Political change and historical analogies

Abstract

Historical analogies are key to how humans grasp the world around them, perhaps even more so in times of perceived change. In international relations, historical analogies have been invoked time and again, but their effectiveness as devices for understanding and framing of action is often hard to grasp. In this article, I suggest reading analogies as myths. This approach allows us to see that they can be read both as first order constructs, with an eye to the fit between past and present, and as second order constructs, with an eye to the political resonance and effects of applying analogous reasoning.

Introduction

In November 2016, Donald J. Trump surprised the world, himself included, by being elected to the US presidency. His completely unorthodox campaign seemingly overturned common wisdom about how to get elected, and the way he outperformed polling in key swing states left most prognosticators with egg on their faces. The shocks continued through a disjointed transition-period and the first, combative and tumultuous months of the Trump presidency. Trying to make sense of the developments, scholars, policy analysts and activists alike have turned to history for analogies and ideas for action, some in opposition to Trump, and others in support.

The turn to history is not restricted to how observers are trying to make sense of the Trump presidency; on the contrary, there seems to have been a steady uptick in the use of historical analogies in both scholarly and political work over the last decades. This is not surprising. History has long been considered the provider of "lessons" – informing those who perceive them correctly, misleading those who misperceive them, and damning those who ignore them. And such lessons are more sought after in times of perceived upheaval and change, than in quieter periods. If today is much like yesterday, and tomorrow can be expected to bring more of the same, there is no perceived need to look for guidance and understanding beyond one's own experience. On the other hand, when seemingly novel phenomena disrupt the daily rhythm, the incentive to look beyond becomes stronger and the need to establish meaning and possibilities for action more acute.

Understanding the present in terms of the past is one of the commonplace ways in which humans situate themselves and make decisions about action. Not being able to read the future, and unable to hang on to the present, many would say it is our *only* source of lessons. If all things appear equal, choosing the course which has been successful at a previous historical situation makes good sense; turning to historical analogies offers what Jervis (1976, p. 220) refers to as a useful "shortcut to rationality". This holds for great political decisions as well as the everyday practices of life. Mythologised great events provide cognitive metaphors which reduce uncertainty for most of us, including decision-makers; the alleged lessons of Munich, Vietnam and Srebrenica have for instance been invoked in international relations at critical junctions over the last seven decades. This mode of decision-making and political reasoning has been the object of much scholarly scrutiny, directly in the form of analysis of perception and misperception and the lessons of history, and indirectly for instance in the form of studies of memory and remembrance. These literatures span a number of disciplines and theoretical traditions, and defy easy summary, but increasingly the focus has moved from "getting history right" to better inform action, to the more modest goal of understanding how and with what effects the past is used in the present.

While it is encouraging to see the Trump presidency and other instances of upheaval leading to a strengthened interest in history, in academe and public life more generally, there nevertheless is a need to caution against facile appropriations of the historical record and the use of superficial similarity to legitimise political action. History should not only point to possible parallels between our current predicament and past phenomena, but also elucidate how the present is in important ways different from the past and how the past is used as a legitimising device. Analytically speaking, the history of lessons might be more illuminating than the lessons of history (Rasmussen 2003), and this should lead us to focus on how lessons of history and historical analogies have important political functions.

Over the next pages, I discuss ways of historicising the present, through some examples of historical analogies applied to the first months of the Trump presidency and other relatively current instances of change. I start with a discussion of historical analogies and concepts, stressing how they can be understood as both first order and second order constructs. Then I discuss the current usage of historical analogies and concepts as both first order and second order constructs, before I conclude.

Historical analogies and concepts

The modern discipline of History grew out of a desire to recount the past "as it really was", based on a correspondence-theory of truth. Similarly, development of analytical concepts has typically been based on a desire to find some essential qualities common to a group of phenomena. When evaluating the use of historical analogies and concepts, the goal has been to distinguish how close a match there is between the signified (a current event) and the signifier (the previous event or the concept). Appropriate usage has been seen as based on a true perception of both signifier and signified. Conversely, misperception has flowed from getting either signifier, signified, or both, wrong. Historians have largely scaled back their truth-claims, but in International Relations, many still look to the discipline of History as the source of evidence and confirmation.

This is not the approach I take here. Concepts and analogies can also be read in light of the scholarship on myths and mythologies, and considered as second-order constructs (Leira & de Carvalho forthcoming, Bliesemann de Guevara 2016). Concepts and analogies rest on already established signs, but instil in them new meaning, which might detach the new signification from the original relationship between signifier and signified. The myth of Westphalia might serve as a useful example. In the immediate aftermath of the treaties of Westphalia, signed in 1648, no specific meaning was attached to them. In retrospect, they were signified more clearly as change. And three hundred years later, in International Relations, "Westphalia" became a signifier of the emergence of a full-fledged system of sovereign states, a system which still defines our present, and which serves as an analogy for studies not only of other state-systems than the European one, but also as a yardstick for current and potential changes in the international system (de Carvalho et al 2011). In the 20th and 21st centuries, what had taken place in Münster and Osnabruck in 1648 became largely irrelevant to the function of "Westphalia" in disciplinary International Relations.

Writers taking what they refer to as a narrative approach to international relations have stressed how the boundary between first and second order representations should be seen as blurry, since there is an irreducible element of narrativity in any representation; humans are telling stories all the time (Shepherd 2013, p. 3, Wibben 2011, p. 43). This follows from the point that whatever "reality" exists, it is only accessible through observation, and must be

narrated to be made meaningful. I concur, and would argue that it is hard to even imagine a pure first order analogy or concept. That which is referred to in the analogy is always already narrated, and analogies and concepts become useful exactly to the extent that they carry a surplus of meaning; if they provide no additional understanding or guidelines for action, they are of no use. This surplus of meaning also implies that analogies, even though powerful vehicles for conveying meaning and framing action, are never fully stabilized. On the one hand, alternative narrations of the original situation can lead any analogy to support competing causes of action. On the other hand, different analogies might make competing sense of the same current event (Angstrom 2011). Where there is one narrative, there can also be another narrative.

Even so, for my analytical purposes here, and to better illuminate how analogies function and why it can be hard to debunk them, I retain a differentiation. My basis for doing so is threefold. First, there is a difference between the truth-claims associated with first order and second order representations. A first order representation should *in principle* be falsifiable within the representational framework in which it is uttered. If an historian claims that 1647 signifies the end of the Thirty Years' War, this is a claim which is falsifiable within the historians' framework. A second order representation lacks this quality. When "Westphalia" is claimed as shorthand for the emergence of sovereign states and the state system, this is not immediately falsifiable; the claim must be broken down into constituent parts before the truth-claims can be discussed. The second reason for retaining the differentiation springs pragmatically from the first one, and is simply that there will often be a fairly broad consensus on first order constructs as "working truths" among experts in a field (Kornprobst 2007: 34), while such consensus is harder to find with regards to second order constructs, as we shall also see below. The final reason for retaining the differentiation is that it helps elucidate why scholars are so often frustrated in their attempts to "set the record straight". The typical scholarly way to deal with the use of a historical analogy or a concept is to gauge its accuracy as a first order representation – is there similarity between the past situation and the current situation? However, analogies must also be seen as second order constructs, and the power to debunk is thus potentially greatly reduced. When "1648 and all that" proves resistant to debunking, it is a result not of the accuracy of the representation, but of the political functions it has within the discipline of International Relations. This case is not unique, as most disciplines, International Relations has been reluctant to revise central disciplinary myths (Leira 2015).

To be clear, what I am suggesting is that analogies can be *read* in two different ways, one similar to how first order constructs are usually read, one similar to how second order constructs are usually read. When Saddam Hussein was likened to Hitler in the run-up to the Iraqi war in 2003, through a representation of the Munich-analogy, this could be assessed both according to whether it made sense to scholars of Nazism, Middle East politics or war, and according to the narratives set in motion and the political effects they had. Approaching historical analogies and concepts as first and second order constructs, thus leads to different scholarly foci. Approaching them as first order constructs raises questions about appropriateness, whether and to what extent for instance Donald Trump is like person X, Y or Z in the past, or whether specific labels fit the current political climate. Approaching them as second order constructs on the other hand raises questions about what sort of function labelling Donald Trump as X, Y or Z has, what is legitimised, delegitimised or brought into political play through the act of labelling. These are both worthwhile scholarly endeavours, but with different implications. Studying labelling as a first order phenomenon leads our attention to scholarly definitions and the perceived fit between signified and signifier.

Studying it as a second order phenomenon on the other hand forefronts the inherently political quality of labelling, and the possible disconnect between the alleged original signifier and the current signified.

Reading analogies and concepts

The discussion above suggests that any analogy or concept contains elements of a second order construct. Even so, the most intense debate over their application usually concerns what is assumed to be first order applicability. In this section I revisit a few analogies and concepts which have recently been in use, and read them both as first and second order constructs.

One fairly common form of historical analogy is little more than name-calling with the goal of conjuring up positive or negative associations. Here the quality of analogies as second order constructs is particularly obvious. When current terrorists are compared to pirates of old, the point is to draw on the abstract notion of pirates as enemies of all mankind. Likewise, when the German magazine Der Spiegel referred to Trump as a modern-day Nero, without any further elaboration, the point was to draw on the association of Nero with tyranny, eccentricity and corruption. It is difficult to gauge the second-order effectiveness of such analogical reasoning, but it seems fair to believe it to be limited, in framing both understanding and action. In the case of piracy, the collective imaginary of Long John Silver, Hook and Jack Sparrow (although also decidedly a second order construct) probably outweighs the negative associations intended to be conveyed, while the common knowledge about Nero is probably too limited for the analogy to have much impact. And none of these analogies served to legitimise or frame action. In both cases, scrutiny of the analogies as first order constructs would be likely to lead to rejection by experts in the respective fields, for being too far removed from working truths.

Other analogies are more open-ended, but still more about creating a framework for understanding or a distinct feeling. When our own era is referred to as analogous to the years predating the First World War or the interwar years, the point is not the specific first order fit of the analogies. The idea is to convey a second order notion of possible impending disaster, with dangers stemming from such general phenomena as great power rivalries, diplomatic complacency, authoritarian politics and nationalism. Further specifications like these can in their turn be used as framing of desired actions.

More interesting are the cases where the analogy is made with someone or something which resonates in the public imaginary, particularly if the resonance is ambiguous. The analogies made between Trump and former US president Andrew Jackson are an instructive example. Opponents of Trump have made the comparison disparagingly, stressing the many negative aspects of Jackson's presidency, such as his alleged autocratic tendencies and his complicity in the forced migration of native Americans. Walter Russel Mead (2017), drawing on his earlier work, made the claim that Trump should be understood as a Jacksonian in foreign affairs, with a number of challenges flowing from that. More frequently, Trump and his supporters on the other hand have embraced the comparison. Trump ordered a portrait of Jackson to be hung prominently in the Oval Office and laid a wreath at Jackson's tomb on the 250th anniversary of his birth. More generally, the outsider mentality and the parallel populisms driving them to victory has been underlined. Jackson has been a controversial figure in American politics and history for almost two centuries, and supporters and opponents of Trump have been able to draw on differing second order constructs of what "Jackson" means. The analogy to Jackson has, as of yet, not been linked to specific action, but is employed as a vehicle of legitimation or de-legitimation.

Predictably, historians have reacted to the analogy between Trump and Jackson by reading it as first order construct. In so doing, they find more dissimilarities than similarities. Their analyses are instructive, for instance in stressing how Jackson's rise to power was drawn out over time, how he had extensive public service before becoming president and how he is associated with a democratisation of the American political system. Relying on the working truths of historians thus points to the many and important differences between the age of Jackson and our own time, and suggests that both of the analogies mentioned above are imprecise, and even that Jackson himself might not have been a "Jacksonian" in Mead's terminology. Then again, read as second order constructs, the important thing is not the working truth of historians, but what is invoked by reference to Jackson. And for the political effectiveness of the analogy, this is decidedly the most important. Thus, while the analogy with Jackson read as first-order construct primarily yields academic insights about how Trump is different from Jackson, read as a second-order construct it provides insight about the self-understanding of Trump and those who support him, and the perceived political gains to be made by reference to being a supporter of the people.

Mead's usage of the concept of "Jacksonianism" points to yet another contested usage of history, namely politicised concepts. When arguing through analogy, likeness is found between two distinct phenomena. When arguing through concept, the point is fit between a phenomenon and a more stylised general category, possibly with empirical illustrations. In the previous decade, "empire" was the prime example, being invoked by supporters and opponents of US foreign policy alike, both in the abstract and with comparisons to particularly the British empire.

The currently most obvious such concept is "fascism", a term used by some critics of Trump to signify the current policies of the US government. Treated as a narrow first-order historical concept, this usage has been criticised on the grounds that Trump can't possibly be a fascist, since he is not engaged in interwar European politics. Even with a broader understanding of fascism, the first-order construct has been challenged, for instance on the count that Trump lacks an explicit ideology, that he is an individualist rather than a collectivist and that the United States in 2017 is hardly similar to Italy around 1920 and Weimar Germany. On the other hand, those willing to use the concept, such as Tomothy Snyder (2017) have focused on the much debated travel ban, on the dramaturgy of both campaign and presidency, on how Trumps plays on the perceived decline from a glorious past and on his rallying against the "elites". These debates can rely on relatively well established working truths about the nature of fascism, understood as a specific type of political movement, and they contribute in important ways to illuminate both parallels and divergence between ideal-typical fascism and the current US administration.

However, first order correspondence (or lack of it) tells only half the story of "fascism". Although it has specific academic meanings, it is clearly also a term of abuse, where the analogy is simply to something known as historically very bad. And, again, the efficacy of the concept is less related to its first order fit, than to this second order experience. Those supporting Trump are likely to reject the usage of the concept out of hand, as a term of insult, while many opposing him might embrace it regardless of first order fit, simply because it conveys their despair. In the latter case, the framing of action is also straightforward – if the current US political system is comparable to Weimar Germany, the president can be seen as a fascist and the possibility of a "Reichstag Fire" looms, resistance is compulsory.

Conclusion

The current deployment of historical analogies and concepts to try to make meaning of the Trump presidency, and suggest courses of action, illustrate vividly how hard it might be to make both analytical and political use of history. For the analyst trying to make sense of the present while not getting embroiled in second-order politicisation, settling for concept with somewhat less analogical baggage, such as authoritarianism rather than fascism, might make sense. For the activist, analogical reasoning might seem tempting, but as the examples have showed, analogies are no guarantee of successful argumentation.

More technically, the examples illustrate how first order fit is not necessarily connected to second order usefulness. The existence of fairly stable working truths might make for interesting academic comparisons of the past and the present, but they are neither necessary nor sufficient for historical analogies and concepts to be effective. But when can we expect analogies to be effective? The mentioned examples allow for some tentative suggestions. While first order fit is not a prerequisite, some knowledge about the signifier in the historical setting is a must. Comparison of Trump to Nero is unlikely to evoke much reaction, while comparisons of Saddam Hussein to Hitler and Stalin had immediate resonance. Likewise, effectiveness is more likely if the second order construction is relatively uncontested. The differing constructions of Andrew Jackson might allow for polarised mobilisation, but seem to make overall effectiveness less likely. And, as the example of fascism suggests, even knowledge of the signifier and a relatively stable second order construction is unlikely to be overall effective if there is significant disagreement on the quality of the current situation. In general, it is not surprising that historical analogies have been more effective in international affairs than in domestic politics. Some knowledge, but not too much, stable second order representations and broad agreement about the current situation has simply been more likely about issues beyond the borders.

But this might not be the case any longer. Paradoxically, in a period with high perceived uncertainty and pervasive references to historical precedent, the power of historical analogies and concepts to make the world intelligible and frame possible action seems to be reduced. While the analyst would hope that this is a result of better understanding of the difficulties involved in analogous reasoning and the oftentimes problematic first-order fit in historical analogies, it seems more likely that the difficulties are associated with lack of second order effectiveness, stemming in part from increasing political polarization. If a situation with broad public agreement about the current situation arises, historical analogies offering appealing second order conceptualisations are likely to be successful again, even if their first order connection with working truths is dubious.

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