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Why we're reliving the 1970s



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‘The 1970s analogy gives us reason to hope. Back then, the centre held — as it has so far today, after eight years of economic misery’

The other evening I visited the impromptu monument outside Maalbeek metro station, where 16 people died in last month's Brussels attacks. It's becoming a familiar European sight: flowers, flags and handwritten notes spilling over a barrier.

Scenes like this are prompting a scary comparison: the west, it's said, is going back to the 1930s. Then as now, we have urban violence, economic stagnation, rising populists and a menacing Russia. Isis is auditioning for the role of Nazi Germany.

The 1930s analogy could still prove correct. But, so far at least, there's a more plausible comparison. The scene at Maalbeek jolted me back to the decade many of us are currently reliving: like so much of Brussels, the spot looks like the 1970s. The flowers lie beneath a brutalist office block, whose ground floor is a car park, beside a four-lane road. Our current era is more similar to the 1970s than the 1930s.

Like all historical parallels, this one is imperfect: the 1970s had inflation, we have inequality. But the echoes are loud. Terrorism was arguably even bloodier then. Today Europe faces a dominant global terrorist group, Isis, whereas the 1970s featured countless local ones, from the Basque separatists Eta to West Germany's Baader-Meinhof gang. In 1972, in Northern Ireland alone, 479 people died in the "Troubles" — about triple Europe's total death toll from terrorism in 2015. But few now remember Anne Maguire, the Northern Irish mother who lost three children in 1976, and later slit her wrists.



It could be argued that 1970s terrorists had limited objectives, whereas Isis seeks Armageddon. It's true that Islamist jihadis could conceivably become as lethal in the west as the Nazis once were — if, say, they got hold of a



nuclear weapon — but, 15 years after they began killing here, they still haven't exceeded the dimensions of 1970s terrorism.

Anyway, the 1970s lot didn't seem that limited at the time. Richard Huffman, an expert on Baader-Meinhof, notes that the gang saw "terrorism as an end in itself, not something to achieve another goal". The 1970s were an apocalyptic age, when many clever young Europeans became followers of the mass murderer Mao Zedong.

Then as now, western governments looked feckless. They, too, suffered from elite rot: in 1974 Richard Nixon resigned over Watergate, three months after West Germany's chancellor Willy Brandt had quit when his close aide Günter Guillaume was exposed as an East German spy.

In Britain 40 years ago this spring, departing prime minister Harold Wilson issued a "Lavender List" of state honours for dodgy businesspeople, and Liberal leader Jeremy Thorpe resigned under suspicion of ordering the murder of his secret gay lover (he was later acquitted).

Then as now, western politicians had run out of economic ideas. The oil crisis of 1973, which unleashed "stagflation", was their equivalent of the financial crisis of 2008. The political exhaustion was best symbolised by US president Jimmy Carter's collapse while running, but best expressed (privately) by Wilson: "The trouble with me now is that I only have the same old solutions for the same old problems." Wilson's successor Jim Callaghan told the cabinet: "When I am shaving in the morning I say to myself that if I were a young man I would emigrate. By the time I sit down to breakfast I ask myself, 'Where would I go?'" (For more well-told 1970s gloom, see Dominic Sandbrook's *Seasons in the Sun* and Francis Wheen's *Strange Days Indeed*.)

Pundits in the 1970s routinely predicted extremist takeover. The British Labour minister Tony Benn noted after lunch with the FT's editor Fredy Fisher in 1973: "He thinks there is a real chance of a rightwing authoritarian government next year." Fisher wasn't speaking idly: Greece, Portugal and Spain had fascist governments then, while Italy often seemed close to joining them even after fending off the attempted "Tora Tora" military coup in 1970.

But the 1970s analogy also gives us reason to hope. Back then, the centre held — as it has so far today, after eight years of western economic misery. Donald Trump is dominating the news but bookmakers expect Hillary Clinton to become president. In France, voters showed in December's regional elections that they will gang up to stop Marine Le Pen taking power. Given that historians devote little space to failed opposition politicians, Trump may one day be just a cameo in a 2010s nostalgia movie.

In the 1970s, too, the west's feared war with Russia never materialised. Leonid Brezhnev

limited his violence to Russia's "Near Abroad", in Afghanistan, just as Vladimir Putin hasn't ventured west of Ukraine and Syria.

And as the recent deaths of David Bowie and Johan Cruyff remind us, behind the dismal 1970s façade there were creative forces brewing. Forty years ago this month, Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak founded Apple (along with Ronald Wayne, who unfortunately sold out to them after 11 days and now lives on Social Security). Then as now, innovation steadily improved daily life, raising expectations that could only be disappointed.

The political 1970s ended when Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan found new solutions, which caused new problems. The 2010s will probably end similarly, rather than in 1930s-style catastrophe.

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Illustration by Luis Grañena

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