

SundayReview

# No, He's Not Hitler. And Yet ...

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We are supposed to find some solace these days in the assurance that Donald Trump is “not Hitler.” One reasonable response is this: Of course he isn’t. Only Hitler is Hitler, and he died in a bunker in 1945. There is no such thing as reincarnation, and history is nothing more than a long, linear series of individual people and events that come and go. It is, as the saying goes, “just one damn thing after another.”

This quip is in part a rejection of the idea that history is, or might someday be, a sort of science in which we subsume particular events under general laws. This idea motivated Hegel to conceptualize human history as a law-governed dialectical process of the “unfolding of absolute Spirit.”

Marx in turn eliminated the ghost from Hegel’s system, and conceived the process of history as one of material relations between classes. But it, too, remained bound by general laws, so that when any historical actors did this or that (crossed the Rubicon, repealed the Edict of Nantes, etc.), they did so not so much as individuals, but as vessels of a historical process that would be unfolding even if they had never existed.

Even when Marx facetiously riffs on Hegel's claim that historical facts and personages always appear twice — by adding that they do so the first time as tragedy and the second time as farce — he is still perpetuating the very serious idea that individual people and happenings in history are instances of something more general.

But what would it mean for the “same event” to happen again? What are the criteria of sameness? How alike do two individuals have to be in order to be paired? How much does this repetition depend on the individuals themselves, and how much on the similarity of external circumstances? Can we really compare the United States at present to the late Roman Empire or to the Hittites just before their collapse, given how much we know to have changed in human societies since antiquity?

With the depressing confirmations of Godwin's Law that can be found every day in the comments sections of news outlets (surely, this article will be no exception), one often senses that “Hitler” is not so much a historical figure as a mythological one, that the war of 70-some years ago has already become something like the Trojan War had been for the Homeric bards: a major event in the mythic past that gives structure and sense to our present reality. As in myth, that great event's personages can appear and reappear not in the exact form they took back then, but as avatars, in new forms, under new names.

History seems to present us with a choice between two undesirable options: If it is just one singular thing after another, then we can derive no general laws or regularities from it, and so we would seem to have no hope of learning from it; but when we do try to draw lessons from it, we lapse all too easily into such a simplified version of the past, with a handful of stock types and paradigm events, that we may as well just have made it up. History seems to be a pointless parade of insignificant events until we shape it into something that has significance for us, until we build myths out of it, until we begin using it to make up stories.

This is what makes it so easy and tempting to weaponize history, to forgo any interest in “how it actually was” — to use the 19th-century historian Leopold von

Ranke's definition of the true goal of the study of history — and to bend it toward our own present ends.

Today Donald Trump excels at treating the past as raw material to be sculpted into whatever claims serve his interests — for example, when he shifts President Obama's birthplace from Hawaii to Kenya. But the idea that history is infinitely malleable is by no means the exclusive property of xenophobic populists. Until very recently it was common to hear from skeptics (in academia and elsewhere) that history is a "narrative," and that we must not expect the facts themselves to dictate to us what version of history we ought to adopt. The facts are inaccessible, it was said, so let us tell stories, and create our reality.

By the early 2000s, as announced in an influential article by the French theorist Bruno Latour, this skeptical attitude had produced some unintended consequences. For one thing, it had fallen into the hands of "the enemy": Creationists were invoking skeptical arguments to undercut the epistemological basis of evolutionary theory; neoconservatives were openly declaring themselves free of any obligation to what was now mockingly called "reality," as they had taken it upon themselves to create a new reality of their own liking by, for example, invading Iraq and, so they had hoped, planting the seeds of Jeffersonian democracy there. And after Sept. 11, 2001, as Latour quickly began to notice, people of all political stripes were rushing to attribute responsibility for the attacks to whatever party or supernatural force best indulged their fantasies about how the world works.

The degeneration of which Mr. Trump is a symptom is by no means limited to American political life. If Trump is not a reincarnation of Hitler, he is most certainly one head of the same global Hydra that has already given us Vladimir V. Putin, Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Narendra Modi. For all of them, the past is not something to study and to attend to, but something to sculpt.

The leader of India, Mr. Modi, for example has brought about, through support of the ideology of Hindutva, a political climate in which Indian nationalist academics can claim that airplanes are described in the millenniums-old Vedas without being ridiculed or marginalized. Mr. Trump is seeking to bring about a climate in which equally false claims may go unchallenged, in the name, purportedly, of something

much more important than mere empirical fact: making America “great again.” The invocation of the past in this slogan is obviously mythological. No one will ever call on him to cite any dates or figures to back it up.

History has always been prone to such deformations. In the 16th century the Spanish Jesuit Jerónimo Román de la Higuera forged a cache of documents meant to prove the antiquity of Christianity in the Iberian Peninsula. Far from falling into notoriety when his inventions were uncovered, he instead went on to even greater fame as the author of the “falsos cronicones,” the false chronicles, which were only the more glorious in that the claims they made were not dependent on mere factual truths of history, but spoke of a “higher truth,” coming directly from God. There is a long tradition in fact of the so-called *pia fraus*: the pious fraud.

Mr. Trump is banking on the American public’s willingness to revert to such a conception of truth that does not require any basis in fact. And it is here that a bit of von Ranke’s hardheadedness can serve as a corrective. We can worry later about drawing significant lessons from history, about finding meaning for our lives in the past. For now what is crucial is to insist that the past can be known — that Mr. Obama was not born in Kenya, that climate change was not made up by the Chinese and that anyone who pretends the opposite, as part of a larger plan to make America great again, is, as a matter of simple historical fact, an impious fraud and a liar.

The task that faces American voters at the present moment is enormous: to save the United States from the same post-democratic order to which parts of Europe and most of Asia has already fallen. Our relationship to history will play no small role in this. History may be rooted in storytelling, but we can summon it to be something more — the arbiter of truth against lies told in pursuit of power.

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Mr. Trump himself appears indifferent to history, as well as to the grave significance of the comparisons of him to Hitler. It's true that Donald Trump is not Hitler. But the fact that the comparison has any traction at all, that it is a recognizable part of our new political dialogue, and that the man at its center is not actively seeking to prove it wrong, shows how severe the current crisis is, and hints at how dark the future might get.

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