

Is Trump like Hitler? The value and limits of analogy

by [Björn Krondorfer](#) in the [May 11, 2016](#) issue



SELF-PROMOTION: Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump greets supporters after a rally at Griffiss International Airport on April 12, 2016, in Rome, New York. AP photo / Mike Groll

I am often asked whether the current American political climate can be compared to that of Germany in the 1930s. I suspect I am asked this question because I was born and raised in postwar Germany and because I head an institute whose mission it is to address the legacy of the Holocaust and issues of social justice.

There is plenty in the current political rhetoric to cause concern: false promises accompanied by fearmongering; divisive rhetoric; speech designed to arouse national pride; references to excluding dispensable populations from the rights, resources, and aspirations that we all want to enjoy. Did not the Nazis promise to make Germany strong again, just as Donald Trump promises to make America great again? Did not Hitler in his speeches violate all accepted political decorum and get away with it, just as Trump does? Is not the popularity of Trump the result of his ability to play to the lowest common emotions, just as the Nazi leadership evoked and employed the gut feelings of fear and pride, victimization and virility, *Volkswohl* (welfare of the people) and hatred of the enemy?

I admit that these analogies are tempting. Yet they may not be altogether helpful. A scholarly colleague of mine, the child of Holocaust survivors, recently told me that when commentators take Nazism and Hitler as their point of departure, they lose credibility in his eyes. "Nothing," he asserts, "can compare to what the Nazis did in Germany."

I understand his point of view. Yet at the same time I would not go so far as to categorically renounce all comparative insight. Analogies, after all, do not proclaim sameness. Rather, they compare one event to another in order to elucidate the case in question. Analogies hold value. We find traces and echoes of the past in what happens today.

But analogies are useful in only limited ways. Rather than set free our imagination for new solutions, they tend to arrest our thinking in linearity: the past remains the reference point for concerns of today. While we may believe that our reasoning is leading to solutions, it may be resolving the problems of the past. We may thus not get it quite right.

For example, if we equate the atrocities of ISIS in Iraq with the Stormtroopers in Germany, we may misread the powerful sway of the notion of a caliphate that has been corrupted in the hands of radicalized men in Islamic environments. If we compare the widespread rape by marauding militias in the Congo with the genocidal killings of the Nazi *Einsatzgruppen* (mobile killing units), we may not understand the postcolonial situation in Africa. If we parallel the 1938 Évian Conference—where 32 countries discussed the Jewish refugee crisis in Europe (without opening their borders to destitute people)—with Europe’s current indecisiveness in responding to the Syrian refugee crisis, we misread the changed political situation in a globalized economy with its steadily deteriorating sovereignty of modern nation states. If we were to allude to Hitler’s dictatorship when commenting on the presidential election campaign, we might miss the specific danger emanating from a different kind of demagoguery.

Trump is a demagogical narcissist, not the type of demagogical ideologue or race ideologist that the Nazi leadership embodied. Narcissism, however, is far from harmless, and on this point modern psychology and traditional Christian ethics agree.

Christianity speaks of the iniquity of vainglory and the sin of pride. Vanity and pride are based in an excessive belief a person has in his or her own ability, thus lacking empathy for fellow human beings and humility toward God. Pride is one of the seven deadly sins in the Christian tradition, first articulated by the Desert Fathers and later developed by St. Augustine in the fifth century. Not only was pride considered a deadly sin, but the sin of all sins. “Pride is the commencement of all sin,” Augustine wrote. And elsewhere he mused, “It was pride that changed angels into devils, it is

humility that makes men as angels.”

Psychology, too, attributes to narcissism a host of negative characteristics: self-centeredness, manipulative and Machiavellian behavior, arrogance, lack of empathy, extreme selfishness, a grandiose view of one’s own accomplishments, and a failure to distinguish between oneself and external objects.

A narcissistic demagogue—as opposed to a racist-*völkisch* demagogue—does not follow ideological consistency, for it is not an imagined greater good that has to be forcefully or coercively implemented, it is only the self that is promoted.

Therein lies some relief, for, as has been repeatedly pointed out, Trump does not offer politically consistent views and has flip-flopped on many issues. He offers neither a grand political ideology nor pragmatic political solutions. What motivates his campaign is whatever feeds his grandiose view of himself. When such narcissism is combined with the principles of self-marketing that run today’s media-saturated world (bad publicity is still publicity; factual truth does not matter; entertainment trumps accuracy), Trump’s public performances are highly unpredictable.

Such unpredictability bears its own dangers. For example, in an interview with Yahoo News, Trump proposed a number of unspecified measures against undesired populations. “We’re going to have to do things that we never did before,” he is quoted as saying. “And some people are going to be upset about it, but I think that now everybody is feeling that security is going to rule. And certain things will be done that we never thought would happen in this country in terms of information and learning about the enemy. And so we’re going to have to do certain things that were frankly unthinkable a year ago.”

Such statements are truly frightening. In alluding to coercive measures in unspecific ways, he leaves to the imagination what these “certain things” will be. To some, they satisfy the wish to expel anyone “not like us”; to others, they raise the dread that Trump will do something akin to what the Nazis did in Germany.

We just don’t know. A demagogical narcissist holds us captive through our imagination—either through our fears or our desires. Enthusiastically supporting him or passionately protesting against him are, in this sense, two sides of the same coin, each feeding the frenzy around him. While I am jotting down these reflections I too cannot escape the grip of such manipulation, for I am giving demagoguery my attention.

The long-term effect of such bullying speech is that it becomes part of acceptable discourse—in bars, schools, public office, and at home. Once the angry genie is released from the bottle, it will not easily return.