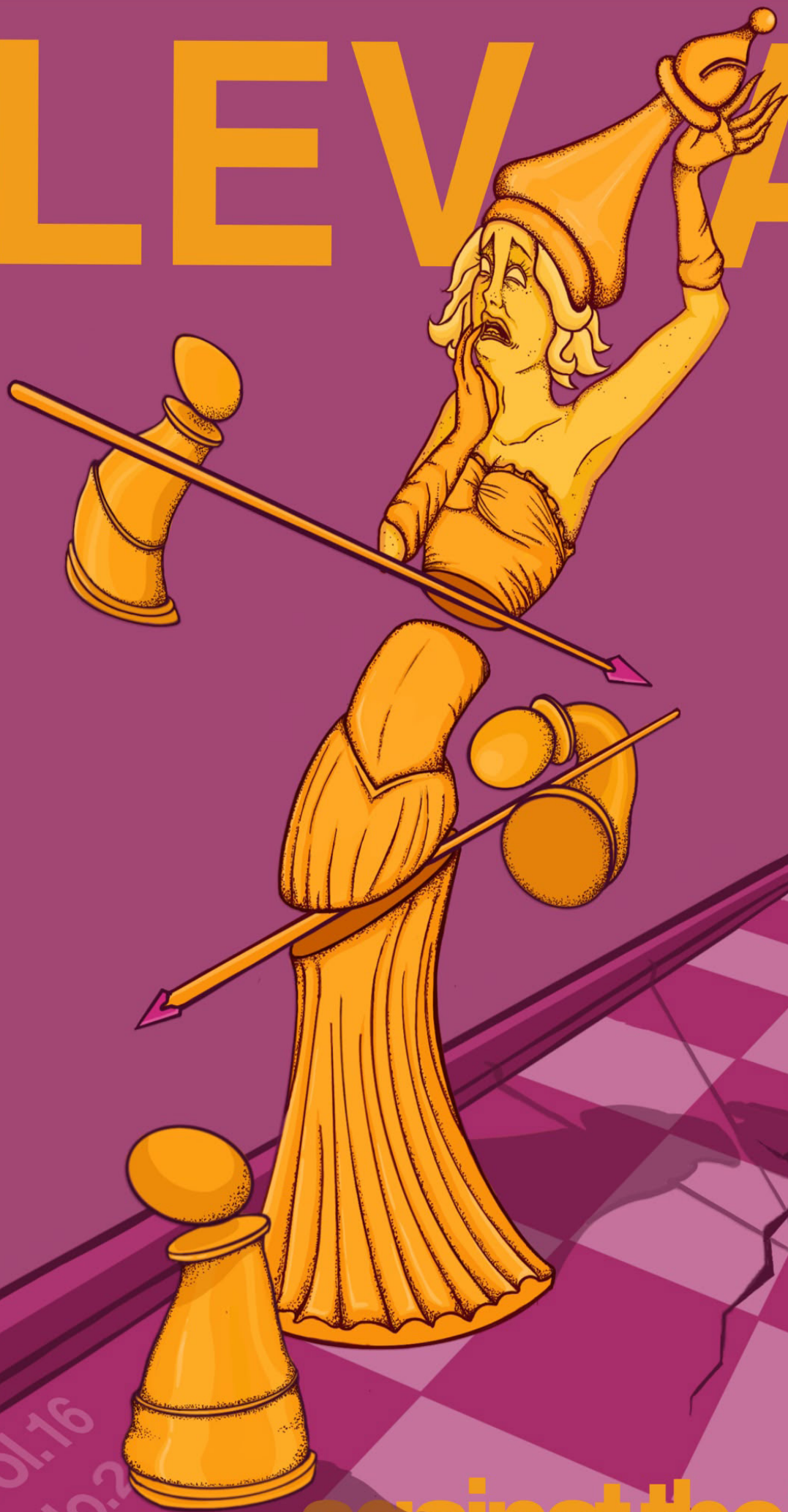


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against the grain.

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The title of this issue—Against the Grain—aptly embodies the ethos of Leviathan. As a fully student-run undergraduate publication, we believe that students, at any point in their educational journey, are not simply passive recipients of long-held knowledge. Rather, we are a community of eager minds, actively contributing to the most important academic conversations. We bring original ideas and newly articulated concepts to the table to challenge conventional understandings of our world and push political thinking to new heights. The imaginings that start here matter and reflect the burgeoning ideas of the up-and-coming generation of political leaders, diplomats, human rights advocates, behind-the-scenes staffers, policy researchers, as well as many changemakers outside the political realm. At Leviathan, we do not simply want to reproduce the status quo; we strive to use our ideas and voices to go Against the Grain. We hope that, in reading this issue, the spirit of change is contagious and galvanising.

Opening this issue, Ornela Beqa challenges conventional assumptions about sexual violence in wartime, shining a light on hegemonic masculinity in the Yugoslav Wars. Subsequently, Leviathan Editor-in-Chief Grace Hitchcock deepens our understanding of gender and authoritarianism, analysing female authoritarian leaders’ reliance on their male counterparts’ cults of personality for legitimacy; Senior Content Editor Milly Mason Holt unpacks the supposedly ‘pro-woman’ narratives directed at women in incarceration by anti-abortion groups in the US. Continuing the examination of US Politics, Evie Booth assesses the different dynamics of collective mobilisation in the Civil Rights Movement compared to Black Lives Matter, and Chase Waldheim critiques the application of the Median Voter Theorem to the US political landscape. Taking a psychological angle on current US public behaviour, Anna Myroshnychenko argues against the historical assumption regarding the rise of consumerism in the US in the 1920s, positing that consumerism’s rise is owed to the deliberate psychoanalytical work of Edward Bernays, rather than organic development. Moving toward US foreign policy, Serina Bonada assesses how Venezuela’s relative resilience and adaptation in light of US sanctions challenges US dollar hegemony, and Oscar Bates analyses US President Donald Trump’s turn away from European alliances in his second administration.

Shifting deeper into European politics, Felix Crawford investigates the determinants of public trust in the EU in France and Denmark. Moving East, Ilenia Willmert analyses Ukrainian media’s portrayal of Russian Buryat soldiers in the ongoing war and its links to Ukrainian national identity; Artūrs Taube argues that Latvia’s attempts at language convergence have alienated Russian-speaking citizens at the expense of trust and national unity. Continuing the linguistic theme, Laken Evans criticises the overuse of lingua francas in conflict resolution, arguing that lingua francas detract from successful peace negotiations, and Rose Stewart Young critiques the Scottish Government’s attempts to preserve Scottish Gàidhlig. Staying in the UK, Matthew Begg investigates the securitisation of Sinn Féin in the lead up to the Good Friday Agreement, and Jonathan Vickers reorients the typically dichotomous debate around UK constitutionalism in favour of a non-positivist, non-dichotomous view. Adopting a comparative perspective, Nick Bacon compares the mobilisation of anger and its relationship to justice in the xenophobic protests in Epping, England, and the Idle No More protests in Canada. Moving from anger to hope, Leviathan Deputy Editor-in-Chief Lucy Barrett, criticises the use of hope in Children in Need’s annual charity telethon, arguing that such forms of hope do not challenge structural ableism. Focusing on another political emotion, Lara Crie argues that the 2008 Canadian Indian Residential School Apology proves insincere and insufficient at transforming Indigenous-Canadian relations.

Diving into an exploration of different utopian visions, Theo Westcott examines neocolonial utopia in South Africa, in light of diverging visions for the rainbow nation. Further using Utopia to underpin their analysis, Agnes Tyley examines the rise of meat substitutes and envisages a more just and environmentally friendly food future. Also centering the relationship between humans and the earth, Luca Freeman makes the case for a political apology to the earth as a possible tool for achieving ecological justice. Max Huberty reframes our understanding of environmental, social and governance investment metrics as polycentric governance systems, not merely financial mechanisms.

Jiwon Hwang continues analysis of our relationship with the natural world, arguing that the digitisation of the agriculture industry produces a ‘Smart Farm Trap’. Continuing the theme of technological analysis, Theo Harding argues that traditional definitions of nationhood insufficiently prepare for climate statelessness, arguing instead for a definition which encompasses Tuvalu’s digitisation efforts. Ben Law tackles the structural inequalities and injustices embedded within artificial intelligence, urging us to understand the AI industry through a Marxist lens. The harmful side of technology is further highlighted by returning author Leo Rosenthal, who advocates for US anti-terrorism policy to shift to prioritise positive peace, ahead of the unreliable negative peace claimed to be achieved by drone warfare.

Next, we launch into a Leviathan tradition, of articles on the same subject taking vastly different perspectives, and we encourage you to read them in tandem, embracing the academic debate the authors have interceded in throughout the term. Nuclear policy is the focus for Ruby McIntee and Arabella Faroppa. While Ruby argues that the threat of Iran possessing nuclear weapons has been misestimated, with technical capabilities and expertise under-accounted for, Arabella argues that the prevailing global attitude of nuclear alarmism overstates the threat, stimulating a counter-productive shift from management to eradication. A second pair discuss the use of human rights as justificatory mechanisms in international interventions, with Maria Ribeiro arguing that humanitarian intervention is never a neutral endeavour, and has many hidden harms. Tessa Protopapa meanwhile focuses on state-intervention, arguing specifically that the Western intervention in Libya used the right to protect and a veil of human rights to launch a self-serving and damaging military operation.

Continuing in the stage of war, Amelia Powell argues that international humanitarian law insufficiently accounts for the needs of women, applying a formal equality framework where substantive equality would better achieve the aim of protection. Also considering international law, Alex Daniels argues that the territory of Somaliland should be recognised as a state, and a recognition system which prioritises declaratory recognition over constitutive is not fit for purpose. Lucy Cho furthers the discussion of statehood and independence, examining post-colonial nationalisms in Vietnam and Korea, to adeptly highlight the idiosyncratic manifestations of nationalism around the world. In this vein, Giulia Mazar Corcos argues that the over-application of postcolonial theory to orientalist photography has been to the detriment of Indigenous resistance against colonial, orientalist photographic methods.

Delving into how history shapes the present, Owen Longstreth analyses the role of collective memory and pre-existing civil society institutions in facilitating a return to totalitarianism in Eritrea and Turkmenistan. Mariela Brown analyses the positive impacts of grassroots religious movements in peace-building efforts following the Guatemalan Civil War. Kagan Efe Ozcetin goes against the grain of Eurocentric, linear theories of history, instead positing that Hikmet Kivilcimlı’s history thesis more accurately reflects historical trends. Last but certainly not least, Thea Matterson concludes this issue by arguing that memoirs—specifically those of two Egyptian feminists, Doria Shafik and Nawal El Saadawi—are forms of resistance against the state and state-driven narratives about women and feminism.

As this is my final issue with Leviathan after four years working on this publication, I owe an immense debt of gratitude to everyone who has contributed to this journal over the last four years and especially to Lucy Barrett who has been an indispensable partner-in-crime and an invaluable friend. In these four years, I have come to feel like Leviathan carries a certain type of magic. Together, we have built something incredible: a community of students who dedicate their free time to researching, writing, editing, and illustrating these articles and, first and foremost, to helping each other learn and grow. It truly feels like a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to have worked alongside such a smart, thoughtful team of students who approach every challenge with ingenuity and compassion and who teach me something new every day. Leviathan has undoubtedly been the highlight of my university experience, and I will forever remember all that I have learned as an editor, manager, and author with this journal. As my invaluable Deputy Editor-in-Chief, Lucy Barrett, always says: five brains put together are better than one; Leviathan would not be what it is today without every single person who has contributed to this journal.

I can’t wait to see what the next generation of leaders, editors, and authors create, and it has been a great privilege to see this journal come to life over the last four years. In particular, I would like to commend our incoming Editor-in-Chief, Macy Johns, for an impeccable tenure as Chief Copy Editor; I have no doubt Macy will be an excellent leader and steward of this community. I know future graduating Leviathan classes will, like us, move forward with warm memories and valued lessons from our time, and we encourage any students who have yet to participate in Leviathan to put themselves forward.

Sincerely,

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
Grace Hitchcock



DEPUTY EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
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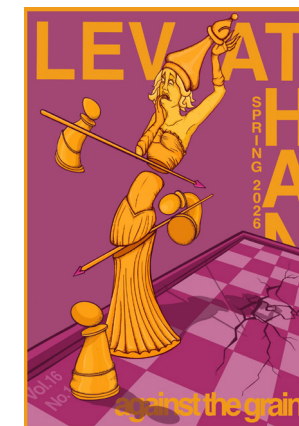
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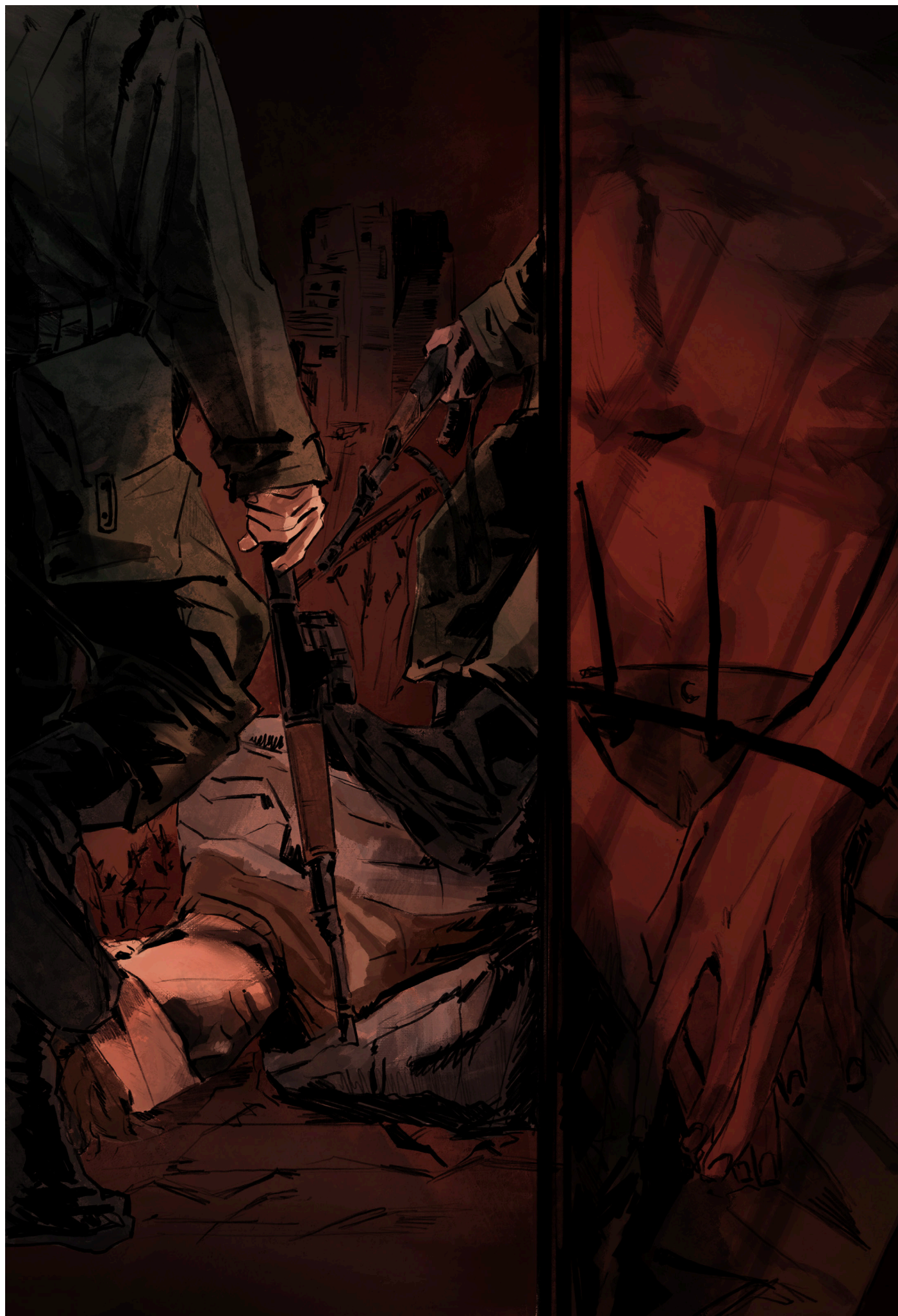
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ERASING THE MALE

Sexual Violence & Hegemonic
Masculinity in the Yugoslav Wars

by ornela beqa

illustration by robin lind-reme

**Please note that this article contains references to sexual violence, rape, and genital mutilation, which some readers may find distressing.*

During the Bosnian War (1992–1995) and the Kosovo War (1998–1999), following the dissolution of Yugoslavia, gender-related sexual violence gained significant attention from the international community. These conflicts each resulted in over 20,000 rape victims (Amnesty International, 2017a; Amnesty International, 2017b), demonstrating the large-scale and systematic nature of these crimes. Despite international intervention and post-war reconstruction efforts mediated by the United Nations and the European Union (Redwood, Morina, and Rexha, 2024, p.246), sexual violence has remained marginalised within international legal accountability and post-conflict political recognition. For many survivors, justice continues to be a long-term endeavour and is often limited by impunity, social stigma, and selective acknowledgement.

While the crimes in Bosnia and Herzegovina have been documented and integrated into international legal processes (Jarvis and Brammertz, 2016), the atrocities committed during the Kosovo conflict have received comparatively less attention in both academic and legal discourse. Male survivors, in particular, remain largely invisible, with their experiences often excluded from post-war narratives and recognition frameworks. Ultimately, this underrepresentation raises broader questions regarding the structural and cultural dynamics that shape wartime violence and post-war silencing. While the primary analysis of conflict related sexual violence (CRSV) during the Kosovo War, the cases of CRSV during the Bosnian War will also be examined as a comparative point of reference. Throughout the Yugoslav Wars, sexual violence against both women and men was shaped by the same patriarchal structures and norms of hegemonic masculinity, aimed at humiliating and dominating the enemy. Nonetheless, while the Bosnian case has been well documented and extensively explored by feminist

scholars such as Hansen (2000) and Snyder and colleagues (2006), sexual violence during the Kosovo War remains significantly underexplored in both academic literature and post-war narratives, particularly regarding the sexual violence directed at men. Building on the Bosnian precedent, examining the Kosovo case is critical to understanding how hegemonic masculinity structured wartime sexual violence and how this gendered logic continues to shape post-war silencing and selective recognition. Kosovo's position within debates on conflict-related sexual violence is particularly significant as it reveals the persistent failure to fully acknowledge survivors and, more specifically, the continued neglect of male victimhood.

Through an analysis of the wartime sexual violence during the Yugoslav Wars, this article argues that sexual violence was not a by-product of war but was used as a deliberate tool of warfare, structured through norms of hegemonic masculinity. This kind of violence was directed at both

women and men—humiliating women as bearers of national identity and emasculating men as a nation’s supposed protectors—as a means of dismantling the enemy’s collective identity and honour. Furthermore, through a post-war analytical lens, the article highlights how these gendered dynamics persist and continue to shape the selective recognition of survivors. Importantly, foregrounding men’s experiences alongside those of women, challenges the assumption that wartime sexual violence is exclusively experienced by women and offers a more comprehensive account of gendered violence in conflict.

SEXUAL VIOLENCE AS AN INSTRUMENT OF WARFARE

In situating the mass rapes and widespread sexual violence committed during the Yugoslav War, the Bosnian case provides empirical precedent demonstrating that sexual violence was systematically organised and deliberately deployed as a strategy of ethnic cleansing (United Nations Security Council, 1993). These practices reveal that Serb warfare was not merely driven by territorial or political objectives but was a calculated instrument of warfare produced by embedded gendered norms. The recognition of rape as a crime against humanity and as a tool of ethnic cleansing by the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) marked a significant legal and international acknowledgment (United Nations, 2008). By holding perpetrators accountable for rape as an instrument of warfare, the tribunal rejected the narrative that reduces sexual violence and rape to an unavoidable by-product of war. Importantly, this legal recognition also marked a turning point in how gender norms and practices came to be understood within conflict analysis and the power structures in which sexual violence occurs (Hansen, 2000, p.69).

It is precisely unequal gender dynamics that shape and normalise ideas of militarised masculinity and legitimise violence as a masculine expression of power (Henry, 2016, p.44). In the Balkans, particularly in Kosovo, patriarchal social structures have historically reinforced rigid gender roles such that ideals of masculinity and femininity remained deeply entrenched throughout the conflict (Munn, 2006, p.289). Importantly, feminist scholars such as Enloe and Cohn (2003, pp.1191, 1198) argue that patriarchal power systems actively construct the expectations of masculinity and femininity that become central to military practices. Within this framework, ‘militarised masculinity’, defined by Sjoberg (2015, p.445) as the association of dominance, violence, aggression, and war-making with masculine identity, operates as a legitimising force for violence. In the Yugoslav context, the Serb forces relied strongly on this logic through military propaganda’s operationalisation of gender, equating masculinity with ‘manliness, national honour and militarism’ (Bracewell, 2000, pp.578–579). Nationalist discourse celebrated soldiers as heroes

and the embodiment of national duty and patriotic masculinity, while simultaneously casting the enemy as weak and feminised (Bracewell, 2000, p.567).

This gendered logic positioned women as symbolic bearers of national identity and biological producers of an ethnic group (Alison, 2007, p.81). Therefore, violence against women—through rape, enforced impregnation, or killing—symbolised an attack on the Bosniak community as a whole (Bos, 2006, p.995). The use of sexual violence was thus deliberately aimed at ethnically cleansing a nation (Snyder et al., 2006, pp.189–190), transforming women’s bodies into sites of political contestation. Violence

”
Ultimately, the same gendered dynamics that enabled sexual violence during the conflict continue to persist in the post-conflict context, reinforcing male authority and the hierarchies that structure wartime violence in the first place.

against women simultaneously functioned to humiliate the male opponent, whose masculinity and pride were undermined by his perceived failure to protect the women of his community (Seifert, 1994, p.59). Nevertheless, the gendered norms that fuelled these practices extended beyond women. Bosniak men, too, were targets of sexual violence, revealing that rape served multiple strategic purposes (Stiglmayr, 1994). As Brownmiller (1975, p.17) argues, rape is therefore not only a crime against the female victim, but also a crime ‘against the male estate’, aimed at emasculating and degrading men.

Overall, these dynamics demonstrate that sexual violence during the Yugoslav wars can be understood as an instrument through which ethnic, gendered, and political hierarchies were simultaneously constructed and enforced. These practices illustrate how militarised masculinity operated as a core principle of organising violence, enabling Serb forces to assert a dominant, aggressive masculine identity over the Bosniak community, constructed as subordinated and emasculated. In doing so, sexual violence functioned not merely as a

tactic of intimidation but as a mechanism of social restructuring. Therefore, the violence was embedded within a broader ideological project that combined militarism, patriarchy, and ethnic nationalism. Within this framework, individual bodies became instruments through which collective domination was enacted. Militarised masculinity, in effect, structured the very logic of the violence.

MALE-TARGETED SEXUAL VIOLENCE

During the Kosovo War, men detained in prisons and detention centres such as Lipjan and Dubrave were subjected to rape, genital mutilation, and other forms of sexual violence, explicitly aimed at destabilising and destroying Kosovar Albanian masculine identity (Shala and Halili, 2022). In a patriarchal society where masculinity is closely associated with strength, dominance, and power, sexual violence against men carries a particular symbolic weight. Through the sexual violation of men, perpetrators sought to ‘feminise and homosexualise’ Kosovar Albanian men, positioning them as weak and emasculated (Zarkov, 2014, p.337). The motive behind these acts of sexual violence stemmed from the desire of Serb forces to assert a superior and hegemonic masculinity grounded in ideals of patriotism and male dominance (Alison, 2007, p.86). Importantly, this masculinity was exclusively a Serbian nationalist one. Serbian nationalist discourse had long feminised and subordinated Kosovar Albanian men as the inferior ‘Other’, against which Serbian masculine dominance was defined (Salecl, 1994, p.34). Krasniqi (2024) argues that an attack on a man through sexual violence signifies a victory for the perpetrator, as it demonstrates the power to assert his dominance over the victim by stripping him of his masculine and ethnic identity. In Kosovar Albanian society, men were constructed as the defenders of the nation’s collective honour. Therefore, their sexual violation, similarly to that of women, symbolically occurred as an attack on the community’s capacity for resistance (Luci, 2002, p.75). Ultimately, beyond physical harm, male rape during the Kosovo War functioned as a symbolic attack, in which Serb forces attempted to assert dominance over the collective identity of the Kosovar Albanian community.

SILENCING, STIGMA & HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY IN POST-WAR KOSOVO

Importantly, the gendered logic that drove sexual violence against men during the Kosovo War did not disappear with the end of the conflict. Twenty-seven years later, the same patriarchal norms shaped by ideas of militarised masculinities continue to shape post-war narratives through the systematic silencing of rape survivors. The patriarchal and traditional gender roles determine whose voices are acknowledged and whose remain silenced and excluded (Krasniqi, 2024). As Henry (2016, p.45) argues, rape survivors are burdened with ‘shame and

stigma’, dynamics that remain particularly entrenched in Kosovo and further constrain survivors’ ability to speak openly about their experiences. The consequences of this silencing are evident in the limited justice the survivors of conflict-related sexual violence have received. The Kosovo Rehabilitation Centre for Traumatized Victims (KRCT) has registered 1,300 cases of CRSV, yet only 4 percent of these cases have been presented to justice institutions (KRCT, 2025), with only one case resulting in the prosecution of the perpetrator (KRCT, 2024, p.14). These statistics highlight the limitations of the post-war justice mechanisms and demonstrate how gender norms impede survivors’ access recognition.

This post-war silencing is essentially rooted in the same gendered norms that structured wartime sexual violence. In both cases of male and female rape, sexual violence is framed as a failure of masculine protection (Olujic, 1998, p.39). Within Balkan societies, where sexual violence remains a deeply entrenched taboo, silence is often more honourable than acknowledging the ‘shame’ associated with rape (Jahjaga et al., 2019, p.180). For women, this shame is deeply rooted and produced through gender norms that frame sexual violation as a transgression against femininity and honour (Amnesty International, 2017b, p.46). The silencing operates as an extension of the wartime logic of hegemonic masculinities in which women’s experiences and voices are constrained. Ultimately, the same gendered dynamics that enabled sexual violence during the conflict continue to persist in the post-conflict context, reinforcing male authority and the hierarchies that structure wartime violence in the first place.

For men, however, acknowledging sexual violence directly challenges the dominant constructions of masculinity, which are rooted in strength, heterosexuality, and authority. As a result, resistance to recognising male victimhood becomes a defence of hegemonic identity itself. Munn (2006, p.299) further argues that such resistance reflects the protection of a specific gendered, sexualised conception of identity; namely, an Albanian, male, heterosexual ideal of masculinity laden with social rewards and symbolic power. Consequently, post-war silencing is not merely a social phenomenon, but a continuation of the wartime logic of hegemonic masculinity. The marginalisation of male survivors is thus a broader reflection of an ongoing struggle to preserve dominant constructions of masculinity, which are tied to nationalism, honour, and patriarchal authority. Taken together, the selective recognition of female survivors and the exclusion of male ones reveal that hegemonic masculinity continues to structure social and political recognition, demonstrating the enduring link between wartime strategy and post-war inequalities.

CONCLUSION

Analysing conflict-related sexual violence in Bosnia and the more understudied case of

Kosovo reveals that rape and sexual violence were used as a weapon of war in the Yugoslav Wars. Drawing on these two case studies, it is evident that sexual violence was systematically deployed by Serb forces to humiliate and emasculate the enemy’s collective identity and honour. Crucially, this violence was structured through patriarchal gender norms shaped by militarised masculinity and vulnerable femininity and was employed to humiliate both women and men. The systematic mass rape of Bosniak women and forced impregnation in different rape camps targeted them as symbolic bearers of national identity. Men were also victimised not only physically, but symbolically, as the violence was also aimed at destroying their pride, honour, and masculinity.

Although conflict-related sexual violence in the Balkans is widely discussed in academia, the cases of sexual violence – in particular male cases – in Kosovo remain underexplored and marginalised in legal accountability and post-war narratives. This phenomenon further demonstrates how the gendered norms that shaped sexual violence in the first place continue to persist almost three decades after the war. The marginalisation of male survivors is a product of the hegemonic militarised masculinity norms and further reflects males’ continuous struggle to preserve their dominant masculine identity.

Ultimately, the inclusion of both women’s and men’s experiences challenges the common assumption that conflict-related sexual violence solely affects women and opens the path towards more inclusive post-war reconstruction and legal frameworks. Initiatives should expand the legal recognition around conflict-related sexual violence and extend justice to male survivors, ensuring that no experiences are excluded or silenced. Acknowledging the experiences of both genders is essential to disrupt the conventional gendered patriarchal norms that facilitate such violence in the first place.

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Gender, Authoritarianism & the Cult of Personality

illustration by freia nilsson

discourse analysis on President of the Russian Federation, Vladimir Putin, and President of Türkiye, Recep Erdoğan, and their conclusion that performances of masculinity afford male leaders a malleable and preeminent legitimization technique. In applying Elski and Wood's relationship between masculinity and the consolidation of power to three female despots—two who gained power, in part, by association with their fathers' political legacies, and one who rose to power in the wake of her husband—this article argues that female leaders must inherit, rely on, and maintain a masculine cult of personality to sustain authoritarian forms of leadership. Beyond contributing to academic debates on the role of gender in authoritarianism, the phenomenon at the heart of this article—the relative absence of female dictators independent of male power—deepens our understanding of the structural barriers to female political power.

Although comparatively minimal literature addresses the question of female dictators directly (Montecinos, 2017, p.1), a subset of political psychology and sociology analyses

what factors lead individuals to be complicit and/or complacent with authoritarian political leaders. Adorno's *The Authoritarian Personality* (1950)—the seminal work in this field—aimed to understand the cultivation of fascism in the Holocaust and World War II; more recent works, notably Peterson and Zurbriggen's (2010) study, have focused attention specifically on the relationship between gender structures and 'the authoritarian personality'. Though not directly answering the question of why there is a relative absence of female authoritarian leaders, Peterson and Zurbriggen (2010, p.1804) find that authoritarian political environments reinforce misogynistic attitudes towards women. Such a finding suggests that the electorate or general population reinforces the nexus between sexism, or systemic advantages for men at the expense of women (Lovisky, et al., 2025, pp.205–206), and authoritarianism, legitimising masculine performances of authoritarianism.

This mutually-reinforcing relationship between patriarchy—broadly defined as 'the dominance of perceived masculinity over femininity and the relative empowerment of men versus women' (Sperling, 2014, p.7)—and authoritarianism at the individual level is further developed by the concept of 'militarised masculinity' (Tapscott, 2020). Tapscott defines militarised masculinity as the processes of socialisation which facilitate and encourage masculinities based on the traits of 'dominance, assertiveness, aggressiveness, independence, self-sufficiency, and willingness to take risks' (Morris, 1996, p.701, quoted in Tapscott, 2020, p.1569), as well as 'sacrifice, compassion and cooperation' (Tapscott, 2020, p.1569), echoing the exceptional qualities of the 'strongman' leader (Ruud, 2023). Tapscott (2020, pp.1565–1566) argues that this particular incarnation of masculinity enables authoritarian leaders to diffuse the power and control necessary for regime durability on the local level by exploiting gender dynamics, tensions, and ambiguities. Such gendered links and processes suggest that masculinity works in tandem with authoritarianism, and, as Elski and Wood (2019, p.733) argue, these links allow male autocrats to create political personas that simultaneously breach and maintain gender norms.

Elski and Wood (2019, p.733) find that performances of masculinity by authoritarian populists, namely Putin and Erdoğan, offer these leaders a degree of malleability in image and power, using different forms of masculinity to consolidate power at opportune moments. Specifically, Elski and Wood (2019, p.733) highlight how this relationship between masculinity and right-wing populism, trending towards authoritarianism, produces a paradoxical 'Janus-faced masculinity of outsiders-yet-insiders, bad-boys-yet-good-fathers'. This

ability of male authoritarians to shape and mould their performances of masculinity to suit their specific governing needs starkly contrasts the narrow, often highly scrutinised parameters of female political leadership where double-standards can be lethal to one's authority (Montecinos, 2017, p.14).

In contrast to the finding that masculinity reinforces authoritarianism, Barton and Huebner (2022, pp.23–24) reflect on how patriarchal societies reinforce the message that femininity is 'weak, passive, deceitful, and manipulative', echoed in Hoskin's (2019, p.687) concept of 'femmephobia', or 'the systematic devaluation of femininity as well as the regulation of patriarchal femininity'. Though Barton and Huebner argue that expressions of femininity should be reconceptualised as powerful (2022, p.31), the dominant dichotomy of masculinity as powerful and hegemonic in contrast to weak femininity forms a prevalent undertone of political competition in democracies and dictatorships alike (Sperling, 2014, pp.12–14). Indeed, as Sperling (2014, pp.13–14) argues, in the context of patriarchy, gender provides a useful 'authority-building strategy', in which performances of masculinity serve as dog-whistles for gaining legitimacy amongst the populace and, on the flip side, characterisations of leaders as feminine can be used by opponents to undermine one's power.

Ultimately, the literature on the relationship between masculinity and authoritarianism proves insightful but disproportionate focus is given to strong-men leaders like Putin and Erdoğan in contrast to women breaking these barriers.

A NOTE ON 'METHODOLOGY'

The case studies of Indira Gandhi and Sheikh Hasina—whose fathers led India's and Bangladesh's independence movements—and Isabel Perón—who married into Juan Perón's regime in Argentina—serve as exceptions to the traditional idea that authoritarianism is a man's game, and therefore illustrate the fragility of female leader's consolidation and maintenance of power. These three women were selected for analysis as illustrative examples of the relationship between gender, authoritarianism, and regime durability, and the long reigns of Gandhi and Hasina contrasted with Perón's brief eighteen months in power offer critical insights into the distinct legitimisation offered by patrilineal inherited power versus a matrimonial relationship to established power. The two case studies of Gandhi and Hasina further point to an interesting relationship between anti-colonial independence movements and cults of personality, suggesting that their fathers' significant roles in national memory deepens their respective reservoirs of political capital.

These case studies, and this article as a whole, brings a new layer of critical analysis to the academic literature on authoritarianism and gender. To do so, the forthcoming case studies draw on a combination of primary evidence and secondary literature to not simply assert that Gandhi, Hasina and Perón were authoritarian rulers, but to critically assess how gender impacted their respective reigns. Curiously, where Elski and Wood (2019) look exclusively to primary speech acts of Putin and Erdoğan to assess the role of gender in their cults of personality, much of the academic literature on Gandhi and Hasina, in particular, focuses on their personality, disposition and 'psychological makeup' (Puri, 1985, p.148). In response to this apparent tendency within the academic literature to analyse female authoritarian leadership through personalistic, politico-psychological terms, this article seeks to add a gendered dimension to such characterisations. Therefore, methodologically, this article takes as its starting point that Gandhi, Hasina and Perón exhibited authoritarian styles of leadership—going beyond this fact to ask how gender and their male counterparts influenced their regime's durability.

PATRILINEAL POWER: THE ENDURING REIGNS OF GANDHI & HASINA

Indira Gandhi

India's first and only female Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi led the state from 1966 to 1977 and again from 1980 to 1984 (EBSCO, 2019). Reflecting Gandhi's upbringing as the daughter of one of the Indian independence movement's leading figures, Jawaharlal Nehru, and her significant role in Indian history, Puri (1985, p.148) notes that '[s] he was its product, as well as its architect'. Among the accounts of her upbringing, many focus on the 'long stretches of abandonment' she experienced as a child, due in part to her father's participation in nationalist movements, making her a 'withdrawn, lonely and reticent but self-reliant person' (Nayar, 1977, pp.325–326). As a young adult, Gandhi shadowed her father and rose through the ranks of the Congress Working Committee, the executive committee of the Congress Party (Nayar, 1977, p.326), though notably her father never named her as his successor (Everett, 2013, p.152). For Morris-Jones (1975, p.458), this upbringing gave Gandhi 'more political experience as a single operator than as a member of a team'. Interestingly, Gandhi's unique familial legacy appears to have endowed her with both preeminent political credibility and a preference for more unitary styles of leadership, building a link between the influence of familial legacy and women's ability to cultivate and maintain authoritarian ruling styles.

In her first years in power, Gandhi was seen as uncertain and insecure, thrust into the political spotlight on the back of her father's legacy, with some characterising her initial cabinet position as merely an attempt at stability and honouring her father's memory after his stroke in 1964, rather than a role of substance (Everett, 2013, pp.173–174). Eventually, her ambitious and dominant political leadership stemmed from the realisation that she enjoyed broad popularity amongst the electorate, later reinforcing her populist centralisation of power (Steinberg, 2005, p.769; Everett, 2013, p.154).

Gandhi, herself seems to have understood the significance of her upbringing on her later political success: defending her controversial declaration of a state of emergency in 1975, Gandhi noted that 'The Indian people have known me from my childhood. All my life has been in the service of our people' (Morris-Jones, 1975, p.453). Declared by the President of India on 26 June 1975 at the request of then-Prime Minister Gandhi, the Emergency was catalysed primarily by popular unrest in response to the Allahabad High Court's finding that Gandhi was guilty of election fraud and Gandhi's decision to remain Prime Minister (Jaffrelot and Anil, 2021, pp.6, 11, 14). The state of emergency enabled Gandhi to rule by decree to subvert constitutional checks and balances to silence opposition to her authority (Klieman, 1981, p.244), culminating in the detention of an estimated 6,229 political opponents and censorship of leading newspapers in regions dominated by the opposition party (Morris-Jones, 1975, pp.451–452). Morris-Jones (1975, p.458) interestingly draws a link between the Emergency and Gandhi's 'disposition', calling her actions in the Emergency and in earlier decisive political moments 'ruthless'. Such sentiments echo her early decisiveness in her first cabinet post, in which she was described as 'the only man in a Cabinet of old women' (Masani, 1975, p.136). Jaffrelot and Anil note that 'the Emergency was first and foremost a *personal* response to a set of challenges to Mrs. Gandhi's authority' (2012, p.312), placing Gandhi's cult of personality at the heart of her authoritarian actions.

The relationship between Gandhi's 'personality' and 'disposition' and her exploitation of a state of emergency to consolidate power thus confirm that masculine performances of cults of personality can often provide the pretext and political capital for authoritarianism, propelling political leaders to a position of immense power in which ruling above the law is possible. Significantly, the combination of authoritarian, masculine leadership style and patrilineal legacy provided Gandhi with latitude and flexibility in her grip on power, as her legitimacy shifted from landslide electoral victories to consolidating power and returning once again to electoral success. Though Genovese

and Steckerider (2013, pp.167–168) argue that '[g]ender mattered for Indira Gandhi in complex and contradictory ways', it was precisely the combination of familial legacy and authoritarianism that allowed Gandhi to supersede the social challenges posed by her sex. It seems that with a strong cult of personality, rooted in anti-colonial history and revered masculine rule, a turn towards authoritarianism was not fatal for a woman's political legitimacy. This finding is reinforced by Gandhi's return to power in 1980, after losing the 1977 elections in retribution for her anti-democratic rule during the Emergency (Klieman, 1981, pp.242–243).

Sheikh Hasina

Like Indira Gandhi, Bangladesh's longest serving Prime Minister, now sentenced to death for crimes against humanity, Sheikh Hasina is the daughter of Bangladesh's

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The case studies... serve as exceptions to the rule that authoritarianism is a man's game; however, these leaders perpetuate the mutually-reinforcing relationship between masculinity and authoritarian regime durability.

independence leader, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, affectionately known by the electorate as *Bangabandhu* or 'friend of Bangladesh' (Khondker, 2017, p.221; Hasina, 2021, p.2). Khondker (2017, p.226) argues that the rise of female leadership in this context can be attributed to 'transferred or derivative charisma', noting that 'Sheikh Hasina was heir to [her father's] charisma'. Importantly, Khondker (2017, p.226) defines charisma as a force which can legitimise 'extraordinary' leadership—one which, in the right circumstances, could certainly legitimise the consolidation of power. Khondker's argument of Hasina's transferred charisma is supported by Hasina's utilisation of her father's image and memory throughout her campaigns and time in office, including the placement of large portraits of her father throughout government buildings

(Khondker, 2017, p.227). Moreover, due to the tragic circumstances of her family's deaths—assassinated by 'disgruntled soldiers'—Hasina 'viewed her main task as completing the mission of her father' (Khondker, 2017, p.228), demonstrating the central role of her father's legacy and charisma in propelling the momentum of her own political successes (Hasina, 2021). Confirming the significance of her father's legacy to her own political image, Hasina (2021) has even published an article titled 'Striving to Realize the Ideals of my Father'.

Chowdhury (2008, p.8) echoes Khondker's concept of 'transferred charisma', arguing that Hasina and her long-time political rival, Khaleda Zia, 'owed their ascent to men'. Chowdhury (2008, p.8) further develops the argument that Hasina and Zia, once in power, 'found it expedient to acquiesce to and accept male hegemony'. Hasina, interestingly, insisted on being called 'sir', not 'madam' (Khondker, 2017, p.231), contributing to the characterisation of her leadership style as masculinised. Ruud (2021) goes so far as to analyse Hasina's regime through the conceptual lens of the 'strongman'. As Ruud (2021, p.414) argues, authoritarian strongman regimes are the result of the 'active building of a regime'. In the case of Hasina, her four terms as prime minister witnessed constitutional changes to coalesce power around her party, the Awami League, effectively transforming Bangladesh into a single-party government during her rule, in addition to the mobilisation of law enforcement to violently target and kill political opponents (Ruud, 2021, pp.414–415, 429). Though Ruud's (2021, p.414) definition of 'strongman leaders' is devoid of any gendered dimensions—perhaps to the detriment of the depth of analysis therein—it is significant that Ruud applies such a lens to Hasina, further reinforcing Elski and Wood's link between gendered traits, a bending of convention, and the consolidation of power.

Though this dynamic is typically used to analyse hyper-masculine leaders, like Putin and Erdoğan, these women prove that the dynamic can be co-opted to legitimise and make possible the reign of female authoritarians. That Hasina ruled for twenty years in total demonstrates the durability of charisma and power consolidated around male nationalist leaders. Fascinatingly, the case studies of Hasina and Gandhi demonstrate that there are two key ingredients to the success and regime durability of female authoritarians: first, their initial political legitimacy and momentum stemming from their fathers' political limelight, and second, performances of masculinity, often militarised or mimicking that of strongmen leadership styles, to reinforce their authority.

Further comparative research is needed to fully understand this specific finding, but this phenomenon suggests that the

relationship between authoritarianism and masculinity can indeed be exploited by women with the right political capital. As a result, female leaders like Gandhi, may use their fathers’ or male counterparts’ political capital and accompanying militarised masculine traits to either complement or obscure their femininity. Such a finding runs counter to the conventional understanding of double standards for women in power, in which women are often viewed as either not feminine enough or too feminine (Montecinos, 2017, p.14).

Moreover, the cases of Gandhi and Hasina are situated in wider academic debates about the prominent role of female leaders in anti-colonial movements and post-colonial democratisation in South Asia (Thompson, 2015). Interestingly, as Khondker (2017, p.224) notes, many South Asian states ‘preceded the Third Wave democratisation with a legacy of female leadership that owed in part to aristocratic politics and in part to a more inclusive anti-colonial struggle’. This mixing of aristocratic and anti-colonial forces that elevated many women, including Gandhi and Hasina, to the highest positions of power reflects the ability of inherited power to sustain female cults of personality and consolidation of power. Both leaders, having risen to power through ‘transferred charisma’ (Khondker, 2017), have mixed track records, suggesting that, like Elski and Wood’s ‘Janus-faced’ performances, inherited power and cults of personality can legitimise the consolidation of power. However, Gandhi’s assassination in 1984 and Hasina’s conviction for crimes against humanity and subsequent escape from the country (Vock and Ethirajan, 2024) raise questions about the limits of female authoritarian power, even when popularity and political capital are inherited from esteemed independence leaders.

MATRIMONIAL MIGHT: PERÓN’S STRUGGLE FOR LEGITIMACY

In contrast to the theory of inherited, patrilineal ‘transferred charisma’ for Indira Gandhi and Sheikh Hasina, how do women who marry into political regimes cultivate and maintain power? Isabel Perón, the third wife of Argentinian dictator, Juan Perón, exhibited greater fragility in her political legitimacy, unable to draw on well-entrenched legacies and decades in the political spotlight. Isabel became the first female president of Argentina in 1974 after her husband, the long-time populist authoritarian leader, Juan Perón, fell ill and required 24-hour medical care (BBC, 1974). Isabel remained in power for a brief eighteen months which many characterise as ‘an unmitigated disaster’ (Weir, 2013, p.256). In the context of ‘political, economic, and military instability—much of which was inherited from Juan Perón’s third administration’ (Weir, 2013, pp.262–263), Isabel’s comparative lack of charisma,

either inherited or cultivated herself, proved fatal to her regime. As Borelli (2015, p.75) notes, the Argentinian press during Isabel’s reign was distinctly critical and antagonistic, ‘highlighting the inability of the president to dominate the political situation’. Significantly, Isabel never carried the charisma that both Juan and his second wife, Evita, enjoyed that was so crucial to the maintenance of Perónism without Perón, although Evita never occupied the highest position of power herself (Weir, 2013).

In contrast to Gandhi and Hasina, Isabel Perón’s first experiences in politics were through her relationship to her husband, and, to complicate matters further for her legitimacy and public image, Perón’s second wife, Evita, was still revered by the public even after Isabel came into the picture (Weir, 2013, p.258). Although Isabel attempted to mimic the style and language of Evita, it appears that ‘transferred charisma’ does not work in such a fashion, reinforcing the necessity of female authoritarians to gain legitimacy from male counterparts (Weir, 2013, p.258). Isabel was frequently Perón’s ‘stand-in’ in the years preceding her own presidency and was even his vice presidential nominee in the 1973 elections (Weir, 2013, p.260). When Perón inherited the presidency from her late husband, the economic climate that had previously legitimised Juán Perón’s personalistic rule had vanished, causing deep divisions amongst Perón’s supporters and requiring Isabel to govern through both economic and political turmoil (Weir, 2012, pp.261–262). Despite her proximity and involvement in Perón’s regime during their marriage, after Perón’s death, the media noted that Isabel lacked adequate qualifications to inherit the presidency, naming her ‘Perón’s delicate heiress’ and decrying her ability to govern the nation through interregnum and instability (Gott, 1974). Where Gandhi and Hasina inherited legitimacy, Perón simply inherited instability from her late husband. The limited availability of English-language sources on Isabel’s brief rule hinders a full understanding of precisely why her reign was characterised as incompetent. However, the instability of her eighteen months in power reinforces the significance of inherited legitimacy for women in power: the problems that defined Isabel’s presidency were inherited from Juán Perón’s third presidency (Weir, 2013, p.262). As such, whether through matrimony or by blood, these authoritarian women have risen to power in the shadow of their male counterparts. Thus, it is perhaps the crumbling of Juan Perón’s regime combined with Isabel’s feminisation in the media that made her brief rule so fragile. The two forces simultaneously working against Perón reflect the greater difficulty for wives to capitalise on transferred charisma, militarised masculinity, and the political capital of their husbands. Therefore, Isabel’s lack of a cult of personality and lack of ‘transferred charisma’ severely hindered

her ability to maintain and consolidate power, demonstrating the significance of not just any form of inherited power but positive paternal legacies, more specifically, as a key ingredient of success for female authoritarians.

CONCLUSION

The case studies of Indira Gandhi, Sheikh Hasina, and, contrastingly, Isabel Perón serve as exceptions to the rule that authoritarianism is a man’s game; however, these leaders perpetuate the mutually-reinforcing relationship between masculinity and authoritarian regime durability. The legitimacy of these women relied on their relationship to their male predecessors, whether that be a father or husband. Interestingly, Gandhi and Hasina’s comparatively long time in power suggests that being the daughter of a well-respected male political figure—in particular, a successful anti-colonial independence leader—offers deeper reservoirs of trust and legitimacy than marrying into political power, where long-lasting acquiescence to the regime is both harder to come by and significantly more fragile. Although we have generally witnessed a rise in women in power over the last several decades and women’s civil and political rights have advanced (Stotsky, et al., 2016, p.4), recent trends of democratic backsliding and the rise of competitive authoritarianism (Levitsky and Way, 2012) remind us that what has been won in women’s rights and power may not be permanent. In this teetering moment, it is important to recognise how deeply entangled masculinity and political power are and how such a phenomenon maintains the fragility of female political power.

Such a conclusion raises several further questions of introspection and exploration that this article hopes may be researched and unpacked further. First and foremost, would the existence of a female dictator, independent of any inherited legitimacy from a male counterpart, be a feminist phenomenon? Where Gandhi and Hasina still had to work their way into positions of power, in North Korea, Kim Ju Ae’s directly inherited power presents a future avenue for analysing how gender manifests itself in inherited legitimacy and power. Drawing on Cynthia Enloe’s *Twelve Feminist Lessons of War*, the solution to the absence of a dictatress is not to advocate for a rise in autocratic regimes led by women, but rather to recentre our understanding of authoritarianism and political power, more broadly, through a more intricately gendered lens. Where authoritarianism simultaneously feeds off of masculinity and reinforces sexism (Eksi and Wood, 2019; Peterson and Zurbriggen, 2010), women’s public and private rights and authority remain inherently vulnerable.

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FOR THE BETTERMENT OF INCARCERATED WOMEN?

Abortions, Pro-Woman Framing & Benevolent Sexism

by milly mason holt

illustration by holly spragg



In the last forty years, scholars have observed a significant transformation in rhetoric used by the pro-life movement in the United States. Unlike the dominant discourse that prioritised fetal rights and demonised women as murderers for having abortions, a new rhetoric has emerged arguing that women, as well as their fetuses, are victims, not perpetrators, of abortions (Trumpy, 2014, p.165; Cannold, 2002, pp.171–172). Supporters of this ‘pro-woman’ ideology, which gained popularity in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Rose, 2011, p.2), assume the role of protecting and saving women from the harms of abortion (Dyer et al., 2023, p.528). Though they have made it their goal to ‘save’ as many women as possible from the procedure, incarcerated women in America are seemingly rarely addressed by these organisations. This article aims to explore and explain the neglected relationship between pro-woman anti-abortionists and incarcerated women in America.

Quality of healthcare in the American prison system is inconsistent and oftentimes grossly insufficient, which is particularly apparent in the reproductive care provided to incarcerated women (Rajagopal et al., 2022, p.76). Even before the landmark ruling in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health* (2022), which stripped the federal protection of the right to an abortion, incarcerated women's abortion access was already obstructed. Their experiences ranged from completely prohibited access to having to pay for the often unaffordable procedure and transportation costs (Hayes et al., 2020, p.S23). After *Dobbs*, it became virtually impossible for incarcerated women to seek abortion care in states where it was newly criminalised, as they cannot travel out of state to receive one unlike their non-incarcerated counterparts (Rajagopal et al., 2022, p.77). Moreover, incarcerated women suffer disproportionate levels of trauma and stress in pregnancy and childbirth: they may be shackled during labor, forcefully sterilised, separated from their babies

within twenty-four hours of giving birth, and experience higher rates of birthing complications (Rajagopal et al., 2022, p.77; Hayes et al., 2020, p.S23).

Though there are non-incarcerated women in the US who have faced similar experiences, this systematic mistreatment in reproductive care and the distinct position of these women's loss of rights while in the incarceration system warrants research. Scholars have made considerable headway in this area (Sufrin et al., 2015; Cavanagh et al., 2022; Furio, 2025; Bradley et al., 2025), notably Hayes and colleagues' (2020) piece on reproductive injustice in prisons. The treatment of incarcerated women by anti-abortion groups, however, is noticeably lacking from the literature. This article addresses this gap by asking how we can categorise and understand the attitudes of anti-abortion groups, particularly pro-woman groups, toward incarcerated women. Implementing a frame analysis, this article analyses the few times the

selected pro-life organisations interacted with incarcerated women. Further, this article argues they give the impression of working towards the betterment of the circumstances of incarcerated women with pro-woman framing and overlap with feminist organisation agendas, but their promotion of traditional gender roles renders this ‘benevolent sexism’ (Glick and Fiske, 2009, p.109). In doing so, they rob women’s agency in decision-making and convince incarcerated women to keep pregnancies, subjecting them to higher rates of physical harm during childbirth and increased trauma in postpartum care (Rajagopal et al., 2022, p.77 and 78).

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Pro-Woman Framing

Framing, as defined by Entman (1993, p.52), is the manipulation of an understanding of a concept ‘to promote a particular problem definition’ in order to influence an audience’s opinion. This strategy is widely implemented in the pro-life movement with a variety of frames (Ferree et al., 2002). This article specifically focuses on the pro-woman frame, as it has become one of the most popular in abortion discourse (Rose, 2011, p.2) and is thus extremely pertinent to today’s political climate.

The pro-woman frame defines abortion as a problem that endangers women as well as their fetuses (Roberti, 2021, p.208). Unlike the dominant fetal frame that has heavy religious undertones and associations, this frame distances itself from this image so as to attract women that may have felt ostracised from its demonisation of them (Cannold, 2002, p.176). The pro-woman frame is steeped in traditional gender roles as its core concept is that ‘abortion must harm women because women are by nature mothers’ (Siegel, 2008, p.1687). This renders any woman that seeks abortion as ‘confused, misled, or coerced into the decision’, and ultimately positions abortion restrictions as ‘freeing’ for women (Siegel, 2008, p.1687).

This paper employs Roberti’s (2021) typology on pro-woman framing to navigate its analysis as it is most consistent with classifications used in relevant literature. According to Roberti (2021, p.212), the manifestations of the pro-woman frame can be categorised into two subsets: protection and education. The protection subset centres on the notion that abortions are physically and mentally dangerous to women and therefore should be regulated or banned (Roberti, 2021, p.212). Though these ideas have been disproven by medical professionals and scientists, this subset argues that abortion can have harmful effects on women, such as an increased risk of breast cancer, and what pro-woman anti-abortionists have termed ‘Post-Abortion Syndrome’, a condition they argue is similar

to that of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (Von Hagel and Mansbach, 2016, p.103; Roberti, 2021, p.208). This framing not only scares women away from abortions but portrays abortion providers as ‘negligent, harmful, or greedy’ (Roberti, 2021, p.212) and pro-woman anti-abortionists as protectors of women.

The education subset, on the other hand, centres on the idea of deterring women from abortions by giving them more information on the procedure and other alternatives, in hopes of making them second-guess their choices. This frame usually manifests as support of counseling that encourages other options and mandatory ultrasound imaging to ‘enlighten’ women on the gravity of their decision and to convince them to keep their pregnancies, while positioning abortion providers as withholding information (Roberti, 2021, pp.213, 215). This frame utilises what Roberti refers to as ‘rights language’ whereby women are supposedly empowered to make an informed decision by giving them more information (Roberti, 2021, p.212). As illustrated by Cannold (2002), this has a deliberate overlap with feminist rhetoric by arguing that they are providing women with ‘informed consent’ (Roberti, 2021, p.216) and preventing them from making ‘coerc[ed]’ decisions that ‘lack autonomy’ and ‘real choice’, that positions anti-abortionists as progressive and protectors of women (Cannold, 2002, p.173).

Benevolent Sexism

Claims that pro-woman anti-abortionists are the ‘true’ supporters of women have been problematised by scholars who reinterpret their actions as benevolent sexism. Benevolent sexism, as originally defined by Glick and Fiske (2009, p.109), is ‘a subjectively favorable chivalrous ideology that offers protection and affection to women who embrace conventional roles’. This covert form of subordination, masked in positivity through praise and protection, awards traditionally ‘moral and pure’ women that fulfil ‘nurturing, caring, [and] maternal’ roles (Bueno et al., 2025, p.60; Winter, 2023, p.429). Therefore, women fulfilling their role as mothers is a crucial pillar to both the traditional ideals of benevolent sexism and, as scholars have shown (Dyer et al., 2023), the pro-woman frame.

Assessing adherence to traditional motherhood norms is how the ‘saints and the sinners’, the ‘Madonnas and the whores’, and the ‘good women and the bad women’ are decided in benevolent sexism (Huang et al., 2016, p.971; Winter, 2023, pp.429–430). In this ideology, pregnancy allows women to fulfill the traditional gender role as a mother while abortion stops pregnancy and thus violates this role. Dyer and colleagues (2023) have since found that pro-woman framing constitutes benevolent sexism as its

positive and protectionist language towards women masks its support of traditional gender roles through advocating against abortions. This article will expand upon Dyer and colleagues’ findings and offer that pro-woman anti-abortion organisations give the appearance of working towards the betterment of incarcerated women through pro-woman framing and overlap with feminist organisation agendas. However, it is only in hopes of enforcing traditional gender roles, making their interactions benevolent sexism. To maintain consistency, this article will use the term ‘women’ instead of ‘pregnant people’, as this is the terminology used by the pro-life organisations analysed.

METHODOLOGY

To properly understand how pro-woman anti-abortion groups interact with incarcerated women, how they define the problem of abortion in the context of incarcerated women must be examined. Analysing such ‘problem definitions’ requires a frame analysis, which this article employs on the websites of two prominent pro-woman anti-abortion organisations. The qualitative nature of this analysis not only allows identification of pro-woman frames, but also investigation of underlying benevolent sexism and its implications. The criterion for choosing anti-abortion organisations was as follows: i) they had to have considerable size and popularity in the US and ii) display prevalent use of the pro-woman rhetoric on their websites. This resulted in the organisations Feminists for Life (FFL) and Americans United for Life (AUL). I chose to analyse the websites of the organisations, rather than their social media, because they are a more accessible platform.

Data Collection

To retrieve the data, I data-scraped each group’s websites, meaning that I recovered textual data from each individual web page, and uploaded the data to qualitative data analysis software NVIVO. The data used are from the period when each website began to February 23, 2026, when I completed the research phase. My codebook, which can be found in Appendix I, was developed from secondary literature (Rajagopal et al., 2022, p.75) as a means to identify when incarcerated women were referenced. The codebook and its stemmed words were applied to search for relevant documents. After analysing a total of 1,198 pages for FFL, 235 pages included these codewords. After analysing each document and sorting for relevance, I found only four had any specific mention to incarcerated women and their reproductive health, though two of these documents were discarded for repetition. For AUL, I analysed a total of 2,032 pages for AUL, of which 534 included these codewords. After reading each document and sorting for relevance,

only five documents made any specific mention of incarcerated women and their reproductive health, though one document was discarded for repetition. The data will be referred to in Appendix II.

FINDINGS

After conducting my analysis, the first major finding was how little incarcerated women were addressed by FFL and AUL. Only four out of 1,198 pages for FFL and five out of 2,032 pages for AUL made specific mention to incarcerated women. This is surprising as one would expect that the gross reproductive mistreatment that incarcerated women experience would be a more frequently discussed issue as it threatens pregnancy and their ability to become mothers. Nevertheless, this is a testament to how ignored and neglected incarcerated women are, even by organisations that proclaim to care for vulnerable women (Cannold, 2002, p.172). Future quantitative research could illuminate the frequency that pro-woman anti-abortion organisations interact with incarcerated women across a wider range of groups and explore the possible reasons why. The second major finding is that when the anti-abortion organisations did interact with incarcerated women, they gave the illusion of working towards their betterment through overlap with feminist organisation agendas and pro-woman framing. However, their enforcement of traditional gender roles through supporting protections of pregnancy and restrictions on abortions shows that this is in fact benevolent sexism. This article first analyses each group independently, identifying pro-woman framing and benevolent sexism, and then assesses their shared patterns and possible implications.

Feminists for Life

In an organisation newsletter (Text A), FFL states their support for the Pregnant Women in Custody Act (2018), which would ‘ban the use of restraints and restrictive housing on female inmates during pregnancy, during labor, and postpartum’ (Text A, FFL, 2019). Interestingly, there is an overlap here with what many prominent feminist pro-choice organisations, like the Center for Reproductive Rights (CRR) (2009) and the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) (2019) support. Thus, when read in isolation, this gives the illusion that FFL is working towards feminist goals and the betterment of women. However, when analysed alongside Text B, it becomes something much different.

Text B celebrates the pro-life amendments that were preserved in the COVID-19 Stimulus Bill under the CARES Act (2020). One being a ‘ban on abortion funding for federal prisoners – and conscience protection for prison employees’ (Text B, FFL, 2021). Notably, FFL writes that

‘advocates for women and children can be encouraged that this bill does not expand support for abortion...’ (Text B, FFL, 2021. Labelling themselves ‘advocates for women’ for supporting this ban is clear usage of the pro-woman frame and, like Text A, gives the illusion that they are working towards the betterment of women. While the goals fought for in Text A are undoubtedly in line with feminist values, when understood with Text B, one can see that they are both instances of benevolent sexism.

Text A seemingly showcases a progressive stance on reproductive healthcare that aims to protect and support women; however, Text B’s denial of abortion rights contradicts this. Though atrocities such as being shackled during childbirth are important issues to address, the restrictions on women’s bodies championed in Text B elucidate

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Pro-woman language and its illusion of care for women may deceive some into believing that these supposed intentions are true.

that FFL is only offering this support in Text A because it protects pregnancy, and therefore traditional ideals of womanhood. Because any woman in question in Text A is seeking pregnancy, and therefore fulfilling benevolent sexism’s traditional ideals of womanhood, they are awarded protection through advocacy of the Pregnant Women in Custody Act (2018). However, any woman in question in Text B is hypothetically seeking an abortion, potentially violating the traditional ideal of motherhood and is thus met with restrictions—though it is disguised as being in their favor through pro-woman framing. Thus, Text A cannot be seen as supporting and enfranchising women, but supporting and protecting *pregnancy*. When considered together, each text inadvertently and directly contributes to the subordination of women, however they are both disguised as being in the best interests of women and for their protection, which is definitionally benevolent sexism.

Americans United for Life

Similar findings arose in the analysis of AUL, particularly with Texts C and D. Text D is AUL’s response to reports of forced sterilisation at an immigration facility in Georgia, calling for a ‘thorough investigation... justice for any victims, and for the full consequences of the law...’ (Text D, AUL, 2020). Advocating against forced sterilisation of women is another issue that pro-woman anti-abortion organisations share with pro-choice organisations, like ACLU (Manian, 2020). So, like in Text A for FFL, AUL seemingly shares and supports goals of feminist agendas; however, Text C sheds light on its true intentions.

Text C is an article about Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh’s dissent in the *Garza v. Hargan* case, and why AUL supports his decision. In this case, a seventeen-year-old undocumented immigrant who was held in federal custody was suing for abortion care and eventually won. Justice Kavanaugh dissented because ‘the Government has permissible interests in favoring fetal life, protecting the best interests of a minor, and refraining from facilitating abortion’ (Text C, AUL, 2018). He added that they were ‘forcing the minor to make the decision in an isolated detention camp with no support network available’ (Text C, AUL, 2018). Deeming denial of abortion rights as in the ‘best interests of a minor’ and portraying abortion as something being ‘forced’ against a person is clear use of pro-woman framing and gives the illusion that AUL is protecting a vulnerable girl from said forced procedure. However, both Texts C and D should be understood as instances of benevolent sexism.

The women referenced in both texts are in arguably similar situations. Both are instances of undocumented immigrants being detained in American facilities and facing issues concerning reproductive care. However, AUL is only protecting one group of women and not both. Similar to the case with FFL, AUL is only granting protection and support to women that are upholding traditional ideals of motherhood and womanhood. In Text D, the ability to be pregnant, and therefore traditional notions of womanhood, are threatened, so these women are granted protection and support via the pro-woman frame. However, the girl in Text C is seeking an abortion: because this ostensibly violates womanhood, she is thus met with support of restrictions on her body and autonomy though it is disguised as being in her favor through pro-woman language. Therefore, the support provided in Text D and the protectionist language used in Text C are evidently not due to want of the betterment and care of women, but for the reinforcement of traditional gender roles, aligning with benevolent sexism.

With this support of traditional gender

roles established, the benevolent sexism behind other uses of pro-woman framing becomes apparent. In Texts D and E, for instance, AUL uses the example of forced hysterectomies in Georgia to argue for the ‘the basic right to informed consent for women considering abortion’ (Text D, AUL, 2020) and the Informed Consent Act (2025), which prohibits the ‘intentional forced abortion or sterilisation of a woman without full informed consent’ (Text E, AUL, 2020). Arguing for ‘informed consent’ in abortion procedures is explicit use of Roberti’s education subset, and gives the impression that AUL is a progressive entity that is ‘empowering’ women by providing them information that ‘deceitful’ abortion providers are not. As mentioned previously, the tactic of ‘empowering’ women through arguing for ‘informed consent’ on abortion procedures has already been proven by scholars to be a facade to persuade women away from the procedures. The commitment to traditional gender roles established in Texts C and D reinforces these findings to show that they are not working towards gaining more rights for women, but rather steering them away from abortions to maintain traditional gender roles.

Similar rhetoric was used in Text F to argue against the Washington Senate Bill 5768, which would protect access to abortion pills by granting the Washington Department of Corrections the power to ‘acquire, sell, deliver, distribute, and dispense’ abortion pills (Text F, AUL, 2023). AUL employed the education subset by arguing that states have a responsibility to provide women with ‘accurate information’ on abortion pills, like their ‘inherent health risks’ and ‘alternatives to abortion’ (Text F, AUL, 2023). They also use the protection subset by saying that this bill will ‘endanger the lives of women and young girls in Washington... whether incarcerated or not’ and offers that ‘lawmakers must incorporate safeguards into state law to protect women and girls from this dangerous overreach’ (Text F, AUL, 2023). As with Text E, such protectionist rhetoric has already been deemed by pro-choice activists to be a vehicle to drive women away from abortions (Cannold, 2002, p.176), but AUL’s commitment to protecting pregnancy, rather than women’s rights, further supports this finding. Therefore, AUL works towards protecting traditional ideas of motherhood and womanhood, though it is disguised as the betterment of women through pro-woman language, making this benevolent sexism.

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

Scholars have long argued that pro-woman frames can manipulate women’s ability to be autonomous decision makers. As elucidated by Cannold (2002, p.174), because the pro-woman frame positions abortions as something that happens to women, it renders them unknowing

victims that cannot make decisions over their own bodies; it robs women of their decision-making autonomy. Moreover, Roberti (2021, p.218) warns that policies that include such protectionism, as found in the pro-woman frame, have long been used to prevent women from participating in the public sphere. For example, laws that restricted women to certain working hours or occupations, or prevention from serving on juries, use protectionist ideology that centres on the idea that ‘women are too weak to act autonomously; that they need protection from the perils of public life’ (Roberti, 2021, p.218). The protectionist policies in the pro-woman frame are just another incarnation of that. Additionally, this becomes even more alarming when one realises that the pro-woman frame is upholding traditional gender policies that objectify and reduce women to the single role of child bearer and mother (Dyer et al., 2023, pp.530, 534).

Pro-woman language and its illusion of care for women may deceive some into believing that these supposed intentions are true. This may be particularly dangerous for incarcerated women who, if persuaded to keep their pregnancies, often experience additional trauma and hardship. As aforementioned, they could suffer complications during childbirth due to insufficient healthcare in the incarceration system and/or be forcefully separated from their newborn just 24 hours after giving birth (Rajagopal et al., 2022, p.77). After pro-woman anti-abortion organisations have driven these women to follow traditional gender roles by keeping their babies, they do very little to ensure women do not face such hardships. Other pro-life organisations, like the National Right to Life, have noted their support for nursery programs that allow incarcerated women to spend time and bond with their babies and teach them skills to prepare them for post-incarceration life (Sielicki, 2026). However, these programmes are fairly inaccessible because of their ‘restrictive criteria to participate’ (Rajagopal et al., 2022, p.78), and these organisations rarely offer anything beyond such programmes for postpartum care. Moreover, such programmes are seemingly non-existent in the organisations studied in this article.

Further research should explore the full extent of postpartum care for incarcerated women and the possible link between the seeming lack of support and the fact that, even after keeping their pregnancies, these women may still not be viewed as traditional women because their incarceration denies them classification as traditionally ‘moral and pure’ (Winter, 2023, p.429). Further research should also analyse the quantitative side of these findings to properly explore how infrequently pro-woman anti-abortion groups interact with incarcerated women and possible explanations for this. For

example, a possible link between their sparse interactions and the fact that a disproportionate number of incarcerated women in America are women of color, as scholars have long speculated the connection between the traditional ideals of womanhood and white supremacy (Dyer et al., 2023, p.531). A more qualitative analysis comparing how these organisations address incarcerated and non-incarcerated women may also prove useful. Evidently, much more research is needed to understand this neglected area in the literature. However, by shedding light on the deceptive tactics of the pro-woman anti-abortion organisations and their true intentions, this article has identified these potential dangers for incarcerated women, and illuminated just how much more attention and research is required.

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APPENDICES

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RESISTANCE IN MOTION

Collective Action during the
Civil Rights Movement &
Black Lives Matter

by evie booth

illustration by oleksandra zhyhalkina



Anti-racist movements, namely the Civil Rights Movement and Black Lives Matter (BLM), arose due to the systemic inequality prevalent in the racial history of the United States (US). The Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s was a response to segregation and oppression based on race (Carson, 2026). This was underpinned by White supremacy: an oppressive social structure, which privileges race and the categories of Whiteness and non-whiteness as significant social realities, resulting in the 'systemic, significant and illicit differential advantages of all or most Whites as a group with respect to non-whites as a group' (Mills, 2017, p.476). Further, such a system is created and controlled by the White population, while its dismantling would reduce their ability to dominate (Mills, 2017, p.476). Jim Crow laws codified White supremacy, enforcing segregation between Black and White Americans (Carson, 2026). The aim of the Civil Rights movement was legal equality and the abolition of all discriminatory and oppressive practices (Carson, 2026). However, these racial dynamics are still prevalent in the US, with Black Americans continuing to face discrimination. This is reflected in the catalyst for BLM, which began in 2013 after seventeen-year-old Trayvon Martin was murdered (Pietri et al., 2024, p.687). The movement highlighted the persistence of police brutality and violence against the black community, and the murder of George Floyd in 2020 by police officers intensified the BLM movement into a mass protest, raising awareness (Reny and Newmon, 2021).

During the American Civil Rights movement, raising support and awareness through overt political allyship increased the movement's prosperity and helped break structural barriers to political participation. The success of the movement and the rise of social media have dismantled many of the previous barriers to political participation, indicating a positive shift in the political climate towards wider engagement. Through a comparative analysis of the African American Civil Rights Movement and the BLM movement, this article reveals that the political climate has transformed from one which punishes engagement with collective mobilisation movements to one which expects alignment with them. This transformation undoubtedly signals an important change in society, with civil rights movements achieving the recognition and support necessary to further their cause. However, this expectation has also diminished the prevalence of genuine allyship and instead has given rise to a new form of performative allyship. This article first examines the Civil Rights Movement's reliance on political allyship, before analysing BLM and arguing that today's performative allyship confuses aims, fosters false progress, and ultimately harms collective mobilisation.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This article's argument is motivated by the tension between performative and political allyship. Allyship, as defined by Drabo and Ouedraogo (2025, p.81), is separate from 'passive solidarity' as 'allyship requires ongoing action, self-education, and accountability to dismantle inequities,' demonstrating that political allyship involves substantial action that has the capacity to assist the creation of genuine change. Allyship has been, and continues to be, fundamental to social movements, drawing attention to issues that would otherwise be overlooked and providing resources and using privilege to advance the movement (Manekin, Mitts, and Zeira, 2024, p.2). This is distinct from performative allyship, which is described by Kutlaca and Radke (2023, p.1) as 'easy and costless actions that often do not challenge the status quo'. Significantly for modern activism, both individuals and corporations can be performative. While performative allyship is not inherently negative, as it demonstrates solidarity and can raise awareness for a movement, performative engagement is not informed by community interests or the goals of the anti-racist movement.

Two core features of the political landscape are relevant here: Habermas' public sphere and the concept of virtue signalling. Habermas' theory of the public sphere denotes this space as a forum in which citizens can debate political and current issues, providing checks on state power (Habermas, 1991). Carney (2016) extends this theory, claiming that social media acts as a new public sphere, creating a platform for larger-scale communication. This is key in contesting the perspectives shared in mainstream media outlets and providing a voice to those who would otherwise be silenced (Bonilla and Rosa, 2015, p.12). Applying this framework to allyship, the rise of social media has reshaped engagement, broadening the scope of political debate and expanding participation. Performative actions are not solely restricted to social media, though, this article mainly focuses on online allyship. The BLM movement gained and maintained widespread attention, alongside active supporters, during the COVID-19 pandemic (Bolsover, 2020), when most activism and communications were restricted to the online sphere. This new form of participation has given way to the phenomenon of virtue signalling, defined as 'the act of engaging in public moral discourse in order to enhance or preserve one's moral reputation' (Westra, 2021, p.156). Also known as moral grandstanding, virtue signalling is crucial to the argument against performative allyship, as it denotes how the political landscape has developed to enable the spread of performativity.

IMPORTANCE OF POLITICAL ALLYSHIP IN THE AMERICAN CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

The American Civil Rights movement aimed to achieve legal equality for the Black population (Carson, 2026). The collaboration between Black activists and White allies helped raise awareness of the cause, with white allies leveraging their privilege to contribute greater resources, such as funding, and to 'counteract negative stereotypes' to generate 'affinity or trust' with wider society (Manekin, Mitts, and Zeira, 2024, p.1-2). Open support from white allies allowed marginalised Black activists and the larger Civil Rights Movement to enter the mainstream American political arena (Manekin, Mitts, and Zeira, 2024, p.1-2). In presenting a unified front, these issues were increasingly recognised as widespread social problems. As previously defined, white supremacist narratives were prominent in American society and embedded within systems and institutions, meaning large numbers of white Americans 'were unwilling to confront racism' (Poulshock, 2004, p.265). The involvement of white allies, therefore, made it more difficult for politicians to disregard the blatant injustices faced by Black people in America; white allies directly challenged 'white privilege denial', drawing attention to the structures which perpetuate racial inequality (Dobbs and Nicholson, 2022). This was because 'disadvantaged groups have less access to political influence, resources, and networks than do advantaged ethnic groups' (Manekin, Mitts, and Zeira, 2024, p.2). Black Americans were excluded from participation in public political forums, so they struggled to resist their marginalisation from within the system.

Using resources provided by white allies, Black activists were able to advance the movement with a faster trajectory. It is important to note that much of the work and legislation enhancing legal rights for Black Americans were the accomplishments of Black activists made independently of their white allies, such as the Black lawyers who won the *Brown v. Board of Education* case. Partially facilitating this the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) received grants from white allies through the Garland Fund, which contributed to the anti-lynching campaign, labour organising, and support for Black publications (Witt, 2022, p.134). These financial resources, drawn from white allies' privilege, directly enabled Black activists to pursue their goals. The fund was used to partially support 'a campaign of lawsuits against Jim Crow', culminating in the *Brown v. Board of Education* case, which declared segregation in schools unconstitutional (Witt, 2022, p.125). This demonstrates that financial support from white allies was able to bolster the work of Black activists and organisations in growing the American Civil Rights movement. Thus, the political allyship between Black and white activists during the American Civil Rights movement was instrumental in advancing the movement's

trajectory, given the structural inequalities embedded in American politics at the time. The role of white allies accelerated the trajectory of the movement, but it was the work of Black activists that was fundamental to the success of the movement.

TRANSFORMATION OF MODERN EXPECTATIONS OF ENGAGEMENT

The role of media in catalysing civil rights movements has transformed with the development of social media, furthering its ability to enable national conversation. Coverage of activists' accomplishments, such as the Montgomery Bus Boycotts and the March on Washington, allowed the wider American population to recognise systemic racial injustice (Nelson, 2001). According to Carney (2016), social media creates a platform to contest the silence of traditional media outlets, thus enabling greater participation from those who would otherwise have limited access. This new space of opportunity is also becoming a space of expectation. Where allies were previously persecuted for supporting the Civil Rights Movement, there is now an inescapable societal pressure in many social circles, especially among young people, to declare support for similar movements (Duncan, Helm, and Kazarov, 2025, p.11). This increased engagement signals societal progress in securing minority rights.

However, it also encourages a superficial level of engagement, which focuses on short-term attention, rather than the longevity of the movement. Duncan and colleagues (2025, p.9) conducted a study asking participants about their relationship with activism and social movements, and found that 63 percent only 'acted' in response to peer pressure and the fear of the damage to their character if they did not publicly appear to support the cause. This demonstrates a reversal in ideas about allyship from a behaviour that would be historically punished to one that is expected. Social media has exacerbated this trend towards performative allyship, with 78 percent of performative actions being conducted online, as participants acknowledged that their action was for self-serving purposes, evidencing the increasing social pressure to appear to engage in collective mobilisation movements (Duncan, Helm, and Kazarov, p.14). Thus, the increasing political salience of civil rights issues, catalysed by the rise of social media, has created an environment in which aligning oneself with civil rights movements has transformed from a punishable offence to a social requirement.

FROM POLITICAL ALLYSHIP TO PERFORMATIVE ALLYSHIP

The diminishing reliance of collective mobilisation on political allies has resulted in a transformation, rather than a decline, in public engagement with these

movements. Alignment with collective mobilisation movements used to require personal sacrifice in a way that is no longer the case. During the Civil Rights Movement, white allies were charged and convicted for working in support of Black activists by purchasing homes for Black Americans or challenging segregationist laws (Drabo and Ouedrago, 2025, pp.88-89). This demonstrates the personal risk associated with allyship, as white citizens acting to support Black Americans were persecuted as traitors to the state. While this is incomparable to the numbers of Black Americans who faced persecution for their activism, the punishment of white allies proved useful. Their commitment to justice despite the threat of persecution exposed white supremacy, drawing attention to the resistance generated by any challenge to the racial hierarchy (Drabo and Ouedrago, p.89). Following this, the political allyship of the American Civil Rights movement required dedication and material contribution to the cause.

Contrastingly, in the context of anti-racist movements, modern forms of allyship are becoming increasingly shallow and self-serving. As demonstrated above, the transition from ostracisation to expectation incentivises individuals to appear as allies in collective mobilisation movements. For example, in the above study, 50 percent of participants admitted to aligning themselves with a social movement as a form of virtue signalling or moral grandstanding (Duncan, Helm, and Kazarov, 2025, p.11). This is reinforced by Abdalla and colleagues' (2022, p.107) study, which demonstrated that 51 percent of interview participants posted in relation to social movements from a sense of obligation, which Abdalla and colleagues (2022, p.113) describe as 'an indicator of performative activism' as participation was mainly motivated by 'the desire to maintain their social image' and that their decision to post may not have been 'to genuinely support the cause'. Whilst this study has an unrepresentative sample, with the participants solely being students at McMaster University, in Ontario, Canada, this highlights the position of young people specifically. Individuals are aligning themselves with movements for personal gain, to signal morality, instead of taking up allyship to promote the cause and aid it in achieving its aims. This is more prevalent in the modern era as the rise of social media has allowed for a form of low-cost activism; posting a story about the movement or reposting a link to information requires little time or engagement with the goals of activists. While performative action can raise awareness and solidarity (Paavolainen, 2022, p.40), genuine engagement is informed by the interests of the Black community and the anti-racist movement and requires 'long-term persistence in overcoming the resistance of those whose power depends on the status quo' (Paavolainen, 2022,

p.42). Solidarity is not enough to further a movement, especially when it becomes prominent in the mainstream media (Kalina, 2020). The twenty-first century changes in the political climate, namely the expectation of action and the existing prominence of race issues in mainstream media, have transformed the role of allyship from one which required true sacrifice, engagement and meaningful contribution to a superficial, self-promoting project.

THE HARMFUL IMPLICATIONS OF PERFORMATIVE ALLYSHIP

This transition from genuine action to performativity harms social movements by hindering communication between activists and obscuring the true aims of the movements. During the BLM movement, many Instagram users took part in 'Black-out Tuesday' in 2020, posting a black square to demonstrate their solidarity with the movement (Wellman, 2022). While this was intended to increase BLM's online traction and successfully led to higher initial exposure, it hindered the movement's

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While performative allyship does play a role in raising awareness, it also encourages behaviour which distracts from the movement and undermines its efficacy, making it detrimental to collective mobilisation movements.

progress. Wellman (2022, p.2) argues that the 'Black-out Tuesday' trend was detrimental to the work of genuine activists, as the #BLM was previously used primarily by activists to share information surrounding instances of police brutality, locations of protests, and how to donate to non-profits. Online communication via this hashtag was vital to the movement, as it allowed for wide participation and rapid response times. However, due to the desire to show solidarity with the movement, furthered by social expectations to appear engaged, approximately 28 million Instagram users posted black squares on their social media, using the hashtag (Ho, 2020). This distracted and obscured important information, as the space was filled with posts of black squares. In some ways, these posts helped

the movement remain politically salient: the discourse on social media 'has in turn influenced news coverage and more mainstream or traditional forms of media' (Carney, 2016, p.195). However, posting a black square but failing to take further action renders this display of solidarity 'a useless performative trend' (Kalina, 2020, p.478). While performative allyship does play a role in raising awareness, it also encourages behaviour which distracts from the movement and undermines its efficacy, making it detrimental to collective mobilisation movements.

Expressions of performative allyship also obscure inaction, allowing for a façade of progress. Spielmann, Dobscha, and Schrum (2023) discuss the role that corporations played in BLM, focusing on the self-interested and artificial motivations behind their support. After protests outside the apartment of Morgan Stanley's CEO, the bank hired Black executives in an attempt to reduce negative brand discourse and protect their image (Spielmann, Dobscha, and Schrum, 2023, p.83). Despite the importance of minority representation in companies, the decision was taken without making a genuine contribution to the goals of the movement. Genuine action could include strengthening DEI frameworks to enforce hiring equality and diversity, or campaigning for structural change, becoming a platform to represent the voice of minority staff. Instead, the company remains 'ranked lowest' in Black leadership of big banks in the US, evidencing the performativity of this action (Spielmann, Dobscha, and Schrum, 2023, p.83).

Despite self-serving motivations, Kutlaca and Radke (2023, p.6) argue that performative action can maintain a positive impact for those belonging to the disadvantaged social group, claiming that even tokenistic support 'can lead to more feelings of psychological safety and improved wellbeing among targets of discrimination.' However, while tokenism may allow members of disadvantaged communities to feel momentarily supported, tokenistic acts of support create a false sense of achievement and fulfilment, allowing companies and members of disadvantaged groups to believe they are moving towards progress (Xue and Mattila, 2024). This fosters 'a culture of complacency within organisations, where symbolic measures are erroneously perceived as genuine progress' (Stephenson, 2024, p.51). Tokenism continues to be seen as genuine action, despite lacking actual change to diversity frameworks, failing to address the real issues and disadvantages faced by marginalised communities. In addition to distracting from these movements, the superficiality of performative allyship obscures the true progress anti-racist movements make.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, the American Civil Rights movement achieved innumerable positive changes in securing rights for minorities, but persisting discrimination and embedded inequalities prompted the emergence of the BLM movement. The rise of social media intensified the shift in the nature of allyship to low-cost methods of showing solidarity and a reduction of direct action campaigning for structural change. This shift towards performativity not only undermines the efficacy of allyship as a political tool but also harms the very movements to which it was previously integral. Allyship has become distorted due to other motives encouraging the practice, such as public perception rather than purely the desire to further the cause. Social media has sensationalised collective mobilisation movements, and individuals use acts of performative allyship to join this trend. Furthermore, much of the action taken by performative allies confuses the aims of anti-racist movements and, in the case of BLM, inhibits the methods of communication for genuine activists and allies, hindering the trajectory of the movement. Most significantly, performative allyship creates a false sense of achievement for the movement, distracting from the true progress being made by activists for the rights of minority groups. The topic of debate presents questions regarding the feasibility of political allyship in the modern era, and it prompts us to consider how allyship can be used by Black-led organisations to enhance the movement with genuine support rather than detracting from its goals. Until the expectation of performative solidarity is replaced by a culture of accountable, sustained action, the movements that depend on genuine allyship will continue to be undermined.

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MAMDANI MANCHIN & THE MEDIAN VOTER

by chase waldheim

illustration by hugh thackway



In the leadup to the 2026 US midterm elections, both major parties stand at a crossroad: either cater to their most entrenched ideological voters in hopes of maximising partisan turnout, or shift towards the middle to theoretically garner a larger portion of more centrist voters (Josi, 2026). Within the Republican party, relatively moderate incumbents have faced primary challenges from more extreme Trump-aligned candidates; most prominently, scandal-plagued Trump loyalist Ken Paxton defeated incumbent John Cornyn in the Texas Republican Senate Primary (Galston, 2026). Similarly, Democrats face a party membership nearly evenly divided between the 52 percent who believe the party should shift towards the centre, and the 43 percent who believe it should either shift leftwards or stay the same (Glueck, Igielnik, and Baker, 2026).

These trends are not isolated, but rather the latest manifestation of central debates of party moderation—namely, the tension between ‘mass parties’, which attempt to cater to niche interest groups, and ‘catch-all parties’, which broaden their appeal to maximise their success with voters across the board (Kenny, 2021, pp. 126–128; Kirchheimer, 1959, pp. 493–494). Given the unique importance of state elections for federal power in the US, this article argues that catch-all parties are likely to have more electoral success—which this article assumes is a primary goal of organised political parties. Ultimately, this insight should guide American parties as they adapt to shifting landscapes in the run-up to 2026 and beyond.

**PARTIES & THE MEDIAN VOTER
THEOREM**

Throughout the nineteenth century, European industrialisation, and increasing democratisation, which created unprecedented mass voting rights, drove the development of the ‘mass party’ which catered to a particular class or ideological niche (Kenny, 2021, pp. 126–128). However, Otto Kirchheimer (1959, pp. 492–494) suggested that as class barriers broke down throughout the twentieth century, workers would develop alternative nodes of allegiance and ideology beyond their class, and thus the mass party would struggle to compete against ideologically flexible ‘catch-all parties’ seeking to maximise their appeal. Mainwaring and McGraw (2019) further clarified the three key characteristics of this emerging party form: first, ideological centrism; second, diverse intraparty beliefs; and third, political flexibility—all of which theoretically contribute to political success. These parties were largely modelled on the

broad American political parties of the era (Hough, 2002, p.29).

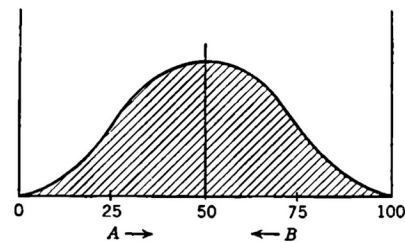


FIGURE 1: DOWNS, 1957, P.118

At the same time, a growing literature sought to utilise inchoate economic theorems in elections. Applying Hotelling's (1929, pp.43–44) notion of stability in competition, Anthony Downs (1957, pp.115–120) developed Median Voter Theorem (MVT) to explain how political parties will win elections by appealing to the median voter, and thus both parties will converge on the ideological centre. Downs (1957, pp.117–118) uses a two-dimensional spectrum to illustrate this phenomenon with all views on a policy ranked from most liberal to most conservative, and voters picking the view closest to theirs. Given this, and a unimodal distribution of voters—one in which most are concentrated around the same ideological point, typically the centre, as shown in Figure 1—Downs postulates that as a party approaches the median, the smaller the ideological difference with most voters and, subsequently, the more electoral success. This theoretically creates a race to the middle, ultimately resulting in electoral equilibrium, in which both parties functionally adopt broadly the same centrist policies to attract median voters (Downs, 1957, p.117).

However, in the US, this theory has been practically inapplicable—an academic discrepancy this article aims to address. First, the theorem struggles to account for multiple ideological dimensions on which voters can be sorted—a particular problem for the ideologically diverse US (Holcombe, 1989, p.120). Second, the applicability of Downs' theory is contingent on institutional design which centres on a single election. In a federal system, where parties must simultaneously compete across varied national and local elections, the single-median model faces significant limitations. Both of these conditions frustrate MVT's assertion that voter incentives will reward an ideologically narrow centrist party. This article argues that given MVT, US parties that embrace some facets of a catch-all party will experience electoral success, due to the ideological inconsistency of the American median voter and the relevance of distinct localities. More specifically, while MVT's assertion that proximity to median voters determines elections is valid, a national party strategy based on a single median struggles to account for the many medians that exist both in individual voters and

different states, thus, the most successful parties will increasingly shun ideology to maximize voter appeal. The notion that American parties will reject partisanship can seem implausible in a time in which polarisation is at near record heights (Lewis et al., 2026). Yet, aspects of this shift are already visible through Trump's attempt to moderate on issues like abortion and some forms of welfare, and the Democratic Party's attempt to run locally-appropriate candidates like Graham Platner, a gun owner critical of party orthodoxy on gun control (Booth, 2025; Hirsch Korn, 2025). Thus, this represents the first steps towards an increasingly catch-all, non-ideological party structure in the US—something this article argues is structurally incentivized in the US.

THE AMERICAN 'MEDIAN'

The initial MVT constructs elections as determined by a single-issue; however, in practise, elections are generally decided by a menagerie of independent issues, presenting a major problem: how does one determine the median when multiple, if not dozens, of issues are at stake (Holcombe, 1989, pp.119–120)? Some, like Holcombe (1989, p.120), suggest that an individual can collapse their political positions to a single dimension. For example, if someone is liberal economically, progressive socially, and dovish internationally, it seems plausible to deem them liberal. However, this is suspect in ideologically complex cases; it is substantially more difficult to categorise a voter who believes, for instance, in strong gun rights, access to abortion, emission standards, and immigration restrictions. Yet, this class of ideologically inconsistent voters makes up a large portion of American voters (Freeder, Lenz, and Turney, 2019, p.286). In the US, voters broadly reject ideological labels. Political independents increasingly dominate: in 2025, 45 percent of Americans identified as independents, compared to just 27 percent identifying as either Democrat or Republican (Gallup, 2025). However, to categorise these voters as moderates who lay ideologically in between the parties is over-simplistic. In reality, many centrist voters hold complex and often mutually conflicting views, which roughly average out to the political centre (Freeder, Lenz, and Turney, 2019, p.286). By some estimates, only 20–40 percent of voters hold consistent, stable policy views (Freeder, Lenz, and Turney, 2019, p.286). Thus, the majority of American voters are not down-the-line partisans, but rather internally discordant across different issues.

Given the need to appeal to this ideologically flexible median voter, MVT indicates American parties that exhibit catch-all policy platforms can be uniquely successful. Mainwaring and McGraw (2019) centralise the political flexibility of catch-all parties: without a firm ideology, parties can nominate candidates which represent

the diverse views of their constituents, stimulating success in such constituencies. National parties cannot merely adopt a single ideologically-narrow median position; rather, electoral success requires a catch-all party that can accommodate the reality of scattered issue-dependent positions. Between issues, voters hold ideologically contradictory positions: a majority support a strong military presence on the border, while a majority simultaneously believes that green energy alternatives should be further developed (Jackson, 2026). Even within a single issue, voters can hold mutually exclusive views. For example, 60 percent believe the US should be more active in global climate efforts, but only 38 percent are willing to pay a 1 US dollar carbon fee to disincentivise emissions (Energy Policy Institute, 2025). Thus, the median shifts not only between issues, but within issues. Depending on framing, a single ideologically coherent platform can be insufficient, reinforcing the need for catch-all flexibility—a need that is empirically observable as well. Trump has simultaneously declined to restrict abortion nationally, a relatively liberal position, while substantially increasing border enforcement, a relatively conservative position (BBC, 2024). These conflicting positions best maximise his alignment with median voters and allow him to maintain strong support. Thus, catch-all parties are not merely possible in the US, but per MVT, likely more successful at maintaining national relevancy with a thoroughly inconsistent public. In a broader sense, catch-all parties adapt to the reality that elections are almost always determined by a constellation of issues.

Critics, like Rowley (1989, p.114) suggest that in contrast to the unimodal median voter theorem, many issues actually have bimodal or multimodal positions—rendering the discovery of a median, even within particular issues, difficult. Many policies have polarising positions, with little middle-ground in between (Jackson, 2026). If a sufficient number of voters are ostracised by a moderate policy and choose not to vote, finding a popular moderate median is difficult (Rowley, 1989, p.115). However, the multidimensional aspect of elections defends MVT. Given the variety of issues pertinent to a campaign, it is relatively unlikely—though of course possible—that a voter will sit-out an election because the party they support took a moderate position on a single issue they feel strongly about. For example, anti-abortion coalitions still largely supported Trump in the 2024 election, despite him moderating on their core issue (McCammon, 2024). Thus, even on issues with multimodal positions, a catch-all party attempting to cater to the median is still rewarded.

LOCAL COMPETITION

Another complication for MVT is the

geographic nature of US political power. MVT is designed to examine how parties adapting to a particular electorate over time will converge on the middle (Downs, 1957, pp.116, 117). While this may allow moderate success for parties confined to the ideological centre in national races, this is complicated by distinct elections across different localities. In order to gain a congressional majority, a given party must win both the House and the Senate—the latter composed equally of two senators from each state, systematically embedding the importance of winning small states (From, 2022). This importance is compounded by the filibuster's 60-vote threshold, which means that even a simple Senate majority is often insufficient to pass legislation, rendering competition across a broad swath of ideologically diverse states electorally central (O'Donoghue, 2024).

Thus, successful political parties must cater not only to the national median, but also the median voter in states as diverse as Wyoming—which supported Trump by a margin of 46 percentage points in 2024—and Vermont, which supported Harris by a margin of 32 percentage points (Associated Press, 2024). Furthermore, given wide-scale polarisation, these disparate results have only continued to bifurcate over the last several decades (Handan-Nadar, Myers, and Hall, 2025, pp.454–455). In terms of MVT, a party must simultaneously cater to median voters in both liberal and conservative states. While these states are superficially polarising, the most polarised citizens are a vocal and engaged minority, with relatively less polarisation of views among most voters (Fiorina and Abrams, 2008, p.577). As mentioned above, most of these voters' preferences cut across party lines, and therefore are more likely to find a broad, catch-all party appealing. Beyond just ideology, the vast divergence in economics, demographics, culture, and more require a party that can offer geographically distinct policies. For example, South Dakota produces 83 percent of its electricity from renewable sources, while only one percent of Alabama's total energy comes from renewable energy sources (Energy Information Administration, 2024). Consequently, to achieve national electoral success, a party needs to have views both amenable to those who support renewables in South Dakota as well as fossil fuel advocates in many states. More broadly, given Senate structure, a party must be able to cater to local state issues, even when they are at odds nationally.

Here, MVT's logic suggests that parties will shift toward a catch-all model to cater to these locally diverse medians. A catch-all party has large amounts of intraparty dispersion—or diverse and potentially conflicting views—and ideological flexibility (Mainwaring and McGraw, 2019). This aligns with MVT's prediction that a successful party must run different candidates who

openly oppose each other based on local priorities and needs. *Prima facie*, this may sound slightly fanciful; it seems implausible that a party can successfully run candidates saying opposite things. Yet, this approach has precedent: in the post-Civil War era, American parties often accepted significant disagreement within the party, unifying around a few select national issues (Hare and Poole, 2013, p.4). More recently, parties have attempted a similar approach. For instance, within the last five years, the Democratic Party has simultaneously included both economically conservative Joe Manchin of West Virginia and Democratic Socialist Zohran Mamdani of New York (Bolton, 2025; Milman, 2021; Pazmino, 2025). On a congressional level, Dan Osborn, the independent Senate candidate from Nebraska, outperformed Harris by fourteen percentage points in 2024, simultaneously

(Downs, 1957, pp.118–119). However, this critique has two flaws. First, it fails to account for the overwhelming majority of voters lying somewhere in the middle, rather than on the ideological extremes—particularly in the American context, in which a large plurality of voters consider themselves independent over ideological (Jones, 2026). Therefore, extreme ideologue defection is not sufficient to disincentivise a party shift to the median. Second, even if there are large amounts of intraparty defection should a party get too close to the centre, it does not mean there is no optimal policy vote-getting position; it merely means said position may be skewed away from the absolute middle. Thus, even given the possibility of ideologue defection, parties will still be optimally positioned with a catch-all stance which best accommodates the median voter.

CONCLUSION

Despite theoretical validity, MVT has failed to manifest ideologically narrow centrist parties in the United States. This article has argued that given the internally conflicting views of American moderates and the uniquely geographic nature of US political power, MVT dictates that American parties who adopt a catch-all model will find electoral success. A dizzying array of contradictory views across various issues creates a variety of ideologically distinct median positions across different issues, requiring large amounts of political flexibility to be accommodated. Beyond individual voters, the system of US political power requires winning elections in distinct states with wildly disparate median policy positions, mandating intraparty dispersion and pliability. Ultimately, as Democrats and Republicans alike plan party strategy in upcoming elections, Downs' (1957) theory suggests that an apolitical equilibrium will seize the day.

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...a national party strategy based on a single median struggles to account for the many medians that exist both in individual voters and different states...

emphasising conservative social positions, like a more militarised southern border, and fiscally liberal, pro-union policy (Otterbein, 2024). Thus, US parties adopt a diverse catch-all model to cater to the geographically diverse medians necessary to win elections. More broadly, MVT struggles to adapt to countries with diverse electoral institutions—assuming a national, single-issue election—when in reality, said elections are relatively infrequent.

However, in catering to a majority away from the extremes, a party risks alienating committed ideological voters. As Downs (1957, pp.118–119) evinces, as parties move closer to a moderate median, it creates a greater spatial distance with the ideologues within that party, increasing the chances of disaffection, and subsequently that they sit out the election entirely. This system substantially complicates the process of finding a median in the first place, as attempts to move towards the centre may gain moderate votes, but lose edge votes

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FROM CITIZENS TO CONSUMERS

How Freud’s Nephew Transformed Consumer Culture in 1920s US

by anna myroshnychenko

illustration by freia nilsson

The 1920s were a period of intense economic growth and consumer spending in the US, accompanied by social transformations such as women’s emancipation and the rise of modern individualism. Among this shifting tide in American society was a key player: Edward Bernays. Hailed as the ‘Father of Public Relations’, he developed methods to influence consumer behaviour (Harmon, 2023). His early career was shaped by the Committee on Public Information (CPI), a US government agency responsible for wartime propaganda during World War I, which mobilised public support by exploiting fears surrounding internal and external enemies, along with economic and social uncertainty (Fischer, 2016, pp.54–56). As a young publicist, Bernays wrote propaganda for the Latin American section within the CPI. After the war, he realised that propaganda techniques which promoted war and the image of former President Woodrow Wilson as a liberator could also be applied in peacetime to influence the way people felt about consumption (Basen, 2014). Incorporating the theories of his uncle, Sigmund Freud, in which people seek instant gratification without employing rational decision-making (Lumer, 2019), Bernays drew on the idea that human beings are controlled by unconscious primitive desires.

He used this insight to directly exploit the psyche of the consumer, manipulating their behaviour in order to create profit. When he returned to New York after WWI, Bernays established a public relations (PR) agency, where he combined CPI propaganda techniques with psychoanalytic insights to transform consumer culture in the US (Curtis, 2002). This article argues against the conventional perspective that American consumerism developed naturally from the 1920s economic boom (Pendergast, 1998, pp.29–33). Although rising prosperity did indeed result in greater purchasing power, PR—particularly through the work of Bernays—deliberately engineered consumers’ desire to increase mass consumption. Applying Freudian theories, Bernays manipulated people’s unconscious drives and transformed citizens into compliant consumers. This article analyses his ‘Torches of Freedom’ campaign to reveal how harmful behaviours such as smoking were sold as symbols of female liberation: being framed as markers of independence and equality with men, ignoring their public health consequences. The long-lasting politico-consumerist movement will also be evaluated through Bernays’ automobiles campaign, demonstrating how individuals’

personal identity and fulfillment were linked to consumption within a capitalist system. Understanding Bernays’ influence on twentieth-century consumer culture is essential, as the manipulative techniques he pioneered continue to shape contemporary advertising, public opinion, and democratic decision-making. **1920S CONSUMERISM: ENGINEERED DESIRE** The 1920s is often viewed as a decade of massive economic growth and consumer expansion in the US (Hendrickson, 2013, p.7). However, it remains unclear whether consumer culture emerged organically from prosperity or was deliberately engineered by corporate and financial elites such as Bernays. It is therefore essential to evaluate the socioeconomic context in order to assess Bernays’ influence. After a brief recession at the start of the 1920s, economic prosperity was reestablished under Republican administrations which favoured pro-business economic policies compared to those of the Progressive Era (Smiley, 2004). For instance, Secretary of the Treasury Andrew Mellon’s tax reductions had the effect of expanding the economy: between 1922, when the 1920–1921 recession ended, and 1929, when



the stock market crashed, there was an increase of approximately 4.7 percent per year in real gross national product, while the rate of unemployment decreased from 6.7 percent to 3.2 percent (de Rugy, 2003, p.2). Although economic growth was unevenly distributed, on average, people had more disposable income and a broader societal shift emerged as credit purchases increased, giving rise to the consumerist ethos of 'buy now, pay later' (Saad, 2016). The economic history of the 1920s therefore points to a consumerist society; however, mass manufacturing alone does not fully explain how consumers developed desire for these new products.

On the contrary, corporations were frightened that overproduction would emerge where consumers had already purchased everything they needed and industrial production exceeded demand (Westbrook, 1988, p.89). Although advertising agencies flourished, most products were sold on the basis of need, with promotions centred around the virtues of functionality and practicality (Curtis, 2002). Thus, there was consensus among corporations that it was crucial to transform people's perception of products. This shift is illustrated through historic accounts such as that of Paul Mazur of Lehman Brothers, a prominent Wall Street banker who argued that it was essential to shift the US 'from a needs, to a desires culture' (Lubin, 2013). Similarly, historian Jackson Lears argued that advertisers moved beyond presenting facts to evoking a sense of 'magic', offering individuals emotional transformation through consumer products (Pope, 1995, p.569). The shift signified that advertising was increasingly targeting psychological impulses related to aesthetics, status, and personal satisfaction, as opposed to explaining the practical benefits of products (Logemann, Cross, and Köhler, 2019, p.2). These differing interpretations highlight how consumer culture did not emerge naturally from economic growth, but required psychological engineering. To understand the direct impact of advertising and PR techniques on American consumer culture, it is useful to examine Bernays' campaigns and their influence on consumer behaviour, as well as how they shaped broader societal trends.

SELLING HARM AS FREEDOM

Bernays demonstrated how consumer desire could be constructed by transforming goods into identity symbols as illustrated by one of his most prominent campaigns, 'Torches of Freedom' (Amos and Haglund, 2000). This campaign increased cigarette consumption among women at a time when the taboo against female smoking was rampant in the 1920s (Christensen, 2012). While the Sullivan Ordinance law prohibiting women from smoking in public places was lifted in 1908 in New York, societal norms still discouraged

women from smoking (Amos and Haglund, 2000; The Center for the Study of Tobacco and Society, 2023). Thus, the president of the American Tobacco Company, George Hill, sought Bernays' help to eliminate this taboo. Bernays consulted the psychoanalyst Dr. A. Brill, coincidentally one of Freud's former students, who argued that apart from immorality, cigarettes also symbolised the penis and men's sexual power. If Bernays could connect cigarettes with that power, he could encourage women to smoke as they would symbolically 'possess their own penises' (Curtis, 2002, 11:38). Hence, instead of targeting rational decision-making, Bernays, in Freudian terms, appealed to unconscious desires, specifically by exploiting symbolic associations of power.

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Analysis of Bernays' influence suggests that 1920s consumer culture was deliberately engineered through psychological techniques.

The campaign was launched at the Easter Parade in New York City, where Bernays persuaded a clique of debutants to hide cigarettes in their clothing and, at his signal, to dramatically light them during the parade. Bernays told the press that they were protesting by lighting up cigarettes that they viewed as 'Torches of Freedom' (Topic, 2021, pp. 216-217). This symbol strategically resonated with the Statue of Liberty: as one of the most recognisable symbols of freedom and democracy in the US, it enabled Bernays to associate smoking with individual liberty, equality, and female emancipation. By invoking these ideals, Bernays suggested that supporting gender equality also meant accepting women's right to smoke. The press spread news of the event worldwide, and cigarette sales among women subsequently increased (Christensen, 2012). While the idea that women who smoked were more free was unsubstantiated, by linking cigarettes to individual expression, Bernays gave tobacco companies access to the previously inaccessible other half of the market. His influence in increasing cigarette sales among women in a highly contentious environment reveals how he was able to exploit contemporary gender norms by framing cigarettes as symbols of liberation; he positioned the product as a tool in women's struggles for freedom and

equality, demonstrating how consumerism can operate as a political tool.

While it is alarming that Bernays encouraged women to view smoking as a form of self-empowerment, the health risks of smoking were not well known in the 1920s, and it was not until 1964 that the effects of smoking were dedicated substantial research in the US (US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2002). As the negative effects of smoking became widely recognised, Bernays became an avid critic of cigarettes and stopped assisting tobacco companies. However, pseudo-truths crafted by PR are not easily reversible. Despite Bernays' attempts to convince the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) to adopt an anti-tobacco policy, he was unsuccessful as tobacco companies comfortably hid under the propaganda Bernays had previously constructed (Miller, 2005). In evaluating the ethical implications, it must be noted that the influence of Bernays exceeded his personal convictions. The success of the 'Torches of Freedom' campaign therefore illustrates how consumer demand for cigarettes was engineered through psychological framing, which redefined a harmful commodity as a symbol of women's liberation.

TRANSFORMING INDIVIDUALS INTO 'HAPPINESS MACHINES'

Bernays' strategy of linking consumer products to personal identity extended beyond his target groups, contributing to the emergence of a broader politico-consumerist culture. In a politico-consumerist culture, consumers use their purchasing power to influence the market and its practices (Copeland and Boulianne, 2022, p.4), blurring the line between citizen and consumer. In 1928, President Hoover celebrated an era of 'rugged individualism', claiming that the government should refrain from intervening in the commercial engine that increasingly dominated American life (Hoover, 1928). This functioned as a presidential endorsement and, after his election, Hoover informed a group of PR specialists and advertisers that they had transformed individuals into 'happiness machines' that were essential to economic progress (Curtis, 2002, 29:43). Thus, a new idea of democracy driven by capitalism was set forth where the consuming self not only served the economy, but created what was considered to be a stable and satisfied society. Ironically, in this self-expression, individuals are reduced to the role of consumers and are therefore disconnected from the reality of the capitalist system. Consumers were unaware that their consumption was driving planned obsolescence—a strategy promoted by Bernays which continues to contribute to today's environmental challenges (Edwards, 2024).

In the 1920s, car advertising primarily

focused on explaining functional features, with advertisements resembling a user's manual. Although the economy was growing, car manufacturers were confronted with a problem: many people who were able to afford a car already owned one and were satisfied with it (Mercer and Morgan, 1971). As with the 'Torches of Freedom' campaign, Bernays aimed to manipulate consumer behaviour through symbolic associations. Hired by General Motors, he suggested that the company should launch new car models annually, introducing constant upgrades, and link cars to symbols of male sexuality (Curtis, 2002). He argued that by upgrading their car, men could feel that they were becoming stronger and more powerful self-expressing individuals. Such psychological appeals were vital in enhancing the American Dream—a 1920s myth that a conscientious individual can succeed regardless of initial socioeconomic status (Riggio, 2021). This dynamic fed directly into lifestyle politics, where everyday decisions became political statements, merging the public and private spheres (Copeland and Boulianne, 2022, p.5). Bernays' campaigns therefore helped create a mirage that concealed the dark realities behind the so-called golden ages. Besides negative health and environmental impacts, other societal issues were also overlooked during the economic prosperity of the 1920s. Income remained unevenly distributed, with the top one percent of the US population holding approximately 24 percent of national income in 1929 (Bambra, 2024, p.199). African American workers were particularly affected, as apart from receiving lower wages, they were subjected to harsh working conditions rooted in systemic racial discrimination (Burden-Stelly, 2019). The danger of the 'happiness machines' was that they were driven primarily by consumption rather than by challenging the system that shaped them. Hence, Bernays helped transform individuals into compliant consumers by manipulating their desires to align with corporate interests rather than reflecting their free will.

CONCLUSION

Analysis of Bernays' influence suggests that 1920s consumer culture was deliberately engineered through psychological techniques, as opposed to having emerged organically from economic growth. The rise in consumer products was not initially matched by high consumer demand, and the resulting need for a desires culture positioned advertisers and PR agents at the foreground of the cultural shift. Bernays was a major catalyst for the rise of consumerism in the 1920s, using it as a political tool with long-lasting effects. His role in normalising cigarette consumption among women, along with laying the groundwork for planned obsolescence through his automobile campaign, remains relevant today despite health and environmental legislations aimed at reversing these

entrenched consumer habits. Bernays' contribution to the politico-consumerist movement, in particular regarding rugged individualism, demonstrates how citizens can be steered away from responding to socioeconomic problems and driven toward mindless consumption. It is therefore crucial to reflect on the effects of consumer culture, as Bernays' manipulation of collective desires reshaped social and political norms that continue to permeate modern society.

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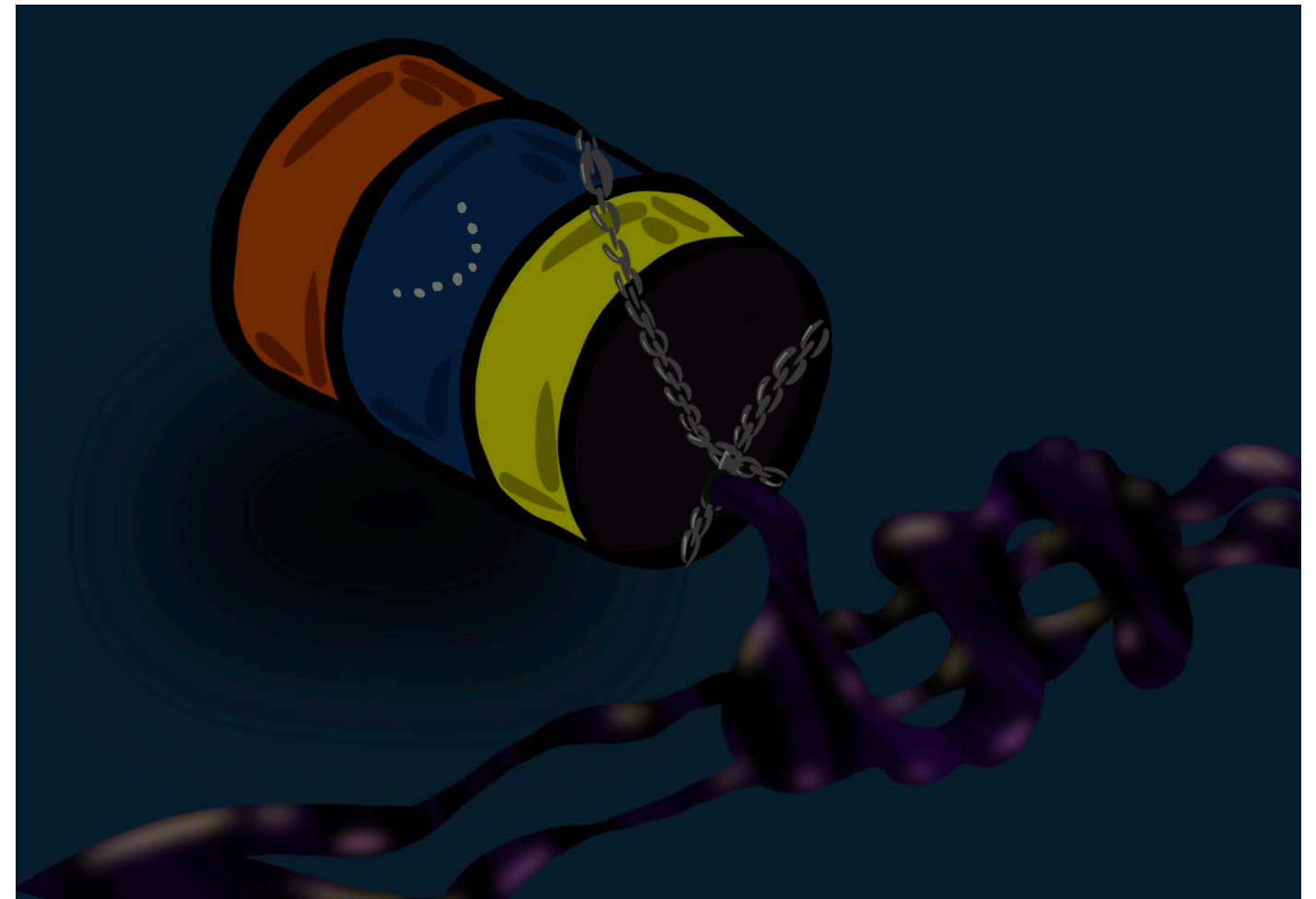
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THE PETRO-YUAN PIVOT

Venezuela as a Case Study in Challenging Dollar Hegemony

by serina bonada

illustration by oleksandra zhyhalkina



Analyses of American global dominance have traditionally prioritised military superiority as the central foundation of the United States' (US) power. Realists have long treated aircraft carriers, overseas bases, and nuclear deterrence as the decisive instruments of hegemony, emphasising material capabilities as the foundation of systemic hierarchy (Waltz, 1979, pp.129–131; Mearsheimer, 2001, pp.55–82). While military capabilities remain central, this focus overlooks another critical dimension of contemporary power: control over the global monetary system. Since the post-war period, US dominance has rested on stewardship of a financial architecture centred on the dollar (Kirshner, 1995, pp.6–11; Cohen, 2015, pp.19–23). Access to dollar liquidity, correspondent banking networks, sovereign debt markets, and international payment infrastructure has become indispensable for participation in global markets (Strange, 1988, pp.24–30; Cohen, 2015, pp.60–65). Most international trade is priced in US dollars and a large share of international payments are cleared through financial institutions operating under US jurisdiction (Cohen, 2015, pp.19–23; Quintana, 2025). This grants the US extraordinary structural reach within the global financial system. Banks and firms that wish to participate in global markets must typically maintain access to dollar clearing and correspondent

banking networks, many of which ultimately pass through New York. Thus, compliance with US financial regulations becomes a requirement for market participation. Actors that violate these rules risk exclusion from dollar clearing, a penalty that can effectively remove them from international trade (Quintana, 2025).

This article conceptualises monetary coercion as the use of financial instruments and network centrality to restrict a state's access to critical financial infrastructure and thereby constrain its economic and political choices (Kirshner, 1995, pp.6–11; Strange, 1988, pp.24–32; Farrell and Newman, 2019, pp.42–50). By using Venezuela as an example of monetary coercion during its period of escalating sanctions by the US, this article demonstrates that US global dominance also operates through monetary structures embedded within the global financial system. Venezuela is a particularly useful case as it is unlike other sanctioned states that have experienced rapid regime collapse or international isolation due to its government's survival from prior incidents. The Venezuelan government survived major financial exclusion effected by the imposition of major US financial sanctions in 2017, carried out through sanctions and related financial restrictions which persisted into 2025, despite operating within a structurally fragile economy

heavily dependent on oil exports before sanctions (Corrales, 2020, pp.39–43; Bull and Rosales, 2023, pp.49–55). Accordingly, the analysis focuses on the period between the introduction of major US financial sanctions in 2017 and the evolving sanctions environment that remained in place through 2025. These pre-existing conditions further restrict any reading of post-sanction adjustment as genuine recovery. The article, therefore, focuses solely on the limits of monetary power. Rather than asking whether Venezuela recovered from these sanctions, it asks whether financial exclusion eliminated the state's ability to adapt within the international system and survive.

Drawing on realist theory, this article argues that while US sanctions severely constrained Venezuela's economy, they also induced adaptive responses including partial settlement of oil exports in Chinese yuan, reliance on alternative payment systems such as China's Cross-Border Interbank Payment System (CIPS), and the use of third-country intermediaries. These adjustments neither restored economic stability nor challenged the global monetary hierarchy. However, they demonstrate that even extensive financial exclusion does not automatically produce total collapse. The case therefore illuminates both the strength and the limits of American monetary power.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Monetary coercion in this article refers to the deliberate use of financial instruments—including asset freezes, restrictions on sovereign debt issuance, exclusion from correspondent banking networks, and secondary sanctions—to constrain the economic activity and political choices of targeted states (Kirshner, 1995, pp.6–11; Farrell and Newman, 2019, pp.42–50). Structural realism emphasises how the distribution of capabilities across the international system shapes state behaviour under conditions of anarchy (Waltz, 1979, pp.97–101). While realism is often associated with military power, capabilities also include economic and institutional influence (Gilpin, 1981, pp.29–34). According to traditional international political economy theory, dominant states can shape global economic structures in ways that reinforce systemic hierarchy, including through control over finance and monetary relations.

Susan Strange’s (1988) rejection of realism develops this idea. Strange (1988, pp.24–32) argues that structural power lies in the ability to shape the structures of finance, credit, and production within which other states must operate. Control over liquidity provision and credit allocation constitutes power because it determines who can access global markets. Recent scholarship describes the strategic use of this structural position as weaponised interdependence (Farrell and Newman, 2019, pp.46–50). Globalisation has produced dense but asymmetric networks in which certain states occupy central nodes, meaning key hubs in financial and informational systems through which large shares of global transactions must pass. In the monetary domain, these central nodes include reserve currency issuance, correspondent banking hubs, and dominant payment messaging systems. The US occupies such central nodes because the dollar functions as the dominant reserve and transaction currency (Cohen, 2015, pp.19–23).

Weaponised interdependence must be distinguished from coercive leverage. The former refers to the structural condition of network centrality, whereas coercive leverage is the policy application of that position, the decision to deny or restrict access to critical infrastructures (Farrell and Newman, 2019, pp.55–59). Sanctions are therefore not the structure itself, but the activation of that structure.

The durability of the dollar reflects institutional embeddedness, financial depth, and network effects (Cohen, 2015). Even transactions not directly involving US entities often require settlement in dollar-denominated accounts because of the dollar’s role as a vehicle currency (Kirshner, 1995, pp.12–14). This configuration grants US authorities significant extraterritorial

influence over global financial flows.

FINANCIAL SANCTIONS AS MONETARY COERCION

Beginning in 2017 and intensifying in 2019, the US imposed sweeping financial sanctions on Venezuela in response to the Maduro government’s consolidation of power, democratic backsliding, and allegations of electoral manipulation following the contested 2018 presidential election (Corrales, 2020, pp.39–43). These measures prohibited dealings in new Venezuelan sovereign debt, restricted access to US financial markets, and froze state-controlled assets abroad, activating what Farrell and Newman (2019, pp.42–44)

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term ‘weaponised interdependence’. This concept builds on the structural position Strange (1988, pp.24–30) identifies, applying it as a intentional instrument of coercion. Secondary sanctions threatened penalties against third parties engaging with sanctioned entities. Given Venezuela’s structural dependence on oil exports for foreign exchange earnings, these sanctions directly targeted the state’s primary revenue source (Corrales, 2020, pp.39–43). International banks reduced exposure to Venezuelan transactions to avoid legal and reputational risk, amplifying the contractionary impact (Corrales, 2020, pp.44–48). Venezuela experienced dramatic output contraction, hyperinflation, and a collapse in real incomes (Corrales, 2020, pp.44–48). The scale of the crisis illustrates the effectiveness of US monetary coercion; between 2013 and 2020, Venezuela experienced one of the deepest peacetime economic contractions in modern history (Corrales, 2020, pp.44–48). Inflation, measured as the annual change in average consumer price index, reached hyperinflationary levels as high as almost 65,000 percent in 2018 (International Monetary Fund, 2018), while shortages of food, medicine, and basic goods contributed to the displacement of more than seven

million Venezuelans (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2025).

It would be misleading to present Venezuela as an example of successful resistance. The economic damage has been profound and long-term (Corrales, 2020, pp.44–48; Bull and Rosales, 2023, pp.49–55). However, despite these constraints, the Venezuelan state did not collapse. Instead, it pursued alternative mechanisms to maintain minimal revenue flows.

VENEZUELA’S MONETARY DIVERSIFICATION STRATEGY

Venezuela’s economic ties with China expanded during the 2000s and early 2010s through oil-for-loan agreements and credit arrangements (Ellis, 2009, pp.73–77). Venezuela’s turn toward China was not incidental. China had already become one of Venezuela’s largest creditors through oil-backed loan agreements established during the Chávez era from 1999 to 2013. These arrangements allowed Venezuela to access financing outside Western financial markets while providing China with secure long-term energy supplies (Ellis, 2009, pp.73–77). As relations between Washington and Caracas deteriorated, cooperation with China also carried geopolitical implications, aligning Venezuela more closely with a major power that maintains a strategic rivalry with the US. However, reliance on Chinese financial institutions also risked intensifying sanctions pressure, as transactions involving sanctioned entities could expose intermediaries to secondary sanctions.

After sanctions intensified, these pre-existing relationships facilitated partial settlement of oil exports in Chinese yuan, increasing dependence on China. Transactions conducted through Chinese financial institutions and in some cases through China’s CIPS reduced reliance on dollar-clearing channels (Farrell and Newman, 2019, pp.60–63). Additional strategies included reliance on third-country intermediaries and discounted oil sales routed through opaque trade networks. However, these mechanisms were both inefficient and costly. They did not restore investor confidence or reintegrate Venezuela into international capital markets (Cohen, 2015). Moreover, inflation remained extremely high and economic recovery was fragile.

It can, however, be argued that Venezuela’s diversification toward the yuan was driven less by strategic autonomy than by economic desperation. Long before sanctions intensified, the Venezuelan economy had already been weakened by structural mismanagement, corruption, and extreme dependence on oil exports. Oil revenues accounted for roughly 95 percent of export earnings, leaving the economy highly vulnerable to price fluctuations and fiscal

instability (Corrales, 2020, pp.44–48; Ellis, 2009, pp.73–77). Declining oil production, currency controls, and unsustainable fiscal policies had already generated inflation and capital flight prior to 2017. In this context, diversification toward Chinese financial channels can be interpreted as a reactive survival strategy rather than a deliberate effort to challenge US monetary dominance. This suggests that the constraints imposed by US monetary power remained largely intact. Venezuela adapted by seeking limited alternatives within the existing international monetary order rather than constructing a viable substitute to it, reinforcing the broader resilience of dollar-centred financial hegemony. It could therefore be argued that adaptation was only possible because China had pre-existing financial exposure to the Venezuelan economy, and not because US monetary power encountered structural limits (Cohen, 2015, pp.124–130). Finally, diversification increased dependence on China rather than reducing external vulnerability. If autonomy means independence from asymmetric dependence, Venezuela did not achieve it (Gilpin, 1981; Farrell and Newman, 2019, pp.60–63).

Venezuela therefore did not necessarily bounce back. Its economic contraction remains one of the most severe in modern peacetime history (Corrales, 2020, pp.44–48; Bull and Rosales, 2023, pp.49–55). Nonetheless, the state retained limited capacity to adjust its external transactions, which suggests adaptation under coercion rather than complete incapacitation. Monetary diversification reduced Venezuela’s direct exposure to US-controlled infrastructure but also increased reliance on Chinese institutions. This did not produce autonomy in the sense of independence but substituted one asymmetric dependence for another (Gilpin, 1981, pp.186–190) as CIPS remains less liquid and less globally integrated than the dollar system (Cohen, 2015). De-dollarisation in this context therefore represents a constrained adjustment within the existing international monetary order rather than a systemic alternative to it. Rather than signalling the erosion of US monetary dominance, Venezuela’s experience demonstrates how states can sometimes adapt to exclusion without fundamentally altering the structures through which monetary power operates. Despite Venezuela having swapped out its dependence on the US for China, it successfully avoided regime collapse or total economic paralysis (Bull and Rosales, 2023, p.51).

Venezuela’s experience also reflects a broader trend within the global financial system. In recent years, several initiatives that seek to reduce reliance on the dollar have emerged, including bilateral currency swap agreements between China and multiple trading partners (People’s Bank of

China, 2025), the expansion of the BRICS financial architecture, and the creation of alternative development institutions such as the New Development Bank (Nach, 2025). Payment infrastructures such as China’s CIPS (Xinhua Finance, 2025), and experimental platforms like the mBridge digital currency project similarly aim to facilitate cross-border transactions outside traditional dollar-based channels (Chu, Fang, and Lai, 2025). Although these initiatives remain far smaller than the existing dollar system, they indicate gradual experimentation with alternative financial infrastructures that could, over time, reduce the exclusivity of US monetary power (Cohen, 2015; Farrell and Newman, 2019; Quintana, 2025).

CONCLUSION

US sanctions against Venezuela, through asset freezes, exclusion from debt markets, and secondary sanctions, exposed the constraints of its operationalised monetary power. While sanctions inflicted severe and lasting economic damage, confirming the formidable leverage embedded in dollar centrality, they did not eliminate Venezuela’s ability to adapt and survive within the international system. The appropriate measure of sanctions success is therefore not whether they achieved regime change or state collapse, but instead, whether financial exclusion eliminated Venezuela’s capacity to adapt and continue participating, however imperfectly, within the international system. Faced with existential pressure, Venezuela adopted constrained adaptive strategies, including yuan settlement and alternative trade routing. These measures did not restore prosperity or challenge dollar dominance but allowed for survival at a reduced scale, although it did come with increased dependence on another state like China. Where limited alternatives exist, even imperfect ones, targeted states retain restricted but meaningful capacity for adjustment. The Venezuelan case therefore illustrates a realist insight that power is substantial but never absolute.

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TRUMP'S SPLIT WITH EUROPE

Turning on 76 Years of American Foreign Policy Consensus

by oscar bates
illustration by sara paruta



Post-World War II, consensus among American administrations has persisted regarding approaches to transatlantic foreign policy. Whether conservative or liberal, each American administration continued a strong relationship with its European allies. Initially developing as a united front against communism (Wittkopf and McCormick, 1990), unequivocal support for strong transatlantic ties continued after 1989 as both sides of the Atlantic sought to uphold a liberal international order (LIO) (Harris, 2018). Values, such as respect for international law and multilateralism, are embedded in bodies such as NATO: an institution which best articulates the strength of transatlantic ties.

However, such trans-Atlantic ties are under threat from Donald Trump, who has publicly caused a significant rift between the United States and its European allies through insulting language (Politico, 2025), economic attacks (Desrochers, 2026), and direct threats to withdraw from NATO (Schuette, 2021, p.1863). This article seeks to explain the ideology that has guided President Trump to undermine the transatlantic relationship between the United States and Europe, specifically

focusing on economic policy and security concerns.

Some academics portray Trump as a unique agent of chaos, attributing this characterisation to his personality over his politics. Academics often overlook traditional ideological debates, misunderstanding him as simply 'erratic' (Mahmood and Cheema, 2018, p.1). Instead of exploring the President's stark departure from past American foreign policy, some have simply prescribed a doctrine of 'unpredictability' (Bentley and David, 2021, p.383). More problematic, a number of academics have attempted to treat 'Trumpism' (Glassmann, 2025) as its own ideology: an ill-fitting bind between Trump's foreign policy doctrine of unpredictability and his nationalist rhetoric. Attempting to establish a new ideology to describe the President is reductive; it over-personalises politics and neglects the 45 years of paleoconservative literature that the following analysis exposes.

This article attributes Trump's political philosophy to paleoconservatism by analysing transatlantic economic and security policy. Given his disdain for globalism and multilateralism (Bloomberg Television, 2019), President Trump's attitude and policy

toward Europe represent not a unique political philosophy but rather a continuation of decades of paleoconservative thought—an ideology that will continue to threaten the US' relationship with Europe well after this administration. This article argues that through his economic and security policy, Trump is enacting an ideologically guided paleoconservative foreign policy platform.

CONTEXTUALISING PALEOCONSERVATIVE IDEOLOGY

Paleoconservatism, coined by Paul Gottfried and Thomas Fleming (1988), is a reactionary ideology that arose in response to the neoconservatives' consolidation of the right in American politics. At its core, it is an ideological opposition to empowered middle management, seeking the limited government and isolationism of the Old Right. Samuel Francis, the foremost conceptual paleoconservative, builds on fellow American James Burnham's 1941 book, *The Managerial Revolution*, identifying that mass organisations in the twentieth century took control of three key areas: the economy, government, and culture (Francis, 2016, p.26). Specifically in the US, Francis (2016, p.28) suggests that an ostensibly shadowy regime of

bureaucratic managers increasingly took power from individuals as the New Deal dramatically expanded government. Through their control of the economy, this regime undermines the individual bourgeois capitalist (Francis, 2016, p.29); their control of the government undermines voter-led government accountability (Francis, 2016, p.39); and through their cultural control, these bureaucratic managers generate popular consent (Francis, 2016, p.57). Paleoconservatives see this as ethically unjust, arguing that it removes individual decision-making power and autonomy. At the political level, paleoconservatives identify that Congress' power is transferred to administrative bureaus that 'proclaim the rules, make the laws, issue the decrees' (Burnham, 1941, p.54). This bureaucratic authority poses a threat to democratic accountability by undermining the power of voter sovereignty.

Beyond the nation, paleoconservatives argue that a global managerial class, facilitated by the expansion of global governance post-World War II by liberals and neoconservatives, poses a threat to national sovereignty. Paleoconservatives fear that such a class would seek to extend its power by establishing new domains and further integrating the international order (Francis, 2016, p.304), thereby shifting power away from parliaments and into international bureaucracies (Burnham, 1941, p.54). Furthermore, managerial globalism significantly oversteps its authority by creating international laws that dictate the relationship between the state and its citizens (Gottfried, 1999, p.74). This is fundamentally at odds with localised sovereignty (Burnham, 1941, p.47).

Paleoconservatives' worldview aligns with the realism of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Drolet and Williams, 2020, pp.40–41), centred on a desire to reassert state sovereignty. This not only positions paleoconservatives as fundamentally opposed to liberal internationalism but also in contrast to the neoconservative worldview, which supports morally-crusading interventionist wars. Much like realism, paleoconservatives reject concepts such as human rights and democracy, with foundational theorists like Gottfried and Buchanan dismissing them as illegitimate reasons for foreign intervention.

TRUMP’S TRANSATLANTIC ECONOMIC POLICY

The transatlantic economic alliance between the US and the EU was once viewed as one of cooperation and mutual economic benefit (Hamilton and Quinlan, 2014, p.7). Despite this, Gottfried (2002, p.149) was staunchly opposed to the EU; he despised the supranational body for undermining the sovereignty of its member states' national politics. He fiercely criticised the EU for plotting to defy the will of the people, as EU

leaders worked together to block the rise of far-right national parties in Austria, Italy, and Belgium at the turn of the millennium (Gottfried, 2002, p.149). Likewise, Trump, through his rejection of multilateralism, has an inherent dislike of supranational bodies such as the EU. Trump holds that to preserve democracy, one must 'hold on to sovereignty' (Bloomberg Television, 2019). Hence, the EU is seen as a threat, as a 'direct challenge to the historically dominant theory of the modern nation state': it empowers supranational bureaucrats and disenfranchises national democratic legislators (Drolet and Williams, 2020, p.35). This deep ideological opposition has led Trump to treat the EU with hostility, in some cases directly undermining it. For instance, in June 2018, Trump suggested that the President of France, Emanuel Macron, leave the EU for a 'more favourable

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The current administration has presented an understanding of the world as one where might is right.

bilateral deal with the US' (Mahmood and Cheema, 2018, p.7). This unprecedented behaviour showcases Trump's hostility to the supranational organisation.

Beyond an ideological opposition to the EU, paleoconservatives like Buchanan (1990) complain that the US has been cheated by globalisation, with unfair trade deals hurting America. It is contended that America's altruism has been exploited by the system it created (Buchanan, 1990). This perspective underpins Trump's rejection of the post-war world order that facilitated globalisation, believing instead that the 'US-led international order [...] has served to benefit America's top-tier competitors' (Harris, 2018, p.626).

Consequently, the EU, a supranational body which has a '\$150 billion trade surplus with the US' (Mahmood and Cheema, 2018, p.6), is the paleoconservatives', and therefore Trump's, principal antagonist—labelled a 'foe' of the United States (Roth et al., 2018). Trump resents the EU for its success in exporting great excesses into the US market. He holds a sense of injustice that has fuelled economic nationalism, leading to his central

foreign economic policy position: tariffs. This central populist policy allowed Trump to frame the struggle as ordinary Americans against unaccountable elites—a group he successfully associated with Hillary Clinton in his first election campaign (Chokshi, 2016). In 2016, to a crowd of steelworkers, Trump called out and criticised the prioritisation of the development of foreign countries and the interests of international wealthy elites over those of ordinary Americans (CNN, 2016). Notably, Trump was the first successful presidential candidate to position himself against internationalism since the establishment of the LIO (Harris, 2018). In 2016, he won the election with a paleoconservative strategy that attacked the elites of the economic, international, and domestic political systems in a manner akin to Francis's (2000) praise for Buchanan's war on the LIO during his presidential bid.

TRUMP’S TRANSATLANTIC SECURITY POLICY

Fundamentally opposed to any system that yields power from a democratic body to an unelected bureaucracy (Burnham, 1941), paleoconservatives do not view NATO as an extension of American power; they see it as a twofold limitation on the nation's sovereignty. First, NATO serves as a 'trip wire' (Buchanan, 1990, p.80) that risks compelling the US into war. Mutual defence clauses undermine Americans' sovereignty to determine whether their nation dedicates blood and gold to wars in foreign lands. Second, paleoconservatives feel cheated into paying for the defence of wealthy nations (Buchanan, 1990, p.81). This feature in particular places paleoconservatism at odds with the US' NATO membership. Trump repeatedly questioned US support for NATO, citing Europeans' failure to fund their own defence (The Guardian, 2025a). This signals Trump's fundamental opposition towards helping apparent allies based on the isolationist, anti-institutional ideology he holds.

More broadly, this perspective highlights Trump's realist worldview, in which there is no international policeman but rather a collection of independent states acting as they please. The current administration has presented an understanding of the world as one where might is right. For instance, Trump's deputy policy chief, Stephen Miller, suggested that the world is governed by strength, not 'international niceties' (Collinson, 2026), solidifying this position. Subsequently, Trump has adopted the paleoconservative position that 'how other people rule themselves is their own business' (Buchanan, 1990, p.81). Trump rejects a higher calling for the United States to police the world, publishing in his 2017 national security strategy his view that 'the American way of life cannot be imposed upon others' (Curran, 2018, p.6). It is the paleoconservative perspective on state sovereignty, which favours bilateral

negotiations over multilateral institutions, that is evident in Trump's approach to the Russo-Ukrainian war. As Trump seeks to end American entanglement with the costly affair, he persistently isolates the United Nations and fellow NATO allies in favour of one-on-one meetings with Putin and Zelenskyy. Trump's ideological understanding is ever-present; when hosting the Ukrainian President, Trump explicitly stated that Ukraine did not hold any of the cards in the conflict and therefore could not dictate the terms (BBC, 2025). This realist understanding of the conflict undermines the severity of the international law violated by Putin in his 2022 invasion: it represents a worldview dominated by power and by individual states acting in their own interests, no matter the impact on the global community. Moreover, Trump's refusal to support Ukrainian membership of NATO (The Guardian, 2025b), fearing the US being caught up in further Russian encroachment, demonstrates the first paleoconservative grief with NATO—the trip wires.

Despite consistent calls from Europeans for American support in Ukraine, Trump's limited response should not be surprising, nor attributed to an erratic personality example of a character flaw. The President's lack of effective action regarding Ukraine exemplifies paleoconservative populist isolationism, which builds on the work of Buchanan in the 1990s, placing disengagement at the forefront of foreign policy (Drolet and Williams, 2020, p.41). Gottfried (2002, p.145) further explains this position by condemning the moralistic language used to bring the US into the Balkan War in the name of upholding international law. He argued that it was unreasonable to commit the US military to a conflict that posed no threat to the continental US. Thus, paleoconservatives such as Buchanan, Miller, and Trump believe in the US re-hemisphering—projecting strength in the Americas while disengaging from transatlantic security agreements.

CONCLUSION

This article traced the adaptation of paleoconservatism over 45 years, from its origins in Francis' conceptual adaptation of Burnham's managerial revolution, Gottfried's texts, and Pat Buchanan's presidential campaign, culminating in the ideology's current champion, Donald Trump. It has demonstrated that Trump is not simply a unique agent of chaos; rather, he has clear ideological foundations to his foreign policy.

Ultimately, adopting this view is crucial for anticipating further developments—in this case, deterioration—in the transatlantic relationship. Critically, for paleoconservatives, there is no room for reform, as they 'believe that existing institutions have degenerated beyond restoration' (Drolet and Williams, 2020, p.31). Therefore, there is little prospect of Trump

seeking to rebuild the US' transatlantic relationship with the EU through deep and complex international institutions such as NATO.

The President's hostilities towards both NATO and the EU have fractured transatlantic relations. With huge repercussions, the ideological retreat from multilateralism has led Europe to reassess its approach to the US: Europe once looked to America as its greatest champion in trade and security policy. The deterioration of this relationship is not the product of a single man; it is the consequence of an ideology fundamentally opposed to the values that created the LIO and upheld a strong transatlantic relationship.

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EU ACTORNESS & THE MATTER OF SOVEREIGNTY

Institutional Trust & National
Narratives in France & Denmark

by felix crawford

illustration by robin lind-reme



In the face of increased volatility from actors such as the United States, Russia, and China, the European Union (EU) has tried to establish itself as a global actor in its own right (Bojinović Fenko and Brsakoska-Bazerkoska, 2024, p.22). This project is lengthy and complicated to execute, yet vital for the EU to secure its own sovereignty while contending with undemocratic and unpredictable external actors. This article focuses on one important prerequisite for this change, namely that the citizens of the EU must acknowledge and trust the EU as a legitimate authority that speaks for them. In 2025, 52 percent of EU citizens reported having trust in the EU—the highest score since 2007—but the variance between Member States is large (European Commission, 2025, p.93). If Member States cannot trust the EU, it faces a crisis of legitimacy (Uhma, 2023, pp.314–315), hampering nations' willingness to pursue more EU centralisation. Further, absent trust in the EU would call into question the EU's ability to represent Member States externally. To answer the question of why Member States' trust diverges so widely, this article considers Denmark and France, as two Western welfare states with deviating perceptions of the EU, pointing out their national narratives and socioeconomic developments as important reasons for this discrepancy. These factors are crucial in

explaining different aspects of the narratives that inform the French, and contrasting Danish, perspectives on the EU (Cautrès, Rivière, and Chopin, 2020; Rozenberg, 2024; Kelstrup, 2024). By comparing a high and low trust country, this article offers possible explanations for why certain countries have more trust than others, and further suggests ways in which high trust can be replicated, mostly through national campaigns. The EU's role in an ever-changing multipolar order requires an increase in institutional trust to maintain, or pursue, a dominant role in global politics; this article outlines proposals such as utilising and manipulating national narratives as remedies to falling trust levels.

Trust is intrinsic to legitimacy, and is thus vital to the image of the EU as a legitimate institution (Uhma, 2023, p.315). EU 'actorness', understood as external recognition of the EU as an entity 'capable of acting on its own' (Rauh, 2025, p.794), has been previously concerned with the external actions that the EU undertakes (Bojinović Fenko and Brsakoska-Bazerkoska, 2024, pp.10–11). However, a stronger focus on trust could aid the EU in its efforts for more collaboration on pressing matters such as defence, subsequently providing Europe with the opportunity to not be reliant on hegemonic support.

METHODOLOGY

While quantifying trust can be challenging, this article uses data collected by the Eurobarometer: a semiannual survey conducted across the EU and select external countries to determine citizen satisfaction and perception of a broad range of topics, including the EU, national governments, the economy, and future prospects (European Commission, 2022). In the spring 2025 iteration of the Eurobarometer, only 42 percent of French respondents answered that they would 'tend to trust the EU'—the fourth lowest score of all Member States. Contrasting that, 74 percent of Danish respondents reported that they tended to trust the EU—the highest trust score in the Union (European Commission, 2025, p.93). To give some insight into possible causes, this article adopts a most-similar-systems design, comparing Denmark and France. Alongside their populations' divergent trust levels in the EU, these states are chosen because they are both Western European welfare states, with France and Denmark first and eighth, respectively, on the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's ranking of social spending (World Population Review, 2025). The two also contribute more money to the EU than they receive (European Commission, 2024). Notably, no other

Column 1	France (% agree)	Denmark (% agree)
"Do you trust your government"	23	65
"Do you trust your parliament"	24	74
"Do you trust political parties"	10	56
"Do you trust the EU"	42	74

TABLE 1: POLITICAL TRUST IN FRANCE AND DENMARK
Data collected from Eurobarometer Spring 2025, pp.73, 89, 91, 93.

country typically considered to be Western European by geographical standards has less trust in the EU than France, while Denmark has exceptionally high trust (European Commission, 2025, p.93). Other European countries with low levels of EU trust, such as Hungary, have different circumstances that inform their trust. Hungarians for example, being net receivers of the EU budget, strongly believe that EU membership has benefitted their country economically yet still have a low level of trust for the institution (Orzechowska-Wa  awska, 2025, p.13), with 48 percent of Hungarians answering that they would ‘tend to trust’ the EU (European Commission, 2025, p.93). Though considering the reasons for low trust in other countries such as Hungary is equally worthwhile, the comparison between France and Denmark in particular has a strong explanatory power through the two countries’ relative similarity. The focus instead on France makes for a better comparison with Denmark.

CULTURE VERSUS INSTITUTIONS

Citizens’ trust is frequently considered through two lenses: institutional factors and cultural factors. The former pertain to how well institutions function, while cultural factors refer to socialisation and context. Verboord, Janssen, and Marquart (2025, p.766) show that institutional factors are more important for trust nationally, whereas cultural factors play a larger role in trust towards the EU. When considering why Denmark and France have such divergent perceptions of the EU, cultural factors such as national narratives and identity forming have a larger influence than concrete EU policy (De Vries, 2018, pp.41–42). The level of trust that countries have in the EU is directly tied to the national narrative that has been constructed in these countries. As such, this article delves deeper into the construction of national narratives in Denmark and France, taking into consideration the historical context through which these were formed. The national narratives as they are have evolved throughout countries’ membership, and as such their historical contextualisation is crucial to understanding the current state of affairs.

HISTORY & NATIONAL NARRATIVES

Denmark and France have had rather different historical relationships with the EU. France was one of the founders of the European Coal and Steel Community in 1951, which later became the EU (European Union, 2017). Overtime, the French have constructed a national narrative in which France is at the centre of a strong Europe, leading the community towards independence from other international actors such as the United States (Rozenberg, 2024, pp.67–68, 83). However, euroscepticism has remained a continuous force in French politics, and worries about sovereignty persist, particularly pertaining to EU overreach into the French social model (Cautr  s, Rivi  re, and Chopin, 2020, p.26; Hobolt and Brouard, 2011, p.319). Furthermore, there is a contradiction between France wanting to establish Europe as a strong international actor and their unwillingness to accept EU enlargement. Generally, France has been wary of incorporating too many new members too quickly (Rozenberg, 2024, pp.72–73). It can be argued, however, that this is a consequence of the French perception of the EU as a coalition with shared norms and goals (Rozenberg, 2024, pp.73–74). Enlargement would mean having to consider more voices, including some that may clash with French values. Having to compromise more in EU policy reinforces a broader French fear that their salience in EU decision making is threatened. This perceived threat is a recurring theme in French politics, both in eurosceptic and pro-EU circles (Rozenberg, 2024, p.76; Hobolt and Brouard, 2011, p.319). As political actors reinforce this message to the public, French willingness to accept EU enlargement stands at 41 percent, tied with the Czech Republic for the lowest in the entire Union, contradicting popular sentiment in the Union (European Commission, 2025, p.163). This dissonance between France and the broader EU risks exacerbating pre-existing French distrust, potentially jeopardising the future of the EU as a stronger cohesive international actor with France playing a leading role.

Contrarily, the Danish perception of the EU has steadily improved over time since joining the European Communities, the

precursor to the EU, in 1973 (Council of the European Union, 2025). Between 1974 and 2015, the proportion of Danes who disagreed that ‘Denmark could face the future better outside of the EU’ rose from 30.7 percent to 71 percent, indicating a growing perception that Denmark benefits from its EU membership (Kelstrup, 2024, p.203). Although there has been anxiety about sovereignty from eurosceptic Danish groups, this has not translated into distrust from the citizens of Denmark. This may partially be because Denmark has provisions in their signing of the Maastricht treaty that guarantee them certain sovereign decisions, including their own currency and migration (Folketinget, 2025; Kluger Dionigi and Wind, 2021, pp.36–37). Although these opt-outs undermine the perception of the Union as a unified actor and resultantly decrease the EU’s legitimacy on an international level, they do mitigate potential friction between national and supranational levels.

Through a referendum in 2022, however, Denmark opted into EU defence cooperation, tying Denmark closer to the rest of the EU (Folketinget, 2025). Polling suggested that the reason for this merger was a feeling of defence solidarity with the rest of Europe (Pedersen et al., 2023, p.85). The referendum was passed with 67 percent in favour (Folketinget, 2025), and since then trust in the EU has remained high (European Commission, 2025, p.93). The matter of defense was a crucial point of worry for Danish voters, leading to their rejection of the Maastricht Treaty in 1992 (Pedersen et al., 2023, p.83). Despite Danish voters remaining resistant to transferring sovereignty to a supranational level to this day, they did agree to opt-in to the common defense clause, increasing the EU’s actorness by giving it more competence. The ‘in favour’ campaign argued predominantly for the importance of a strong and unified Europe for international security, for example against Russia (Pedersen et al., 2023, p.84)—this was evidently convincing on a national level, and may also be adopted in different contexts to persuade voters in other countries towards greater EU integration. This shows that closer cooperation is possible without jeopardising trust.

The difference between national narratives in France and Denmark is stark. Where France has historically centred itself in the leadership of the EU (Rozenberg, 2024, pp.67–68), Denmark has understood itself as a less central character in the Union, placing a larger focus on the benefits that it receives from the EU (Nedergaard, 2014, pp.34, 40), for example by emphasising the benefits of the Common Agricultural Policy and the EU Single Market. This has made Denmark more open to EU enlargement and consolidation, whereas France has at times been hesitant (Rozenberg, 2024, pp.72–73). Historically, French political elites have framed closer EU cooperation as a means of

enabling France to exercise leadership and play a more serious role in the international system (Rozenberg, 2024, pp.68, 70). The perceived loss of sovereignty may be reframed as a transposition of sovereignty from the national to the supra-national level. Pushing for this reframing of the national narrative could improve the trust levels in France, allowing the EU to consolidate and reinforce their unity. While the Danish case may initially suggest that giving countries more opt-outs—allowing them to decide on a per-county basis which competencies the EU may hold—would be good for an increase in trust in the EU, it is important to consider the larger picture. Institutional trust in the EU is of such relevance because it is a large factor in EU actorness. Actorness cannot be achieved when the EU has only partial competency to represent its Member States, or when this competency could be revoked at a Member State’s whim. While increasing legitimacy through higher trust levels, the EU project as a whole would become a less legitimate international actor, becoming more similar to other international coalitions such as the Association of South East Asian Nations.

ECONOMIC FACTORS

National narratives are not only shaped by the historical relationship a country has had with the EU, but also by their economic circumstances and interpretations of these. Danes have generally perceived the EU single market as beneficial to them (Nedergaard, 2014, pp.34, 39, 44). As a small economy with the majority of exports going to European countries, access to the EU market has significantly boosted Denmark’s economy (Bentsen, Van Deurs, and Zhuang, 2025). In 2024, 42 percent of all Danish exports were to the EU (Bentsen, Van Deurs, and Zhuang, 2025, p.4). This makes Denmark highly invested in the EU single market, with projections of the Danish National Bank suggesting positive consequences of possible further market integration (Bentsen, Van Deurs, and Zhuang, 2025, p.16), with every percentage point of reduced trade barriers giving a 0.4 percent increase in Danish welfare. Instead of seeing the interaction between the Danish market and the EU market as a liability, the economic benefits have led to a positive perception of the Union. The optimism the Danes have for the EU goes further than just trust: 62 percent of Danish citizens are in favour of enlargement (European Commission, 2025, p.163). This is likely linked in part to the economic benefits associated with the EU single market: expansion of the market means more possible trade partners.

Polling in 2019 showed that more than half of French citizens believed their national economy had been weakened by the economic integration of the EU, though a majority did believe that the country benefitted from EU membership overall

(Orzechowska-Wa  awska, 2025, pp.14–16). This is despite the fact that 56 percent of French exports in 2022 were to EU countries and thus benefitted from the lower trade barriers (Trading Economics, 2024), as well as the arguably unquantifiable structural benefits and long-term funding the EU provides; there is a discrepancy between the objective economic variables and the perceived economic situation (Orzechowska-Wa  awska, 2025, pp.4, 10–11, 14–16). Similarly, while political elites largely agree that EU membership has allowed France to perform better than it would have outside of the EU, French politicians rarely mention the benefits of the EU single market; more frequently, the single market is framed as a hindrance due to an underlying resistance to economic liberalism (Rozenberg, 2024, pp.71, 73). Eurosceptic French politicians have taken a variety of stances, anywhere from arguing that the EU is too liberal to arguing that the EU is totalitarian (Mayer and Rozenberg, 2021, p.48). This supports findings that argue that low levels of trust in the EU are

Trust in EU institutions is vital to the legitimacy, and future, of the EU.

frequently driven by misconceptions about how it functions, both in France and in the EU at large (Cautr  s, Rivi  re, and Chopin, 2020, pp.28–29; De Vries, 2018, p.42).

Both Denmark and France expend more money to the EU than that they receive. France currently has a yearly net contribution of approximately 7.8 billion euros, and Denmark a net contribution of approximately one billion euros (European Commission, 2024). The per capita contribution of the two countries is approximately 116 euros for France and 159 euros for Denmark (European Commission, 2024). To the Danes this is not a very salient point: over the past few decades, it has not frequently been brought up by politicians, nor does it divide different sides of the political spectrum (Kelstrup, 2024, pp.212–213, 220–221). Despite these contributions from Denmark to the EU, the EU is also fiscally beneficial for Denmark as it allows access to its single market—benefits that are generally uncontested, even by eurosceptics

(Bentsen, Van Deurs, and Zhuang, 2025; Nedergaard, 2014, pp.38–41). Notably, the net contribution of France has also not been a major talking point for eurosceptic politicians, though it may have contributed to broader sentiments pertaining to a loss of sovereignty (Rozenberg, 2024, p.75). Seemingly, the French distrust of the EU is not based on tangible economic policy, but rather on an indirect fear of an intrusion by the EU on national sovereignty (Cautr  s, Rivi  re, and Chopin, 2020, p.26; Rozenberg, 2024, p.75). In Denmark, this fear may be less present due to the stronger emphasis on the benefits of the EU market that is prevalent in the national narrative.

The economic factors and how these have been interpreted in the national narratives of each country showcase some clear similarities: both countries have a significant net contribution to the EU budget (European Commission, 2024), yet neither country’s politicians use this as a major talking point against the EU (Kelstrup, 2024, pp.212–213, 220–221; Rozenberg, 2024, p.75). Rather, for both France and Denmark, sovereignty has been a concern in their relationships with the EU. Denmark has mostly mitigated these concerns through their opt-out clauses in the Maastricht Treaty, which has allowed them more independence in their economic policy (Hansen, 2003, pp.73–74). France, on the other hand, is completely entwined with the broader EU in this context, and as such, the worries about sovereignty are more salient (Mayer and Rozenberg, 2021). A possible way of improving trust from an economic perspective may be found in the Danish national narrative, which focuses on the benefits of the EU single market. This emphasises that the tangible economic advantages that come with more cooperation could sway those who believe the EU single market to be a hindrance to the French economy. Simultaneously though, differences between the French ideas regarding the future of the EU, and the ideas of the broader EU, may be hard to overcome, as the EU is a democratic institution that aims not to tailor its policy to benefit one Member State over others (European Commission, 2024).

CONCLUSION

Trust in EU institutions is vital to the legitimacy, and future, of the EU—thus a comprehensive understanding of trust levels as informed by national narratives is necessary. This encompasses self-identity, or what role the country envisions for itself in the EU, as well as the perception of social and economical policy. The French national narrative is based primarily around ideals of leadership and self-determination, whereas the Danish national narrative emphasises the economic benefits and opportunities the EU provides. Both countries value their sovereignty, but where this wish may have led to lower trust levels in France, it has

not manifested as such in Denmark. While allowing countries more freedom in which competencies they allow the EU to adopt may lead to an increase in institutional trust, this policy direction would contradict the main point for why increasing trust is important; it would delegitimise the EU as an international actor. Possible alternative ways to increase trust in France centre around ways to change the national narrative of the country, rather than EU policy changes, due to the relative importance of narratives over tangible legislation. Furthermore, emphasising the importance of a unified Europe for common security seems to be a successful strategy. Though the comparison between Denmark and France is hard to generalise, it gives insight into how different national narratives can inform public trust and how these national narratives are shaped, partially through the socioeconomic circumstances of a country. If the EU would want to act as a representative for its Member States internationally, national narratives must be unified to accept and trust the EU as a legitimate authority to do so.

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‘PUTIN’S COMBAT BURYATS’

Ethnic Othering Within Ukrainian Civic Nation-Building

by **ilenia willmert**

illustration by rebecca sterner



The Buryats are an Indigenous Siberian population residing primarily across Mongolia, China, and the Republic of Buryatia—a province in the southeast of Russia. Numerically, they comprise only a small fraction of the Russian Federation’s population (0.34 percent) and, although disproportionately overrepresented, a marginal portion of its armed forces (0.6 percent) (Vyushkova and Sherkhonov, 2023, pp.132–133). However, leading up to and following Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Buryats have gained visibility in Ukrainian and Western media discourses that far exceeds their actual demographic numbers (Szmyt, 2024, p.170). Visibly Asian in appearance, Buryats have increasingly been transformed into metonyms for the Russian military and, by extension, for the brutality associated with Russia’s war in Ukraine. In Ukrainian media, they have frequently become the face of Russia, symbolising violence, imperial aggression, and otherness. They are often portrayed as the ‘backbone of Russia’s war efforts’ and ‘Putin’s Combat Buryats’ (Szmyt and Dudeck, 2024, p.5; Szmyt, 2024, p.176), reflecting how distorted the perception of

ethnic and cultural diversity is in conflict. The actions of a minute subsection of the Russian military have thus been weaponised to construct a racialised, orientalist image of Russia, reinforcing a sharp distinction between Ukrainians and their aggressor.

This development is striking given the prevailing scholarly analysis that contemporary Ukrainian nation-building is grounded primarily in civic rather than ethnic nationalism; surveys and political discourse suggest that civic national identity has consolidated in response to Russian aggression (Dodonova, 2024; Minesashvili, 2023; Onuch, 2023; Wilson, 2023). This article interrogates how exclusively civic this process truly is, arguing that ethnicity too continues to play a significant role in the construction of Ukrainian national identity. Ukrainian discourses both orientalise Buryats as well as frame Ukrainian colonial solidarity with them, and, although seemingly contradictory, both invoke ethnic categories to delineate intrinsic moral and ideological boundaries between Ukraine and Russia, thereby strengthening a unified national identity. The civic quality of this nation

building is examined through Ukrainian media representations of Buryats which construct and consolidate national identity in a time of war. Focusing on both orientalist portrayals of Buryats as personifications of a violent, characteristically Asian Russia as well as narratives framing them as fellow victims of Russian colonialism alongside Ukraine, in the sections below I analyse how both these seemingly contradictory tropes invoke ethnicity to delineate the Ukrainian in-group and Russian other. Through this analysis, I demonstrate that ethnicity remains an important, embedded factor behind the formation of Ukraine’s civic national identity.

THE CONSTRUCTION OF NATIONAL IDENTITY: CIVIC & ETHNIC

Adopting Kohn’s (1944) definitions, civic nationalism is a connectedness between people of the same political community through rational, liberal thought and a common expectation to uphold human rights and personal freedoms. Contrastingly, ethnic nationalism develops through primitive, tribal relations tied to religion

and myth (Kohn, 1944). According to some authors, modern Western countries exhibit the former, while Eastern, developing, and post-colonial countries demonstrate the latter (Gellner, 1983; Ignatieff, 1995; Kohn, 1944; Tamir, 2019, p.425); this dichotomy remains highly influential in defining the markers of civic and ethnic nationalism. Notably, civic nationalism continues to be associated with liberal-democracies and countries inclusive of diversity, while ethnic nationalism is still largely associated with authoritarianism, prejudice, intolerance of minority groups, and unstable nations (Roshwald, 2015, p.1). Consequently, the West continues to be highlighted as the exemplar of civic nationalism while the East is negatively defined by ethnic nationalism.

National identity can shape and is shaped by civic and ethnic forms of nationalism, and is frequently constructed through differentiations between us and them—a perception of shared characteristics between citizens that are distinct from others internationally. In-groups are recognised to be connected through shared values, beliefs, and myths that contrast with those of the out-group (Korostelina et al., 2025, pp.2–3). To construct these boundaries and subsequently define the people of a country, a shared sense of association must be cultivated so that its diverse members identify with each other and the country (Shulman, 1999, p.1020). Frequently moralised, groups will interpret their traits—and those they perceive to have in common with other groups—positively, while othering, often negatively, the identities of outside groups thought of as racially or culturally different (Molla, 2024, p.6). Commonly, it is a civic national identity that develops when countries experience geopolitical crises; disregarding internal cultural differences in favour of political homogeneity is crucial for domestic unity, stability, and mobilisation. Uniting previously divided groups against a common enemy and shared sense of danger, threat, and stress (Onuch, 2023, p.54), civic nationalism and a strong civic national identity become, consequently, ‘not merely a symbolic construct but a tangible instrument for ensuring societal stability and progress’ (Marukhovska-Kartunova et al., 2025, p.3). From the onset of Russia’s 2022 full-scale invasion, Ukraine has exemplified this phenomenon.

NATION-BUILDING IN UKRAINE: A SHIFT TOWARDS CIVIC UNITY

Ukraine is a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural country, and, as a result, Ukrainian national identity has been highly contested and fragmented for decades. Identities vary across ethnic, cultural, linguistic (Olzacka, 2017, p.25), and ideological lines (Dodonova, 2024, pp.68, 70; Korostelina et al., 2025, p.4). The traits one group considers positive can be negatively perceived with

other groups domestically (Shulman, 1999, p.1015), promoting disunity and conflict within the country. The East-West divide is especially significant, and conceptualisations of Ukraine’s national identity—either Eastern, Russian, and Asian, or Western and European—are greatly debated historically. Frequently, feelings are ambivalent and not dichotomous, as many citizens support greater, albeit differing, integration with both Europe and Russia (Males and Konieczna-Salamatin, 2025, pp.92–93). However, now fighting for sovereignty against an existential Russian threat, a civic and political national identity is growing ‘based on accepted bonds rather than inherited traits’ (Minesashvili, 2023, pp.461), as echoed by Dodonova (2024, pp.70–71), Onuch (2023, pp.54, 59), and Wilson (2023, p.13). In this context, cultural and linguistic differences have been largely superseded. Increased civic national identity consolidates support for Ukraine’s self-defence, aids mobilisation efforts, decreases variation in national narratives and myths, and homogenises agreements about the trajectory of its future (Korostelina et al., 2025, pp.6, 19), serving as an important war-time tool.

Through the development of a civic Ukrainian in-group united against the common threat of Russian aggression, Russia has come to quintessentially symbolise the other. War ‘favors stricter views and stereotypes’ (Olzacka, 2017, p.35), and consequently, over time, Russians have become the main negative reference for Ukrainians, with their culture and politics perceived as undesirable (Hrushetskyi, 2025; Shulman, 1999). As a result, Ukrainian identity is constructed through a rejection of Russianness and subsequent efforts to de-Russify personal and national identities (Korostelina et al., 2025, pp.13, 19–20; Marukhovska-Kartunova, 2025, p.2). Even Ukrainian Russophiles and ethnic Russians have largely diminished their support for Ukrainian-Russian partnerships, with many now advocating for the civic nationalist demands of Ukrainian sovereignty and furthering national interests (Minesashvili, 2023, pp.475–476). As identification with Russia has declined in Ukraine, association with Europe and the West has increased. The previously fractured East-West domestic divide has unified around a widely accepted perception of shared, positive, and desirable European values, like democracy, good-governance (Korostelina et al., 2025, p.12), and civic nationalism (Minesashvili, 2023, pp.472–473; Tsyrf, 2013, pp.45–46) that unites Ukraine with Europe (Tsyrf, 2013, p.44; Shulman, 1999, p.1020). Europe provides an alternative civic identity with which Ukraine can associate and an increasingly popular alternative future independent of Russia and its sphere of influence (Korostelina et al., 2025, pp.13, 19–20; Minesashvili, 2023, p.461). Survey results demonstrate that since the start of the war, the vast majority

of Ukrainians have supported the nation’s entrance into the European Union and NATO, while the numbers of those who identify as Soviet (Dodonova, 2024, pp.72–73) as well as anti-European, pro-Russian rhetoric have both diminished greatly (Minesashvili, 2023, pp.475–476). The developing civic Ukrainian national identity is thus moulded by moralised relationships in which Ukraine and Europe share societal characteristics that contrast with Russian traits, fostering a sense of national affiliation throughout the diverse Ukrainian communities and promoting internal unity in a time of crisis.

INVOCATIONS OF ETHNICITY AND THEIR ROLE IN CONSTRUCTING NATIONAL IDENTITY

Orientalised Rhetoric

In Edward Said’s 1978 book *Orientalism*, he pioneers the concept of orientalism as a Western style of thought that constructs the East as inferior, exotic, and a perpetual other in comparison with the rational, developed, and civilised West. The East, or the Orient, is a constructed antipole of the Occidental West; the Western collective ‘us’ (self) is intrinsically opposite to ‘them’—the Eastern others (Said, 1978). Identification of the Oriental other, Said (1978) argues, is determined through the hegemony of Occidental knowledge production that determines and constructs the essentialised, inferior traits of the Orient. Importantly, this construction is negative—‘irrational, depraved (fallen), childlike, “different”’ (Said, 1978, p.40)—invoking racial, ethnic, and cultural stereotypes so as to highlight the normalcy and virtuousness of the West (Thomas-Olalde and Velho, 2011, pp.29–31). As is demonstrated below, Ukrainian media and government orientalises Russian Buryat soldiers, exploiting their Asian appearance in Ukrainian media.

Despite the development of a civic national identity in Ukraine and the increasing disregard for ethnic differences domestically, ethnicity continues to contribute to Ukrainian nation-building through the orientalised and racialised instrumentalisation of Buryats in Ukrainian media discourses. Siberian minorities, including Buryats, largely began to appear in Ukrainian media in 2014 after Russia invaded Crimea, identified by Ukrainian locals as East-Asian looking Russian soldiers sent into Ukraine under the guise of being volunteer recruits. Their images and names were circulated in newspapers and online videos in an attempt to prove that the newly arrived minorities were, in fact, Russian soldiers committing brutal acts. For instance, Vladimir Andanov was a Buryat volunteer for the Russian army accused of brutally murdering Ukrainian prisoners; he maintained a virulently arrogant online presence, coming to personify the collective image of militant Russian cruelty (Szmyt,

2024, p.176). Later, after the massacres in Bucha and Irpin, Siberian soldiers who made up only part of the multi-ethnic Russian units responsible were unequally blamed (Szmyt, 2024, p.176; Vynogradova, 2022), leading many in Ukraine to associate the murders and later Russian savagery with the Buryats. As one soldier stated, ‘if, God forbid, [the Russian army] managed to gain a foothold...their artillery would reach the city centre. It would be the second Bucha, because then the Buryats were advancing’ (Demchuk and Simkina, 2026). Over time, ‘Putin’s combat Buryats’ has become the moniker for any Asian-appearing Russian soldiers, and Ukrainian media continuously accuses them disproportionately of theft, torture, and crimes against civilians (Szmyt, 2024, p.176).

These media fixations on Asian-appearing Russian soldiers, regardless of their actual prevalence in the Russian military, demonstrate the invocation of ethnicity, racialisation, and orientalist rhetoric in an attempt to other Russia and establish Ukrainian in- and out-groups. Through the ascription of stereotypes based on perceived racial markers, Ukrainian media categorises and stigmatises Buryats. It creates ‘otherness out of physical difference’ associated with human-constructed social meanings (Molla, 2024, pp.18, 21). Unlike other Western orientalist discourses, however, the Ukrainian orientalised and racialisation of Buryats ‘is used by the victims of military aggression as a reactive measure of differentiation, set against the Russian discourse of national unity between Russians and Ukrainians’ (Szmyt, 2024, p.173). Thus, it functions to further demonise Russia through the Buryat image as uncivilised, savage, complacent with Russian authoritarian demands, and wholly antithetical to European, and, adjacently, Ukrainian values (Uncu, 2025, p.450; Wilson, 2023, p.14). This augments Ukrainian media’s othering of their aggressor (Voloshyn, 2022). Moreover, the Buryat’s Asian appearance functions as tangible evidence of the negative Asian character of Russia and its people: ‘a threat-posing Other[.]... an immoral Asian entity with imperialistic goals’ (Minesashvili, 2023, p.472).

Orientalised overrepresentations of Buryats constructs a binary, moralised, and racialised boundary between the Ukrainian, European ‘us’ and Russian, Asian ‘them’, stressing how wholly incongruent and unlike Ukrainians and Russians are (Szmyt, 2024, pp.172–173, 177). It is a clear invocation of ethnic identity for the purpose of othering the enemy and strengthening Ukraine’s national, civic identity. Furthermore, this employment of orientalised (Szmyt, 2024, p.184) superiorises Ukrainian identity and dissuades Ukrainian citizens from identifying with a demeaned, inferiorised, and vilified Russia, further incentivising a united civic Ukrainian nationalism. Orientalisation emancipates

Ukraine from historical and current Russian imperialism, functioning to affirm Ukrainian identity, sovereignty, and agency in the face of Russian colonial rhetoric and aggression (Szmyt, 2024, p.186). Additionally, as the historical ‘Euro-Orientalism’ of Ukraine (Kuldkepp, 2023, p.66) is subsequently overcome, Ukraine’s sovereignty in the face of Russia’s colonial war rhetoric is established (Szmyt, 2024, p.186), and greater Western support for Ukraine’s defence is garnered and legitimised through an orientalised, racialised evaluation of national values, identities, and relationships.

Colonial Solidarity

In addition to invoking ethnicity through the orientalised Buryats and, consequently, greater Russian society, Ukrainian media also contrastingly promotes ethnic rhetoric

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The instrumentalisation of ethnicity, specifically of the Buryats, is intrinsic in both orientalist and solidarity rhetoric and is highly significant in producing perceptions of Russia and Ukraine that only augment Ukraine’s war-time civic nation-building.

by sympathising with the Buryats’ decolonial struggle and frequently connecting the Buryats’ fight against Russian imperialism with that of Ukraine. In many instances, Ukrainian discourses attempt to portray Buryats (and other Siberian minorities) as enslaved groups under Russian colonialism who are, like Ukrainians, striving to resist Russian rule and emancipate their populations (Szmyt, 2024, pp.174–175). Discourses frequently portray Buryats as ‘cannon fodder’ (Szmyt, 2024, p.176) for Russian imperialism in Ukraine, pointing to their exploitative overconscription and high fatality rates in the war, as well as the general inequalities and discrimination against them (Szmyt, 2024, pp.174–175). At times, Siberian independence projects are also highlighted and politicians are quoted advocating for Siberian resistance movements (Szmyt, 2024, pp.174–175). Similarly, Ukrainian media frequently attempts to associate the Ukrainian experience with that of the Buryats

through their histories and memories as colonised people fighting for sovereignty and agency against an aggressive imperial Russia (Males and Konieczna-Salamatin, 2025, p.105). For example, culturally Russian and Russian-speaking Ukrainians have been said to only speak the language because of Russian colonialism, rather than as an independent conscious decision and affiliation with Russianness (Korostelina et al., 2025, p.18). As a result, discussion on the potential future dissolution of the Russian Federation, independence for federal subjects like Buryatia, and the benefit these would provide Ukraine is not uncommon (Szmyt, 2024, p.174). One article notes that ‘centrifugal movements of the enslaved peoples of Russia can play in favour of Ukraine in a situation of war, because they will destabilise the aggressor state and question its existence within the existing borders’ (Kotubey-Herutska, 2023). It goes on to spotlight the historic anti-racist movements in Ukraine that organised against Russia’s imperialism of its ‘enslaved peoples’ (Kotubey-Herutska, 2023). Exemplifying these descriptions and accounts, a number of Buryat prisoners of war in Ukraine have taken up arms with the Ukrainian army to fight Russian incursions, appearing occasionally in Ukrainian media to call attention to Russian racism and colonialism. Additionally, Buryat activists living in exile have been featured in the press advocating for decolonisation, dissolution of the Russian empire, and national sovereignty for ethnic regions of Russia (Serdyuk, 2023; Szmyt, 2024, pp.174–175).

The invocation of ethnicity in discourse relating Ukrainian and Buryat colonial experiences is, like with the Orientalist rhetoric, a critical component of further villainising Russia. By identifying the multi-ethnic character of Russia and the ongoing ethnic discrimination within the country, it highlights Russia’s colonial foundations, serving to further demonise the country and elevate the moral standing of Ukraine as both a country accepting of ethnic diversity and as another victim of Russian imperialism. It sharpens the boundary between a civic, tolerant European Ukraine and an imperial, ethnically hierarchical Russia, compounding the ‘us’ versus ‘them’ perspective and consolidating a cohesive, civic national identity for Ukrainians. While this discourse may appear contradictory and antithetical to the orientalising and othering of Buryats, in reality, the two narratives naturally reinforce each other’s purpose. Through identifying ethnicity, both intend to establish a clear boundary between the Ukrainian in-group and out-group populations, thus strengthening Ukraine’s united national identity. Both discourses reiterate the acute need for Ukraine to emerge from under Eastern imperial Russian rule and return to its inherent Western partners in Europe (Szmyt, 2024, p.172). Together, the ethnic portrayals established

a clear distinction between the aggressive Russian coloniser and the moral, victimised Ukraine. The instrumentalisation of ethnicity, specifically of the Buryats, is intrinsic in both orientalist and solidarity rhetoric and is highly significant in producing perceptions of Russia and Ukraine that only augment Ukraine’s war-time civic nation-building.

CONCLUSION

The consolidation of Ukrainian national identity since 2014, and especially since Russia’s 2022 full-scale invasion, has frequently been characterised as a process of patriotic unity through civic nationalism. Faced with the Russian existential threat, Ukrainians across linguistic, cultural, and regional divides have rallied around shared political values, sovereignty, and democratic aspirations, differentiating themselves from authoritarian, despotic Russia and connecting closer with Europe. However, the discursive treatment of Buryats in Ukrainian media and political rhetoric complicates this analysis of a purely civic transformation.

As this article has demonstrated, Buryats have been simultaneously orientalised as personifications of an uncivilised Asian Russia and positioned as victims of Russian imperialism alongside Ukrainians. These seemingly contradictory narratives in fact serve a common purpose of sharpening the boundary between Ukrainian and Russian identities and values. Racialising the Russian enemy and contrasting it with a civic, European Ukraine reinforces national cohesion despite cultural diversity, legitimises Ukraine’s geopolitical reorientation toward Europe, and garners support for Ukraine’s self-defence. In practice, Ukrainian nation-building is therefore not exclusively civic, but both civic and ethnic; ethnicity remains a powerful tool in defining Ukrainian in- and out-groups. Recognising this complexity allows for a more nuanced understanding of how war reshapes identities and ‘us’ versus ‘them’ discourses, revealing that even civic endeavours of nationhood are rarely free from ethnic undercurrents.

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ALIENATED THROUGH LANGUAGE

Russophones’ Disaffection and Language Rationalisation in Latvia

by artūrs taube

illustration by oleksandra zhyhalkina

Two years prior to Latvia regaining independence from the USSR in 1991, only 52 percent of the population was ethnically Latvian (Chmielewski, 2024; Šūpule, 2024, p.63). Consequently, the Latvian majority felt threatened from the perceived threat of their minority status (Šūpule, 2024, p.62). Following independence, the Latvian government pursued an integration policy aimed at strengthening the Latvian majority: reforms included those in language policy, citizenship, and education, while also reversing five decades of prioritising the Russian language (Šūpule, 2024, pp.63–64). In the 1990s and 2000s, some liberalisation efforts gained momentum. For example, the constitution was amended such that it asserts that Latvian is the only state language, but minorities have a constitutional right to maintain and develop their languages and culture (Saeima, 1998). In addition, the naturalisation process was made less time consuming; however, subsequent reform soon ceased (Apine, 2006, p.15). A pivotal moment for the long-term future of Latvia’s integration policy emerged in 2012, when a referendum proposing a constitutional amendment to make Russian the second official language (Centrālā vēlēšanu komisija,

2023) was decisively rejected, thus shaping the trajectory of Latvia’s integration policy.

This article argues that language rationalisation, or a policy that promotes ‘convergence on a privileged public language’ (Patten, 2001, p.701)—in this case, Latvian—prioritises expediency at the expense of long-term, successful social cohesion in Latvia. The disadvantages of language rationalisation will first be illustrated by showing that Russophones—Russian-speakers—feel pressured to give up their identity which is tied to the Russian world, due to the trend toward converging on a single language and government policies that facilitate such convergence. Second, it is argued that apoliticism is rising in the Russophone community, partly caused by government restrictions on Russian-language media. Finally, this article argues that these phenomena are not entirely attributable to successful Russian propaganda. Thus, it is demonstrated that it is exactly government policy that is heightening tensions between Russophones and Latvian speakers within the Republic of Latvia.

Šūpules’ (2024) analysis provides a general

perspective on integration processes in Latvia since 1991, including the period following the 2012 referendum, which is of particular importance for this article. Overall, Šūpules’ analysis concludes that the integration policy has been very successful in achieving its goals. A larger number of Russophones speak Latvian, general education is conducted entirely in Latvian, minority-language education paths have been dismantled, and the number of non-citizens has fallen drastically (Šūpule, 2024, pp.66–68). Due to the citizenship laws of Latvia, non-citizens were mostly those who immigrated during the years of USSR’s occupation and had weak Latvian skills, mostly Russians, Belarusians, and Ukrainians (Šūpule, 2024, p.65). Additionally, the pro-Russian media scene has been limited, with certain channels being banned due to ‘incitement to hatred and violence’ (Rönngren, 2025, pp.34–35). However, according to researcher Alan Patten (2001, pp.704–705), failing to grant equal recognition to a minority language can alienate its speakers and undermine political cohesion. Yet, this sense of alienation and lack of political unity is not among the metrics used in Šūpules’ analysis, thereby creating a gap in the evaluation of integration



policy. This introduces the possibility that Latvian successfully becomes the main public language without achieving social cohesion. Patten’s theoretical possibility has materialised since 2012. The Russophone minority in Latvia has become increasingly distrustful of the government in response to integration laws perceived as overbearing (Zelče, 2009, p.48)

LANGUAGE RATIONALISATION & THE PRESSURE TO BECOME LATVIAN

To assess the potential political and societal effects of these language-centric policies, including the role of the 2012 referendum, it is useful to consider Patten’s (2001) framework for language policies. At this critical junction, Latvia could have pursued a variety of such policies, including official multilingualism, in which several languages are afforded the same privileges in state and public use. Alternatively, language rationalisation could be pursued, where state-supported convergence towards one publicly used language is justified by the numerous benefits a state and a population enjoy from having one privileged language used nationally (Patten, 2001, pp.695, 701). The result of the referendum reinforced the government’s commitment to language rationalisation.

One of the advantages language rationalisation can bring about is a common identity without the division along linguistic lines (Patten, 2001, pp.701-702), but this requires successful uptake of this common identity. Therefore, an important prerequisite is the Russophone readiness to assume this common Latvian identity. A lack of this readiness reinforces alienation from the political community and hinders the implementation of language rationalisation policy.

There is a lack of current quantitative data exploring Russophone identification with the Latvian identity: While some crucial studies on this issue are PhD theses (see Barth, 2024; Rönngren, 2025) and thus lack rigorous external review, this highlights a gap in the literature which is particularly highlighted by this article, specifically the fact that Russophone experience on questions of integration has been understudied. Notably, between 2004 and 2014 there was a very significant decrease among Russophones in Latvia identifying as Russian and an increase in people identifying with the nation state (Duvold et. al., 2020, p.35). This suggests a positive trend in identity convergence, but without any data since 2014 it is not possible to evaluate what effect the new language rationalisation policies have had. More recent data suggests lower satisfaction with democracy and representation among Russophones in Latvia (Chereson and Estes, 2023, pp.594-595). But these findings are not direct indicators of identity uptake.

However, more qualitative research has been conducted on this issue. Barth (2024) interviewed Russophones in Latvia aged 22 to 33. While this research only conducted eight interviews with Russophones that lacked demographic diversity (Barth, 2024, pp.30-32) and is, therefore, unlikely to represent the full range of opinions in the Russophone community, it can provide nuanced personal accounts of people’s complex identities. Barth found that there is a common perception of pressure to adhere to Latvian ideals and culture, spearheaded by the Latvian language, where ‘you are supposed to treat the Latvian language as something with transcendental value’ (Barth, 2024, p.37). The ideas of the Latvian national awakening were also incorporated into school language lessons and, furthermore, Russophones do not understand the need for this pressure and would rather that Latvia be a place where multiple different identities can coexist (Barth, 2024, p.38).

Even this small sample size included one individual who went to a Latvian school, who felt a stronger affiliation with Latvian culture than most other Russophones (Barth, 2024, p.44). This example demonstrates that there are instances in which Russophones gain a common identity due to language rationalisation policies, but more research should further investigate whether Russophones educated in Latvian rather than minority schools consistently help to construct a common identity. Additionally, this appeared to be the only example of substantial acceptance of the Latvian identity, and Barth (2024, p.44) simultaneously found a complete rejection of Latvian identity by others. Thus, language rationalisation would be difficult to achieve as long as Russophones perceive attempts to promote the Latvian language negatively and are reluctant to accept a common identity with Latvian speakers.

MOVING BEYOND HISTORICAL NARRATIVES

Perceived pressure on identity is heightened by conflicting historical narratives between Latvian speaking and Russophone groups. The Latvian and Russian identities have significant differences in their historical narratives to such an extent that many consider it impossible for a person to accommodate both identities (Zelče, 2009, p.48). The most acute difference concerns the memory of World War II, as for Latvians, this represents the start of a brutal 50-year-long occupation by the Soviets (Plakans, 2015, p.134). Many Russophones, however, recall it as a more acute period of suffering in which their ancestors fought to defend the USSR (Cheskin, 2012, pp.565-566). Tension between these collective memories is further heightened by the Russian government’s exploitation of historical narratives to politically mobilise

the Russophone community (Zelče, 2009, p.54; Polegkyi, 2016). In response, the Latvian government has restricted certain symbols, such as banning the public use of the St. George Ribbon, a Russian remembrance symbol (Rönngren, 2025, pp.32-33). This has left some Russophones distressed about not being able to display symbols of remembrance of their family members, resulting in the sidelining of their competing collective memory (Rönngren, 2025, p.167). While Rönngren’s findings must be approached with caution due to a limited sample size (Rönngren, 2025, pp.74-78), this sentiment nevertheless exemplifies a broader perception that the Russophone identity is under attack. In turn, the perception of being under threat erodes trust between the Russophone community and the Latvian government.

A 2011 poll conducted on 9 May, the Victory Day commemorating Russia’s role in World War II, showed that younger Russophones only partly agreed that Russia never occupied Latvia (Cheskin, 2012, p.568), displaying a tendency to deny a historical fact. In contrast, older generations almost fully endorsed this view (Cheskin, 2012, p.568). This phenomenon indicates that Russophones had begun a slow shift away from the Russian historical narrative before language rationalisation policies were introduced in 2012. This signals that some identity convergence was already underway before 2012 and before stricter language rationalisation policies were implemented. Recent policies limiting Russian symbols may have intensified feelings of resentment, which interestingly may be reversing the progress that had been made before language rationalisation. Therefore it is logical that resentment between Russophones towards the state and the rest of the population that is caused by language rationalisation is weakening social cohesion.

Before the shift toward stronger language rationalisation policies, there were positive trends in Russophone integration and less distrust toward the government’s policies concerning culture and identity. While some Russophones felt they did not belong in Latvia, many understood the need for knowledge of the official language (Cheskin, 2013, pp.301-302). For example, a 2004 law requiring 60 percent of education in minority schools to be conducted in Latvian was generally accepted as it aimed to help them learn Latvian (Cheskin, 2013, p.301). This understanding of the practical necessity of the Latvian language persists today (Barth, 2024, pp.41-42). While expressing alienation, the Russophones did not blame Latvians or the state; they only noted regret (Cheskin, 2013, p.301). This is significant, because current disagreement with the language rationalisation policies shows that some Russophones since 2012 have begun perceiving the Latvian government as the cause of their alienation.

Cheskin (2013) also concludes that the high potential for integration evident among Russophones at that time arises from this minority's retention of its cultural ties to the Russian world. Limiting these cultural freedoms would likely lead to discourses of marginalisation (Cheskin, 2013, p.309). This is significant, as it clarifies that Russophone perceptions of marginalisation and alienation are not inherent to the integration process but are linked to policies that aim to replace the Russian identity with a Latvian one. The effects of state policy were not unforeseeable. While language rationalisation requires the convergence of identity, the policy has placed unwelcome pressure on the Russophone community. Positive integration trends had already occurred, indicating a slow, gradual convergence. However, the recent, highly visible legal changes, such as the ban on the St. George ribbon, have ignited resentment and a sense of betrayal.

**NO OPINION OR A HIDDEN
OPINION: APOLITICISM WITHIN
RUSSOPHONES**

One benefit of language rationalisation is that it can improve democratic deliberation: if everyone in a state speaks the same language, democratic discussion and representation can function more effectively (Patten, 2001, pp.701–702). However, Russophones have increasingly demonstrated a lack of interest in politics (Kapráns et al., 2025, p.32). Moreover, political apathy and decreased democratic participation correlate with an avoidance of political media (Matthes, Heiss, and van Scharrel, 2023).

The Latvian media environment is divided between Latvian and Russian-language sides (Rönngren, 2025, p.33). The Latvian government has sought to create a single-language media sphere to protect Latvia from Russia's influence by limiting access to sources that promote aggression or Russian propaganda narratives. However, this has resulted in a substantial portion of Russophones refusing to consume political media due to a perception that all political media is unreliable or biased (Saulītis, 2024, pp.12–15).

Additionally, some Russophones perceive media restrictions as limiting free speech, a long-standing Kremlin narrative (Rönngren, 2025, pp.95–97). Most participants opposed the ban, citing either free-speech concerns or the need for greater variety in news sources (Rönngren, 2025, pp.161–163). The latter stems from the fact that Russophones often consume a variety of sources simultaneously to counteract their distrust of any single source, although this phenomenon is present in Latvian speakers as well (Rönngren, 2025, pp.108–110). It is nonetheless important to note this, because it is specifically Russian language media that

is restricted. The fact that Russian-language media is singled out continues to undermine social cohesion between Russophones and Latvian-speakers.

Thus, the language rationalisation policy does not appear to be achieving its intended goals, as Russophones are not shifting to the Latvian-language media sphere. As a result, it is unlikely that language rationalisation policy will increase democratic deliberation, as the Latvian language cannot be established as the prioritised language. Furthermore, rather than increasing political engagement, these policies appear to contribute to disengagement. The government's actions have eroded Russophone communities' trust in receiving

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While language rationalisation requires the convergence of identity, the policy has placed unwelcome pressure on the Russophone community.

accurate information about the world, highlighting a broader distrust in the Latvian government.

**JUST THE EFFECTS OF
PROPAGANDA?**

Given Russia's attempts to influence Latvian politics through the media (Duvold et. al., 2020, pp.31–33), distrust of the Latvian government may stem from Russian propaganda. For instance, 29 percent of Russophones believe that Russia is fighting Nazism in Ukraine (Kapráns et al., 2025, p.5), a claim rooted in the Kremlin's attempts to justify the war in Ukraine (Drugā, 2022, pp.88–89) which is widely regarded as false (EUvsDisinfo, 2025). This suggests that part of the Russophone community is influenced by Russian state narratives. However, Russophones are capable of comparing Russian propaganda narratives with their lived experiences. Many reject the claim that Latvia is forcibly assimilating Russian speakers through education, while simultaneously opposing policies such as the ban on Russian media (Rönngren, 2025, pp.154–156, 161–163). This variation demonstrates that Russophone views

are not homogeneous as they might be if there was a universal uptake of Russian propaganda narratives.

Furthermore, the factors that determine whether a Kremlin narrative is accepted are Russophones' expectations of practical improvement or deterioration in their living conditions. For example, many believe that the Latvian language will provide them with greater opportunities and that changes in the conduct of general education will increase Russophone opportunities in the long term (Rönngren, 2025, p.154). Conversely, Russophones reported family members who can only consume Russian-language media due to their lack of Latvian-language proficiency, and concluded that limiting access to these sources will disadvantage Russophones (Rönngren, 2025, pp.141–142). Another study found that propaganda narratives from the media organisation *Sputnik* increase the perceived discrimination of Russophones in Latvia. Nonetheless, this study acknowledged that these narratives rarely rely on irrefutably false information and include some genuine concerns about Latvia's policy (Hoyle et al., 2024, pp.759, 767–769). These examples indicate a potential link between Russophones' real-life experiences with Latvian policy and their receptiveness to Russian narratives. Thus, the previously discussed impact of language rationalisation policy on Russophone cohesion with the rest of society is relevant, despite Russian propaganda narratives amplifying these grievances with the state.

While Russian propaganda is effective, the Latvian government's policy aimed at achieving language rationalisation has fostered conditions that allow the Russian government to further proliferate and perpetuate its propaganda narratives. Thus social cohesion is lowered by a combination of propaganda and practical conditions, rather than propaganda alone.

CONCLUSION

Language rationalisation can be beneficial to a state, which is partly observable in Latvia. However, it has also caused distrust of the Latvian government and increased susceptibility to Russian propaganda narratives within the Russophone community. This is largely because the Russophones perceive that, alongside pressures to know and use Latvian, they are facing pressure to alter their identity by giving up their ties to the Russian world. The government's decision to limit access to Russian-language media has contributed to Russophones avoiding political media, thereby failing to achieve the potential effect of increased democratic deliberation. These outcomes are not solely the result of effective propaganda, as most Russophones evaluate claims from Russia against their own experiences, showing that susceptibility

depends on real-life conditions. Language rationalisation could have created a cohesive media sphere and given the population of Latvia a unifying language; however, the speed and abruptness of its implementation has weakened social cohesion within the Latvian state. In a global context this can be seen as a case study of the possible limitations of maintaining one privileged public language while there exist prominent linguistic minorities within the state.

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FLUENT IN CONFLICT

The Unseen Dangers of the Lingua Franca

by laken evans

illustration by freia nilsson



The past half-century has seen a clear uptick in violent conflict; localised, reactive outbreaks of violence are becoming increasingly common (United Nations, 2019). In such a world, efficient conflict resolution methods are more important than ever. For as long as global conflict resolution has existed, a lingua franca has existed in tandem: Latin, Arabic, French, and now English have all served in this role (Friedrich, 2007, p.76). A lingua franca is a non-native third language employed to facilitate communication between two parties who do not have a common spoken language between them (Meierkord, 2000). English has been used as the *de facto* lingua franca in peacebuilding for the past several decades, though recent scholarship has begun to call its efficiency in facilitating peace, and the efficiency of its predecessors, into question (Grant, Maoz, and Keysar, 2022, p.980). This article argues that a lingua franca is not suited to successful conflict resolution, and in fact actively impedes peacebuilding efforts. Its use elicits a greater proportion of negative, non-conciliatory emotions from parties involved in negotiations, and hinders comprehension in negotiations when compared to bilingual translation. The transformation of lingua francas into linguistic capital also serves to exclude those who do not possess mastery from places of negotiation and this over-reliance on a non-native language deteriorates the linguistic vitality of regional languages. In addition, the use of a lingua franca

perpetuates the residual colonial hierarchy which laid the groundwork for many of the same conflicts it is attempting to resolve. In lieu of instituting a linguistic hegemony for the sake of efficiency, the merits of bilingual moderation should be considered as an alternative in peacebuilding spaces.

NEGATIVE EMOTIONAL ELICITATION

Negotiations, especially those to resolve armed and violent conflict, are often impeded by strong emotions from all sides of the conflict. These 'hot conflict' negotiations are typically extremely ideologically, religiously, or ethnically personal to those involved, and hindered by the conscious or unconscious establishment of the opposing party as the 'enemy' (Bar-Tal, 2000, pp.357–358). Parties will subconsciously discount the sincerity of a proposal from the opposing side, and this reactive devaluation hinders proactive peacebuilding (Ross and Ward, 1995, p.270). In theory, a lingua franca aids immensely in facilitating more impersonal discourse (Grant, Maoz, and Keysar, 2022, pp.981–982), in that it lacks native language-specific words which could be linked to negative emotional responses.

However, this solution of complete emotional detachment by utilising neutral words without any cultural significance to the negotiating parties is counterintuitive. Grant, Maoz, and Keysar's (2022) seminal study illustrates these issues. Here, researchers provided a mock peace proposal

from a Palestinian delegation to Israeli Hebrew speakers with a comparable fluency in English. They did so in either Hebrew or English, and asked several questions to gauge the perception of the proposal; participants were asked to evaluate the extent to which the proposal was 'pro-Israeli' or 'pro-Palestinian'. Participants consistently perceived the proposal in Hebrew as being more favorable than the proposal written in the lingua franca, English. Using the native language of the opposition during conflict mediation has been proven to elicit a more positive response from those involved, creating a greater likelihood of a favorable outcome (Grant, Maoz, and Keysar, 2022, p.988).

Impartiality is one of the supposed benefits of a lingua franca, but due to inevitable unconscious biases in the resolution process, that cannot be guaranteed. Further, beyond the issue of unconscious bias, it is questionable whether impartiality is achievable, or is even desirable in peacebuilding spaces. While the language may be impersonal to non-native speakers, this lack of emotion is antithetical to resolution. Initiating negotiations in a party's native language rather than a lingua franca is often viewed as a gesture of goodwill, and creates an initial sense of alignment between parties due to the impact of a language on creating a sense of shared identity (Giles and Johnson, 1987, pp.70–71; Grant, Maoz, and Keysar, 2022, p.981). The resolution of conflict, especially violent

and localised conflict, is a deeply personal and emotional process. To that end, any alignment or proactive cooperation is exceedingly valuable to meaningful resolution. The proposal in this instance, when read in Hebrew, elicited greater sympathy and less hatred, suggesting that the emotional resonance which stems from a shared linguistic identity may be more conducive to conflict resolution than the purported neutrality of a lingua franca.

The superiority of a lingua franca in peacebuilding has also been called into question from an empirical perspective. Researchers are beginning to question whether its primacy is due to its superficial efficiency rather than its true substantial benefit to peacebuilding. While it may be a quicker, more logistically attractive option for peacebuilding, Reithofer (2011, pp.152–153) proves that there is an inevitably lower overall level of comprehension with a lingua franca. As an alternative, when cross-language discussions are conducted via bilingual moderation or bilingual written translation, there is a greater level of audience comprehension than when a lingua franca is utilised. Mutual understanding is one of the most critical aspects of a negotiation aiming to foster continued peace and communication between warring states; a disregard for the immense impact language plays in this process introduces further roadblocks to sustained peace.

THE PARADOX OF LINGUISTIC IMPERIALISM

Much of the research lauding the implementation of a lingua franca in commerce, media, and diplomacy, as well as its entrenchment in bureaucratic processes, uses the base argument that a transnational global language is beneficial and should be strived towards (Gerhards, 2012). It is touted as a unitary factor; its use across multiple fields effectively standardises language, generating a large pool of individuals who all speak the same tongue. It is often seen as an inevitable global shift, which can be aided along its path but not stopped or reversed (Van Parijs, 2011, pp.24–26). What such claims fail to recognise is that this entrenchment of a lingua franca is not a deliberate modern choice, but a vestige of colonial power structures. All lingua francas used today have gained that position of primacy through linguistic imperialism, a hegemony derived from a ‘dependent core-periphery relationship’ (Aydinli and Aydinli, 2024, p.944).

Linguistic imperialism is defined as a conscious domination of a country’s language by the language of its coloniser, driven by both institutions and the attitudes of the language’s speakers (Canagarajah and Ben Said, 2011, pp.388–389). When this linguistic imperialism is applied to the sphere of conflict resolution, it can be seen

that the *de facto* lingua franca actively excludes those without mastery of the language from the negotiation process. This cultivates a reliance upon native speakers of that lingua franca, creating a lack of agency for countries over their own peacebuilding efforts. Many of the disputes being settled by lingua francas today are the result of arbitrary colonial divisions or the fallout from extractive colonial institutions (Sadio and Ba, 2025, p.620). The lingua franca for these negotiations is often the same one initially imposed by the colonial powers which directly or indirectly laid the groundwork for

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these conflicts as illustrated by Opara (2016, p.12) and House and colleagues. (2025, pp.715–716). A reliance upon speakers of that imperial language is cultivated to solve the problems created by the entrenchment of colonial systems, including the imposition of that language in the first place.

A clear example of this is the negotiations surrounding the Central African Republic (CAR) Civil War (2013-present). Former members of the *Séléka* (‘alliance’ in Sango, the lingua franca of the CAR), a consortium of criminal groups, entered into armed conflict with the *Anti-Balaka* (‘machete-proof’) militia group (Fortin, 2013; Zimmerman, 2022, pp.68–69). The origins of this conflict can be traced to French post-colonial intervention in the leadership of the CAR. Resource extraction during French colonial rule weakened the country and, following its formal independence, France continued to selectively support or oppose militant groups in the CAR. Due to the status of the CAR as a former French colony, France sent 2,000 troops in Operation Sangaris to stabilise the region and lay the groundwork for the subsequent UN Stabilisation Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA) (Kłosowicz, 2016, p.44). As Kłosowicz (2016, p.36) acknowledges, ‘the problem [of the CAR Civil War] was exacerbated

by the colonial legacy, as the European superpowers delineated boundaries of their zones of influence, but failed to take into account ethnic and cultural differences’. The borders drawn under French colonial rule alienated the country’s Muslim minority in under-developed and systemically underrepresented regions of the country, which led to the birth of the largely-Muslim *Séléka* alliance. The subsequent violence under the *Séléka* gave rise to the Christian and Animist *Anti-Balaka* militia, which began a campaign of ethno-religious cleansing against the country’s Muslim population in 2013 (Amnesty International, 2014). The conflict between former *Séléka* members and the *Anti-Balaka* militia is a direct result of those original French partitions, which led to a sectarian, highly politicised series of human rights violations by both sides.

During Operation Sangaris and MINUSCA, French was used as the lingua franca in peace negotiations between the warring groups. In this way, French, the former colonial language, was imposed to resolve a conflict directly caused by the past interference of that same colonial power. The use of a lingua franca in negotiations did not lead to a definitive peace agreement as the civil war in the CAR is still ongoing (Kamau, 2016). Throughout Operation Sangaris, French was used as a lingua franca (Laassel, 2015; Mezouar, 2014), though most of the ex-*Séléka* forces ‘spoke no French or Sango, only Arabic’ (International Commission of Inquiry, 2014, p.18). Thus, one side of the civil war did not have the linguistic capability to engage with the peacebuilding being done by other nations and organisations on its behalf. The arbitrary imposition of a lingua franca resulted in forced dependency of the CAR on France and Morocco for negotiations, and a complete lack of agency for Central Africans over their nation’s future. With the repetition of colonial patterns, facilitated by a colonial lingua franca, the population most affected by negotiations is effectively sealed from peacebuilding spaces.

TRANSITION OF LANGUAGE INTO LINGUISTIC CAPITAL

As mentioned before, the use of a lingua franca in conflict resolution is extremely exclusionary, not least due to the fact that this gradual linguistic hegemony transforms the lingua franca into an unevenly distributed form of capital. The phenomena of a ‘linguistic capital’, or ‘linguicism’ occurs when knowledge or mastery of language becomes a marketable skill and a tool for upward social mobility (Phillipson, 2009, p.338; Skutnabb-Kangas, 1988, p.13). In terms of conflict resolution, this is detrimental for a number of reasons. Firstly, the dispossession of regional languages creates a much narrower path to negotiation. If a lingua franca is entrenched in negotiations, there is reduced possibility of agreement being reached without its

involvement. The dominance of a single non-native language also has the secondary consequence of eroding the vitality of regional languages over time. The decline of linguistic vitality, or the social health of a language (Medeiros, 2017, p.627), has been extensively documented over the past half century. The devaluation of regional languages leads to a reduction in their vitality; as a language’s vitality is decreased, valuable cultural heritage and personal identity is lost (Friedrich, 2007, pp.72–73). If language continues to be viewed by some in the peacebuilding sphere as just a means of resolution rather than a complex, living entity, this shift will only be exacerbated. What functions as a simple means of streamlining the negotiating process does irreparable damage to language health.

CONCLUSION

By supplanting regional languages, lingua francas solidify their position as a form of sociocultural capital in the sphere of global peacebuilding. While linguistic homogeneity is undoubtedly beneficial in some areas of commerce and trade, the assumption that a lingua franca benefits conflict resolution reduces the role of language to that of a simple tool. In reality, language pervades every aspect of both conflict and peacebuilding; in a world where rapid conflict resolution is increasingly important, this assumption does a dangerous disservice to peacebuilding. The use of a lingua franca evokes a more powerful negative emotional response in negotiations than the use of a native language. The introduction of bilingual moderation in the place of lingua franca negotiations shows promise in multilateral peacebuilding, and is a path which should be explored further in peace literature. From a logistical standpoint, despite what might be assumed, lingua francas have not been shown to have any benefits for comprehension when compared to bilingual moderation. High quality bilingual translation/interpreting is more effective than a lingua franca. As could be seen in the CAR, lingua francas can be a direct heritage of extractive imperial institutions. The arbitrary imposition of a lingua franca served to remove victims of the conflict from negotiating spaces, and cultivated an involuntary dependency on those with lingua franca mastery; that forced dependency breeds lack of agency. With its newly solidified position as linguistic capital, a source of value and power, the lingua franca has become a tool of peacebuilding which impairs the speed, consistency, and overall efficacy of conflict resolution.

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THE UNICORN IN THE CHAMBER

Gàidhlig and Representation in Scottish Politics

by **rose stewart young**

illustration by **lucy barrett**

Scottish Gàidhlig speakers account for only one percent of Scotland's population (Scottish Government, 2025a). Scotland's 2022 Census recorded 69,701 people able to speak Gàidhlig and 130,161 able to speak, read, write or understand it; these figures represented the first census increase in reported Gàidhlig-speaking ability since 1971 (Scotland's Census, 2022). In centuries gone by, Gàidhlig was a widely spoken language but now faces a decline into dormancy. Such decline points to the need for language revitalisation efforts, meaning measures which reverse a trend in decline of speakers (Hinton and Hale, 2001, p.5) to ensure habitual social use and therefore generational transmission, creating Gàidhlig as a normal language of families and services.

Scots, another Indigenous language of Scotland, must be acknowledged within this context; in Scotland's 2022 census, 1,508,540 people reported that they could speak Scots. While Scots and Gàidhlig are both indigenous languages of Scotland and both now possess official status, their demographic bases and histories are not identical. The recognition and prominence

of Scots does not, however, account for the weakness of Gàidhlig policy. Further, the existence of one strong Indigenous language does not mean there cannot be another. This article focuses on Gàidhlig because its remaining communities face an acute problem of transmission and because a distinct statutory framework has developed around Gàidhlig since 2005.

Responding to the dormant state of Gàidhlig, the Scottish Government had undertaken measures to stop the slow erosion through several major legislative interventions. The Gaelic Language (Scotland) Act 2005—featuring a Scottish-Government-led, economically-focused language planning method—and the Education (Scotland) Act 2016, pertaining to Gàidhlig education, are key mechanisms. The Scottish Languages Act 2025, referred to here as the 2025 Act, continued these aims. Significant principles within these acts include the recognition of Gàidhlig as an official language, the evidently short-term commitments made to Gàidhlig education, and the ill-fated creation of the 'Gàidhlig economy'.

However, it is too soon to see the 2025 Act's full effects, given it only came into

force on 30 November 2025. Nonetheless, we can see that previous revitalisation efforts have not been fully effective. The effectiveness of the 2025 Act can be evaluated against the shortcomings of previous legislation. The insufficiency of these acts are demonstrated through status planning and acquisition planning, both key aspects of effective language planning leading to language revitalisation. Overall, this article argues that Scottish Government policy is inadequately designed for its goal of revitalising the language, despite achievements in institutional recognition and visibility. Importantly, analysis must go beyond official statistics of speaker numbers, acknowledging day-to-day usage and intergenerational transmission.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This article employs language revitalisation (LR) theory to evaluate the Scottish government's efforts on Gàidhlig. Hinton and Hale (2001) describe revitalisation broadly as action intended to reverse language shift, while Sallabank (2012, p.293) outlines three main tasks of LR efforts: to increase the number of speakers, to increase the language's domains of use, and

to restore intergenerational transmission. Based on the 2022 Scottish Census, the number of speakers is increasing; however, further analysis is needed to evaluate success in domains of use: the areas and institutions of society in which the language is found (Haberland, 2005, p.230), and intergenerational transmission: the passing down of the language from parents to children (Campbell and Christian, 2003, p.91). These three interlinked outcomes are adopted for this analysis.

Language policy refers to the decisions and strategies which inform LR, while language planning refers to the concrete measures taken to implement these. This article focuses on top down, (Sallabank, 2012, p.284) or governmental approaches, to LR through the lens of language policy and planning. Two approaches are particularly relevant. First, status planning, referring to attempts to secure official recognition for a language (Wright, 2004, p.1), which has been argued to be an essential aspect of LR by granting the language greater access to resources (De Cillia and Busch, 2006, p.577). The second, acquisition planning, refers to deliberate attempts to increase the number of speakers of a language (Hogan-Brun, Clinton, and Thonhauser, 2013, p.1). Specifically, this article discusses a form of acquisition planning coined by Kaplan and Baldauf (1997, p.122) as language-in-education planning, which focuses on the transmission of the language through formal education. Policies explicitly aiming to contribute to the targets of LR outlined above, alongside their implementation through effective planning initiatives would constitute successful language revitalisation. Policy must therefore be evaluated by its combined effect on legal status, speaker acquisition, everyday domains, and community reproduction. Census data is relevant, but an increase in self-reported skills is not sufficient evidence of success without corresponding evidence of frequent use, transmission, and institutional embeddedness.

STATUS PLANNING

The Scottish Government's approach to status planning for Gàidhlig has been insufficient to confer any tangible benefits on the language's revitalisation. A standard definition of official status is that it must be as much symbolic as it is meaningful and practically communicative (Zamyatin, 2014, p.124). To be practically communicative would require the language to be utilised in courts or public services (Mac Sìthigh, 2018, p.79) in order to create more domains of use. Further, the incorporation of the government as a domain of use for the language by including the language in all government correspondence would constitute expanding the domains of use. An understanding encompassing these substantive and symbolic principles is

vital in revitalisation initiatives, allowing normalised usage for the wider population, increasing its visibility, but also, crucially, enabling its usage in a range of situations and environments (De Cillia and Busch, 2006, p.577).

The 2005 Act secured the status of Gàidhlig as an official language on an equal level with English. While, on paper, this aligns with the conceptualisation of status planning established above, any potential benefits it may have conferred to Gàidhlig have been hindered by its application in practice. Most significantly, the 'official status' of Gàidhlig conferred in the Act was never defined or expanded on (Law Society of Scotland, 2024, p.1); not only is there no outlining of bilingual provisions, but even if there were there would be no legal impetus on public bodies to follow these directions. The legal effect of official status is limited to ensuring the promotion, facilitation, and support of Gàidhlig and Gàidhlig education by Scottish Ministers (Law Society of Scotland, 2024, p.3) which neglects the importance of strong legal baselines which ensure the protection and usage of the language. There is no service commitment nor bilingual provision to any great degree in any Scottish public body and, as the 2005 Act did not include a definition stipulating a legal impetus to provide this, no such commitments need to be made. This is why Wilson McLeod (2006, p.19) goes so far as to say the 2005 Act's definition of official status is designed to be vague, leaving so much of public bodies' responsibilities up to their own discretion in order to not have to include actual provisions for bilingualism. This means the government as a domain of use is not being taken advantage of to a degree that would be beneficial for LR.

This matters for revitalisation because a language gains a domain of use only when speakers actually use it. Bilingual branding and translations increase visibility, but not interaction. A stronger status-planning model makes Gàidhlig an option in public services, develops staff capacity, and gives public authorities clear standards against which performance can be assessed. Without such mechanisms, official recognition risks insufficient communicative effect.

The Welsh Language (Wales) Measure 2011 states that the Welsh Language has official status in Wales, and contrastingly sets out a definition of what 'official status' means and involves. As with most status affirming documents, this Act outlines the duties conferred to public bodies to operate bilingually (Welsh Government, 2025, p.3). In keeping with this definition, there are 41 standards ensuring all interactions with the Welsh public will be offered in Welsh and English (McLeod, 2025) thus constituting effective LR by expanding domains of use. Additionally, a Welsh Commissioner

was conferred with the power to impose these standards on organisations (Mac Sìthigh, 2018, p.81), providing accountability and enforcing responsibility on these public bodies so they cannot ignore the provision of Welsh. The Scottish and Welsh situations are not identical and it would be inappropriate simply to transfer every Welsh duty to Gàidhlig. Nevertheless, the comparison shows how official status can be connected to specific rights, duties, and accountability, rather than left primarily to variable organisational planning.

Overall, due to the unspecific, ambiguous definition of 'official', it is clear that Gàidhlig has been denied adequate status planning and consequently an expansion of domains of use. Essentially, the national recognition it has been given does not equate to linguistic equality nor increased usage in practice.

The Scottish Languages Act 2025 responds to parts of this criticism. It places relevant public authorities under a general duty to promote and support Gàidhlig language and culture, and empowers ministers to set standards and requirements for public bodies (Section 7). It also allows particular measures to be applied in areas of linguistic significance, where Gàidhlig use or activity is especially important (Section 4). However, the effect of these measures is still undetermined, and heavily reliant on practical implementation. The relevant test will be whether speakers encounter more real opportunities to use Gàidhlig in services and administration, particularly in areas where it remains a community language.

The Reality of Gàidhlig Education

Education is the most developed mechanism for increasing the number of Gàidhlig speakers. A key aim of the 2005 and 2016 Acts was to ensure Scottish Ministers would promote, facilitate, and support Gàidhlig medium education (GME), or standard education through the medium of Gàidhlig (Section 2(2)(b), 2005), and Gàidhlig learners' education (GLE), Gàidhlig teaching which sits alongside the teaching of other modern languages in an English-medium curriculum (Part 2(6A)(1), 2016). Successful language-in-education planning would set goals for the language education system in response to the needs of the language community more generally, as well as a plan for the acquisition of language teachers and teaching materials (Ingram, 2008, p.55). With this in mind, a large focus on the maximisation and expansion of GME and GLE to reverse the decrease in Gàidhlig speakers, as well as plans for the qualification of more Gàidhlig teachers would be expected, but neither have occurred. Instead, 0.8 percent of all Scottish pupils receive GME and 0.9 percent receive GLE (McLeod, 2025), while 90 percent of high schools and even more primary schools do not teach Gàidhlig (McLeod, 2025).

Specifically, 5.4 percent of all schools within the Highland Council area receive GME while 11 percent receive GLE (McLeod, 2025) and a third of local authorities generally make no provision for Gàidhlig at all (McLeod, 2025). This indicates that there is no widespread inclusion of GME or GLE in the Scottish education system, signifying the Scottish Government is not implementing successful language-in-education planning.

One common explanation for this lack of GME and GLE is the shortage of Gàidhlig teachers; however, there has never been a wide-reaching, purposeful initiative aimed at resolving this issue (McLeod, 2025). This may be due to the misconception that a larger number of teachers is not needed due to the current small number of pupils; nonetheless, the number of pupils will not rise unless there are more qualified Gàidhlig educators. An increase in pupils in GME and GLE, alongside teachers to support them, is essential; even more essential is maximising the potential for Gàidhlig learners (McLeod, 2021). This lack of forethought indicates a more symbolic, shorter-term approach to language revitalisation by the Scottish Government.

From the statistics on GME and GLE (McLeod, 2025), it is evident that there is more provision being made for GLE. This is an additional error in LR as it has been shown that immersion education such as GME is the most efficient and effective way to develop 'communicative competence', defined as the ability to use the language spontaneously in a range of situations (DeJong, 1998, p.35). The earlier a child is consistently exposed to a language, the greater their proficiency in that language will be (DeJong, 1998, p.38); thus, immersion is the closest substitute for learning a language in a home environment (DeJong, 1998, p.43). The skewed focus of the Scottish Government on GLE indicates ignorance of this fact. Therefore, it is inadequately designed for its goal of revitalising the language as it has not, as outlined, increased the number of Gàidhlig speakers and does not make adequate provisions for the future of GME or GLE, which deprives the positive effect on revitalisation effort of a much-needed influx of spontaneous speakers. This has meant that the Gàidhlig community does not benefit from the boost in the number of speakers that effective language-in-education planning could have conferred.

Education also has limits as a revitalisation strategy; schools create speakers, but not a community of use. Pupils require opportunities to use Gàidhlig socially and in work after leaving the classroom. If English remains dominant in peer interaction, services, and work, competence acquired at school is rendered passive.

The Scottish Languages Act 2025 may strengthen these connections. Its provisions

include educational standards (Section 16), expanded processes for requesting Gaelic early-years and school provision (Sections 10, 24), support for qualifications, and targets relating to people speaking and learning Gaelic (Section 17). These are potentially important improvements because they facilitate more systematic and measurable planning. Again, implementation will determine their value. Standards must be matched with teachers, resources and realistic timetables, while targets should measure enrolment alongside proficiency, retention, and use. A policy that increases the number of pupils encountering Gaelic without increasing the number who can and do use it beyond school would not achieve full revitalisation.

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[The Scottish Government] favours symbolic approaches to recognition, lackluster efforts to integrate the language into the population, and economic benefit for the masses over the community of minority language speakers they have pledged to support.

THE GAELIC ECONOMY

It is widely accepted that the intergenerational transmission of a language is closely linked with the socio-economic status of its residents (Majumder, 2018, p.40); this is reflected in the Highlands and Islands communities. Supporting Gàidhlig communities has been a focus for the Scottish Government and was theoretically the aim of their creation of the Gàidhlig economy. The concept of 'Gaelic development' was created in the 1990s in collaboration with the Scottish Government and outlined the plan for the Gàidhlig economy (McEwan-Fujita, 2011, p.59). Gàidhlig development was an economically focused form of language planning which was found by academic consultants to pertain to the delivery of Gàidhlig goods and services rather than 'to the social act

of communicating through the medium of spoken or written Gaelic' (McEwan-Fujita, 2011, p.59). Hence, the creation of the Gàidhlig economy aimed to maximise the financial output potential of the language (McEwan-Fujita, 2011, p.59).

The focus on financial output was a fundamental flaw in the development of the plan as it resulted in no consideration being given to the importance of the intergenerational transmission, which occurs in the Gàidhlig heartlands and is closely linked with the socio-economic status of its residents (Majumder, 2018, p.40). The plan manifested in attempts to create jobs and stimulate economic growth in the Gàidhlig heartlands (Scottish Government, 2025b). This has been criticised as a poor substitute for effective language policy particularly as one ramification of this 'economic development' has been an influx of non-Gaels arriving in the Highlands and Islands, in turn undermining the process of intergenerational transmission of the language (Chalmers and Danson, 2006, p.245) and affecting these areas as domains of use. This finding exposes the limits of national measures that count plans, learners, or funded projects without examining whether Gaelic remains the ordinary language of relationships and local networks.

The promotion of the Highlands and Islands as a new economic haven by the Scottish Government has influenced wealthy non-locals and non-Gaels to purchase massive amounts of property in these Gàidhlig havens (Dahmer, 2021). Subsequent housing shortages have caused young people to move away from the environment in which language knowledge would be transferred to them. The result of this is that they do not learn and retain Gàidhlig which contributes to the decline of the language. It is overly simplistic to present incomers as inherently harmful to Gàidhlig; the structural issue is whether housing, employment, and services allow Gàidhlig-speaking residents—especially younger people—to remain in the areas where dense speaker networks have historically existed. At the same time, policy can support newcomers who wish to learn and participate in Gàidhlig life. Underpinning this should be the dual aims of community continuity combined with inclusive language acquisition.

Additionally, the relegation of Gàidhlig to a mere commodity within the Gàidhlig development plan undermines any attempt to confer meaningful status to the language by reducing its value to a number. Due to the aim of the Gàidhlig economy being based on increasing economic activity, it could be heralded as a success, but this has come at the expense of the linguistic community. The influx of English speakers and exodus of Gàidhlig speakers in the Gàidhlig heartlands, arguably due to the intervention of the

Scottish government in the community (Chalmers and Danson, 2006, p.245), clearly indicates the community aspect of revitalisation has been ignored in the development of policy solutions. The damage these interventions are causing to the speech community and domain of use are incalculable.

The areas of linguistic significance created by Section four of the Scottish Languages Act 2025 offer a possible means of integrating language with community planning. The framework allows local authorities to designate areas on the basis of Gàidhlig activity, education and heritage, and requires relevant public authorities to address Gàidhlig in their plans for those areas. Ministers may also set differentiated standards concerning education, community development and economic development. This is a potentially important shift because it recognises that the same policy cannot operate identically in every part of Scotland. The value of designation will depend on what follows it. Areas of linguistic significance will contribute to revitalisation only if they influence the everyday use of Gàidhlig, rather than existing as another symbolic label. Economic development should be judged based on whether it strengthens the capacity of Gàidhlig speaking communities to pass on the language, rather than just money generated.

CONCLUSION

This examination of status, GME, and communities indicates that, in the case of Scottish Gàidhlig, current policy and planning is insufficient and does not make good reference to the principles of status planning and acquisition planning. The correct aims are being identified with regard to the attempt to confer official status: the basic inclusion of Gàidhlig education in the Scottish education system and these seemingly innocuous, albeit misguided, attempt to economically support Gàidhlig speakers—but these are not being successfully applied in practice. While the 2022 census recorded an increase in Gàidhlig-speaking ability and the Scottish Languages Act 2025 provides official status—alongside stronger public-authority duties, educational mechanisms, target-setting powers and areas of linguistic significance—the aim of vibrant linguistic communities has been neglected. National increases in reported ability coexist with serious weakness in habitual community use and intergenerational transmission. Success should therefore be evaluated by the frequency and domains of use, family transmission, and the sustainability of Gaelic speaking networks.

In all the examined aspects, it has been shown that further adherence to these theories and translating legislative aims into real world solutions would improve Gàidhlig’s status in Scotland. If official status came

with legal accountability, education was widespread and predominantly immersive, and intergenerational transmission was not affected by economic development goals, we would perhaps begin to see the positive realisation of LR. However, the Scottish Government has consistently ignored solid evidence and academic theories, even in policies that seem to demand their recognition. Instead, it favours symbolic approaches to recognition, lackluster efforts to integrate the language into the population, and economic benefit for the masses over the community of minority language speakers they have pledged to support. Thus, Scottish Government policy around Scottish Gàidhlig is inadequately designed for its goal of revitalising the language.

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THINGS CAN ONLY GET BETTER

The Desecuritisation of Sinn Féin in the Lead Up to the Good Friday Agreement

by **matthew begg**
illustration by lucy barrett



Sinn Féin is an Irish Republican party that has historically been strongly connected to the Provisional Irish Republican Army (IRA). Following the IRA's bomb attack on London's Docklands in 1996, an agreement between Prime Minister John Major and Taoiseach John Bruton excluded Sinn Féin from all-party peace talks until a ceasefire had been restored and arms decommissioning was underway (Melaugh, 1996). However, by April 1998, the Good Friday Agreement was signed and Sinn Féin had moved from being projected by the media as the political face of a terrorist organisation to being accepted, albeit contentiously, as a legitimate participant in British politics. This shift in both political and cultural perceptions of the political legitimacy of Irish Republicanism allowed Sinn Féin to become desecuritized as a political actor.

In this context, securitisation describes the process by which political actors are

framed as threats to state security, justifying exceptional legislative measures (Wæver, 1995). Desecuritisation, alternatively, refers to the process of becoming a legitimate political actor from being viewed as a threat (Wæver, 1995). By analysing monthly articles published by *The Times* (London) between the Docklands bombing and the signing of the Good Friday Agreement, this article argues that Sinn Féin's political image evolved from that of an object of securitised language to that of a legitimate political actor. This article highlights that *The Times'* coverage of the 1997 general election was a critical turning point in this process through two main mechanisms: first, the electoral mandate received by Sinn Féin legitimised their place in British politics and second, a change in the material conditions in the relationship between the Republican movement and the British Government resulted in a structural shift in the approach to the Northern Ireland Peace Process. This study is significant in its examination of how

minority separatist and ethnic groups—in this case, the Irish Catholic nationalist community—are constructed as threats to democratic politics and subsequently reintroduced into the arena of ordinary politics.

DESECURITISATION: FROM SECURITY THREAT TO POLITICAL ACTOR

Securitisation Theory

Before examining *The Times'* transition from portraying Sinn Féin as a dangerous party to a legitimate political actor, it is necessary to articulate how this article understands and utilises desecuritisation. One of the most salient theoretical approaches towards security studies can be found in the works of the Copenhagen School, which views security as a socially constructed notion (Stępką, 2022, p.18). Securitisation is thus conceived as a process through which a

specific issue is moved from the realm of a political issue to that of a security issue through a ‘speech act’ that frames the issue as an existential threat to the current iteration of power, consequently legitimising the use of extraordinary measures outside the scope of normal politics (Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde, 1997, pp.26–33). Securitisation is therefore not an objective condition, but rather a mutual perception of threat between agenda-setting elites and audiences to justify extraordinary measures (Wæver, 1995, pp.52–54; Huysmans, 1998, p.232). Consequently, securitisation often legitimises governments’ suspension or shift from normal democratic procedures. Understanding how issues and actors are subsequently desecuritisised and brought back into the realm of ordinary politics is crucial for explaining how highly contested political relationships can be normalised over time.

One weakness in the Copenhagen School of thought, however, is its approach to the process of desecuritisation as simply the reverse of the securitising process. In practice, desecuritisation happens as an active process of discrediting previous securitisation rather than solely the absence of securitising speech (Donnelly, 2015, pp.915–917; Al and Byrd, 2018, p.612). In essence, the Copenhagen School neglects desecuritisation as a means of pursuing political legitimacy as an actor. According to Oelsner (2005, p.15), this form of desecuritisation in the sub-state realm can occur through two means: (i) the securitised actor is perceived by audiences to no longer constitute a threat, or (ii) a qualitative change occurs in the relationship between the securitising agent and the securitised party, resulting in a level of trust that the threat once posed has subsided. This idea is further explored by Hansen (2012, p.543), who emphasises the importance of a voluntary rearticulation and acceptance of the securitised issue as ‘normal’ politics by involved parties. Therefore, tangible political change must be seen by audiences to catalyse a decreased threat perception. In order to best analyse the mechanisms that underpin the processes of desecuritisation in this case study, the focus on the active negotiation of material conditions between actors provides a more fruitful framework, rather than the Copenhagen School’s understanding of desecuritisation as solely a reversal of the initial securitising conditions.

Media, Agenda-Setting & Securitisation

Mass media plays a critical role in politics, setting the political agenda by controlling how issues are portrayed (McCombs and Shaw, 1972, p.185; Gavin, 2018, p.840). The framing of policy issues is of particular importance because it is through this interpretive mode that media constructs both securitising and desecuritising

discourse.

In studying agenda-setting, Entman’s (1993, p.52) influential notion of framing denotes the selection of ‘some aspects of perceived reality’ to ‘make them more salient in a communicating text’ in order to ‘promote a particular problem definition’ as well as ‘treatment recommendation’. When applied to the study of securitisation, framing affects the way in which an actor becomes desecuritisised through making certain elements of their character more noticeable to project their image as a tangible threat to the audience. This mechanism is prevalent within news media due to its role as a key intermediary between reality and knowledge reception in the general public (Lippmann,

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Despite Sinn Féin’s legitimisation as an actor, previously securitised parties may still face contextual preconditions to their inclusion in the political arena.

1922, p.2; Pan, 2008). Additionally, and most significantly, mass media provides a strong reflection of public sentiment, as the business model of media outputs ensures that content is produced to meet demand (Downs, 1972). This reflection provides a way to track processes of desecuritisation, indicating shifting public sentiment, but also enabling the analysis of the frames that facilitate these changes.

Entman’s work is particularly useful in this case study, as it allows for the interpretation of subtextual signals. Because British journalists were constrained by impartiality rules when reporting on The Troubles, meaning securitising discourse was often constructed implicitly through patterns of association and language, rather than explicitly naming elected parties, making subtextual signals especially relevant to this case study.

Securitisation in the Case of Sinn Féin

Sinn Féin has long held a contentious stature within the British and Irish political

arena due to its close links to the IRA. The party was banned in Northern Ireland from 1956 until 1974 (Bourne, 2018, p.2) and faced broadcasting bans and other restrictions throughout the 1970s and 1980s (Curtis, 1998, p.198). During this period, Sinn Féin’s ability to participate in British Parliamentary politics was often contingent on the behaviour of the IRA due to the perception that the military and political wings of Irish Republicanism were one and the same. Crucially, while there was an overlap of membership between the two entities, there was no equivalent scrutiny of the links between unionist parties and the loyalist extremists they often actively courted (Curtis, 1998, pp.89–106).

These institutional barriers to participation were both a mechanism and a reflection of securitised discourse, as they ensured that Sinn Féin were viewed as either indistinguishable from the IRA or at least inextricably linked. This allowed unionist powers to restrict the party’s access to the political domain, despite having a mandate of representation through national elections. Sinn Féin have always maintained a policy of abstaining from taking their electorally mandated seats in British parliament, which likely compounded the political exclusion they experienced, although this itself was not a widely securitised issue.

Given these dynamics, it can be hypothesised that the 1997 general election, and the subsequent restoration of the IRA ceasefire, mark a key turning point in how Sinn Féin are framed by the British media. If desecuritisation is an active and negotiated process, this shift is likely to be gradual and uneven rather than instantaneous, and should be visible both in how the party is constructed and in debates about whether, and on what terms, it should participate in formal negotiations.

METHODOLOGY

The chosen method for this study is an inductive qualitative content analysis, following the structure of Zhang and Wildemuth (2005) and Kyngäs (2020). An inductive approach allowed close engagement with the relatively small sample and the development of themes directly from the texts.

After gaining an in-depth understanding of the texts, it was deemed most appropriate to build a codebook based on the active approach to desecuritisation proposed by Oelsner (2005) and Hansen (2012). This led to the texts being coded on three key components: a) how is Sinn Féin constructed as an actor; b) how is Sinn Féin’s participation in the political arena framed; c) whether explicit securitising or desecuritising discourse is contained within the article. These frames are the most appropriate way to analyse the data as they

allow for an understanding of how different desecuritising frames can interact, as well as understanding how the strength of these frames change over time. Article Categories were developed inductively: an initial reading of a subset of articles generated a working set of descriptive labels, which were then refined and consolidated into three mutually exclusive categories for each dimension (for example, *securitised*, *ambivalent*, and *political* for the construction of Sinn Féin as an actor), based on recurring patterns in how the party was described and the language used to justify or contest its participation in politics. Full definitions and in-text examples for each category are provided in the codebook (Appendix 1). Where an article contained language spanning multiple categories, for instance, describing Sinn Féin in both securitised and political terms, it was coded according to the frame that received the greatest emphasis or textual space within the piece. This coding process necessarily involves a degree of interpretive judgement, and a

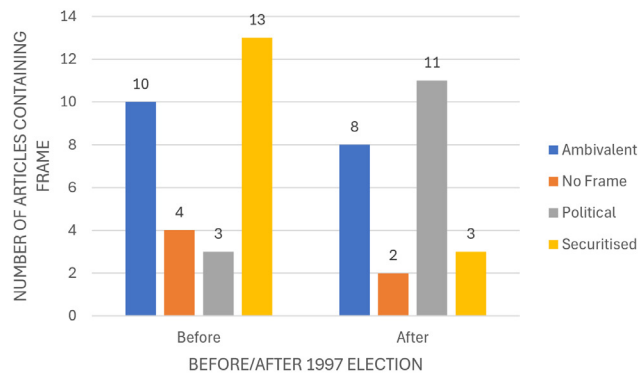


FIGURE 1: NUMBER OF ARTICLES CONSTRUCTING SINN FÉIN AS SECURITISED, AMBIVALENT, OR POLITICAL, BEFORE AND AFTER THE 1997 GENERAL ELECTION

small number of borderline cases required close re-reading to establish the dominant frame, a limitation common to qualitative coding more broadly. If an article did not fit any of the aforementioned categories, the article was denoted as “No Frame”.

Article categories were then counted by month and by pre- and post-election period to identify broader patterns (Appendix 2a–2c), while Appendix 3 provides the full list of sampled articles, including titles, publication dates, authors, and document type, allowing the coding to be traced back to the original source material.

Data

Newspapers provide an insightful source into the process of the political securitisation of Sinn Féin. This article chooses *The Times* newspaper, as it’s data source, due to its long-standing reputation as a newspaper of record (Conboy, 2011) and activity during the relevant period. In addition, *The Times* is widely perceived as a proponent of the

British political establishment, signifying its importance as an agenda-setter (Nevins, 1959, pp.413–414). *The Times* was also deemed most suitable for the study as during the period of interest it was in a unique position of having not endorsed any parties in the 1997 election (Butler, 1997, p.170). This is a critical factor ensuring the robustness of the analysis; any changes in the desecuritisation of Sinn Féin within the data are less likely to be mechanically driven by adherence to a party line.

All *Times* articles between 1996–1998 which reference Sinn Féin were isolated as the population of possible de-securitising acts. Of these, a sample of 54 articles, selected randomly but stratified to ensure two per month, were selected for analysis.

The chosen timeframe between 1996 and 1998 provides the best scope for a political trend for the desecuritisation of Sinn Féin. It includes key moments in the Northern Ireland peace process: the Docklands

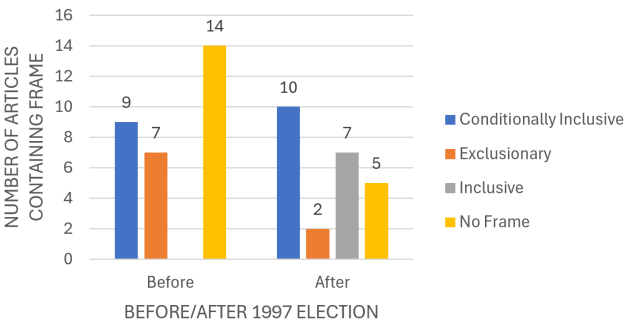


FIGURE 2: NUMBER OF ARTICLES FRAMING SINN FÉIN’S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AS EXCLUSIONARY, CONDITIONALLY INCLUSIVE, OR INCLUSIVE, BEFORE AND AFTER THE 1997 GENERAL ELECTION

bombing by the IRA in 1996; the 1997 general election, which saw a major shift in the government’s approach to the Northern Irish problem (Hayes and McAllister, 2001, p.75; Bean, 2015, pp.236–239); and finally, Sinn Féin’s readmittance into all-party talks. This analysis focuses on three dimensions derived from the theoretical discussion above: the construction of Sinn Féin as a political actor, the framing of its place in institutional politics, and the explicit use of securitising and desecuritising language.

CONSTRUCTION OF SINN FÉIN AS AN ACTOR

Figure 1 reports that in the pre-election sample, out of 30 articles, Sinn Féin is most often constructed as a securitised actor, primarily through linking their activities to those of the IRA (13/30), or as an ambivalent actor, where they are framed as a politically viable actor while still identifying them with Republican violence (10/30). Only 3/30 articles constructed Sinn Féin primarily as a political actor. In the post-election sample,

the dominant pattern shifts, and political constructions increase to 11/24 articles while securitised constructions drop to 3/24.

These findings indicate a clear shift around the 1997 general election in the framing of Sinn Féin towards a legitimate political party. Appendix 2b provides a further timeline of this shift and suggests that the desecuritisation of the party’s identity is gradual. Following the 1997 election, there remained a degree of trepidation about Sinn Féin’s place within normal politics; whilst securitised framing decreased to three examples in the post-election period, discussions of Sinn Féin still oscillated between ambivalent and political framings.

This temporal shift in the framing of Sinn Féin as a political actor is in line with Oelsner’s (2005) theory on regional desecuritisation. The 1997 election saw qualitative change in the nature of the relationship between Sinn Féin and the British government, primarily through gaining an elected mandate

and winning two seats in Westminster, though they abstained from taking them. Additionally, this happened through the Labour Party’s historic victory with an overwhelming majority, which allowed leaders to propose Northern Irish policy without the pressure of Unionist MPs, which had propped up the previous government.

Sinn Féin’s Place in Politics

Figure 2 shows that of the sampled articles, before the election, 14/30 contained no explicit participation frame, while 7/30 are exclusionary, and 9/30 are conditionally inclusive, often requiring an end to Republican violence in order to allow full participation; notably, there are 0/30 articles coded as fully inclusive. After the election, inclusive framings rose to 7/24 articles, exclusionary framings fell to 2/24, and no-frame fell to 5/24.

This data provide evidence that the framing of Sinn Féin’s participation in formal politics also changes over time, as there is a clear

reduction in the number of articles that use exclusionary language towards Sinn Féin and a corresponding increase in those taking an inclusionary stance following the 1997 election. This pattern is not as strong as that found for Sinn Féin's identity, however, due to the prevalence of articles containing no explicit frame.

Even so, it further highlights the critical importance of a mandate to establish the legitimacy of separatist groups within the political arena, as whether reluctant or not, their place in parliamentary proceedings must be legally respected by all parties involved. In Sinn Féin's case, their policy of abstention from parliament has occasionally led to issues in promoting nationalist sympathetic policy (Dibble, 2021, p.39), though this procedural absence does not erase its electoral legitimacy. In terms of understanding the conditionally inclusive view on Sinn Féin's political participation, it appears to be consistent across both periods, however the conditions on which it depends do gradually change over time,

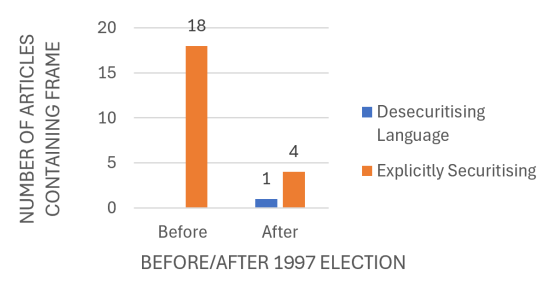


FIGURE 3 - NUMBER OF ARTICLES CONTAINING EXPLICIT SECURITISING OR DESECURITISING LANGUAGE, BEFORE AND AFTER THE 1997 GENERAL ELECTION

from a hardline stance on requiring IRA arms decommissioning to a change in policy requiring only an IRA ceasefire for admittance into peace talks. This further reflects the importance of changing relationships for desecuritisation; the reciprocity of trust is demonstrated by the IRA maintaining its ceasefire and Sinn Féin being respected as a legitimate party by the government.

(De)securitising Language (Oelsner, 2005)

Figure 3 shows that in the pre-election sample, 18/30 articles contain explicitly securitising language and none contain explicitly desecuritising language. In the post-election sample, explicitly securitising language drops to 4/24, whilst explicitly desecuritising language appears only once—most post-election articles (19/24) fall into the 'no explicit language' category.

Thus, securitising speech acts are much more readily used than desecuritising speech acts by *The Times* across the period studied. Explicit references linking Sinn Féin to terrorism or treating it as a security threat are far more common

than statements that actively affirm its democratic legitimacy or argue for its political inclusion. Whilst this dimension is less focused on the specificities of the Sinn Féin case, it is of critical importance to the literature on desecuritisation as a whole. It appears to demonstrate the inadequacy of the Copenhagen School's opinion that securitisation and desecuritisation are simply reverse processes (Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde, 1997). In this case, the desecuritisation of Sinn Féin is expressed more through shifts in the media's identity framing and patterns of conditional inclusion than through explicit desecuritising speech acts, suggesting that in liberal democracies, desecuritisation may be a layered, practice-driven process in which language lags behind institutional change. More broadly, this points to several observable features of desecuritisation: the gradual normalisation of how actors are described, the recalibration of the conditions under which they are admitted to political institutions, and the slow, often incomplete erosion of overtly securitising labels.

CONCLUSION

This article has examined how Sinn Féin was desecuritised within *The Times*' coverage in the lead up to the Good Friday Agreement. Though the findings of this study are indicative rather than definitive, the central finding is that *The Times*' framing shifts markedly around the 1997 UK general election. Electoral mandate functioned as a key mechanism through which Sinn Féin became harder to construct

as a security problem, with the democratic legitimisation of the political actor ensuring its acceptance into political discourse. Despite Sinn Féin's legitimisation as an actor, previously securitised parties may still face contextual preconditions to their inclusion in the political arena. Additionally, these findings appear to support critiques of the Copenhagen School's approach to desecuritisation as a reversal of the initial securitising process (Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde, 1997, p.29). The data in this article instead point towards the desecuritising process of Sinn Féin being expressed through changes in participation criteria and relationships with a new government, echoing the active and negotiated account of desecuritisation as proposed by Oelsner (2005) and Hansen (2012).

Identifying these features matters because, in deeply divided or violence-affected societies, the move from treating opponents as existential threats to recognising them, even conditionally, as legitimate political actors is often a precondition for negotiated settlements and durable peace. Further research replicating this study with a focus on Ulster Unionist parties and their connections to Loyalist paramilitaries could

analyse how framing changes between pro and antiestablishment insurgencies.

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APPENDICES

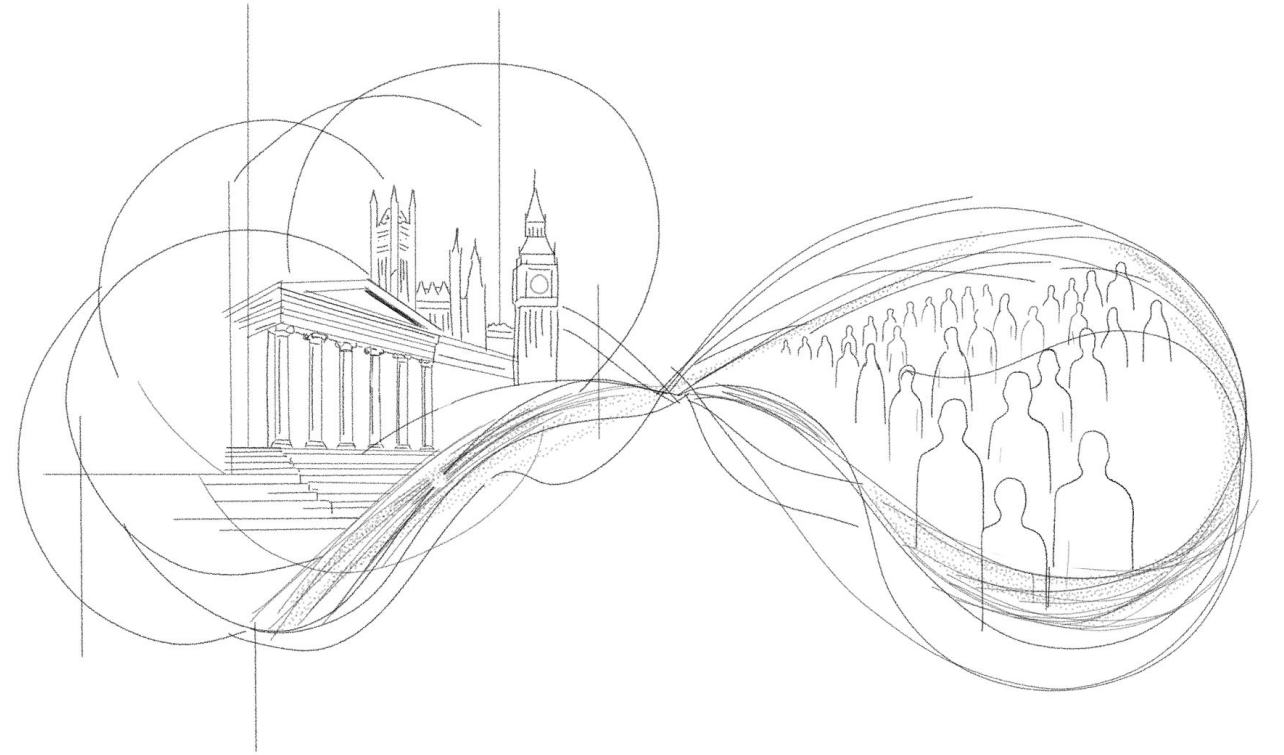


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A NON-POSITIVIST 'RECASTING' OF RIVAL CONCEPTIONS OF UK CONSTITUTIONALISM

by **jonathan vickers**

illustration by lucy barrett



'The British constitution has always been puzzling and always will be' - Queen Elizabeth II (Cited in Hennessy, 1995)

This well-used quote by the UK's longest-reigning monarch serves to illustrate—and perhaps justify—the bewilderment that the UK constitution evokes in the minds of students and scholars seeking to arrive at definitive conclusions about it. This confusion likely derives from the complex nature of the constitution: the United Kingdom is one of five countries in the world that does not have a codified constitution (Tomkins, 2023, pp.7, 16).

This article focuses on the general purpose of constitutions: finding ways to allow 'the government to get away with less' (Tomkins, 2023, p.18). In pursuit of this purpose, the way in which the constitution constrains government authority has become a focal point of academic discussion. Within this discussion, legal and political philosophers have arranged their ideas into seemingly incompatible convictions about fundamental constitutional principles, imagining constitutionalism as falling within two diametrically opposing camps: politics or law (Latham-Gambi, 2020, p.738). This debate has been the focus of scrupulous scholarship, with some scholars seeking to

dispel this divide (Latham-Gambi, 2020; Gee and Webber, 2010; Kavanagh, 2019; Galligan, 2008).

Tomkins (2023, pp.18-19) argues that this ideological divide has created two distinct 'species' of constitutions: legal and political, both of which are deemed to have respective merits and limitations on effectively constraining government power. The impact of this distinction is twofold. Firstly, Aileen Kavanagh (2019, p.45) stated in this context that 'if a discourse is dominant whilst its key terms are "indistinct and ill-defined", both scholars and the UK public "run the risk of misunderstanding [our constitution], [instead] talking past each other and relying on vague assertions and distorting exaggerations"'. Similarly, we are beginning to misunderstand one another in the constitutional 'social imaginary'—the common understandings that make up social life (Latham-Gambi, 2020, p.748). This article proposes that existing scholarship largely ignores the potential benefits a more cohesive constitution could offer in service of the effective constraint of government power in the UK constitution.

The thesis of this article is therefore to remedy these issues by recasting this debate. To do so, this article first argues that the reason

we have fallen into this debate derives from the positivist orthodoxy embedded in the legal constitution, separating the notions of parliamentary sovereignty, or legality, and political morality. This article will argue that a non-positivist approach, adopting Dworkin's (1996) interpretivism, would serve to integrate these two concepts and thus unite the legal constitution with the political. The reunification of the two 'species' permits a collaborative approach to UK constitutionalism and effectively constrains government power. However, adopting this approach to judicial interpretation in the UK constitution may pose significant difficulties without a codified constitution, upon which Dworkin places his emphasis. This argument is therefore not an attempt to define either species, but a piecemeal step in the quest for a 'collaborative constitution' (Kavanagh, 2019, p.45).

POSITIVIST ORTHODOXY IN UK CONSTITUTIONALISM

Legal Positivism

Jeremy Bentham pioneered positivism as a legal theory in *A Fragment of Government* (1776), in which he established the core positivist doctrine of separating 'law as it is' from 'law as it ought to be' (Spaak and

Mindus, 2021, p.204). A useful conception of positivism for these purposes can be distilled down to relying on two broad assumptions: law derives from social sources—in other words, it is derived from sociological practices—and law’s validity is not contingent on its merits, or on moral content (Spaak and Mindus, 2021, pp.39–41). Based on these fundamental assumptions, two dominant branches of positivism have emerged.

Professor John Austin produced the first conception, known as ‘Command Theory’: believing the nature of law to be orders directed by a sovereign, backed by threats, and habitually obeyed by all individuals in that jurisdiction (Kramer, 2021, p.303). A perhaps humorous illustration would fall along the lines of a Queen giving orders to her subjects with the likely consequence of non-compliance being ‘off with your head!’ and such orders, if obeyed habitually, being valid law without regard to the moral repugnance of decapitation.

Professor Herbert Hart rejected Austin’s command model through his seminal work *The Concept of Law* (2012). His proposal countered the rigidity of Austin’s model, thus his dubbing in legal theory as a ‘soft’ positivist. He instead saw law to comprise the ‘complex’ union of (i) rules which imposed duties, or commands, known as primary rules, (ii) rules to provide procedure to change the primary rules, known as secondary rules, (iii) a rule which recognises what is valid as law or not in a given system, known as a ‘rule of recognition’ and (iv) a general critical attitude of those who are in breach of primary rules (Kramer, 2021, pp.307–324).

Two distinctions between both conceptions are important for the purposes of this inquiry. Initially, both ‘hard’ Austinian positivism and ‘soft’ Hartian positivism rely to some degree on habitual acceptance or on a special attitude of acceptance by a given society in order to distinguish between other social norms and legal norms. Without this there is no difference between rules a population is obliged to follow as law, and those they ‘should’ follow for the cohesion or morality of society. However, as a ‘soft’ positivist, Hart proposed moral discretion may form part of the criteria which recognises the validity of a legal norm due to the possibility of the rule of recognition accepting moral criteria in recognising legal norms. Conversely, Austin, a ‘hard’ positivist, would argue that law and morality have little to no connection, given that the source of validity is solely derived from the command of an accepted sovereign. We can recognise these two different indicators of positivist thought through the main justification for the authority of laws in the United Kingdom constitution, the sovereignty of Parliament.

Legal Positivism in UK Constitutionalism: Parliamentary Sovereignty

‘Whatever the Queen-in-Parliament enacts as a statute is law’ (Barber, 2011, p.145).

Diceyan philosophy has dominated UK constitutional scholarship since the publication of his work in the late 19th century. Dicey’s (1959) core argument consists of two cardinal rules: the sovereignty of Parliament and the rule of law. By drawing on Austin’s work as a philosophical explanation of parliamentary sovereignty, this argument is indicative of the influence of Austinian positivism in UK constitutionalism given Dicey’s ‘abiding influence’ (Tomkins, 2023, pp.20–21; Lakin, 2009, p.25).

“

If this ‘recasting’ cannot be implemented in a satisfactory manner, the possibility of uniting the two separate paradigms of politics and law is placed in jeopardy.

Subsequently, an Austinian interpretation of Parliamentary sovereignty requires judges to make new law in exercise of their discretion where Parliament is silent, justified as tacit commandments by the sovereign (Lakin, 2009, p.25). In practice, this manifests as judges interpreting the intent of the statute imposed by Parliament (Lakin, 2009, p.83). Ultimately, this supports an Austinian conception of sovereignty as demonstrable in Lord Hoffman’s speech in *R. v. Secretary of State for the Home Department, Ex Parte Simms* where he opened with ‘Parliamentary sovereignty means [...] [Parliament can] legislate contrary to fundamental principles of human rights’, for it alludes to Parliament’s will amounting to the command of a sovereign, being Parliament, regardless of any arguable moral repugnance associated with the diminishing of ‘human rights’ (*R. v. Secretary of State for the Home Department, Ex Parte Simms*, 1999).

Further aspects of Hartian positivism can be identified in precedent by interpreting the phrase introduced at the beginning of

this section: interpreted as a Hartian ‘rule of recognition’ which determines what is valid *qua* law in the United Kingdom (Lakin, 2009, p.30). In practice, therefore, where the law is silent, judges would have wide discretion to make a decision in accordance with the rule of recognition (Jepson, 2024). Lord Nicholls’ ‘jurisprudential analysis’ in *Jackson v. Her Majesty’s Attorney General*, mirrors this: ‘an Act passed by both Houses is accepted by the courts as speaking for itself’ (*Jackson v. Her Majesty’s Attorney General*, 2005).

A *prima facie* reading therefore echoes Lakin’s observation, as positivist adjudication in cases of constitutional significance supposes that sovereignty derives from what ‘most officials accept it to be so’ (Lakin, 2009, p.32), or perhaps because Parliament appears to exercise sovereign power (Lakin, 2009, p.33). Essentially, the fact legal validity is dependent on Parliament means there is little to glean from UK legal philosophy as to the morality of Parliament’s sovereignty, except that it is in the hands of Parliament. The consequence is that moral justification in respect of sovereignty/constitutional authority is left unanswered in the UK’s legal constitution, deferring to the exercise and acceptance of sovereignty to legitimise its existence. Therefore, when matters of constitutional importance require some form of ‘moral’ discretion, debate emerges on who is better placed to make a collective judgement for the ‘common good’ (Dyzenhaus, 2008, p.139). Since legality is separate from moral merit, the immediate answer is to defer to Parliament. Comparatively, this is not the case for the US constitution, which can be regarded as expressing abstract moral requirements, which then are applied to concrete cases through the exercise of fresh moral judgement (Dworkin, 1996).

It is undeniable however that the UK position is now more complex, given, primarily, the enactment of the Human Rights Act 1998 (HRA). The HRA granted vast powers to the judiciary to interpret and give effect to legislation in a way which is compliant with most of the Articles of the European Convention of Human Rights (ECHR) (Human Rights Act 1998, s.3). There is thus scope to argue this disrupts the traditional, albeit positivist, conception of sovereignty whereby giving effect to Parliament’s legislation is of utmost importance in favour of the principles of the ECHR (Magaard, 2022).

However, when applying these conferred powers, a court can only issue a ‘declaration of incompatibility’ where it deems an Act of Parliament contrary to the ECHR, which does not affect the validity of said Act (Human Rights Act 1998, s.4). The correlative is that Parliament is still entitled to legislate contrary to the ECHR if it so wishes. Further, the courts in the past have avoided giving effect to an ECHR-compliant interpretation

if it is contrary to the ‘underlying thrust’ of the legislation (*Sheldrake v. Director of Public Prosecutions*, 2004, s.28). Despite the vast discretion conferred to the courts via the HRA, legal precedent suggests judges adjudicate in a way which still respects the positivist conception of sovereignty. Thus, the intent of Parliament still reigns supreme. Yet, it is undeniable that the introduction of the HRA imports greater moral discretion than previously, beyond the ‘four walls’ of Parliament’s sovereignty.

Thus, it can be said the exercise of open-ended discretion without understanding why different constitutional institutions act or ought to act in scenarios generates this cleavage in the ‘social imaginary’ (Latham-Gambi, 2020, p.748). We find ourselves questioning who should properly take on the role of exercising moral judgement, while anchored to accepting the separability of sovereignty and political morality. These separate notions render us unable to see the possibility of a more ‘collaborative constitution’ (Kavanagh, 2019, p.45) in the pursuit of constraining government power.

A NON-POSITIVIST ‘RECASTING’: DWORKINIAN INTERPRETIVISM

Non-positivism

The most prominent rival conception of law can be attributed to Ronald Dworkin. In *A Matter of Principle*, he seeks to demonstrate the intermingling of legality and morality with the name of ‘law as integrity’ (Jepson, 2024).

‘Law as integrity’ proposes that law is integrated with morality: lawyers and judges are working political philosophers of a democratic state (Wacks, 2014, p.49). Thus, legal validity is not solely derived from a social fact; in other words, whatever Parliament enacts as a statute is a valid law, but validity is qualified, as a law also must be cohesive with the ‘general principles’ found within a given legal system (Wacks, 2014, p.52). In the New York Court of Appeals’ decision of 1889, *Riggs v. Palmer*, a beneficiary under a validly executed will murdered the testator in order to inherit (Wacks, 2014, p.52). The rules on succession provided no exceptions, but the murderer was not able to inherit on the basis that no person should profit from wrongdoing (Wacks, 2014, p.52). Dworkin saw this as evidence of the existence of ‘non-rule standards’ (Wacks, 2014, p.52).

Essentially, in cases with conflicting legal outcomes, judges ‘plug the gap’ by interpreting previous legal materials in order to ‘give voice’ to the values the law is already committed to (Wacks, 2014, p.51). The judges then attempt to make the most ‘moral’ sense of legal practices (Wacks, 2014, p.53). To add complexity, the ‘general principles’ are also afforded varying dimensions of importance,

meaning that principles may need to be weighed up against others before providing a reason to decide a case in a particular way (Wacks, 2014, p.55). He thus proposes that judges ought to adjudicate in a way which best coheres with the institutional history of that community (Wacks, 2014, p.56). This interpretive process engages, for Dworkin, in arguments in which moral questions feature (Wacks, 2014, p.52). The central question in a given legal system then turns to which legal materials are interpreted and given moral weight in order to make sense of current legal practices. One can imagine this brings important political questions to the forefront in a situation such as one which Lord Hoffman alludes to in *Jackson*, where Parliament would seek to limit or remove certain human rights from having effect in the United Kingdom.

In other words, Dworkin purports to justify the moral authority the law has to exert a monopoly of force over a population (Wacks, 2014, p.61). Hart (2012, p.21), alternatively, would be more inclined to accept some laws have good justifications while some do not, for justifications are not necessary to render a law valid in a given system.

A non-positivist ‘recast’

This article takes the stance that a non-positivist reading would fuse together notions of legal validity and political morality; the previous section established this as a primary cause of separated notions of legal and political constitutions.

This fusion has two significant effects on constitutional understanding in the UK: the justification of law shifts from being Parliament-centric to principle-centric and the academic narrative then shifts away from the question of who exercises political morality to how each institution can collaborate to best uphold the fundamental values of the UK constitution. The latter effect is most relevant to this work.

This can be demonstrated by revisiting *Jackson (Jackson v. Her Majesty’s Attorney, 2005)*. The issue in this case was whether two Acts of Parliament—the Parliament Act 1949 and the Hunting Act 2004—passed under the Parliament Act 1911, which allowed an Act to become valid without the approval of the House of Lords, were valid Acts (Lakin, 2009, p.35). The judicial analysis was composed primarily of the construction, or interpretation, of section 2(1) of the 1911 Act which contained the procedure allowing an Act of Parliament to be enacted with the sole approval of the House of Commons (Lakin, 2009, p.35). This section expressed the sole exception to this procedure that occurs where a Bill is introduced which extends the term of Parliament beyond five years (Forsyth, 2011, p.134). This section thus purported to express a limit on Parliamentary sovereignty. This naturally led to a greater

conceptual analysis, with *dicta* in *Jackson* notably rejecting the idea of a Parliament with completely unqualified sovereignty. Significantly, however, the justices in this case arrived at the same conclusion with different justifications, implying a confusion as to the nature of sovereignty in the constitution (Lakin, 2009, p.36–37).

What *Jackson* illustrates in part is that the courts cannot unify the separability of law and sovereignty whilst simultaneously adhering to the traditional formulation of sovereignty, which is viciously guarded by the elected representatives of the UK country (Forsyth, 2011, p.133). A positivist reading would require all the officials of the UK legal system(s) to accept a new rule of recognition which fuses ideas of political morality and legal validity in order to unify conceptions of legal and political constitutionalism. Judicial interpretation alone may not be sufficient.

In applying a non-positivist analysis, a judge in this particular instance would be entitled to expand their analysis beyond the construction of section 2(1) of the Parliament Act 1911, looking at Britain’s position, per Lord Steyn’s description, as a ‘liberal European democracy’ (Simms, 1998). This non-positivist perception could also be expanded in light of the principles which the 1911 Act sought to protect as a result of the constitutional crisis during the early 20th century (Tomkins, 2023, p.69). In short, the Act would not be interpreted as a statute delineating procedure, but as one piece of evidence of what the political branch of the Constitution deems to form part of the political morality of the UK constitution, hence creating a coherent constitutional identity and potentially widening the scope for the constraint of political power.

That is to say the courts would be interpreting not only the words of the legislation itself, but also the political values which underpin it. In giving effect to this approach, we thus fuse the notion of political morality and legal validity, whereby nature removes the treatment of law and politics as two paradigms in opposition. Both branches exercise moral discretion, with the nature of the interpretivist construction preventing the judiciary from construing their own convictions into the constitution (Dworkin, 1996).

A practical interpretation in UK constitutionalism?

When proposing this recast to dispel the legal versus political constitutionalism debate, one must recognise the distinct constitutional, legal traditions within which both jurisprudential theories were founded. If this ‘recasting’ cannot be implemented in a satisfactory manner, the possibility of uniting the two separate paradigms of politics and law is placed in jeopardy.

Dworkin (1996) seeks to bridge the paradoxical contrast between mainstream US constitutional practice and US constitutional theory. As we know, the US constitution is a codified document, whereas the UK’s uncodified constitution contains many sources (Torrance, 2025). The result in the UK, as previously alluded to, is that political morality has no institutional home in the UK constitution. A positivist conception of sovereignty need not answer this question, for the justification for Parliament’s authority is not founded on moral criteria. For an interpretivist position to function, one would need to successfully identify the sources of broad moral principles to apply when exercising moral discretion. This poses a severe difficulty to the UK jurist.

Dworkin (1996), needed only to look to the US constitution as the apex source of constitutional principles. The risk therefore is that we may once more fall into a similar debate about where judges ought to draw moral principles: constitutional convention, common law, or the intention of Parliament. The division of political compared to legal sources of principles may mirror the current debate we are seeking to dispel. In order for interpretivism to function in this context, it would be necessary to revisit the hierarchy of sources of the UK constitution as equal sources of principles, with perhaps a respective higher ‘dimension of weight’ afforded to an Act of Parliament to reflect the historical constitutional position of the institution.

CONCLUSION

When discussing UK constitutionalism, we have arranged ourselves into two opposing, yet purportedly irreconcilable, conceptual camps of politics and law. This article has initially established the influence of legal positivism in UK constitutionalist thought, in turn facilitating the separation of sovereignty and politics and thus this binary debate in scholarship. Through the lens of *Jackson*, it is argued that a Dworkinian reading instead would place political morality into judicial reasoning, thus shifting this debate to how each institution should best protect political morality. However, due to the uncodified nature of the UK constitution, the practical implementation of this approach would face difficulties, particularly in requiring recognition of a Parliament with limited sovereignty and the identification of moral principles to shape such limitations. Regardless, the quest for a ‘collaborative constitution’ (Kavanagh, 2019, p.46) channels both political and legal means of accountability and deserves a shift in the academic grain to create a modern constitutional order reflecting the political and legal principles which underpin it.

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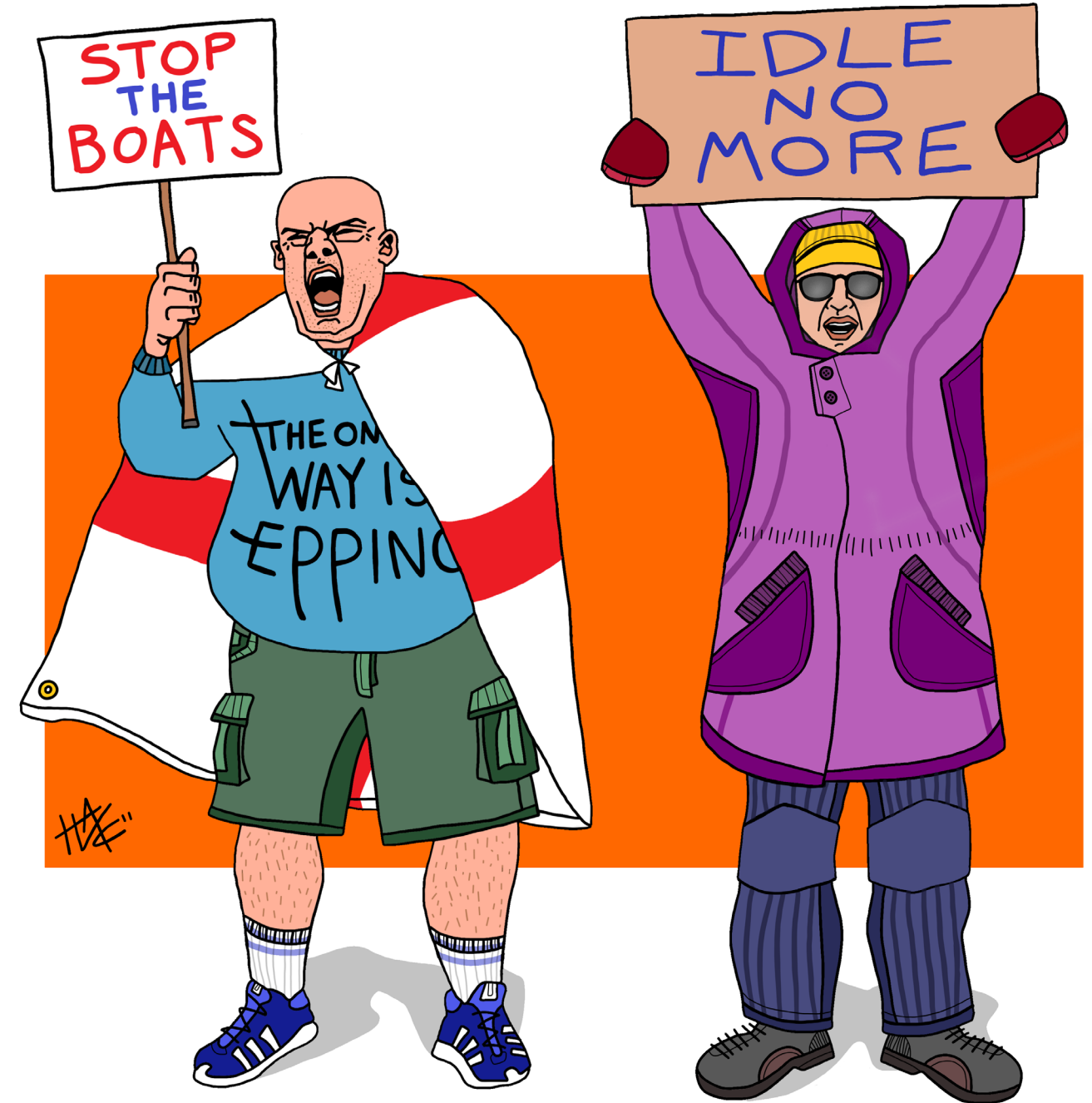
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JUSTICE, ANGER & ANTICIPATORY LOSS

Epping & Idle No More

by nick bacon

illustration by hugh thackway



Expressions of anger within political discourse are understood as one dimensional. This decontextualises political acts and facilitates false equivalence. This article explores the relationships between anger, loss, and justice to illuminate this misconception, recognising the importance of white supremacy in the justness of emotional expression. To achieve this aim, comparisons are drawn between two political cases and two theorists. The first case is the asylum hotel protests in Epping, in the South of England, where residents and non-residents demonstrated against the use of a local hotel to house asylum seekers. The second is the 'Idle No More' movement, a series of Indigenous-led protests across Canada opposing the erosion of Indigenous sovereignty through the Jobs

and Growth Act 2012. Despite arising from vastly different political contexts, both cases represent communities that mobilise anger in response to perceived threats to their way of life, making them effective examples to examine the contested relationship between anger, love, and community. This article also explores this relationship by comparing the works of Roger Scruton, a conservative philosopher, and Rachel Flowers, a scholar of Indigenous decolonisation.

While the protests in Epping and the Idle No More movement were similarly driven by 'anticipatory loss' (Hooker, 2023, p.31), this article argues that they are not both just acts. The structure of white supremacy and its political, economic, and social implications informs this distinction, which

is made salient through the lens of 'outlaw emotions' (Jaggar, 1989, p.168). Within this structure, anger shifts from a tool of oppression when wielded by those in Epping, to a tool for a 'limitless love' within the Idle No More protests (Flowers, 2015, p.40). These comparative expressions of anger are further explored utilising Hooker's (2023) concepts of 'Black grief' and 'white grievance'. This article argues that anger, while often driven by similar experiences of love and loss, has a complex relationship with justice as the structures of white supremacy reorients the political outcomes that emotional expression produces, allowing different expressions of anger to be just and unjust.

OUTLAW EMOTIONS IN EPPING &

IDLE NO MORE

The rational approach to the study of knowledge, known as a positivist epistemology, understands emotions as ‘considered potentially or actually subversive of knowledge’ as they are placed into dichotomy with reason (Jaggar, 1989, p.151). As a result, emotions become non-academic objects: fleeting, trivial experiences that are to be mastered by the rational being. Under this guise, emotionality has been used to undermine and obscure the experiences of minority groups, reconstructing their legitimate grievances with oppressive structures as irrational outburst or ‘outlaw emotions’ (Jaggar, 1989, p.168). By rejecting this dichotomy and engaging with emotion critically, we both take seriously the experiences of the oppressed and unlock a reflexivity that recognises ‘how the reconstruction of knowledge is inseparable from the reconstruction of ourselves’ (Jaggar, 1989, p.170). Anger, for instance, could be seen through the prism of Nussbaum’s ‘transition-anger’ in which each party exclaims ‘How outrageous! Something must be done about this’ as they hope to address injustice without the infliction of harm (2016, p.52). Thus, there is much value in closely scrutinising the relationship between anger and justice.

Migration has become increasingly divisive within the British political climate as rising parties such as Reform UK campaign on an anti-migration platform. Over the summer of 2025, several asylum hotels became sites for demonstrations demanding their closure to protect the cohesion of the local community (Stacy, 2025). In Epping for example, large protests were sparked by safety concerns after a local girl was sexually assaulted by a migrant staying at the Bells Hotel (Dedman, 2025). This became national news when Epping Council successfully filed for the hotel to close, effectively providing the blueprint for other councils to follow suit (Adams, 2025). While this appeal was rejected by the Court of Appeal on behalf of the Home Office (Adams, 2025), this outcome only deepened the distrust, anger, and frustration experienced by those protesting.

Alternatively, the Idle No More protests were sparked by the Jobs and Growth Act 2012, an omnibus bill which hoped to promote economic growth throughout Canada (Woo, 2013, p.183). As part of this act, the powers held by Indigenous communities were hugely reduced: environmental protection, Indigenous land claim, and Indigenous title were all limited. Elizabeth May (2012), a Green MP in the Canadian House of Commons, argued the bill was intentionally large and complex. Woo (2013) suggests this breadth attempted to hide the disempowerment of Indigenous communities. While the Idle No More protests and associated acts of civil disobedience directly responded to Bill C-45

and its impacts, they presented a broader challenge to the histories of oppression experienced by Indigenous communities across Canada.

THE OIKOS, LOVE & COMMUNITY

Both examples of anger can be conceptualised similarly as Scruton (2015) and Flowers (2015) promote the connection between love and anger in community. In particular, they articulate an inclusive love for community which is expressed through an exclusive anger.

Scruton’s central concept is the *oikos*: ‘a place, a community and a way of life that is “ours”’ (2015, p.25). He argues that individuals are predisposed to love their *oikos*—termed *oikophilia*—and this is normatively positive as it provides the only basis for an enduring, stable community in a world of ‘uncontrolled immigration’ (2015, p.169). By defining community in this way, the Other is constructed to allow for a construction of the self. This often expresses itself as ethnonationalism, with ‘places’ and ‘a way of life’ becoming synonymous with race and nationality, thus creating a racialised Other (Scruton, 2015, p.25). Applying this understanding to the asylum protests, *oikophilia* becomes the driving force in the expressions of anger. To be an *oikophilic*, the individual must be angered by the threat to their community. The asylum hotel presents a threat to the *oikos* and therefore individuals must act to fight the injustice (Nightingale and Jay, 2026). Anger becomes synonymous with the expression of love for an individual’s community as Scruton describes the need ‘to protect them [their community] against decay’ (Scruton, 2015, p.30).

While in the context of Indigenous experience in the Canadian settler colonial state, Flowers (2015) argues that expressions of anger against oppressive structures are manifestations of ‘inclusive love’. Flowers reconstructs the claim that Indigenous communities should have boundless love, a conceptualisation that grounds indigenous resistance in solidarity and compassion. She argues instead that ‘our limitless love must be turned inward: for our cultures, each other, and ourselves’ (Flowers, 2015, p.40). Flowers (2015, p.32), in so doing, validates alternative emotional expressions ‘such as sadness, resentment, or anger’ and thereby, expands the potentialities for resistance against settler colonialism. This is because their outward-facing, boundless love is exploited as a productive tool for settler colonialism. As opposed to other forms of colonialism, settler colonialism requires the presence of the ‘Native’ as a ‘refractory imprint of the native counter-claim’ (Wolfe, 2006, p.389). The ‘Native’ is to be repressed and confined but not eliminated: without them, the settler identity cannot exist. Boundless love is taken from indigenous

peoples to justify settler colonial action, as witnessed by the ongoing failure to address the crisis of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls (Flowers, 2015, p.34). By emphasising this love, the settler colonial state suggests there is a capacity to withstand exploitation, repression, and confinement. This assertion justifies inaction and the Canadian state does not feel compelled to act. Indigenous love is boundless, yet within the structure of settler colonialism, this boundlessness is utilised to maintain the oppressive system of governance and, by extension, the construction of the superior settler identity.

Increasingly, Indigenous peoples in Canada are rejecting the exploitation of their love and the Canadian state itself. This is often expressed in acts of refusal and anger, limiting access to physical resources, and refusing Canadian sovereignty. By engaging in acts of civil disobedience, Indigenous communities subvert the state’s capacity to control them, suggesting they are governed by alternative forms of sovereignty. Anger and resistance for Flowers become a form of reimagining: challenging the histories, present reality, and expected futures of settler colonial dominance. By engaging in these emotions, Indigenous communities demonstrate their inward ‘limitless love’ as they transcend the systematic discrimination they face. This is an instrumentally different material reality from that which Scruton faces in his work. While both argue their communities face challenges, Scruton’s *oikos* is not structurally subordinated; the decay that is faced does not constitute ‘a logic of elimination’ (Wolfe, 2006, p.387). This must reframe our readings of the portrayed relationships between anger, injustice, and community as Flowers’ proposal counteracts an existential threat whereas Scruton only challenges the changing nature of his community.

ANTICIPATORY LOSS

Anticipatory loss can be argued to be the foundation that Scruton and Flowers share as they theorise against the challenges facing their communities. Hooker (2023, p.33) defines anticipatory loss by the experience of harm caused by an event which has neither happened yet, nor is necessarily grounded in reality. In Epping, the anger expressed is driven by a fear of the Other; those in the community are unsettled by the presence of the non-white. There is a belief that immigration poses an existential threat to their community as it may dilute their identity (Mesoudi, 2022). While this loss of identity is not based upon reality nor has it yet taken place, individuals experience acute feelings of loss and, as a result, express their anger at the present to protect that which they believe will be threatened in the future. Those involved in the outpourings of anger understand their action as a fight against the perceived injustice of cultural loss, and immediate action represents the only option

available to them.

Idle No More was also driven by anticipatory loss, and not simply a response to Bill C-45. Their emotional expression contests the erosion of Indigenous sovereignty under the imposition of the Canadian state; the histories of oppression inform their perception of the future. Their action is not grieving the isolated loss inflicted by C-45, but rather the trajectory of Indigenous experience in which loss is inevitable. Indigenous communities live under the Canadian state which ‘sets the terms of what a shared future is’ (Flowers, 2015, p.35). This imagined future requires perpetual structural loss for Indigenous communities to maintain the settler colonial project. Indigenous anger rejects these experiences, challenging the past, present, and future of Canadian settler colonialism.

The similar experiences of anticipatory loss complicate the relationship between anger and justice. Building from the comparison between Flowers’ and Scruton’s conceptualisations of community and threat, it must be recognised that the ‘justness’ of anger is informed by material reality it exists within, the response it creates, and the possible future it imagines.

A JUST ANGER?

Prima facie, it could be suggested that these expressions of emotion in Epping and Canada are treated equivalently as they are ‘outlawed’ by the state and society. Outlaw emotions refer to the emotional experiences of disadvantaged individuals that are deemed socially unacceptable because they challenge dominant social understandings (Jaggar, 1989, p.166). This incompatibility arises as they subvert and ‘challenge dominant conceptions of the status quo’ that are harmful or unjust (Jaggar, 1989, p.167).

The Epping protestors could be considered ‘subordinated individuals’ as their actions were deemed irrational and emotional (Jaggar, 1989, p.166). Their behaviour became expressions of irrational white working-class anger, building upon their portrayal as ‘unchanging, anachronistic, and left behind’ (Lawrence, 2019, p.192). This shift towards emotionality removes the perceived intentionality behind an individual’s acts. Those in Epping were understood as simply being angry, rather than acting according to an internal logic that regulated or informed their expression. While this may suggest their expressions were outlawed, I argue their views were highly compatible ‘with the dominant perceptions and values’ and therefore, could not be understood as outlaw emotions (Jaggar, 1989, p.166). As previously stated in regards to the rise of Reform, anti-immigration rhetoric has become common throughout UK politics (Consterdine, 2025). Within this context, the emotional experiences of those in

Epping were excluded, but they echoed the dominant political understanding and therefore cannot be considered as outlaw emotions.

In contrast, the expressions of anger by Indigenous communities, as demonstrated by the Idle No More Protests, are outlawed emotions. Indigenous individuals exist within a position of subordination, their emotional experiences and expressions are devalued, and their actions destabilise the presiding understandings and structures of the Canadian state. Indigenous communities

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To understand the relationship between anger and justice, we must consider the political structures the anger exists within...

have suffered from the systemic oppression of white supremacy as it exists as a prerequisite for settler colonialism. Those that have existed before the establishment of the state must be devalued as part of the justification for settler presence. Indigenous communities expressed their anger at this system, hoping to destabilise settler colonialism and allow for the reestablishment of Indigenous nation states. This was demonstrated by the attempt of Indigenous leaders to enter the chamber in Ottawa (Woons, 2013). They were asserting their capacity to meet with the Canadian Prime Minister not as his constituents, but as foreign nations. Police blocked their entry to the chamber with their expressions of anger understood by the Canadian state as dangerous and unruly because they challenged the civility and structure of political action. The emotions expressed in the Idle No More protests were outlawed at the point at which they became ‘particularly problematic when used to challenge white supremacy’ (Thompson, 2017, p.459).

This dissonance within the relationships between emotions and outlawing is indicative of the central role political structures must play in the framing of our understanding of just and unjust anger. Hooker’s (2023) conceptualisation of ‘Black grief’ and ‘white grievance’ can be utilised

to illuminate this discrepancy. ‘White grievance’ refers to a relationship between loss and anger, in which power exists as a zero-sum game within the structure of white supremacy (Hooker, 2023, p.33). While the system of white supremacy does not equally distribute influence, it guarantees a minimum for the white-working class through the construction of the devalued, racialised Other. This system exists as part of the lived reality, the position of privilege is assumed as the norm by whiteness. Within the zero-sum game, any perceived shift in racial power dynamics is conceptualised as an unjust loss. This is experienced acutely by the white working class, whose whiteness is afforded the least advantage within the system of white supremacy. Applying this to the asylum hotel protests in Epping, we can see their expressions of anger as unjust. The protestors’ experience of anticipatory loss is founded upon the perceived challenge to white supremacy. The expression of anger devalues the non-white Other, asserting their own influence and value while misattributing the cause of their perceived disempowerment. Through their emotional expressions, those in Epping reinforce an environment of hostility towards immigration that is rooted in white supremacy. Anger in this example functions as an arm of structural discrimination, channeling ‘racist resentment to reassert white priority’ (Hooker, 2023, p.33).

Alternatively, Idle No More presents a just expression of anger as it challenges the present, past, and future experience of settler colonialism. Parallels can be drawn between Indigenous experience and the concept of ‘Black grief’: the perpetual state of mourning imposed upon non-white individuals in a system of white supremacy (Hooker, 2023, p.3). Rather than reinforcing these structures, Indigenous anger challenges it, empowering Indigenous communities to be able to engage equally through an alternative sovereign. Their anger becomes just in the struggle against the structural oppression that has, and will, define the Indigenous experience under the Canadian state. Rather than fighting to maintain white supremacy against perceived injustices, Indigenous communities contest the realities of discrimination. Their anger responds to the experiences of marginalisation and imagines alternative structures outside of white supremacy. This can be utilised to reconceptualise white backlash. Drawing on Hooker (2023, p.34), the anticipatory loss in Epping was not a material inability to provide and share with those in the Bells Hotel, it was an inability to engage and imagine the community and the self with a migrant presence. Those in Epping could not self-conceptualise while the Other was so apparent. They must exist within the structure of white supremacy as it defines their identity as individuals and community. Conversely, the anger of the Idle No More protest not only promotes

justice for Indigenous communities but arms individuals with the capacity to strive towards justice.

CONCLUSION

The anger in Epping promoted an injustice that served their community and perpetuated the structure of white supremacy. The anger of the Idle No More protest challenged this structure, promoting justice, an alternative future without the requirement for a racialised Other. This article has discussed the similarities between different expressions of anger, recognising how their resemblance does not necessitate their equivalent relations to justice. To understand the relationship between anger and justice, we must consider the political structures the anger exists within, and hopes to alter, and whether their anger achieves a more equal distribution of power.

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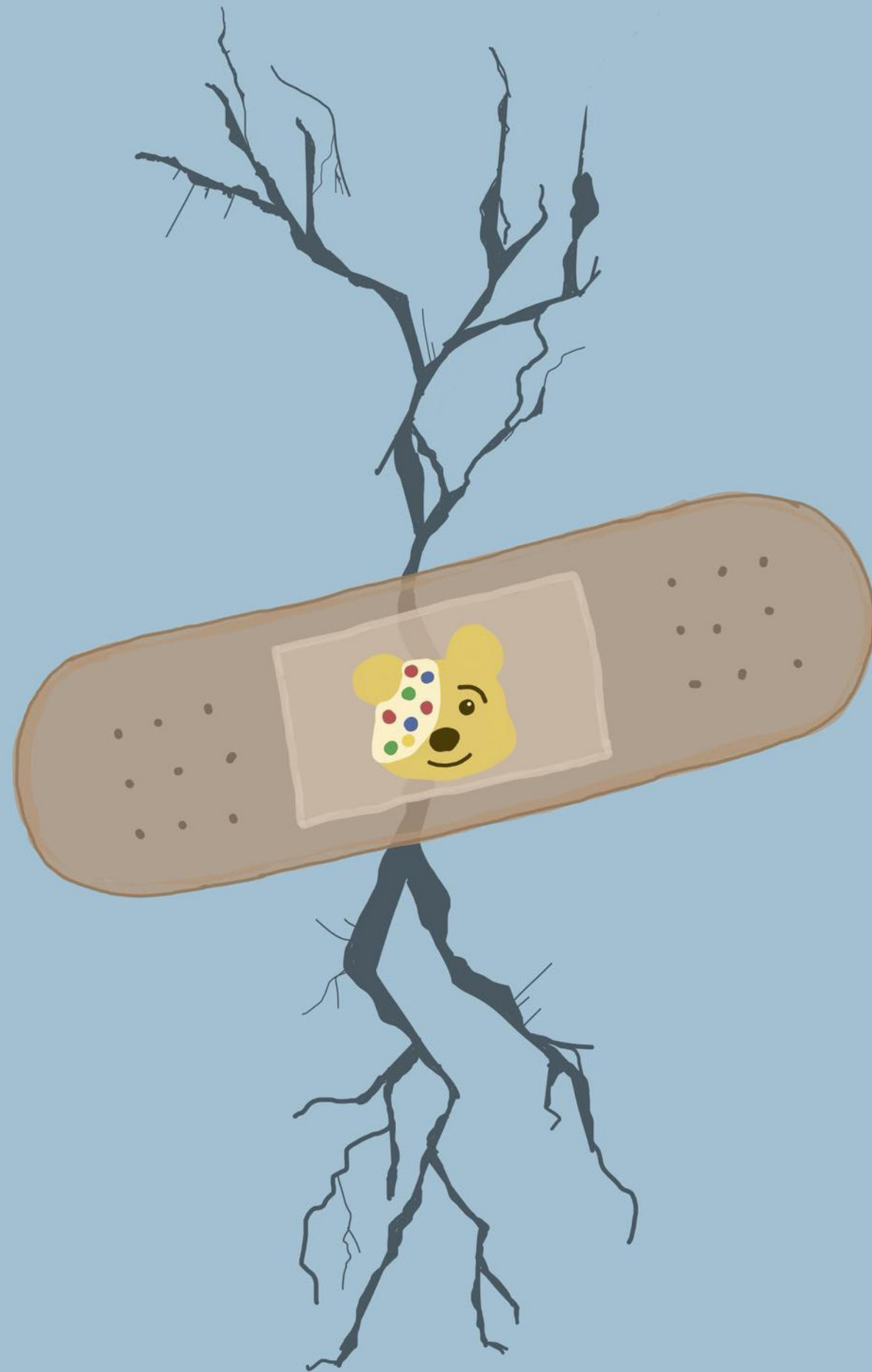
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HOPE AGAINST ABLEISM

Critical Disability Studies & the Politics of Children in Need

by **lucy barrett**

illustration by adeline cheung



Hope is often treated as an unqualified political good, but for many marginalised groups it can reproduce the hierarchies it is assumed to subvert. The notion that hope can be oppressive for people with disabilities is well illustrated in popular narratives of an improved future (Vogler, 2024, pp.591–592). Charity telethons are a particularly revealing example. While framed as mechanisms to raise funds and awareness, these events simultaneously perform a hidden social and political function (Longmore, 2015): the hope they generate, through appeals for donations and personal testimonies of charitable interventions, produces particular cultural understandings of disability and sets narrow pathways for change. These telethons exist in a context where hope is used as a mechanism through which democratic societies can grapple with large-scale inequality (Appadurai, 2007, p.33). In a modern world where the suffering of others is more visible than ever before, hope has been mobilised as a comforting emotion, allowing people to feel like these divides can be overcome. This article examines

one instance of this dynamic in the 2025 *Children in Need* broadcast. *Children in Need* is a charity in the UK, facilitated by the BBC, which funds and supports UK-wide projects aimed at alleviating poverty and inequality for children (Children in Need, 2026). Its most visible manifestation is an annual telethon, hosted by a wide variety of celebrities, in which money is pledged to alleviate the suffering of disabled children, among other causes.

This article posits that conventional evaluations of hope tend to conflate the distinctive dimensions of effectiveness and appropriateness. The hope offered at *Children in Need* is indeed highly effective in terms of mobilising people, raising money, and engaging people with the issue of inequality (BBC, 2025; Children in Need, 2025a). However, *Children in Need*, like many telethons, embraces a neoliberal approach to inequality and has faced criticism from the disabled community (Baker and Bennet, 2022, p.152; Disability Union, 2021; Reay, 2023). Therefore, the appropriateness of the hope promoted by

Children in Need, in terms of its alignment with the desires of those it claims to represent, requires closer examination. I subsequently argue that the hope offered by *Children in Need* is inappropriate from the standpoint of Critical Disability Studies (CDS) because it constructs a hoped-for future in which charitable intervention is sustained, while preserving ableist binaries and neglecting disabled people's political agency. In particular, *Children in Need* hopes for a future where impairment, not ableism, is eliminated. This thesis is developed in three stages: first, by critiquing the 2025 broadcast of *Children in Need* on the grounds that it promotes a vision of minimal impairment. Second, this argument is expanded, critiquing the *Children in Need* vision for charitable help as part of a wider problematic model which renders disabled people dependent on philanthropy. Finally, a CDS-informed appropriate conception of hope is constructed, illuminating alternative avenues for appropriate hope which are eminently possible.

Despite its activist orientation, CDS has been

criticised for insufficiently engaging with the realities of disabled life (Vehmas and Watson, 2014, p.642). My analysis responds to this concern by employing CDS to reconstruct a hope which serves the disabled community. I therefore reject arguments that hope can never be valuable for marginalised communities (Huber, 2024, p.878), instead emphasising that an assessment of hope's value must be preceded by evaluation of its appropriateness.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Hope is a future-facing emotion. Following Blöser and colleagues (2020, p.2) and Moellendorf (2006), hope requires a non-certain belief that a vision can materialise: a desire for its realisation, and incorporation of the object of hope into the agent's plans. When orientated toward political aims, hope can consolidate communities around a shared vision and motivate political action (Blöser, Huber, and Moellendorf, 2020, p.1). Adopting this definition, collective hope functions as a political resource, for those aiming to achieve the hoped-for-future, or the object of hope.

However, collective hope does not entail symmetry between those who construct the narrative and those on which this narrative is projected, even if these groups are at times overlapping. The latter group therefore form the stakeholders, as hope is attached to and invested in them in order to mobilise action. With this in mind, a distinction emerges between the instrumental logic of effectiveness and the normative logic of appropriateness, which is often neglected in debates on hope, obscuring the value of stakeholders' assessment of the hoped-for-future which is projected onto them. With this division in mind, Blöser and colleagues' definition requires consideration of further dynamics of effectiveness and appropriateness within each element of hope. The distinction between the agents and objects of hope in this context is often neglected, further reinforcing the entanglement of appropriateness and effectiveness when hope is assessed.

While hope can be highly effective in mobilising people and stimulating political action, assessment of its appropriateness is still necessary. Howard (2024) argues that hope is appropriate only when its envisioned future is open to critique and aligned with the aspirations of those it claims to represent. This definition of appropriateness is necessary to recognise the agency of the communities whose future such hope aims to reshape, to allow distinction between hope as a normatively desirable and effective concept, and change as a simply effective one. Where the hoped-for-future is misaligned with the vision of those regarded as 'partners in our political effort', it is inappropriate and must be disavowed (Howard, 2024, p.946). Appropriateness

in this sense is not about popular appeal, but political alignment and accountability to those whose futures are hoped about. Inappropriate hope risks fracturing movements, delegitimising important voices, and perpetuating marginalisation, regardless of its instrumental effectiveness in generating emotional engagement or political momentum.

To evaluate the alignment of the hope at *Children in Need* and the aspirations of the disabled community as stakeholders, I employ Critical Disability Studies. CDS is particularly appropriate because this analysis concerns not only how disability is represented, but also the political arrangements which the concept of disability facilitates. As a post-structuralist tradition, CDS rejects naturalised assumptions about disability, understanding it as socially constructed through exclusionary and ableist systems, not inherently located within bodies (Corker, 1999; Goodley, 2016, p.191). Furthermore, CDS emphasises the relational nature of all embodiments—or human physicalities—contesting the boundary between disabled and non-disabled (Shildrick, 2019; Butler, 2021). Accordingly, hope is inappropriate when it advances a future which sustains ableist logics, reinforces perception of deficit, or removes the agency of disabled people to articulate and contest our own future. While divergent visions for the future may exist within the disabled community, this essay approaches CDS as representing an emancipatory and inclusive future which can be widely embraced. Simultaneously, other approaches to disability may produce visions which are appropriate from divergent disabled perspectives.

VISION FOR MINIMAL IMPAIRMENT

Hope in *Children in Need* is offered through the promise that donations can help children with disabilities overcome inequality—understood as lower quality of life and life chances as a result of impairment. CDS challenges this hope on two grounds. First, *Children in Need* merges impairment and disability, neglecting the social production of disability and perpetuating the marking of these bodies as inferior and deviant (Goodley, 2016, p.115; Campbell, 2009, p.6). Telethons have long positioned disabled people as either 'invalids' or 'overcomers' (Longmore, 2015, p.102). *Children in Need* (BBC, 2025, 37:10, 1:24:00, 2:12:01) blends these roles, using case studies which introduce children discussing their hobbies and dreams, before their parents narrate their experience of impairment. In this way, impairment is framed as a tragic disruption. Donations are portrayed as solidarity, by funding medical intervention or enabling individual determination, with hope for a return to normal lives. Stories of children 'defying the odds' (BBC *Children in Need*, 2025, 38:38, 2:20:21) and completing fundraising challenges with relentless

positivity reinforce that success is measured by proximity to non-disabled life and self-sufficiency. Disability is narrowed to medical need, obscuring the role of ableism in the problems children with disabilities face. Thus, disability becomes the problem to fix with third party intervention rather than changes in social structures, and support and change is instead narrowed to the individual level. This hope envisages a future with fewer people categorised as disabled, and impairment eliminated, rather than a less ableist society.

Second, CDS rejects *Children in Need's* portrayal of vulnerability as a characteristic of some bodies that can be overcome with third party assistance, like the charity's telethon, rather than a universal feature of embodiment. This is contrary to CDS' understanding that all bodies are vulnerable and interdependent (Butler, 2021; Shildrick, 2019) and instead constructs a binary in which donors are invulnerable while donees are dependent (Longmore, 2015, p.207). Hope then becomes a counterforce against disability itself, envisioning a future where disabled people are not vulnerable by aligning more closely with the non-disabled normal. By insisting on disabled people's independence as the hoped-for-future, the reality of our mutual interdependence—whatever our embodiment—is negated, and dependency is framed as a failure. This binary is complicated by reminders in *Children in Need* (BBC, 2025, 1:01:50, 1:26:45) that disability could affect anyone. This tactic encourages donations by making viewers more invested in the hoped-for-future, but deepens fear of disability and perceptions that it must be pitied and avoided (Longmore, 2015, pp.214–217). Therefore *Children in Need* reinforces the undesirability of embodiments constructed as disabled.

VISION FOR CHARITABLE HELP

Children in Need constructs a hopeful future for disabled people resting on charitable donations. While this hope is effective in generating emotional engagement and donations, it is inappropriate in terms of the mode of change it identifies for disabled people, rendering them dependent on external generosity and perpetuating disabled othering in society. CDS identifies two core problems. First, charity frames disabled people as objects of compassion, rather than autonomous agents. Being marked as vulnerable in this way removes agency, creating the perception that the community cannot challenge their own subjugation (Butler, 2021, p.181). Second, change is viewed as a result of individual generosity, not collective obligation. In this way *Children in Need* draws on neoliberal visions of justice, in which philanthropy is necessary for redistribution of wealth and life chances.

Charitable framing is reinforced by the use of individual narratives isolated from their structural contexts. While some argue that telethons in this model can facilitate effective political messaging (Baker and Bennet, 2022, pp.152–153), this places disabled people in the position of relying on and performing for donations. Further, donors' role in creating poverty for disabled people, for example by voting against their interests through favouring the restricting of state support for disabled peoples, is left unexamined. In one case, a young disabled carer expresses gratitude for a support club funded by *Children in Need* and later undertakes an intense fundraising challenge to 'give back' (BBC *Children in Need*, 2025, 37:14). She embraces responsibility for mitigating an oppressive system, while donors are told that to address this hardship they must donate. Hope for change from these oppressive conditions is offered by donating to continue 'life changing' support projects (BBC *Children in Need*, 2025, 15:23, 48:08, 2:01:34, 2:47:49), rather than challenging the conditions which place a child in this position in the first instance. Further, the disabled child conducting the fundraising project has their agency restricted, and must seek support through charity rather than more full attempts to alleviate the social and economic injustices she faces. Instead of explaining the structures which have placed the child in this position, narratives around luck and chance are prominent, depoliticising their structural conditions. Within this charity model, the contradiction between action which upholds an oppressive system in the long term and short term moral opposition to its effects is hidden, thus depoliticising the lives of disabled people.

This hope does not offer transformation for disabled people, instead providing moral and social reward for donors. In a neoliberal society where redistribution depends on charity, charity in turn becomes a prism for asserting middle class identity in opposition to those who require philanthropic support. Charitable donations can become markers of social status and morality (Longmore, 2015, p.71). In this way, children with disabilities become a means for non-disabled people to reaffirm their political identity and moral character. This further aligns with Vogler's (2024, p.591) suggestion that in some visions for the future, the improved treatment of People With Disabilities (PWDs) 'serves merely as a marker of the enlightened character of the proposed utopian vision'.

This is best exemplified by the *Children in Need* tactic of producing highly visible cultural markers of participation. During the months before the televised event, supermarkets, schools, and social spaces around the UK place banners and donation pots in prominent locations, as well as distributing stickers and badges to donors (*Children in Need*, 2025, p.19). These items

produce a moral hierarchy between those who donated and those who have not, and more significantly, between those who donate, and those who the donations go to. This fixes disabled people in subordinate positions as beneficiaries, whose suffering enables others to demonstrate compassion. The performance of charity therefore leaves the unequal distribution of power intact, while enhancing the social standing of donors without challenging the perceptions of those who donate. The alleviation of disabled suffering becomes part of non-disabled identity, while disabled people remain excluded from determining how justice is defined and delivered.

Additionally, telethons coexist comfortably with neoliberal narratives that cast disabled people as economic burdens and

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While this hope is effective in generating emotional engagement and donations, it is inappropriate in terms of the mode of change it identifies for disabled people, rendering them dependent on external generosity and perpetuating disabled othering in society.

'counterfeit citizens' (Hughes, 2015, p.1001). Existing within the BBC, Children in Need does not approach the political decisions which create the structures it addresses, instead maintaining a veneer of neutrality. In this way, prevailing narratives about disabled people and their consequences are left unproblematic. While appearing supportive, they reaffirm the belief that disabled people must rely on benevolence, and the state can legitimately avoid responsibility to support, by placing this responsibility on individuals instead. As Vehmas and Watson (2014, p.647) observe, disability is produced and sustained by economic structures—something which is neglected in telethons—relying on private philanthropy. Instead of collective responsibility, disabled people

here must hope for voluntary compassion. In this way, *Children in Need* stabilises a politics which governs disability through sentiment not rights.

ALTERNATIVE HOPE

The preceding analysis identifies interrelated problems with the hope constructed by *Children in Need*: it envisions overcoming impairment, rather than dismantling ableism; disabled people are positioned as dependent objects of non-disabled compassion; collective, institutional responsibility is substituted for voluntary charity; and disabled recipients must show gratitude for the assistance they receive. An appropriate conception of hope, informed by CDS, turns away from these features by changing the future that is desired and the political mechanisms this is pursued through.

First, CDS-informed hope reorients its object away from the elimination or transcendence of impairment, towards change of ableist social arrangements. Rather than aspiring to approximate a non-disabled norm, hope then targets ableist normativity, rejecting 'same-ness' as the basis for equality (Campbell, 2009, p.14). The hopeful vision is one of equality, where people can genuinely say 'I never wished I didn't have a disability' (Heumann and Joiner, 2020, p.201), because bodily difference does not determine social value. Here, the social model of disability is fully embraced, and the hopeful vision is one of structural reconfiguration not bodily transformation.

This reorientation requires *Children in Need* to move beyond stories in which disabled children endure tragedy or overcome bodily differences. A rebuilt broadcast could examine how inaccessible education, inadequate transport systems, and exclusionary public sector policies construct the disadvantages and restrictions on disabled children's lives. The object of hope then moves from the desire for an individual child to become independent or approach the non-disabled norm, and instead that institutions become accessible and accountable. This does not require ignorance of the pain or medical requirements of disabled lives, but this is not placed as the only or natural cause of inequality and exclusion.

Second, CDS-informed hope would challenge the hierarchy created by the disabled/non-disabled binary, without denying that different embodiments generate different needs. Dichotomies between disabled and non-disabled people tend to present the latter group as autonomous and complete, and the former as vulnerable and dependent (Corker, 1999, pp.639–640). Challenging this requires recognition of universal vulnerability experienced regardless of the

individual specifics of human embodiment. Some argue that the binary must be maintained, because different embodiments require differentiated support, even in a society free from ableism (Vehmas and Watson, 2014, p.641). However, they assume that the binary is necessary to justify such differentiated treatment. A more appropriate telethon would emphasise that all people are vulnerable and interdependent, but without obscuring that vulnerability is also socially distributed in unequal ways. In this way, vulnerability is not an aberration only experienced by disabled people, nor is it evenly experienced by the entire population regardless of their structural conditions.

Universal vulnerability therefore provides the basis for collective responsibility and empathy, but not a claim that everyone has identical needs. A CDS informed conception of hope could emphasise that universal guarantees, such as basic human rights, require differentiated provisions, such as accessibility measures, communicative technology and support which responds to embodiment and circumstance. Such differentiation however does not need to mark its recipient as deficient or other, but as possessing one of many forms of embodiment. Appropriate hope therefore envisions a future in which support is guaranteed not because some bodies are marked as deficient, but because all bodies require care.

This change requires ambition for the future and hope for radical transformation, rooted in greater security, agency and institutional accountability, rather than dependency and benevolence. *Children in Need* can continue to fund services that meet urgent needs, even where they do not facilitate societal transformation, while presenting this funding as a response to current institutional failure, rather than a permanent substitute for public provision. Broadcasts which explain why projects are not government-funded, campaign for policy change, and report on whether institutions accept responsibility for the failures they highlight are essential for this. This is a rejection of the telethon model, which seeks broad popularity through emotionally compelling narratives, while avoiding confrontation with marginalising systems (Baker and Bennet, 2022). In this sense, CDS-informed hope does not necessarily reject telethons as a mode of communication, but their current charitable logic.

Additionally, appropriate hope requires structural guarantees rather than relying on individual will. Rights, accessibility, and welfare are demanded as matters of justice, not generosity, rooted in our mutual ‘unchosen vulnerability and unchosen dependency’ (Butler, 2021, p.191). The structural character of ableism requires acknowledgement of its reproduction through state-practises such as the

education system, welfare rules, healthcare provision and infrastructure. Because the state regulates, funds, and sustains these arrangements, opposition to structural ableism and hope for disabled people must make public institutions responsible for changing them.

This does not leave the state as the only source of care; communities and networks can provide support and solidarity that the state cannot replicate. However, access to the conditions necessary for flourishing should not depend on whether charitable organisations can generate sufficient sympathy or whether individual donors choose to give. A reconstructed *Children in Need* would use its visibility to demand enforceable commitments and accompany fundraising with investigations into gaps in public provisions and policy demands. Hope grounded in CDS therefore mobilises opposition to ableism, replacing donor gratification with democratic accountability.

Finally, appropriate hope should be authored by disabled people themselves. Rather than requiring disabled people to participate in affect regulation, the management of emotion to make the disabled experience palatable to non-disabled audiences (Goodley, 2016, p.110), disabled people are able to express anger, dissatisfaction, and be demanding, without risking the withdrawal of support. Hope is then reclaimed as a form of political agency, rather than accepted as a future projected onto disabled people by donors, charities or broadcasters. As Butler (2021, p.181) emphasises, the agency and activity of disabled people must be recognised, alongside the support that all life requires.

For *Children in Need*, this could mean giving disabled people authority over the presentation of stories, without fear of a change in support based on their decisions. Paying disabled contributors is essential here, as well as giving meaningful ability to challenge the charity's priorities, rather than just testify to its success. One avenue of manifesting this would be accounts of inaccessible institutions and stories of political organising. These must be detached from the expectation of recipients to give back, be positive about their situations, or tell donors that they had transformed their lives.

While this article does not assume homogeneity on the part of the disabled community, and acknowledges that different conceptions of disability would emerge to inform versions of appropriate hope, CDS represents the most comprehensive political account of disability and effective way of dismantling the oppressive effects currently produced by children in need. Appropriate hope, informed by CDS, therefore moves beyond sympathetic representations of disabled people, and instead advocates for

differentiated support, structural reform and disabled authority.

This vision recognises the disproportionate vulnerability people with disabilities face, without reducing vulnerability to a binary condition. Events that represent hope for disabled people must then move beyond individualising stories to capture the full relational experience of embodiment.

CONCLUSION

Therefore, while *Children in Need* mobilises hope effectively, it does so in service of an inappropriate political vision which preserves ableist norms, depoliticises disability, and marginalises disabled agency. Taking Critical Disability Studies seriously requires the reconfiguration of such hope to demand structural justice, not charitable compassion. Further, hope must be reorientated to no longer be understood as a less disabled future, nor the enhancement of private generosity to mitigate structural injustice. Instead, appropriate hope will target ableist social arrangements, reject independence as a measure of value, and affirm vulnerability and interdependence as shared conditions of embodiment.

This reconceptualisation has far reaching consequences. Any political project mobilising hope on behalf of disabled people, or any other detached stakeholder group, must remain open to critique by those it represents; reject individual, paternalistic solutions in favour of structural transformation; and resist creating moral spectacle from inequality. Hope then becomes a demand that institutions change, rather than a warm emotion. With this shift, hope is a collective orientation toward accountability and new material conditions that allow flourishing for all forms of embodiment.

While this article has primarily articulated what inappropriate hope looks like, it has also traced the outline of a CDS-informed alternative. Future work should examine how disabled-led movements articulate hope in practice, and whether such visions meet Howard's criteria of political alignment with community stakeholders. While hope remains crucial, it should not be viewed as a rescue, but a persistent refusal to accept ableism.

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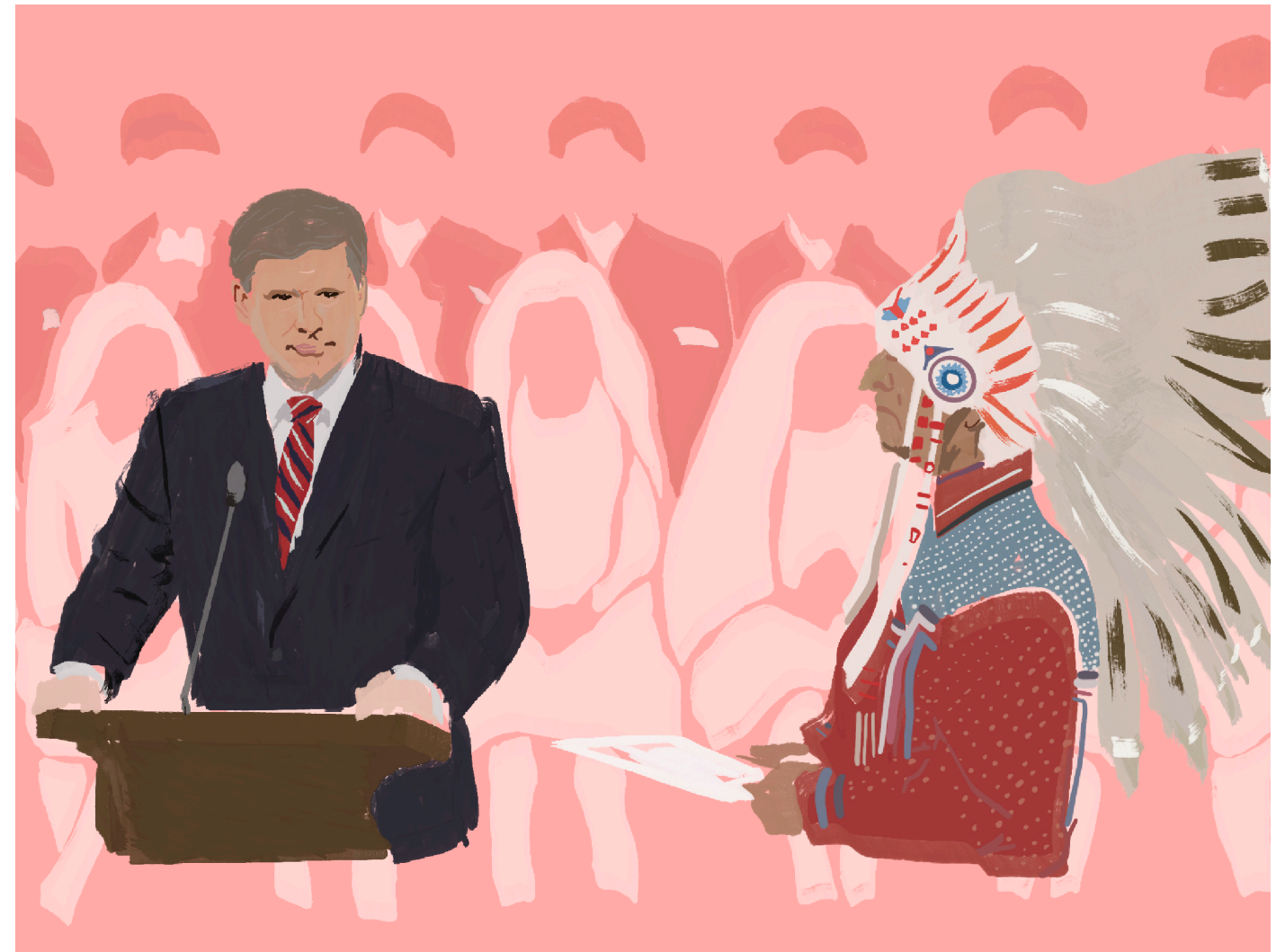
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THE POLITICS OF SINCERITY

Reflecting on a Hollow
Canadian Apology

by **lara crorie**
illustration by sara paruta



Recent decades have been coined the age of ‘apology mania’, an era where state apologies have proliferated in order to renew societal relations and start reconciliation processes (Amiel, 1998, p.11). However, if their intention, motivation, wording, and audience is wrong, these state apologies merely provide ‘window dressing for the status quo’ with ‘a few perfunctory words’ to move on from a period of living history (Funk-Unrau, 2014, p.138). State apologies are a newly emerging phenomenon in Indigenous relations, used by Australia, the United States, New Zealand, and of particular relevance here, Canada, to acknowledge historical wrongdoings and turn a new leaf in citizen relations. This article examines whether the 2008 Canadian Indian Residential School Apology (IRSA), which has been widely considered an international success, was in fact a sincere and successful state apology, or simply reinforced the status quo constituting no great change to Indigenous relations with the Canadian state. This article attempts to showcase the Canadian Apology in its true light rather than accepting it as an international success. As many subsequent state apologies have been modeled on this 2008 Apology, overestimating its success has prevented subsequent state apologies

from enacting true sincerity.

The Indigenous residential schools that operated in Canada were directly funded by the government, and the horrific abuse that occurred in these schools up until the 1990s led to Indigenous calls for action and extensive legal claims (Funk-Unrau, 2014, pp.140–141). While these abuses were publicly acknowledged through the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP) in the mid-1990s and a Statement of Reconciliation was offered in January 1998, these acknowledgments were considered insufficient by Indigenous councils and were met with considerable resistance (Funk-Unrau, 2014, p.142). After the 1990 case *R v. Sparrow*, the scope of Indigenous legal claims expanded, ranging from self-governance to jurisdiction and land ownership. These actively flooded courts across Canada, and were often met with strong opposition. Finally, Supreme Court intervention and appeals were widely unsupported by government legislation (*R v. Sparrow*, 1990). This historic pattern creates a backdrop for the 2008 IRSA, one that gave ‘grudging’ concessions in response to extensive legal claims and public pressure rather than a true desire for reconciliation (Funk-Unrau, 2014, p.144). The limited

concessions brought by the 1998 Statement of Reconciliation meant that the 2008 IRSA needed to transform the relationship between the Canadian government and Indigenous peoples to constitute a true attempt at reconciliation.

To consider the sincerity of the 2008 IRSA, read by former Prime Minister Stephen Harper, we must consider whether it showcases a change in the pattern of Canadian reconciliation that came before it: from reluctant, small concessions to something more meaningful. A meaningful change would constitute a transformation of Indigenous relations that reshapes the current begrudging relationship, with significant changes to how Indigenous needs are communicated, acknowledged, and met. Through consideration of the 2008 IRSA’s political motivations, wording, and audience, this article argues that it was insincere and constitutive of no meaningful change to Indigenous relations. This has wider implications for Canadian politics, begging questions of the sincerity of policy that emerged during the Harper government and whether political apologies have value beyond self-serving gestures.

APOLOGY THEORY: WHAT IS A

SINCERE APOLOGY?

As state apologies have little effect on the legal status of citizens and ‘only indirect’ political consequences, their positive influence is identified through their success in creating ‘affective membership’— or feelings of belonging and acknowledgement of historical harm to further transformative relationships (Tsosie, 2010, p.146). The sincerity of affective membership and changes in Indigenous relations is a necessary indicator of a successful apology. If an apology and apologist are sincere, this provides victims with a legitimate basis to explore mutually agreeable solutions and reconciliation (Yang and Diehl, 2025). Importantly, it does not matter whether the official voicing an apology, such as Harper, personally feels remorse and regret, as they are apologising for an institution that has caused and contributed to injustice (Thaler, 2012, p.266).

Sincerity allows us to distinguish an apology from denial of wrongdoing or ‘rationalisation of mistakes’ to legitimate and meaningful remorse and attempts for change (Tavuchis, 1991 in Yang and Diehl, 2025, p.8). Therefore, sincerity is the best measure of a successful Apology as it ‘alludes to the harmony between internal beliefs and external manifestations’ creating a basis for new policy and relationships (Tavuchis, 1991 in Yang and Diehl, 2025, p.8).

To measure sincerity, Arendt argues that intention and responsibility should lead analysis, stating that ‘every government assumes responsibility for the deeds and misdeeds of its predecessors and every nation for the deeds and misdeeds of the past’ (Arendt, 2003, p.149). Official apologies on behalf of a country must involve a change of attitude and come from a place of meaningful restitution to give sincerity to an apology (La Caze, 2006, p.458). This illustrates that a state apology is not premised on collective guilt but collective responsibility (La Caze, 2006, pp.451–453), not simply of the past but also of the effects today, such as the huge mental health impact on Indigenous residential school survivors in Canada. Nobles’ (2008, pp.139–141) affective membership theory considers sincere official apologies as an effort to reshape the meanings and terms of national membership with an ultimate purpose to ‘enable citizens’ and cultivate ‘a sense of belonging’ (Thaler, 2012, p.268). Therefore, a sincere apology can be analysed through both the intention behind the words and the transformation in relationship they bring. Consequently, an insincere apology, or ‘botched apology’ as Aaron Lazare termed it, would be one that fails to communicate the offender’s responsibility, and is offered for alternative motives (Lazare, 1995, p.40). Thus, there is consensus that sincerity politics is the best measure for a successful apology as it considers intention and

affective membership. Both intention and affective membership are necessary indicators of sincerity and therefore success. However, historically there have been no sincere state apologies to exemplify this theory, begging the question on whether apologies can be sincere due to political governments’ motivations behind them. Importantly, a truly successful state apology must not model apologies of the past. Successful apologies allow the government to cultivate a sense of belonging and contribute transformative change to Indigenous relations through a genuine apologetic attempt of reconciliation. These measures are best analysed in the 2008 Canadian Apology through motivation, wording, and audience.

POLITICAL & ECONOMIC INCENTIVES

The 2008 Indian Residential School Apology failed to have a convincingly sincere motivation, instead being centred by economic and political incentives attempting to preserve Canada’s self-image and sweep historical wrongdoing under the rug.

On the economic front, when Harper came into office in 2006 the Canadian government was facing a ‘flood’ of lawsuits and legal claims from residential school survivors that led to a revised Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement (IRSSA) (Funk-Unrau, 2014, p.143). This changed the terms of compensation that were previously ‘so cumbersome and demeaning that less than ten percent of claimants took advantage of... compensation during its first year’ (Funk-Unrau, 2014, p.143). This 2006 Settlement Agreement was another example in the series of responses to the residential school legacy, continued by Harper’s office, to partially concede to increasing legal claims and calls for reconciliation with a ‘gradual willingness’ (Funk-Unrau, 2014, p.144). Members of Harper’s government, such as the 2006–2009 Head Speechwriter Paul Bunner, viewed the 2008 apology as ‘a strategic attempt to kill the story’ and were unhappy with its intentions (Barrera, 2015). These claims led analysts to consider that Harper was motivated by attempts to end the conversation on lawsuits and land claims, especially considering that the apology omits mention of Indigenous claims to land and resources (Funk-Unrau, 2014, p.149). This evident insincerity reinforces the IRSA’s failure to transform the historical Indigenous relationship, instead working as another in a long line of small concessions to nullify Indigenous peoples in response to the economic land-ownership pressures posed to the government.

This insincere intention is also reflected through Harper’s strong political motivations for the IRSA. The IRSA serves to paint a ‘benevolent picture’ of a remorseful

Canadian state, yet Canada ‘asserts control over the Indigenous population’ through its refusal to negotiate economic and political accommodation (Funk-Unrau, 2014, p.150). The decision of Harper’s government to reject the United Nations Declaration on Indigenous Rights on 13 September 2007 exemplifies the role of IRSA as an attempt to preserve Canada’s political image after this international humanitarian failure through the 2008 Apology (Funk-Unrau, 2014). This political motivation of self-image restoration showcases that attention was focused on the international stage and government reputation rather than Indigenous relations. Prior to Harper’s election in 2006, Canadian governments had supported the drafting of the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous people for over 20 years, which aimed to address collective Indigenous rights and environmental concerns (Fraser-Kruck, 2009, p.11). The Conservative government gave up on the declaration before the final draft was proposed, arguing that it ‘allotted too many protections and rights to Indigenous people leaving the Canadian state vulnerable to litigation’, and refused to participate in negotiations showcasing their dismissive attitude towards political accommodation (Fraser-Kruck, 2009, pp.10–11). This decision was a political blunder that led to negative international press, as Canada stood as one of four countries to vote against the Declaration, damaging their progressive political reputation (Fraser-Kruck, 2009, p.1). Thus, Harper’s government chose to give the 2008 IRSA ‘as a strategy of containment’, an attempt to ‘manage Indigenous calls for social change by substituting rhetorical gestures of atonement for more radical processes of redistributive justice or political power sharing’ and to restore international relations through promotion of self-image (Wakeham, 2012, p.2). This political motivation for issuing the IRSA showcases the insincere intentions behind the apology and indicates it was not a remorseful attempt to reconcile with Canadian Indigenous peoples and reimagine the relationship between peoples and government, but an attempt to restore Canada’s international image.

WORDING

How a state apology constructs its past through its wording is indicative of its intentions and what ‘ideas of reconciliation it seeks to model’ (Dorrell, 2009, p.30). The 2008 IRSA is worded to focus on closure and containment of a chapter of history rather than considering the residential schools as ‘a critical component of a larger and continuing colonial project’ or the detrimental impacts residential schools had on the present and future lives of Indigenous Canadians (Dorrell, 2009, pp.29–30). It had the potential to bring Canada’s ‘larger history of colonial violence and dispossession to light’ but failed to acknowledge ongoing control of Indigenous land and resources,

likely due to the Conservative government’s fears of litigation and land claims (Dorrell, 2009, p.33). The IRSA is another instance of the government’s inability to verbalise the connection between residential school abuses and issues of land claims, self-government, and the wider ongoing present reality of Indigenous colonisation and assimilation (Dorrell, 2009, p.39; Funk-Unrau, 2014, p.148). Its intention, manifest in the wording, showcases the apology as insincere and incapable of transforming the relationship between the government and Indigenous peoples.

The 2008 IRSA begins with the words ‘the treatment of children in Indian residential schools is a sad chapter in our history’, minimising Indigenous suffering by implying it was limited to a narrow period of the past and dismissing their continued struggle under Harper’s government (Dorrell, 2009, p.32; Harper, 2008). This wording was purposefully used to paint this as a past issue rather than a current one, creating a damaging effect on Indigenous relations with the government.

The apology speaks of ‘Canadians’ and ‘Aboriginals’, and although it refers to First Nation, Inuit, and Metis language and culture, it fails to go further than imagining a ‘simplified reconciliation between two distinct [...] homogeneous groups’ (Dorrell, 2009, p.35). Failing to promote affective membership corrodes levels of identity and reduces the sense of belonging that state apologies should aim to promote. The Inuit leader Mary Simon and President of the Metis National Council Clem Cartier both ‘voiced concerns’ that the 2008 IRSA ‘did not recognise or respond to the majority of Inuit and Metis peoples’, and omitted mention of day schools which were also left out of compensation agreements (Dorrell, 2009, p.35). This homogenisation alienates Indigenous peoples as they are grouped together into one identity despite stark differences in geography, history, culture and language, thereby fundamentally failing to recognise cultural nuances and convey a sense of belonging, signalling the IRSA’s insincere nature.

Finally, the IRSA ends by mentioning the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) opening as a ‘positive step in forging a new relationship’, asserting the claim that this is the consequential change brought alongside the IRSA to signify a new relationship (Harper, 2008). However, the TRC is not a brand-new concession to the Indigenous peoples in 2008, as it was proposed as part of the IRSSA in 2005 and announced in 2006 (University of British Columbia, 2022). Therefore, the apology does not come alongside any mention of new reparations or initiatives to provide support to the Indigenous peoples despite demands for more post-2006 TRC announcement, thus showcasing its insincere intention

to transform the relationship with the Indigenous people, instead merely providing ‘window dressing for the status quo’ (Funk-Unrau, 2014, p.138).

CONSTRUCTING AN AUDIENCE

The true sincerity of a state apology can also be reflected through its chosen audience. The 2008 IRSA excluded three key Indigenous areas; Newfoundland, New Brunswick, and Prince Edward Island (PEI) (Harper, 2008). This choice to omit regions of Canada from the apology is more than an oversight, but a deliberate decision to remove responsibility from the Canadian Government for these residential schools and showcases that the apology chose not to acknowledge impacts and the damaging effects of assimilation on the Government-Indigenous relationship.

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The 2008 IRSA was an unsuccessful state apology as evidenced by its failure to genuinely attempt the transformation of the Indigenous-state relationship...

The choice to omit any Indigenous peoples fundamentally undermines the IRSA as it shows a failure to understand the premise of collective responsibility, not just of the past but of the present (Arendt, 2003, p.158). Governments have a representative responsibility over the present world that must lie at the centre of any public apology. The consequences of historic denial of rights and land abuse have damaged all Indigenous communities across Canada. Omitting Indigenous groups develops a view of their community as separate and fails to contribute a collective sense of belonging and unity across the nation today.

The 2008 IRSA had the opportunity to transform the relationship between the federal government and Indigenous peoples in Newfoundland and Labrador (NL) through recognition of the damaging effect of the residential schools in their area and their Indigenous identity (Hanrahan, 2003). However, the 2008 Conservative government argued that ‘it was not accountable for the boarding schools because they had

opened before Newfoundland and Labrador had become a part of Canada’ (Procter, 2020). The region of NL was omitted due to its undefined nature within Canada and previous omission from the identity of Indigenous. This isolation from Canadian Indigenous peoples enabled Harper’s government to deny accountability without huge political outcry, instead disguising the injustice as a historical continuity. This omission demonstrates that Harper’s Apology came from a place of continuity not accountability, that did not attempt to renew or transform Indigenous relations but plaster the walls. Importantly, it allowed the 2008 Canadian Government to claim that all people living in NL were ultimately settlers which ‘converts treaty obligations from rights to privileges’ (Schaepli, Godlewska, and Lamb, 2019, p.149). This demonstrates the financial motivations for this omission, underlining a potential intention of the Harper Government to disable the five class-action land claim lawsuits that were called in 2007–2008 (Government of Canada, 2019), none of which related to the NL area.

This injustice was addressed in 2017 when former Prime Minister Justin Trudeau issued an apology on behalf of Canada to Newfoundland and Labrador where he stated the ‘long overdue’ nature of the apology, confirming that it was unfairly omitted (Trudeau, 2017). The 2008 Canadian Government’s omission of these territories in its audience is demonstrative of a core failure behind the IRSA, and represents more than an oversight but a perpetuation of a longstanding injustice towards Newfoundland and Labrador. The role of a state apology to ensure that injustices of the past are not repeated is a necessary ‘attribution of sincerity’ that conveys a transformative shift in relationship that allows for reconciliation (La Caze, 2006, p.458). The construction of an Indigenous audience that bars the entry of NL Metis and Inuits perpetuates a longstanding injustice that the government was wary of since 1949 and that was actively protested and demanded from NL Indigenous communities, reaffirming the government’s failure to address Indigenous calls, and failure to right a significant historical wrong to favor alternative motivations.

The omission had a damaging effect on Newfoundland and Labrador Indigenous peoples’ sense of belonging in the country, contradictory to the aim of a state apology to create a sense of national unity and belonging. Nunatsiavut Finance Minister Danny Pottle argued that the Canadian government’s decisions continue to ‘fragment and divide our people’ (Procter, 2020). Similarly, Charlotte Wolfrey, an Inuit Leader from Rigolet, stated that the exclusion of the aforementioned regions from the apology and settlement ‘pains us, it hurts us, as Labrador people, as Inuit, and as Innu to not be believed’

showcasing the consequences for the community and sentiments of lack of belonging (Procter, 2020). Therefore, the IRSA's exclusive audience showcases an inability to consider belonging, membership theory, and collective responsibility when writing and presenting the official apology, demonstrative of the Conservative government's ulterior intentions and insincerity.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, in this era of ‘Apology mania’ we must consider the intention and sincerity behind state apologies to assess their success and ability to create strong reconciliation (Amiel, 1998, p.11). The 2008 IRSA was an unsuccessful state apology as evidenced by its failure to genuinely attempt the transformation of the Indigenous-state relationship; a failure underscored by the apology's economic and political motivations, wording, and omission of critical Indigenous groups in its named audience. In each of these areas the conservative government focused on self-image, sweeping historical wrongdoing under the rug and providing small concessions which silenced active change and true reconciliation. In situations where analysis concludes that a political apology is insincere, wider implications are raised on Canadian politics, questioning the Indigenous policies that emerged under these governments and current Indigenous-state relationships. The 2008 Apology has been previously considered as a framework for state apologies, preventing genuine and sincere apologies. Future research can follow this political apology theory framework, studying motivation, wording, and audience to measure state apology success. Whilst we must accept that state apologies are imperfect and so it is not easy to point to an example of a perfect state apology the use of the 2008 Apology as an international success has led to an insincere model of apologies as apologies should intend to genuinely and authentically transform the political relationship for the better and, as exemplified throughout this article, this intention would enable its consideration as a success (Friedrich, 2022).

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UTOPIA IN THE RAINBOW NATION

Competition over Aspirational Politics in South Africa

by theo westcott

illustration by lucy barrett



In Orania, a secluded town in the middle of South Africa's Northern Cape, the populace use their own currency, fly their own flag, and organise their own sewage works (BusinessTech, 2025). The fact that a town can so intentionally reject its inclusion into the wider South African state reflects the unresolved internal struggle between different utopian regimes, or competing visions of the future. After the fall of Apartheid, which constituted the macro-level, legally codified separation of South Africans based on racial identities (Kosciejew, 2015, p.101), theologian and human rights activist Desmond Tutu's 'Rainbow Nation' ideal paved the way for a particular utopian vision to influence post-apartheid nation building. The Rainbow Nation morphed from a purely political term into a more formalised utopian basis for African National Congress (ANC), the dominant post-Apartheid party, to lead postcolonial development.

This article argues that utopian analysis can be applied to South Africa and reveal the existence of both a neocolonial and decolonial utopia and stark tensions between the two visions. Specifically, I propose that Ruth Levitas' (2013) three-pronged *Utopia as Method* allows for a meaningful academic approach to the current state of South Africa. This academic analysis provides greater insight, specifically

revealing a decolonial utopia alongside an alternative and opposing neocolonial utopia. The leading decolonial utopia is derived from the Rainbow Nation and is inclusive and reconciliatory, having been used in concert with legal processes. These legal processes included a constitution that enshrined rights to all (Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996, p.5) in a top-down, state-sponsored manner. Conversely, a competing neocolonial utopia, exemplified by the town of Orania, is inherently exclusive and rejects the state as both a multiracial entity and a dominant service provider, and at its most extreme, has led to grassroots alternatives to state provision in the form of enclave-based, self-reliant forms of social organisation that reproduce racial and class divisions. Contemporary analysis of South Africa's post-Apartheid era has primarily used a macroeconomic paradigm (Mariotti and Fourie, 2014, p.117), focusing on the direct consequences of these competing utopias rather than the visions themselves. The significance of these two rival utopias rests in their ability to cause a rift between two alternative developmental paths, one of which is inclusive and state-sponsored, the other being selective and relying primarily on the free market as the final planner. As this article argues, these rival utopias ultimately lead to setbacks to the post-Apartheid nation-building and reconciliatory process as a result of ideological splits—which are

even more charged by the profound legacy of racism and colonialism in South Africa.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: LEVITAS' UTOPIA AS METHOD

Levitas' work on utopia unpacks her broad definition of utopia as a 'desire for being otherwise' (2013, p.3), framing utopia not as a scientific blueprint, but as a longing to imagine and inhabit an alternative social reality. In this sense, Levitas' definition of utopia is fitting for South Africa because it captures a collective mood in the immediate post-Apartheid period: that the nation's existing resources and infrastructure could be mobilised in order to unlock higher living standards as part of the Rainbow Nation. Levitas (2013, p.182), in her final three chapters of *Utopia as Method*, outlines her utopian theory as three distinct yet inseparable strands: utopia as archeology, utopia as ontological mode, and utopia as architecture. The former involves the 'excavation' (Levitas, 2013, p.154) of past societies and cultures to construct ideas of a 'good society' that can be used to structure current society's institutions and policy. Utopia as ontology is utopia at the micro-level: in essence, it bridges who you are now with who you might be in a future society (Levitas, 2013, p.196). Finally, utopia as architecture involves the creation of an alternate and imaginary utopian world and

describing its contents, specifically its social and political structures; it is a ‘provisional hypothesis about how society might be, offered as part of a dialogue’ (Levitas, 2013, p.198).

When applied to South Africa, utopia as ontology and architecture are forward-facing strands, while archaeology is past-facing and based on both internal and historical self-reflection. While both utopias utilise societal frameworks to construct future societies, the neocolonial utopia exhibits archaeology: engagement with the historic background to create a South Africa that informs itself on the past, in particular using Afrikaner nationalism. In contrast, utopia as ontology is more fitting for the decolonial utopia; it treats the people of South Africa as an equal and homogenous bloc in accordance with the Rainbow Nation.

RIFT IN THE NARRATIVES OF SERVICE PROVISION

The utopian logic of the neocolonial and decolonial utopia fundamentally contrast one another; an apt illustration is service provision. Nadvi, Sayeed, and Smit (2018, p.3) note that the quasi-romantic expectations of a flourishing and diverse Rainbow Nation have not been realised due to spiralling economic inequality and cadre deployment—the ANC’s practice of appointing party loyalists to high-level civil service offices, which has particularly affected service delivery (Mlambo, Zubane, and Thusi, 2022, p.16). Ergo, members of the neocolonial utopia have uncoupled from state services and migrated to the private sector, thus creating a framework in which they can usurp the state as a service-provider. To this end, Animashaun (2009, pp.48–49) defines African state disengagement as ‘a retreat from the state by disaffected segments of the citizenry with its attendant creation of parallel social, cultural, economic and even political systems competing with state institutions’. Domestic security in South Africa exemplifies this architectural rift, as it represents a fundamental disagreement about the future of institutional organisation.

It was reported in 2022 that there were four private guards for every uniformed police officer in the country (BusinessTech, 2023), a rate that has only grown since then. Shaw (2002, pp.126, 103, 116) proposes that the rise of private security reduces state incentives to improve police provision, which fundamentally infringes on the norm of democratic societies that policing is available to all but also perpetuates higher crime rates into communities that cannot afford private security. These effects are problematic and exclusionary as they segment the population along neo-colonial lines. The dilemma of service provision shows the significance of the dual utopia system—although utopian studies have

been critiqued for their practical relevance (Zuolo, 2025, p.21), immediate, functional ramifications ensue from the dual utopia system.

ORANIA: A FOCAL POINT FOR THE NEOCOLONIAL ALTERNATIVE

The self-reliant community of Orania is the most prominent example of present-day exclusionary utopian thinking in South Africa, and thus acts as the focal point of the neocolonial utopia. It represents the neocolonial utopia taken to its furthest end: Orania acts as its own self-sufficient, independent state and rejects inclusion into the wider multiracial South African state (Seldon, 2015, p.69). Furthermore, Orania rests on an ideological basis: the Afrikaans notion of a Volkstaat (nation-state) is part of its fabric, implying ‘an Afrikaans territory’ (Seldon, 2015, p.14).

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When pushed to extremes, this neocolonial utopia has led to segregationist settlements based on racial grounds, which isolate themselves from the state as a service provider.

Afrikaans people are descendants of those that settled South Africa in the 1700s from Northern Europe (Hermann, 1983). Ramutsindela (1998) proposes that sections of the Afrikaners community have interpreted one of the tenets of a Volkstaat to be a society based on racial exclusion, thus mirroring the neocolonial utopia. While there is academic debate over the role of race in the organisation of Orania, Kotze and colleagues (2019, p.217) note its population remains exclusively white. Majavu (2022, p.15) also links Orania’s structure to ‘organised racism’, directly opposing the inclusive logic of the decolonial utopia. In essence, Orania represents a fundamentally exclusionary community that rejects the potential of wider political change to enact progress; they have no motivation to pursue change through the political

organs of South Africa. It is this rejection of conforming to the multiracial state of South Africa as a whole that most undermines the theoretical basis of the decolonial utopia; that is, the notion that, even 30 years after the Apartheid settlement, the country cannot and will not become a homogenous, inclusive country. Moreover, the perceived necessity of Orania’s existence in order to safeguard the Volkstaat undermines the ideal of the Rainbow Nation by implying that tolerance and minority protection still remain impossible in modern South Africa. Seldon (2015, p.34) proposes that, for many in Orania, the end of Apartheid made it ‘even more important to find a way to ensure the persistence of Afrikaans identity into the future’, thus manifesting itself as a separatist project.

The most captivating aspect of the Oranian project to utopian theorists is its focus on an Afrikaner identity; it is a past-facing community which harks back to a time when Afrikaners had significant social and economic power and formed the sole political class. Orania rests on a revisionist view of the past in order to justify the survival of the Afrikaners as an ethnic group through separatism (Seldon, 2015, p.35). Thus, Seldon (2015, p.164) proposes that it acts as a ‘strategy for survival’. By applying Levitas’ *Utopia as Method*, we identify utopian archaeology; Orania utilises its common Afrikaner identity and shared language, culture, and tradition to justify its community organisation. However, the overemphasis on utopian archaeology—as opposed to architecture and ontology—grounds the Oranian project in regressive and past-facing frameworks that allow racist premises to persist under the guise of cultural protection. The pursuit of creating a new Volkstaat through utopian archaeology forces a restructuring of society away from a multiracial state and towards both individual and collective independence.

In addition, while each utopian strand is distinct, they do not act in a vacuum—Orania’s archaeology directly informs their ontology—thus, Seldon (2015, p.142) proposes that there is an unfulfilled desire for an ‘ideal-type Volk’. This conclusion carries important implications: for post-colonial countries with troubled history, utopian architecture is fundamentally anchored to the past, such that attempts to imagine future ideals can ultimately collapse into colonial recreations. Furthermore, the media attention (Senekal, 2023, p.2) alongside high population growth (BusinessTech, 2025) means it acts as a focal point for similar ideologies, attracting attention both related to the neocolonial utopia and from those who doubt the Rainbow Nation’s ability to deliver higher living standards. Although Orania is undoubtedly a unique project, it is not exceptional—as evidenced by the existence of competing hubs for the growth of a Volkstaat such as Kleinfontein

and Balmoral (Seldon, 2015, p.34). In this way, Orania exists as one among several archeological reflections of the past as a neocolonial utopia.

There are myriad nationwide ramifications to this dual utopia system, with scholars like Southall (2018, p.203) proposing that the domestic politics of South Africa is at a state of proto-polarisation, or on the path to greater extremism. In conjunction, there has been growth of provocative language, such as calls of a ‘white genocide’ and Julius Malema, leader of the left-wing Economic Freedom Fighter party chanting ‘Kill the Boer’ (Lötter, 2025, p.1). Greater research is necessary; however this inflamed rhetoric could be at least in part, attributable to the dual utopia system, because it has led to bitterly opposed political fronts that disagree about the future of SA, namely between orthodox ANC rule and the wider reformist bloc.

Challenges to this dual utopia thesis may be that the addition of a formalised utopian theory adds little to the discourse for the current realities of South Africa are shaped more heavily by socioeconomic factors; in other words, Orania is a purely economic, pragmatic enterprise and thus political analysis is unyielding. South Africa’s extreme inequality seems to reinforce this point: it is considered the most unequal country, where the top 0.1 percent of earners capture 25 percent of the country’s wealth (Fraser, 2024). Harvey interrogates spatial utopia in *Spaces of Hope* (2000), labelling gated, bourgeois communities like Orania ‘privatopias’ (p.167) but importantly posits that they shield inhabitants for primarily practical, instead of ideological, reasons. Although there are undoubtedly gated communities in South Africa that exist for purely practical reasons, such as collective security, it nevertheless creates division and ‘othering’. The existence of Orania as a means of community organisation is powerful evidence of the neocolonial undertones which persist in South Africa. Thus utopian analysis compliments, rather than competes with, macroeconomic analysis of South Africa.

CONCLUSION

By utilising Levitas’ trimodal *Utopia as Method*, this article argues that utopian studies can productively contribute to academic discourse surrounding development in South Africa and that this analysis reveals a distinct competition between two utopian frameworks. One is decocolonial and another neocolonial, relying on different strands of Levitas’ utopia. The decolonial utopia that emerged as part of the Rainbow Nation is future-centric, and uses utopia as ontology, or to imagine what a utopian South Africa would look like. The emerging, heterodox, neocolonial utopia utilises archaeology as a means to inform

its architecture, while rejecting modern reconciliatory post-Apartheid themes. The neocolonial utopia derives itself from a lack of faith in the multi-racial state as a provider, but also incorporates ideological themes such as cultural protection that enable racist frameworks to develop. When pushed to extremes, this neocolonial utopia has led to segregationist settlements based on racial grounds, which isolate themselves from the state as a service provider. More analysis is needed, but this divide may have started to precipitate in the domestic politics of SA, as a result of the country being fundamentally torn between two different visions of the future.

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TO-FU OR NOT TO-FU

Moving Beyond Technological
Utopias Toward Agro-Ecological
Futures

by agnes tyley

illustration by lucy barrett



The food system we live within is dominated by industrial agribusiness, shaped by the forces of neoliberalism and globalisation. Food in the United Kingdom (UK) is often not produced within a consumers' local area, or even country (Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, 2021). Global corporations predominantly produce foodstuffs through monoculture production, prioritising export-led growth in throughput over local consumption, with environmental and social damage a common byproduct (Magdoff and Tokar, 2010). In meat production—a significant source of protein across much of the Western world (Geiker

et al., 2021, p.3)—this push for higher production levels is leading to extensive environmental destruction (Thavamani, Sferra, and Sankararaman, 2020, pp.348–349; Manickavasagan, Lim, and Ali, 2022, p.5; Breewood and Garner, 2023, pp.4–12). Our meat consumption relies heavily on the unsustainable practices of livestock farming (Casanova, 2025, p.14): 37 percent of our protein comes from meat and dairy, yet the livestock industry occupies 83 percent of farmland and produces 60 percent of agriculture's greenhouse gas emissions (Keulertz, 2019, p.844); growing one kilogram of beef protein releases 113 times more greenhouse gases compared with pea

protein (Monbiot, 2022). With this ecological impact in mind, re-conceptualising where protein is sourced from away from meat production is an understandable demand from those wishing to create a more environmentally conscious future.

To re-imagine this industry-dominated model of agriculture in general, and meat production in particular away from the injustices inherent at present, I argue that utopian theory is critically necessary. The utopian visions produced by these theories should be evaluated for their ability to improve our food systems' response to human needs. This article focuses on two

central considerations for designing utopian protein futures: environmental sustainability, alongside local sovereignty over food choices and production. Bookchin's (2006, p.15) theory of social ecology is applied here to frame utopian reimaginings of food systems 'toward a new synthesis that contains the best of both [the natural and social]'. This emphasis on the interdependence of ecological and social wellbeing informs the analysis developed here. Thus, this article understands the need for the food system to become less environmentally destructive, promoting long-term sustainability for both food production itself and holistic ecological flourishing. However, it must simultaneously change the food system from one where unaccountable corporations dictate what food is produced, where and for what consumers, to one which promotes food justice. This justice would involve local populations regaining the decision-making power over their food, regaining for it the central role in communities that it has had for millennia. This allows cultural and social connection, with traditional foods persisting. Furthermore, local sensitivity also promotes a holistic ecological approach to food, with Indigenous crops fitting better to their environment and preventing further ecological damage. These two factors, viewed through social ecology, are mutually reinforcing: humans cannot flourish without the environment flourishing.

Protein sourced without animals is increasingly promoted as a more sustainable alternative to meat, with new 'alternative proteins' (APs), attempting to mimic meat in taste and texture becoming popular, making it one utopian response to the aforementioned flaws of agribusiness. These products are created in factories, not fields; the popular mycoprotein brand *Quorn* as well as lab-grown meats are made in specialised tanks known as bioreactors (Linder, 2024, p.3). This article's primary contention is that APs, as a form of technological utopian thinking on the future of meat-free protein production, fail to meet the need for change in the food system on the dual criteria of environmental sustainability and local sovereignty over food. While they do nominally reduce the environmental destruction of protein production when compared with meat production, they do not currently promote any wider, holistic view of ecological flourishing, nor the necessary changes in the social structuring of the food system where power is brought back from corporations to communities. Production of APs is rarely controlled locally; technology with the power to improve human diets is instead being co-opted by corporate structures and detached from consumer control (Abergel, 2024, p.140). Thus, this form of utopian thinking on meat-free protein production fails to adequately address the current injustices of the global food system. I develop this argument as follows. First, I

briefly outline the theoretical framework of utopianism as a means to rethink our current food system. Next, I reconstruct the utopian vision within AP futures, drawing out its social and ecological insufficiencies. Against this, I present an underexplored alternative vision for how a meat-free protein future could be imagined, responding to the need for change in protein production identified yet unfulfilled by AP. This is in the form of an agro-ecological approach to producing plant-based proteins, with minimally processed plants such as beans, lentils, or soy-based tofu, produced within local communities. This, instead, provides a more suitable vision for addressing the need for social change in our food system and the creation of a meat-free future.

THEORISING FOOD UTOPIAS

Utopian thinking involves the exploration of alternative ways of structuring human life. Utopias are therefore innately hopeful conceptions, imagining positive visions of how the future could look. Despite often being derided as 'unrealistic' (Levitas, 2013, p.143), utopian theory can be used to look at issues such as protein production from new angles, and consider how the needs of humans could be better met. Utopian visions stem from dissatisfaction with the status quo and a resulting 'desire for being otherwise', or a reimagining of social systems to improve such systems' response to human needs (Levitas, 2013, p.11). Such a framework is often applied to environmental issues, responding to the pressing demand for a more ecologically sustainable future with reimaginings of human systems.

As food is a crucial connector between social and environmental questions, many utopian thinkers have approached the topic of food systems. What people eat relates to families and communities, gender relations, rural/urban relations, and our relationship to the land (Sargent, 2015, p.14). While utopian fiction and theory have reimagined food production and consumption in many ways, current discourse is largely shaped by technological utopian narratives of food futures, of which APs are typical (Piatti, 2015, p.90). Utopia encourages a plurality of alternatives being considered; other futures for protein should be considered. Bloch's (1995) description of utopias as 'not-yet-become' promotes the need to focus on the practical applications of utopian thinking taking place at present, with the seeds of these new futures needing development to become a future socially just system. This article explores the idea of agro-ecological approaches to meat-free protein, arguing it answers utopian thinking's call for a revolutionary transformation in food systems, where power is shifted from corporations to consumers and sustainability is ensured.

TECHNOLOGICAL UTOPIAN FUTURES

FOR PROTEIN

At present, APs dominate the view of a future of protein sourced without animals. They have seen an explosion of popularity: as of May 2026, Sainsbury's supermarket stocks 66 plant-based products that seek to replace meat with similar looking and tasting alternatives, such as fake salmon and steak (Sainsbury's, 2026c). Various production methods and forms exist within the category of AP, such as mycoprotein, lab-grown meat, and the produce of Solar Foods, a Finnish company that creates a richly nutritional flour-like substance made from desiccated bacteria (Monbiot, 2022, pp.187-189). Proponents present these as the future of protein where animals need not suffer, the environment thrives, and people eat nutritional foods (Linder, 2024, pp.2-4). Technology is central to this AP vision of a future without relying on meat. Complex processing is needed for factories to turn raw materials into meat-free products resembling meat. This is a technological utopian vision; technology is the 'means of bringing about utopia' (Segal, 2017, p.10) of a meat-free future. When technology is centred as the solution for the food system, however, critique of the social structures and issues inherent in the industrial agribusiness production of food is sidelined. Although reducing the damage from meat production, it does not create a holistic ecological vision in its production. By centralising technology, the connection between communities and food production is not promoted and corporate dominance continues.

There is no denying that AP reduces environmental pressures in comparison with livestock production (Breewood and Garner, 2023, p.18), yet it does not create the holistic ecological vision that a sustainable future for protein production demands. AP production is not embedded in natural processes nor the environment, but rather involves highly technical processes designed to circumvent dependence on these; scientific literature speaks of products 'irradiated by light-emitting diodes to achieve a high photosynthetic photon flux at optimized wavelengths' (Tzachor, Richards, and Holt, 2021, p.326). Lab-grown meat removes the need for nature and complex organisms, with a small sample of cells submerged in growth mediums in order to create meat without the environmental damage of industrial meat production (Keulertz, 2019, p.846). Energy use is a concern; AP production is highly energy-intensive, with mycoprotein requiring submersion in large bioreactors filled with nutrient rich broth which require vast quantities of energy (Linder, 2024). Further, if Solar Foods' production was scaled up globally, it would increase the world's electricity demand by eleven percent (Monbiot, 2022). Driven as it is by large, profit-motivated corporations, APs rarely centre ecological sustainability as a key driver of its work beyond nominal

comparisons with current meat production. In this way, the separation from nature in AP discourses oversimplifies the issues at hand by abstracting food production from wider questions of ecological sustainability embedded in tangible environments, and their relationship to the deeper political-economic structures driving environment destruction. Thus, presenting AP as an environmentally conscious solution to food production degrades the concept of ecological justice as the issue of sustainable food production is abstracted from its roots in corporate dominance.

Furthermore, corporate dominance is embedded in AP production; the financial potential of the growing demand for AP is leading to large amounts of investment from corporations and venture-capitalists, with the sector now valued at 21.2 billion US dollars (Abergel, 2024 p.140). AP is often controlled by the same companies as meat production, with many popular meat-producing corporations, like *Richmond Sausages*, producing vegan ranges (Sainsburys, 2026b). Hence, the interests of capitalist agribusiness are entangled with this technological utopian narrative, with the technology installation necessary for AP production requiring this heavy investment. This dependence on technology casts doubt on the claims of proponents of AP of its ability to feed the world in its lack of accessibility for many communities across the world (Keulertz, 2019, p.851). The new technology required for producing AP is costly and thus unaffordable for poorer producers which operate locally (Magdoff and Tokar, 2010, p.230). Monbiot, generally a supporter of AP for its ability to solve the issues in the agribusiness-dominated food system, declares that microbial flour can be produced anywhere at the same cost (2022, pp.191-192)—a true statement, but one that ignores the capital required to invest in risky technology and the fact that investors, not local producers, are profiting from technology installation. Corporate dominance is not reduced in the utopian vision of AP that relies on technology for its success; this does not fulfill the needs of a more just food system.

With the dominance of corporations in AP production, communities fail to regain the control over food production and consumption that a social ecology utopian vision demands. McMichael (2013, p.156) highlights the issues inherent in the current 'food from nowhere' regime, where food is a commodity rather than centralised within individuals' lives. Cultural connection to food is reducing as cheap food is bought from supermarkets and shared meals rarely play a role in community life (Lacey, 2015, p.281). Local sovereignty over food consumption is important for food justice; AP's production necessarily negates the role of locality in food production. Complex production methods are rarely understood, if known

about, by the consumer, preventing holistic understanding of the food system occurring in this utopian vision, which is so missing in the agribusiness set-up at present.

Ultimately, APs use what Lacey (2015, p.280) describes as 'decontextualising methodologies', abstracting problems from their societal roots. AP attempts to solve the problem of meat's environmentally destructive impacts by creating a sustainable protein, but ignores the social roots of the dominance of agribusiness—a capitalist and corporate driven food system where individual sovereignty and sustainability is sidelined in the pursuit of profit. This is not to suggest that technological advances, driven by capitalism, provide no benefits, or that life sciences are not vitally important to deepening our understanding of the environment. For instance, The Land Institute, led by Wes Jackson, is developing perennial grain varieties to create an

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[APs'] focus on technology to solve the issues in the food system negates the social injustices that underpin this system; corporate dominance is heightened, not dismantled, and communities have little sovereignty over production.

alternative to intensive agriculture (Jackson, 2015, p.18; Monbiot, 2022, pp.179-185). The issue is therefore not technology itself, but rather how this technology is co-opted by corporate structures, removing the realm of food from consumers themselves. Thus, relying on technology to solve the problem of sustainable protein is reductive without a consideration of system change. AP's technological utopianism struggles to imagine a world beyond the current capitalist-driven system. Utopian visions of a meat-free protein future must consider other alternatives to AP, where the dominance of industrial agribusiness is reduced with justice for both the environment and humans improving as a result.

AGRO-ECOLOGICAL UTOPIAN FUTURES FOR PROTEIN

In contrast to the utopianism of AP thinking, agro-ecological utopian futures view food system issues as a result of extractive agricultural practices, imagining a better world where food is prioritised, not commodified. Meat-free protein production in this vision centres on minimally processed plants and plant-based products, such as beans, lentils, tofu, and seitan. Agro-ecological principles provide guidance for an alternative conception of how the food system could be structured, but it is not a detailed ideology. Rather, as a farming practice and political project, it 'aims to achieve a balance among [...] productivity, sustainability (that is, robustness, resilience and adaptability of agroecosystems, and conservation of biodiversity), health of members of the farming communities and their surroundings, and strengthening of local people's culture and agency' (Lacey, 2015, p.281). Practically, this involves appreciating the system of food production and consumption holistically, with scientific attention to such considerations as soil microorganisms and social attention to what a community desires from its food; the aim is for a system that is 'robust, resilient and adaptive' (Lacey, 2015, p.282). Similarly to Bookchin's theory of social ecology, environmental and social factors are appreciated as innately intertwined (Lacey, 2015, p.282). I suggest that these guiding principles can be applied to imagining a meat-free future. This is a distinctly different imagining of how human needs could be met: the desired utopian principles of local sovereignty and sustainability are clearly centralised within agro-ecology, and plant-based protein produced in this way could offer an alternative way of meeting protein needs effectively. Through this shift, land becomes a vital part of our world to work with, not against (Cronon, 1996).

Within this vision, protein from plants is harvested as much as possible in the local community, reducing the control agribusiness has on consumer choice and maximising consumer knowledge and sovereignty over the food they consume. Non-animal protein sources are compatible with this emphasis on local harvest; beans and lentils, for example, are resilient to various soils, easily produced in small batches, and are more nutritious when locally produced due to perishability (Lockyer, 2015, p.67). Another example is seitan; following ancient traditions, wheat can be transformed by consumers into a gluten-rich substance high in protein (Manickavasagan, 2022).

Local production alone does not guarantee sustainable practices, but it tends to promote greater ecological and social accountability. This is recognised by the food sovereignty movement, which promotes local knowledge in food production; originating in the peasant-based organisation *La Via Campesina*, it proposes that 'agricultural practices... "teach respect for Mother Earth"

(Lacey, 2015, p.277). These principles of working with rather than against nature allows a conceptualisation of protein production outside of the abattoirs that exploit nature as well as the lab-grown meat factories that seek to circumvent nature. When efficiency, be that in meat production or in APs, is elevated above social justice, poor producers suffer because they cannot be as efficient in the short-term as the corporation-led system demands (Wiebe, Desmarais, and Wittman, 2010, pp.92–93). Agro-ecological practices have been shown to provide positive outcomes financially in terms of income and productivity, as with time the ecological state of the farm flourishes with the reduction in damaging uses of chemicals and intervention (Mouratiadou et al., 2024, p.19).

Against technological fixes, Scott (1998, p.354) proposes that successful designs for social organisation depend upon viewing tacit, practical knowledge and explicit, abstract knowledge equally. Through these designs, Indigenous and local knowledge is elevated within agro-ecological utopias and consumers are re-connected with food production as community understanding of production is renewed. Plant-based protein has existed for millennia; moving beyond the industrial food system requires returning to these methods with a utopian focus. Notably, a market economy does not have to be rejected within agro-ecological food systems, but rather a more holistic economy is focused upon; ‘the deeper meanings of agroecology and community in ways that do not reject markets but rather seek to “multiple niches” as an alternative strategy to the expansion of one set of products at the expense of all others’ (Friedmann, 2005, p.261, cited in Blay-Palmer, 2016, p.5).

Sustainable food is often accused of being elitist due to the high price tag attached to it (Piatti, 2015, p.94). However, current lower food prices are not the root of the problem, but rather a symptom of it. The global agribusiness system relies on cheapness, quantity, and speed, with little appreciation for environmental justice and quality (Piatti, 2015, p.94). Instead, a utopian protein future can be imagined where food is affordable, accessible, and high-quality; it simply requires a new system. We must imagine alternatives, placing protein within an ecological and communitarian system rather than one dominated by capital-backed scientific ‘solutions’.

CONCLUSION

We need utopian visions of protein, different from our current livestock system which damages the environment, local sovereignty, and culture. The protein-producing food system of the future must ensure environmental sustainability is improved, but this is interdependent with a focus on local sovereignty and justice.

Despite being the predominant utopian vision of meat-free protein, AP does not successfully address the current injustices in the agribusiness-dominated food system. Although it does reduce the environmental damage compared with meat production, a holistic ecological system is not promoted with a focus on factory processes rather than a connection to land. Its focus on technology to solve the issues in the food system negates the social injustices that underpin this system; corporate dominance is heightened, not dismantled, and communities have little sovereignty over production. Against this, an alternative vision could be considered; that of an agro-ecological approach to plant-based proteins. Affordable staples such as beans, lentils, and tofu can provide accessible protein in lower-income regions, countering the likely rise in meat consumption concentrated among wealthier populations. To advance the agro-ecological utopian vision everywhere, we must experiment and create spaces for these ideas to be explored and practiced. We must *do* food utopias, harnessing increased interest in sustainable food to build a new future. To live in this utopia, we must come together, break bread, and eat beans.

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POLITICAL APOLOGIES, BETTER ECOLOGIES?

A Case for Apologising 'to Nature'

by luca freeman

illustration by agatha wren



Since the end of the Cold War and the turn of the millenium, a massive upswing in political apologies aiming to redress varied historical wrongs committed by states and other institutions has been documented (Zoodsma and Schaafsma, 2022). Indeed, this upswing has led some scholars to proclaim we now live in an 'Age of Apology' (Gibney et al., 2008), where states and other institutions are increasingly facing up to their troublesome pasts. The political praxis of apology is largely executed by liberal democracies and is rooted in liberal ideals of human rights, accountability, and justice (Zoodsma and Schaafsma, 2022, p.45). For actors that subscribe to these ideals, this new era heralds a potentially fruitful reexamination of history and a move towards a more just future.

The reception of this 'age of apology' by its skeptics, however, is rather less rosy than this picture. Political apologies are commonly critiqued as largely insincere or hypocritical gestures by politicians seeking to avoid the hard questions raised by historical injustice (Thaler, 2012, pp.259–266). On this view, the more apt metaphor for apology may be that of washing one's hands of history, rather than facing it. Apologies for the more cynical analyst might therefore contribute to the wrongdoings they nominally address, by unfairly 'consigning' ongoing injustices to the dustbin of history (Archer and Matheson, 2025) and thus defusing pressures for more substantive, material challenges to systems of oppression.

However, this article begins from the premise that, while apology without action

is indeed problematic, action without apology may also be an insufficient strategy for change. I therefore construct a positive case for using political apology to address one of society's most pressing challenges: the ecological crisis. A political apology to 'Nature' could be normatively and ethically generative. It could challenge public cultures to regard the 'more-than-human'—the natural beings and systems our existence is entangled with (Abram, 1996, p.7)—as objects of concern, in an attempt to foster a broader move towards a more ecologically conscious democracy. This argument begins by outlining the qualities and normative significance of apologies, building on Stef Craps' (2025) analysis of ecological apology and David Collings' (2014) work on ecological responsibility and ethics. This is followed by the discussion of

two mechanisms through which ecological apology could stimulate transformations in public culture and leverage citizen's cognitive and emotional powers. First, apologies should provide an 'exemplary political judgement' (Mihai, 2012, p.203) that re-orient societies' political identities towards new ethical goals. Coupled with this, they should enfranchise eco-grief through commemoration (Mihai and Thaler, 2024) and mourning (Barnett, 2021) that can assist this ethical reorientation by facilitating emotional connection with the more-than-human. Finally, the limitations of ecological apologies must be acknowledged: as its critics suggest, apology cannot be a panacea, but instead only one potential tool for change if coupled with concrete political action.

Importantly, this article is primarily concerned with establishing the theoretical case for using political apologies as a tool of ecological action. It does not, therefore, address outstanding practical questions of the particular forms this apology should take, nor what its exact contents should be. These are important considerations yet remain unappreciable in the context of largely conceptual argumentation: a model apology cannot be designed in abstract. I concur with Mihai's position that 'it is up to political actors, embedded in real contexts, to reflect and offer inspiring apologies' (Mihai, 2012, p.217), attending to questions of rhetoric, style, cultural histories, and political circumstances in a way that this article cannot hope to. Consequently, this article does not intend to suggest a 'checklist' for ecological apology. As a final note, given the abstract nature of the argument, the 'us' of this argument is left unspecified, acting as a placeholder for whichever society issues such an apology. I return briefly to these issues in the conclusion.

APOLOGISING TO NATURE?

In his analysis of *Apology to the Great Auk*, British artist Marcus Coates' short film attempting to apologise for that species' extinction, Craps (2025, p.32) is candid about the film's shortcoming as an apology. For example, the recipients of said apology, the great auk, are absent, and the apology is on behalf of humanity, from whom there is no single mandate—clearly, this apology is limited as a simple communication of wrongdoing to victims. Nevertheless, Craps (2025, p.39) implores the reader to consider the film as 'an experiment—one that exposes the limitations of conventional frameworks [of apology] while gesturing towards new ways of conceptualising moral responsibility'. He thereby highlights that rejecting some commonplace conceptions of apology, for example seeing it as just a simple communication of regret, may be necessary to understand the specific political work that ecological apologies might undertake.

From this, Craps' (2025, p.40) account outlines two major distinctions from conventional approaches to apologies for 'human-to-human wrongs', such as those to Indigenous peoples in Australia and Canada, or Blair's apology for the UK's role in trans-Atlantic slavery. First, he regards ecological apology as 'primarily about redeeming the apologist and working towards norm change' (Craps, 2025, p.40). He thus decentres victims as the sole subject of an apology and instead examines the effects of apologies on perpetrators. He argues that ecological apologies function as 'ethical reckonings', asserting the 'moral weight of extinction and human culpability' of more-than-human loss (2025, p.40) and thereby forcing us to contend with them. Further to this point, Craps (2025, p.40) demonstrates how ecological apology disrupts the 'perpetrator-victim-witness' model that characterises conventional political apologies: not only is the victim, the great auk, and its voice absent from political life and unable to respond, the apologising perpetrator of ecological destruction, humanity, is diffuse and intergenerational', and any witnesses are further likely to be implicated parties. By disrupting these positions, ecological apology compels further interrogation of the notion of responsibility, asking us to re-examine what culpability and ethical obligations we bear towards those more-than-human entities that have been harmed. Craps (2025, p.40) outlines an apology that transcends the model of a dialogical exchange between human parties, defining the core function of ecological apologies as a 'public declaration of moral failure' which prefigures normative transformation from the apologist. Overall, grasping this morally and ethically generative potential within the act of apologising is essential to understanding its value for addressing the ecological crisis.

This returns us to this article's starting premise, that action without apology may be inadequate. As Mihai (2012, p.206) posits, there is 'something valuable that an official apology offers that compensation alone cannot', located in its symbolic and self-reflective power to change values and public culture. Collings' (2014) analysis of the moral dilemmas of ecological crisis illuminates the role apology's ethical work could play in this context. Collings (2014, p.139) elucidates a separation between private concern for environmental issues and a 'public sphere that on ultimate matters remains largely [ethically] disabled'. This is because many public cultures are premised on a 'right to destroy' Nature (Collings, 2014, p.140) as an existential condition; they therefore cannot take true moral responsibility for ecological destruction, as it exemplifies this right. To counter this, radical environmental action must include dismantling these embedded cultures of disavowal that have allowed ecological destruction to continue with a

'people's stamp of legitimacy' (Mihai, 2012, p.206). In this task, simple policy changes, even those that supposedly recognise the urgency of ecological issues, may prove ineffectual, as they fail to intervene in the social reproduction of destructive values.

To substantiate this claim, the pitfalls of current green policy might be regarded as symptomatic of such failures to rethink our wider ethical relationship with Nature. Take, for example, the surge in demand for elements such as lithium as a result of 'green growth' agendas. Driven largely by the surge in battery production for electric vehicles and energy grid storage, there is a predicted threefold rise in demand over this decade (International Energy Agency, 2024, pp.126–129). The proliferation in mining operations to meet this demand has led critics to designate these practices as 'green extractivism' (Voskoboynik and Andreucci, 2022), reproducing the same modernist imaginary of Nature as a resource to be plundered even whilst utilising discourses of sustainability. This fits within the wider milieu of contemporary climate policy, in which instrumental forms of rationality dominate decision-making (Roberts and Brown, 2023, pp.179–80). In the case of green extractivism, these wider ecological concerns thus paradoxically become subsumed under a 'moral economy of speed' (Hitch and Barakos, 2026, p.2), demanding rapid action to tackle climate change without attending to the plethora of impacts green growth may have, given its failure to decouple growth from environmental impacts (Hickel and Kallis, 2020). Indeed, Hitch and Barakos (2026) rightly highlight that the race for minerals reveals a deep continuity of non-ecological values, as the industrialised destruction of Nature becomes merely displaced and reframed. In their words, 'what changes is not the substance but the syntax of justification: exploitation reframed as rescue, acceleration as care' (Hitch and Barakos, 2026, p.5). Thus, action without apology—or more precisely, without the wide normative and ethical reconfiguration apology can elicit—risks being ineffectual at best or a harmful 'Trojan Horse' (Hitch and Barakos, 2026, p.5) for ecologically destructive logics at worst.

Given this, I suggest that an apology to Nature could help to avoid these outcomes. What is needed is a way to simultaneously reveal the ethical roots of environmental destruction and begin the process of challenging them; a political apology may provide the opportunity for such an undertaking. In prefiguring transformations in public culture that counteract hegemonic disavowal, it may allow apologisers, in Colling's (2014, p.156) words, to assume an 'infinite responsibility' for historic failures and future actions. Apologies could thus allow public acceptance of our deep moral obligations to Nature and therefore work towards motivating a commitment to

transforming society as fully as possible, beyond the weak and contradictory paradigms of sustainability currently in vogue. I now turn to examine two more concrete mechanisms by which ecological apology may effectuate these changes, engaging our intertwined cognitive and affective faculties.

EXEMPLARY JUDGEMENTS

The first way ecological apology may change public culture is through embodying an 'exemplary political judgement' (Mihai, 2012, p.203). In being exemplary, such judgements stimulate innovative political imaginations and produce new norms out of existing ones; in essence, acting to bridge the 'is' with the aspirational 'should be' (Mihai, 2012, p.210). They can therefore function as 'engines of historical change when we have no readily available formulae' (Mihai, 2012, p.210), acting as novel sources of normativity that provide citizens a sense of the possibilities to better realise the principles they espouse. Within an apology, these judgements—most obviously, the judgement of historical events as *wrong* and worth apologising for—reveal the gap between professed ideals and actual history, challenging dominant narratives and preventing the reproduction of the practices and values embedded therein (Mihai, 2012, p.218).

Considering this potential, an ecological apology could be highly effective in stimulating norm change regarding our ethics and responsibility towards Nature. Given the ecological crisis's unprecedented nature and the plain inadequacy of existing ethical frameworks, apology's normatively innovative nature—here both in its potential to reshape democratic self-understanding and in its subject matter—could be a useful tool to reveal alternative normative frameworks for democratic political communities to adopt. For example, an apology could exemplify a potential expansion of liberal democracy's supposed 'respect and concern for all' (Craps, 2025, p.411) to include Nature. However, apology's basis in shared principles, such as those of liberal democracy, is also a boon: by drawing upon the common normative resources embedded in existing political identities, apology engages numerous potential dissenters on the terrain of their own beliefs (Mihai, 2012, p.215).

An ecological apology could therefore frame taking responsibility for transgressions against Nature as an 'act of courage' (Mihai, 2012, p.217) towards furthering the political community's shared values—a framing likely to resonate more widely than guilt or castigation. In this way, acting ethically towards the environment could become a positive task, providing an opportunity for the community to live up to cherished identities and values by following the

inspiration of the exemplar. Indeed, this resonates with 'ethics *in extremis*' that Collings (2014, p.152) asserts is necessary for assuming responsibility despite the diminishing prospect of material benefits—this ethics would act non-instrumentally for the good of doing justice in itself, seeking to realise identities that make us 'agents, not merely the heirs, of our shared history' (Collings, 2014, p.156). Therefore, through apology's exemplary redefinition of collective normative commitments, it may reorient the very foundations of democratic political cultures towards valuing Nature by allowing an affirmation of the injustice of ecological destruction to become a new political norm. As a result, new political identities and ethics suitable for the ecological crisis are signalled.

COMMEMORATING GRIEF

Secondly, ecological apology could change public culture by directing eco-emotions

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Overall, grasping this morally and ethically generative potential within the act of apologising is essential to understanding its value for addressing the ecological crisis.

towards normatively productive expressions. To capture this, Mihai and Thaler's (2024) concept of 'environmental commemoration' is instructive. Commemorative practices work to politically legitimise emotions such as grief, which already exist but are typically confined to the private sphere (Mihai and Thaler, 2024, p.1380). Apology's commemorative element, enacted through the rituals and ceremonies that typically accompany the performance of apology, would not only 'create spaces where losses are registered and mourned', (Mihai and Thaler, 2024, p.1381), but could, by conferring salience on eco-emotions such as grief, destabilise anthropocentric value-systems that construe such losses as unimportant. By asserting the moral worth of ecological losses and thereby challenging the biopolitical hierarchies that define them as 'ungrievable' (Butler, 2021, p.185), ecological apologies can further represent the ideal that 'every life should be grievable' (Butler,

2021, p.187). The potential synthesis of these cognitive and affective stimulations within apology could prove especially powerful. Given that democratic judgements are always 'infused with passion' (Hall, 2005, p.128), reshaping public norms must engage citizens emotionally and encourage working with emotional processes as necessary complements to reason. Apologies could therefore negate the political inability to both think and feel the more-than-human as part of one's moral spheres of concern, and motivate a new ethic to recognise this. Indeed, this resembles the core insight of Melissa Nobles' (2008) influential 'membership theory' of apology, which suggests that apologies function to change the terms and meanings of membership in a political community for historically excluded groups — here, a similar effect might be accomplished through the moral work involved in challenging biopolitical hierarchies of anthropocentrism.

Moreover, the commemoration embedded in apology could serve an additional function, insofar as acknowledging that historic losses facilitate vigilance towards future ones (Barnett, 2021). Recognising the dual temporal nature of mourning, both 'retrospective, and anticipatory', Barnett (2021, p.19) argues that through tending to past loss we gain the affective knowledge to care for those losses 'on the horizon'. Consequently, Barnett (2021, p.19) posits that publicising such mourning is one of the 'conditions of possibility' for any new ecological relationality, one that may enact ethical concern both affectively and politically. To borrow Haraway's (2016) terminology, 'staying with the trouble' of more-than-human losses renders us conscious of our relationships with the more-than-human, overcoming the ethical dissociation Collings (2014) emphasises by recognising our existential entanglements with the natural world and the responsibility that lies therein.

In this task, there may be a synergy between this process and apology's cognitive work. Just as apology refuses to 'close the history books' (Mihai, 2012, p.215) by unsettling dominant historical memories and orienting us towards new futures, its expression of grief disturbs hegemonic emotionality by refusing to move on from the memory of more-than-human loss which can inspire future consideration of losses to come (Barnett, 2021, p.17). In this way, effectively grappling with loss while retaining an orientation towards future possibilities of betterment may also serve to counter more politically pernicious emotional responses to ecological crises, such as tendencies towards naïve optimism, hubristic heroism or fatalist pessimism that Stoknes and Randers (2012, pp.209–210) identify. Vigilant mourning can contend with these emotional structures' tendency to collapse into either wishful denial or paralysing,

too-late hopelessness, instead forging a grounded hope that holds together grief and action based on a commitment to imagining a possibly better, more ethical future (Stoknes and Randers, 2012, p.211). Ecological apology would therefore be well-placed to harness the latent potentials of mobilising eco-emotions, alongside the faculty of judgement, to create public cultures that can assume proactive responsibility for their relationships with Nature—past, present and future.

CONCLUSION

Throughout this article, I have left vague multiple specifics about this hypothetical apology, namely, who would issue it—who ‘us’ is—and to whom specifically ‘we’ may address it. I did so because I submit these are secondary considerations; an ecological apology’s value would lie primarily in the act itself, with its normatively transformative potential for whomever apologises. The subject-object indeterminacy of this apology reflects that any project of apology may be multivocal; a village council apologising to local fauna can and should co-exist with the United States government apologising to the oceans. It is only through a multitude of apologies, from varied actors in diverse contexts, that the transformative potentials of the practice can be most widely realised throughout society, establishing a richer web of moral and ethical ties.

More troublingly for my argument is that even if we grant that ecological apology unfolds as outlined above and has the intended ethical and affective effects, it remains unclear how significant this would be overall. My response to this point is twofold. Firstly, as ecological issues often contain multiple intersecting and overlapping ethical—not to mention political—dilemmas, then one must conclude that this singular practice cannot hope to cut through this Gordian knot. Yet, I maintain apologies could be a necessary, if insufficient, part of the solution; even to put non-humans on the ethical agenda takes a step towards dissolving one of the barriers towards a truly ecological ethics, and the significance of such a shift when compared with the present cannot be overstated. Secondly, we can heed the problem of apology without action: Thaler (2012, p.267) argues we should evaluate apology’s hypocrisy on a consequentialist basis, scrutinising the transformative outcomes triggered within the political community. As such, any ecological apology which is not coupled with, or even functions to delay, changes beyond attitudinal shifts—for example the failure to create political structures and systems to reflect these new values—would not only be inadequate but harmfully hypocritical.

To conclude, an apology to Nature might be a useful tool for future ecological politics to deploy. Notwithstanding possible limitations,

as an ethical and normative praxis of change, it has serious value. However, whilst I argue here for a recognition of apology’s promises, we must remain cognisant of its perils; as critics highlight, if decoupled from concrete action apology risks becoming a dangerous exercise in hypocrisy and deferral. Therefore, the necessary task accompanying apology must be politics that put into practice these new ethics. What form these politics would take is uncertain, but apologising may be a productive first step.

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GOVERNING THE GREEN

ESG Ratings as Three-Dimensional Power in a Polycentric Corporate Governance

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illustrations by sara partua
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35 trillion US dollars—more than a third of total global assets under management—have been allocated to ESG (the widely used acronym for Environment, Social, and Governance) related funds (Ehler et al., 2024, p.222). The figure reflects how the increasing challenge of environmental issues has pushed investors and corporations to consider how sustainable development is necessary for the economic future, which was addressed through the development of ESG (Pollman, 2022, p.407). In practice, ESG works by rating agencies giving companies scores on environmental, social, and governance areas, as a measure of preparedness for the future, which are then used to determine the allocation of investments (Ehler et al., 2024, p. 224), in turn incentivising companies to raise their scores (Liu et al., 2023). However, this investment trend has sparked debate about ESG's effectiveness. Proponents praise ESG for driving green innovation, while critics question whether it represents genuine accountability or just protects investors' money (Pollman, 2022, p.403; Christiansen, Serafeim, and Sikochi, 2021).

Conversations around the given trend have been extensively examined through financial analysis with scholars investigating whether ESG investments generate competitive returns and whether ESG funds deliver measurable environmental benefits that help companies grow (Pollman, 2022, p.403; Wang et al., 2023, p.1155). Yet this financial perspective, while revealing important aspects of ESG's market functioning, cannot fully address fundamental questions about how ESG operates to change corporate behaviour. Financial analysis treats ESG ratings as neutral information but crucially overlooks the political dimensions: who defines sustainability, which issues receive attention, and how corporations are induced to change behaviour? Understanding these dimensions requires engaging with political perspectives—recognising that corporate behaviour is shaped not only by market incentives but also by power relations, governance structures, and norm-setting processes that operate beyond economic logic. Thus, this article argues ESG can be better understood by viewing it as a polycentric governance system (Ostrom, 2010), where three-dimensional power (Lukes, 2005) is exerted to shape corporate behaviour. Such an understanding provides insight into how ESG produces positive societal impacts, its limitations, and a normative guide to bolstering ESG's benefits. This can be understood through analysing two theoretical frameworks: Lukes' theory of three-dimensional power and Ostrom's polycentric governance theory.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Lukes' *Power: A Radical View* develops a three-dimensional framework for understanding how power can be exercised beyond visible coercion (Lukes, 2005, p.28). The most obvious conception of power

outlined by the model is decision-making, where one actor secures outcomes contrary to another's interests (Lukes, 2005, p.29). The next dimension is concerned with the power to set agendas. This 'hidden' power works by controlling what issues are available to be discussed or acted on. Such power exists when there is observable conflict, to shape the agenda to benefit the powerful's interest (Lukes, 2005, p.23). Finally, the third dimension is ideological power: the ability to shape people's preferences outside of conflict and determine what is viewed as normal (Lukes, 2005, pp. 28–29). This article argues that the operationalisation of ESGs exercises all three simultaneously. Investors deploy first-dimensional power by directly coercing corporate behaviour through financial allocation and withdrawal. The second dimension of agenda-setting is used to analyse how rating agencies set the agenda for corporate behaviour. Lastly, the third dimension is used to explain how sustained ESG pressure results in corporations internalising sustainability as genuine strategic preferences rather than external impositions.

Ostrom's theory of polycentric governance argues that many centres of decision-making can exist in interdependent relationships rather than under single hierarchical authority (Ostrom, 2010, p.643). Polycentric governance provides the structural context in which Lukes' three-dimensional power operates: rather than centralised authority determining standards and enforcing compliance, ESG functions through fragmented centres where rating agencies set agendas, investors enforce norms through capital allocation, corporations respond by altering behaviour, and governments provide regulatory guardrails.

The application of Ostrom (2010, p.641) to ESG does not perfectly fit the intended assumptions of polycentric governance as the theory is supposed to apply over common-pool resources. Common-pool resources are non-excludable, meaning no actor can be prevented from benefiting from them, but experience subtractability of use, meaning their consumption by one actor diminishes availability to others (Ostrom, 2010, p.645). ESG exhibits subtractability of use in that the pool of investor capital is finite; however, non-excludability is not met as investors can selectively direct capital towards firms that meet ESG criteria and exclude poorly rated firms. Despite this imperfect fit, Ostrom's theory remains applicable on two grounds. First, the fundamental governance challenge ESG faces of coordinating multiple independent decision-making centres toward shared sustainability outcomes mirrors the coordination problem that polycentric governance was proposed to address. Second, ESG indirectly governs corporate behaviour toward the common-pool resources that Ostrom was originally concerned with: by translating environmental considerations

into market and investment incentives, ESG extends polycentric governance logic to discipline firm behaviour towards the commons. ESG can therefore be understood as a market-mediated extension of polycentric governance, where the coordination mechanisms Ostrom identified are transposed from community-based resource management into the architecture of corporate accountability.

Understanding ESG's political operation requires synthesising these two theoretical frameworks that work together to explain different aspects of how ESG functions as a governance system. Lukes' conception of three-dimensional power reveals what issues ESG brings to corporate attention and how ESG shapes behaviour once those issues are on the agenda. Ostrom's theory of polycentric governance describes the structural context in which these power mechanisms operate—a fragmented system of multiple authorities rather than centralised command. Crucially, Lukes' (2005, pp.108–109) theory asserts that power lies with identifiable agents, and Ostrom's polycentric theory enables identification of such agents and how they interact. Furthermore, identification of these centres of powers allows for dissection of their limitations and how ESG can function better through realignment of power. Together, these frameworks reveal that ESG functions through three-dimensional power that eventually becomes embedded in firms, structuring what they measure, prioritise, and consider legitimate corporate strategy.

ESG ACROSS LUKES' THREE DIMENSIONS

ESG's power over corporate behaviour operates across all three dimensions of power, moving from the most overt to the most embedded. The first dimension is the most visible: investors directly coerce corporate behaviour by rewarding strong ESG scores with capital allocation and withdrawing investment from poorly rated firms (Janz, Rilke and Yurtoglu, 2025). This constitutes a straight-forward exercise of first-dimensional power. In particular, there is an observable conflict between the firms' assumed preference to profit maximise without the costs and constraints ESG proposes (Friedman, 2007) and investors' conditions for providing capital. However, instead of profit maximisation being prioritised, investors directly override that preference in favor of long-term sustainable growth. The behavioural impact of this conflict is visible in corporate practice. ESG coverage is associated with fewer governmental interventions for environmental or social violations, and encourages firms to increase investment in green innovation (Bikmitova and Pirinsky, 2025; Chen, Fan and Fan, 2023). These outcomes demonstrate that investor-enforced pressure produces substantive changes in corporate behaviour, not merely reputational adjustment.

Moving beyond the first-dimensional power exerted by investors, rating agencies use agenda-setting power within ESG to determine the topics investors and corporations interact with. The common metrics used by agencies are the topics which companies have incentives to improve and even collect data on, where disclosure of data is often a metric under the governance pillar itself (Drempetic, Klein and Zwergel, 2019). Examining Refinitiv’s, a large market data provider, (now LSEG) categories across the E, S, and G pillars—spanning emission reduction; human, worker, and shareholder rights; and innovation among others—illustrates the breadth of topics rating agencies score (Ehler et al., 2024). These categories demonstrate what is included on investor and corporate agendas, but the elements excluded hold just as much significance.

The mechanics of this agenda-power become evident when examining what is systematically excluded. Metrics measuring biodiversity are often excluded from the agenda (Zhu and Carrasco, 2025). Indeed, areas such as ecological restoration, species exploitation, and invasive species remain widely unaddressed by ESG ratings, reflecting ESG’s structural bias towards issues that can be easily quantified and standardised (Zhu and Carrasco, 2025). This shows how the agenda-setting power takes away incentive from corporations to pursue important action in less quantifiable areas. Further, because governments often rely on ESG to steer corporate regulations, ESG’s agenda-setting power gets compounded as it shapes what legislation is more likely to be pursued (Liang et al., 2025, p.25).

While this agenda-setting power is significant in influencing the incentives of corporate behaviour, the impact is somewhat dulled by inconsistencies across rating agencies that reduce focus on any particular topic. Although most agencies rate comparable ESG indicators, the interpretation, calculation, and weight of the indicators can vary significantly (Liu et al., 2023). Still, the patterns seen in ESG ratings illustrate Lukes’ second dimension of power: by structuring which ESG issues are visible and prioritised, rating agencies shape corporate and investor behaviour towards certain topics while leaving others neglected. Recognising this agenda-setting power challenges the assumption that ESG objectively rates sustainability. Rather, improving ESG scores does not address all material risks to the company; biodiversity, for example, may pose financial risk but not be included in a rating. Moreover, when regulations rely on ESG to guide policy, they inherently accept agencies’ priorities as their foundation, despite possible clashes in interests. ESG therefore governs corporate strategy not through legal mandates, but by determining which sustainability concerns enter strategic calculation and which remain marginal.

Where the first dimension coerces and

the second shapes the agenda, the third dimension captures the internalisation of sustainability priorities as genuine corporate preferences. Such internalisation occurs as external power pushes firms to reconceive what their interests are and can challenge Friedman’s (2007) assumption of profit maximisation as the superior corporate goal. Ding and Wang (2025) found internalisation of ESG priorities resulted from mimetic pressure within industries, meaning firms began to emulate peers perceived as successful, embedding sustainability into their strategic self-understanding rather than treating it as an external constraint. Critically, this mimetic dynamic is self-reinforcing. As more firms internalise ESG priorities, the baseline of what constitutes normal corporate behaviour shifts, making non-adaptation increasingly anomalous.

However, the depth of this internalisation should not be overstated. Because ESG scores are not perfectly representative of optimal sustainability outcomes,

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By understanding ESG as a site of power relations rather than merely a market mechanism, both its potential and its limitations can be better grasped.

firms prioritise optimising performance on measured indicators. Underlying sustainability outcomes that these indicators are intended to capture are then neglected. Indeed, Ding and Wang (2025) find that firms subject to normative pressure in weakly regulated environments tend toward performative compliance—adopting the surface features of ESG responsibility without substantive integration in corporate strategy. Critics describe this more broadly as ‘sustainability theatre’, where corporations make changes sufficient to satisfy rating criteria while leaving fundamental business models intact (Busch et al., 2023, p.777). This limitation points toward the accountability and coordination challenges that Ostrom’s polycentric model is best placed to address.

POLYCENTRIC GOVERNANCE

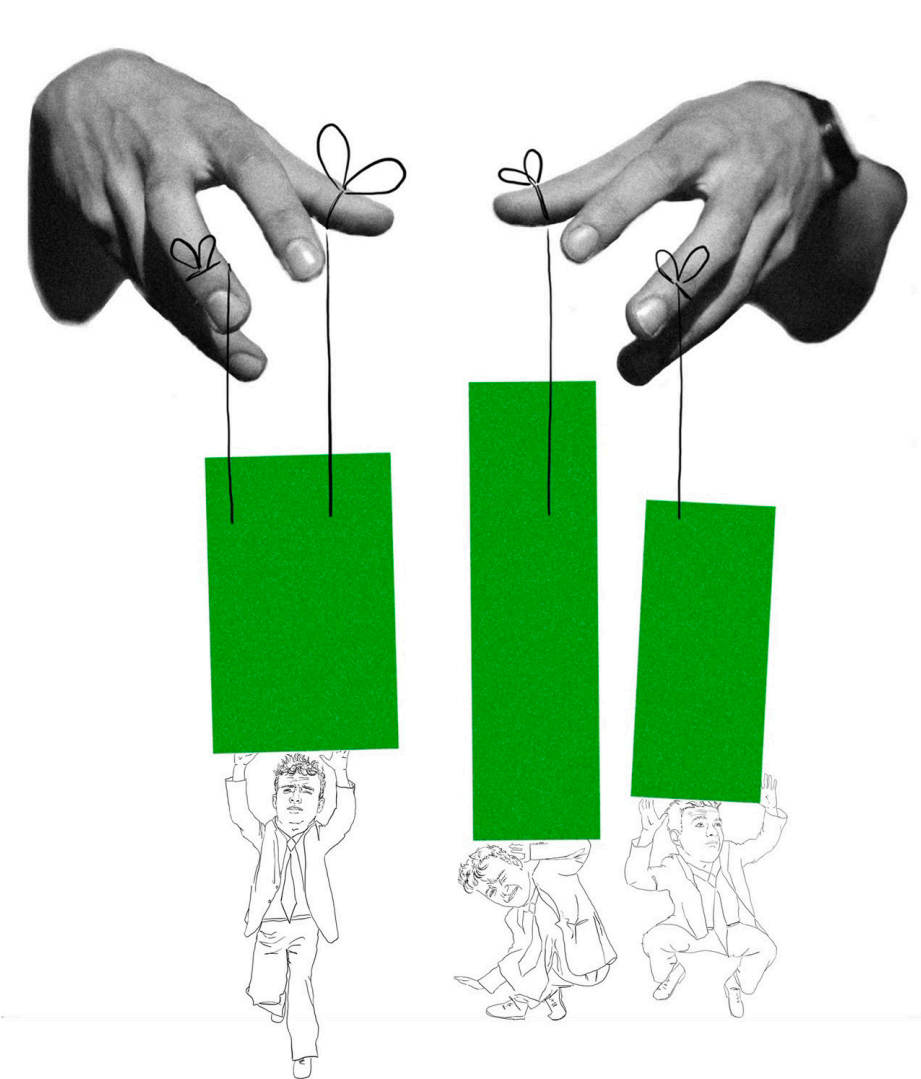
Through examining Lukes’ three dimensional power, authority is shown to be fragmented between investors who provide funds, rating agencies that provide standardised scores,

and firms that internalise sustainability goals. Further attention must be given to the governmental institutions that provide legislative guardrails to ESG to fully understand how ESG operates (Liu et al., 2023, p.4). Together a polycentric governance system emerges through the interaction of these centres, with shared standards and incentives guiding corporate conduct.

This distributed architecture creates adaptive capacity that a centralised system could not achieve. Firms have developed their own data-disclosure standards, reaching higher disclosure rates over time (Rouen, Sachdeva and Yoon, 2022, p.1). This acts in accordance with Ostrom’s polycentric model as the variety of institutions can work at multiple scales, fine-tuning their operations to further efficiency, equity, or sustainability (Ostrom, 2010, p.665). Similarly, the plurality of rating agencies allows more local agencies to use tailored, country-specific methodologies to provide more accurate ESG scores than global agencies (Chen et al., 2025, p.161). These adaptations emerge from the interaction of multiple independent centres of authority, mimicking the dynamic Ostrom’s theory anticipates.

Yet, this same fragmentation generates the accountability deficit that the ‘sustainability theatre’ critique (Busch et al., 2023, p.777) exposes. Where no single actor controls the system, firms can exploit the gaps in rating agencies’ methodologies without addressing deeper sustainability concerns. Ostrom (2010, p.664) emphasised that a successful polycentric model requires clear accountability mechanisms and trust, and ESG’s current structure struggles to provide these: where agency and governmental standards fragment without coordination, divergence in ESG scores erodes the coherence of ESG governance, diminishing both its financial and environmental effectiveness (Zhao, Ngan and Jamil, 2025). The sustainability theatre problem is therefore not merely a failure of corporate intent but a structural consequence of insufficient coordination among ESG’s multiple centres of authority.

However, this is not an argument for total centralisation. Lukács and Molnár (2025, p.1) found that countries such as Germany and India that had strong ESG disclosure regimes can achieve lower rating divergence than unregulated markets like the US or China, demonstrating that coordination can be strengthened within a polycentric framework without collapsing its adaptive advantages. The effectiveness of ESG as a governance system therefore depends on calibrating coordination between shared authority and local flexibility—legislators must provide sufficient coordination to guardrail against rating divergence and close the gaps that enable metric optimisation, while preserving the distributed structure that allows ESG to innovate across different institutional environments. Resolving the



tension between these imperatives is the central opportunity to improve ESG’s ability to reach sustainable outcomes.

CONCLUSION

Ultimately, viewing ESG through a political lens reveals dimensions of its operation that purely economic or financial analyses obscure. By understanding ESG as a site of power relations rather than merely a market mechanism, both its potential and its limitations can be better grasped. Lukes’ three-dimensional framework exposes how ESG exercises power at every level of corporate engagement: investors directly coerce behaviour through capital allocation, rating agencies determine which sustainability concerns enter strategic calculation, and sustained ESG pressure gradually reshapes what corporations regard as their own interests. Yet these dimensions of power are only intelligible within the structural context Ostrom provides—a polycentric system in which no single actor commands compliance, but governance nevertheless emerges through the interaction of multiple centres of authority. This political perspective is crucial because it shifts the conversation from whether ESG ‘works’ in narrow financial terms to the more fundamental questions of who holds power in defining sustainable development, what priorities are embedded in rating methodologies,

and how governance can be exercised effectively in an era where traditional state regulation alone proves insufficient. Understanding these dynamics is important for anyone seeking to strengthen ESG’s positive impacts while addressing its blind spots and inequities.

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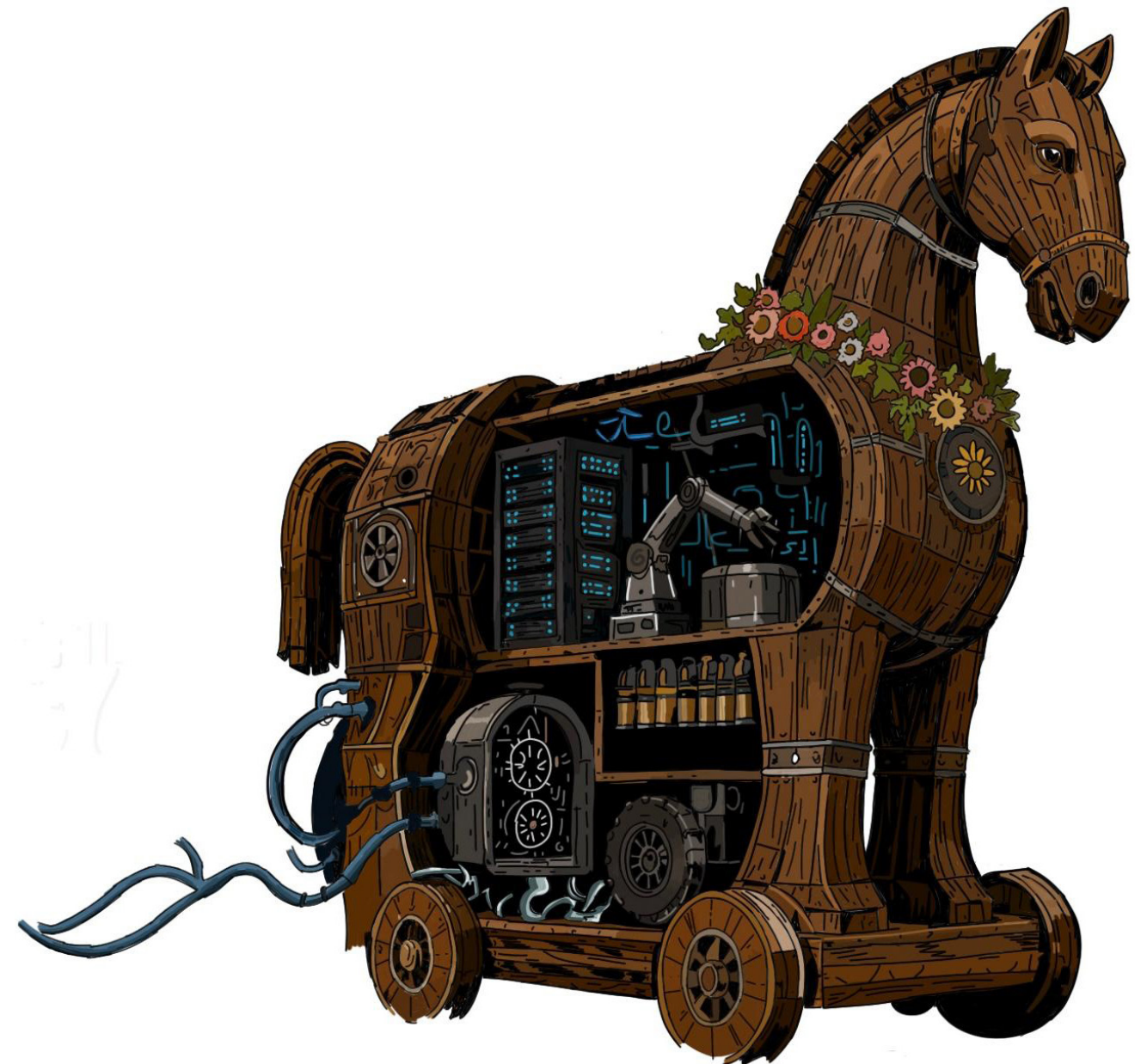
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THE SMART FARM TRAP

Biopolitical Sovereignty Against the Grain of Efficiency

by **jiwon hwang**

illustration by lucy barrett



The global food system has long been organised around the liberal assumption that openness, comparative advantage, and technological upgrading will secure food supplies through greater efficiency, thus encouraging policymakers to 'go with the grain' (Scott, 1998, pp. 345–346). Within this school of thought, the 'Smart Farm' appears as a cyber-physical management system that integrates information and communication technologies such as sensors, cloud computing, and data analytics, into decisions on planting and inputs (Wolfert et al., 2017, p.70).

This article argues, however, that hyper-globalised and digitised agriculture creates a strategic trap. The efficiencies promised by smart farming are achieved by embedding agriculture in proprietary

platforms and concentrated input regimes that shift control away from territory and into governed infrastructures, thereby weakening states' capacity to sustain their populations (Farrell and Newman, 2019). In this context, biopolitical sovereignty refers to the state's ability to secure the conditions of biological reproduction through control over the infrastructures, inputs, and knowledge systems upon which food production depends. This article conceptualises this process as a 'Smart Farm Trap', in which digitisation deepens dependence on licensed software, patented seeds, and concentrated inputs, thereby eroding biopolitical sovereignty.

Ultimately, this article posits Sovereign Soil as the analytical antithesis to the Smart Farm Trap, denoting an agricultural order in which the material and epistemic conditions

of food production remain politically governable rather than externally dictated (McMichael, 2013, pp. 54–55; Foucault, 2003, p. 247; Stock and Gardezi, 2021, p.196). It does not imply autarky, referring to absolute self-sufficiency, or total market withdrawal, but a selective recovery of domestic capacities within global interdependence (Rodrik, 2011, pp. 19–20; Chang, 2002, pp. 1–4). By shifting focus from formal territorial command to practical authority over the infrastructures of cultivation, the concept treats sovereignty as an infrastructural question of who can access, maintain, and govern the systems through which food is produced (Farrell and Newman, 2019, p. 58; Mann and Iazzolino, 2021; Plantin et al., 2016). It therefore encompasses control over inputs and machinery, repair protocols, data assets, and agronomic knowledge (Federal Trade Commission, 2021, p.19; Couldry and Mejias,

2019; Fricker, 2007). While the Smart Farm Trap illustrates how efficiency is converted into dependence, Sovereign Soil represents the biopolitical capacity surrendered when a state can no longer sustain, repair, or direct its food systems without the consent of external actors. The argument develops along two intersecting lines: how agri-food dependency is produced, and what is politically lost when it deepens.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Farrell and Newman (2019, p.58) show how concentrated networks within the global economic systems that organise trade, technology, and information develop chokepoints that powerful actors can exploit, turning interdependence into an instrument of state coercion. The Smart Farm Trap is read here as a layered case of this dynamic, in which agricultural peripheries are bound to grain corridors, semiconductor supply chains, and proprietary digital platforms whose central nodes can withhold, slow, or condition access. This concentration is not incidental. It is the agricultural face of a longer pattern in which peripheral economies bear disproportionate exposure to volatility while gains from technical progress accumulate at the centre (Prebisch, 1950).

What such dependency threatens is biopolitical sovereignty: not merely formal legal authority, but practical control over the life-sustaining systems of food, soil, seed, and labour (Foucault, 2003, pp.246–247; Stock and Gardezi, 2021, p.196). Biopolitical sovereignty is taken here as the relevant analytical core, both because the systems under examination govern life processes directly, and because formal legal standing offers little protection when the material and informational conditions of cultivation are externally controlled.

The two lines meet through infrastructural power. Platform and agri-tech firms occupy central, or hub, positions, in contemporary agri-food systems and exercise governance through contractual terms, proprietary technology, and data control (Mann and Iazzolino, 2021, p.830, 842; Plantin et al., 2016, pp.308–309). Their infrastructures translate structural concentration into political effect since they decide what counts as compliant production, which farms receive credit, and which agronomic practices are legible to the system. Each layer of the trap that follows, whether trade, technology, or data, is analysed as a distinct configuration of this infrastructural power, applies pressure on the same biopolitical core through a different route. In contrast, these layers define the parameters of Sovereign Soil, where the state maintains the biopolitical capacity to secure resilient supply corridors, ensure equipment remains repairable, and keep agronomic expertise within the realm of public governance rather than proprietary control.

THE PHYSICAL TRAP: WEAPONISED INTERDEPENDENCE

The architecture of the global grain system is often legitimised through discourses of liberal interdependence. Rules-based trade and market integration are treated as stabilising, and food import dependence is recast as efficiency rather than exposure (Rodrik, 2011, pp.19–20). This is not because states simply follow liberal theory, but because liberal policy rationales and institutions are produced and normalised in the centre within a core-periphery order (McMichael, 2013). In this order, decision-making power rules over trade, risk standards, and acceptable forms of dependence are concentrated and then projected outwards to shape how peripheral states understand and govern food security risk. Under the corporate food regime, comparative advantage becomes policy common sense: states are expected to specialise, liberalise, and import staple foods (McMichael, 2013 pp.136–137; Rodrik, 2011, pp.19–20). As a result, vulnerability is recast as efficient optimisation, while sovereign provisioning capacities such as stockholding, redundancy, and diversified domestic output are dismissed as wasteful inefficiencies (McMichael, 2013 pp.136–137; Rodrik, 2011, pp.19–20).

Russia's 2022 blockade of Black Sea ports exposed how concentrated, import-dependent grain corridors can become coercible chokepoints. By disrupting Black Sea routes, Russia demonstrated Farrell and Newman's (2019) point that actors controlling critical nodes in global networks can convert interdependence into leverage. Because Russia and Ukraine together supplied roughly 26 percent of global wheat exports in marketing year 2021/2022, disruption did not merely reduce supply; it transmitted price shocks through import-dependent societies, intensifying political stress in countries such as Egypt and Lebanon (Foreign Agricultural Service, 2022, p.1; Hellegers, 2022; United Nations Trade and Development, 2022; Papale and Castelli, 2026).

In this context, efficiency is not a neutral metric but a political choice. It prioritises short-term cost minimisation and continuous flow by concentrating production in regions deemed most cost-effective, holding minimal strategic reserves, and adopting Just-in-Time management, in which goods move directly from producer to consumer without buffer stocks. This logic reproduces a core-periphery order in which import-dependent states face unequal exposure to volatility while control over supply is concentrated at the centre; this weakens both substantive sovereignty and the state's biopolitical capacity to sustain population life (Prebisch, 1950, pp.1–2; Hellegers, 2022, pp.1503–1505). Liberal interdependence does not command states directly, but

instead structures risk perception: food dependence is rendered as optimisation rather than vulnerability, encouraging the thinning of buffers that are not profitable in normal times. Here, systemic resilience refers to shock absorbers, redundancy across suppliers, strategic reserves, spare capacity, and alternative routes that prevent local disruption from cascading into widespread crises (Benton, Froggatt, and Wellesley, 2022, pp.2–3). When those buffers are cut, the grain network's hub structure becomes coercible, as flows concentrated through a small number of highly connected export hubs and maritime corridors allow disruption at a chokepoint to cascade across import-dependent states and generate biopolitical pressure through price spikes, scarcity, and unrest (Farrell and Newman, 2019, pp.55–56).

THE AG-TECH TROJAN HORSE: THE DIGITAL TRAP

While the physical blockade of grain is visible and dramatic, a more insidious erosion of sovereignty is occurring through the technological infrastructure of production itself. The narrative of agricultural modernisation suggests that high-tech tractors and precision agriculture tools are instruments of independence, allowing farmers to work the land more effectively (Walter et al., 2017). Yet contemporary farm machinery is no longer simply mechanical equipment made of steel and diesel; it is a smart, connected device integrated into a proprietary digital ecosystem (Prause, Hackfort, and Lindgren, 2021). This shift creates the 'Ag-Tech Trojan Horse' (Thomas, 2022). This Trojan Horse captures how digital agriculture enters as a seemingly technical upgrade: optimising yields, reducing waste, enabling climate-smart farming, while quietly shifting authority from agronomic judgement and public regulation toward private code and contracts (Thomas, 2022, pp.6–7). The platform mediates what counts as a good decision via metrics like risk score, prescription, compliance, and the farm's data becomes an extractable asset that can be aggregated, sold, and used to structure credit, insurance, and market access. That is why the shift is not simply digitisation but platformisation: services become indispensable infrastructure, creating lock-in and asymmetrical dependence (Bronson and Knezevic, 2016, pp.1–3; Plantin et al., 2016, pp.293–295). Control over food production is exercised through data rights, standards, and algorithmic prescriptions rather than overt territorial command (Couldry and Meijas, 2019, pp.8–14). Importing smart farming technology also imports proprietary infrastructures which deepen technological lock-in and reduce domestic control over the means of food production (Koebler and Gault, 2021).

The Semiconductor Chokepoint in the Soil

The vulnerability of Smart Farming is physically located in the silicon chips that power it. Contemporary cultivation equipment, from tractors to harvesters, has transitioned into a suite of smart, connected devices governed by proprietary software, electronic controls, and automated guidance systems (Wolfert et al., 2017, pp.69–70; Walter et al., 2017, pp.6148–6149). The global semiconductor shortage of 2021–2022 highlighted the fragility of this technological integration, as disrupted chip supply chains directly stalled the production and delivery of essential agricultural machinery (Miller, 2021). These machines are, in effect, computers on wheels, tying cultivation to a concentrated and fragile global chip supply chain. The 2021–2022 semiconductor shortage exposed this vulnerability by delaying agricultural machinery production and shipments (Miller, 2021).

For a state seeking to secure its food supply, foreign semiconductors create a technological lock-in by tying the machinery of production to externally controlled supply chains and proprietary replacement systems. This is not merely a logistical inconvenience but a biopolitical sovereignty problem: when replacement systems are externally controlled, food production becomes exposed not only to weather and markets, but to the geopolitics of chip supply. If geopolitical conflict disrupted semiconductor flows from Taiwan, agricultural fleets dependent on smart machinery would face a severe chokepoint. In 2023, Taiwan accounted for about 46 percent of global foundry capacity, 68 percent of advanced-node capacity, and nearly 80 percent of EUV-based process capacity, making it a highly concentrated hub in the production of the leading-edge chips upon which digitally intensive farm equipment depends (TrendForce, 2023). Unlike mechanical failures, which can often be jury-rigged by local mechanics, a failure of digital components requires specific, proprietary replacements that are often not forged locally. Thus, digitally intensive agriculture risks surrendering operational control over cultivation to the stability of the Taiwan Strait.

The 'Right to Repair' as a Sovereign Struggle

The erosion of sovereignty is codified in the legal enclosure of farming machinery. Through end-user license agreements (EULAs) and digital rights management (DRM), corporations like *John Deere* have successfully redefined the concept of ownership. A farmer may own the tractor or combine as a machine, but not the embedded software required to operate and repair it, which manufacturers license rather than sell through restrictive end-user

agreements (Deere and Company, 2016, p.3; Federal Trade Commission, 2021). This legal architecture underpins the restriction on the 'Right to Repair' (Koebler and Gault, 2021). Manufacturers utilise software locks to prevent farmers and independent mechanics from diagnosing or repairing equipment. If a sensor fails, the machine may enter 'limp mode' (Koebler and Gault, 2021), requiring an authorised dealer with proprietary software codes to unlock it. Such restrictions can raise costs and reduce competition (Federal Trade Commission, 2021, pp.19, 23, 40).

The restriction is a direct assault on the autonomy of the producer. In a crisis scenario, such as a pandemic or a trade war, the inability to repair domestic machinery becomes a critical vulnerability. If the

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What appears as resilience through interdependence and technological upgrading instead relocates control over grain flows, machinery, data, and agronomic judgement to external actors, thereby deepening dependence and eroding biopolitical sovereignty.

manufacturer's network goes offline, or if a state is sanctioned, the machinery of food production becomes inert. This turns the farmer from an independent yeoman into a digital tenant, and the nation into a client state (Mann and Iazzolino, 2021, p.842). The 'Farm Hack' movement and legislative pushes for Right to Repair are therefore not merely consumer protection issues but acts of technological sovereignty, attempting to reclaim from manufacturers the practical authority to operate, diagnose, and repair the machinery on which food production depends (Carolan, 2016, p.817; Stock and Gardezi, 2021, p.200; Fairfield, 2017). Viewed through this lens, the capacity for repair ceases to be a marginal technicality and emerges as a foundational pillar of Sovereign Soil; lacking the autonomous power to

service and sustain equipment, a state finds its governance over cultivation reduced to a hollow formality while operational authority resides elsewhere.

DATA COLONIALISM & THE LOSS OF AGENCY: THE BIOLOGICAL TRAP

The third dimension of the trap lies in the extraction and control of biological and environmental knowledge. The transition to 'Agriculture 4.0' is fundamentally a transition to an extractive data economy (Prause, Hackfort, and Lindgren, 2021, p.641). A small number of dominant agribusiness firms aggregate these data on proprietary cloud platforms such as Bayer's Climate FieldView, John Deere's Operations Center, and Syngenta's Cropwise, producing what Couldry and Meijas (2019, pp.5–6, 25–27) describe as 'data colonialism'. Farmers often resist sharing data where legal and trust frameworks are weak (Wiseman et al., 2019, pp. 1, 14–15). This reluctance is politically consequential: if farm data are the new strategic assets, withholding them becomes a form of defensive autonomy. Yet once access to repairs, credit, insurance, or agronomic recommendations is bundled to data submission, refusal turns into exclusion, transforming 'sharing' from a voluntary exchange into an infrastructural condition for participation (Wiseman et al., 2019).

The Value Circulation Paradox

Data colonialism extracts not only information but the life processes of cultivation, rendering agriculture a biopolitical domain of monitoring and optimisation (Couldry and Meijas, 2019; Stock and Gardezi, 2021). The raw material is no longer only wheat, but information about how it is grown. This creates a value circulation paradox: farmers generate the data, but platforms capture and monetise it (Sarku and Ayamga, 2025, pp.15–16, 19). Platforms then use this data to train AI models, producing proprietary knowledge sold back to farmers as 'prescriptive planting' advice (Sarku and Ayamga, 2025, pp.1044–1045).

Read through a core-periphery lens, the paradox is structural: peripheral producers 'export' low-value raw data while value is realised in the core through proprietary analytics, intellectual property, and platform rents, which are then re-imported as priced 'solutions' (Prebisch, 1950, pp.1–2, 13–14). The sovereignty implication is epistemic as much as economic—public agronomic capacity and local standards-setting are displaced by privately owned models that increasingly define what is deemed rational cultivation, risk, and compliance.

This dynamic manifests with particular intensity across the Global South, where digital agriculture is frequently articulated through discourses of inclusive or

philanthropic development. Despite being framed as benevolent, these donor- and start-up-driven platforms facilitate novel regimes of data extraction and structural dependency (Sarku and Ayamga, 2025, pp.1, 3–4, 10–11). Within this development narrative, initiatives backed by entities such as the Gates Foundation present digitally mediated agricultural services as instruments for enhancing smallholder yields and incomes, thereby ostensibly advancing global efforts to eliminate hunger. However, critics argue this functions as ‘agro-imperialism’ (Mann and Iazzolino, 2021, p.842). Through the assimilation of smallholders into proprietary digital architectures beyond their influence, such initiatives facilitate the systematic harvesting of localised expertise (*mētis*), threatening to displace it with standardised algorithmic governance (*technē*) (Scott, 1998, pp. 318, 339, 356; Sarku and Ayamga, 2025, pp. 6–7, 15–16, 19). The farmer is transformed from a decision-maker into a ‘monitor of screens’, following the instructions of an app that optimises for the platform’s profit rather than the farmer’s long-term resilience (Mann and Iazzolino, 2021, p.830).

In other words, the development narrative can operate as a governance strategy: it converts local knowledge into legible data, and then treats the platform’s prescriptions as the authoritative baseline. Over time, this reconfigures the policy space—states and communities become dependent on external datasets, benchmarks, and model updates to govern food security, even though the risks, such as price shocks, ecological failure, rural displacement, are born locally.

‘Make Bloom and Let Wither’: Algorithmic Necropolitics

The ultimate expression of this loss of sovereignty is the delegation of life-and-death decisions to the algorithm. Foucault (2003, p.241) defines biopolitics as the modern transformation of sovereignty from ‘the right to take life or let live’ into the inverse power ‘to make live and to let die’. In the context of the Smart Farm, this becomes the logic of ‘make bloom and let wither’ (Stock and Gardezi, 2021, p.196), in which precision agriculture tools decide which parts of the field receive investment such as fertiliser and water, and which are ignored or terminated with herbicide, based on calculations of return on investment.

The ‘necropolitical’ (Mbembe, 2003) element of this practise is the distributive power embedded in optimisation: the model performs a form of triage, allocating life-supporting inputs to plots, crops, and practices that meet profitability thresholds, while rendering others non-viable. This is not merely technical efficiency but a political re-ranking of which livelihoods and ecologies are worth sustaining, shifting contestable

public choices into proprietary calculation. While marketed as efficiency, this represents a profound ethical shift. The decision-making power over the life of the crop and the survival of the population is outsourced to a ‘black box’ algorithm owned by a foreign corporation (Just and Latzer, 2017, pp.250–251). On a macro scale, this logic favours large-scale industrial monocultures—making them bloom—while systematically neglecting biodiverse, subsistence farming—letting them wither. The ‘grain’ of the market, reinforced by code, entrenches a food system that is fragile, homogenous, and dependent on the constant flow of proprietary inputs. A state that relies on such a system has ceded its biopolitical sovereignty. It can no longer guarantee the biological reproduction of its people without the consent of the algorithm.

This ‘consent’ is also epistemic: what the model cannot recognise is treated as noise or risk, discounting local, place-based knowledge not through debate but by design—a form of algorithmic epistemic injustice that devalues alternative ways of knowing and narrows whose knowledge can count (Kay, Kasirzadeh and Mohamed, 2024, pp.3, 5–6). The consequence is visible in other domains of land governance: scholarship on Aboriginal land management and cultural burning in Australia shows that long-horizon, locally embedded ecological knowledge can materially shape fire regimes, landscape resilience, and risk—precisely the kind of knowledge a standardised platform may erase when it universalises ‘best practice’ around its training data (Yibarbuk et al., 2001, pp.325–326, 338–341). Sovereign Soil therefore also has an epistemic condition: cultivation must remain intelligible through public, local, and contestable forms of knowledge, rather than being surrendered to proprietary models that unilaterally define the parameters of rational production.

CONCLUSION: CULTIVATING SOVEREIGN SOIL

This article has argued that the Smart Farm Trap extends the logic of efficiency beyond trade and into the infrastructures of production itself. What appears as resilience through interdependence and technological upgrading instead relocates control over grain flows, machinery, data, and agronomic judgement to external actors, thereby deepening dependence and eroding biopolitical sovereignty. Food insecurity, in this account, is not simply a problem of scarcity. It is a problem of dependence structured through concentrated networks, proprietary technologies, and asymmetrical control over the conditions of production. Cultivating Sovereign Soil therefore means preserving the capacities that efficiency tends to erase: strategic buffers, repairable machinery, public data governance, and agronomic knowledge that remains

contestable rather than proprietary (Hellegers, 2022; Federal Trade Commission, 2021; Wiseman et al., 2019; Sarku and Ayamga, 2025). The point is not autarky, but the recovery of domestic capacities to sustain, repair, and direct food systems under conditions of crisis. Security cannot be downloaded from the cloud; it must be cultivated, season by season, in the material and sovereign reality of the soil.

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CLIMATE STATELESSNESS & DIGITISATION

The Future of Nationhood

by theo harding

illustration by lucy barrett



Mustafa Suleyman has described the coming world as descending into 'Hezbollahisation': a 'tribalised world' in which technologically empowered communities achieve forms of self-sufficiency traditionally reserved for territorially-defined nation-states (Suleyman and Bhaskar, 2023, p.197). This prediction would continue a historical pattern by which, transformative communication technologies such as the printing press reconfigured power relations between established authorities and emergent economic actors (Posada, Weller, and Wong, 2021). Today, technological advancements are precipitating a similar shift. The evolution of technology and subsequent globalisation has challenged the connection between territory, nation, and state, and enabled the emergence of digital nations, transitioning statehood, culture, and sovereignty into the digital realm (Echavarria, 2025). This article focuses on the atoll nation of Tuvalu, where rapid sea level rise has necessitated an answer to climate statelessness more urgently than ever before. The Tuvaluan population is currently on course to become a diasporic community (Tuvalu, 2024), which in turn problematises the relationship between physical homeland, digital twinning, and notions of nationhood and statehood. As part of this transformation, the Tuvaluan government is in the process of digitising their nation (Tuvalu, 2024), using technology as a bridge between the present and the future in addressing the case of climate statelessness, while the issue of international law and recognition has yet to catch up. Drawing on Anderson's (2006,

p.6) definition of the nation as an imagined political community, this article evaluates how Tuvalu's digitisation process challenges conventional understandings of territory, nation, state, and diaspora. Ultimately, this article argues that climate change and sea-level rise have caused the emergence of digital nations alongside supporting flexible redefinitions of nationhood.

CONTESTED CONCEPTS: NATION, STATE, & TERRITORY

Consensus exists regarding the definition of statehood, as outlined in the Montevideo Convention, requiring a permanent population, defined territory, government, and the capacity to enter into relations with other states (Montevideo Convention on the Rights and Duties of States, 1933, Article 1). However, the definition of nation is essentially contested, alongside its relationship to statehood. Materialist scholars such as Gellner and Hobsbawm state that the nation can only be meaningfully discussed as part of the 'nation-state'—concepts too intertwined to separate (Hobsbawm, 1992; Gellner, 2006; Grotenhuis, 2016, p.28). Contrastingly, primordial perspectives, as articulated by Anthony Smith (1996, pp.446–447), root nationhood in ethnic continuity instead of in statehood. While Smith (1996, pp.446–447) acknowledges that some nations are relatively new, he maintains that nations have historically struggled to form without an ethnic base. He defines a nation as a 'named human population sharing a historic territory, common myths and historical memories, a

mass, public culture, a common economy and common legal rights and duties' (Smith, 1996, p.447). Despite divergence, throughout all of these definitions, historic, physical territory is central. However, the constructivist viewpoint, most famously held by Benedict Anderson, emphasises territory, instead describing a nation as an imagined political community, constructed as both limited and sovereign (Anderson, 2006, p.6). I argue that in the modern day Anderson's definition is the most persuasive and empirically accurate as it addresses the failure of both materialist and primordial perspectives to acknowledge increasing globalisation and movement of people; nations and nationality are not always rooted in ethnicity nor physical location. The case study of Tuvalu further reinforces the need for a definition of nation that goes beyond physical territory and includes the soon-to-be problem of climate statelessness.

In addressing the issue of sinking nations, Anderson's cultural definition provides a platform for the international community to embrace climate statelessness. Under his definition, a nation state can be recognised without physical territory. An emerging alternative to climate statelessness and a lack of physical territory is digital nationhood, embraced by endangered island nations such as Tuvalu. Simultaneously, Lu and Liu (2018, p.13) argue that the internet threatens the mutual reinforcement between nation and state by enabling transnational communities detached from territory. Thus, technological developments exert contradictory pressures; they can cause detachment, but can also

enable communities to coordinate, finance, and govern themselves outside traditional territorial structures, such as in the case of Tuvalu.

**CHALLENGING CONVENTIONS:
DIASPORA OR DIGITISATION**

Tuvalu, a Pacific island nation consisting of low-lying atolls, faces the prospect that its physical territory may become uninhabitable or submerged within decades which will render the Tuvalu population stateless (Tuvalu, 2024). Current international law relies on traditional definitions of statehood as outlined in the Montevideo Convention, centering physical territory, which are being challenged by Tuvalu's efforts to become a digital nation in wake of widely-predicted sea level rise. By translating their nation and statehood into the digital sphere in response to climate change (Tuvalu, 2024), Tuvalu is directly contradicting the Convention's necessity for a defined territory and a permanent population. When Tuvalu eventually submerges, the population will disperse into a diasporic community: 'a segment of a people living outside the homeland' (Connor, 1986, p.16), or in the case of Tuvalu, all of the people. While digitisation raises multiple questions, it ultimately serves as a tool to connect Tuvalu's present nationhood to its future. Consequently, Anderson's definition of nationhood allows for this flexibility that the Montevideo Convention does not.

The digitisation initiative serves multiple purposes, firstly preserving cultural memory by encouraging its citizens to submit objects, stories, and traditions for digital archiving, ensuring that collective identity; Anderson's imagined community persists even if physical territory disappears. Second, it seeks legal innovation; by advocating for international recognition of a state without territory, Tuvalu challenges the existing legal definition of sovereignty. Reportedly, a growing number of states have expressed support for maintaining Tuvalu's legal personality irrespective of territorial erosion (Tuvalu, 2024). In effect, Tuvalu is decoupling nationhood from territory while striving to retain statehood in digital form.

Diaspora

With the loss of physical territory, the Tuvalu population will be forcibly displaced as a diasporic community. Despite this, the importance of a digital nation continues to be questioned by scholars, who continue to dispute the significance of territory and a physical centre for a diaspora. Traditional scholars, namely Gilroy (1994), have argued that a diasporic group necessitates a physical 'centre' or territory which they have departed from. Gilroy (1994, pp.207–208) similarly states that 'the nation-state has regularly been presented as the institutional means to terminate diaspora-

dispersal, at one end through assimilation and at the other through return'. From this perspective, in the case of Tuvalu, as there will eventually be no nation-state to return to, the population might be forced to assimilate into their new nation-state, losing their ties to their original nation. The great significance of the nation-state for diasporic communities is also asserted by Yasemin Soysal (2002, p.325), who states that diaspora is merely 'an extension of the nation-state model'. Even though this primarily aligns with the materialist definition of a nation, it is important to note that the existence of a diasporic community does not necessitate the end of the associated nation-state (Soysal, 2002, p.138; Huyssen, 2003, p.150). These traditional

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scholars have highlighted an eventual return to a homeland; however, in the case of Tuvalu, its physical territory will be replaced by a diasporic community with a digital centre. Traditional perspectives, therefore, do not fully align with issues of climate statelessness and thus more contemporary outlooks must be adopted. From traditional perspectives, Tuvalu presents a challenging new prospect of the persistence of a nation of people, without state-territory, almost inverting the traditional diasporic problem.

Contrastingly, William Safran's (1991, p.83) argues that an original homeland is a place for the diasporic population to maintain or restore before any possible return, bridging the gap between traditional diasporic scholars and contemporary ones. He does not place as much emphasis on territory as traditional scholars, yet does not fully reject the need for it (Safran, 1991, p.83). Even so, if Tuvalu is unable to restore or maintain its homeland, the population would arguably be in a constant state of diaspora. It is here that contemporary scholars disagree on the importance of physical territory. For example,

Alatas and Slama (2022, pp.411–412) argue that 'returns cannot, and should not, be reduced to physical movements.' Instead they raise ideas surrounding re-embedding and re-encountering—concepts denoting returning to diasporic practices and meeting with diasporic peers respectively (Alatas and Slama, 2022, pp.411–412). Tambiah (2000, p.170) holds a similar view, that even if members of a diasporic community are not able to extend relationships with home communities, they are still able to connect with peers in an increasingly globalised age and create a transnational global network. As both of these processes—re-embedding and re-encountering—can take place without physical movement, the necessity of territory to preserve culture in a diasporic community is rendered less significant than traditional scholars thought. In an increasingly globalised age, transnational global networks have been forged, creating new spaces to connect with nationhood; a physical centre may no longer be as necessary.

Digitisation

Perhaps most importantly, the digitisation of Tuvalu can provide a 'centre' for the Tuvaluan population who face displacement. A physical homeland or centre belonging to a diasporic community has the purpose of both a physical location and a symbolic construct, and thus has an important role by holding emotional and cultural resonance. Edward Said's (1978) idea of imagined geographics highlights that these meanings are constructed beyond physical territory—descendents of the displaced generation may never have visited their physical homeland. Consequently, Said argues that a centre is not simply where identity is rooted, but where it is performed and imagined (Said, 1978). This purpose of a centre aligns very closely with Anderson's (2006) idea of an imagined nation—therefore this flexibility in the definition of a 'nation' allows for the future flexibility of a diaspora's centre to be in the digital sphere, instead of a physical territory.

Despite the apparent benefits and necessity of digitisation for Tuvalu, scholars have questioned the success of the digitisation, warning of the dangers of digital twinning. Baudrillard's (1981) description of how an image becomes a simulacrum through four stages is especially applicable to Tuvalu's evolving nationhood. Simulacrum occurs when an image develops from being a reflection of a profound reality to masking the absence of one, which can be applied to the connection between Tuvalu's physical territory and its digital twinning (Baudrillard, 1981, p.6). A simulacrum in the form of a digital nation, therefore, can undermine true nationhood as it replaces the 'imagined community' with a tangible one that is not able to accurately mimic it. Consequently, the disconnect between the nation and the

state can become greater as the nation-state splits into a simulacrum and digital governance. If the digitisation of Tuvalu results in a simulacrum, their relation to a centre becomes increasingly further away from traditional definitions of diaspora, as it will no longer be an extension of the nation-state, nor provide an accurate location to return to. Consequently, while a digital nation is able to provide a temporary solution to Tuvalu's rapidly approaching climate statelessness, it does not fully preserve the traditional tenets of nationhood. This approaching challenge thus reinforces the need for a more innovative definition of diaspora and nationhood—like those associated with Anderson (2006)—to be adopted by the international community.

However, even if digitisation does not offer a complete solution to sea level rise, it does play a pivotal role in bridging the gap between the present Tuvalu and its future, given embedding digital continuity as national policy is enshrined in the constitution (Buchanan, 2023). If sea levels continue to rise and diaspora becomes an unavoidable reality, the digital twinning of Tuvalu serves as a temporary cultural centre for the community; even though it may not be true to the imagined community existing as a nation-state, it still provides a semblance of a nation and centre. The existence of a digital nation is therefore necessary to preserve the culture and heritage of the Tuvalu population as a temporary solution, as the alternative is a diaspora with no tangible centre to connect to.

CONCLUSION

Globalisation and technology have enabled the formation of imagined communities of new nations. The view that nationalism, in the traditional sense, will succumb to globalisation is not only professed by Suleyman (2023) and his theories of 'Hezbollahisation', but also by scholars Horsman and Marshall (1994, p.102), who describe nationalism and nations as transient forces that are becoming obsolete due to globalisation. Consequently, it is imperative that Anderson's definition of a nation should be accepted: if states do not recognise a nation without a territory, Tuvalu and other nation-states suffering similar fates will succumb to a historical loss of culture, heritage, and tradition. This article has argued that although digitisation does not fully replace physical territory, it allows for something that diaspora alone would not be able to offer—a non-traditional, but continuous nation. Ultimately, as a temporary solution, it bridges the gap between the present, physical nation and the future diasporic community.

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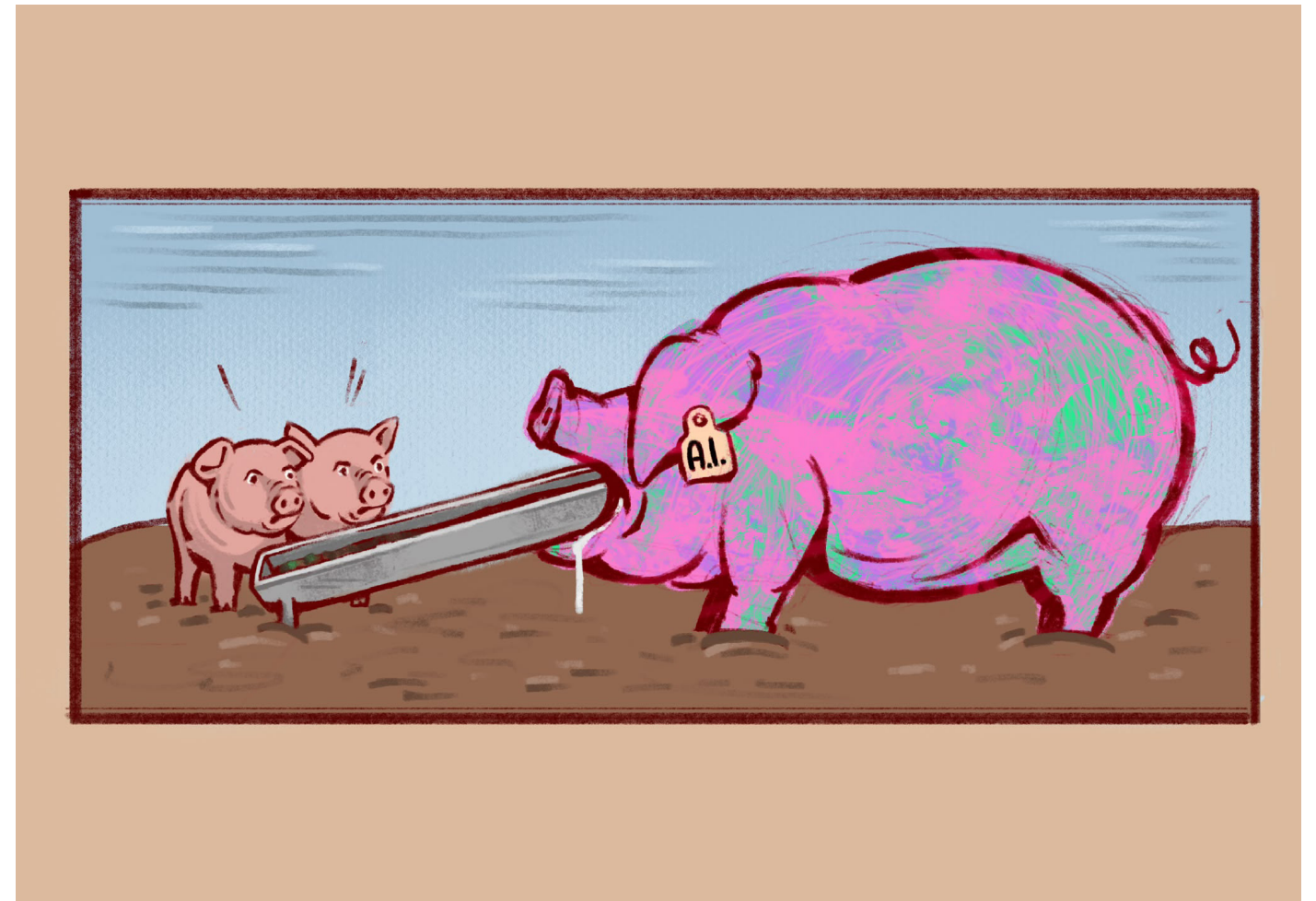
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UNPLUGGING THE OLIGOPOLY

Why Artificial Intelligence Needs a Revolution

by ben law

illustration by vik balt



Artificial intelligence (AI) exacts a severe environmental and social toll, relentlessly degrading human life while driving intense global surveillance (Benjamin, 2019, p.5; Zuboff, 2019; Crawford, 2022, p.54; Alnafrh, 2025, p.9). Yet, the dominant response to this crisis remains stubbornly reformist. Under the banner of 'Responsible AI' (RAI), scholars and firms champion ethical frameworks designed to sanitise the technology, without ever threatening its underlying economic engine (Dignum, 2020, p.7). This project rests on the fatal illusion of separability: the naive assumption that developers can build a system of extraction and subsequently govern it from the outside (Floridi and Cows, 2019, p.6).

This article rejects that assumption. It argues instead that AI functions by actively reproducing capitalist relations at an immense social cost. Abandoning the exhausted project of harm mitigation, this article interrogates the specific forms of power AI requires to exist, and what collective force is required to dismantle them.

The industry's current trajectory dictates perpetual growth, enforcing unequal social conditions for its operation (Kaplan et al., 2020, p.2; Bender et al., 2021, pp.1-3). Development is permanently locked into

monopolistic control over computing infrastructure, relentless data capture, and a highly exploited, globally fractured workforce (Srnicke, 2017, p.39; Couldry and Mejias, 2019, p.23; Roberts, 2019, p.35). Because the system relies on these extractive features for its operation, meaningful opposition cannot be moral appeals. Instead, this article proposes a militant intervention, directly confronting the architecture binding technology to capitalist accumulation and imperialism.

THE MATERIALITY OF AI

To dismantle the reformist framework of RAI, we must start from a foundational premise of Marxist political economy: machinery is never politically neutral. Karl Marx demonstrated that capitalism operates by relentlessly commodifying human labour and shared resources to fuel the accumulation of profit (Marx, 1977, pp.104-125). Under capitalist ownership, technology functions as an instrument of expropriation. It systematically absorbs living labour, embedding that extracted knowledge into privately owned machines designed to deskill and discipline the workforce. By subordinating human agency to the compulsion of capital, the worker is reduced to a mere 'appendage of the machine' (Marx, 1888, p.18).

Scholars such as Nick Dyer-Witheford (2015) bring this critique into the digital age, arguing that AI represents the ultimate capitalist enclosure, particularly relevant given that the technology operates by harvesting the collective intellectual output of humanity to automate control (Halpin, 2026, p.1). This theoretical framework demonstrates that attempting to govern artificial intelligence through moral appeals fails to neutralise a machine designed specifically to dominate. A truly emancipated future demands a militant stance towards tech monopolies, entirely repurposing the means of computation to serve uncommodified human needs rather than the automated accumulation of capital. The extraction of data and degradation of labour globally constitute the exact imperatives the capitalist system was built to execute.

As political theorist Langdon Winner (1980) established, technological artefacts actively organise and constrain social relations. Certain complex systems, he argues, function as fundamentally authoritarian structures. A nuclear power plant, for instance, cannot be managed by a democratic committee; its extreme physical danger and technical complexity dictate a rigid, top-down chain of command.

Focusing purely on economics and

infrastructure, however, hides the deeper human cost. Aimé Césaire (1955, p.42) famously defined the colonial process as a literal engine of ‘thingification’, a system that violently strips human beings of their complex social relations to reduce them to easily exploitable objects; AI makes this logic digital. The technology harvests the complexity of humanity, converting our most personal routines directly into digital commodities for profit.

To maintain the illusion of a flawless, universal intelligence, the industry relies on a deeply fractured global geography. The software enjoyed in wealthy nations depends entirely on the ongoing reality of imperial spatial division (Fanon, 1961). It necessitates what Achille Mbembe (2019) terms ‘necropolitics’, requiring the maintenance of hidden, distant sacrifice zones where dispossession of local populations is treated as an acceptable cost. This compartmentalised violence stretches from the ecological destruction caused by cobalt and lithium extraction for computer hardware to the severe psychological trauma forced upon underpaid data workers across the Global South (Mbembe, 2019, p.92).

AI depends entirely on concentrated wealth, the mass theft of human experience, and an unequal international workforce. The resulting damage defies classification as simple engineering glitches or regulatory oversights. As this article’s critique contends, these harms constitute the system itself.

THE PRINCIPLES OF A RESPONSIBLE AI

Despite this reality, the dominant institutional response attempts to govern these foundational mechanisms as accidents. RAI represents a broad effort to make artificial intelligence safer without challenging its underlying economic goals. This approach assumes the technology remains fully governable through traditional regulation and reform. Scholars such as Floridi and Cowls (2019) have built extensive ethical frameworks to guide policymakers, creating a massive industry around AI governance. The academic field of Fairness, Accountability, and Transparency (FAccT) anchors this movement. FAccT focuses heavily on policing technology after its release and attempting to program ethics directly into the software, alongside establishing basic supply chain audits (Barocas and Selbst, 2016; Bender et al., 2021; Maslej et al., 2023).

RAI treats technology as something to be governed only after it is already built. Legislators operate completely outside the production process, classifying risks and imposing rules while leaving the ownership and physical infrastructure of AI development untouched. The European Union’s AI Act (2024) illustrates this approach. The

legislation categorises specific commercial applications, such as algorithmic credit scoring or biometric identification, as high-risk (European Commission, 2025). Companies must complete extensive safety checks and technical paperwork before selling these systems in Europe. Yet this friction only applies to the finished product. The framework fundamentally accepts the massive concentration of wealth and computing power required to build the technology as a given. It assumes that a privately owned system can be rendered safe simply by policing how it is sold to the public. Ultimately, this approach legally normalises the extractive foundation of capitalist AI by inadequately reducing political intervention to consumer protection.

Alongside legal regulation, this framework assumes complex moral principles can be seamlessly translated into computer code. Researchers attempt to turn profound social issues involving discrimination and accountability into straightforward design constraints (Floridi and Cowls, 2019). This practice reduces deeply entrenched political conflicts into apparently solvable engineering problems. Developers try to fix biased outputs simply by curating better datasets, or they attempt to block unsafe behaviour using technical filters and monitoring software (Bender et al., 2021).

When RAI does look behind the curtain at how AI is made, it treats the exploitation of workers as a manageable defect, as Phil Jones (2021) shows in his critique of platform labour. He argues that the AI ethics industry attempts to engineer a ‘fairtrade’ version of data extraction, treating workplace degradation as a supply-chain oversight, rather than a requirement for the technology’s financial survival. Recognising the sprawling global supply chains required to build these systems, advocates propose basic workplace protections and audits for the thousands of people engaged in data labelling and content moderation (Crawford et al., 2019, p.29; International Centre for Missing and Exploited Children, 2024).

Ultimately, RAI seeks to preserve the immense profitability of the technology while smoothing out its most visible harms. This project relies on the illusion of separability: the belief that a finished tool can be divorced from the brutal conditions required to manufacture and sustain it. Yet, the physical realities of the system– massive computing power, relentless data extraction, and a subjugated global workforce– function as the absolute foundational requirements for building AI, structurally precluding any after-the-fact regulation.

THE MEANS OF AI PRODUCTION

Compute: Concentrated Capital, Concentrated Power

Exposing the failure of ethical reform requires starting at the physical base of the technology. AI relies on prohibitively expensive computing infrastructure, a reliance which guarantees its capture by a handful of tech monopolies (Whittaker, 2021). The industry’s current obsession with scale pushes AI models forward simply by throwing massive amounts of data and processing power at the software (Kaplan et al., 2020, p.3; Hoffmann et al., 2022, p.1). Driven entirely by demand for profit rather than scientific necessity, this brute force approach ensures that only institutions capable of mobilising vast wealth can even participate in AI development.

In this ecosystem, technological power and economic capital are indistinguishable. The astronomical financial costs required to train AI systems make centralised authority a strict, unavoidable requirement. A handful of tech monopolies restrict access to specialised hardware and massive data centres, utilising physical infrastructure as an impenetrable moat to secure corporate dominance (Widder, West and Whittaker, 2023, pp.7–8). This permanently ties the physical backbone of AI to state-funded agendas and the global extraction of natural resources.

RAI frameworks believe we can govern technology from the outside, assuming these systems remain flexible enough to be guided by democratic oversight. Applying Winner’s (1980) concept of inherently authoritarian infrastructure exposes exactly why this fails. If the physical base of the technology strictly mandates top-down, monopolistic control, attempting to govern it democratically after the fact is an impossibility. Political action cannot be limited to merely treating the symptoms of monopoly as the starting point. Simply put, whoever owns the computing power sets the limits on what governance can achieve. As long as AI development functions as a centralised engine for generating wealth, reformist policies will only ever put out small fires, leaving the core monopoly and resulting harms of the AI industry intact.

Data: Capture as Infrastructure

Data operate as the second material requirement of AI. To push software performance forward, the industry must continuously extract from constantly replenished datasets (Kaplan et al., 2020). Digital platforms and legal frameworks actively manufacture these data, systematically converting human activity and lived experiences directly into raw material for profit (Zuboff, 2019).

Surveillance acts as the foundation of this industry. It cannot be dismissed as an accidental abuse of an otherwise neutral algorithm. Because the current economic system demands that complex social life

becomes measurable, predictive software relies on a constant supply of tracked behaviour. AI therefore systematically forces human life into machine-readable formats simply to exist.

The massive scale of this extraction destroys the illusion of meaningful consent promoted by RAI frameworks. Clicking ‘agree’ on a privacy policy theoretically consents to commercial appropriation of personal data and intellectual labour. Mass web scraping makes this apparent: the February 2026 Common Crawl archive alone collected 2.1 billion web pages from 45.5 million hosts (Foppiano, 2026). At this magnitude, permission at the level of individuals becomes unattainable. Relying on privacy policies and user opt-ins across billions of interactions reduces consent to a legal loophole, deployed entirely to justify mass expropriation.

This reality completely destroys the idea that technology can be separated from its origins. Privacy by design cannot function as a guiding principle when a model’s basic performance requires converting human culture into computational inputs. Because the foundational infrastructure relies on data colonialism, the continuous structural appropriation of human life into a digital resource for capital extraction, individual privacy safeguards are simply incompatible with the technology’s mandate for boundless accumulation. Governance models fixated on final usage rules or algorithmic transparency leave this extractive machine completely untouched. Contesting AI requires abandoning individual privacy frameworks to directly attack how data are produced. We must abolish the infrastructure of surveillance and build collective institutions capable of absolute refusal.

Labour: The Hidden Proletariat of Automation

AI is sustained by a central illusion: the erasure of human work. The technology relies on a deeply divided global workforce, deliberately breaking jobs into highly insecure, outsourced roles. Once corporations purchase this human effort, they systematically conceal it. As Marx (1887, p.227) established in his critique of cooperative labour, capital masks the collective power of workers, making the resulting intelligence appear instead as an inherent, autonomous property of the machine itself. This division intentionally strips workers of their agency. It violently drives down wages while ensuring the system’s massive human dependencies remain invisible (Dyer-Witheford, 2015, p.15). Data labelling and content moderation show this dependency. The illusion of automated platforms requires a subjugated workforce to absorb the severe psychological trauma the system cannot process on its own

(Roberts, 2019, p.73). This is a system that literally forces outsourced workers across the Global South to filter through depictions of murder, torture, and child abuse for pennies an hour just to keep the chatbot interface clean for Western consumers (Spector-Bagdady, 2023, p.3). RAI advocates treat this exploitation as a manageable defect, proposing basic workplace audits to reduce harm to an acceptable level. This diagnosis completely ignores how the industry actually operates. The profound psychological toll extracted from these workers is the exact fuel maintaining the system’s financial viability, entirely erasing the possibility of ethical reform.

” Responsible AI clings to the illusion of separability, operating on the false premise that an algorithm can be cleansed of the dirt from which it grows.

BEYOND REFORM

The preceding analysis establishes compute, data, and labour as the mutually reinforcing conditions of AI. Concentrated computational control and expansive data capture actively reorganise social life around extraction, while segmented labour stabilises the illusion of autonomous machine intelligence (Gray and Suri, 2019; Couldry and Mejias, 2019, p.86). Reformist governance operates entirely at the level of outputs and documented risk, leaving this extractive production regime largely untouched. Because technical artefacts embody forms of authority in their operation, real contestation cannot stop at superficial mitigation; the material prerequisites themselves need to be radically reorganised. Breaking with the premise of separability demands an offensive capable of seizing compute, data, and labour at the exact level of ownership, permanently abandoning the project of external ethical correction.

Cooperative Control of Compute

Frontier AI development demands extreme capital intensity, rendering democratic governance impotent against privately controlled infrastructure (Ahmed and

Wahed, 2020, p.9). Reformist frameworks inevitably fail because they attempt to regulate outputs while leaving the core imperative of capital accumulation completely intact. Resolving this material contradiction requires transforming the means of production into a socialist structure.

This necessitates the outright abolition of private ownership over physical infrastructure. Specialised hardware and hyperscale data centres can no longer function as unquestioned engines for private accumulation. Hardware must be forcefully integrated into the global commons, while the fabrication facilities and data centres themselves are seized and repurposed as public assets. Merely transferring ownership to the capitalist state reproduces the extractive truth; real expropriation forces a radical shift in authority at the exact point of production, transforming computational infrastructure into a collectively owned utility. Severing the dictates of profit permanently reorients computational power toward democratically determined social priorities, shattering the link between technological scaling and capitalist exploitation.

Capitalist AI treats our ecosystems as infinite sinks for thermal and carbon waste, violently externalising the massive energy demands of data centres onto local communities (Crawford, 2022, pp. 41-45). Where private firms currently possess the unilateral authority to drain water tables and exhaust energy grids to train models designed for labour displacement, cooperative control subjects the energy expenditure of AI to a form of democratic rationing. Communities must exercise the unmediated power to decommission extractive infrastructure and allocate computational energy strictly toward social and ecological reproduction.

Transforming compute, the vast hardware and processing power required for modern systems, into a democratically governed utility destroys the market mechanism of allocation entirely. While capital allocates processing power exclusively to optimise surplus value, a socialised infrastructure allocates compute based on democratically articulated use-values. Resource distribution shifts away from boards into the hands of federated technical councils and community assemblies, ensuring society dictates exactly which computational projects merit the material and ecological cost of their execution.

Data Syndicalism & Direct Control

Capitalist AI development relies absolutely on the relentless expansion of machine-readable social traces, while liberal privacy frameworks simply manage the optics of this mass expropriation (Zuboff, 2019; Couldry and Mejias, 2019). Even contemporary socialist proposals frequently fall short. As Aaron Benanav

(2024) observes, the Left often relies on what amounts to managerialism, imagining post-capitalist technology governed from above by investment boards comprising state representatives and technical experts. A Marxist alternative must avoid this state-centric approach, demanding instead data syndicalism: the direct, collective seizure of data pipelines by the workers and communities generating them (McQuillan, 2022, pp. 124-127).

Because building general-purpose foundation models inherently mandates web-scale aggregation and perpetual surveillance (Bender et al., 2021), this syndicalist model requires abandoning the scaling paradigm entirely. A radical design trajectory instead prioritises local systems subordinated to the communities they impact (Delacroix and Lawrence, 2019).

Collectives can transform data from passive resources into active instruments of class struggle by deploying tools that sabotage algorithms, such as the ‘data leverage’ frameworks proposed by Nicholas Vincent and colleagues (2021), which coordinate the mass withholding of digital data to actively degrade a model’s performance and financial value. The ultimate aim should remain the physical dismantling of the extractive infrastructure itself, permanently stripping platforms of their presumed right to continuous capture and forcing all technological development to submit entirely to the collective will.

We must utterly reject the financialisation of human life that liberal reformers frequently propose when they suggest data property rights or data dividends to negotiate a fairer price for surveillance (Lanier, 2013; Posner and Weyl, 2018). Integrating the exploited into the profit structure of their own extraction simply legitimises the capitalist logic. The true objective remains the decommodification of lived experience: where capital forcibly converts social activity into raw material for accumulation, data syndicalism reclaims it through organised and direct class power, ensuring social traces can never again function as exchange-value.

Transnational Labour & Direct Action

Just as the system aggressively commodifies human data, capitalist automation relies on a lie: the erasure of the deliberately fractured and invisible global proletariat sustaining it. While liberal responsibility frameworks address the welfare of workers strictly to stabilise the extractive relations of production, this paternalistic oversight simply ensures the scaling paradigm remains financially viable without disrupting the flow of capital (Crawford, 2022, pp.63–69). A Marxist alternative rejects welfare capitalism entirely, demanding instead the

direct seizure by the workers themselves.

The AI supply chain operates as a strict apparatus of imperial extraction, reliant on vast geographic disparities in wages and legal protection (Dyer-Withereford, 2015, pp.115). Consequently, confining labour politics to the domestic tech sectors of the Global North merely reproduces this colonial compartmentalisation. Transnational solidarity cannot rely on a flattened, romanticised conception of the working class. Infrastructural engineers in the metropole function as a labour aristocracy, their material privileges directly subsidised by the super-exploitation of data annotators across the Global South.

Forging a genuine internationalist bloc requires confronting this internal contradiction materially. Metropole workers must weaponise their access to the server farms in direct coordination with the Global South annotators who control the flow of training data. Synchronising these chokepoints means a halt in Kenyan data labelling must coincide precisely with server-level strikes in Virginia. Only by paralysing both the physical infrastructure and the data pipeline simultaneously can this globally fractured workforce shatter the means of their exploitation.

Because subordinating human labour to an algorithmic end reduces workers to disposable instruments of accumulation, the machine degrades their cognitive and affective capacities to sustain itself. Internationalist labour politics demand the direct, working-class steering of AI, ensuring that the workers and affected communities collectively determine which forms of labour should or should not be automated (Dyer-Witeford, Kjøsen and Steinhoff, 2019, pp.154–155). A true collective-decision making process severs the imperial supply chain and asserts the right to reject the machinic liquidation of human activity entirely (Dyer-Witheford, Kjøsen and Steinhoff, 2019, p.154).

CONCLUSION

Responsible AI clings to the illusion of separability, operating on the false premise that an algorithm can be cleansed of the dirt from which it grows. AI remains inextricably bound to the violence of its own making. It functions as a vast, compartmentalised architecture that forcefully metabolises human life into dead capital. Regulating this machinery after the fact just polishes the gears of an extractive engine, as capital accumulation dictates its absolute function. Meaningful contestation requires shattering the liberal fantasy of ethical alignment; we must refuse to gently steer the apparatus of our own enclosure. The only viable trajectory is the radical expropriation of the machine itself.

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DRONES & THE CHANGING ONTOLOGY OF WARFARE

by **leo rosenthal**
illustration by lucy barrett



On 17 June 2004 in South Waziristan, Pakistan, local Taliban commander Nek Mohammad was killed by a US drone strike (The Bureau of Investigative Journalism, 2017). His death was part of the transition from using drones for surveillance to utilising them for targeted strikes, initiating a CIA-led campaign across the Federally Administered Tribal Areas of Pakistan (FATA) against Taliban and Al-Qaeda forces (Cachelin, 2022, p.445). The goal was to eliminate Al-Qaeda's 'power to destroy, inspire, humiliate, command and unify' (Combating Terrorism Center, 2009, pp.1-3), while minimising civilian casualties (Brennan, 2012). In a 2012 speech, counterterrorism advisor to the Obama administration and later CIA director John Brennan presented the drone strikes as a highly legal and ethical method of warfare against Al-Qaeda on the grounds that they targeted legitimate military threats while minimising local civilian impacts. While the conventional American military perspective presents drones as the most cost-effective method of counterterrorism, this article draws on Johan Galtung (1969) to argue that drones superficially manage conflicts without addressing structural issues of violence and thereby undermine the potential for a positive peace. Significantly, this means that the US must reassess the use and ability of these weapons in addressing

the underlying structural determinants of terrorism.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The outcome of conflict resolution methods has been extensively theorised. Galtung (1969, p.183) develops the distinction between negative peace as the 'absence of personal violence' and positive peace as the 'absence of structural violence'. The latter is referred to as social justice: '[an] egalitarian distribution of power and resources' (Galtung, 1969, p.183). He argues that the absence of personal violence is insufficient to generate social justice which is a positively defined condition; conflict and peace are intimately connected and cannot be studied in isolation (Galtung, 1969, p.183). Applying this logic to counterterrorism, an approach to warfare centred on the elimination of imminent threats, would target only personal violence, not structural. While traditional approaches to national security, like structural realism, argue that the elimination of imminent threats is the chief concern of states in an anarchic international system (Waltz, 1988, p.619) and therefore any elimination of imminent threat is valued, the pursuit of a strictly negative peace inhibits the possibility of a positively defined condition post-conflict (Galtung, 1969, p.183). In relation to the

conflict with Al-Qaeda, security is measured through the extent to which citizens are safe from terrorist organisations (Miller, 2016, p.176). Addressing violent extremism through purely a framework of negative peace has failed to abate the problem (Mahmoud and Anupah, 2017, p.1). Instead, following Mahmoud and Anupah (2017) of the International Peace Institute, this article calls on counterterrorism efforts to address the root causes of this violence.

THE US MILITARY CASE FOR DRONE WARFARE

In his 2012 speech, John Brennan stated that the US' targeted drone strikes against members of Al-Qaeda were both 'ethical and just' (Brennan, 2012). While Brennan makes the case that drones are legal and ethical, the case for drones as counterterrorism is largely derived from their low opportunity cost and tactical utility. In this context, opportunity cost describes the relatively low financial costs and political risks associated with drone warfare (Rhoads, 2021, p.10). In 2012, a MQ-1 Predator drone cost 10.5 million US dollars while an F22 Raptor fighter jet cost 14 times the price (Hashim and Patte, 2012, p.9).

Moreover, a nation which utilises drone strikes can eliminate terror targets without

directly putting their own soldiers’ lives at risk and facing political consequences (Boyle, 2013, p.4). Drones maintain tactical utility by providing real time surveillance, allowing the identification and elimination of targets through missile strikes while minimising risk to military personnel (Mayer, 2015, p.766). In terms of political capital, drones not only require less resources than conventional counterterrorism strategies since they do not endanger soldier’s lives, but can also generate short-term political gains. Bodderly and Klein (2021, pp.1–4) show that drone strikes can boost presidential approval ratings, potentially functioning as a form of diversionary force. Not only are drones financially and politically lucrative, but they are effective at eliminating acute targets. Based on data from the New America Foundation and Terror Free Tomorrow (2010) regarding the US drone campaign in Pakistan, an average of six militants were killed per strike, including one militant leader for every five killed. These strikes severely hindered Al-Qaeda’s ability to organise and conduct future attacks by forcing the replacement of competent leaders with less experienced personnel (Loidolt, 2022, p.56). Many senior figures, including external operations chief Hamza al Rabia, were killed in 2005, significantly weakening Al-Qaeda’s ability to launch foreign missions from Pakistan (Loidolt, 2022, pp.56, 66).

The low opportunity cost and tactical utility of drones, along with the apparent short-term decrease in extremist violence, supports the American case for relying on drones as the primary strategy of counterterrorism in pursuit of a negative peace. However, this perspective does not account for the effect this drone campaign has had on regional security, namely the effect on civilians on the ground in Pakistan. Drone strikes alone have failed to facilitate a positive peace in the region and undermine the potential of said peace, yet remain misrepresented as an ethical and legal tool of counterterrorism.

ON THE GROUND IN PAKISTAN

The behaviour of militant groups undermines claims that drone strikes are legal, ethical, and effective modes of counterterrorism. While strikes can temporarily improve regional security by undermining the ability of terrorist cells to organise (Johnston and Sarbahi, 2016, p.215), targeting leadership can undermine the ability of civilians to live safe lives by displacing militant activity to urban areas, triggering retaliatory attacks and thereby increasing levels of urban terrorism, and risking civilian lives through an overreliance on profiling (Abrahms and Potter, 2015, pp.329–330).

In response to drone strikes, Al-Qaeda and other terrorist organisations relocated to more urbanised areas where they were less

vulnerable to drone targeting, effectively displacing militant activity rather than eliminating it (Gartzke and Walsh, 2022, p.474). At the same time, militants face pressure to launch retaliatory attacks to display their organisational strength, despite a diminished capacity to attack hardened military targets. The consequent shift to urban areas where they are less vulnerable to drone strikes alongside the aforementioned pressure to retaliate leads to higher levels of urban terrorism (Gartzke and Walsh, 2022, p.464). This is further reinforced by correlation between militants killed in drone strikes and civilians killed in retaliatory terror attacks.

Using data from the Bureau of Investigative Journalism (2004–2018)—which relies on press releases, videos, images, and other available media to determine drone strikes—along with the Global Terrorism Database

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[Drones] simply manage the conflict by seeking to protect US interests through containment rather than addressing the underlying causes of terror acts and working towards a positive peace.

which tracks terror attack data from 1970 to 2020 (National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism, 2024), the relationship between the number of annual drone strikes, the number of terrorist attacks, and associated civilian casualties in Pakistan during the same period can be evaluated. This data focuses on the period between 2004–2018, the era in which US drone activity in Pakistan was at its highest. For example, in 2008, there were 38 strikes with a minimum of 193 militants killed. In that same year, 342 civilians were killed by terrorists over the course of 129 terror attacks. Meanwhile, at least 621 civilians were killed in terror attacks in 2010, rising from 242 in 2009 (Bureau of Investigative Journalism, 2017). In 2010, as the number of US strikes rose to 128, the number of dead militants was 666 with the civilian death toll rising to 621 from 224 terror attacks (Bureau

of Investigative Journalism, 2017; National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism, 2024). This demonstrates that drones at a minimum are ineffective at providing regional security for civilians and may indirectly undermine it based on increased terror attacks.

At the same time, US drone strikes undermine behaviours which operate in the direction of a positively defined condition (Galtung, 1969, p.183). The US has focused primarily on eliminating the ability of Al-Qaeda to operate as a material threat to the US without a wider consideration on how drone strikes would influence civilian populations. Militant groups weaponise civilian deaths from drone strikes as propaganda to justify retaliatory violence and recruit supporters (Gartzke and Walsh, 2022, p.472). In fact, only 16 percent of FATA residents, the region in which most significant US drone usage has occurred, believed that strikes accurately targeted militants while 48 percent believed they primarily killed civilians (New America Foundation and Terror Free Tomorrow, 2010, p.3). Therefore, preexisting assumptions about how drones can be used as legal and ethical tools of counterterrorism are undermined by such populations’ perceptions of drone strikes as deadly and increasing regional instability. This demonstrates that drones in their current form are insufficient in achieving genuine conflict resolution through positive peace.

Drones have been used to pursue negative peace through the elimination of threats while making the conditions required to achieve positive peace more challenging. Partly, this stems from the use of signature strikes which target individuals based on patterns of behaviour which match pre-established profiles of hostile actors rather than objective identity (Vlad and Hardy, 2025, p.1203). Determining signature behaviours consistent with threatening action has proven difficult. For example, non-combatants in areas of militant activity may be mistakenly perceived to be affiliated with militant groups and consequently classified as militants (Vlad and Hardy, 2025, p.1220). Military-age civilian males are thereby at risk of becoming civilian casualties based on proximity to terrorist activity rather than identity as a terrorist (Becker and Shane, 2012). Therefore, the immense civilian toll of the drone campaign helps explain why 75 percent of FATA residents opposed US actions, even while simultaneously maintaining opposition to Al-Qaeda’s presence (New America Foundation and Terror Free Tomorrow, 2010, pp.1–4). Additionally, 70 percent of the population supported the Pakistani armed forces as alternative forces of conflict resolution, suggesting that the FATA population felt that their security interests were unrepresented by US armed forces (New America Foundation and Terror

Free Tomorrow, 2010, p.1). This disapproval stemmed partly from the US focus on achieving negative peace through the elimination of threats in the region.

Moreover, government complicity with the drone campaign severely damaged public trust, further destabilising the relationship between state and local populations (Deri, 2012, pp.12–13). This lack of trust undermines regional stability if the Pakistani public perceive the drone campaign as evidence of their own government’s failure to maintain direct oversight in its airspace and monitor security in FATA. The drone campaign emerges as an ineffective strategy given civilians it apparently intended to help simultaneously opposed and felt threatened by it. In this way, despite providing tactical advantages for the US, short-term military gains can undermine long-term security. This understanding further supports the idea that drones, while presented subjectively by the US as legal and ethical methods of counterterrorism, are ineffective in achieving stability. They simply manage the conflict by seeking to protect US interests through containment rather than addressing the underlying causes of terror acts and working towards a positive peace.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the US drone campaign from 2004–2018 illustrates the impact of technological change in the conduct of warfare by demonstrating that new technology increasingly incentivises governments to make short-term decisions which undermine the potential for positive peace. The proliferation of drones in armed conflict also reflects a wider pattern in which the political cost of military force is declining in relation to how it is effectively outsourced away from soldiers. As drones continue to develop and feature in counter-terrorism efforts, particularly by governments such as the US, their use must be scrutinised to determine their role in creating meaningful and lasting positive peace.

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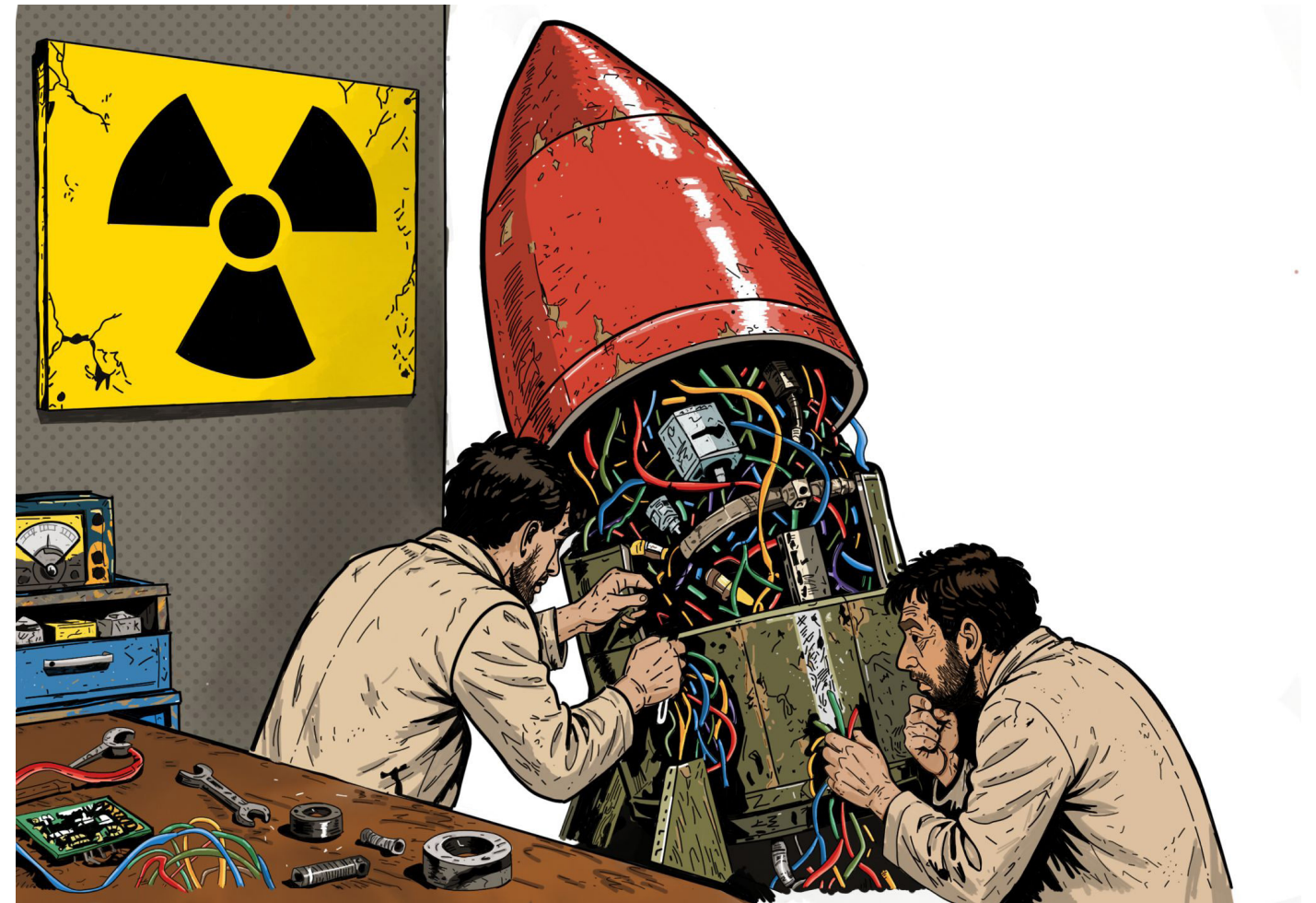
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AGAINST THE GRAIN OF REALISM

Iran & the Practical Case Against Nuclear Aspirations in the Middle East

by ruby mcintee

illustration by lucy barrett



Signed on 14 July 2015, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) was a cooperative effort of the United Nations (UN) Security Council that aimed to constrain and oversee Iran's atomic capacity (European Parliament, 2015, p.1). The plan reduced the ability to stockpile enriched uranium by phasing out IR-1 centrifuges, capping further enrichment at 3.67 percent, and limiting centrifuge facilities such as Arak, Natanz, and Fordow (European Parliament, 2015, pp.6, 7, 25). Although the JCPOA has since collapsed following President Trump's withdrawal in 2018 and Iran's subsequent resume to nuclear activities (Robinson, 2023), many saw this treaty as a diplomatic triumph, a feat of political negotiations. Yet some analysts would disagree with this assessment. Most significantly, Kenneth Waltz contended that permitting Iran to develop a nuclear weapon could generate regional stability while legitimising and strengthening Iran's hard power might deter external incursions and reduce conflict (Waltz, 2012, p.2). While Waltz wrote this before the JCPOA was established, his paper would become a keystone for oppositional thinking. What Waltz and others overlook, however, is that the JCPOA was not merely a political agreement, but a highly technical cooperation project.

Against the grain of Waltz's analysis, this

article argues that granular, technical considerations should have precedence in the case of Iran, as the primary danger for nuclear threshold states lies in the maintenance of nuclear weapons and infrastructure rather than political intent. In this context, nuclear threshold states are understood as those that have 'chosen nuclear restraint despite having significant nuclear capacity' (Ruble, 2010, p.49). To demonstrate this, this article surveys the prevailing logic on Iranian nuclearization, before offering a more detailed capacity analysis on Iran's specific ability to maintain an atomic weapon—notably looking at the historical development of Iranian nuclear facilities, centrifuge technology, and external pressures that may result in a lack of expertise, accidents or mistakes. Iran is selected as a case study because its acute geopolitical tensions and status as a nuclear threshold state—combined with the collapse of the JCPOA—make it both theoretically significant and empirically salient. Rather than implying inherent incapacity, this analysis situates the risks associated with Iran's nuclear capacity within wider structural pressures, external constraints, and the universal difficulties of managing complex nuclear technologies. Iran would face heightened constraints in managing the risk of nuclearisation due to intense external pressure and asymmetries of power and surveillance caused by a post-

colonial regional order. As such, it is not only a deliberate decision to 'push the button' that could precipitate incidents; rather, it may be the dropped wrench, the slip of a finger, or a breakdown in communication. The primary issue with nuclear weaponry may not be deliberate escalation, but the overextension of state capacity.

NUCLEAR PROLIFERATION IN THEORY: WALTZ & RELATED SCHOLARSHIP

Waltz's 2012 paper, 'Why Iran Should Get the Bomb,' was pivotal in extending structural realist logic to the case of nuclear proliferation in the Middle East. His logic is as follows: a nuclear Iran would alter security strategy in the Middle East through shifting the internal and external calculus of powers, famously writing that 'power begs to be balanced' (Waltz, 2012, p.2). Waltz (2012, p.4) mechanises this, noting that Iran's regional transition to power would likely be peaceful and that after this transition, Iran would be accepted by other nuclear superpowers. Furthermore, Waltz claims that this is both the rational decision for actors and the path proven by historical precedent. Iran would be a viable threat, meaning that antagonisms from large external powers like the United States, would de-escalate. This would translate to a reduction in the violation of state sovereignty and a rollback

of incendiary rhetoric, as such, nuclear Iran would decrease agitational action and language (Waltz, 2012, p.3). Greater risk and capacity on the international stage would construct lasting stability in the Middle East. To some extent, recent events have helped prove Waltz right. Disarmament has often brought increased agitation towards states, notably in the case of Ukraine (Umland, 2016). Underlying this is the claim that Iran has both the incentive and capacity to protect and maintain nuclear weaponry. Waltz notes that the Nezam—or Iran’s system of government—is likely governed by ‘sane ayatollahs’ willing to protect their arsenal from co-option and only use it as a last resort (Waltz, 2012, p.4). Using a framework of Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD), it is explained that it is in no one’s interest to press the red button of nuclear warfare, and further that almost every individual has the capacity to recognise this reality. The issue is not what Waltz accounts for, but what he does not: technological failure.

Rohlfing explains the realist framework remains insufficiently attentive to inherent risk (Rohlfing, 2023, pp.40–41).This article builds on Rohlfing’s insights, by grounding analysis of practical limitations of states in the twenty-first century, using Iran to elucidate the ongoing issues in avoiding mishaps, misperceptions, and unintended escalations in complex nuclear environments. Further, it integrates Perrow’s argument on technological complexity: through the implementation of safety mechanisms, systems can paradoxically be at greater risk of failure (Perrow, 1999, pp.4–5). New safety-oriented technologies may initially create more intricate and less predictable systems, heightening the risk of unanticipated interactions and cascading failures (Johnson, 2021, p.18). This explains why even if there were to be an influx of funding and support to a nuclear programme—which may mitigate Rohlfing’s analysis—short of overhauling the whole operational structure, such risk would be an everpresent threat to a nuclear Iran. Therefore, even if there is increased stability at the strategic level for threshold states, this coexists with an increased risk at a technological level.

IRANIAN NUCLEAR INFRASTRUCTURE: THE IMPACT OF HISTORIC FRAGMENTATION ON DAILY OPERATIONS

Understanding the mechanics of atomic weapon construction is necessary when evaluating a state’s technological and institutional capacity to safely manage a nuclear arsenal. Nuclear arsenals only confer deterrent power if they are operational; they require complex systems of production, command, and control that must function reliably over long periods of time (Lieber and Press, 2017, p.11). As such, the feasibility of nuclear deterrence is inseparable from the

strength of the technological infrastructure that supports it. This article posits that in the case of Iran there are multiple barriers to this, stemming from the historical fragmentation of infrastructure, a lack of expertise combined with the monetary and technical demands of weapons-grade isotope enrichment render atomic aspirations tenuous.

The first barrier to Iranian nuclear proficiency is internal issues with the ability of sites to host weaponry. Specifically, the historical development of infrastructure has resulted in a complex disjointed array of infrastructure. Iran initially began developing nuclear infrastructure in 1957 as part of Dwight D. Eisenhower’s ‘Atoms for Peace’ plan, following a US and UK-backed coup in 1953 making the Shah—Mohammad

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Like the plutonium-239 and uranium-235 isotopes from which they are made, nuclear weapons are inherently unstable. Analysis should adapt accordingly.

Reza Pahlavi—appear more reliable to the Eisenhower administration (Balaghi, 2013; Wills, 2018). Throughout the next two decades, Iran’s nuclear capacity expanded significantly. However, in 1979 the Shah was overthrown during the Iranian Revolution, bringing Ayatollah Khomeini and the Islamic Republic to power. The new regime initially halted many of the Shah’s ‘modernization’ projects, including nuclear development, as they became viewed as symbols of Western influence (Wintour, 2025). Programmes were halted and restarted, and the lack of continuity and maintenance within this period raised its own problems. The Bushehr Nuclear power plant is emblematic of the harm this historic trajectory has on Iranian nuclear infrastructure, and the potential issues with further development. Initial construction started in the 1970s, however the plant was not operational until 2010 (Khlopkov and Lutkova, 2010, p.1). Within this developmental period, responsibility for the project shifted from Germany’s Kraftwerk union to the Russian Atomic Energy Ministry following the collapse of the

Soviet Union (Khlopkov and Lutkova, 2010, p.3–4).

The resulting product was as complex as its creation, a layered framework of collaborative efforts spanning decades and continents. This nexus has resulted in a power plant uniquely difficult to run. Before 2026 it was staffed by roughly 700 specialists from Russia, who were responsible for the daily operations and managing of the plant (Osipovich, 2026). After the outbreak of the Iran-Israeli war, Rosatom pulled all but 20 key employees, leaving a skeleton crew at Busher. Finding 680 highly trained technical staff with sufficient security clearance to replace the Russian workers is an expensive, difficult undertaking. Filling the gap left by external forces is difficult, even more so, when the initial method used to train Iranian nuclear staff was the discussed ‘Atoms for Peace’ plan. Previously Eisenhower’s agreement instituted a Master’s programme at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology to train individuals (Wills, 2018). However, this programme has since been decommissioned, exacerbating the lack of expertise—an element of nuclear capability that is even more important when contextualizing atomic weaponry as opposed to a power plant. The process of fission—the base reaction for a weapon—is demanding; it is the splitting of heavy atoms nucleus to release neutrons and energy (Teller and Latter, 1958, p.61). Isotopes of enriched uranium or plutonium are essential: as heavy nuclei, they facilitate the reactions upon which a weapon may be built (Teller and Latter, 1958, p.66). Then to make the minerals instrumentally useful, one has to enrich and process them into weapons-grade material. Enrichment requires sophisticated centrifuge technology capable of separating fissile isotopes, particularly uranium-235 (U-235), from the more abundant uranium-238 (U-238) (Teller and Latter, 1958, p.67). This stage is often a critical bottleneck for emerging nuclear threshold states. Gas centrifuges, the most widely used method, operate at extremely high speeds to achieve this isotopic separation. Maintaining and operating this equipment is neither cheap nor easy, particularly when external kinetic and malware attacks are everpresent, as notably seen in recent reports from incidents at Fordow, including an explosion on 23 June 2025, which was described by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) as causing ‘very significant damage’ (Grossi, 2025).

Without this training or external support, the plant’s future is in unsteady hands. Nuclear accidents can happen due to human error, a lack of protocol, or simple misfortune. The 1980 Titan II missile explosion in Arkansas, US, illustrates how even minor mistakes can have a prodigious impact. Here, a maintenance air force man dropped a wrench socket, piercing the first-stage fuel tank. The result; 100,000 gallons of contaminated water, the

destruction of Launch Complex 374-7 and the death of an Air Force soldier (Schlosser, 2013). As such, the risk posed by a lack of expertise and historic fragmentation is not passive—with small mistakes potentially leading to disastrous outcomes. Any issues with manning nuclear sites raises doubts about capacity to sustain a reliable nuclear deterrent over time. Greater complexity of fission physics, enrichment processes, and infrastructural integration underscores the significantly higher technical risk and barriers involved in developing a weapons-grade nuclear capability. This compounds existing capacity issues already evident within the Iranian nuclear programme. Taken together, these constraints highlight that the challenge for Iran is not simply initiating a fission reaction but developing the sustained material and technological infrastructure required for a reliable and operational nuclear deterrent.

CONCLUSION

Most remember the JCPOA as a political agreement, a triumph of diplomatic negotiations. Or, if you are a realist like Waltz, a strategic misstep. Waltz’s thesis is clear: giving Iran a nuclear deterrent could stabilize the Middle East. This logic may work in isolation, as perhaps ‘power begs to be balanced’ (Waltz, 2012, p.2). The best-case scenario for realists is one where Iran is a perfectly rational actor, where proliferation is minimised, and co-option is prevented. Yet even this scenario cannot account for the acute, unavoidable and inherent threat of hosting a nuclear deterrent—intrinsic technological risk. The JCPOA was not a purely political arrangement, but a highly technical agreement that helped minimise the risk of nuclear research development (European Parliament, 2015).

For Iran, due to the complex development of nuclear systems, the loss and underdevelopment of centrifuge enrichment facilities like Natanz, and the cost of long-term maintenance and weapon deployment systems, risk is magnified. Theorists grasp the abstract, citing changes in relational power and international dynamics. But changes in relational power only actualise if the state can maintain its arsenal. Developments in international dynamics occur only if a polity does not (quite literally) implode upon itself. The analysis of Waltz and others who opposed the JCPOA continuously falls short, as the incentives and the balancing of power are secondary to solidifying and maintaining this power in the first place. Against the grain of Waltz’s deterrence theory and the bulk of political analysis, stability does not hinge only on incentives, rational actors, and the careful balancing of political power. There is a second calculation the political theorist must consider: unmanageable technical, human, and organisational risks. Like the plutonium-239 and uranium-235 isotopes from which they are made, nuclear

weapons are inherently unstable. Analysis should adapt accordingly.

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AGAINST NUCLEAR ALARMISM

Rethinking Proliferation and Security
Risk

by **arabella faroppa**
illustration by lucy barrett



Nuclear proliferation is widely framed as one of the most acute and destabilising threats to international security. In both academic scholarship and policy discourse, the spread of nuclear weapons to new or potential nuclear states is commonly treated as an inherently dangerous development that sharply increases the risk and escalation of conflict (Sagan, 1994, pp.66–68; Gavin, 2015, p.11). This perspective, referred to as nuclear alarmism, places particular emphasis on the dangers of accidental use, organisational breakdown, and irrational leadership, and has strongly shaped prevailing non-proliferation policy (Sagan, 1994). The risks associated with nuclear weapons are real and should not be dismissed or understated. However, alarmist narratives frequently rely on deterministic assumptions about state behaviour that obscure important patterns of restraint. By treating nuclear proliferation as uniformly destabilising, alarmist frameworks collapse distinctions between capability, intent, and behaviour, encouraging worst-case interpretations of emerging nuclear threats. This article advances a more nuanced assessment of nuclear risk. It argues that alarmist approaches to nuclear proliferation rely on deterministic assumptions about state behaviour that are poorly supported by empirical Cold War evidence and have

contributed to counterproductive policy choices, particularly in response to Iran's nuclear programme. This analysis first situates the argument within key debates between alarmist and deterrence-based perspectives, before turning to the Cold War as a historical reference against which alarmist predictions can be assessed. Iran is then examined as a contemporary case study that illustrates how alarmist framings have shaped policy in practice. This article concludes by addressing claims about the distinct dangers posed by new nuclear states, arguing that while these concerns warrant serious attention, they do not justify blanket alarmism or the abandonment of context-specific approaches to nuclear risk management.

BETWEEN ALARMISM & DETERRENCE

A substantial body of international security scholarship approaches nuclear proliferation as an inherently destabilising process (Ogilvie-White, 1996, p.51; Sagan, 1994, pp.66–68). Summarising this perspective, Payne (2019, p.8) identifies a dominant 'nuclear disarmament narrative' that frames proliferation as an urgent danger requiring coercive policy responses. Alarmist perspectives emphasise the risks associated with the spread of nuclear weapons, particularly the dangers of accidental use,

organisational failure, misperception, and unintended escalation (Sagan, 1994, p.68). From this view, the addition of new nuclear-armed states increases uncertainty and multiplies potential pathways to catastrophe 'since the motivations of these actors are not only less knowledgeable but often ruled by passions and nationalism' (Fettweis, 2019, p.14).

One of the most influential contributions to nuclear alarmist literature is Scott Sagan's (1994) organisational theory. Sagan (1994, p.68) argues that nuclear weapons are managed by large, complex military organisations that are prone to routine error and bureaucratic dysfunction. Rather than assuming rational and unitary state behaviour, this approach highlights how accidents and miscommunication can undermine deterrence stability (Sagan, 1994, p.71). From this organisational standpoint, nuclear proliferation heightens danger because new nuclear states cannot assume their government leaders will remain free from the influence of 'powerful organisational actors', which are described by Sagan as myopic and biased (Sagan, 1994, pp.71–73). These actors are unlike more established nuclear powers, which may be better insulated by stronger civilian oversight. Alarmist arguments have been highly influential in United States inhibition

policy debates, where nuclear acquisition is frequently framed as an urgent and existential threat requiring preventive or coercive responses. As early as the 1960s, Gavin (2015, p.28) identifies how this logic informed US consideration of preemptive action against new nuclear states—a framing that has continued to shape non-proliferation discourse (Gavin, 2015, pp.9–11). Critics of this approach argue, however, that alarmist frameworks tend to rely heavily on worst-case assumptions and give insufficient attention to empirical patterns of restraint (Waltz, 1990, p.736).

In contrast, deterrence-based approaches argue that nuclear weapons fundamentally alter strategic incentives in ways that encourage caution rather than aggression. Kenneth Waltz’s (1981, p.1) structural realist claim that ‘more may be better’ directly challenges pessimistic assumptions about proliferation. Waltz (1990, p.737) contends that the catastrophic consequences of nuclear war create powerful incentives for restraint, as leaders of nuclear-armed states prioritise regime survival above all else. This logic is closely associated with mutually assured destruction (MAD) theory. MAD contends that when adversaries possess secure second-strike capabilities—the ability of the country to absorb a preemptive attack and retaliate to cause unacceptable damage (Long and Green, 2014, p.38)—the prospect of reciprocal catastrophe deters deliberate nuclear use (Sokolski, 2004, pp.12–13). Waltz (1990, p.736) further argues that exaggerated assessments of nuclear danger often distort strategic thinking and policy, encouraging instability rather than reducing it.

Building on this, Paul (1994, p.4) argues that the political and normative costs associated with nuclear use limit the ability of states to translate nuclear capability into coercive power, reinforcing incentives for restraint. Historical evidence from the Cold War, marked by repeated crises but no nuclear use, is frequently cited to support the claim that nuclear-armed states have demonstrated a consistent capacity for reserve (Paul, 1995, pp.484–485; Payne, 2019, pp.20–21). Importantly, anti-alarmist scholars do not deny the dangers associated with nuclear weapons. Rather they argue that these dangers themselves constrain behaviour, producing incentives for caution and crisis management (Futrell, 1989, p.444).

More recent scholarship has developed alarmist pessimism into a broader critique of nuclear proliferation in the contemporary era. Building on Sagan’s earlier organisational arguments, further literature contends that deterrence is increasingly fragile in what they describe as a ‘new nuclear age’ (Narang and Sagan, 2022, pp.1–3), characterised by additional nuclear-armed states, smaller arsenals, weaker institutional

controls, and more volatile regional security environments. From this perspective, the spread of nuclear weapons heightens risks of miscalculation and escalation particularly outside and beyond the relatively structured context of the Cold War (Mearsheimer, 1990, pp.5–6; Narang and Sagan, 2022, p.5). While this body of work reinforces the view that nuclear proliferation poses serious and enduring dangers, its policy implications remain contested. By treating proliferation as broadly destabilising across contexts, alarmist frameworks can downplay variation in nuclear behaviour and the historical record of restraint among nuclear-armed states (Waltz, 1990, pp.740–744). These frameworks also risk obscuring instances in which strategic calculation, signalling, and norms have constrained escalation even under severe crisis conditions. These conditions are evidenced by the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, where back-channel signalling and mutual recognition of catastrophic risk produced a negotiated de-escalation rather than military confrontation (Tannenwald, 1999).

The divide between alarmist pessimism and more restrained approaches has significant implications for policy. Alarmist frameworks tend to prioritise coercive responses such as preventive military threats, expansive sanctions regimes, and diplomatic isolation (Gavin, 2015, p.11); they assume proliferation will inevitably lead to instability, making coercion appear necessary rather than optional (Waltz, 1990, pp.731–736). In contrast, deterrence-based approaches suggest that policies centred on transparency, security assurances and managed engagement are more likely to constrain nuclear behaviour than coercive denial strategies, which risk incentivising the very hedging they seek to prevent (Waltz, 1990, p.743; Sagan, 2006, p.47). Taken together, these debates highlight that the core disagreement is not over whether nuclear weapons are dangerous, but over how those dangers should be interpreted and managed. This article does not deny the risks identified by alarmist scholars, but argues that when alarmist assumptions are translated into policy as uniform worst-case framing, they distort threat perceptions and tend to produce counterproductive outcomes by incentivising coercive strategies that heighten insecurity rather than mitigate nuclear risk.

THE COLD WAR US–SOVIET NUCLEAR CRISES

The Cold War rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union is frequently cited as one of the most dangerous periods in nuclear history (Lebow and Stein, 1995, p.180). Within this period, Gavin (2009, p.92) identifies the years 1958–1962 as the period of most acute nuclear danger, marked by the Berlin Crisis and Cuban Missile Crisis. Accordingly, the Cold War occupies a central

place in theoretical debates, serving as the primary empirical reference point for both alarmist and deterrence-based scholars on nuclear stability. Both states possessed large nuclear arsenals, with a combined stockpile reaching 70,000 warheads in 1986, and experienced repeated emergencies such as the Cuban Missile Crisis and the 1983 Able Archer NATO exercise that carried risks of rapid escalation (Natural Resources Defense Council, 2015, p.64). Alarmist interpretations, like Sagan’s, emphasise the dangers of misperception, organisational failure, and accidental use in this environment (Sagan, 1994, pp.68–71). However, despite these risks, nuclear weapons were never used in conflict during the Cold War, remaining confined to exercises and deterrence posturing. From a deterrence-based perspective, this outcome reflects the powerful constraining effects of MAD theory. Waltz (1990, p.736) argues that the catastrophic consequences of a first nuclear strike generated strong incentives for restraint, as US and Soviet leaders could not generate objectives that justified the risks strikes entailed, leading to the conclusion that in such context, deterrence was ‘deeply stable’.

Using the Cold War as a historical benchmark complicates deterministic alarmist claims that nuclear proliferation inevitably produces instability. While organisational risks were real, empirical behaviour suggests that nuclear-armed states often responded to these dangers with caution rather than recklessness. Such examples can be seen within the Cold War context; toward the end of the Korean War with Eisenhower’s unexecuted threat of nuclear attack on China and, similarly, in 1969 when Nixon exercised restraint over nuclear use in Vietnam (Paul, 1995, p.485). While alarmists may argue these reflect the specific institutional strengths of established nuclear powers rather than a general logic of restraint, the normative and strategic costs of nuclear use—independent of institutional capacity—suggest that even newer states face powerful disincentives against first use (Paul, 1995, p.484; Tannenwald, 1999, p.460). As Waltz (1990, p.731) goes on to argue, exaggerated perceptions of nuclear danger during the Cold War distorted strategic thinking. In turn, alarmist perspectives encouraged policies aimed at achieving nuclear superiority and investments in ballistic missile defences such as Nike-X. This system ultimately increased insecurity before culminating in the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, which was widely regarded as a ‘cornerstone of strategic stability’ (Rhineland, 2001, p.92).

IRAN’S NUCLEAR PROGRAMME

Iran’s nuclear programme has been subject to sustained international scrutiny since the early 2000s, following the discovery of undeclared enrichment facilities (International Atomic Energy Agency, 2011, Annex pp.4–6). Consequently, the

country has become a central case study in debates over how proliferation risks should be managed. Iran remains a signatory to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and has consistently denied pursuing nuclear weapons, but concerns regarding transparency and compliance have shaped international response (International Atomic Energy Agency, 2011, Annex pp.4–6).

Over time, Iran’s nuclear activities have come to be framed within US and allied policy discourse as an urgent and exceptional threat, often characterised by assumptions that Iranian leaders are ideologically driven and resistant to deterrence (Sagan, Waltz, and Betts, 2007, p.138). This framing had direct policy consequences: it informed the imposition of sweeping economic sanctions regimes, the diplomatic isolation of Iran, US and Israeli threats of military strikes, and the targeting of Iranian scientists through covert assassination programmes. These responses predicated on the assumption that Iran’s nuclear ambitions were both inevitable and undeterrable. Policy debates surrounding Iran’s nuclear programme have frequently adopted alarmist framings that treat Middle Eastern nuclear development as inherently destabilising and increasingly prone to miscalculation and escalation due to their lack of second-strike capability which served as the basis of successful nuclear deterrence during the Cold War (Edelman, Krepinevich, and Montgomery, 2011, pp.71–72). Within this framework, uranium enrichment itself came to be framed as an unacceptable outcome rather than a risk to be managed. The shift from managing behaviour to eliminating capability is consequential because it transformed a negotiable proliferation concern into a perceived existential threat.

This interpretation helped legitimise an emphasis on coercive policy tools, including expansive economic sanctions, diplomatic isolation, and threats of regime change, while narrowing the space for negotiated risk management (Sagan, Waltz, and Betts, 2007, p.144). Although sanctions imposed significant economic pressure on Iran, deterrence-based scholars suggest that if Tehran is adamant their security depends on nuclear capabilities, sanctions are unlikely to succeed (Waltz, 2012, p.2). International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) (2015, pp.10–12) reporting indicates that periods of heightened coercion coincided with continued enrichment activity, and, at times, expansion of Iran’s nuclear infrastructure. These dynamics reillustrate the argument that policies rooted in worst-case assumptions about Iranian intentions did not reduce nuclear risk, but rather corresponded with continued enrichment and hardened adversarial positions.

From a deterrence-based perspective, such outcomes are not surprising. Waltz (1990, pp.731, 743) argues that policies driven by exaggerated threat perceptions can narrow

diplomatic options and reinforce adversarial incentives, ultimately increasing insecurity. In his analysis of Iran’s nuclear programme, Waltz (2012, pp.2–4) asserts that portraying Iran as irrational or undeterrable has distorted strategic judgement, encouraging coercive sanction policies that heighten confrontation without addressing underlying incentives for restraint. In this context, treating nuclear development as an immediate existential threat narrows diplomatic options and encourages confrontation, reinforcing the very security policies it seeks to prevent.

A more measured approach to Iran’s nuclear programme would have focused earlier on managing risk through transparency and contingent security guarantees rather than attempting to eliminate nuclear capability

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Blanket alarmism, by treating all proliferation as uniformly destabilising, forecloses the case-by-case analysis necessary to distinguish genuine exaggerated threats, thus risking producing the very instability it purports to prevent.

outright (Sagan, 2006, p.47). The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) agreement made in 2015 between Iran and the P5 nations briefly embodied this logic by imposing limits on enrichment, expanding inspection mechanisms, and embedding Iran’s programme within a monitored institutional framework (IAEA, 2015, pp.2–10). Under the agreement, Iran reduced its uranium stockpile by approximately 98 percent, dismantled two-thirds of its centrifuges, and accepted continuous IAEA monitoring, substantially extending the estimated breakout time from weeks to over a year (IAEA, 2015, pp.10–12). Rather than eliminating Iran’s nuclear capability, the agreement sought to constrain and monitor it. This distinction underscores the argument that managing nuclear risk through verification proved more effective than attempts at outright denial.

Although the JCPOA was ultimately fragile as it was undermined by US withdrawal in 2018 and subsequent Iranian non-compliance, its period of operation demonstrated that nuclear risk could meaningfully be reduced through verification and negotiated constraint rather than coercion alone. The agreement’s collapse following renewed maximum pressure policies, rather than disproving the risk-management approach, illustrates how returning to coercive denial strategies reversed the progress made under the agreement. The Iranian case therefore demonstrates why the logical flow from alarmist framings of proliferation risk to coercive denial strategies is problematic. By prioritising elimination over management, US policy has incentivised nuclear hedging and failed to secure the compliance it sought.

NEW NUCLEAR STATES

A common objection to deterrence-based critiques of alarmism is that the logic of restraint observed during the Cold War applies primarily to established nuclear powers, while new or aspiring nuclear states pose qualitatively different dangers. Smaller arsenals, more domestic instability, and the concern of personalist dictators with fewer checks and balances on decision making presents a structurally different deterrence environment (Narang and Sagan, 2022, p.2). Alarmist scholars argue that newer nuclear programmes are more vulnerable to organisation failure, weak command and control structures, and have limited operational experience, which in turn increases the risk of accidents or unauthorised use (Sagan, 1994, pp.68–69). From this perspective, the absence of established crisis management practices and bipolar power balances undermines confidence in deterrence stability.

This critique is analytically compelling and highlights genuine risks associated with nuclear proliferation outside the Cold War context. It rightly cautions against assuming that all nuclear-armed states will replicate the behaviour of the long-established powers. However, acknowledging these differences does not justify blanket alarmism. While Waltz (1990, p.731) does not deny the organisational and political challenges associated with emerging nuclear capabilities, he cautions against exaggerated interpretations of nuclear danger that assume worst case behaviour as inevitable. The persistence of restraint among nuclear armed states suggests that even imperfect actors remain constrained by the catastrophic consequences of nuclear use (Mearsheimer, 1990, p.20). Therefore, the argument presented here is not that deterrence is automatic or risk free, but instead that alarmist assumptions should not substitute careful, case-specific analysis of incentives and behaviour.

CONCLUSION

This article has argued that dominant alarmist approaches to nuclear proliferation, while grounded in legitimate concerns about organisational failure and miscalculation, frequently overstate the inevitability of instability and use. By minimising distinctions between nuclear capability, intent, and behaviour, alarmist frameworks rely on deterministic assumptions that obscure important patterns of restraint in our historical record. The literature reviewed demonstrates that the core disagreement within international security scholarship is not about whether nuclear weapons are dangerous, but about how those dangers should be interpreted and managed.

By using the Cold War as a historical reference point and Iran as a contemporary policy case, the analysis shows how alarmist assumptions can distort and translate into counterproductive outcomes. In the context of Iran, worst case framings encouraged coercive strategies that narrowed diplomatic options without eliminating nuclear risk, while episodes of restraint and negotiated risk management demonstrated alternative pathways. Acknowledging the distinct challenges posed by new or emerging nuclear states remains essential, but this article has argued that while new nuclear states do present distinct organisational and structural risks, the deterrence logic of catastrophic cost and the normative taboo against nuclear use exert constraining pressures that are not exclusive to established powers. Blanket alarmism, by treating all proliferation as uniformly destabilising, forecloses the case-by-case analysis necessary to distinguish genuine exaggerated threats, thus risking producing the very instability it purports to prevent. The February 2026 US-Israeli military escalation with Iran underscores that debates about alarmism are not abstract theoretical disputes, but concerns with immediate and potentially catastrophic consequences. In an era of renewed nuclear anxiety, resisting deterministic interpretations of proliferation is a necessary step toward policies that manage, rather than exacerbate, nuclear risk.

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THE COST OF LIBERATION

by maria ribeiro

illustration by oleksandra zhyhalkina



When viewed as a neutral and necessary response to human suffering in times of crisis, the provision of aid is widely regarded as an unequivocally good act (Anderson, 1999, p.2). The prevailing rationale of prioritising civilian welfare has not only shaped humanitarian operations, but also influenced the broader framework of foreign assistance, in which military, political, and economic aid is justified, at least in part, as a means of protecting civilian populations (Rieff, 2002, pp.111–112).

Historically, the dominant framework holds that aid organisations and workers can address the pitfalls of aid in conflict by improving its design and implementation (Rieff, 2002, p.112). This article challenges the notion of an ‘implementation problem’ and argues that the inherent structure of foreign aid—whether humanitarian, military, or financial—during civil wars, specifically, prolongs conflict and escalates violence against civilians, ultimately causing more harm than it alleviates. Therefore, aid delivery in regions experiencing civil conflict must be fundamentally restructured. This article makes this argument by examining how the characteristic of fragmented authority in internal conflicts politicises aid and renders it susceptible to manipulation

(Abeytia et al., 2023, p.348), drawing on case studies of the civil uprisings in Libya (2011) and Biafra, Nigeria (1967). In Libya, after the overthrow of Gaddafi, humanitarian aid flooded into the country in response to mass displacement and the subsequent violent civil war; in Biafra, its uprising as a secessionist state and the Nigerian federal government’s punitive response resulted in aid responses to address the famine and suffering of the population. Libya and Biafra are particularly intriguing for this analysis: despite receiving different aid forms from distinct sources, they illustrate how aid in civil conflicts can easily become entangled in fighting, potentially channeling resources to one side irrespective of the original intent. The nearly 50-year gap between the two conflicts solidifies the ongoing and structural nature of this problem, rather than being incidental.

THE ISSUE OF PARTISANSHIP: AID & THE POLITICS OF CIVILIAN CONFLICT

A central structural problem with foreign aid in civil conflicts is the inability for it to account for structural power asymmetries which shape and potentially perpetuate the very conflicts aid seeks to relieve (Abeytia et al., 2023, pp.342–344; Rieff, 2002,

pp.112–113, 116–117). Since approximately 80 percent of total humanitarian assistance financing comes from public sources or is provided by governments (United Nations Children’s Fund, 2024, p.11), the dependence of aid organisations on donor funding compromises their independence, making them beholden to the powerful states and institutions that finance them (Abeytia et al., 2023, p.351; Rieff, 2002, p.118). This is the case for various types of aid, including humanitarian and military. For example, during the Qatari intervention in Libya, direct military aid, including weapons and training, was granted to rebels with the purpose of helping the Libyan people fight against the oppressive forces of the *de facto* leader Muammar Gaddafi, resulting in the escalation of violence and disorder (Ulrichsen, 2016, p.128). Qatar emerged as an indispensable force in the rise of the National Transitional Council (NTC)—the opposition to the Libyan government during the war. This was largely motivated by building a diplomatic bridge between the Arab world and Western-backed institutions such as NATO, fostering positive relationships with powerful countries (Ulrichsen, 2016, pp.123–125; Khatib, 2013, p.421). Therefore, Qatar’s role demonstrates that aid is provided not simply as a response to human suffering, but as a mechanism for the donor state to

gain political leverage.

Given the nature of civil conflicts, distribution of humanitarian aid often requires engaging with specific factions, whether through negotiations with a government that restricts aid corridors, or working with rebel groups that control border crossings (Abeytia et al., 2023, p.348). This engagement risks conferring political legitimacy onto one side of the conflict, thereby exacerbating tensions and entanglement within the conflict dynamics (Anderson, 1999, pp.50–51). Attempting to deliver aid ‘neutrally’ is fraught with challenges; even unintentional actions can influence the conflict, as exemplified in Biafra.

The Nigerian Civil War commenced seven years after Nigeria gained independence in 1960, when the country was plagued by ethnic tensions, coups, and great political instability (Bradley, 2023, p.29). Such tensions culminated in the Igbo population in the South to declare the Republic of Biafra, effectively breaking away from Nigeria (Bradley, 2023, pp.28–30). The humanitarian crisis in Biafra arose from a blockade imposed by the Nigerian government that prevented aid delivery among established routes as the parties involved also refused to compromise on an alternative, with Biafrans refusing aid from Nigeria (Bradley, 2023, pp.26, 36–37). Stuck in this conundrum, over 30 European and North American Christian churches collaborated to airlift aid directly to Biafra (Pérouse de Montclos, 2009, pp.72–73). In response, the Nigerian military shot down three of these delivery planes as this effectively broke the blockade (Pérouse de Montclos, 2009, pp.72–73). These actions directly entangled humanitarian operations in the conflict and exacerbated the violence and suffering endured by civilians (Pérouse de Montclos, 2009, p.73). Contrary to the situation in Libya, where military and financial aid were directed towards insurgents, the complexity of aid delivery in Biafra exemplifies how the delivery of emergency humanitarian aid to a civilian population can entangle aid with the conflict itself. Regardless of implementation, the structure of access negotiation, as highlighted by divisions in civil wars, makes a neutral outcome in aid delivery impossible. Therefore, in addition to inciting higher levels of violence, such as in Libya, the non-partisan nature of aid in contact with civil conflicts can further provoke violence, as seen in the case of Biafra.

HOW AID PROLONGS CONFLICT: FUNDING AND DIVERSION

Furthermore, foreign aid can inadvertently prolong civil conflict by distorting the informational signals that combatants rely on to assess relative strength and negotiate a settlement. According to Neil Narang (2015, p.186), ‘fighting ends when opponents learn

enough about their prospects in war’, but aid potentially obscures these assessments by reducing the costs of fighting, thereby prolonging hostilities. Narang’s (2015, pp.190, 193–194) research suggests that higher levels of aid are associated with an 11.1 percent decrease in the instantaneous likelihood of a conflict ending in the post-Cold War period. The effect is most acute in peripheral insurgencies, where aid is harder to observe and greater uncertainty is added to the bargaining process; in these cases, higher aid levels are associated with roughly a 50 percent reduction in the likelihood of war ending at any given moment (Narang, 2015, pp.192–193). According to this framework, during internal conflicts where insurgents require sufficient resources to ‘extract concessions from a stronger opponent’ and to maintain ‘support of the

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The presence and delivery of humanitarian aid can thus have seemingly unintended partisan consequences, especially in politically motivated circumstances.

local population’ (Narang, 2015, p.187) , aid helps sustain the notion that those waging war do not feel the pressure to stop the war, as provisions are being provided by a third party and scarcity is not visible. The aid provided to Libya, financial, political, and military, was indispensable to prolonging the conflict, which, without such assistance, would likely have struggled to sustain the fight against Gaddafi’s forces for long (Ulrichsen, 2016, p.124).

In addition to the malignant complications with aid delivery, the resulting perpetuation of violence and conflict has been seen to increase from the mere presence of humanitarian sites within civil war (Wood and Sullivan, 2015, p.744). This is supported by evidence of a positive, statistically significant correlation between humanitarian aid and one-sided rebel violence, for example, with a 25 percent increase in the rate of rebel attacks on civilian targets in areas with humanitarian aid relative to areas without it (Wood and Sullivan, 2015, p.744). Rebels looting aid sites is widely

documented and reflects how humanitarian sites often have scarce resources in conflict zones, making them attractive targets for those seeking supplies to support their war efforts (Wood and Sullivan, 2015, p.738). Returning to the example in Biafra, the insurgent government sustained its military campaign in part by diverting humanitarian funds, with approximately fifteen percent of aid redirected to military expenditures (Pérouse de Montclos, 2009, p.74; Bradley, 2023, p.40). Pérouse de Montclos (2009, pp.73, 75–76) also explains that Biafran militants engaged in raids of humanitarian distribution sites to steal supplies and food, making it ‘difficult to protect civilians [...]’; aid workers had to hire armed guards to protect their stores from looting’. The appropriation of aid resources by parties involved in the conflict can inadvertently prolong the conflict and intensify chaos and violence.

THE ‘DO NO HARM’ PRINCIPLE

Alternatively, applying Anderson’s (1999, pp.24–25) ‘Do No Harm’ framework challenges the traditional perspective on aid delivery during humanitarian conflict, suggesting that conflict has both dividers and connectors with the potential to both aggravate and mitigate friction. ‘Capacities’ for peace present means beyond purely reactive needs for assistance (Anderson, 1999, pp.31–32, 34). Recognising these potentials is a deliberate process of valuing the persistent efforts of communities to maintain their connections even under the most extreme, divisive circumstances (Anderson, 1999, p.33–34). In contexts where some semblance of authority exists, this logic has merit, though this position fundamentally misunderstands the nature of civil conflict. Unlike interstate wars or natural disasters, civil wars are defined by the very absence of settled authority; sovereignty itself is what is being contested. On this view, the harms documented in Libya and Biafra represent failures of implementation, not structural inevitability: better-designed, conflict-sensitive aid could avoid these pitfalls.

Abeytia and colleagues (2023, p.342) argue that for the ‘Do No Harm’ framework to function in some capacity, there must be a semblance of authority and a neutral order so that actors can focus on providing humanitarian aid as efficiently as possible. In the case of a civil war, however, there are no neutral connectors for aid agencies to work through, as every social institution, community leader, and means of distribution is already aligned with a side, whether by choice or lack thereof. Libya and Biafra demonstrate precisely this collapse of neutral infrastructure in practice.

In the uprisings and the ensuing civil war in Libya, Qatar played a significant role, taking a leading position among Arab nations and providing hundreds of millions of US dollars

in aid (Ulrichsen, 2016, p.125). However, in October 2011, an investigation by the Wall Street Journal revealed that Qatar’s channels for delivering other types of financial aid were overseen by the same individual who was delivering over eighteen shipments of arms to rebels (Dagher, Levinson, and Coker, 2011; Ulrichsen, 2016, pp.126–128). In Biafra, authorities in charge of the rebellion became dependent on aid as the war economy, driven by the humanitarian crisis, sustained the conflict, thereby removing the incentive to end it (Pérouse de Montclos, 2009, p.74; Bradley, 2023, p.40). Reliance on insurgents as intermediaries for humanitarian aid is problematic because their interests often prevent the cessation of hostilities (Anderson, 1999, pp.42–43). Additionally, seeking help from those unaffiliated with either rebel groups or governments is challenging in a civil war as all parties involved are compromised. These are not failures of implementation; applying a framework designed for natural disasters to a geopolitical crisis such as a civil war ignores the asymmetric power structures that make neutrality impossible from the outset (Abeytia et al., 2023, p.342).

Anderson’s framework, therefore, cannot resolve what ultimately is not an implementation problem, but a structural condition inherent to civil conflict itself. When humanitarian assistance sustains war economies and blurs the line between relief and military support, the costs fall on civilians in the form of extended displacement, famine, and violence. Both examples highlight the difficulty in providing neutral or even targeted cooperation with local populations in civil war. Targeted aid is highly susceptible to being understood as an endorsement of a particular side, which Abeytia and colleagues (2023, p.362) believe ‘further evidence[s] the impossibility of the mandates of humanitarian principles in the context of civil war’. Aid is inherently partisan; within the context of a civil war, it becomes captive to structural partisanship. Within civil wars, agents can become increasingly dependent on aid, prolonging the conflict rather than stopping it. The broader implication is that this is not case-specific, but is rather reproduced whenever aid comes into contact with civil wars.

CONCLUSION

The presence and delivery of humanitarian aid can thus have seemingly unintended partisan consequences, especially in politically motivated circumstances. In Libya, the resulting power vacuum facilitated the rise of armed militias, escalated internecine fighting, and contributed to the proliferation of arms and the spread of Islamic extremism across the region, including into neighbouring states such as Mali (Shaw, 2013, p.208). Difficulties regarding the armaments of these militias also persist to this day (Shihudu, 2022, p.69; Human Rights

Watch, 2026). The Biafran case tells a parallel story across a different decade: scholars now widely recognise that the humanitarian crisis was deliberately instrumentalised to prolong and internationalise the conflict, with many contemporary Nigerian scholars concluding that the absence of international aid could have led to fewer deaths overall (Bradley, 2023, p.41). These cases reflect a structural pattern in which aid, regardless of its expressed intentions, redistributes power, prolongs conflict, and compounds the suffering it purports to alleviate in civil wars. Therefore, the problem does not lie in operational failure or poor implementation, but in the architecture of the humanitarian system itself. Its dependence on donor states and embeddedness within international political hierarchies renders aid susceptible to instrumentalisation even when guided by seemingly neutral principles.

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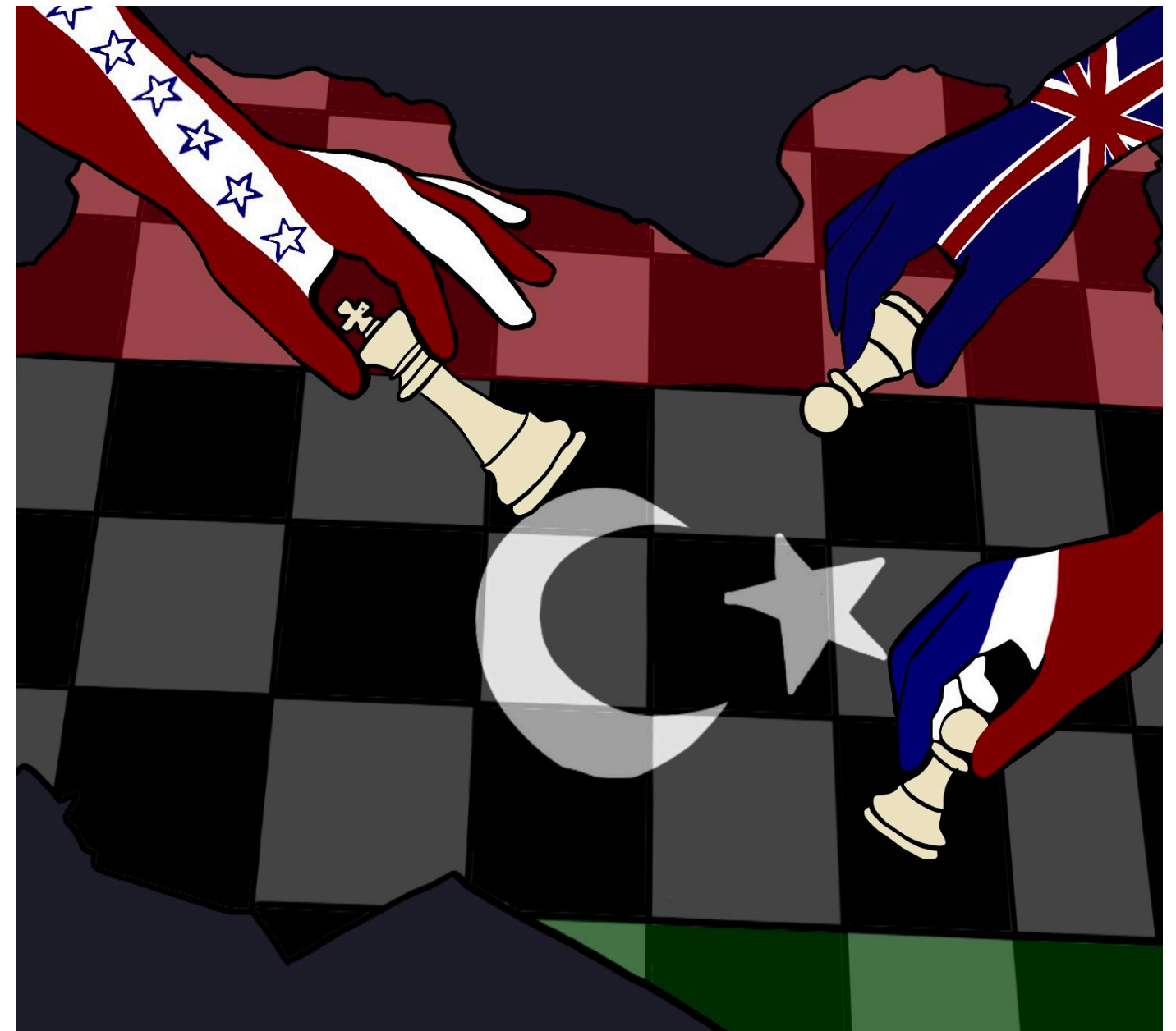
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HUMANITARIAN INTERVENTION AS A MASK FOR POLITICAL POWER

The Case of Libya 2011

by **tessa protopapa**
illustration by **oleksandra zhyhalkina**



Following the atrocities of the two World Wars, the international community sought to prevent future conflict, drafting and signing the Charter of the United Nations in 1945 (UN Charter) to create an instrument designed to facilitate sustained peace (Hanhimäki, 2015, p.3). Accordingly, as outlined by Article V of the UN Charter (1945, p.6), the United Nations Security Council's (UNSC) role, is to maintain international peace and security. The UNSC however, despite having fifteen members, concentrates decision-making authority with the five permanent states—Russia, China, the US, the UK, and France—through the veto power (Charter of the United Nations, 1945, p.6). Such power enables the five key states' political interests to influence internationally-binding outcomes.

Unchecked power such as this becomes particularly pivotal during moments when international peace is fragile. In the case of

the Libyan Crisis of 2011, the threat of civil war in Libya, catalysed by an uprising against Muammar Gaddafi and his four-decade rule (United Nations Human Rights Council, 2011), represented a moment in which the international community ostensibly acted to prevent future conflict. The response to this threat was constituted by UN Security Council Resolution 1973, which in essence gave the legal justification for Western intervention in Libya in the subsequent months and years. More particularly, it also authorised UN-enforced no-fly zones and gave political cover for the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation's (NATO) intervention in the conflict.

Security Council Resolution 1973 and the subsequent intervention raise questions over the motivations of the Western powers instigating these events, and whether they were in pursuit of humanitarian objectives or served the strategic priorities of the UN's most powerful members. Significantly,

NATO's intervention in Libya was the first use of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) doctrine (Dietrich, 2013, p.323), transforming it into a highly controversial and powerful instrument in international relations. This article argues that the practice of R2P in Libya was marred by a skewed Western narrative, political motivations of those in the UNSC, and military superiority. In doing so, it agrees with the neorealist perspective that the global world order cannot displace the self-help tendency of states. Thus, this article rejects the claims that the Libyan intervention was a humanitarian success and ultimately displays how Western powers are able to use international institutions to alter the political trajectory of other nations to their benefit.

THE REALITY ON GROUND VERSUS A SKEWED NARRATIVE

In early February 2011, uprisings against Muammar Gaddafi, the ruler of Libya for

42 years, were sparked in Benghazi by the arrest of human rights lawyer Fethi Tarbel and fuelled by long-standing marginalisation and mismanagement of oil wealth (Koenig, 2011, p.11; Campbell, 2021, p.975). Protests rapidly intensified into violent confrontation, with demonstrators attacking and killing members of the security forces (Bandeira, 2017, p.157). Gaddafi's regime perpetuated severe human rights violations, including unlawful detention, denial of due process, and allegations of torture (United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2011, p.23; Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2017, p.5). The conflict subsequently evolved into a two-sided civil war that left Libya without consolidated authority.

While Gaddafi's actions are not condoned in this article, the narrative advanced by Western member states suggests a secondary motive for the military intervention, as their account of the civil war's causes differs from the explanation outlined above. The intervention was framed as a moral necessity, with Western powers such as the US, the UK, and France calling for increased international pressure on Gaddafi to relinquish power, while portraying him as the sole violent aggressor in the conflict (United Nations Human Rights Council, 2011; US Department of State, 2011). These portrayals contributed to a simplified interpretation of the conflict, presenting the uprising as a unified democratic revolution rather than a complex civil war with competing political interests (Spencer, 2019). As such, the legitimacy of their employment of R2P is called into question.

THE GAP: THE US, THE UK & FRANCE'S POLITICAL MOTIVATIONS

The NATO intervention can be understood in light of the self-interested political and economic motivations of the US, UK, and France—all permanent UNSC members with longstanding stakes in Libya (Davidson, 2017; Mezran and Varvelli, 2017; House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee, 2016, p.10). Oil was central to these interests: US involvement dates back to the 1950s when it imported large quantities from the Middle East and North Africa, including Libya, with Britain's dependence growing in parallel (Curtis, 2003). When Gaddafi seized power in 1969 by overthrowing Western-backed King Idris and declaring a state that would no longer serve Western interests, he effectively ended Western access to Libya's oil infrastructure. With access prohibited, Britain lost an estimated 100 million US dollars in investments alongside losing access to key military bases (Davidson, 2017, p.93). Furthermore, US oil imports, including from Libya, exemplify how the US also had an incentive to control Libya. Based on these economic benefits, undercut by the Gaddafi regime, Western powers have been motivated to dispose

of Gaddafi. This is exemplified by the fabricated Libyan plot to assassinate former US President Ronald Regan (Davidson, 2017, p.94). Following Gaddafi's fall, the opening of Libya's oil industry enabled Western companies to pursue concessions framed as reconstruction and democracy-building initiatives (Mezran and Varvelli, 2017). Therefore, the post-intervention restructuring of Libya's oil sector facilitated by Resolution 1973 suggests strategic motivations for intervention, allowing the re-establishment of Western economic influence over Libya.

These theoretical motivations are evidenced by some action taken during the intervention, under the cover of Resolution 1973. For example, a UK Parliament report

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These contradictions between purpose and action are problematic as NATO's intervention effectively...set a dangerous precedent for powerful states to use humanitarian intervention to justify regime change.

reveals a conversation reported by a US State Department adviser with French intelligence officers in April 2011, stating that the protection of civilians was not the sole reason for Resolution 1973 (House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee, 2016, p.10). The report identified French economic and political incentives such as securing economic interests in Libyan oil, expanding its influence in North Africa and Francophone Africa, strengthening domestic political standing, and reasserting its military power (House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee, 2016, p.11). These conversations between the permanent members of the UNSC suggest a consensus that concern for the Libyan people was not the primary motivation behind their action.

Solidifying these hidden motivations, the NATO intervention can thus be seen as part of an increasingly antagonistic relationship between the West and Africa. This is observable through Pan-Africanist initiatives which rival the West; for instance,

Gaddafi's open advocacy for the creation of the currency of a gold dinar, created by Muslim and African states to rival the dollar and the euro. His establishment of the African Investment Bank and African Monetary Fund to undermine Western financial institutions, likewise posed a direct threat to American and European economic dominance (Forte, 2012). These dynamics suggest that civilian protection functioned primarily as a justification for the execution of economic and political self-interest in the region.

Significantly, P5 members which would not be considered traditionally western, China and Russia, chose to abstain, rather than veto, Resolution 1973. This absence of opposition further confirms that all UNSC permanent members acted out of structural self-interest, consistent with a neorealist reading in which states prioritise relative power over humanitarian norms (Waltz, 1979). For Russia and China, lacking the long-term strategic stakes in Libya that drove Western powers, calculated that abstention best preserved their position within the international order, while the US, UK and France actively intervened to consolidate theirs (Ishetiar, 2019; Sun, 2011)

THE LACK OF A HUMANITARIAN INTERVENTION

The intervention ultimately only contributed to achieving the political objectives of its main proponents (UNSC, 2011). Constituting the legal mandate of the military operation in Libya, UNSC Resolution 1973 Paragraph Four authorised UN member states 'to take all necessary measures [...] to protect civilians and civilian populated areas under threat of attack in the Libyan Arab Jamahiriya, including Benghazi' (UNSC, 2011, p.3). The UN Charter states that military measures taken in pursuit of other aims is a breach of Paragraph 4 and amounts to an unlawful 'threat or use of force' against the targeted state. Under the UN Charter Chapter 1, Article 4, UN member states are prohibited from using or threatening force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state (Charter of the United Nations, 1945, p.3). For example, in support of UNSC Resolution 1973, NATO then agreed to enforce the UN-mandated no-fly zone over Libya on 24 March 2011 (NATO, 2012). The Alliance assumed leadership of the operation due to its existing military capabilities and command infrastructure of NATO (NATO, 2012). In April 2012, following its conclusion, NATO labeled the operation 'successful' (NATO, 2012), reflecting a Western perspective that contrasts with the reality in Libya, where the outcome was characterised by humanitarian crisis (Mansour-Ille, 2024, p.206) and political instability (Ali, 2025, p.994). Specifically, the power vacuum left by Gaddafi's disposal, as executed by NATO, allowed for people trafficking operations to flourish, extremist

groups to re-establish themselves and massive internal displacement (Dominguez and Pitt-Rashid, 2012; (House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee, 2016). In this way, NATO's military intervention in Libya exhibited a drastic shift in narrative from civilian protection to regime change, as its operations often exceeded the UN mandate, increasing civilian harm. This further demonstrates how R2P was veiled colonialism.

The R2P emerged in 2005 to prevent mass atrocity crimes, including genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity (UN, 2005; Maluwa, 2023, p.73). Given that R2P is grounded in the primary objective of protecting civilians from such crimes, the 2011 intervention in Libya can be understood as a breach of its core principles rather than their fulfilment. Anchored in three pillars, R2P obliges states to protect their populations, encourages international assistance, and permits collective action if a state fails, forming the basis of UNSC Resolution 1973 (Adams, 2012, p.3; UNSC, 2011, p.1). Nevertheless, Libya did not clearly meet the threshold for R2P application, as the situation on the ground resembled a two-sided civil war rather than mass atrocity crimes, a distinction obscured by the UK government's intelligence according to their own reports (House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee, 2016, paras. 25-28, 38). Further, the intervention itself failed to prioritise the protection of civilians and instead contributed to greater instability (Mansour-Ille, 2024).

Moreover, Resolution 1973, and the underpinning idea of R2P, do not give a mandate for intervening states to advance regime change. However, NATO action under the mandate clearly was underpinned by such intentions. NATO struck homes of Gaddafi loyalists, which resulted in the killing of civilian women and children, constituting a gross overstep of the UN mandate (Igwe, et al., 2017, p.7). Moreover, in March of 2011 the UK announced that it would deploy military experts to advise the rebels in eastern Libya, characterised by the press as 'a clear intervention on the ground to bolster the anti-Gaddafi uprising' (UK Government, 2013 pp.3, 8). NATO's provision of military assistance to rebel forces, including weapons, training, and the covert deployment of foreign troops, directly facilitated the capture and execution of Gaddafi in October 2011, reinforcing the interpretation of the intervention as regime change rather than civilian protection (Deeks, 2018, p.756; Ali, 2025, p.1000). Following his capture and consequently the regime change, the situation in Libya remained highly unstable and the site of a 'violent regional proxy battleground', (Zambakari, 2016, p.54) with broad groups and factions fighting in Libya (Ali, 2025, p.994). This undermines the claim that humanitarian concerns were NATO's primary motivation and instead

suggests that regime change served Western political interests, exemplified by NATO's framing of this as a success. These contradictions between purpose and action are problematic as NATO's intervention effectively violated the UN mandate and set a dangerous precedent for powerful states to use humanitarian intervention to justify regime change.

Furthermore, NATO's intervention fundamentally failed in its duty to protect and caused a power vacuum which intensified destabilisation of the greater region. The timeline of NATO's intervention in mid-March coincides with the rebels retreating with Gaddafi regaining control of most cities, with some estimating that the conflict could have ended within just six weeks, with an estimated death toll of under a thousand (Mansour-Ille, 2024, p.200). While this relies on there being no change in trajectory in the conflict, it indicates that NATO did not assess widely what the avenue to end the conflict with the least harm to the Libyan people would be. Instead, NATO's significant alteration of the balance on ground contributed directly to the prolongation of the conflict by seven months which led to 7,000 more casualties (Mansour-Ille, 2024, p.206). Thus, NATO's intervention, under the guise of humanitarianism, ultimately exacerbated mass casualties and prolonged the Libyan conflict. This further demonstrates that NATO's military intervention exceeded the mandate, not protecting the civilians but instead creating casualties and further destruction as collateral damage in order to achieve the political objectives of the UK, the US and France.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, the 2011 intervention in Libya demonstrates how humanitarian discourse can be employed to legitimise actions that are ultimately driven by political interests. The manipulation of R2P by Western states in Libya allowed the pursuit of strategic aims, while subordinating the interests of the Libyan population. First, an imbalanced narrative between the reality on ground and the Western perspective reveals another motivation for the intervention. Second, the actions of the US, the UK, and France indicate that their political motivations, including oil, regional influence, and domestic political incentives, played a significant role in supporting a military intervention as opposed to addressing the humanitarian crises as originally claimed. Finally, NATO's conduct of the intervention demonstrates a clear violation of the original UN mandate, shifting from the protection of civilians to the pursuit of regime change and causing further casualties and destruction of the region. Taken together, these factors challenge the widely supported narrative that the intervention in Libya represents a successful application of humanitarian

intervention (Daalder and Stavridi, 2012). Rather, the intervention should be seen as an example of the West's ability to illegitimately gain political and economic power at the expense of other nation states. When studying R2P and humanitarian interventions, the genuinely protective elements of an intervention should be highlighted above the stated intentions of intervening states.

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WOMEN IN WARTIME

Challenging International Humanitarian Law's Gender-Blindness

by amelia powell
illustration by lucy barrett



International humanitarian law (IHL) is the legal mechanism adopted by the international community to regulate the practice of war, primarily implemented by military personnel rather than solely by courts (International Committee of the Red Cross, 2019, p.2). These 'laws of war' constitute 'a set of rules which seek, for humanitarian reasons, to limit the effects of armed conflict' (British Red Cross, 2022). However, the neutral language of these laws threatens to reinforce patriarchal power dynamics during conflict. The inherent masculinity of the military has been well-documented by scholars (Duncanson, 2019, pp.469–470; Mégret, 2018, p.1; Enloe, 2023, pp.19–33). When extrapolated to the broader interactions of the military with society, such militarised masculinity (Tapscott, 2020) reinforces an androcentric—referring to the universalisation of patriarchy and hegemonic masculinity as the default in a given context (Abrams, 1993, p.222)—'propensity to centre society around men and men's needs, priorities, and values and to relegate women to the periphery' (Taylor, das Nair, and Braham, 2013, p.775). During armed conflict, this androcentricity is exemplified: civilian women are systematically disadvantaged as masculinity is the operational foundation of military tactics. This masculine lens also influences the operationalisation of IHL by

soldiers and the broader military complex; consequently, many feminist scholars like Frédéric Mégret, Claire Duncanson, and Cynthia Enloe have critiqued IHL as being inherently masculinised (Mégret, 2018, p.1; Enloe, 2023; Duncanson, 2019). Amongst other instances, this disparity in practical protection under IHL arises because implementers fail to recognise that substantively equal treatment does not necessarily ensure equal protection.

Hence, the present article posits that militaries, through their implementations of international humanitarian law, must recognise the disproportionate barriers and hardships faced by women during armed conflict and accord them distinct, favourable treatment to ensure they are fully protected in wartime. Primarily, we must understand the relevant provisions of international humanitarian law, primarily those concerning discrimination and the principle of positive distinction. Using the examples of evacuation notification and refugee camps, this article establishes that providing differential treatment to women under international humanitarian law is not only legally permissible, but necessary. Ultimately, women must be granted greater accommodation during armed conflict to ensure their full protection under

international humanitarian law. It should be noted that while this article analyses the experience of cisgender women, the detrimental impacts of militarised masculinity in IHL and wartime likewise affect queer and non-gender binary individuals (Jeenger, 2025).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: GENDER IN WARTIME

Patriarchies across the world disadvantage women, creating barriers to their full participation in the social, economic, and political spheres of life (Nash, 2009, pp.102–107). During conflict, these impediments are exacerbated with patriarchal family and relationship dynamics intensified. Women are frequently isolated to the private sphere of domestic care, where they are expected to care for children and the elderly while the husband fights in the war, (Enloe, 2023, p.9). Cynthia Enloe (2023, pp.8–10) details how women are consistently expected to take on additional unpaid labour to maintain their family, to eat less to allow for the men to be full, and to give in sexually to the complex desires of soldiers and other men, despite the risk of pregnancy leaving them even more socially and economically vulnerable.

The structural effects of patriarchy are

aggravated during conflict, resulting in different experiences of war between men and women. However, living in an androcentric patriarchy, women's experiences during war are often hidden by the media in favour of other considerations where gender is deemed irrelevant in the midst of the tragedies of war. This results in highly visible and discussed male experiences, in contrast with neglected and underexplored female ones.

However, it is widely recognised that gender-based violence is often used as a 'tactic of war,' and international institutions have made strides towards preventing and punishing such crimes (United Nations Women, 2026). The patriarchal system structurally and culturally disadvantages women to the point where seemingly gender-neutral issues—including resource provisions in refugee camps and evacuation notices—carry far-reaching, detrimental impacts for women. These structural vulnerabilities for women in wartime have led to criticism of IHL. In particular, within its codified language, IHL assumes a gender-neutral stance regarding the effects of war and conflict, perpetuating a *de jure* model of equality rather than a *de facto* one (Durham 2002, p.655; Gardam 2018, p.40). This therefore results in a harmful emphasis on theoretical equality, neglecting the practical situations the law is supposed to address.

Due to this, many feminist scholars like Frédéric Mégret and Cynthia Enloe have critiqued IHL as inherently masculinised (Mégret, 2018, p.1) building on the conventional perception of war as masculine, creating an international legal system which affects men and women differently (Enloe, 2023, pp.19–33; Duncanson, 2019, pp.465–475). Gender dynamics are heightened during conflict at the expense of women, and actors implementing IHL disregard the varied experiences of women in wars, maintaining patriarchal norms.

DISCRIMINATION & POSITIVE DISTINCTION IN INTERNATIONAL HUMANITARIAN LAW

Among the primary functions of IHL is the protection of civilians in wartime (International Committee of the Red Cross, 2021). The fourth Geneva Convention is the most notable codification of such regulations, stipulating that humanitarian protections should be implemented to 'cover the whole of the populations of the countries in conflict, without any adverse distinction based, in particular, on race, nationality, religion or political opinion, and are intended to alleviate the sufferings caused by war' (*Geneva Convention Relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Times of War*, 1949). While this prohibition of discrimination in the application of international humanitarian law proves foundational to the discipline

itself, a notable exception exists: although no 'adverse distinction' between persons is permissible, 'a distinction may be made to get priority to those and most urgent need of care' (International Committee of the Red Cross, 2023). Where the principle of adverse distinction prohibits 'unfavourable discrimination based on race, gender, nationality, religious belief, political opinion or any other similar criteria in the treatment of prisoners of war, civilians, and persons hors de combat' (International Committee of the Red Cross, 2023), IHL permits differential treatment where strictly necessary so long as it does not discriminate against one of the aforementioned protected parties. It recognises that equal treatment of two individuals will not necessarily ensure they are equally protected; the ultimate aim is to ensure that sufficient treatment is granted to all protected persons under international

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humanitarian law. The principle of adverse distinction and its corollary have typically been applied with respect to medical treatment. However, this article challenges the gender-blindness of IHL and instead posits that some necessary distinctions *must* be made on these grounds in order to address the detrimental implications of militarised masculinity.

In practice, for the positive distinction exception to justify providing differential treatment to women during armed conflicts, it must be absolutely necessary to ensure sufficient protection under international humanitarian law. Furthermore, such protections must not disadvantage male protected persons in the process. Below, these two requirements are evaluated in the contexts of the disproportionate disadvantages women face in evacuation notices and refugee camps, concluding that the thresholds are met.

EVACUATION NOTICES

IHL requires militaries to provide sufficient advanced warning of an attack to a prospectively affected civilian population, ensuring they are given ample time to evacuate, as noted in Article 57(2)(c) of the 1977 *Protocol I*. Many humanitarian organisations, including Amnesty International, recommend that it include maps displaying safe routes to evacuate and sufficient information about the forthcoming attack (Amnesty International, 2024), although it is not required by law (Biggerstaff, 2024). Evacuation notices are typically disseminated through public media, including SMS messaging, radio broadcasts, and air-dropping leaflets for civilians to read (Biggerstaff, 2024). For example, Israel has often used social media platform X to provide evacuation notices to Lebanese civilians (Amnesty International, 2024). Even before considering how a gendered lens reveals distinct weaknesses to this process, evacuation notices face endemic challenges. Amnesty International's analysis of the Israeli–Lebanon conflict concluded that the evacuation notices provided by Israel were insufficient as they included 'misleading' information regarding what areas would be hit and were extremely short-notice; 'in one instance less than 30 minutes before strikes began' (Amnesty International, 2024). Israel reportedly published evacuation notices on X in the middle of the night, when people were asleep, and then proceeded to bomb buildings only a few hours later (Amnesty International, 2024). Within this already demonstrably insufficient and illegal system, women face distinct disadvantages.

The practice of delivering evacuation notices reinforces the androcentric nature of armed conflict, where men's needs are considered by militaries to be undifferentiated of the needs of the wider population. Considerable evidence contradicts this idea. Women-led households are common during conflict as men are conscripted to fight and 'women are often expected to fill the gaps left behind by collapsing systems – caring for children, the sick, and the elderly while trying to keep families afloat' (United Nations Women, 2026). In this way, women face the barrier of evacuating not just themselves, but many dependents. Further, women face greater obstacles to fleeing disasters and conflicts, as social and cultural sexism in the household often leaves women underprepared for evacuation. (Center for Disaster Philanthropy, 2025). The disproportionate caregiving responsibilities that women take on hinder their ability to evacuate (Center for Disaster Philanthropy 2025; Women for Women International 2024), as it is harder for elderly people, young children, and disabled people to evacuate due to mobility issues and a reduced capacity to look after themselves. This slows down movement and often means they cannot leave their homes immediately, leaving them at greater risk

(Amnesty International 2024).

For example, between 2001 and 2021, Afghan towns were bombed and many civilians were killed by United States forces as part of *Operation Enduring Freedom*, which sought to eradicate Taliban rule after the World Trade Center terrorist attacks (Laub and Maizland, 2022). Domestic policies implemented by the Taliban before the attacks meant only fifteen percent of Afghan women could read and write (Enloe, 2023, p.20), and, because only fourteen percent of Afghan girls and women were engaged in paid work (Enloe, 2023, p.21), women were left entirely financially reliant on their male relatives and without any independence. Afghan women did not have the personal resources or agency to protect themselves and their families. Taliban law dictated that women could not leave the house without a close male relative—a *mahram*—to accompany them (Amnesty International, 2025). When instructed to evacuate by the Americans, this law had tumultuous effects, as women who did not have a *mahram*—an estimated 40,000 widows lived in Kabul at the time—were ‘among the least likely to be able to escape the conflict’ and thus structurally disadvantaged, risking public beatings for leaving the house alone (Human Rights Watch, 2001). Structurally-embedded sexism places women in particularly vulnerable and disadvantaged positions during high-risk evacuations—a problem that IHL, at present, does not address.

REFUGEE CAMPS

The notion that women require differential, favourable treatment to ensure them sufficient, and indeed equal, levels of protection during armed conflict is exemplified by examining the conditions of refugee camps. Customary international humanitarian law mandates that refugees be provided with sufficient living conditions, including ‘shelter, hygiene, safety and nutrition’ (International Committee of the Red Cross, 2015). In practice, this materialises as adequate living space, limited overcrowding, shelter constructed from weather-resistant and safe materials, enough food and water to maintain nutrition, clean water for sanitation, clean and reliable healthcare, and limited crime (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2026). However, refugee camps often fall below these standards. The world’s largest refugee camp, Kuptalong in Bangladesh, houses more than 931,000 people with each person having an average of 10.7 square meters of personal space, well under of the 45 square meter international standard (USA for United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2023; Frelick, 2018). Such crowding heightens the risk of violence and ‘infectious diseases such as malaria, respiratory infections and diarrheal illnesses’ (Alenezy et al., 2025) while limiting access

to basic services, such as clean water, toilets, food, and safe healthcare. The experiences which lead someone to refugee camps are also often traumatising, something which many refugee camps are not equipped to be sufficiently supportive (Alenezy et al., 2025).

Although the conditions within refugee camps are substantively analogous for men and women, and thus they are ostensibly equally protected, the environment of refugee camps directly and indirectly heightens the specific dangers that women face. Limited access to healthcare disproportionately affects women, especially those seeking reproductive and maternal care (United Nations Security Council, 2024, p.4), while food rationing and the threat of malnutrition also adversely affects this group (Global Network Against Food Crises, 2026, pp.41, 50). The ‘Global Acute Malnutrition rate among refugee children and pregnant or breastfeeding women in Kenya [was] above 13 percent’ in 2025 (World Food Programme, 2025). For pregnant women, this is especially dangerous as both the mother and child require increased nutrition to ensure a safe pregnancy and childbirth (Saha and Camacho, 2026). Beyond health risks, there are many safety risks which disproportionately affect women in refugee camps.

Within refugee camps, domestic and sexual violence against women are especially prominent, as there are generally insufficient security measures in place (Sakaria, 2017). Many refugees live in tents, which do not provide suitable protection from the outside and can be easily intruded upon by strangers. Further, the layout of toilets and their scarcity also endangers women. When using the bathroom, women are vulnerable to attack or intrusion (Ross-Sheriff, 2013); studies from refugee camps in Ethiopia show that women are 48 percent less likely to have access to water, sanitation and hygiene than their male counterparts (Nyuot et al., 2026). Many toilets are often far away from living areas and do not have locks or have poor lighting, which dissuades many women from using them (Ross-Sheriff, 2013). Besides heightening their risk of contracting urinary tract infections and other diseases, these conditions also force many women to live in a state of perpetual fear; for many refugees who live in camps for years, this turns into a life of fear and uncertainty.

These specific vulnerabilities are not experienced by men as they are for women. For women, the stress of being a refugee is exacerbated, often referred to as a ‘double burden’ which includes the concerns and fears of all refugees, as well as health complications and the ever-present threat of violence (International Catholic Migration Commission, 2025). The intersection of gender and migration status poses problems

for women that are often under-addressed, especially within the implementation of IHL, since they are seen as just humans, and not women with specific gendered needs. Although in IHL, and often in practice, men and women are afforded the same resources, they do not have the same experiences—yet these discrepancies extend far beyond resource provisions. To resolve this, conditions in refugee camps need to improve to meet women’s needs and relieve the burden of patriarchy. For example, this could look like more and better access to clean and well-stocked toilets with sufficient lighting, safe locks, and proximity to the living quarters. The presence of dedicated security personnel may soothe women’s fears surrounding using personal hygiene facilities at night or when they are alone and thus reduce risk of infection and violence. Additionally, there need to be dedicated female healthcare clinics with professionals who can assist with pregnancy, menstruation, the psychosocial impacts of gender-based violence, and provide a safe space for female health issues. These clinics would benefit from being primarily women-led, using their experiences to guide the development of such resources; this is in line with United Nations (UN) Resolution 1325 (UN, 2000) which re-affirms the importance of having women in decision-making processes across post-conflict settings.

Finally, domestic care burdens should be distributed more evenly among men and women: research shows that women are often the exclusive water and food collectors in refugee camps, putting them at risk of violence (Nyuot et al., 2026). While this is a perpetual problem, even in peacetime, the issue is clearly aggravated in the refugee camp setting. Camps should, where possible, provide quality childcare to support women during motherhood. Not only does this benefit children’s educational development, but it is also rewarding and empowering for women, giving them time to work which provides more social and financial independence. This is particularly beneficial for women-led households. Additionally, measures which increase women’s independence can facilitate the deconstruction of the cultural and behavioural norms which relegate women to the domestic sphere. Women’s empowerment, through a variety of different means, would reduce many of the risks women face in refugee camps. Importantly, this does not constitute an adverse distinction between men and women as it does not disadvantage men, but instead levels the playing field for women and accords them equal protection.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, international humanitarian law must recognise the disproportionate disadvantages and obstacles that women face during conflict, and provide additional

provisions to ensure equal protection under IHL. This article has demonstrated how providing favourable treatment for women should not be considered a form of unfair or adverse distinction towards men, as IHL’s current gender-blindness creates disparate levels of protection in wartime on the basis of gender. IHL reflects androcentric principles and tendencies through the interpretation of its gender-neutral language: men are favoured because IHL is tailored to a male experience of conflict, obscuring patriarchal barriers and obstacles that women encounter. At present, equal treatment does not result in equal protection in the implementation of IHL as demonstrated through the analysis of refugee camps and evacuation notices.

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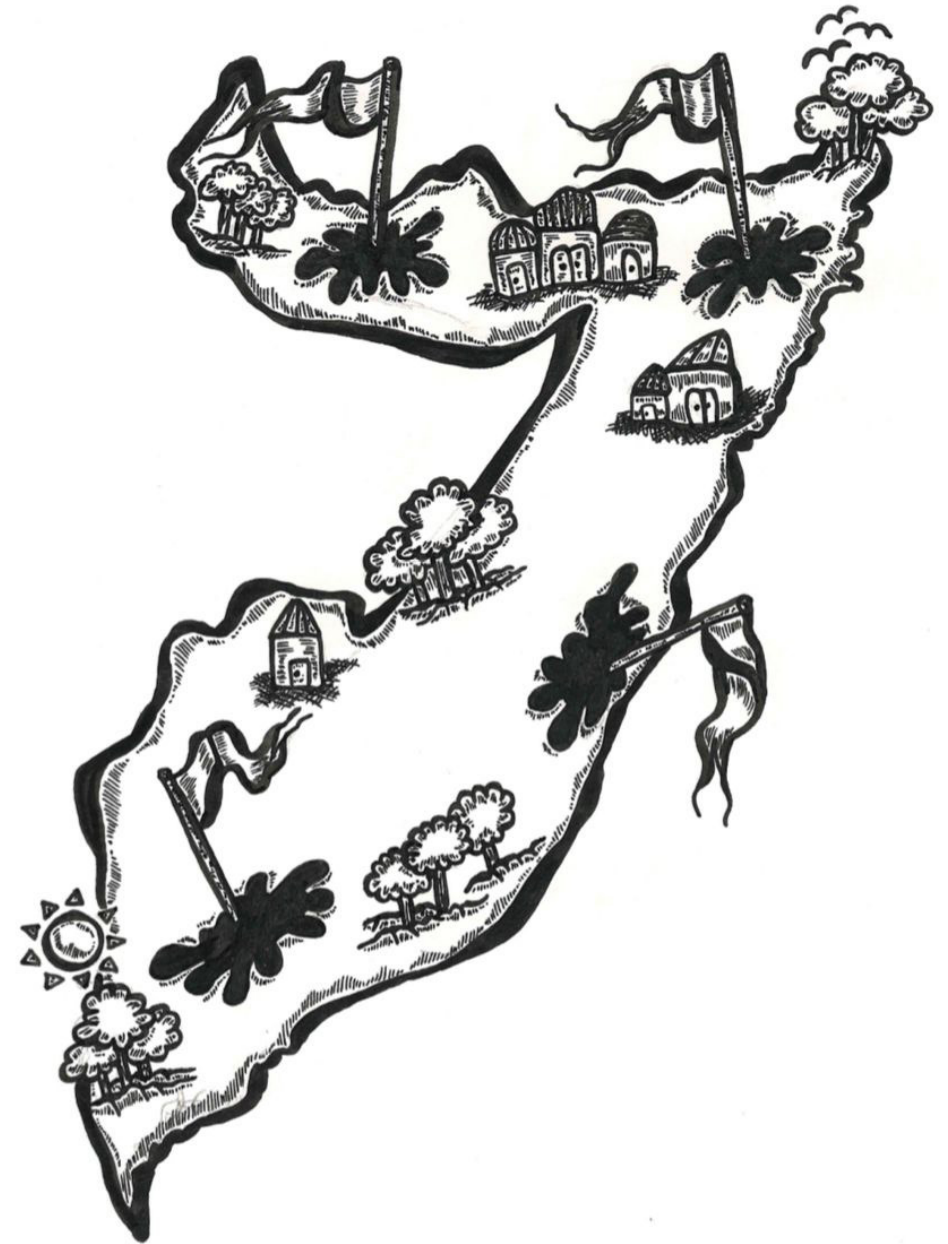
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RETHINKING STABILITY IN THE HORN OF AFRICA

The Case for Recognising Somaliland

by alex daniels
illustration by agatha wren



Somaliland is a self-declared independent state along the Horn of Africa which seceded from Somalia in 1991 along the former colonial border between British Somaliland and Italian Somaliland (Höhne, 2009, p.257). Yet, Somaliland has not been recognised *de jure* by the international community, although a number of states—most notably Ethiopia and the United Arab Emirates—liaise with it as a *de facto* state (Menkhaus, 2018, p.114). Somaliland's prolonged non-recognition reflects a structural misalignment in which its citizens enjoy many, but not all, of the rights and responsibilities of independent statehood. After being stuck in *quasi-state* limbo for 35 years, the issue of recognising Somaliland has recently grown in salience since Israel became the first state to formally recognise Somaliland's independence on 26 December 2025, sending shockwaves

across the region (Mchunu, Domena, and Micah, 2026).

This article posits that recognition should derive from the fulfilment of objective criteria, as prescribed by the declarative theory of recognition (Kilibarda, 2024, p.167). Contrastingly, constitutive recognition, whereby statehood is requisite upon the recognition from existing states, is theoretically flawed and overly static. Nonetheless, proponents of the constitutive framework are correct to emphasise the importance of formal recognition from the international community. Thus, rather than using the declarative framework to assess statehood, it ought to be used to determine recognition. This logic is illustrated with the case study of Somaliland, which has long exceeded the declarative criteria for statehood but has nevertheless been

denied such status by the international community of states. Recognition would enhance Somaliland's security and development, enabling economic growth and reducing regional tensions. To advance this argument, the article first constructs a framework using self-determination and declaratory recognitional legitimacy theory, and engages with the strongest arguments in favour of constitutive recognition, before outlining why recognition through a declarative framework would benefit Somaliland's foreign relations, security, and development.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: THE MONTEVIDEO CONVENTION & THEORIES OF LEGITIMACY

The criteria for recognitional legitimacy diverges between constitutive and

declarative frameworks. Constitutive recognition, the dominant recognitional legitimacy framework within international relations, posits statehood is realised only through recognition by pre-existing states (Crawford, 2006, p.57). Under this view, a territory is not a state until other states recognise it as such, regardless of how it functions in practice. However, constitutive recognition is fundamentally flawed. A state exists in practice even if it is not internationally recognised—for example, Taiwan maintains informal foreign relations and sovereign control of its territory, demonstrating its day-to-day normative practices of independent statehood. Constitutive recognition additionally overlooks how conditioning statehood on formal recognition from the international community makes statehood dependent on power politics rather than objective legal criteria, undermining international law’s supposedly impartial and rules-based nature (Crawford, 2006, pp.126-127).

Conversely, declaratory theorists argue recognition is the acceptance by the international community of an independently pre-existing situation of statehood as defined by certain objective criteria (Kilibarda, 2024, p.167). In other words, statehood exists as a legal fact once the relevant criteria are met; recognition by other states merely acknowledges that fact rather than creating it. Declaratory recognition better reflects how states operate in practice, explains partial and contested recognition, and avoids the constitutive framework’s circularity. The primary method to assess a state’s international legal legitimacy is through the Montevideo Convention criteria: ‘(a) a permanent population; (b) a defined territory; (c) government; and (d) capacity to enter into relations with the other states’ (Convention on the Rights and Duties of States, 1933; Buchanan, 1999, p.49). Once an entity fulfils these criteria, it becomes a state under international law and recognition by other states becomes a mere formality (Convention on the Rights and Duties of States, 1933; Kilibarda, 2024, p.167). Somaliland has possessed all four of these attributes for decades, and South Africa’s government, for example, has declared that Somaliland meets the Montevideo criteria (Bile, 2024, pp.7-8; Hansen and Bradbury, 2007, p.463).

Somaliland satisfies the normative conditions associated with self-determination due to its effective self-governance and its formal declaration of independence from Somalia (Buchanan, 2003, p.206). Self-determination is a core principle of international law denoting ‘the right of a people of an existing State to choose freely their own political system and to pursue their own economic, social, and cultural development’ (Thürer and Burri, 2008). Self-determination proliferated—

with contested effects—during the period of decolonisation from the 1960s onwards (Aka, pp.79, 81). Somaliland entered the Somali Republic—a post-independence union of Italy and Britain’s respective Somaliland colonies—in 1960. Because Somaliland’s peoples were then subjected to genocide and systematic marginalisation under Somalia’s Barre regime (1969-1991) (Mburu, 2001, p.6), Somaliland’s claim-right to secede after Somalia’s collapse is justified because groups who experience state-imposed repression ‘ought to be acknowledged by the international community to have the claim-right to repudiate the authority of the state and to attempt to establish its own political unit’ (Buchanan, 2003, p.207). While this right to ‘attempt’ to establish an independent state is ambiguous, Somaliland has satisfied the normative criteria associated with justified recognition (Buchanan, 2003, p.207).

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The constitutive framework thus actively self-perpetuates the privileging of existing state interests over the rights of peoples who have demonstrably earned independent statehood.

Somaliland has been continuously inhabited by the Isaaq clan for nearly a millennia (Janzen, 2026). Presently, it has a population of approximately six million, demonstrating a clear fulfilment of the first criteria (BBC News, 2024). Additionally, Somaliland fulfils the second Montevideo requirement of territorial definition because not only does Somaliland have a defined territory but its boundaries fall within the scope of *uti posseditis juris*—the principle, derived from Roman law and widely applied in postcolonial international law, that newly independent states should retain the borders of their colonial predecessor (Allen, 2006, p.729). Historically, most successful self-determination movements have possessed territorial integrity while fulfilling the *uti possidetis* criterion (Radpey, 2024, p.66), thus further legitimising Somaliland’s

bid for independence. Somaliland fell under indirect British rule whilst Somalia was administered by Italy, a contrast resulting in a relatively stable Somaliland as well as linguistic, legal, bureaucratic, and financial differences between the two territories (McPherson-Smith, 2021, p.204; McConnell and McMahon, 2010, p.144). While the African Union (AU) opposes postcolonial border transformations due to fears of destabilisation (Tieku and Coffie, 2025, p.802; Rudincová, 2016, p.216), in Somaliland’s case such opposition has paradoxically entrenched instability. Somaliland’s claim is uniquely compatible with *uti possidetis* because it preserves, rather than disrupts, inherited colonial borders between British Somaliland and Italian Somaliland (Carroll and Rajapogal, 1993, p.679). Furthermore, as Eritrean and South Sudanese independence violated *uti possidetis* (Mnyongani, 2008, pp.468, 475) without inflaming secessionist movements in neighbouring states, it is unlikely Somaliland’s independence would (Mesurvey, 2021, p.2). As the AU (2005, p.4) itself has found, ‘the case should not be linked to the notion of “opening a Pandora’s box,” regarding the political impacts of recognition.

One final challenge to Somaliland’s territorial legitimacy concerns the disputed eastern regions of Sanaag, Sool, and Cayn (SSC), which are also claimed by Puntland, an autonomous federal member state within Somalia (Pegg and Kolstø, 2014, p.197). Historically, the existence of territorial disputes has inconsistently impacted a state’s ability to satisfy the Montevideo criteria. In some cases, an ongoing territorial dispute does not inhibit this process, as internationally recognised states often possess contested border regions—for example, Eritrea’s post-independence border conflicts with Ethiopia. The SSC dispute therefore reflects a political contest rather than an absence of territorial definition. Moreover, the persistence of SSC conflict is closely linked to Somaliland’s lack of recognition, which constrains its access to the resources necessary to address local grievances including limited security provision and economic development outside of Hargeisa, Somaliland’s capital (Taylor, 2024). Recognition would therefore be more likely to facilitate stability in the region than undermine it. Despite recent insurgency, Somaliland continues to exercise authority over a defined territorial core consistent with the Montevideo requirements.

Furthermore, Somaliland’s government has consistently been more democratic, effective, and secure than neighbouring states, overachieving Montevideo’s third requirement. In East Africa, Somaliland is second to only Kenya regarding its electoral processes, freedom of expression, rule of law, and individual rights—with Somaliland’s Freedom House (2026) score of 47 out of

100 substantially clearing the likes of Eritrea (three), Somalia (eight), Ethiopia (18), and Djibouti (24). Somaliland is also East Africa’s strongest democracy, with numerous peaceful, competitive, and relatively clean votes throughout the twenty-first century at the presidential, parliamentary, and district levels (The Economist, 2017).

Finally, regarding foreign relations, a number of governments have embraced *de facto* partnerships with Hargeisa. The US, Canada, UK, France, and Norway, among others, maintain informal diplomatic missions in Somaliland, while a range of states including South Africa, Kenya, and Ethiopia acknowledge Somaliland passports (Rudincová, 2016, pp.217–218; Hansen and Bradbury, 2007, p.463). This level of international engagement with Somaliland reflects a clear normative acknowledgement that Hargeisa is the legitimate authority of its territory. As a democratic and effective self-governing *quasi-state* with a permanent population and clear colonially-inherited boundaries, Somaliland meets the requirements for statehood under the declarative theory of recognition, despite being deprived of this title under the constitutive framework.

THE CASE FOR CONSTITUTIVE RECOGNITION: COUNTERARGUMENTS & RESPONSES

Having established Somaliland’s declarative legitimacy, it is necessary to engage with the strongest arguments in favour of the constitutive framework before proceeding to consider the practical case for recognition. Constitutive recognition exerts powerful influence over international diplomatic practice, and its persistence demands explanation rather than dismissal.

The most persuasive argument for constitutive recognition is that it preserves meaningful state leverage over the international system. By conditioning statehood on formal recognition by existing states, constitutive theory gives those states an instrument of geopolitical influence to exercise instead of legal statehood criteria (Price, 2024, p.2), as recognition can be extended as a reward for compliance with international norms, withheld as a sanction against norm violations, or granted strategically to advance national interests. From a realist perspective, this is not a flaw but a tool in the arsenal of statecraft in which countries prioritise their ‘parochial interests’ (Coggins, 2011, p.461). Requiring the consent of existing states before a new one is admitted to the international community may impose a useful threshold, discouraging premature or destabilising secessionism and ensuring that newly recognised states have at least some degree of diplomatic backing. This leverage argument is not merely theoretical,

as Western recognition of Kosovo was tied to its democratic trajectory and regional stability commitments (Caspersen, 2015, p.394).

A second argument is that constitutive recognition better reflects international diplomatic reality. States do not, in practice, extend recognition based purely on objective legal criteria, as some states lacking such characteristics have been recognised nonetheless (Crawford, 2006, p.93). States additionally consider political motives such as strategic interests and alliance commitments when determining whether to recognise a state, which may propagate new states failing to meet basic governance standards (Coggins, 2011, p.436).

These arguments deserve acknowledgement, but they do not withstand scrutiny in Somaliland’s case—and in important respects, they inadvertently support the declaratory position. The leverage argument presupposes that the international system’s existing configuration is worth protecting through the gatekeeping function of constitutive recognition. In Somaliland’s case, however, constitutive non-recognition has not produced a stable or just outcome: it has instead perpetuated a legal fiction in which a functioning democratic state is denied the international standing it has earned, while empowering less democratic and less stable actors in the region. The ‘leverage’ constitutive recognition theoretically affords has not been deployed to encourage Somaliland’s democratic progress—which has occurred regardless—but has instead been absorbed into broader geopolitical competition in ways that harm Somaliland’s citizens.

The realist argument cuts both ways. It is precisely because existing states pursue self-interest that an objective, rule-governed framework for recognition is needed. Without declaratory criteria, recognition becomes wholly arbitrary—a function of whether powerful states find a given entity convenient to acknowledge. Israel’s recognition of Somaliland in December 2025 was widely interpreted as a strategic manoeuvre rather than a principled legal determination (Mchunu, Domena, and Micah, 2026), especially when contrasted with Israel’s failure to recognise Palestine as a state. This paradox reinforces that constitutive recognition, applied inconsistently according to realpolitik, produces exactly the unpredictability and norm erosion that the declaratory framework is designed to prevent. The fact that recognition is often politically motivated in practice is not an argument for the constitutive framework; it is an argument for moving towards a more principled alternative.

Most fundamentally, constitutive

recognition is logically circular in a way that traps functional states in permanent limbo. Paradoxically, under the constitutive model, Somaliland cannot easily acquire the diplomatic capacity to be recognised without first being recognised—it lacks access to international institutions, development financing, bilateral treaty frameworks, and multilateral security arrangements that would enable it to build the very international relationships through which constitutive recognition is granted. The constitutive framework thus actively self-perpetuates the privileging of existing state interests over the rights of peoples who have demonstrably earned independent statehood.

SOMALILAND’S ECONOMY, DEVELOPMENT & SECURITY

It has been demonstrated that Somaliland fulfils the criteria for obtaining statehood, and thus is a state within the declarative framework for state recognition. In spite of this, the prevailing constitutive model for recognition deprives Somaliland’s people of their right to self-determination. This demonstrates the need to adopt the objective declarative test for international recognition, thus ensuring the rights of all individuals are respected without deference to the political proclivities of pre-existing and dominant states. Recognised statehood is positively correlated with economic growth and development, as non-recognition trade costs can substantially harm a given territory’s economy (Choi, 2017). Partially recognised states struggle with integration into international markets, as is exhibited by Kosovo’s struggles with postage, international bank transfers, access to international treaties, and bilateral trade with non-recognising countries (Choi, 2017). Somaliland’s recognition could be used to stabilise macroeconomic policy, support development finance, borrow sustainably, and leverage private investment (Hurre, 2026). Better access to development capital would also enable Somaliland to fund further investment in education, health, and development, countering the ‘brain drain’ issue Somaliland faces due to its lack of economic prospects (Ferragamo and Klobucista, 2025). This creates a self-reinforcing cycle in which government efficiency supports legitimacy, which in turn buttresses further efficacy. In cultivating an international legal system allowing for recognitional change to occur, declaratory legitimacy thus directly benefits marginalised territories by supporting integration into global economic networks through recognition when meeting objective criteria. These global economic connections have proven key to lasting economic growth and development, breaking the cycle of weakened state capacity which empirically hinders recognition.

Furthermore, recognition is positively correlated with ‘the security of a community’, thereby stabilising borders and reducing the risk of external intervention, as was the case of Slovenia and Croatia’s secession from Yugoslavia (Berlin, 2014, p.538). As recognition supports security, formal recognition of Somaliland would derisk potential regional conflict by enhancing security in Somaliland and across the Horn. For example, on 1 January 2024, Ethiopia and Somaliland signed a Memorandum of Understanding, giving Addis Ababa access to Somaliland’s Berbera port in exchange for Ethiopia beginning a process to recognise Somaliland’s independence (Webb, 2024). However, due to Egyptian-Ethiopian tensions over Ethiopia’s new Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, Egypt has signed a security agreement with Somalia to hedge against Ethiopia by training Somali soldiers and sending 10,000 Egyptian troops to Somalia (Asem, 2024). Notably, this dynamic illustrates the constitutive framework operating in practice: Egypt is exploiting Somaliland’s ambiguous international status as a lever in a broader regional power contest, precisely because non-recognition constrains Somaliland’s access to the international legal protections formal statehood would provide. Rather than undermining the case for declaratory recognition, this example reinforces it. Additionally, Somaliland spends more on its military relative to other crucial sectors such as health and education, than it would if it were recognised and could access official multilateral security measures (Pegg and Kolstø, 2014, p.198). More broadly, by providing clear international borders, and coalescing the international community around a state as soon as it meets requisite conditions, declaratory recognition prevents conflict by clarifying potential territorial ambiguities and increasing the cost of potential aggression. In providing a framework permitting recognition when it is practical and beneficial to do so, declaratory legitimacy is thus the framework best suited to support national security, prevent foreign intervention and sovereignty violations, and buttress regional development.

These two aspects represent a bifold argument in favour of applying declaratory legitimacy in the context of states’ recognition decisions. Firstly, adopting a declaratory approach allows the potential benefits discussed above to be realised in practice. Secondly, this demonstrates how recognition based on constitutive legitimacy is self-perpetuating and incoherent in its refusal to permit states to develop. Without recognition, states experience increased difficulty attaining the international resources needed to form the diplomatic capacity to be recognised, perpetuating a cycle of non-recognition that locks perfectly functional states out of statehood. Thus, the international community ought to adopt the declaratory framework—prioritising

objective factors when recognising a given state.

CONCLUSION

Somaliland exemplifies why *quasi-states* seeking to exercise their right of self-determination whilst meeting the Montevideo criteria ought to be recognised internationally through a declarative framework. Under the constitutive framework, recognition can be applied inconsistently due to national interests and geopolitical competition, so adhering to objective and legally codified criteria constitutes a much more useful framework for determining statehood. While constitutive recognition offers existing states a measure of political leverage over new entrants to the international system, this leverage has not been deployed in Somaliland’s case to produce stability or justice; it has instead entrenched a legal fiction serving the interests of powerful states at the expense of Somaliland’s citizens. While declaratory legitimacy provides a crucial contribution with its objective criteria for statehood, it stops short of acknowledging the empirical benefits provided by international recognition. Somaliland’s economic growth, development, and security would all be enhanced by formal recognition, in addition to its normative legitimacy. Recognition would not resolve all regional tensions, it replaces an unsustainable fiction with a more honest and stabilising political reality which supports Somaliland’s economic growth, development, and security. The case of Somaliland therefore exemplifies why declaratory legitimacy theory provides the superior theoretical framework for contested recognition cases around the world, as it pursues a more predictable and rule-governed approach to contested statehood. Given the empirical benefits of formal recognition, declaratory legitimacy should thus be adopted by the international community as the primary framework for assessing such recognition.

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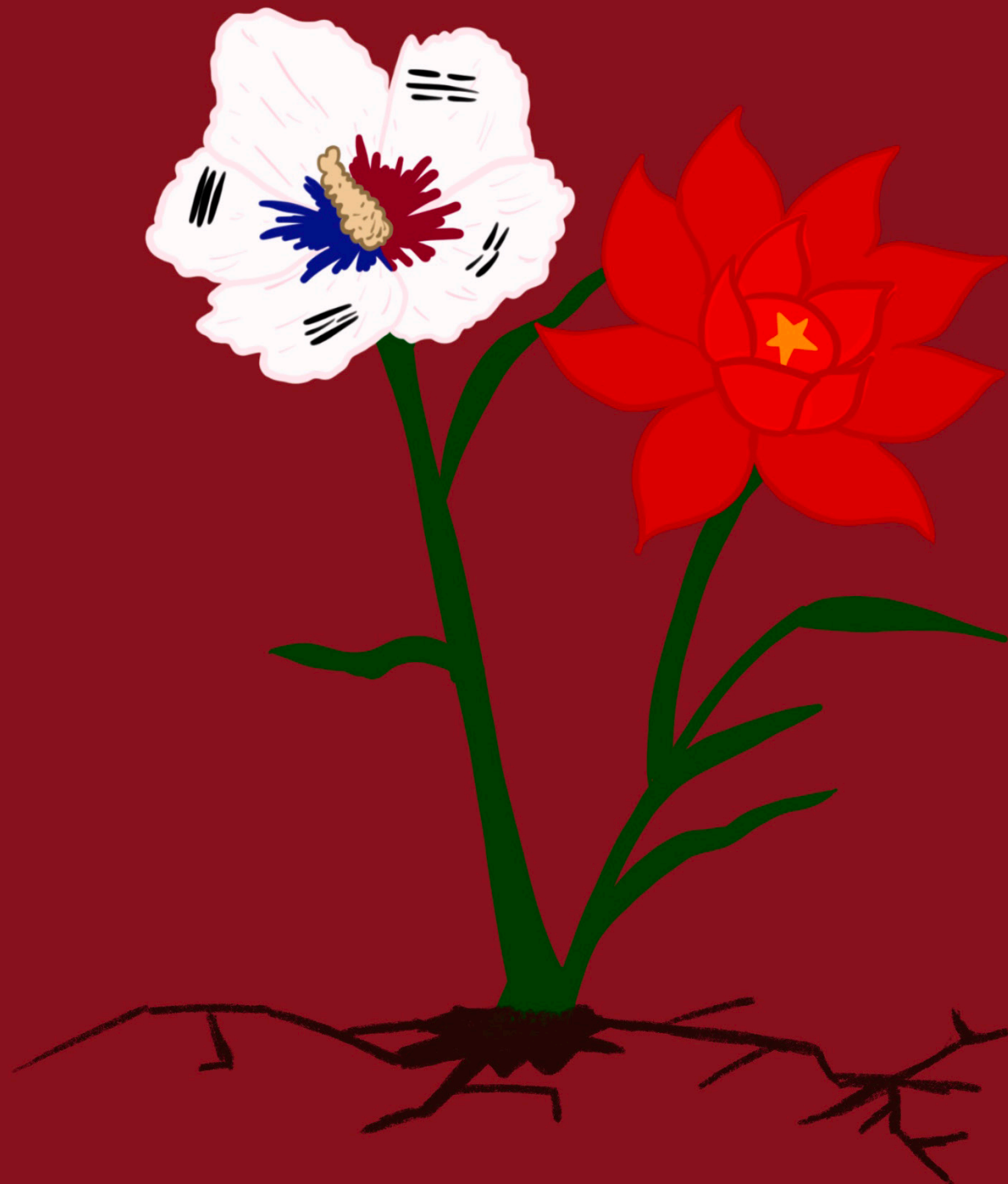
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NATIONALISM AS A CONSTRUCTIVE FORCE

in Anti-Colonial Korea and Vietnam

by **lucy cho**

illustration by **oleksandra zhyhalkina**



The concept of nationalism has often been understood as a divisive and exclusionary force in Western contexts (Vincent, 2013, p.457). However, such negative perceptions bring the risk of simplifying the term and dismissing its positive role in challenging colonial rule. This article examines how anti-colonial nationalism in colonial Vietnam and Korea laid the foundation for cohesive national identities. By focusing on these understudied cases, this article contributes to broader anti-colonial academic discourse. To date, academic debate has largely centred on European colonies in Africa thus leaving non-European imperial powers and colonial excursions in Asia underdiscussed (Breuilly, 1998). As Vietnam was colonised by France and Korea ruled by Japan, studying these two cases allows a comparison of different colonial systems and their relationship with anti-colonial nationalism. This article explores how national identity was fostered in Vietnam through elite westernisation as a result of the French administrative framework, and in Korea, through the print media due to Japan's assimilationist policies. It argues that anti-colonial nationalism helped construct resilient national identity in both cases, but through distinct mechanisms due to the nature of the colonial power. Ultimately, this challenges the view of nationalism as a uniform process, demonstrating instead how it is always context-dependent and best understood through case-specific analysis.

ANTI-COLONIAL NATIONALISM

While some scholars treat nationalism as inherently exclusionary or destabilising (Hirvonen, 2017, p.249), others argue that it functions as a form of collective empowerment in colonial and neo-colonial contexts (Fanon and Farrington, 2002, p.211). In modern Western discourse, nationalism is often viewed as a threatening force, with strong links to racism and anti-immigration policies (Hirvonen, 2017, p.249). This narrow definition is reinforced by the media, positioning nationalism as a synonym for authoritarianism or populism (Bieber, 2018, pp.519–520). These understandings overlook diverse manifestations in anti-colonial movements where exclusion functions differently.

Alongside these popular understandings, divergent academic explanations exist for defining the origins of the nation. Prominently, Benedict Anderson (2006, pp.6–7) defines a nation as an 'imagined community' in which individuals perceive themselves as belonging to a shared political community even if they do not personally know each other. Within this framework, the concept of nationalism can be understood as a social and psychological construct shaped through shared narratives and cultures (Schnee, 2001, p.9). Focusing on alternative functions, Ernest Gellner (1983, p.1), states that nationalism is primarily a political principle arising from industrial

modernisation, where the national unit and political unit should be aligned. Applying this in colonial contexts, nationalism was initially used by colonial powers to align the colonised group's identity with the new colonial government and justify imperialism through claims of superiority to govern and civilise foreign territories (Breuilly, 1993, p.10). Consequently, anti-colonial nationalism functioned through elites and nationalist movements mobilising people through shared histories, cultural traditions, and political grievances to challenge colonial authority and imagine an independent national community (Fanon and Farrington, 2002, p.211).

Unlike nationalisms that emerge within established states, anti-colonial nationalism has frequently developed in communities that were in a social-psychological state before becoming a sovereign nation-state (Go and Watson, 2019, p.36). Understood in this way, nationalism enabled a group of people to see themselves for the first time as one community and led to nationalist movements that claimed the right to self-governance (Lawrence, 2013, p.16). Therefore, anti-colonial nationalism can be defined as a form of nationalist ideology that seeks to become a sovereign political community through resistance to colonial rule and the construction of a shared national identity.

While this does not mean that anti-colonial

nationalism is entirely emancipatory and Western nationalism purely exclusionary, their characters are still distinct. Given that the exclusion practised under anti-colonial nationalism is primarily directed against colonial rulers and their collaborators, as a strategy to achieve liberation, the approach for analysis and understanding in colonial contexts needs to be distinguished (Go and Watson, 2019, p.32). Therefore, going beyond the modern Western discourse on nationalism, later sections of the article focus on the specific nature of anti-colonial nationalism distinct from Western nationalism to apply it in colonial resistance contexts.

Past discourse around anti-colonial nationalism centres on factors which enable nationalism to be a positive force for anti-colonial spirit and liberation. This article discusses two main mechanisms frequently identified in the literature. First, westernisation of elites suggests that anti-colonial nationalism becomes more effective as more colonised elites are exposed to Western institutions and ideals (Go and Watson, 2019, p.58). As nationalism tends to spread from higher to lower levels of society, elites' roles were particularly important in sparking movements (Breuilly, 1998, p.158). Consequently, when colonised elites were westernised through education, but later faced discrimination when trying to participate in bureaucracies, their resentment, combined with political awareness, sparked strategic mobilisation of anti-colonial nationalist movements (Breuilly, 1998, p.157). This produces a top-down enactment of anti-colonial nationalism, as seen in Vietnam. The second factor is the importance of print media, a medium with historical links to 'literary languages' in earlier nationalist discourses (Breuilly, 2013, p.153). Printed media in local languages, without censorship, helps form one cultural and national identity by creating solidarity. As these ideas are repeated and diffused widely, their image of 'imagined communities' solidifies and transforms into collective consciousness (Anderson, 2006, p.92). This fosters a community-driven anti-colonial nationalism, as seen in Korea. Together, this framework demonstrates how anti-colonial nationalism can work as a political mechanism in forming national identity.

METHODOLOGY

Using this theoretical framework, this article examines the mechanism of how national identity was preserved, depending on the structure of the colonial power. For Vietnam, given that France was the coloniser, Western bureaucracies were established, suggesting that elite westernisation was the driving mechanism by which anti-colonial nationalism was stimulated. Consequently, westernised elites acted as primary agents in Vietnam to construct an effective national

identity to resist colonial power. In contrast, the elite westernisation factor is predicted to be inapplicable in Korea since Japan, Korea's coloniser, is a non-Western power that used a direct rule excluding colonised elites from the system. Rather, in Korea, the print media mechanism played a role in stimulating anti-colonial nationalism, allowing the preservation of its national identity—notably its cultural identity, in the face of Japanese assimilationist policies. Therefore, analysing these cases deductively through this framework demonstrates that, while nationalism preserved national identity, the specific mechanism depended on the unique colonial context. This finding challenges dominant, Eurocentric views that tend to reduce nationalism to a guaranteed negative force.

VIETNAM

Anti-colonial nationalism in Vietnam fostered a unified national identity against the French strategy of territorial fragmentation, representing a significant turning point from the way in which Vietnam came under French colonial rule in the late nineteenth century. For instance, the Viet (Kinh) group comprised a majority of 87 percent of the Vietnamese population, while there were also minority ethnic groups, including Thai and Nung (Thuy, 2025, p.3314). As these groups were a small marginalised minority, they faced historical discrimination from the majority, making minority groups initially hesitant to join the dominant revolutionary forces (Pelley, 2002). This unequal power dynamic was thus vulnerable to exploitation by the French government as political leverage. In fact, they did so systemically by collecting data on each ethnic group in Vietnam and adopting differentiated policies, such as giving more autonomy to Thai groups to counter the Viet Minh, the main liberation force (Pelley, 2002). Consequently, while anti-colonial resistance predated the rise of nationalism, they were often limited to several regions and could not become widespread (Khanh, 1971, p.770). Hence, forming a cohesive national identity was crucial to closing these ethnic gaps and dismantling discrimination faced by minorities, which colonial powers used as political leverage.

Such an inclusive national identity was formed as the elites in Vietnam were westernised. The younger Vietnamese generation, who later formed leadership of the Viet Minh and Indochinese Communist party (ICP), were educated in the French system, as part of a French policy of using reliable French-speaking Vietnamese workers for administration and local bureaucracy (Anderson, 2006, p.88). The competition for entry into French system schools was often high, as this promised a better future and the prospect of participation in the bureaucracy (Anderson, 2006, p.89). However, as those who

received French education entered into such roles, they faced discrimination, resulting in frustration that motivated them to leave the bureaucracy and lead nationalist movements (Breuilly, 1998).

An early example of this elite mobilisation is the speech by Nguyễn An Ninh in 1923, which noted Vietnam's relative lack of intellectuals compared with other countries and the vulnerability to foreign domination this created (Pham, 2020, p.522). The speech was made to improve and motivate the coming generations to learn from various sources and find new ideals (Pham, 2020). While such early rhetoric reflected elite intellectual reform rather than a cross-ethnic national project, it gave individuals the sense of responsibility to learn and contribute to the common goal of rebuilding their own nation, laying the foundation for wider mobilisation later on as seen by the ICP leadership's approach. Since elite westernisation meant that these elites gained experience with colonial institutions, where they were aware of the French colonial strategy that aimed to exploit ethnic differences, they knew that effective resistance against this would require coordination across different social groups. Hence, during the watershed May 1941 Eighth Plenum, the party's official resolution directly identified the national issue as ethnic groups turning against each other and thus stated that fighting against imperialism required all populations to move past class divisions and consciously unite (Vu, 2016, p.94). This even allowed them to hold the people's national congress that included people from different ethnicities and social classes, with representatives sent from all three regions (Khanh, 1971, pp.761, 772). These events demonstrate that key nationalist organisations such as the Viet Minh force and the ICP, led by westernised elites, were able to promote Vietnamese civic identity and mobilise people at scale to reach liberation. Therefore, elite westernisation served as the primary mechanism for anti-colonial nationalism in Vietnam by creating a civic identity that united diverse social and ethnic groups even under the threat of colonialism.

KOREA

In contrast to Vietnam, where nationalism formed a civic identity to overcome ethnic division, Korea demonstrates how colonial assimilation policies led to anti-colonial nationalism fostering cultural identity. Unlike the French rule in Vietnam permitting a degree of Vietnamese elites to join the administration, Japanese power functioned through highly centralised direct rule, where bureaucratic inclusion for Koreans was minimal (Chae, 2010, p.402). Due to this exclusion, the factor of elite westernisation did not lead to anti-colonial nationalism constructing national identity in the same manner as it did in Vietnam. Instead, as they

faced colonial strategies like the 'yellow race' theory, where the Japanese regime justified the occupation of Korea by claiming shared racial and historical ties, Korean elites strove to find ways to resist assimilationist policies through cultural preservation (Cumings, 2021, p.3). For instance, scholars like Sin Chae-Ho challenged these imperial narratives. By tracing the lineage back to the mythical founder Dangun, he provided an ethnic identity that made Korean identity inherently separate from the Japanese and resilient against assimilation. Through all these writings by nationalist intellectuals, Korean history was framed as distinct and continuous, providing foundations for a shared national identity. Therefore, the strict direct rule of the Japanese regime led to anti-colonial nationalism operating differently as the elites identified the reassertion of Korea's distinct history and culture as the priority.

While the elite's efforts to preserve Korean history served as the foundation for a culture-based national identity, the broader consolidation of a unified national identity required transmitting this knowledge to the masses (Verma, 2021, p.228). As seen by the March First Independence Movement of 1919, print media helped mobilise and organise it into a large-scale uprising, where more than two million people participated across 1,500 gatherings (Corby, 2011). Nonetheless, the mass arrests of participants during this movement demonstrated that spreading elite knowledge of Korean history and the concept of national identity could not be sustained solely by underground networks and activism, which carried a severe risk of infiltration and were too hidden to foster lasting public solidarity. Consequently, print media like the *Tonga Ilbo* played a major role in disseminating national identity to the wider population since it could unify the scattered willingness of resistance into a single imagined community, as it meant that geographically distant individuals read similar narratives regarding Korean history at the same time (Caprio, 2009, p.175). The success of solidifying this national identity was possible also because there were efforts to increase literacy of peasants, alongside activities like communal reading that allowed the masses to access these ideals. For instance, networks of informal private night schools called *yahak* and social education classes (*sasŏlgangsŭphoe*) provided literacy instruction and distributed text to practice with to build the reading capacity of the working class (Lee, 2023). There were also communal reading practices, where literate elders would regularly read articles at gatherings, which allowed newspaper copies to circulate through entire neighborhoods and reach hundreds of residents (Schmid, 2002, p.52). Such background, combined with print media, bypassed the challenge of individual illiteracy and allowed newspapers to transform what would have been an isolated, elite information into a shared

knowledge for peasants, actively uniting people previously divided by regional boundaries and lack of formal education. Thus, print media allowed nationalist ideals and cultural discourse to spread beyond intellectual circles and translated these into a shared cultural identity among the broader population.

COMPARING MECHANISMS OF ANTI-COLONIAL NATIONALISM IN VIETNAM AND KOREA

Comparison between the cases of Vietnam and Korea illustrates that the mechanisms through which nationalism solidifies national identity are distinct, as they are influenced by the structure of colonial power. Although some scholars such as

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While nationalism preserved national identity, the specific mechanism depended on the unique colonial context. This finding challenges dominant, Eurocentric views that tend to reduce nationalism to a negative force.

Ernest Gellner (1983) propose general theories that seek to explain nationalism through broad, uniform processes linked to industrialisation, this article demonstrates that a single theory cannot account for the preservation of national identity across different colonial contexts, having evaluated the variables of elite westernisation and print media. For instance, the variable of elite westernisation provides a convincing explanation for the formation of civic national identity in Vietnam, but not for Korea, since bureaucratic participation was restricted under direct rule. In contrast to Vietnam, where westernised elites were able to construct a civic national identity, westernisation of elites in Korea led to the decline of nationalist movements that were based on Western values since they were affected by the failure of western liberalism and fascism globally during the 1930s and 1940s (Chae, 2010, p.400). This suggests that for elite westernisation to foster national identity, the colonial regime must provide a minimum level of administrative

participation, since it is the initial inclusion of colonial elites within the administration, followed by their later exclusion, that motivates their transition into nationalist leadership and equips them with the insight needed to build a civic identity that counters colonial strategies. Therefore, the variable of elite westernisation does not apply in every case, as it becomes less relevant when this process is blocked by an assimilationist policy.

Conversely, the print media variable provides a strong explanation for the mechanism of anti-colonial nationalism in Korea, while playing a more secondary role in Vietnam. In Vietnam, the French state deliberately fragmented the territory into three separate administrative zones and used divisive policies involving ethnic minorities to prevent a unified anti-colonial front (Pelley, 2002). This made political networks like the Viet Minh and the ICP more necessary to overcome geographic and political fractures, with print media serving as an auxiliary tool for the party. In contrast, print media was not only an essential tool for defending Korean heritage against the existential threat of Japanese assimilation but also effective due to Korea's monoethnicity, where it is easier to create a unified imagined community against the colonisers without the risks of internal discrimination and fragmentation (Chae, 2010). This was also possible in Korea because print media was paired with night schools and communal reading practices that delivered nationalist ideals to illiterate working class citizens. Hence, the variable of print media better explains Korea's example than the Vietnam case due to their respective colonial context. Taken together, the comparison shows that elite westernisation and print media work differently depending on the context, as the variable of elite westernisation can be ineffective under direct colonial rule, whereas print media plays a more central role under assimilationist regimes.

The application of the theoretical framework allows us to check whether factors widely discussed as mechanisms of anti-colonial nationalism also apply to cases that have been previously underdiscussed, especially as past anti-colonial research has largely been based on a narrow set of examples, such as British West Africa, Belgian Congo, and India (Breuilly, 1998). The comparison of the two cases shows how these variables do not apply uniformly across colonial contexts, as the mechanism of how anti-colonial nationalism operates varies depending on the different struggles that states face under different colonial rules. Recognising this variation allows for a more nuanced understanding of how nationalism operated under different forms of colonial occupation and helps explain why similar anti-colonial nationalist movements aimed at fostering national identity can develop through different mechanisms.

While this study has presented elite westernisation in Vietnam and print media in Korea as clear, linear mechanisms that foster national identity, limitations should be acknowledged since other important factors were at play. For example, the emergence of a Vietnamese civic national identity was not achieved solely through elite westernisation, but was also driven by peasant movements, Confucian resistance, anti-tax protests, and external geopolitical conditions. In particular, the Japanese coup d'etat in March 1945 created a major power vacuum as French authority collapsed and the Japanese were not yet in full control, making it significantly easier for the Viet Minh and ICP to expand their power (Khanh, 1971, p.774). Nonetheless, this does not undermine the core argument, as elite westernisation remained a foundational factor that cultivated political leadership and ideological coherence necessary to reduce ethnic divides and coordinate nationwide resistance. Therefore, while it is important to acknowledge that elite westernisation and print media were not the sole factors at play, they still provided the essential structure and direction that contributed to solidifying a unified national identity.

CONCLUSION

The comparison between Vietnam and Korea demonstrates two distinct trajectories of anti-colonial resistance. In Vietnam, civic identity was facilitated by westernised elites that were capable of uniting people, while cultural identity constructed in Korea through print media, protected national identity against assimilation policies. Therefore, approaching nationalism ‘against the grain’ reveals that anti-colonial nationalism can construct resilient national identity through various mechanisms that respond to specific pressures created by different colonial regimes.

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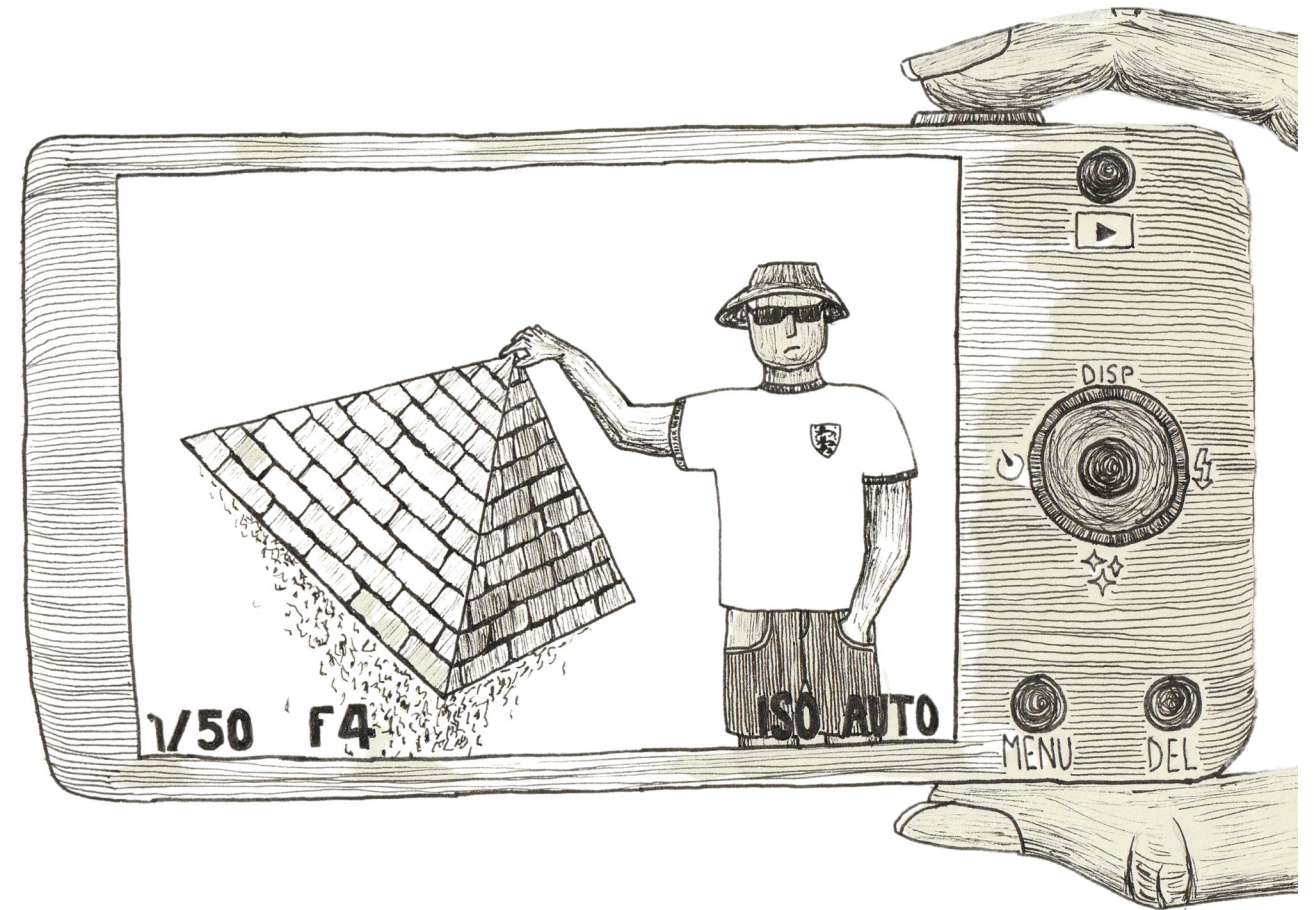
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PHOTOGRAPHY & THE PARALLEL EMPIRE

A Postcolonial Evaluation of
Orientalist Iconography

by **giulia mazar corcos**

illustration by emily fitzpatrick



Photography played a pivotal role in shaping the imaginative geography of colonial empires, with French governmental institutions such as the *Institut d'Égypte* and the *Société Orientale* propagating the production of popular iconography of the Middle East and then disseminating it through imperial society (Behdad, 2023, p.13). Whether staged or carefully selected, these photographs were viewed as rapidly consumable 'living visual documents to prove an imaginary reality' (Woodward, 2003, p.363). As a cultural product of nineteenth century Western Europe, the medium sustained themes, and visualities, and practices were shaped by colonial structures of power it evolved alongside.

Postcolonial thought has transformed the formerly imperial practice of photography, which presented alleged historical fact, into a site for interrogating how cultural dynamics, imaginative geographies, and power structures are portrayed in colonial representation. Postcolonial discourse has thus redefined the role of photography; where it previously functioned to 'remove the impediments of space and time, and to bring the intellects of civilized lands to bear' upon scientific and sociological discourse (Birrell, 1996, p.120), it is now understood as a type of subjective depiction. This allows photography to be studied for its portrayal

of wider historical and cultural settings. Considering the region maintained a privileged position within European colonial imaginaries and visual culture throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Middle East provides a crucial example of photography employed as a tool to perpetuate colonial stereotypes and legitimise colonial practices. In the colonial context, the region frequently subsumed under the imperial construct of the 'Orient', a term used to denote a geographically and culturally constructed space distinct from the West. The term is thus retained here not as a neutral descriptor of the geographical region, but rather as a means of exhibiting the colonial language and conceptual frameworks employed to represent the Middle East in imperial practices of photography.

Engaging with the history of photography through a postcolonial lens highlights how pictorial tradition is governed by a 'scopic regime', or a culturally-specific viewpoint which comes to dominate a historical period and defines how the world is understood (Getch Clarke, 2005, p.50). While beneficial for highlighting the Indigenous traditions marginalised by the colonial project (Pedri-Spade, 2017, p.107), the application of the post-colonial framework to Orientalist photography has become the singular dominant frame for analysing Middle

Eastern photography. The overapplication of this framework, as this article argues, comes at the expense of more diverse, detailed viewpoints, including those which prioritise the agency of Indigenous communities in redeveloping photographic practices that authentically represent their cultures and lifestyles. This argument is developed first through a theoretical framework drawing on Said's *Orientalism* (1978), followed by analysis of how the post-colonial framework has previously been used to highlight Orientalisation in photography. The article then applies the post-colonial lens to deepen our understanding of how photographs constructed a Eurocentric scopic regime through analysing two photographs: Du Camp's *Cour des Bubastites et entrée principale de la salle hypostyle* (1850) and Zaganaki's (1890–1900) *Femme Arab avec le Yachmak*. This article attempts to ameliorate the over-dominance of the post-colonial lens by subsequently examining the comparatively underexposed role of Indigenous photographic self-representation and the manner in which local photography production functioned as a medium of colonial resistance within the region.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Although now used colloquially, the origins of the term 'Middle East' are colonial and feed

into narratives which systematise images of the ‘Orient’. These dynamics are theorised by Edward Said in *Orientalism* (1978), which helped establish the foundations of postcolonial thought. His concept of ‘Orientalism’ refers to the Western systems of thought and scholarship which create and perpetuate reductive representations of the East, facilitating and legitimising European dominance (Said, 1978, p.184). These oppressive practices situate spaces and inhabitants of Southwest Asia and North Africa (SWANA) into fundamentally degrading categories, seeking to eroticise, exoticise, and ‘other’ these populations. Evolving postcolonial discourse has increasingly called for greater nuance regarding the broad application of Said’s Orientalist theory to the historical uses of photography in attempts to foreground Indigenous pictorial resistance against overgeneralising claims (Pedri-Spade, 2017, p.109). Said’s postcolonial framework highlights how Orientalist representations are not truthful ‘depictions of the Orient’ but constitute the backbone of a ‘relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony’ (Said, 1978, p.5). Said’s framework conceptualises representation as a site of power, therefore allowing photography to be examined as an active contributor to the production of colonial knowledge and discourse rather than passive mirrors of historical truths. In the colonial context, scopic regimes were used by colonisers to portray conquered lands as culturally hegemonic, transforming those who were allowed to be seen into fictionalised clichés (Gregory, 2003, p.224). These stereotypes manifest the ‘othering’ of Indigenous populations, while positioning a Western colonial lens as the default perspective (Woodward, 2003, p.363). When Indigenous peoples were shown, portrayals encompassed deliberate fabrications, operating on what grew to be conventional Orientalist iconography, mixing racism and sexism to form ‘inexplicit pornography’ (Gregory, 2003, p.210). In doing so, scopic regimes highlight the ways in which visual representation structured spectatorship, and thus reinforced assumptions of cultural difference and social hierarchy. Active efforts to subvert such modes of representation occur within the production of counternarratives—resistant images published by Indigenous populations—aiming to disrupt colonial categorisation.

THE PREDATORY LOGIC OF ORIENTALIST PHOTOGRAPHY

Despite Said’s (1978, p.34) focus on literary texts in his construction of Orientalism,

photography can be used to construct what he defines as imaginative geography: ‘the Orient’s construction by Europeans as a set of complex and contradictory ideas and images of the East’. This postcolonial discourse contextualises photography within the broader scheme of colonial expansion. It challenges the assumption that Europe is the predominant source of the modern by exposing forms of repression, violence, and ambivalence immersed in dominant narratives (Chakrabarty, 2000, p.43). Drawing on Said’s framework, Orientalist photography from the colonial era is characterised by the way in which it depopulates landscapes of its inhabitants by presenting spaces unimpeded by the presence of their Indigenous citizens. It then simultaneously portrays a region on the brink of destruction, which requires



FIGURE 1:THÈBES. PALAIS DE KARNAK. COUR DES BUBASTITES ET ENTRÉE PRINCIPALE DE LA SALLE HYPOSTYLE (DU CAMP, 1850)

saving. Working together, these methods of representation justify the colonial project to imperial citizens (Behdad, 2023, p.24). Such visualities erase Indigenous agency by denying inhabitants the capacity to appear as active historical and political actors. Susan Sontag’s (2008) framework illuminates the role of colonial photography in constructing colonised peoples and landscapes as ‘types’—or embodiments of colonial stereotypes and perceptions of the region. Photography performs this function by removing populations from their own histories and repositioning them into a taxonomy where they are examples of an exotic and timeless Orient (Gregory, 2003, p.224). Sontag (2008, p.15) highlights the predatory nature of photography, writing:

[T]o photograph people is to violate them, by

seeing them as they never see themselves, by having knowledge of them that they can never have; it turns people into objects that can be symbolically possessed.

The notions of predatory appropriation echo the colonial gaze: perpetuating external fantasies of the existence of a Middle East while maintaining asymmetries in structures of knowledge and power. By removing the narratives of local populations from photographs and seeking their substitution with Western normativity, systems of colonial control are naturalised as necessary and beneficial tools.

Sontag (2008, p.36) displays the photographer as a conscious actor which ‘chooses oddity, chases it, frames it, develops it, titles it,’ sustaining the one-directional role of the ‘sentimental spectator’ in commercialising predatory visuals. Orientalist photography thus reinforced a global politics of history where the Western consumer remains a complicit spectator in the distribution of colonial power. In exploiting landscapes and people under the predatory gaze of Orientalist photography for the means of distribution, asymmetries in power are reproduced, removing both Indigenous narratives and self-conceptions from popular representation.

IMAGINATIVE GEOGRAPHIES & THE SELECTION OF WHO IS PICTURED

Art historian Linda Nochlin’s (2002, p.74) analysis of Orientalised visual culture highlights the process of selective omission and concealment which naturalised the surveying, critiquing, and fantasising of Islamic societies, thereby presenting colonial perspectives as objective and authoritative. Nochlin (2002, p.70) argues against the apparent realism of Orientalist imagery which conceals its ideological work by projecting a carefully constructed visual discourse of fantasy rather than a truthful record of the region’s reality. Within Western modes of representation, when portraying SWANA, photographers relied on the emphasis of imagined realities that consisted of void landscapes and the notion of a belated Orient, as depicted in Figure 1. For example, SWANA geographies are frequently presented as empty spaces unimpeded by the presence of Indigenous citizens, virtually disappearing into the masonry and rubble (Figure 1). Depopulating landscapes of their inhabitants was used as a justification for an expanding empire (Solomon-Godeau, 1981, p.100); these visually void landscapes contributed to a sense of belatedness, construing the Middle East as needing to be rescued. This act transformed photography into a site of advocacy for cultural rescue.

As these practices relied on the impression that what was picturesque was also nearing destruction, the threat of disappearance was imposed not exclusively on landscapes but on cultures themselves (Nochlin, 2002, p.74). Building upon Nochlin’s insight, Ali Behdad (2013, p.22) argues that the sense of antiquity conveyed in Orientalist images visually rescues the remnants of the Orient’s remains, which were photographed to appear threatened by impending destruction. Thus, only when there is an impression of imminent loss projected on to the photographed cultures and landscapes can nostalgia be mobilised to transform these scenes as subjects of delight fabricating the belated Orient. Through this use of photography, colonial powers erased Indigenous identity and depicted the partial and continued deterioration of Indigenous presence as a means to superficially romanticise and justify intervention. A postcolonial reading of these photographs illustrates how narratives of void landscapes and the belated Orient are constructed by imperialist economies and Orientalist stereotyping.

ORIENTALIST STEREOTYPING & COUNTER-REPRESENTATION

Images which reinforced Orientalist stereotypes were not exclusive to the representation of landscapes, but extended to the portrayals of Indigenous populations as hypersexual and exotic beings. Colonialist photography regulated populations through ‘the epistemology of the veil’; by capturing and fixing native ‘types,’ photographs sought to ‘unveil’ the mystifying and covertly sexual Orient. These portrayals ensured their subordinated status based on the dominant knowledge regime of Western modernity. Women in particular were frequently characterised as curious, exotic, and amusing characters (Gregory, 2003, p.196). Such characteristics of Orientalist

representation are evident within the works of the Zangaki Brothers who were a set of photographers in nineteenth century Ottoman Egypt producing traveler photograph albums and postcards for the growing tourist trade within the Suez Region (Cavatorta, 2006, p.19). The brothers’ works most commonly circulated as albumen prints with a French title preceded by its plate number, suggesting its design for the French market. Zangaki’s photograph entitled ‘Femme Arab avec le Yachmak’ (Figure 2) depicts a woman wearing a religious *yashmak* purposefully incorrect, exposing her cheeks, nose, and breasts. The sexually explicit nature of the photograph makes no reference to women in a traditional setting, but rather utilised the veil as a dehumanising garment to create body parts in isolation to be objectified and consumed. In this case, photography normalised opportunities of possessing the eroticised Other by transforming photographs of the SWANA woman into cultural clichés. Such representations were surrounded by the mystery and curiosity of ‘types’ of Indigenous women available for European voyeuristic viewing (Behdad, 2023, p.27). This notion of eroticism went beyond women, as heterosexual male subjects were confronted as the ‘Eastern despot,’ embodying sexual excessiveness and tyrannical tendencies (Beaulieu and Roberts, 2002, p.8). As postcolonial perspectives establish, the photographic typology and exoticisation of those indigenous to SWANA established itself as a colonising gesture which sought not only the preservation, but also the policing and regulation of the colonial order (Gregory, 2003, p.225). In doing so, the essence of culture, religion, and the personhood of the colonised could be known and possessed by both the coloniser and the populations of the metropole who functioned as active participants in the production and reproduction of these depictions in physical form. At the same time, this does not necessarily render the photographed as passive participants in the regime.



FIGURE 3: STUDIO PORTRAIT OF MODELS WEARING TRADITIONAL CLOTHING FROM THE PROVINCE OF SURİYÉ (SYRIA), OTTOMAN EMPIRE (SEBAH, 1873, P.279)

INDIGENOUS PHOTOGRAPHY PRODUCTION

While assessing the history of photography within SWANA from a postcolonial standpoint highlights the disparities existing within representation, it risks downplaying or entirely obscuring the role of Indigenous photography production as a form of active resistance, threatening to reproduce the issue it seeks to critique. The impact of postcolonial debates, particularly following Said’s Orientalism, redirected pictorial history towards critiques of colonial photography and the Orientalist gaze. Although this intervention has been essential to the uncovering of the politics of representation, postcolonialism’s sustained focus on colonial photographic practices and its enduring legacies may inadvertently reproduce representational asymmetries by positioning European photographers as the principal actors in the region’s photographic history. Recognising Indigenous agency in shaping how they were presented subverts the notion that late-nineteenth-century photographic representations of the Middle East were entirely homogeneous, but rather ‘created individual stylistic responses to the complexities of the real world’ (Woodward, 2003, p.363).

For example, the Sebah family, proprietors of a prominent commercial photography studio in the Ottoman Empire, depicted local societies and inhabitants as modern citizens, destabilising common representations of a static Middle East and focusing on groups of individuals in public space (Woodward, 2003, p.366). This emphasised connections to larger society and established a counter-narrative which attempted to showcase the genuine conditions of the subjects’ lives with dignity for those pictured (Figure 3; Woodward, 2003, p.363). Pascal Sebah

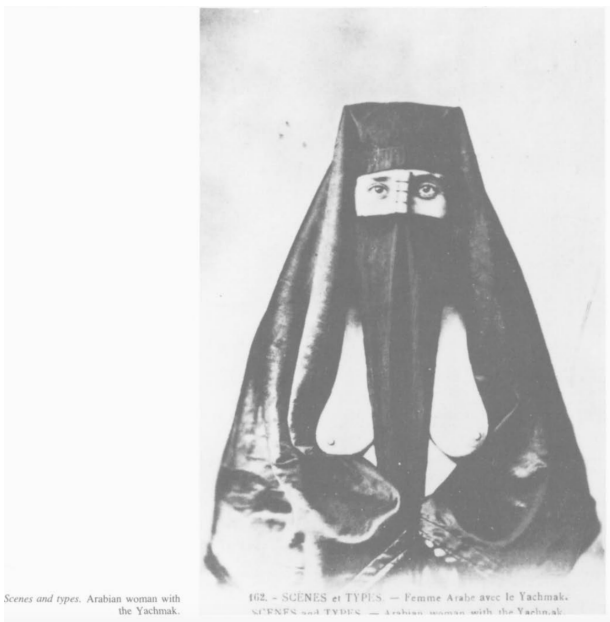


FIGURE 2: FEMME ARAB AVEC LE YACHMAK (ZANGAKI, 1890–2000)

was commissioned by the Ottoman Court to photograph the varying folk costumes of the empire's provinces for the Ottoman Exhibition in Vienna's 1873 World Fair, taking form in a photography album titled *Elbise-i Osmaniyye*, which contained 320 pages of text and 74 phototypes of men and women in regional dress (Hyde Nolan, 2022). The album was divided into three sections organised by geographic region, including Turkish European territories, Aegean Mediterranean territories, and African Asian territories, containing all Ottoman provinces distinguished by size and region. Each photograph is accompanied by a short text which chronicles regional histories and provides a structured lens through which to view each local Ottoman costume (Launay and Hamdi Bey, 1873). The photo from the *Elbise, Studio portrait of models wearing traditional clothing from the province of Suri`yè (Syria), Ottoman Empire* (Figure 3), demonstrates the degree of actorness provided to the photographed subjects, demonstrated in the inclusion of fashion regional to Damascus such as the *tantur*, worn by the woman in the center, and the *qabqab*, worn by the woman on the left. Sebah's visual contributions to the *Elbise-i Osmaniyye* functioned to transport both Ottoman dress and a multi-cultural Ottoman social body into the world, positioning Indigenous culture and tradition away from popular Orientalised perspectives such as those of the Zangaki brothers (Figure 2). In doing so, Sebah's work counters the assumed monolithic nature of Middle Eastern photography, revealing the diverse modes of visual representation existing within Indigenous photography production. Art historians Beaulieu and Roberts (2002, p.3) underscore that 'Orientals', particularly women, deserve recognition as producers of resistant images, rather than mute objects of representation. As Roberts (2002, p.190) contends, women were actively engaged in the production of an 'aesthetically hybrid self-representation' by exerting control over their commissioned portraits which blended contemporary European fashions with traditional Islamic aesthetics. By intervening in the compositional process of portrait making women reflected their individual taste, resulting in portraits which bore little resemblance to the erotic and exoticised harem painting popularised in Western Orientalist tradition (Beaulieu and Roberts, 2002, p.16). This reflected local cultural considerations which challenged the values of Western artists, inverting the usual power dynamic and lending influence over compositional processes to women (Beaulieu and Roberts, 2002, p.8). The postcolonial perspective initially served as a critical tool uncovering the ideological foundations of Orientalist photography. However, as discourse surrounding Said's work has evolved, such frameworks have advanced to become a means to identify and value resistance and negotiation in photographic history, functioning as a departure point to interrogate the complicity

between knowledge and power (Behdad, 1994, p.4).

CONCLUSION

The introduction of postcolonial perspectives, largely driven by the broad influence of Said's *Orientalism*, fundamentally reshaped the manner in which the history of photographic practices were interpreted and understood. This shift recognised photography as a process which actively produces interconnected networks of objects, power, and social relations. By shifting the understanding of photography from merely a technical process, to an active production of social and visual objects, postcolonialism reframes the staged realities of photographs. Modern Western usage of Oriental photography intentionally creates a distance between SWANA populations and landscapes, thus creating and perpetuating Orientalist narratives that portray the region negatively. This effectively structures the notions of emptiness and belatedness which belong to the eroticised and exotic inhabitant, functioning as a justification for the expansion of colonial empire and thought. The application of postcolonial theory to pictorial history however 'risks overlooking the concrete efforts to achieve representation that were, in fact, deployed by an otherwise subaltern resistance' (Feldman, 2013, p.154). Recognising Indigenous photography production, such as the work of the Sebah family, demonstrates the heterogeneous nature of the region's visual representation and the capacity for agency Indigenous individuals had in utilising photography as a tangible form of resistance to colonial narratives. The shift in dominant narratives demonstrates Orientalist photography not as a fact of Southwest Asia and North Africa, but instead as a tool of colonial appropriation and a perpetuator of Western knowledge systems.

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MONOPOLISING MEMORY & BUILDING NEW WALLS

Lessons from the Emergence
of Totalitarianism in Eritrea &
Turkmenistan

by owen longstreth

illustration by lucy barrett



In the 1990s, Saparmurat Niyazov of Turkmenistan and Isias Afwerki of Eritrea became the first leaders of their newly-independent states and reversed global anti-authoritarian trends by establishing totalitarian systems of government. Like all totalitarian states, they act without limits, transforming education into indoctrination, and adding regimentation to people's lives (Gray, 2023, pp.87-90, 94-98). They use state terror, such as arbitrary arrest and disappearances, to coerce people into obeying (Roberts, 2020). As conceptualised by Hannah Arendt (1973, pp.200-202), the end goal of these regimes is 'force produced through organization,' in effect a society wholly subjugated by the totalitarian ruler. Significantly, Adolf Hitler and Joseph Stalin thought command over the population in this way to be more important than wealth and natural resources (Arendt, 1973, pp.200-202). Since then, both Turkmenistan and Eritrea's totalitarian regimes have remained two of the most repressive states in the world (Freedom House, 2024a; Freedom

House, 2024b).

As this article demonstrates, both Niyazov and Afwerki took advantage of institutionalised frameworks that existed before their independence and relied heavily on their public's collective memories to construct totalitarian rule in a period when the opposite was happening worldwide. As such, totalitarian regimes are specific to the contexts in which they arise, with states using the ruptures afforded by independence to reshape national identity around cults of personality and state obligation, and in so doing creating an alternative to democratic ideals. They further established total control over the media, allowing them to prevent counter-narrative forming and keep the population insulated. In these ways, Niyazov and Afwerki created publics who have come to regard totalitarian rule as the way things are, the way things have always been, and the way things will always be.

Totalitarianism is often shaped,

institutionally entrenched, and legitimised through the use of collective memory (Arendt, 1973; Gray, 2023). As a system of government, totalitarianism is defined by totalism, or the idea that everything must be controlled by the state—even groups as innocuous as chess clubs (Gray, 2023, pp.90-94). Beyond the desire for control, all totalitarian regimes are rooted in an ideology that claims to have all the answers for organising a stable society, thus making the rest of the world untrustworthy and dangerous, creating deep paranoia (Gray, 2023, p.92). In order to rectify this paranoia, their control must be absolute, extending to the memories of the people they rule.

Collective memory, or the way groups of people view and understand the past, has been the catalyst for the construction of totalitarian regimes. Under Adams' (2024, pp.1-2) conceptualisation, collective memory operates as a currency that can be used by governing elites to form identity and create ways of seeing the past. Collective memory

can be subdivided into two corresponding notions: ‘communicative memory’ and ‘cultural memory’ (Assmann and Czaplicka, 1995, pp.125–127). Communicative memory refers to surface-level memory of the past formed from everyday communication with others, typically within the last century (Assmann and Czaplicka, 1995, pp.126–127). Beneath it lies cultural memory, referring to memory that revolves around key past events that form identity, understanding, and rules of conduct for a given group (Assmann and Czaplicka, 1995, pp.128–130). Totalitarianism and other forms of governmental repression utilise collective memory to create legitimacy, a key ingredient for stability.

This article employs a thematic analysis of the two case studies: Turkmenistan under Saparmurat Niyazov and Eritrea under Isias Afwerki. This enables full examination of the development of totalitarian rule, eschewing a narrow focus. By looking at the cases holistically, it is possible to identify commonalities and develop a deeper understanding of the formation of totalitarianism and the role of memory within it. While there are no direct links between the regimes of Niyazov and Afwerki, they are both outliers in a time otherwise known for world-wide liberalisation, and are thus productive sites for analysis.

COMMUNICATIVE MEMORY

The communicative memory of an authoritarian past and its lasting institutions and norms were used to construct and legitimise totalitarian rule in newly sovereign Turkmenistan and Eritrea. Arendt (1973, pp.193–195) wrote that totalitarian states are shapeless, in that they tend to duplicate government institutions and eschew formal hierarchies, leaving even top officials unclear of their place in the system. Before gaining independence, Eritrea was ruled by the Derg (1974–1987): the Communist, totalitarian government of Ethiopia. As Kibreab (2009, pp.24–26) writes, the unchecked power, lack of religion, and absence of rule of law which characterises the Afwerki regime is not dissimilar to the Derg, providing a precedent to his actions after independence. Similarly, in Turkmenistan, many governmental institutions like the Ministry for National Security and the ruling Turkmenistan Democratic Party are continuations of older Soviet institutions like the KGB and the Communist Party (Peyrouse, 2012, pp.89–90, 96–98), which were also grounded in totalitarian ideologies.

These examples of state precedent highlight how collective memory provides the foundations of totalitarianism. In Turkmenistan, Niyazov did not build a single party and security service from the ground up; rather, he appropriated institutions that had been around for as long as the people could remember, operating on the communicative memory citizens had of them. In Eritrea, Afwerki likewise copied a

system of government that, at the time, all Eritreans were familiar with. The shapeless, repressive governments that emerged in the two states after independence were highly similar to those which came before, serving to enhance the legitimacy of the regime as totalitarian norms were familiar. Reinforcing this, the secret police which underpinned the regimes were not newly established. Instead, the location of their central headquarters were moved from Moscow and Addis Ababa to Ashgabat and Asmara, respectively. This is a key part of the formation of totalitarianism in Eritrea and Turkmenistan. Both leaders took familiar institutions from the past and repurposed them for their own ends, thus utilising communicative memory.

Furthermore, the acceptance of totalitarianism often lies in beliefs about nation building and the role of the state which are shaped by collective memory. In lands full of nomadic communities, the Bolsheviks created the idea of a Turkmen nation-state by cultivating a literate, settled elite that ruled the nation until independence (De Leonardis, 2018, pp.45–48). A Turkmen nation-state was brought into being as Stalin ruled the Soviet Union and has existed under a repressive state apparatus since. Repression encompasses the entirety of the communicative memory of the Turkmen people, which explains the success of totalitarian rule post-independence. Much like Turkmenistan, Eritrea’s more distant past features Italian colonial rule and its fascism in the 1930s, with Eritreans being forcibly mobilised by the state in service of an endless revolution, accompanied by conscription not dissimilar to the present (Treiber, 2009, pp.109–111). It is meaningful that the demands made by the newly-independent state would go on to mirror those of the colonial period, because it shows that the regime was trading on the cultural memory of what is to be expected from a ruling government as a strategy to build legitimacy. Much like Turkmenistan, elements of the past have done a great deal to shape the collective memory of the Eritrean people. It means the idea of a highly demanding state was not invented by Afwerki but rather an idea that many Eritreans were familiar with, as they grew up amongst totalitarian rule. These states exemplify a model where authoritarian governments use the entrenched institutional norms which interact with citizens on a day-to-day basis to co-opt acceptance of the repressive environments in which they reside.

CULTURAL MEMORY

Cultural memory plays a key role in the creation of totalitarianism and its institutions, namely through a national identity that centres devotion to the state and facilitates the limitless demands on its subjects. Both Eritrea and Turkmenistan have created new national identities that prioritise loyalty above all else. Eritrea

has cultivated a strong sense of quotidian nationalism, expressed through everyday symbols, narratives, and commemorative practices that embed national identity into daily life. The *shida*, a plastic sandal worn by revolutionary fighters, has come to symbolise self-reliance and sacrifice, values that extend beyond the liberation struggle into the lived experiences of ordinary citizens (Riggan, 2016, pp.32–33). This is reinforced through public discourse, particularly in plays and short films performed during national holidays, which frequently depict young people leaving to join the front, with parental resistance ultimately giving way to acceptance in the name of national duty (Riggan, 2016, p.47). Central to this is the figure of the ‘fighter’ (*tegalalai/tegalalit*), who functions simultaneously as a national icon and an everyman or everywoman, representing the shared experience of sacrifice across society (Riggan, 2016, p.48). This logic is further deepened through the commemoration of martyrdom, where personal experiences of loss are incorporated into collective national memory. Practices such as Martyrs’ Day and the everyday recognition of those who died in the conflict with the Derg transform private grief into a public affirmation of national values, reinforcing sacrifice as a defining feature of Eritrean identity (Riggan, 2016, pp.49–50). Together, these elements demonstrate how collective memory is mobilised through quotidian forms to normalise and sustain a political culture centred on shared sacrifice, resilience, and national service.

In Turkmenistan, Niyazov moved quickly to create a cult of personality. In 1993, state media began to refer to him as *Turkmenbashi*, or ‘The Father of the Turkmen’ (Peyrouse, 2012, p.105). Niyazov also ghost-wrote the *Rukhnama*, a pseudo-historical account required to be taught in schools and universities as well as be placed within every religious building, that stated Turkmens had a 5,000 year history and that one-man rule was a Turkmen tradition (Anceschi, 2008, pp.89–94). He further promoted the arts and religion, with the requirement that he was directly mentioned and praised frequently (Anceschi, 2008, pp.85–88). While the cult of personality created in Turkmenistan did not make the same demands of its people as the new national identity in Eritrea, it made Niyazov synonymous with being Turkmen, creating a pervasive, anti-democratic national identity, similar to the cult of personality around Stalin. In the case of Turkmenistan, Niyazov decided to utilise the collective memories of the Stalinist period to legitimise his own rule. By copying the past, he telegraphed the idea that rule by a strong man, and total devotion to him, is a culturally normal state of affairs, and one that is legitimate.

These demands for devotion based on a manufactured identity manifest in a series of obligations that each state requires from

its citizens, such as the aforementioned conscription. Conscription normalises great demands from the state onto its citizens, and produces shared experiences while also facilitating greater labour productivity for the state. Over time, these experiences are reframed through state narratives into cultural memory, where sacrifice and obedience are understood as defining features of national identity. Following the Border War with Ethiopia, Eritrea instituted indefinite conscription, with people spending their whole working lives in the employ of the state (International Crisis Group, 2010, pp.9–11). Meanwhile in Turkmenistan, Niyazov used conscription to grow the army to 100,000 troops, which he then used as a source of free labour (Peyrouse, 2012, p.97). Importantly, as seen by the use of conscription, this obligation to the state is open-ended as Eritrea extends it indefinitely and Turkmenistan uses draftees as a source of free labour. As Verovšek (2014, pp.397–399) comments, Arendt saw in the Nazis a desire to monopolise memory, as this would allow them to control society and break down individuality by preventing individual memories. This monopoly forces all citizens to spend years, if not decades, in service of the state. It co-opts national and cultural identity for the sake of the totalitarian state’s and manpower needs. Everyone emerges from conscription with universal, strong memories of totalitarianism, especially key as these experiences happen during individuals’ transition to adulthood. This shapes the cultural memory of the people and acclimatises them to totalitarian rule.

Beyond conscription, both states also enforce a series of other obligations upon their citizens. Turkmenistan’s many state employees are required to spend eighteen US dollars a month to purchase government propaganda, a tall order in one of the poorest countries in the post-Soviet world (Peyrouse, 2012, p.151). Meanwhile in Eritrea, people are required to undertake local service projects that can last anywhere from hours to weeks, and all students spend their summers doing mandatory volunteer work (Riggan, 2016, pp.52–54). These obligations enhance the identity creation that comes from conscription by making the state omnipresent. Instead of solely devoting oneself to the state during military service, people are expected to do it for their whole lives, reinforcing totalitarian ideas. This shapes the cultural memory of both societies, as generations of people will see the contours of their lives shaped by an endless series of obligations to the state, creating an impression that to do so is the natural order of society and necessary to be a member of society.

MEDIA

The overarching tool used by Eritrea and Turkmenistan to instill and warp the national narrative to sustain and legitimise totalitarianism is complete control of the

media, which keeps societies insulated and wary of governmental or systemic change. In 2001 the Eritrean Group of 15 (G15)—key veterans of the guerilla war with the Derg—wrote an open letter criticising Afwerki for seizing power (Kibreab, 2009, pp.38–42). In response, Afwerki carried out a purge, disappearing eleven members of the G15, nine journalists, and the leaders of thirteen independent media organisations (Kibreab, 2009, pp.38–47). The events of 2001 show the end of any democratic aspirations in Eritrea and the sinking reality that Afwerki would rule long into the future. It is noteworthy that this took place shortly after the start of indefinite conscription, as the end of independent media is but one step towards a closed totalitarian state where the goal is to monopolise memory and prevent alternative ideas from being known.

Turkmenistan also exhibits an extreme version of media control, as foreign media

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While the examples of Eritrea and Turkmenistan are extreme, they demonstrate broader lessons of how authoritarian governance implants itself into the psyche of its people and the institutions which control them.

is *de facto* absent within the country. Foreign media is illegal outside of a small number of Russian newspapers sold in the capital (Peyrouse, 2012, p.151). The Turkmen government also banned satellite dishes used to watch Russian or Uzbek TV (Peyrouse, 2012, p.152). This ban is an example of how totalitarianism, and its trademark paranoia, work to isolate the population and prevent exposure to alternative ideas. As Russia and Uzbekistan are not free societies, it is difficult to see how watching TV from either country could introduce democratic ideas or critique the status quo. What the bans of both satellite TV and of nearly all other foreign media do is control access to information. By preventing access to all foreign media, even media from other authoritarian regimes, the state ensures a total monopoly on information that goes beyond simply censoring ideas

they disapprove of. Totalitarian rule comes to an end when new narratives are created and the past is refigured to break up the previous national narrative, causing a ‘crisis of self-understanding’ (Verovšek, 2014, pp.400–403).

As the cases of Turkmenistan and Eritrea show, historical rupture can allow for the formation of new totalitarianism. In the aftermath of independence, perhaps one of the most cataclysmic ruptures of all, collective memory can be shaped at both levels as totalitarianism’s pattern of monopolisation reaches the media. At the level of communicative memory, it constructs a historical canon of oppression which is devoid of democracy, as the daily discussion of politics and life will not include it. On the deeper level of cultural memory, the blackout of foreign media ensures that the disinformation and propaganda which fuels cultural history and identity will not be challenged. This dynamic aims to prevent ideas about individualism and democracy from becoming present in the same way that they are elsewhere. Both Turkmenistan and Eritrea showcase exactly how totalitarian states do not just censor the media, but monopolise it, in doing so creating a domination of memory.

CONCLUSION

Communicative and cultural memory are used to create feelings of institutional permanence and national identity. The use of memory promotes state devotion, is enforced through the suppression of media, and serves to foster and deepen totalitarian rule. Turkmenistan and Eritrea are prime examples of this. The nature of regional history and previously existing authoritarian institutions left both societies with communicative and cultural memories of totalitarianism that led to the tacit acceptance that a domineering state is the way society always has been and always will be. Reinforcing this, the creation of cults of personality and limitless state obligation serve to reshape national identity around totalitarian values, inculcating the population with new memories and ideas that benefit the system. Finally, both states exercise total control of the media to prevent the spread of alternative ideas and shape the communicative and cultural memories of both societies. Non-democratic states do not exist because of coercion alone; like all states in the world, they require legitimacy. The ruling elites of Eritrea and Turkmenistan have created theirs in a heavy-handed, explicit manner, but they are not alone in searching for it amidst a political system that is undemocratic. While the examples of Eritrea and Turkmenistan are extreme, they demonstrate broader lessons of how authoritarian governance implants itself into the psyche of its people and the institutions which control them.

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RELIGION

The Double-Edged Sword of Guatemalan Peacebuilding

by mariela brown

illustration by lydia kempton

Since the invasion of the Spanish Conquerors in the early sixteenth century, much of the Latin American region has maintained strict adherence to Christianity (Hendrickson, 2022, p.23). In Central America especially, Catholicism is embedded in the social and political framework, with government and religion existing as almost inextricable forces. In Guatemala following a *coup d'état* in 1954 led by the United States and the United Fruits Company, a bitter civil war waged between various leftist rebel groups and the government between 1960 and 1996 (Schlesinger and Kinzer, 1983, pp.228–225). The war became characterised by its genocide of the Maya people and manifold human rights violations committed against civilians (Schlesinger and Kinzer, 1983, p.11).

Although the socio-economic impact of the war has yet to be completely eradicated from the Guatemalan fabric (Brett, 2022), this article argues that the major peacebuilding efforts undertaken by religious institutions during its latter stages helped create and sustain practical and palpable concord between the people and their government. The work of grassroots religious institutions, notably the Catholic Church, demonstrates the importance of decentralised religious movements in the face of a corrupt central state. The success

of their work was threefold: the rejection of previous conservative ideas; the subsequent adherence to effective liberal ideas of Just Peace and Liberation theology; and the development of grassroots organisations to garner international support. The formation of these grassroots groups was a natural consequence of the fomentation of potent ideas such as Latin American Liberation theology. The profound tragedy of the violence committed against members of the Catholic Church in Guatemala reflects the force of grassroots movements in challenging the status quo.

Furthermore, whilst religion can be a valuable and positive force during peacebuilding processes, the Guatemalan case also highlights how powerful religious rhetoric can be weaponised by authoritarian and despotic regimes. The growth of the Evangelical movement in Guatemala coincided with the political mobilisation of Guatemalan Catholicism; however, this movement was inorganic and institutionalised by dictator General Efraín Ríos Montt (Amendáriz, 1986, p.36). Unlike the reformed Catholic Church, the Evangelical movement promoted ideas of obedience and anti-ecumenism—rejecting the unity and cooperation among Christians promoted by Ecumenism (Koskela, 2008, p.9)—which did not reflect the discontent

and suffering of the Guatemalan people. The state's evangelising efforts culminated in state-sanctioned violence, arguably underpinned by the use of religious dogma. Evidently, when religion is centralised and institutionalised in an already despotic regime, it is a useful tool to reinforce that power.

Religious institutions and ideologies were most effective when acting as external agents in opposition to an extreme and authoritarian central power. Only when those religious ideas and institutions were subsumed by those same anti-democratic institutions did religion become a tool used against the population. Yet, without the Catholic Church's peacebuilding efforts, it is difficult to envision an alternative peaceful end to the Guatemalan conflict. In times of political discord, religious actors are 'natural norm generators, norm transmitters, norm spreaders, and norm implementers' (Love, 2022, p.422). As this article asserts, the Guatemalan case reflects the pivotal potential of grassroots religious movements, rather than centralised or institutionalised ones, in state-building and post-war reconstruction. Comparing and contrasting the Catholic Church's grassroots movement in the immediate aftermath of the Guatemalan Civil War to the rise of Evangelical Protestantism, driven by the



authoritarian General Efraín Ríos Montt, illuminates the significance of grassroots movements for peacebuilding.

THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AS A POSITIVE PEACEBUILDING FORCE

Guatemala's post-colonial context, marked by the stratification of agrarian society, breakdown of civil society, the looming Cold War, and the presence of the Catholic Church, laid the perfect foundation for the proliferation of the ideas of Liberation Theology and Just Peace (Galeano, 1997, pp.50, 113). Latin American Liberation Theology was the theological movement within the Catholic Church which prioritised the need for social and political liberation of marginalised people along religious lines (Chopp and Regan, 2024, p.471). Stemming from the advocacy and teachings of individual theologians and Catholic bishops in war-torn Latin American countries, these ideas later garnered international support from other Latin American religious groups, and also from the Vatican. The term 'Just Peace' is used by secular and religious actors to denote principles and actions that aim to prevent violence and create positive, sustainable peace. These principles include the protection, defence, and restoration of human life, dignity, and the common good, positive intentions, participation, reconciliation, and sustainability (Love, 2022, p.420). The substantial effect of these principles in Guatemala was due to the heightened prevalence of religious actors in the wake of a corrupt state actor, and consequently weakened civil society. In the absence of traditional and stable state institutions, these actors resonated with the Guatemalan people due to the religious dominance of Catholicism, with approximately 80 percent of the population identifying as Roman Catholic (Nelson, 1984, p.72). For the Catholic Church, the adoption of theories of Just Peace seamlessly blended Catholic Social Teaching and international human rights law, enabling its successful application and the pursuance of long-term peace traditions (Love, 2022, p.421).

During the civil war, the Catholic Church shifted away from its previously apathetic attitude towards the poverty and suffering of the Latin American people towards a progressive, socialist, and anti-imperialist ideological consensus. This shift proved integral to the effectiveness of the Catholic Church during the peacebuilding process, as the input of religious figures and organisations was accepted more readily. Following Guatemalan independence from Spain in 1821, the Catholic Church continued to consolidate links with the Guatemalan conservative elite to reaffirm its power (Manewal, 2007, p.52). In the span of just over a decade, the Church in Latin America went from working hand-in-hand with the established oligarchy in fighting popular

uprisings it believed to be communist, to having prominent priests disseminate ideas rooted in left-wing socio-economic analysis (Manewal, 2007, p.50). In both cases, it is clear that the authority of the Church defined the prevailing moral attitudes: the Church's reactionary streak either affirming the position of the post-colonial elite or the Church's nascent progressive streak fostering social justice and sustainable peace.

The advocacy work of religious figures became increasingly influential, now backed by a powerful, new ideology which promoted sustainable and long-term peace. Bishops promoted a view which attempted to be politically neutral, but simultaneously condemned the violence committed by both political parties in Guatemala and the inequitable social and economic system with which they were associated (Calder, 2001, p.785). The military government viewed the Catholic church's progressive shift as a threat akin to the revolutionary armed resistance movements (Manewal, 2007, p.49). Consequently, violent persecution of the Catholic Church and its personnel, projects, and members ensued. A notable case was the assassination of Bishop Juan Gerardi in 1998 following his advocacy on the National Reconciliation Commission and the publication of 'Guatemala: Never Again!' which implicated the government in the disappearances of 200,000 civilians (Goldman, 2010, p.5). The extent of the violence and threat to Church officials caused the Catholic Church to convey an image of a united opposition—bolstered by the martyrdom of priests and bishops—which continued to fuel the resistance movement and garnered national and international support (Calder, 2001, p.785). State-sanctioned violence and suppression as an attempt to limit the spread of the Church's work denotes the efficacy and political power of the Church's newly galvanised grassroots movement. The mobilisation of Catholic ideas and actors effectively threatened the despotic central government by powerfully reflecting the discontent of the Guatemalan people.

LATIN AMERICAN LIBERATION THEOLOGY IN PRACTICE

The Guatemalan peace process, culminating in the 1996 signing of the 'Accord for a Firm and Lasting Peace,' was deeply shaped by religious involvement, both domestic and international, particularly in its ecumenical and grassroots dimensions (Calder, 2001, p.774). Ecumenism is a movement that aims to promote unity and cooperation among different Christian groups and is integral to the formation of an inclusive and representative peace (Koskela, 2008, p.9). With the theories of Just Peace and Latin American Liberation Theology garnering local and international attention, the work of Catholic grassroots institutions promoting

this approach in Guatemala established productive and relatively unified ecumenical peacebuilding efforts.

The turning point for the formal peace process came after a series of failed peacebuilding attempts in the early 1980s and the regional momentum of the Esquipulas II Accords in 1987 (Calder, 2001, p.776) which articulated the deep central opposition to the power of the religious grassroots movement. President Vinicio Cerezo, responding to these accords, authorised the creation of peace-oriented institutions like the National Reconciliation Commission (NRC), and the National Dialogue in 1990; the latter involving around 60 civil society organisations (Calder, 2001, p.779). Significantly, the NRC included a strong religious delegation comprising 26 representatives from accredited religious bodies, including the Conference of Religious of Guatemala (CONFREGUA) (Calder, 2001, pp.779, 786). CONFREGUA faced near-eradication due to the murder and disappearance of its members, it re-emerged as the Office of Multiple Services (OSM), founded in 1988–1989, and coordinated pastoral work and supported victims of violence, drawing inspiration from similar Catholic initiatives in Chile, Peru, El Salvador, and Nicaragua (Calder, 2001, p.791).

In October 1989, an ecumenical fact-finding delegation led by the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) intervened in a political deadlock and encouraged communication between various religious factions (Calder, 2001, p.780). These communications led to the Oslo Round in March 1990, hosted by the Norwegian government, and monitored by the LWF, where both sides signed the Basic Agreement on the Search for Peace by Political Means (Calder, 2001, p.776). This agreement established an agenda for resolving key social, economic, and political issues, and rested on the participation of the religious sector. Fundamentally, the successful utilisation of Latin American Liberation Theology by the Catholic Church attracted local support from various civil society agents, but the peace process also received important oversight by international actors due to the appealing facets of the theology. This culminated in a visit from the Vatican and Pope John Paul II's 1992, ultimately forcing international accountability from the Guatemalan government to the international Catholic institution (Calder, 2001, p.774).

This is not to suggest that disunity did not exist during the peace process between the various religious sects. A follow-up meeting in Quito in September 1990 produced the Declaration of Quito (Calder, 2001, p.781). The consensus of this declaration was significantly weakened by the ideological divides between progressive groups, like the *Conferencia de Religiosas y Religiosos*

de Guatemala (CONFREGUA), and more conservative factions like the Evangelical Alliance and Jewish representatives (Calder, 2001, p.778). The final peacebuilding aims of the Declaration of Quito were understood as incoherent and lacklustre by the more progressive religious groups (Calder, 2001, p.782). Yet, given the violent and oppressive nature of the authoritarian state of Guatemala, the importance of grassroots, non-state actors to the peacebuilding process cannot be understated, regardless of any moments of marginal misalignment. When traditional institutions and authorities failed to serve the Guatemalan populace, ecumenical and external religious groups successfully shouldered that responsibility and sought long-term peace.

RELIGION AS AN OPPOSITIONAL FORCE

Despite the supposed predominance of the Catholic Church in Guatemala, the Protestant community saw rapid growth in the 20th century. This growth, however, did not arise entirely from grassroots religious movements. As opposed to the Catholic Church’s policies of peace, the Evangelical church espoused rhetoric of capitulation, a position more readily accepted by the dictatorial central power. General Efraín Ríos Montt, the *de facto* president of Guatemala between 1982 and 1983, instrumentalised and institutionalised this feature of the Evangelical faith (Amendáriz, 1986, pp.30–31). Protestantism was used to pacify various communities instead of engendering peace and justice. Evangelicalism came to serve as an indicator of the threat that religious ideology could pose to civil liberties when co-opted by a central government with ulterior motives, in contrast to Catholicism’s grassroots mobilisation.

Guatemala has the highest percentage of evangelicals in Latin America (Samson, 2008, p.68), a reflection of the political implications of Protestantism’s rise. The attraction of these churches to the various communities in the country was plain: their message of a violent and unjust world reflected the lived reality of the Guatemalan people. The promise of redemption provided moving ideas of justice, empowerment, and liberation (Garrard-Burnett, 1998, p.131). Evangelicals still made up a small minority of the Guatemalan religious communities, but faith was institutionalised in order to convert rural Indigenous communities and consolidate dictatorial power. This policy was initiated by General Efraín Ríos Montt, who sought to tranquilise the Mayan community due to their guerrilla sympathies (Amendáriz, 1986, p.36). Moreover, he began the *Fusiles y Frijoles* (Bullets and Beans) scorched earth policy, which furthered the proselytising effect of his political goals.

On the one hand, the army was mobilised to murder the Indigenous people who did not

support the government (Berryman, 1984). On the other hand, Ríos Montt enlisted members of the World Church to create an organisation for administering charitable contributions from North American evangelicals to provide humanitarian aid to the refugees of his own counterinsurgency campaign (Manewal, 2007, pp.56–57). Conscription to the evangelical doctrine was both carrot and stick for the Guatemalan citizens, enabling the utilisation of Protestant ideas and institutional abuse, especially under Ríos Montt, to pacify the rebellious ideas of the Catholic opposition. Unlike the Catholic Church, evangelicals were inherently not openly at odds with the Guatemalan state, regardless of who was in power. Consequently, Montt’s evangelicalism was swiftly institutionalised and then weaponised to promote order rather than justice, and therefore underpinned the violent means with which he attempted to achieve

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While religion played a complex role in Guatemala’s peacebuilding efforts, its overall impact, particularly through the Catholic Church, was profoundly positive.

this (Samson, 2008, pp.68–70). Contrary to the successes of the religious grassroots groups in challenging corruption, when religion is centralised and institutionalised in an already despotic regime it can be a useful tool to reinforce that power. Religion is an essential positive force in peacebuilding processes when it emerges from organic origins; however, religious actors emerging from inorganic or centralised sources will ultimately falter in the production of a long-term or representative peace.

CONCLUSION

While religion played a complex role in Guatemala’s peacebuilding efforts, its overall impact, particularly through the Catholic Church, was profoundly positive. Ultimately, the Protestant communities appear to have established a precarious spiritual hegemony in Guatemala in opposition to the progressive and semi-revolutionary fervour of the Catholic Church (Stoll,

1990, p.119). This hegemony was inorganic compared to the work of grassroots Catholic organisations, who sought to build concord through representative and accountable means rather than forceful proselytism and a centralised dissemination of their religious message. It hindered the peace process by using covert and overt means to inculcate the populace against change and progress. However, the persistent engagement of faith-based actors, particularly the Catholic Church, helped keep the peace agenda alive across shifting political landscapes.

By contrast, the Evangelical church, especially under Ríos Montt, often aligned with authoritarian interests, using faith as a tool of control rather than liberation. This contrast highlights that religious actors may either empower peace and progress or entrench oppression via proselytising efforts. Without the nascent but potent ideas of the Catholic Church, and a relatively uniform ecumenical effort by non-state actors, Guatemala’s peace process would have likely been sluggish, exclusionary, and short-term. When negotiations between state actors alone are compromised and thus produce unsustainable peace, religious and civil society mechanisms provide broader and more inclusive peace settlements.

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AGAINST THE EUROCENTRIC LINEAR MODEL OF HISTORY

Hikmet Kivılcımlı's History Thesis

by **kagan efe ozcetin**

illustration by sara paruta



Critiques of Eurocentrism have become increasingly influential in recent decades, particularly in fields influenced by postcolonial and decolonial scholarship. However, given the strength of these critiques, relatively few attempts have been made to construct systematic alternative theories of historical development. This gap becomes particularly visible in debates on non-Western historical development, where Eurocentric models often continue to structure interpretation. It is in this context that Hikmet Kivılcımlı's (1902–1971) history thesis becomes theoretically significant. His history thesis can be reinterpreted to construct a systematic alternative theory of historical development, from a politically-

left standpoint. Unlike preexisting models, Kivılcımlı's model offers a non-essentialist, dynamic understanding grounded in the logic of combined and uneven development. In this article, I argue that the thesis' criticism of the Eurocentric Linear Model is twofold. Firstly, it offers an analytical alternative by generalising the logic of combined and uneven development across the ancient period, enabling the analysis of Eastern societies without reducing them to either a delayed version of Western feudalism—a socioeconomic system of fragmented authority based on vassalage and personal ties, characterised by mutual protection and obedience between lords and vassals (Harding, 2002)—or an unchanging and utterly unique Oriental structure. Secondly,

by establishing the dynamic factor in the historical thesis through the figure of the communal barbarian, it also allows for a normative critique of the Eurocentric progress model.

WHAT IS THE EUROCENTRIC LINEAR MODEL?

Eurocentrism is the view that understands the West as the engine and actual site of history, the representation of universal values, and a model of progress (Sundberg, 2009). From this Eurocentric foundation emerges the concept of culturalism: the belief that 'cultural invariants can persist through and beyond possible transformations in economic, social,

and political systems’ (Amin, 2009, p.7). Culturalism directly feeds into European exceptionalism, where the West’s customs are inherently deemed rational, active, modern, and disciplined, while the East’s customs are dismissed as irrational, static, traditional, and slovenly (Amin, 2009). As Edward Said (2003) emphasised, such a dichotomy was not merely analytical; it was essential for Western self-identity and acted as a legitimisation tool for colonial power.

By evaluating non-Western societies solely through the lens of Western development, European exceptionalism ignores the interconnectedness of the history of political development. More importantly, this exceptionalism is inextricably linked to the normative presuppositions of linear progressivism. Linear progressivism can be defined as the broader tendency to conceptualise history as an automatic, forward march where bourgeois society is universally superior to earlier social forms, ignoring the destruction of humane values and the loss of a sense of community along the way (Löwy and Sayre, 2001, p.93). Although Eurocentrism and linear progressivism are not entirely reducible to each other, they combine to form a rigid historical framework: the supposedly universal timeline of progress is entirely modeled on the specific historical experiences of the bourgeoisie in Western society.

The overarching problem, therefore, is the methodological trap of treating the Western historical trajectory as a singular, universal measurement by which all other societies are measured, and inevitably found lacking. The problem becomes more striking within Marxist historiography. Despite existing as a tradition that explicitly seeks to overcome Eurocentrism, it nevertheless reproduces linear and Eurocentric assumptions in some of its interpretations such as Soviet Marxism’s five-stage linear theory and the Asiatic Mode of Production (AMP) literature (Anderson, 2010). While the five-stage theory of Soviet Marxism attempts to fit social reality into models derived from Western historical experience, the absence of key actors and institutions—such as fragmented feudal power, the autonomy of cities from central authority, the bourgeoisie, and civil society in the Western sense—created significant theoretical tensions. Alternatively, AMP recreates a dichotomy between West and East by assigning them two different modes of production. As argued, AMP represents a mode of production based on the state-ownership of the land under the rule of centralised despotic power (Fogel, 1988). Hence, at the first glance, it is possible to see it as an attempt against Eurocentrism by introducing a non-European model into the analysis of precapitalistic societies. However, in AMP Eastern societies are criticised due to their character of being defined through negotiation with the West.

The key manifestation of this is centering missing elements of the East, rather than finding value in what was already there (Anderson, 1974, p.462). As Chakrabarty (2000) suggests, analytical theory should provincialise Europe, by grasping it as a case study as opposed to a singular norm in which other societies are defined or criticised. Kivılcımlı’s history thesis allows for such provincialisation through its non-essentialist categories.

KIVILCIMLI’S THEORY

Kivılcımlı’s history thesis aims first and foremost to understand the reasons and determinants behind precapitalistic history. This theory suggests that, in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of the current situation, analysing only the current class structure, state apparatus and economic development is not enough; grasping the distinct ‘spirit’ of a country is equally necessary (Kivılcımlı, 2020a, p.73). Furthermore, spirit rests on a country’s history: more specifically, the history of cyclical barbarian invasions on civilisation, which he defines as ‘Historical Revolutions’. This concept exists to differentiate such events from modern Social Revolutions—such as the French, American, and Soviet Revolutions—which Marxism understands as stemming from intra-societal class conflict, in the context of antagonism between the mode of production, such as capitalism and feudalism, and the factors of production, including tools, machinery, and factory buildings. However, in Kivılcımlı’s examination of ancient history—a period he defines as between 4000–5000 BC and AD 1400–1500—he sees no intra-societal actor that could cause a revolution in the case of a clash. This blockage stems from the objective conditions classes have and the lack of class consciousness that might lead to the redesign of the system (Cörüt, 2021, p.27; Kivılcımlı, 2012, p.19). Hence, Kivılcımlı argues that crises stemming from bureaucratic rigidity, extreme inequality, and the general decay of a state in the ancient period could not be solved from within the system as with modern revolutions. He then argues that in the face of this blockage, the only possible course of action is the invasion and reconstruction by barbarians, which he defines as ‘Historical Revolution’ (Kivılcımlı, 2012, p.22; 2016, p.63; Kaya, 2020, p.106).

Barbarians, as defined by Kivılcımlı (2016, p.187; 2020, p.67), represents a general category of classless and stateless tribes located outside of civilisation. These tribes are understood to live in a communal, equal manner without a private property regime due to their migratory way of life. Such a way of life appears to give them an advantage in wars against civilisation due to strong communal bonds. Kivılcımlı’s theory takes inspiration from Ibn Khaldun’s theory of *asabiyyah*, which suggests that the class-division, and individualised nature

of civil societies cannot match the social solidarity and primitive socialist traditions of barbarians (Cörüt, 2021, p.24; Bora, 2021, p.649). Kivılcımlı utilises Khaldun’s framework to understand the foundations of complex societies, such as the rise of Islam, formation of the Ottoman State, the birth of capitalism in England, as well as Meiji Modernisation in Japan (Kale, 2014). Central to this approach is the idea that the stagnation of an old order is often broken by the vitality of outside forces. Consequently, in Kivılcımlı’s framework, separate events such as the Migration Period, the Mongol Invasions, and the Islamic Expansion all reflect the same underlying phenomenon: the regenerative power of barbarian invasions (Kivılcımlı, 2012, p.89). Hence, it is a universal theory of history that aims to find common conceptions for world history rather than presupposing one ideal model.

After this Historical Revolution, barbarians became the ruling class of a newly founded state and settled there. However, as Kivılcımlı states, because barbarians are accustomed to live in a communal, equal manner without a private property regime in their migratory way of life, their form of organisation also reflects egalitarian characteristics such as decentralised power through tribes, low levels of stratification, and the new ruler being understood as first among equals (Kivılcımlı, 2018, pp.116–122). As time passes through generations, they adjust to civilisation’s way of life due to determinate conditions—production of surplus value through advancements in agriculture, animal husbandry, and home crafts—that create such a need for stratification, inequality, centralisation, and authoritarianisation (Kivılcımlı, 2012, p.133). Then, as they become more and more bureaucratised and stratified, and as inequalities rise, they become the victims of a new invasion by another barbarian tribe. Hence, rather than a linear progression from one stage to another, there is a cyclical movement of construction and destruction between civilisation and barbarians. However, due to its nature, such cyclical movement cannot be never-ending; after every historical revolution, the number of barbarian tribes diminishes and modern social classes emerge, and Kivılcımlı argues the age of Social Revolutions begins. Yet, this periodisation, as I later argue, is not as clear-cut as it first appears.

ANALYTICAL CRITIQUE

Kivılcımlı’s History Thesis offers an alternative to Eurocentric Linear Development models by allowing us to critique both the possibility and normality of linear development. This occurs because the logic of combined and uneven development is generalised across the Ancient period (Kücükaydın, 2013, p.159). The theory of combined and uneven development posits that, rather than history unfolding in a linear progression from one stage to

another, it mostly skips intermediate stages in underdeveloped countries, combining separate steps into an amalgam of archaic and more contemporary forms (Löwy, 2010). This concept directly undermines the linear development model of clear development from one stage to another. For example, Kivılcımlı (2016, p.77) argues that in Turkey’s transition to capitalism, ‘crippled usurer-merchant system has entered into perfect resonance with the monopolistic, crippled capital called Finance-Capital. They have become perfectly compatible’. What makes Kivılcımlı’s theory distinct is that, rather than focusing solely on the transition from precapitalism to capitalism, it treats it as a general historical phenomenon. Such a formulation is important for introducing a non-Eurocentric understanding of history.

Through this lens, it is possible to argue that, while Kivılcımlı agrees with AMP that there is no Western-type feudalism in Ottoman history and that the state is the owner of property, he opposes AMP due to its static view and essentialisation. In Kivılcımlı’s argument, AMP is not essential to East’s culture or geography but rather a form of organisation for a newly founded state after the barbarian invasion. As he argues, the same characteristics can also be observed in German or Slavic barbarism (Özcan-Eliacık, 2021, pp.231–232). Moreover, his understanding of feudalism is not a teleological form that serves as the father of capitalism, as in the feudal reading (Belge, 2017). Instead, feudalism is understood as drifting away from *asabiyyah*, the primitive socialist tradition of the newly founded state, and hence understood as a sign of decadence (Kivılcımlı, 2016, pp.63–64). Hence, far from being a historical development or a necessary step, feudalism is a sign of disaster (Kivılcımlı, 2016, pp.63–64).

From this premise, what is commonly described as ‘underdevelopment’ can be reinterpreted, within Kivılcımlı’s framework, as a form of historically produced bureaucratic overdevelopment. In trying to explain the uneven development of Eastern societies despite their long histories of civilisation-building, his analysis suggests that many non-Western societies developed rigid and extensive bureaucratic structures at an earlier stage. Over time, this led to highly centralised and despotic political systems that disrupted the *asabiyyah*. This is precisely where the logic of combined and uneven development materialises in his analysis of the ancient world. Rather than experiencing a linear progression where economic base and political superstructure develop symmetrically, Eastern societies experienced an uneven trajectory: an ‘overdeveloped’ political superstructure—the highly advanced, centralised state machinery—combined with an archaic, stagnant economic base—the parasitic merchant-usurer class. By

contrast, in Western Europe, the continued impact of Historical Revolutions repeatedly disrupted processes of centralisation, leading to more fragmented forms of political organisation which was crucial for the development of bourgeois social class and Social Revolutions (Kivılcımlı, 2016, p.30; Kivılcımlı, 2018, p.127). In Kivılcımlı’s (2012, p.334) framework, Eastern societies became trapped by the dominance of the ‘merchant-usurer’ (*tefecî-bezîrgân*) class within a despotic state machinery, which accumulated wealth through circulation and usury—extraction of a producer’s surplus wealth through exorbitant interest in the sphere of circulation—rather than investing in the means of production. Kivılcımlı sees this class as a parasitic class in the sense that their economic practice concentrates on tax, usury interest and pure trade. This parasitic relationship between merchant-user class with the despotic state confined the East

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to a stagnant cycle of ‘narrow production,’ or simple reproduction, that suffocated industrial development.

In contrast, the fragmented political structure of the West prevented such centralised despotism, forcing capital to socialise the production process itself into ‘broad production,’ or expanded capitalist reproduction (Kivılcımlı, 2012, p.334; Kivılcımlı, 2018, p.18–20). In this sense, the difference between East and West can be understood not as a matter of inherent superiority, but as the result of different historical trajectories of state formation by their relations with Barbarian Invasions and primitive socialist traditions. Kivılcımlı’s approach is useful for non-Eurocentric history theories because it treats such institutional forms as historically produced rather than civilisationally, culturally, or biologically fixed. Such an approach allows us to see struggles from inside and outside,

communal organisations, and nomads’ resistance to the class structure and extensive bureaucratisation.

NORMATIVE CRITIQUE

One of Kivılcımlı’s (2012) most significant contributions is assigning barbarism positive and constructive meaning—as opposed to common negative reductions—as this is especially important to Political Romanticist criticisms. Defined by Lowy and Sayre (2001, p.17), Romanticism is understood as ‘a critique of modernity, that is, of modern capitalist civilisation, in the name of values and ideals drawn from the past (the precapitalist, premodern past),’ in other words, a criticism to capitalist reality. Kivılcımlı (2012, p.88) interestingly echoes Edward Said’s (2003, p.154) critique of Marx’s writings on India by arguing ‘as civilisations rise, slaughtering and enslaving the innocent barbarians surrounding them, History joyfully celebrates this event as a “civilising” progress’. Kivılcımlı (2012, p.22) suggests barbarians possess superior character traits to those of civilised persons, highlighted in his argument that ‘civilised people are always far more cruel, tyrannical, despotic, vile, predatory, and destructive than barbarians’. This notion is developed in later works which suggest that the primitive socialist remnant village lives a better life in terms of productivity, culture, and happiness (Kivılcımlı, 2020b, p.14). Kivılcımlı’s optimistic, longing view of barbarism is reflective of the Romanticist yearning for pre-capitalist, pre-modernist society. For Kivılcımlı, the socialist past is not simply the past, its legacy has effects every day.

As Tanıl Bora (2021, p.648) emphasises, Kivılcımlı attempts to find a theory of history that opposes reducing materialism to mere economic determinism. In line with this, Kivılcımlı observes barbarism as a productive force; to him, productive forces include technology, but are certainly not limited to it (Kivılcımlı, 2016, pp.24–25). Within this framework, there are also historical traditions and customs, as well as the influences and reactions of geography, which are demonstrated through humane collective action (Kivılcımlı, 2012, p.25). However, generalising Kivılcımlı’s framework (2012, p.25) to argue for progress, one’s unit of analysis ought to include the ‘spiritual’ aspects, such as tradition and human will. Moving beyond Kivılcımlı’s immediate historical focus, this idea is important for thinking about development, while also shedding light on what is lost for economic modernisation, such as Anatolian humanism, Sufi depth, and the tradition of communal living. However, the past is not too idealised or seen as a point to return, but as a source of inspiration. By extending Kivılcımlı’s framework, with the barbarian as his active subject, we can see these aspects not as archaic, but rather as a potential source for new discourse for leftist movements,

viewing them as a functional economic and social force. The study of history then shifts from a focus on mistakes and ruins to a search for hidden possibilities and alternative ways of seeing and experiencing

EVALUATION

While Kivılcımlı's history thesis offers a novel conception of Marxist historiography, its impact is hindered by limited contemporary scholarship and lack of English translation of his work, and fundamental internal tensions. As Küçükaydın (2013) notes, Kivılcımlı's Stalinist alignment creates an ambiguous, politically motivated dichotomy between cyclical Historical Revolutions and linear Social Revolutions. This produces empirical stretches: for example, framing Ottoman Janissaries as progressive 'wage earners' (Kivılcımlı, 1976, p.33) to legitimise the modern Turkish military's tutelage (Özcan-Eliaçık, 2021), or romanticising the heavily bureaucratic Ottoman conquest of Constantinople as a 'barbarian' Historical Revolution to appeal to nationalist sentiments (Kivılcımlı, 1980).

However, rather than discarding the theory over these inconsistencies, one can radicalise Kivılcımlı's framework by overcoming this dichotomy and theorising Historical Revolutions within modernity. Although a full-scale theorisation of such a perspective is beyond the scope of this paper, it is possible to sketch a blueprint of what it would look like. Firstly, this perspective would be vital in seeing the current situation as a symptom of a rotting, decaying civilisation rather than a symptom of a linear, deterministic chain of progress. Therefore, the transition to a more advanced society would not be understood as an automatic evolution driven by internal economic gears, but as a contingent rupture. Secondly, the subject of Historical Revolutions within modernity would act as a broad democratic coalition of marginalized and dispossessed masses, much like the ancient figure of the barbarian. Here, just as the barbarian revolution was not meant to conquer and use existing power structures but to lead to a renewal, a modern Historical Revolution would also direct its founding will toward building a new social contract from below through direct democracy. Although it might seem like an over-romanticisation, such a perspective would allow for drawing an organic link between ancient historical ruptures and modern struggles. That would also be crucial for closing the gap between normative and analytical aspects of Kivılcımlı's theory.

CONCLUSION

Eurocentric logic often fails by treating non-Western societies as failed or incomplete versions of Europe. Kivılcımlı provides a way to see the history of Non-Western Societies as having non-essentialist, dynamic logic. This logic is built upon the figure of the

barbarian, perceived in romantic ways. Here, the barbarian, far from being a figure of destruction, is a figure of rejuvenation against a bureaucratic state. This process of decay and rejuvenation is understood to occur through combined and uneven development. Hence, during the same period, different modes of production might coexist, either separately in different locations or jointly in the same place. With this model of coexistence, the tradition and will of primitive socialism of barbarians are understood not as a thing of the past but an active source of inspiration. An important implication of this is to move away from viewing history as a list of things to forget and towards seeing it as full of potentialities for political action.

In conclusion, Kivılcımlı's history thesis offers essential tools against Eurocentric Linear Development by allowing historians to criticise clear-cut models of development, adopt a different, un-schematised approach to feudalism and AMP models, and normatively critique linear development by arguing that tradition and human will have a material existence. Hence, Kivılcımlı's thesis allows us to view the process of development with reference to its effects on community, nature, imagination, and alienation.

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Female Memoir in Postcolonial Egypt

illustration by rebecca sterner

Although state feminism in Egypt appeared to grant greater legal rights for women, scholars have argued that this expansion instead led to different forms of gender subordination and control (Hatem, 1998, p.87). This article argues that the regime's engagement with women's rights was simultaneously instrumental in gaining popular support for itself and limited by the persistence of gendered structures, as revealed through the comparative analysis of the writing of two feminist activists, Doria Shafik and Nawal El Saadawi. Shafik and El Saadawi's work exposes the gap between state-led reform and reality. As sites of emerging feminist theory, the memoirs of Shafik and El Saadawi facilitate a critique of the dominant historiographical narratives

Autobiographies serve as important tools to examine regimes, acting as a site for reclaiming marginalised voices. Key scholars such as Helen Buss (2002, p.xii) emphasise the subjective nature of memory not as a hindrance to the authenticity of the source, but as a tool for regaining space in public history. Instead of questioning the authenticity of biographies and memoirs as objective tools, Buss, drawing from Kate Adams, suggests we approach biographies as a site where women express personal and public memories of an event or an era (Buss, 2002, p.i.). Writing becomes a method through which feminist subjectivity is constituted under authoritarian rule, transforming memoirs and autobiographies

into a political act as well as a retrospective reflection.

Women across different societies have traditionally been portrayed as both political actors and the carriers of moral values, representing either virtue or dishonour in conflicting ideologies (Kucukalioglu, 2007, pp.13–14). As Egypt debated the growing influence of globalisation and the West throughout the twentieth century, women acted as symbolic representations of the nation and competing modernities in Egypt (Abu-Lughod, 1998, p.243). Incumbent political regimes sought to leverage the growing presence of women's issues through state feminism. Nonetheless, state feminism was not an emancipatory reform, but rather a replication of disciplinary systems of control, acting as a gendered technology of power in the post-colonial state (Hatem, 1998, p.87). The writings of both Shafik and El Saadawi reject state feminism, and detail the marginalisation and political appropriation of the Egyptian feminist movement.

This article approaches the memoirs of Doria Shafik and Nawal El Saadawi as insights into personal betrayal, but also democratic representations that reveal complex dynamics between women and the state in the twentieth century. Throughout this period, the rise of feminist consciousness and unions expanded women's social and political lives in Egypt (Badran, 1995, p.26). It is within this context that Shafik and Saadawi grew up. Shafik emerged from a generation of educated middle-class women and saw herself as a symbol of the modern Egyptian feminist (Nelson, 2008, p.320). As a political activist, she later became disillusioned with Nasser's movement and drew much attention and criticism for her demonstrations against the Nasser regime and nationalism. Saadawi emerged in a somewhat similar context, hailing from an upper-middle-class family who encouraged her to pursue her education (Hussey, 2020). During the Nasser regime, she discussed patriarchal injustices from her experience as a doctor and how those experiences shaped her as a feminist (Hussey, 2020). Her primary political struggle took place under the Sadat regime, where she continuously wrote criticisms about the government. Both women shaped broader intellectual and literary output that challenged the state narrative of both regimes. By analysing their memoirs, we can understand how women articulated their private and public positions and how they individually challenged the superficiality of state feminism and the traditionally masculine narratives of the regimes. Read together, the memoirs of Doria Shafik and Nawaal El Saadawi reveal an evolution in Egyptian feminist thought from liberal feminism to a radical critique that recognises nationalism itself as a site of patriarchal domination.

DORIA SHAFIK: TRACING DOWNFALL

Contextualising Nasser's Regime

The activism and support of educated professional women facilitated Nasser's rise to power and made women's rights a key issue under his regime (Hatem, 1998, p.87). State feminism under Nasser granted women the right to vote in 1956 and 50 days of paid maternity leave in 1959 (Hatem, 1998, p.87). Despite expanding women's liberties and protections, these reforms arguably failed to successfully engender equality as women statistically occupied a subordinate position in both professional and private spheres, demonstrating a gap between theoretical measures and lived experiences (Hatem, 1998, pp.88–90). Through media, state-sponsored feminist organisations, political parties, and curated histories of women, Nasser's regime worked to construct a national understanding of femininity. Although it appeared to endorse feminist progress, this construction amounted to a form of state feminism in which the regime tightly controlled feminist narratives, not only regulating activism, but also displacing and silencing independent women's movements (Nelson, 2018, p.310). By engaging with the memoirs of Doria Shafik, who initially supported the revolution but later denounced Nasser's repression, this article highlights how these movements were progressively marginalised and written out of the dominant political narrative.

Shafik's Life & Broader Legacy

During this time, Shafik's feminist activism developed, introducing the *Bint-al-Nil* (Daughters of the Nile) Union and advocating for women's rights (Nelson, 2018, p.319). Her dominant concern was the vulnerability of middle-class women with little control over their income (Nelson, 2018, p.319). She was a defender of Nasser's revolution, publishing texts that criticised the anti-revolutionary voices, (Nelson, 1996, p.186) and saw herself as the ideal middle-class feminist (Nelson, 2018, p.320). In 1952, she published 'Egypt's Renaissance' in the French magazine *La Femme Nouvelle*, where she discussed the coup as a renewal for Egyptian life and formed an outline to combat illiteracy as a key issue in the country among both men and women (Nelson, 1996, p.188). In these early stages, she received backlash for wanting attention from the press and advocating for more international cooperation with European and Western states to gain global recognition (Nelson, 1996, p.190). This advocacy revealed a disunity among revolutionary ideas and friction with other feminist movements that supported Nasser's non-aligned movement. Despite the expansion of women's political rights in 1956, Shafik challenged Nasser's one-party regime, officially positioning herself against it in 1957 (Nelson, 2008, p.312) by undertaking a hunger strike at

the Indian embassy (Nelson, 1996, p.244). Following this, she was erased from political life through censorship and isolated from the feminist organisation that supported Nasser. Despite the end of her house arrest, Shafik would continue to avoid the public sphere until her death (Nelson, 1996, p.165).

Responses to Shafik's Activism

Shafik remains a controversial figure in contemporary Egyptian historiography and sparks a range of responses. Her memoirs reclaim her story, retracing the responses of the government, the Egyptian population, the Egyptian feminist movements, and religious bodies to Shafik's activism. Looking at her memoirs collected by Cynthia Nelson entitled *Doria Shafik, Egyptian Feminist: A Woman Apart*, we can trace Shafik's responses to the changing atmosphere of Nasser's regime and the internalisation of her political environment. In the first few years of the regime, Nasser's Free Officer movement disbanded independent women's movements and excluded women from the Constitutional Assembly in 1954, resulting in Shafik protesting through her first hunger strike in 1954 (Nelson, 2018, p.26). She cited her refusal 'to be governed according to a constitution in whose drafting I have not been included' (Shafik cited in Nelson, 1996, p.193), placing women's rights at the forefront of debates surrounding national liberation and emphasising that a liberated Egypt is only as productive as her liberated daughters (Nelson, 1996, p.194). As well as maintaining women's rights as a key political topic in Egypt, her activism also underlined the failure of Nasser's regime to substantively represent women. Her beliefs often aligned with European and Western cooperation, resulting in frequent criticism from Egypt's nationalist movements, 'who took every opportunity to call [her] a pro-colonialist, pro-Zionist' (Shafik cited in Nelson, 1996, p.191). Their rejection of Shafik's internationalist ideology underscores the divergence of Nasser's state feminism from comparative Western feminism.

Shafik's internationalisation of the feminist movement would later impact her views on Egypt's nationalist government. During her time discussing the feminist movement abroad, the attempted assassination of Nasser by the Muslim Brotherhood led to a political crackdown that created an environment that Shafik could not defend. Her memoirs reflect these repressive developments: 'my country was advancing towards the abyss' (Shafik cited in Nelson, 1996, p.220). Upon her return, the state-controlled media failed to give her a platform to express her views (Nelson, 1996, p.234). Her second hunger strike in 1957 officially pinned her against the regime and was seen as an act of treason by Nasser's supporters (Nelson, 1996, p.245). No longer able to express her views, Shafik slowly disappeared from public spheres.

Her trajectory corroborates the historical analysis of Nasser's regime as both liberating from the monarchy but also as a regime that replicated its own post-colonial systems of societal control (Fahmy, 2021, p.110). Internationally, her protests were seen as a demonstration of political consciousness in the country, but internally, her actions were met with mockery and criticism (Nelson, 1996, p.207). Shafik reflected on the ridicule her activism faced in her memoirs, discussing the destructive rumours from the national press that were spread about her demonstration with claims 'that we were undressed before men—even foreign men—and had no morals' (Shafik cited in Nelson, 1996, p.198), demonstrating how her body was used to delegitimise her political activism (Shash, 2015, p.41). Eventually, mockery would reach her family life, where marriage was used to question her political legitimacy; her husband 'received telegrams from religious bodies ridiculing him for not being strong enough to "beat his wife and take her home"' (Shafik cited in Nelson, 1996, p.198). This mockery proves how Nasser's regime relied on patriarchal moral frameworks to police women's activism, shaping Shafik's understanding of state feminism as a multilayered form of oppression (Nelson, 1996, p.198).

Shafik's memoirs also reflect on how political freedom and the emancipation of women are mutually dependent (Nelson, 1996, p.194). Her exclusion and public mockery came from male-dominated religious and political movements, as well as feminist ones. Despite maintaining that women's rights and liberation movements go 'hand in hand', the nationalist feminist movement in support of Nasser isolated her and claimed that the further expansion of women's rights through activism during a politically unstable time would be too difficult and complex to carry out (Nelson, 1996, p.200). Her hunger strike in 1957 as a counter-revolutionary committed to Western bourgeois values severed her ties with the nationalist feminist movements (Nelson, 2008, p.326). Yet Shafik's memoirs reclaim her story from these popular narratives that ridiculed and delegitimised her. She wrote how her fight for reform left her in solitude against a system that actively sought to erase her: 'alone I bear the responsibility of this work' (Shafik cited in Nelson, 1996, p.247). By challenging Nasser's populist regime, she highlights a disjuncture between the promised inclusion of women and reality (Bier, 2011, p.79). Her criticism reveals the complicated nature of Egypt's post-colonial state, not as a liberating force, but as a reorganisation of patriarchal structures under revolutionary language.

NAWAL SAADAWI: ARREST & INCARCERATION AS PLATFORMS FOR DISCUSSING MULTILAYERED STATE AND GENDER OPPRESSION

Sadat's Regime, Divergence from Nasserism & Saadawi

Sadat's state feminism granted women the right to travel without their husband's permission and raised the age of marriage consent to eighteen (Abdelrazek-Alsiefy, 2023, p.12). These laws came to be known as Jehan's laws, named after Sadat's wife, and were praised for expanding women's rights (Abdelrazek-Alsiefy, 2023, p.12). Nevertheless, state news and TV outlets pushed for a conservative representation of gender and encouraged women to stay in the domestic sphere (Hatem, 1998, p.93), facilitated by an education system that pushed traditional gender roles from an early age (Hatem, 1998, p.97). The upward social mobility of women during the middle of the twentieth century led to a rise of

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The analysis of [these] memoirs acts as a site to reclaim feminist movements from state feminism, challenging the dominant gendered narrative of the state by continuing to exercise intellectual freedom.

female middle-class Egyptian authors (Ahmed, 1992, pp.213–214) like Saadawi who challenged the growing conservatism in Sadat's regime. Saadawi was a doctor and a writer and used these experiences to articulate and theorise feminism in the context of Sadat's continued erasure of women from political life. Through her writing, she not only challenged Sadat's regime, but also broader issues of misogyny and abuse faced by women in Egypt (Ahmed, 1992, p.215). Her memoirs reflect on patriarchal and political structures as mutually reinforcing forms of oppression towards women.

Saadawi's Depictions of Multilayered State & Gendered Oppression

Published in 1986, Saadawi's book *Memoirs of a Woman's Prison* describes her arrest and incarceration under the Sadat regime. Contrasting Shafik's memoirs, Saadawi's

experience was personally compiled, allowing her to use literary devices to portray her vision. Saadawi makes use of a range of narratives and literary devices to blur political and patriarchal oppression and explores how both are portrayed as a loss of identity. In doing so, she demonstrates a shift in the Egyptian feminist perspective and suggests that colonial, national, and masculine oppression are intertwined.

Saadawi emphasises a solidarity among women in the pseudo-families and sisterhood created in the prison cells, stating that '[her] name was replaced by this number' (Saadawi, 1986, p.24). In turn, this stimulated a sense of unity that challenges a system intended to erase humanity and isolate. In her memoirs, she uses the body as a theme for understanding the state oppression of women. Her depiction of rape and murder as a disciplinary tool by the police demonstrates how Sadat's regime used abusive mechanisms as a means of punishment and discipline. During her arrest, she contemplates her fate and how the policemen will 'rape maybe, before they murder' (Saadawi, 1986, p.19). Rape as a tool for patriarchal domination used by the state further entwines these two structures of power into one, blurring patriarchal and political oppression. In the same way abuse and discipline become merged, patriarchy and politics become one, revealing the use of the gender hierarchy as a tool for political order as she 'entered prison because (...) of oppression by men' (Saadawi, 1986, p.44). Portraying state and gendered oppression of women actively challenges Sadat's 'state feminism' by contradicting the regime's claim to modernise the nation. Her memoirs act not just as a testimony, but as a symbol of the broader ideological shift from liberal feminism towards a more structurally formed feminism, which challenged the state and its representations of women as reserved for the domestic sphere.

The analysis of Saadawi's memoirs acts as a site to reclaim feminist movements from state feminism, challenging the dominant gendered narrative of the state by continuing to exercise intellectual freedom. This tension is explored in her critique of state censorship as she writes that the warden claims it is 'easier to give you a pistol than a pen and paper' (Saadawi, 1986, p.49). She sees writing as a way of reclaiming identity and thought; it is political and personal resistance, as she notes 'I write in my memory' (Saadawi, 1986, p.69). This act of writing challenges state representations of women that focus on masculine conceptions of feminism (Booth, 2001, p.308) and reclaims the political appropriation of women (Buss, 2002, p.xii). Adopting Buss's (2002, p.21) understanding of memoirs as curated narrations, Saadawi's experience should not be seen as a confessional space, but as a historical resource that shows how women's acts of resistance were reclaimed

(Buss, 2002, p.186). Where Doria Shafik’s writings demonstrate the effects of political loss of feminism on her personal life and the impact of revolution, Saadawi expresses the personal influence of revolution and its failure, reappropriating the deteriorating movement that challenges the gendered oppression of the post-colonial state.

CONCLUSION

This article examined how feminist memoirs under the repressive governments of Nasser and Sadat created an alternative source of counter-narratives and challenged the state’s claim to women’s increased political agency. Shafik and Saadawi’s memoirs demonstrate that nationalist, revolutionary, and masculine discourses silenced women’s voices. Their articulation, despite political restrictions, allows authors to exercise their sense of self in a society that seeks to erase them. Doria Shafik’s memoirs challenge secularist ideas that colonialism and religion are the only oppressors of women’s rights, recognising that Nasser’s post-colonial state acted as a gendered force. Her experience provides a deeper analysis for historians to reflect on the broader limits of Nasser’s nationalist movement and the repressive nature of his so-called feminist reforms. Her memoirs reclaim her character from political appropriation by exposing how her private life was used as a tool to delegitimise her political theories, allowing her to reclaim feminism and femininity from Sadat’s state feminism and conservative portrayals of gender. Saadawi’s experience of arrest and incarceration reflects on how state and gender oppression are embedded in each other and how this type of multilayered oppression affects women in particular. Her memoirs directly challenge Sadat’s state feminism, reclaiming feminist discourse for feminist movements, rather than political appropriation. These memoirs challenge the assumption that subjectivity undermines the validity of memoirs as historiographical sources, demonstrating how women used memoirs and writing to reclaim their marginalised voices in a repressive society. Both women’s writings demonstrate how Egyptian women’s feminism flourished despite nationalist independence movements, not because of them.

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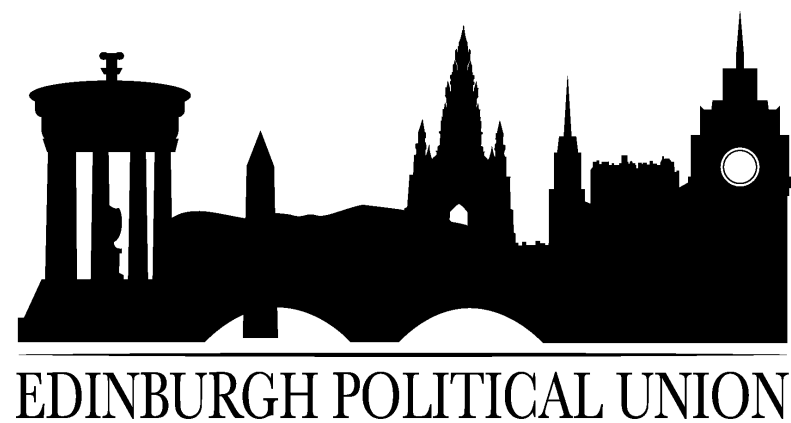
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CONCLUDING REMARKS

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