

Year of Disenchantment: Memories of 2015

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Years tend to only become memorable much after the fact. This point is aptly illustrated by the observation, made by E. H. Carr, that history is read by the contemporary circumstances that give meaning to them. Some years have been totally forgotten; others have revived.

The fall of Constantinople and the Byzantine Empire in 1453, effectively ending the Eastern imperial arrangements in place after the fall of Rome, sent shudders through Christendom. But it was only historians and their subsequent theses about the loss of Constantinople to the Ottoman Empire that made the event even more significant. Alternative trade routes, for instance, needed to be found. Exploration on the part of rapacious and ever hungry European powers were given a fillip. Cause and effect led to the search for new continents, and markets.

Just a touch under four decades later, the Colombian encounter took place, one that dramatically created a transatlantic system, destroying and supplanting civilizations, while initiating various exchanges. In effect, the chance sighting by Christopher Columbus in 1492 of the Bahamas brought several continents, including Africa, into play, underdeveloping and impoverishing much of the continent in the slave trade and creating various slave regimes in the New World. There were vast human, cultural, and biological transfers, many forced, and others the tragic consequence of situation. At the very least, it transformed the European diet.

For all of that, 1492 was both romanticised, and demonised, again after the fact. It was not even clear at that point that the enterprising citizen of Genoa had, in fact, found a people rather different to those of India. The year, for that reason, is less the year to remember than one to either mourn or glorify, depending on which side of ideological fence you find yourself.

What then, for 2015? It was another year which saw its share of calamities, its historical follies heaped up. But it will take some time to know where the consequences will come home to roost.

For the student of history, 2015 will conjure up those fateful months leading up to the invasion of Iraq in 2003. The surge of Islamic State's revolutionary aspirations, the flowing blood of the Shiite-Sunni divides across the Middle East, seem inconceivable without the invasion by the US-led coalition of the destructively willing. The sanctimonious insistence on removing various regimes on the part of sentiment and poorly thought out strategy has proven disastrous.

An exemplary illustration of this problem is the Syrian conflict, which in 2015 moved into its next, ever more dangerous phase. Countries such as the United Kingdom extended their strikes on Islamic State targets in Syria after parliamentary debate. Russia joined the

conflict in dramatic fashion, claiming to strike Islamic State targets while also targeting anti-Assad forces.

The very busy skies were bound to lead to confrontations, with Turkish jets engaging and downing a Russian Su-24 fighter in November. The severe deterioration of relations between Ankara and Moscow provide ominous signs between various powers battling for influence in the Middle East. These, in turn, are also historical jousts. Pessimists have already pulled out such works as Barbara Tuchman's *The Guns of August*, even if such historical parallels tend to be poor, if not impossible examples to use. Just as you will never step on the same spot of a beach, you will never replicate history in its exact sequence, let alone mimic its forms.

Having failed in Syria, diplomacy has also retreated in the face of facing one of the most prominent consequences of the war: refugees. Millions have been displaced, and have trekked across continents, and sailed across seas. Thousands have drowned. Countries such as Australia and Hungary have respectively sought fortress reactions, be they turning back the boats or sealing off the borders. Others, such as Germany, have preferred accommodation. The result: uneven chaos and electorates ripe for plucking by the populists.

Not all international relations need end in blood or stalemate. The dark chapter regarding Syria should also be read alongside the deliberations over Iran's nuclear program. The US and Iran, accompanied by China, Russia, France, UK and Germany, were finally convinced to come to the table, one which culminated in the July deal that ostensibly limits Teheran's pursuit for a nuclear weapon in exchange for lifting sanctions. Cynics, mainly among the Republicans in the United States Congress and Israel, were not convinced, desperate to see Iran bounded and bowed.

Others will prefer underlining the environmental accord of COP21, the Paris meeting that saw a mixed, albeit global attempt to forge an agreement limiting the rise in global temperatures to "well below" 2°C above pre-industrial levels. Differentiation, as ever, remains the big problem, and whether 2015 is the year when the human race chalked up an environmental victory, or failed to avert impending catastrophe, will have to be written.

Every year has to have some historical exaggeration, a talking point that is invariably inflated to invest it with gravitas. 2015 will be one of those years where terrorism continued to receive false authority. The ledger was certainly crowded: spectacular attacks by Boko Haram in Nigeria; assaults in France by Islamic State militants; continued bombings in Iraq, to name a few. The motivating fear in many countries has been Islamic radicalisation at home, though it is one often disengaged from the foreign policy dimension of governments.

It is striking, in fact, to listen to officials from Paris to Canberra, from Washington to Ankara, to consider terrorism in the most hermetic of vacuums, indifferent to origins and motivations. The rather bland excuse is minted in the same school of apologetics: They hate us because of our values. Eventually, fanaticism of any sort tends to cloud discussion, and make us all pious.

The response to this phenomenon has varied, but what is evident is an internationalisation of the surveillance state. If 2015 is to be a year of any significance in that regard, the erosion of civil liberties, across a range of areas, must be one of them. Civil liberties have suffered in Australia, Britain, France and Canada. Legislation stripping the citizenship of dual-nationals has passed. The mania for data retention and pushing Internet Service

Providers into the role of deputised police over content is a trend that sees no sign of abating.

Finally, two points on economics and sovereignty. The European Union, to take a most obvious example, continues to stutter towards doom, showing how a broad-based continental program was high-jacked by a bank-based, financial philosophy obsessed by austerity. It has seen the most grisly of capitulations by Greece and the railroading of its financial independence before the European Central Bank, European Commission and the International Monetary Fund. Will 2015 be the year the EU began penning its obituary?

A second, and not unrelated point. Those of the neoliberal persuasion would have been delighted by the continued push of the technocrats, typified by the Trans-Pacific Partnership, an agreement between twelve countries that nets the Asia-Pacific economic zone in an effort to combat China. The "free trade" rationale suggests why 2015 is memorable from one, distinct perspective: the relentless, estranging rise of the corporate shadow state over the legislative competence of people's representatives.

While twelve parliaments and assemblies will be busy implementing the text in the forthcoming year, the casualties are bound to be severe. Environmental protections, the prices of pharmaceutical products and biologics, and the role of copyright and intellectual property, will all feature in some form. And if companies are dissatisfied with the policies of signatory states, they will be able to sue on lost profits. A true recipe for disenchantment, and one for continued scepticism in 2016.

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