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Opinion

Cold War-era spy novels have much to tell us about the US, China and the new year



Tom Plate

- John le Carré's fiction, set during the Cold War, can easily be a platform for understanding the current frost between Beijing and Washington
- Will the two sides understand that they are not that different, after all?

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Gary Oldman as secret agent George Smiley in an adaptation of John le Carré's spy novel *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy*. Photo: Focus Features

So what about this coming year? Maybe it will be better (oh, yes please).

But who knows? Public opinion surveys, which certainly have seen better days, are not so good at prediction: some people prefer to keep their feelings secret. Social science studies can be useful, but narrow.

Opinion journalists have it rough, having to tender predictions under deadlines. Particularly if you are looking for big truths, probably only artists with time to think and space to consult with himself will satisfy. You just have to find one you trust – a true artist.

One for sure is John le Carré, who, with just a couple of weeks of 2020 to go, had his clock run out at age 89. The great English writer wrote about the past – but, as we shall see, that was only half his story. Over the holiday season I set about rereading as many of his enduring novels as I could – rough but smart Russian communists playing espionage games, cynical capitalist spies replying in kind.

The colours which this novelist painted were mostly grey, very rarely black and white. He was not a hopeful sort: his belief in the possibility of redemption was dwarfed by his belief in the far stronger probability of repetition. Human nature to him was more unyielding than any artificial wall, whether in Berlin or China.

The Cold War slugfest between Moscow and the West that provided a setting for his technically fictional stories can easily be imagined as a platform for understanding the current frost between Beijing and Washington.

The transition from the old Cold War to the new one is a no-brainer; names and adversaries change, but human nature never does. The game seems always on: “Don’t you think it’s time to recognise that there is as little worth on your side as there is on mine?” Le Carré’s literary character, George Smiley, sighs in the 1974 *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy*.

Right – all that is needed to fuel a new cold war is human beings in significant numbers on both sides swallowing the myth of exclusive superiority. Any way to lose some of that? We have to all admit that a sense of bilateral brainlessness certainly characterised much of the official response to Covid-19.

It has to be said of the Chinese authorities that too much time was lost facing up to the pandemic initially; and of the United States authorities, it must be said that even when they finally knew what they faced, what they did was turn away, rather than properly face the reality.

Governments all over the globe clocked in with incompetence. Even those that had moments of effective Covid-19 containment – South Korea, for example – scarcely had time to rest on their plaudits when some broken link in their health governance system surfaced and they rejoined the pandemic parade of infection and death.

The cliché “no man is an island” must now give way to the need for everyone to find an island and hunker down: social utility is now maximised not by networking but by retreating.

If you want to go bowling – to borrow a metaphor from political scientist Robert D. Putnam’s book, *Bowling Alone* – go alone, or only with those from your isolation pod. (But call ahead first – the bowling alley is probably closed.)

One paradox is that the more things change – the rules, the health regulations, the acceptable social habits – the less there is to do. This leaves us with more and more time to think, and yet, less and less of an appetite for much thinking at all.

Controlled and uncontrolled substances are selling as well, if not better than ever. Le Carré: “There are moments that are made up of too much stuff for them to be lived at the time they occur.” Is this not precisely the confusing jam in which we now find ourselves?

Again and again, le Carré's astute Smiley wonders whether the two superpowers reigning in the pre-1989 era are, ultimately, more or less the same. Over time, might such a heretical thought be a seed of doubt, perhaps yielding ideological agnosticism on both sides?

With regard to the pair of superpowers today, could it lead to a plot change? The supposed ethical superiority of one system over the other might well be a thing of the past.

It would be a huge irony – an electrifying le Carré-style plot point – if the very pandemic that has been pushing us into various Zoom networks of isolation chambers winds up lowering the temperature of the US-China relationship. Certainly, shaming China and obnoxiously branding Covid-19 as the “Chinese virus” never made any sense.

But are enough of us smart enough to sense when our governments, whatever their politics, have not been smart enough – and won't be good enough? Shrewd and objective mutual observation should pave the way for an axis of humility, providing a slip road to avoid another cold war.

This, it seems to me, is a very fine thought for the new year: a virus of peace for a new breed of Smiley's people – much smarter.

Professor Tom Plate began writing about Asia and America in 1996. He is the Distinguished Scholar of Asian and Pacific Studies at LMU in Los Angeles