

THE ATLAS

A NEWSPAPER

SOUL SEARCHING

Silicon Valley, the Vatican
and the fight over the
meaning of life **P14**

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The Atlas launch event

Wednesday, 28 October

1pm ET / 6pm CET / 7pm CAT / 10:30pm IST

A virtual gathering. All readers welcome

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▲ The Bibliotheca Alexandrina, overlooking the Mediterranean seafront, is the modern-day successor to the ancient Library of Alexandria in Egypt. (Illustration: Mariam El-Reweny)

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Illustration: Yemsrach Yetneberk

New to *The Atlas*?

This is a newspaper. It's about the planet, and the people who live here, and the wonderful and crazy and terrible things that we do and see. The journalism inside it is produced by people, too.

We have designed the newspaper to make it as easy to read for as many people as possible.

No paywalls. No logins.

And a distinctly un-sexy format – the humble PDF – that lets us bypass digital censorship, of both the authoritarian and algorithmic varieties.

We live in the same world. Let's read from the same page. Then, when you've finished reading, and if you've learned something new, give the newspaper to someone else – someone you know, and love, and trust.

Get the next edition delivered directly to you: theatlasnewspaper.org. Would you like a print-friendly A4 version of *The Atlas*, to read with friends and family, or leave in coffee shops and libraries? Email Editor-in-Chief Simon Allison at simon@codastory.com

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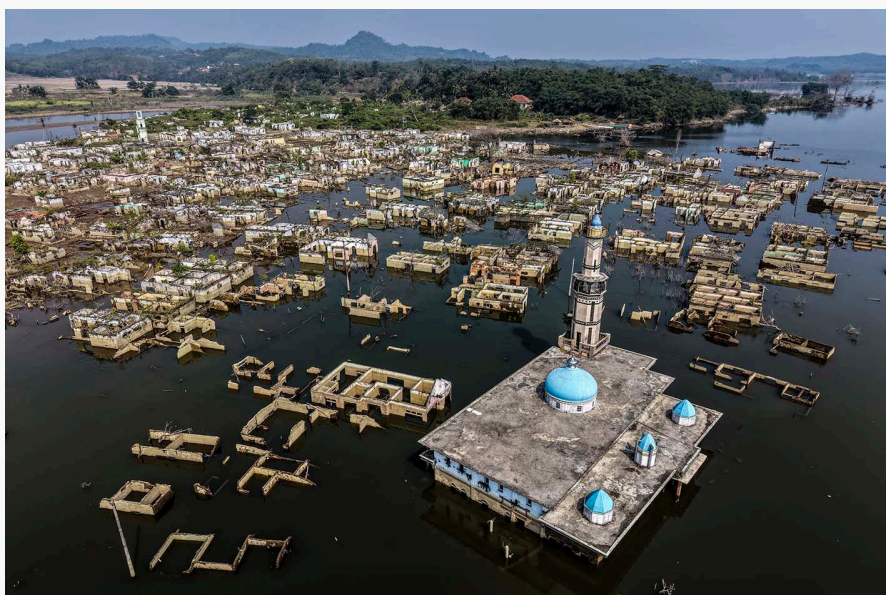
A jaw-dropping, super-sized, mind-blowing, monster Godzilla

It has begun. Meteorologists say this will be the strongest El Niño in a millennium. Coda Story's early warning system tells us it's already playing havoc with weather patterns, as publications around the world reach for their strongest adjectives. Read together, they reveal the contours of something much, much bigger.

▶ Waters off the coast of Peru are normally one of the most productive fisheries in the world ... But in late August, the government cancelled the anchovy season early: the El Niño event ... sent full-grown anchovies in search of food to deeper, colder waters, ruining the catch. – *Nature*

▶ In Panama...reduced rainfall associated with El Niño has prompted the Canal Authority to restrict both the number of ships using the canal and their maximum permitted cargo to conserve water and keep the passage operating. – *Valor International*

▶ El Niño doesn't recognize borders. As the Pacific gets warmer, it sends ripples through the atmosphere that disturb weather patterns thousands of kilometers away. – *China Daily*



▶ Markets are already reacting. Since late June, corn prices have gone up about a third, while sugar has risen almost a quarter since late July. – *Quartz*

▶ A new generation of insects may appear as a result of warm autumn in some regions of Russia. – *TASS*

▶ Malaysia's Securities Commission plans to ask companies to disclose how they are preparing for El Niño amid concerns the country's businesses may be ill prepared for the fallout from the weather phenomenon. – *The Star (Malaysia)*

▶ The Ecuadorian scientific community...has warned of its impact on the flora and fauna of the Galapagos Islands, home to the highest concentration of species not found elsewhere on Earth... "plankton, algae, and smaller fish species, which are food for larger marine animals, practically disappear," explained Washington Tapia, director of Biodiversa Ecuador. – *AP*

▶ Somang village in Lebak, Indonesia, was deliberately flooded to make way for a dam that opened in 2023, but it has now re-emerged due to El Niño-driven drought. (Photo: Bay Ismoyo/AFP)

▶ Nairobi opens emergency centre as authorities prepare for possible evacuations. – *The Eastleigh Voice*

▶ Gov. Newsom declares state of emergency for El Niño that could pound California coast. – *The San Francisco Chronicle*

Which disruptions will spread? Who is prepared? Coda's early-warning system – powered by journalists tracking news across geographies, technologies and power structures – brings these scattered reports together, helping us see emerging patterns and know what to watch next.



SHANGHAI

On the 15th day of the 8th month of the lunar calendar (25 September this year), China celebrates the mid-autumn festival with mooncakes, lanterns and light shows, like this one in Shanghai. The 3,000-year-old harvest festival honours the legend of Chang'e, the immortal moon goddess. Next year, the spacecraft Chang'e 7 will attempt to land on the moon's south pole. (Photo: AFP)

CURRENTS

Yes, we see exactly what's happening

Walking down Lady Somerset Road, an elegant street on the northern edge of the once decidedly inelegant Kentish Town, a visitor might miss the discreet signs that an election is coming up. "Vote Labour" suggests the occasional placard in a plant pot. This is Keir Starmer territory. But on 1 September, the former British prime minister stepped down as a member of parliament for Holborn and St Pancras, triggering a by-election next month. The left wing

Green Party of England and Wales sees an opportunity. So much so that its candidate is party leader Zack Polanski, gambling with his political future. The Labour candidate, Sagal Abdi-Wali, came to Britain as a child in the 1990s with parents who had fled Somalia. "Do you see what's happening?" tweeted a far right Reform Party politician, claiming Abdi-Wali was being "foisted" on the British public. It's the question that now animates this local election – do candidates still matter more than social media smears? – *Shougat Dasgupta in London*



▲ India's Brics summit resulted in a series of mist opportunities. (Photo: Ishan Tankha/The Atlas)



No stanning on ceremony

Diplomatic motorcades shut down major roads in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, earlier this month, with the Russian and Chinese presidents among the dignitaries in town for a Shanghai Cooperation Council summit. No matter: the rest of the country's

attention was focused on the 6th World Nomad Games. In the showpiece finals in Cholpon Ata, Kyrgyzstan's national men's team defeated arch-rivals Kazakhstan in both the kok boru and kokpar.

▲ (Photograph: Aigerim Turgunbaeva/The Atlas)

Delhi's clean dream and its reality are poles apart

Street poles tell their own stories in India's capital. One of them bears a giant poster of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, his "Humanity First" message undercut by the nest of surveillance cameras above. From another pole emerges a fine mist of water – an anti-pollution measure that critics have described as expensive and essentially futile. Delhi is a water-stressed city that also has some of the world's most persistently awful air quality. New misting machines were deployed as part of the city's frantic and temporary glow-up ahead of the Brics summit earlier this month, which was attended by both China's President Xi Jinping and Russia's President Vladimir Putin. – *Ishan Tankha in Delhi*



HAVANA

Amid rolling blackouts and an economic blockade imposed by the US, summer carnivals kept Cuba dancing to the Conga beat. “¡Un, dos, tres, pa’llá! ¡Un, dos, tres, pa’cá! That’s how you dance it. The swag comes from within,” wrote historian Marley Pulido for *In Dance*. “Drummers beat at their own rhythm as the neighborhood follows them, dancing its worries away.” (Photo: Ramon Espinosa/AP)

The roof of the world is melting

And Tibetans in exile still can't assess the full extent of the disaster.

Ishan Tankha in Dharamshala

Several of the great fault lines that run through our societies, and our planet, converge in a small town in northern India.

Here, in Dharamshala, in the shadow of the Dhauladhar mountain range, sits the Dalai Lama and his

Tibetan government-in-exile.

The Tibetan Plateau, controlled by China since 1951, is on the other side of the mountains.

The exiles watch on as China harnesses the immense power of modern technology – surveillance infrastructure, cellphone networks and, increasingly, artificial intelligence – to tighten its grip on Tibet. They also watched on, last month, when a collapsing glacier unleashed devastating flash floods in the Nepal-Tibet border region.

In Nepal, 1450 people were officially declared dead, and over 6,000 missing. In Tibet, the official numbers are far lower: 45 people killed, and more than 500 missing. But it's hard to know the full scale of the disaster in Tibet, because so little information is getting in, or out.

Kalsang Tamang, 64, has been able to confirm that at least four family



▲ Dharamshala, on the Indian side of the Himalayas, is home to the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan government-in-exile. (Photos: Ishan Tankha/The Atlas)

▼ Portraits of Tibetans who died by self-immolation on display near the Dalai Lama's official residence.



members were killed in the floods. But that's because his relatives lived on the Nepali side of the border. "For Tibetans searching for family on the other side of the Nepal border, that isn't even an option," he said.

The Chinese government has denied access to Tibet to foreign journalists, and even Tibetan families in the region.

It was different during the last major disaster, in January 2025, when an earthquake struck Shigatse prefecture. Then, Tibetans across the Tibet Autonomous Region organised relief efforts and were able to share updates relatively freely.

"Influencers on social media were successful in raising money and providing help, there were many videos we saw online," said Lobsang Yangtso, a senior researcher at the International Tibet Network.

This time around, Chinese authorities have banned information-sharing on social media. Disasters, she said, "have a way of uniting communities and, in Tibet, the Chinese don't want that at any cost".

Tenzing Lekshey, director at the Tibetan Policy Institute and



spokesperson for the government in exile, reinforces Lobsang's point. "The world talks about the Tibet-Nepal floods, a reminder of Tibet's sovereignty. They don't speak of Xizang, which is what the Chinese want to replace the word 'Tibet'."

The lack of information makes it difficult for the Tibetan government-in-exile to know how to respond to this disaster – or to anticipate the

next one.

Yangtso wonders what the impact will be of the mega-dam in Mêdog County, on Tibet's border with India, that is currently under construction – it is planned to be three times the size of the Three Gorges Dam.

"China's environmental and mining regulations in Tibet effectively disregard downstream consequences, even for neighbouring countries," said Yangtso.

In his residence in McLeod Ganj, a suburb of Dharamshala, the 91-year-old Dalai Lama still grants regular audiences to visitors.

Last Sunday, *The Atlas* was there, and tried to ask him a question about the flash floods and Tibetan grief – but received a blessing instead. ●



▲ Exiles have struggled to get updates about the fate of family on the Chinese side of the border.

◀ The Snow Lion flag – a symbol of Tibetan independence – continues to fly high in Dharamshala.



NARATHIWAT

Late last month, in Thailand's far south, more than a thousand Zebra doves took part in the latest installment of the city's annual birdsong competition. Bird handlers from all over the region compete for a Royal Trophy handed out by Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn. Birds can be entered in four categories: alto, tenor, soprano and "rising star". (Photo: Madaree Tohlala/AFP)

Sleepless September in Yemen

In June, Osama Farhan reported for *The Atlas* from Taiz, a city in southwestern Yemen besieged by rebel Houthis. He wrote about a club that had screened movies for 67 consecutive weeks – the result of a ceasefire that was holding long enough to permit the illusion of normal life. That illusion was shattered this month, as the Houthis took control of the Bab al-Mandab strait and Yemen's Red Sea coast. Now, from a very different Taiz, Osama gives us an eyewitness account of life on the front line.

► A passenger mini-bus drives past a war-damaged building on the eastern front line in Taiz, Yemen. (Photo: Abdulnasser Alseddik/AP)

It was nearly three in the morning when the sound of an explosion shook the house.

“Osama, Osama,” I heard my wife say, as she reached out for my hand. “What was that?” But she already knew what it was. We both did. Having been in and out of a civil war since 2014, the people of Taiz know the sound of shelling.

I took her hand and rested my other hand on her belly, carrying our first child. “Don’t be afraid,” I said, “that sound was far away.”

I barely had time to complete my words before we heard a second explosion. My wife wanted me to help her up. She wanted, she said, “to wash up and pray”. Prayer was all we had to fight our fear.

Taiz, where we live, is under siege. The Houthis, who control the Yemeni capital Sanaa and large swathes of northern Yemen, are making rapid advances along the Red Sea coast. They’ve taken the port city of Mokha and have moved further through the highlands of Kadaha and Jabal Habashi towards Taiz.

Yemen’s civil war began in 2014 and Taiz has effectively been under siege for over a decade, though a

By the time I returned, the street had already returned to a familiar rhythm. My wife was even doing housework. What else is there to do but get on with the day?

ceasefire agreed in 2022 has largely held, even after it expired.

That morning, I went to the corner shop for breakfast. My wife stood at the window, watching me until I disappeared around the corner. By the time I returned, the street had already returned to a familiar rhythm. My wife was even doing housework. What else is there to do but get on with the day?

But the shelling still hasn’t stopped. Even typing this piece, I have to stop mid-sentence when an explosion sounds particularly close.

More than 125,000 people have already been displaced. War is here again and no one knows when it might go away. ●

This story was published in collaboration with Egab.



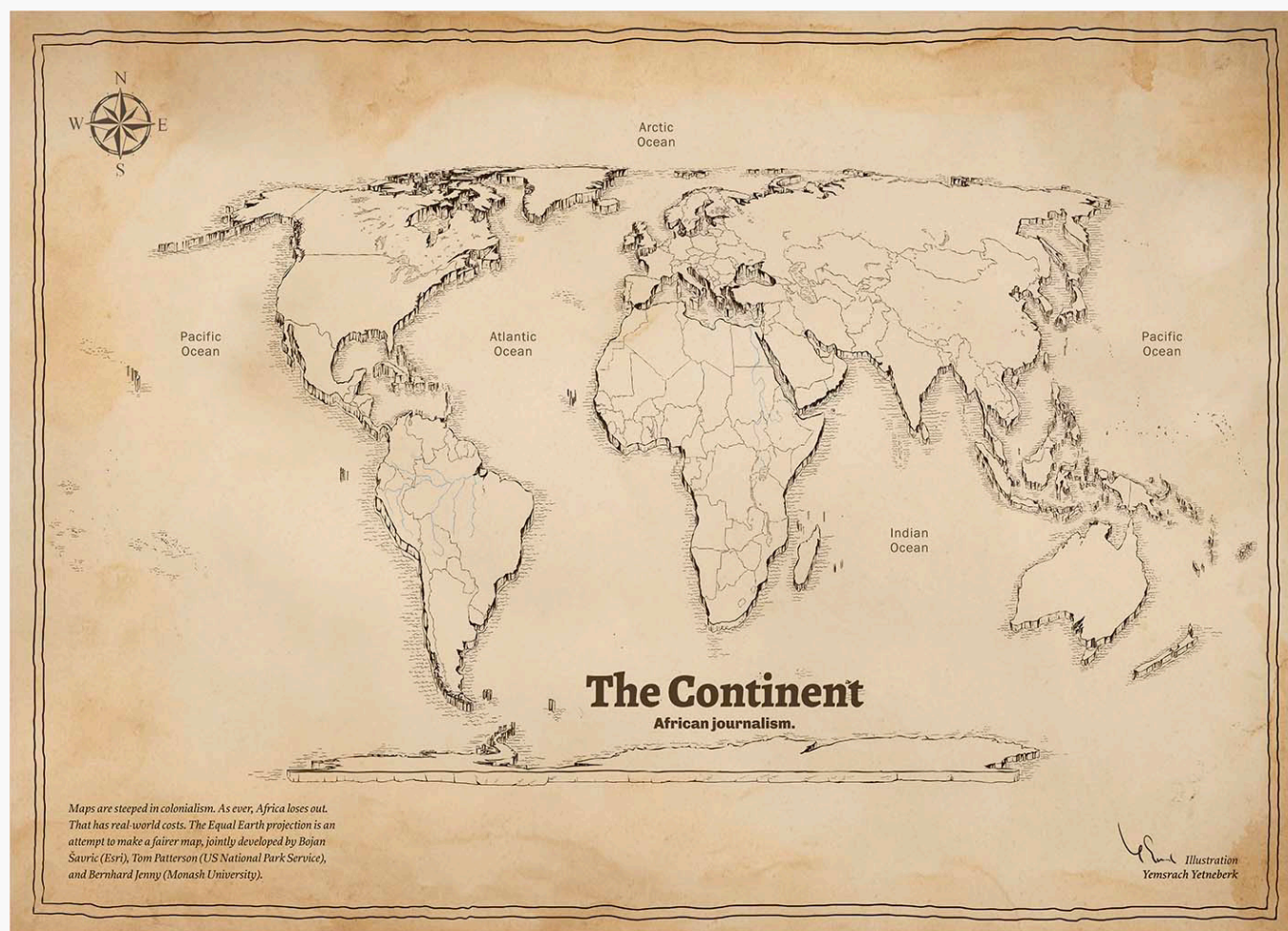


Photo: Skyler Reid

CODA STORY & THE CONTINENT

Things are changing, fast. Navigate the new world order with *The Atlas* newspaper
- a collaboration between Coda Story and *The Continent*.

BACKGROUND CHECK:
Where in the world is this poster? Find out if you're right on p35



The world was not enough

Kiri Rupiah in Bulawayo

It took Yemsrach Yetneberk a week, sitting in her office in Addis Ababa, painstakingly tracing every single line. By the time she was finished – adding depth to the land masses, texture to the water, and smudging the background to give it that old map feel – Yetneberk had drawn a map unlike any she had seen before.

Greenland was smaller than usual.

Much smaller. South America looked strangely elongated. And Africa was at the centre of the world.

Yetneberk* is an illustrator for the pan-African newspaper *The Continent*. The newspaper published her map, based on the Equal Earth projection, in August 2025. Just over a year later, the United Nations voted to endorse that same projection for use on official maps, replacing the more familiar Mercator projection.

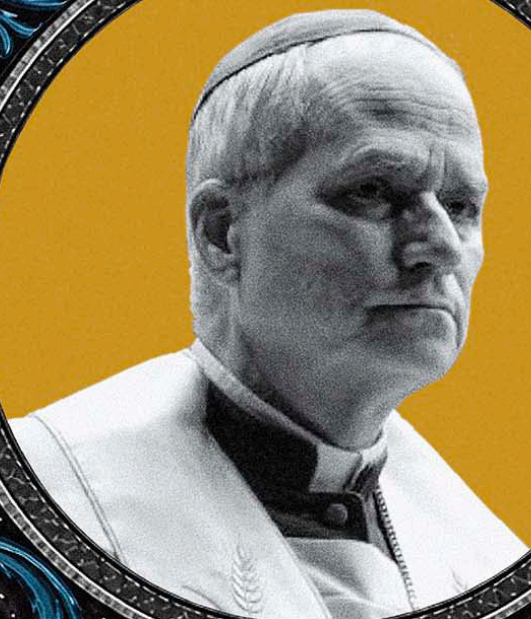
It's not that the Mercator map is "wrong". It was designed in the 16th century for navigation, and is very good at that job. But it's not good at helping us understand the size of the world. In the Mercator projection, Greenland can look roughly the same size as Africa. In reality, Africa is about 14 times larger.

Size matters. A civil society

coalition led by Africa No Filter launched the *Correct the Map* campaign, arguing that a map making Africa look smaller than it is will distort how the continent is understood – and treated. The African Union backed it, and Togo's foreign minister, Robert Dussey, made the case in international forums.

Cartographer Bojan Šavrič, who helped create the Equal Earth projection, told *The Atlas*: "No map projection could basically show the true world," he said. Equal Earth gets areas right, but not every shape or distance. "Maps create a perception."

*Yemsrach Yetneberk also illustrated the world map for *The Atlas* (see page 2)



Ai

Is AI conscious? The Vatican wants to know

(Illustration: Anna Jibladze)

Isobel Cockerell in Rome

As one, three thousand drones arise above the dome of St Peter's Basilica. It is September 2025, and Kimbal Musk – little brother of Elon – is showcasing his drone spectacle to the Vatican. Lighting up the night sky, the machines gather to form an effigy of the late Pope Francis.

The younger Musk runs Nova Sky Stories, a drone show company. He had travelled to Rome earlier in the year to offer his services to Pope Francis. It didn't happen then: the Italian news agency *Ansa* reported that Musk did not observe the correct protocols, and was rebuffed.

But when Pope Francis died, something changed. Musk told journalists he received a letter with the new Pope Leo's blessing to bring his flying machines to the Vatican. And here they were, shapeshifting now into the iconic image from the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel: Michelangelo's two hands – God's and Adam's – almost touching.

Watching in the VIP section was Lorena Jaume-Palasi, a prominent researcher and founder of several ethical tech NGOs, who has served as adviser on AI to the United Nations and the European Union.

Jaume-Palasi was surprised to learn that Kimbal Musk was behind the drone show, and that the event itself was partly sponsored by tech billionaire Luke Nosek.

Nosek, alongside fellow billionaire Peter Thiel and Kimbal's trillionaire brother Elon, is a founding member of the so-called "PayPal mafia", a group of co-founders who have gone on to wield enormous influence in the tech world.

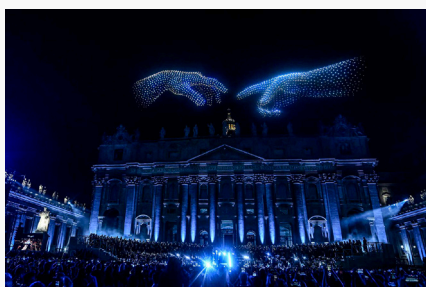
(Just a few months later, when the Epstein files were released, Kimbal Musk's name appeared repeatedly. The emails suggest that convicted



▲ Pope Leo XIV greets Anthropic co-founder Christopher Olah during the presentation of his encyclical on artificial intelligence, *Magnifica humanitas*, at the Vatican, in May. (Photo: Alessandra Tarantino/AP)

sex offender Jeffrey Epstein helped orchestrate an intimate relationship between Musk and a woman in his circle. The woman has not publicly addressed the relationship with Musk, but in 2021 her lawyer told journalists that she was "enslaved in Epstein's sex-trafficking organisation for 13 years". Musk did not respond to requests for comment, but has previously said Epstein did not personally introduce him to the woman in question, and that he only met Epstein once. Being named in the files does not connote legal wrongdoing.)

The public drone show (pictured below) was the entertainment. The business was happening behind closed doors. Along with Jaume-



▲ (Photo: Filippo Monteforte/AFP)

Palasi, the Vatican had invited some of the world's most prominent AI thinkers to help chart a course for the "coexistence" of artificial intelligence with human intelligence.

Among the participants was the "Godfather of AI" Geoffrey Hinton, acclaimed science writer Yuval Noah Harari, Turing Award winner Yoshua Bengio, physicist Max Tegmark, and computer scientist Stuart Russell.

The conversations began on Zoom calls, then moved to opulent meeting rooms in the heart of Vatican City, where the group sat beneath vaulted ceilings and marble busts to discuss humanity's future.

Jaume-Palasi had come to Rome with one aim in mind. She disagreed with the very premise of the discussion – the question of how we can "coexist" with machines – and wanted to reject it. "The implication is quite obvious:

‘coexisting’ with machines implies that machines have an existence that is parallel to human existence.” She knew the opinions of her fellow attendees. Geoffrey Hinton, for instance, has publicly stated “there’s no reason” why AI systems won’t become conscious, and that there’s a “10% to 20%” chance that they will wipe out humanity. Yuval Noah Harari talks about a future where humans become cyborgs. Tegmark envisions a possible scenario where we create a sentient AI that replaces the human species entirely.

These ideas are deeply disturbing to Jaume-Palasi, who argues that they are part of an ideological, “eugenicist” Silicon Valley belief system.

Hinton and Bengio declined a request for comment, while Harari, Tegmark, Russell and the working group’s scientific co-ordinator did not respond.

OLD GUARD, NEW GODS

Six thousand miles away from Rome, in the heart of Silicon Valley, a new religion is being built. One that says a sentient, conscious artificial intelligence can free humanity from pain, suffering, and poverty – or perhaps, end the human race altogether. AI’s biggest evangelists believe that, one day, their machines could become a kind of all-seeing, all knowing, digital God.

“What are the characteristics of God? What can God do? If you just list out those characteristics, they mirror AI almost identically. AI will become omnipotent, omniscient. It has all the characteristics,” the tech entrepreneur Bryan Johnson told me over a video call from his house in California.

Johnson believes it is possible. He is best known for his relentless pursuit of another characteristic

more commonly attributed to God: immortality. “The narrative is God created us,” Johnson said. “The irony would be that God didn’t create us, but we actually create God.”

Naturally, the Vatican is paying close attention. In recent years, it has poured lavish resources into bringing researchers, philosophers, theologians, tech leaders, and engineers to Rome to study and discuss AI. Amid a frenzy of lobbying, pomp and circumstance, the Church and the tech world are competing – and collaborating – to define the narrative around what it means to be human in an AI-dominated world.

Within the Vatican, different

▼ A broader gathering of working groups at the Vatican in September 2025.

(Photo: Fondazione Fratelli Tutti)



factions have emerged, with priests, friars and bishops jostling to have the Pope's ear on the subject of AI.

"There's a spectrum," Jaume-Palasi observed. "There's a lot of different interests in the Vatican with regard to big tech."

The Church finds itself in a unique position to mount a response to AI takeover that is, in many ways, more full-throated, thoughtful and better-informed than that of many governments.

"I think the advantage for the Holy See is — to use a crude term — we don't have a horse in the race. Our economy doesn't depend on it. We're not in competition for foreign direct investment," said Bishop Paul Tighe, secretary of the Vatican's Dicastery for Culture and Education, and a prominent Vatican expert on AI.

But some critics argue the Vatican is nonetheless taking sides. In February, the Vatican Bank launched two lists of stocks it said "aligned with the social doctrine of the Catholic Church." Among the top US investments were Meta and Amazon. And, when Pope Leo unveiled *Magnifica Humanitas*, his 40,000-word AI encyclical, in May, he did so with Anthropic co-founder Christopher Olah sitting alongside him.

There, Olah described AI as "a little like bringing a fictional character to life. And now we're entering an extraordinary world where those fictional characters speak to us, do work, have jobs. This clearly raises questions beyond computer science."

Olah's inclusion felt to some like the Church was giving Anthropic and the Silicon Valley worldview he represents a papal stamp of approval.

Bishop Tighe demurs. "It didn't mean that everything that comes out of Anthropic was being somehow canonised by the Holy See," he said.

He added that AI cannot be allowed to be developed by a small group of

people who may have a fundamental mastery of the technology, but "who don't have any particular great insights into the future of humanity".

THE MEANING OF LIFE

In coming to Rome, Jaume-Palasi said, "my main intention was to avoid having the Vatican present a statement saying machines are sentient". She wanted "to present at least a minimal amount of resistance".

This proved difficult. As the conversation between the scientists and scholars progressed, it felt to her like most of the group was pushing vehemently for a distinct narrative: that artificial intelligence has the capacity to be a conscious being.

Jaume-Palasi found herself in the strange, isolating position of being one of the only speakers — alongside another woman — pushing back.

"There were two women that would not sign off on the idea of sentient machines or conscious machines," Jaume-Palasi said. "Everyone else was sort of fine with the idea of consciousness in machines, saying that there is some sort of agency behind the new AI systems."

More than once, tempers ran high. Jaume-Palasi recounted how the men in the room reminded her who she was talking to: some of the "most-cited" scientists in the world.

She believes the idea that machines have consciousness sets humanity's future on a horrifying path. If you contend that machines are more than mere objects, this has direct legal implications, she explains. It becomes the machines — rather than the human programmers — that are liable for the harm they cause.

Jaume-Palasi found herself disturbed by how fervently most of the group wanted to sign off on the idea. And there was a bigger intention, as she saw it: to convince the Vatican itself. "Once you have

Olah's inclusion felt, to some, like the Church was giving Anthropic — and the Silicon Valley worldview he represents — a papal stamp of approval.

a head of a religious state with 1.4-billion believers telling you AI has consciousness, then you are changing the narrative big time," she said. After that, AI becomes a belief system, freed from the constraints of science, such as proper safety testing, risk assessments, and regulation.

For Jaume-Palasi, the Church's intention seems clear: to create an "infrastructure of dependency" so that tech leaders rely on the Church to legitimise them. "I think they are interested in becoming the moral platform of big tech."

She succeeded in her goal — in the end, the document signed by her working group did not make any mention of machines being conscious. Neither did the encyclical: in it, Pope Leo emphasised that AI systems "do not feel joy or pain, do not mature through relationships and do not know from within what love, work, friendship or responsibility mean".

So far, Jaume-Palasi says, she has not been invited back to Rome. ●

Isobel Cockerell has spent the past year trying to understand the courtship — and locking of horns — between Silicon Valley and the Vatican, two enormously powerful institutions whose decisions affect billions of lives. She has attended conferences and university classes; stood outside Peter Thiel's infamous "antichrist" lectures as priests and others scuttled out; and spent hours interviewing clergy and tech leaders. Her long-form feature will be published on *Coda Story* in the coming months.



Photo: Badru Katumba

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THE ATLAS SUBSCRIBES TO...

This month we've got \$345 to spend on our favourite independent news outlets – publications that we love and trust, and think you should know about too. The money comes from you, readers of *The Atlas*, via individual donations. We'd love to add more outlets to our growing list – if you'd like to help, you can find our donation details at theatlasnewspaper.org.

THE REPUBLIC

Before I had read a word of *The Republic's* journalism, I fell in love with the magazine through its front covers. Always beautifully illustrated, these are works of art as well as journalism. That style – appearing effortless yet anything but – sets the tone for the entire publication. Equally stylish is its ambition: to explain the world from a Nigerian vantage point, “recognising that African stories are not peripheral to global history but essential to understanding it”. – *Simon Allison*

The Atlas purchased two copies of the latest edition of *The Republic* magazine – headlined ‘Africa’s Hustle Republics’ – for \$59, including shipping.



▲ The Republic magazine.
Visit www.rpublic.com

EGAB

Egab is a go-to resource if you want news from countries where most people live but are rarely heard from. Its network of journalists who live in the places they report from are sympathetic witnesses to life as it is lived thousands of miles away from global capitals. With outstanding editorial support, Egab enables local journalists to tell the story as they see it, and connects them to international newsrooms, including *Coda* and *The Continent*. – *Shougat Dasgupta*

With a small top-up from our own budget, *The Atlas* asked Egab to commission Yemeni journalist Osama Farhan's eyewitness report from Taiz, amid the intensifying Houthi offensive.



ALREADY ON THE LIST:

Himal Southasian released a stellar investigation into American archaeologist Mary Slusser, who made her name as an expert on Nepali culture – even while looting some of the country's most precious artefacts. The killer line: “It is a very sweet piece... I don't think the temple will miss it at all.” The magazine has also introduced “The Greatest Paywall in Southasia”, which guarantees free access to everyone based in Southasia.

Nigerian investigative outlet *HumAngle* is leading this week with a story from Murbai, a rural community in northeast Nigeria, where journalist Saduwo Banyawa is solving a mystery: why are so many people in this village suddenly going blind? It also reports on the collapse of an informal gold mine in Mayo-Kam, Taraba State. Rising gold prices have sparked a new, often dangerous gold rush in parts of West Africa.



Photo: Egab

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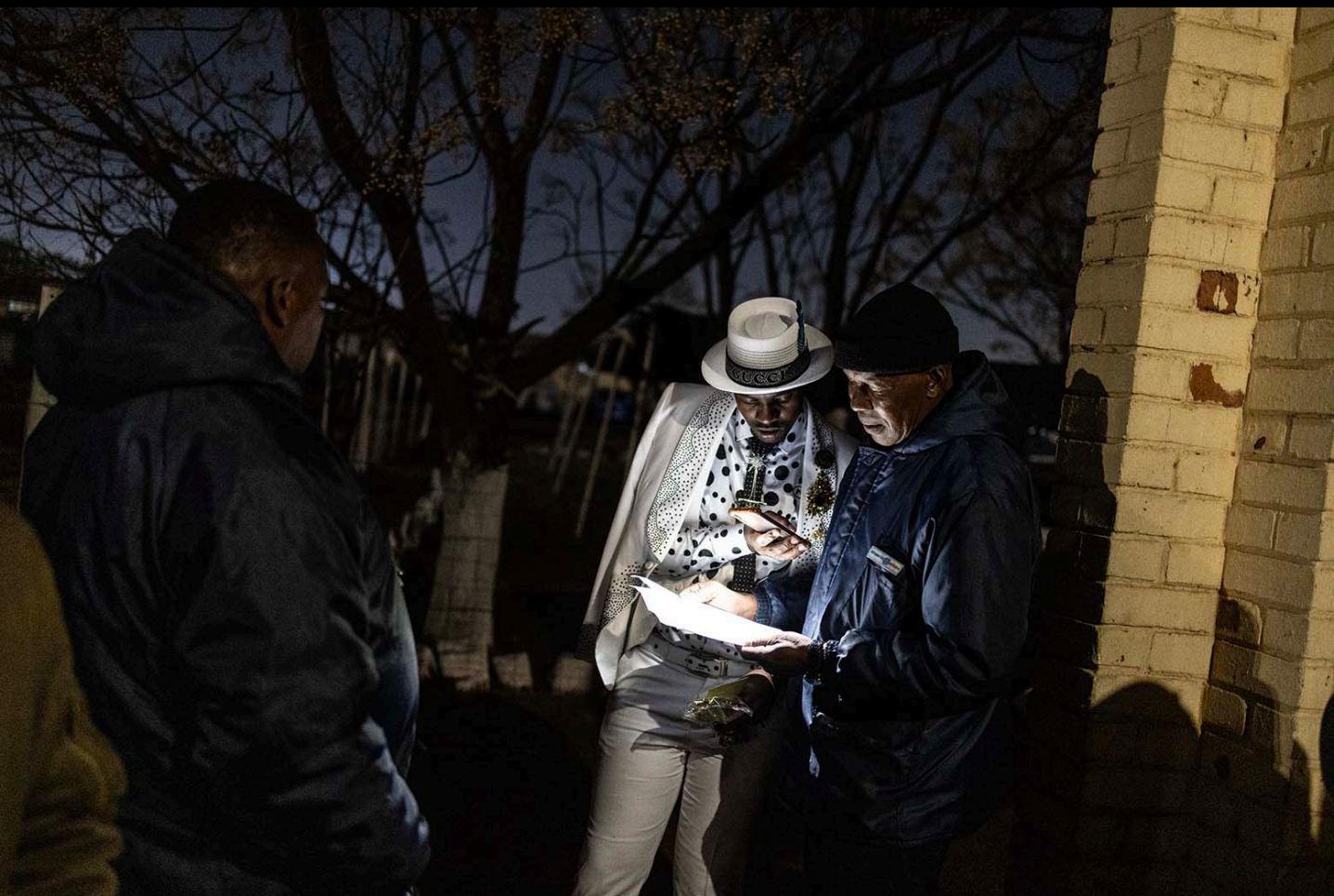
BACKGROUND CHECK:

Where in the world is this poster? Find out if you're right on p35

Johannesburg's best dressed

Photos and words: Paul Botes/*The Atlas*

The Swenka tradition emerged among migrant workers in Johannesburg during the mid-20th century. Men living in workers' hostels would transform themselves with carefully tailored suits, shoes and hats. They paid close attention to the smallest details: cufflinks, tie pins, socks, watches. They would compete in informal contests, presenting their clothes through a series of distinctive poses and movements. Suits were sometimes tailored, or sourced through high-end stores. Men would often own several suits.



Over time, Swenka has evolved. Grooming remains of paramount importance. But what began as a community tradition has become more theatrical, with contestants incorporating choreography, character, and stage presence into their performances. Contests are held every few weeks in Johannesburg, South Africa's largest city, and across KwaZulu-Natal province. A women's category, Onobuhle ("beauty" in isiZulu), was more recently introduced. ●





Men living in workers' hostels would transform themselves with carefully tailored suits, shoes and hats. They paid close attention to the smallest details.





What began as a community tradition has become more theatrical, with contestants incorporating choreography, character, and stage presence.





Street cred tests Tehran's limits

Iranshahr and Sanaei are completely unlike anywhere else in the Iranian capital. Maybe that's why Tehranis keep coming back.

Ariya Farahmand in Tehran

It's a few hours before sunset on Iranshahr street, and the sidewalk is barely passable. Tables spill out from the cafes, packing their patrons in so close together that you either shout across them or lean in nose-to-nose to be heard.

A man in loose, bohemian layers argues about a theatre class two seats down from a woman with a sharp, ancient-Egyptian-style bob, a tank top, and no hijab.

Cars circle the block over and over, looking for parking. Somewhere,

briefly, a street musician plays something Western before he's moved along.

It is loud, and warm, and packed, and completely unlike anywhere else in the Iranian capital.

Then, at eight, the party's over. Shop shutters begin rolling down one by one. Streetlights are drastically dimmed, and the crowd doesn't so much disperse as retreat, huddling into tight islands in front of whichever cafe doors are still lit.

The pavement between one island and the next empties out completely.

Iranshahr and its sister street

▲ Young people hanging out outside a cafe-restaurant in Tehran, Iran.
(Photo: Ali Mohammed/The Atlas)

Sanaei are both in central Tehran's District 6. Iranshahr housed an Allied military garrison during the second world war, before it became a park ringed by cafes and galleries.

Sanaei grew out of the historic Behjatabad gardens. Together, they're the liveliest cultural corridor in the city, and a problem for the state.

"For me, walking toward the sunset in a street with bright lights, multiple cafes, and people sitting outside is fascinating," says Mahsa, 36, a regular.

Gothic style has caught on among the neighbourhood's teenagers. Women sit outside without the mandatory hijab, in a way that would draw an instant crackdown almost anywhere else in the city.

"It shows that a local urban culture is forming," Mahsa says. "Like Paris or New York, where certain

neighbourhoods have their own way of thinking and dressing. We didn't have this in Tehran for the middle class. Now we do, and seeing it is incredibly pleasant. The courage of these women is admirable."

Cafes like Do Bar and Ransheh – recently shut down by authorities – function as the city's social network, a workaround in a country where international dating apps are blocked by state firewalls. For a middle class that does not have access to the private parties of the wealthy, or travel abroad, a table on Sanaei or Iranshahr is often the only place to meet someone new.

That lingering is exactly what the authorities are trying to kill. When dimming the lights isn't enough, the state uses other methods. On 28 July, an Iranian journalist posted a video of workers demolishing a sidewalk on Sanaei Street.

Shopkeepers call the practice "de-gathering", intended to erase places where people might stand, smoke or talk. "Do you have no sense, no tact?" the journalist wrote. "In an era where people and businesses are under economic pressure, what do these destructive behaviours and decades-old decisions mean? Who authorised this?"



For a middle class that does not have access to the private parties of the wealthy, a table on Sanaei or Iranshahr is the only place to meet someone new. That lingering is exactly what the authorities are trying to kill.

Keyvan, 47, manages a cafe on Sanaei, and deals daily with the harassment of officials and their

shifting red lines.

"They tell us we must give hijab warnings to our customers. Or two officers will show up and demand a 'gift' so that they don't report on women not wearing the hijab and threaten to seal the cafe if we don't pay," he says.

During January's anti-government protests, the authorities demanded that Keyvan keep his cafe open to project an illusion of normalcy on the streets. "When we ask them who will guarantee our security, they just curse at us," he says.

His cafe has now been shut down, punishment for not staying open during the unrest and the violent government crackdown.

But while a metal shutter can be pulled down over a shop front, it's harder to pull one over people's memories; and, every day, Tehranis come to Iranshahr and Sanaei to make new ones.

This story was published in partnership with Egab.



(Photos: Ali Mohammed/The Atlas)

Dare Differently



TONI DOVE, SUNJAMMER 6: A TALE BLOWN BY A SOLAR BREEZE. DANCER: ALICIA DELLIMORE.



**DORIS DUKE
FOUNDATION**

We're just in time

Two keyboards. Two very different disciplines. Or are they?

There are two keyboards in my living room. One is attached to a piano, the other to a laptop. I spend a lot of time sitting at both of them, in different ways trying to create order, to make things make sense.

I've just written a book called *The Melody of Things* about a period of my life in which I rediscovered music after a long hiatus, moved from London to Georgia, and spent a year, alongside my journalism career, relearning the piano.

My friends and loved ones often ask how I reconcile these different practices; these different modes of creating and thinking.

Language is steeped in the intention of specificity, whereas music exists in the realm of the abstract. That might make them seem like strange bedfellows, but the opposite is true: playing the piano and writing have more in common than I had previously imagined.

Both are, fundamentally, ways of making form out of time.

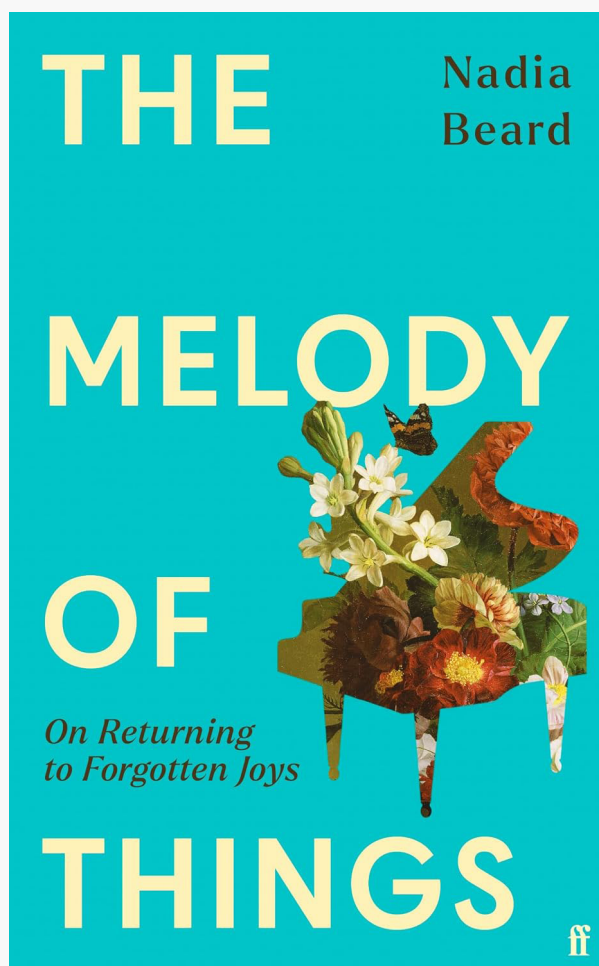
A piece of music has no existence outside of time – one note follows another, one phrase after another, and so on – and it moves in only one direction: forward.

Writing works in much the same way. A sentence has meaning mostly because of the sentence that came before it and the one that follows. The same can be said of a paragraph, a chapter. It's context and continuity

that make it make sense. It's a form of marking time.

Life itself is mostly resistant to form. Journalists, more than most, spend so much time trying to defy this fact by trying to make sense and coherence, where often there is none.

To write, for example, is to decide at what point something starts and ends, as much as it is about what belongs together, or what can be left out. Playing music does something similar. It takes an infinite range of possible sounds and places them, deliberately, in relation to one another.



Language is steeped in the intention of specificity, whereas music exists in the realm of the abstract. That might make them seem like strange bedfellows, but the opposite is true: playing the piano and writing have more in common than I had previously imagined.

Since returning to the piano, there has been much that I've realised, or indeed learned for the first time, about writing.

Musicians often complain about the amount of practice needed to maintain, to say nothing about improving, their technique, but this

repetition is ultimately a process of refinement.

It's the thing writers and journalists will recognise, the process of going over and over a sentence or phrase to find the truest expression of that thing musicians also covet: a voice.

For the piano as much as writing, you need to play it again. ●

The Melody of Things was published in the UK earlier this month, and will be released in the US in January. Nadia Beard is Coda Story's managing editor.

RESTAURANT REVIEW

The world's best goulash

What do you mean it's not in Hungary?

The Atlas ordered:

Goulash
Srem (traditional Vojvodina sausage)
Cucumber Salad
Homemade Gelato
Noodles with Poppy Seeds
Sremski Karlovci Red Wine

I was born between the mountains of Vitorog and Manjača in Bosnia and Herzegovina, dreaming of the sea and great cities. Yet nothing has ever felt as much like home as the never-ending flatness of Vojvodina.

The plain has always drawn its poets, but nobody wrote about it like Đorđe Balašević, Novi Sad's most beloved son: "I felt Vojvodina sticking dangerously to my shoes, but that was nothing compared to how my shoes stuck to her." Here, the slow life matters, the detail matters and, of course, the food matters.

Vojvodina is one of Serbia's two autonomous provinces. It joined the Kingdom of Yugoslavia in 1918. It's been under Hungarian, Ottoman, Habsburg, Ustaše and Nazi rule, has six official languages, 28 recognised ethnic groups and a cuisine that brings



it all together. It's also the epicentre of the student protests that erupted after the canopy collapse at Novi Sad train station killed 16 people.

Plava Frajla is a traditional Vojvodinian restaurant in the Spens complex, a masterpiece of Yugoslav architecture. It's colourful and open, with chairs glued to the ceiling, companions to the many lamps.

Vojvodinian cooking is mostly an interpretation from the margins of the food from the centre, whether

German, Austrian, Hungarian, Turkish, or southern Serbian. We chose what sits nearest our heart and our map: the goulash.

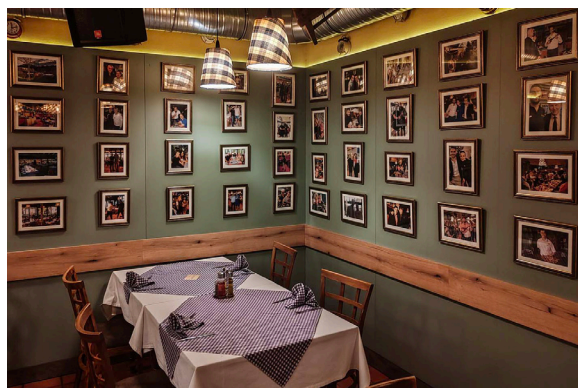
Hungarian readers will forgive me, but the goulash is better here in the southern Pannonian Plain, where it never runs as heavy or as thin.

Plava Frajla's iteration is stunning: soft, tender meat, mashed potatoes seasoned just right, accompanied with a red from Sremski Karlovci, Vojvodina's most famous wine village. The Srem sausage, a close cousin to German and Austrian delicacies, was a hit too. But the goulash is what we recommend. Do not skip Plava Frajla's homemade bread.

If you're ever in the area, slow down, put on Balašević's song *Al' Se Nekad Dobro Jelo Baš*. And try the goulash. *Prijatno!* ●

In Vojvodina, the slow life matters, the detail matters and of course, the food matters.

(Photos: Božidar Milovac)



Plava Frajla was reviewed by Božidar Milovac in Novi Sad, the capital of Vojvodina

MATCH REPORT

Somewhat over the rainbow

South Africa 29 – 24 New Zealand
FNB Stadium, Johannesburg

Simon Allison in Johannesburg

It is one of the last days of winter in the southern hemisphere; a cold, windy Saturday afternoon. South of the city centre, amidst industrial estates and the remains of abandoned mine dumps, rises The Calabash.

There are 85,976 people inside – that's 5,000 more than watched this year's Fifa World Cup final in New Jersey. They are here, Castle Lager or brandy and Coke in hand, to watch the most important rugby match of the year. The smell of flame-grilled *wors* rolls drifts through the stadium, the players are on the pitch, and the South African national anthem is about to start. Listen carefully.

Like so much of the new South Africa, the anthem is a compromise: two songs, with two very different histories, smashed together to forge a new national identity.

Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika, the first half, is a 19th-century isiXhosa hymn, sung by revolutionaries at anti-apartheid gatherings. *Die Stem*, the second half, was the official soundtrack of the white supremacist state. The two songs must exist now in some kind of harmony – much like the national men's rugby team itself.

The Springboks were, for most of their history, a whites-only team; the ultimate symbol of white supremacy. Then apartheid ended, and they won the 1995 World Cup, in another stadium not too far from here. Nelson

Mandela donned the green-and-gold jersey to present the trophy. The Rainbow Nation was born.

Since then, the Springboks' on-field performance has been a proxy for the state of the nation. Which should be good news, because the team has never been better, winning two World Cups in succession and every other possible trophy in between.

Its captain, Siya Kolisi, a black man from an unprivileged background, is the most successful captain in the history of rugby union. "Stronger together" is the team's motto.

Kolisi understands that he is a symbol, as well as a rugby player, and not just in South Africa. Last year, after the Boks thrashed France

in Paris, Kolisi used his post-match interview to explain that diversity is the foundation for the team's success – a pointed rejoinder to the French far-right, which claims French rugby as their own.

When Kolisi sings the national anthem, he closes his eyes and belts out every word. But he cannot transform South Africa by himself.

The crowd is overwhelmingly white, and muddles its way through *Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika*, assisted by karaoke lyrics on the big screens. It then roars into life for *Die Stem*, the old apartheid anthem reverberating around the stands.

The Springboks go on to win the match comfortably, confirming their status as undisputed champions of the world. The state of the Rainbow Nation is a more complicated question. ●

▼ Nearly 86,000 rugby fans gather in the FNB Stadium in Johannesburg to see the Springboks renew their rivalry with New Zealand's All Blacks. (Photo: Lefty Shivambu/Gallo Images)





▲ Illustration: Teona Tsintsadze

A SHORT SHORT STORY

What slides beneath

Dispatches from the future in 300 words or less

Mary was in her garden, gathering cabbages. The moon was still in the sky, and the sun was just beginning to rise. It was misty, and the air was fresh from last night's rain. Mary stopped for a moment, just to breathe it in.

The barn raising was today, the first in the valley. A solar fleet was bringing people from a hundred miles away. Mary had heard they might bring sugar, too.

In her kitchen, Mary rinsed the cabbages. At first they'd had to collect water. But as more people had slid beneath, things had gotten easier. Sliding beneath was no longer considered heretical. There weren't even deterrents anymore, and the villages were rapidly multiplying.

The truth was, the Fathers and

Sons were too obsessed with each other to worry about people sliding beneath. After the first Fathers had uploaded themselves, and the first Sons unplugged them, things had gotten ugly for a while. But eventually, those whirring digital brains in the desert had permitted the remaining Fathers to upload in their bunkers. A whole new economy had emerged, circular and retaliatory in nature. The Fathers and Sons just forgot about everyone else.

The fleet arrived just as the sun reached the top of the sky. Mary knew one of the men from before. He was thinner, browner. More peaceful looking.

He told her there'd been a big success siphoning energy from Sons in Nevada, or what had been Nevada.

Mary laughed because he didn't say "Sons". He said AI, like in the old days.

"Were you never a believer?" Mary said.

The man held up his arm to show his heretic branding.

"I'm sorry," Mary said. "I shouldn't have laughed."

She hugged him, and he hugged her back.

The green grass of the valley rippled in the wind. ●

Heather Chaplin is the founding director of Journalism + Design at the New School in New York City and author, most recently, of *Reckless Years, A Diary of Love and Madness*

The Historical Record

with BAO NGUYEN





(Photo: Ray Lavers/Netflix)

One of the 20th century's most famous historical artefacts is *The Terror of War*, the photograph sometimes referred to as “Napalm Girl”. The 1972 image shows a young girl, Phan Thị Kim Phúc, running for her life after a napalm attack during the Vietnam War. In *The Stringer*, Bao Nguyen – the Emmy-nominated documentary filmmaker – examined the photograph's contested provenance. In the latest instalment of *The Historical Record* we turned the tables, asking him what fragments of history he would preserve for posterity.

A RECORD

Is This It by The Strokes. The album came out when I was in college. It was freshman year. It was a tough year. It was around September 11, actually, 2001. And that album just solidified the sound of New York at that time, the resilience of New York, the grit of New York. So, I always think about The Strokes. Is this it? Is this it?

A BOOK

The book that I instantly think of – a book that moves me – is Ocean Vong's *On Earth We're Briefly*

Gorgeous. I couldn't remember the last time a book made me cry so much. It is just a perfect encapsulation of the Vietnamese refugee experience, in the most poetic way.

AN ARCHIVE

I'm privileged to live in Los Angeles, a place that loves cinema. I often go to the Academy Museum of Motion Pictures, which has one of the largest archives of not just films, but also film props and collectibles. You remind yourself, as a filmmaker, of the fun and beauty and the magic and wonder of film.



▲ Album cover of The Strokes' *Is This It* (RCA Records, 2001)

A MEAL

My dream meal is very simple. It's just white rice with scrambled eggs and a little Maggi sauce. It's something that I learned to cook myself when I was really young. My parents were refugees from Vietnam. They opened a small business and they were away for most of the day. I'd come home, and they wouldn't come home until like 8pm. I would take care of myself. I learned to fry a couple eggs. They would cook the rice for me already, and I would add just a little Maggi sauce, which is like a kind of soy sauce. I eat that nowadays, and it just brings a lot of warmth to my heart.

A PLACE

There's a town in the south of France called Arles. It's just this perfect balance of European charm, but also culture. It has the world's largest photo festival, and it's just this place that me and my wife fell in love with, and fell in love in.

A TURNING POINT

I think for me, as for many Vietnamese of the diaspora community, April 30th, 1975 – what they call the fall of Saigon – is something that's hugely impactful to the history and the trajectory of the Vietnamese community. I don't know if I would exist; or my existence would be drastically different if that event didn't happen. And so I often think about that day. For many in the Vietnamese community, it's something to celebrate. And for many others, it's a day of mourning. There's a complexity to that day that is special and unique to the Vietnamese. ●

Bao Nguyen is an Emmy-nominated documentary filmmaker. Nguyen's most recent releases include *The Greatest Night in Pop*, *The Stringer* and *BTS: The Return*.



LEFT: Rue des Capelans in old town Arles, France. (Photo: Tim Graham)

BELOW: Crowds gather as North Vietnamese army tanks take position near the presidential palace in Saigon on 30 April 1975. (Photo: AFP-VNA/Vietname Out)

The fall of Saigon is hugely impactful to the history and the trajectory of the Vietnamese community. For many, it's something to celebrate. For others, it's a day of mourning.

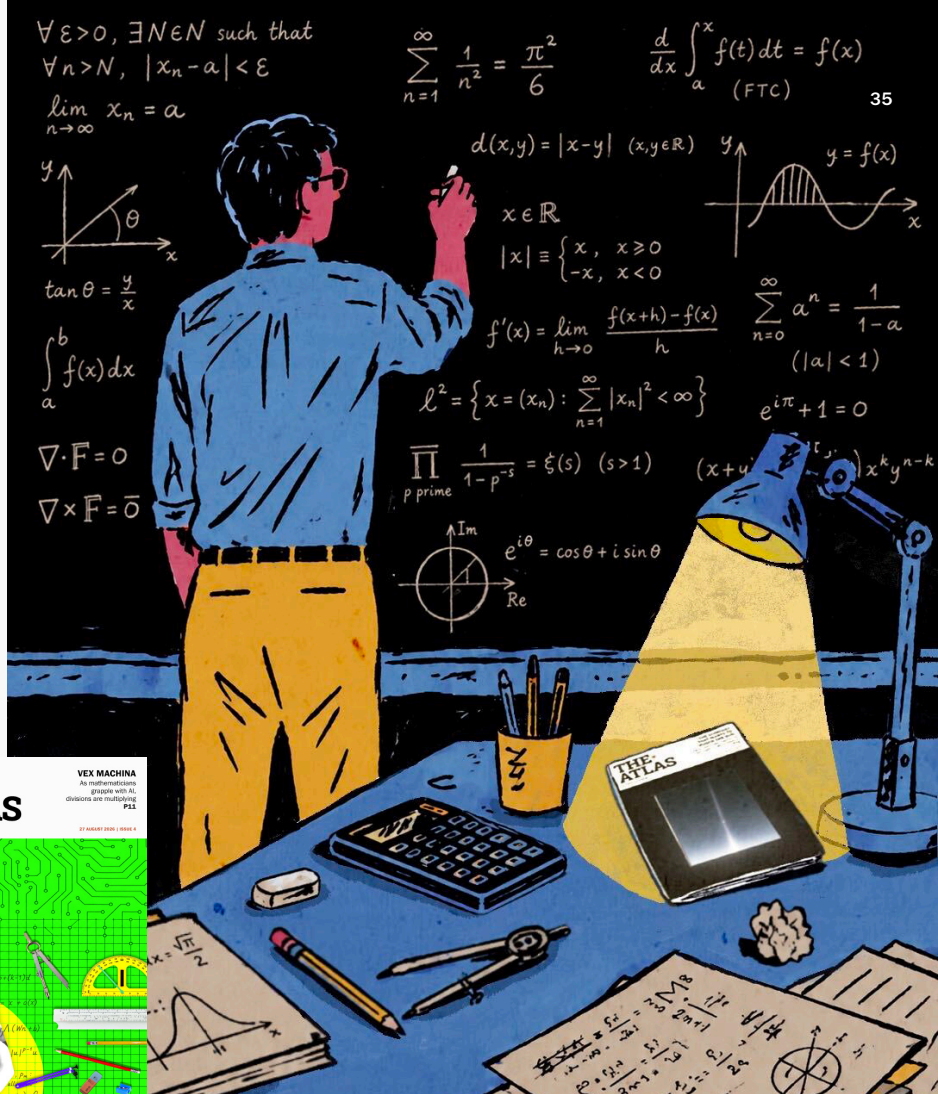


Right of reply

In Issue 4, we asked you to help us understand why mathematics is beautiful. Erich Pawlik writes:

"I'll admit, I'm an introvert and perhaps just a tiny bit autistic. The beauty of mathematics is its clear structures and a framework rooted in a past stretching back thousands of years. You can move around within this framework, lose yourself in it and always discover something new..."

"Sometimes I wish I could stay in this simple world of thought and not have to face what it means to apply mathematics in the real world... The philosopher and mathematician Nassim Nicholas Taleb once wrote that his PhD in mathematics was much easier to obtain than his PhD in philosophy. For example, understanding how the AI algorithms that generate mathematical results work is much easier than answering whether and why the algorithms produce useful mathematical results..."



Thanks and congratulations, Erich! A very limited edition print of Teona Tsinsadze's cover illustration is on its way to you.

Send all queries and feedback to the editor-in-chief on simon@codastory.com
▲ (Illustration: Anna Jibladze)

About Coda Story

Coda Story is an award-winning journalism studio that investigates the forces shaping the world. Through deep reporting, pattern-recognition journalism and storytelling innovation, Coda connects stories across borders and over time, revealing the systems beneath the headlines.

About The Continent

The Continent is an award-winning pan-African newspaper that began publishing in April 2020. Distributed as a PDF on encrypted messaging platforms, it is Africa's most widely read newspaper, with subscribers in more than 140 countries.

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Yemsrach Yetneberk
Yusuf Omotayo

BACKGROUND CHECK:

1. Coda Story, The Atlas and The Continent are in New York City.
2. The Republic is in Kampala, Uganda.
3. Egab is in Zamalek in Cairo, on the bank of the Nile. On the opposite shore is the former Ministry of Foreign Affairs building; and, to the right, the iconic Maspero Television Building.

.coda
The Continent

The Coda

Someone is already in control

Natalia Antelava in New York

“An AI agent would have delivered this better,” a colleague joked as we listened to a European diplomat warn us, in a sleep-inducing monotone, about the dangers of artificial intelligence. We were in one of the United Nations’ beige, wood-panelled conference rooms in New York. While the setting felt like it belonged to another century, many conversations at this year’s UN General Assembly asked whether humans would remain in control of the next one.

Recent headlines have been full of scary AI stories: out-of-control agents hacking into company systems; dire warnings that this technology could kill us all, and quickly; and calls for increased regulation before it’s too late.

Some of these warnings are coming from the big AI companies themselves. They are also shaping what regulation looks like. Anthropic says it is bringing independent evaluators into its labs. OpenAI wants mandatory safety requirements and international standards. These are significant proposals. But independent scrutiny is not the same as public accountability.



Meantime, another disclosure from Anthropic that month raised a question that gets far less attention: What happens when AI is used not to escape human control, but to help one group of humans control another?

According to Anthropic, an independent consultant working with Mali’s state intelligence service used Claude to engineer Lakana 360, a mass-surveillance platform for the agency. Designed to monitor roughly 25-million SIM cards, it could identify people by their voices and generate intelligence dossiers. The consultant removed a warrant requirement, presumably at his client’s request. Anthropic banned

the consultant’s account. But the platform had already been deployed locally, using other models. Cutting off Claude did not disable it.

In Mali, the critical decisions had nothing to do with a machine developing a will of its own. A human chose to build that system – using technological tools built, and made publicly available, by other humans.

The more immediate question, then, is not whether people can remain in control of AI; but whether the people building it, and the people deploying it to malign ends, can be held accountable for the consequences. ●

▲ Illustration: Teona Tsintsadze

We live
in the
same world.
Let’s read
from the
same page.



Our next edition is due at
the end of October... get it
delivered!

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