

The world in 2008: a year and an era

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* [Ivan Krastev](#) [0] - [KA Dilday](#) [0] - [Rajeev Bhargava](#) [0] - [Kerry Brown](#) [0] - [Mariano Aguirre](#) [0] - [Roger Scruton](#) [0] - [Ramin Jahanbegloo](#) [0] - [Ivan Briscoe](#) [0] - [Nasrin Alavi](#) [0] - [Keith Kahn-Harris](#) [0] - [Krzysztof Bobinski](#) [0] - [Becky Hogge](#) [0] - [Mary Kaldor](#) [0] - [Michel Thieren](#) [0] - [Chukwu-Emeka Chikezie](#) [0] - [John Palmer](#) [0] - [Arthur Ituassu](#) [0] - [Mark Vernon](#) [0] - [Patrice de Beer](#) [0]

Ivan Krastev

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The shorter 21st century

The historian Eric Hobsbawm introduced the notion of the "[short 20th century](#) [1]" lasting only seventy-seven years: it started in August 1914 in Sarajevo and ended (after the fall of the Berlin wall in November 1989) in December 1991 in Moscow, with the collapse of the Soviet Union. Perhaps the 21st century - conceptualised in the European imagination as the age of post-nationalist politics and increased interdependency - will turn to be much shorter: some future historian might even conclude that it started in 1989 and ended in 2008.

The coming year has the potential to be a revolutionary one that forces European publics into a radical re-perception of the world. The Beijing [Olympics](#) [1] will mark the shift from a Europe-centred world to an Asia-centred one. The hosting of this major spectacle is but one indication of China's [arrival](#) [1] as a global superpower. A worldwide economic slowdown - perhaps recession - will accelerate the shift and make awareness of it unavoidable. And as liberal democracy continues to lose its monopoly on political discourse, the world's China-focus will increase interest in liberal democracy's competitors: Beijing's one-party capitalism or the Kremlin's "[sovereign democracy](#) [1]".

A much to be desired - and still possible - victory of Barack Obama in the United States presidential elections in November 2008 would wake European publics to a fact that experts have known for quite some time: that the US is not a European power any more - neither in its strategic concerns and priorities, nor in its demographics, nor in the socialisation of its elites.

This is the third year in succession **openDemocracy** has invited our contributors to look ahead to the year to come.

The previous collections are:

- What does 2006 have in store? - [parts one](#) [1] and [two](#) [1]
- 2007: [reflections and predictions](#) [1]

Closer to home, Russia in 2008 will challenge dramatically the foundations of the postmodern, post-cold-war European order. Turkey's debate [1] on European Union membership ("should Turkey join?") will become as important for Turkey-EU relations as the EU debate on Turkey ("should we allow them to join?"). And the reality of EU recognition of Kosovo's [1] independence will signal the return of "sphere-of-influence" politics in Europe.

So, welcome to the 22nd century. *This* could be a long one.

KA Dildaycontinue [2] to be the most important issue in 2008: northbound trans-Mediterranean migration, trans-European migration, forced migrations born of war waged in Africa by Africans, and in Asia and the middle east by the United States and its coalition. The US will confront the moral hypocrisy of instigating wars ostensibly for humanitarian reasons and then refusing to take in the humans who suffer [3] because of those wars. Western European countries will continue to undergo identity crises as their demographics shift and the European Union impinges on nation-state duties; east European EU member-states will discover that some people are more European than others; Africans will continue to voluntarily undertake this century's "middle passage" - the perilous journeys [4] on rudimentary seacraft that litter the Mediterranean with the bodies of failed migrants.

We will grow no closer to figuring out the dilemma of migration [5] - how to preserve the good life for those of fortunate geographical birth while allowing those whose weren't so geographically lucky to share in it. I predict that this difficult issue will be a less appealing topic of discussion than environmentalism, which allows wealthy westerners to indulge in the self-obsession of purifying their bodies with organic goods and pretend they are saving the world.

Rajeev BhargavaThe sum of all fears in Latin America [5]", 7 May 2006), there is no middle ground in this battle.

The third point was raised by the defeat of Brazil's President Lula in the senate over his effort to extend a transitory financial tax (CPMF, which raises 40 billion *reais* [\$22.6 billion] a year). The rising arc of government revenues (now almost 40% of the country's GDP) seems to have reached a peak, and a debate over establishing new priorities is emerging. This could become an important turning-point in public debate in Brazil about the role of the state, which leads politics to address the most urgent issues in the country: basic education, healthcare, public security and a judiciary that can be universally accessed, respectful of the laws and observing minimum standards of efficiency.

Mark Vernon

Dogma and departure

Public discourse on religion in 2007 was dominated by Richard Dawkins's international bestseller, *The God Delusion*. But it dominated by being loathed as well as loved. Some protested that their God, about whom they are supposed to be so deluded, was not the deity that Dawkins portrayed. Others worried that the book will only feed the martyr-complex of religious fundamentalists, thereby adding to the world's woes. Perhaps 2008 will be the year in which Arabic translations of the book are found in Pakistani madrasas, proving to militants that western secularism believes they are a virus.

More parochial vitriol will dominate the Anglican church in 2008. It is the year of the ten-yearly Lambeth conference. It falls in the middle of the slow schism of the worldwide communion, ostensibly over the issue of homosexuality. I've never believed that myself: homosexuality is just the lever various factions are pulling to effect a shift in the balance of power - either away from

the Church of England or against Anglicanism's traditional latitudinarianism. Lambeth '08 will be angry. Gay people will continue to be sacrificed on the altar of unity.

But why should you care, if you are not a churchgoer? Well, if the conservatives have their way, the Church of England will change. They will demand overt and literalist confessions of Christian belief before you can marry in your parish church, send your kids to the school, even have a religious funeral. There's a lot of concern about Britishness at the moment, that will rumble on through 2008: the loss of the ethos associated with the parish church would deepen that anxiety.

These two religious issues are signs of our times in more profound ways too. For they emerge because of the crisis that has been building since Nietzsche announced the death of God. He knew it would take centuries to play out and would be horrid on the way. Thus, we also see scientism rushing in to fill the vacuum vacated by religion.

This is dangerous. Determining all by numbers opens up a gap between what counts as knowledge and who we are. Think of consciousness studies. Its cheerleaders say it is only a question of time until meaning is measured in a brain scanner. But meaning is no more deepened by watching neurons firing than a Vincent van Gogh painting is appreciated by treating the image as smudges of paint. If science is taken as the whole of learning, our wisdom is colourless, utilitarian, dehumanising.

However, there are signs of a new departure. Consciousness, along with other sciences like cosmology, are forcing the truly big questions of existence. There are philosophers, disgusted with the endless arguments about arguments, who seek to return to the mystery at the origins of their discipline: the confrontation between being and thought. Even in religion, there are movements that are neither doctrinaire, sectarian nor defensive. They are asking afresh how we should live. The tensions will increase in 2008, but so will the possibilities of enlightenment.

Patrice de Beer

A virtual year

So many new as well as old worries, so many achievements - 2008 should be more than a repeat of 2007. Sub-primes, global warming, Iraq, Afghanistan, but also technological and e-revolutions and the certitude that George W Bush will be out. Let's hope he does not start a new war before then!

But does it all really matter? Don't we live now in a virtual world where what we are given to see supersedes what really happens, where those who rule over us - if they don't any longer rule the waves - rule the airwaves, dominate and cajole and pressure the media, shape the political agenda with words, images, slogans, promises and photo-ops: a permanent blitz of data which obfuscate the real reality? Mostly photo-ops; it's the virtuality, stupid!

Tony Blair was the first to make an art out of the new communication techniques, filling the agenda with news and projects to "change" Britain - which he did - before being buried in a backlash when all he had left were empty words disconnected from reality. After all, if the art is to beautify reality and powerful people - in France we call it "people-isation" - it still has to connect, at least partly, to people's daily hard reality, and to their hip-pocket nerve. You can't, as under Stalin or Mao, forever promise joyful tomorrows, under penalty of death if you fail or refuse.

George W Bush succeeded in hijacking the global agenda after 9/11. He made Americans

believe that the Iraqi dictator was more dangerous than the man who blew up the Twin Towers, and managed too to carry with him the conformist and not-too-brave United States media, who took three years to admit they had been fooled, or had fooled themselves, into reprinting the cuckoo-land stories brewed by the White House. Never has the word “truth” been so often used, and never has truth been dealt with so economically.

In France, Nicolas Sarkozy is so close to his business-baron “brothers” who control the print and electronic media that he does not even need to pressure them into promoting his agenda. Like Blair, he daily fills the news with projects, promises, reforms, and photo-ops - today’s news chasing away yesterdays in an unending circle. In Russia, Vladimir Putin has convinced voters that he is their new Tsar and the west that he is a democrat (or at least, that if it doesn’t treat him like one, its oil and gas pipelines might be shut).

So, politicians and their unreal “reality shows” could still shape our tomorrows - rather than scientists, intellectuals or NGOs looking at what is actually happening. Until we wake up, until someone rocks the boat or a clumsy politician breaks unwillingly the magic mirror. Perhaps in 2008? We can still hope.

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[1] <http://www.randomhouse.com/catalog/display.pperl/9780679730057.html>

[2] <http://www.migrationinformation.org/index.cfm>

[3] <http://bt.yahoo.com/>

[4] <http://www.ipsnews.net/africa/nota.asp?idnews=40131>

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