

The Implications of Nazi-comparisons in Current European Discourse

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Eurocrisis in the
Press

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“They’re Germans”, whispers John Cleese, “so don’t mention the war!” Four decades after the classic [Fawlty Towers episode](#) first aired, the memory of World War II continues to cloud Germany’s foreign relations, with German public opinion reacting strongly to the Nazi-comparisons used in international protests against Berlin’s policies. Yet as much as it is unhelpful to compare Angela Merkel or Wolfgang Schäuble to Adolf Hitler, it is also counterproductive to dismiss southern European indignation by overemphasising that side of the protests.

Provocatively invoking Germany’s past in order to satirise its political elite is not a new phenomenon, and neither is the German reaction, which views such comparisons as an affront, exclusive to criticism in the context of the Euro Crisis. For example, this had already been the case with the [periodic use of such imagery by Polish media](#). Yet some German journalists argue that this kind of language has become too deeply entrenched, with potential long-term consequences to the detriment of European public discourse. The increased frequency of Third Reich comparisons has led to the conclusion that what was once done in the spirit of political satire has now become a [“genuine, widespread and worrisome belief.”](#)

There is a danger of reading too much into this type of insults. Comparing politicians, or adversaries in general, to Hitler [is hardly something that only applies to German leaders](#); to the point that there is even a [popular theory](#) about the comparison’s predictability in internet forums. Even German politicians [are not completely beyond this](#). The iconographic translation of the comparison into protest signs is all the more unsurprising given its recognisability. From [hipster jokes](#) to [cats](#) to [real estate](#), Hitler’s moustache has been appropriated by global visual culture way beyond the context of Germany. It is certainly a more resonant reference than the ‘Merkiavelli’ nickname coined by German sociologist [Ulrich Beck](#)

At the same time, there are specific implications of aiming such slurs at German targets. The apparent scale and regularity of such comparisons in this context suggest xenophobic undertones. More than typically vilifying their target, these insults also reinforce a traditional stereotype, one that is particularly unfair on a generation that had no responsibility for the crimes of National-Socialism and which overwhelmingly does not subscribe to that ideology. Germans’ oversensitivity is therefore understandable after decades of Nazi connotation in international fiction, despite Berlin’s efforts to atone for and repudiate its predecessor’s actions.

There is perhaps [more to this sensitivity than a mere sense of historical guilt](#). For the past decades, Germany – more so than other European powers such as the UK and France – has displayed an enduring need for acceptance and the desire to compensate for its lack of popularity. While the US, for example, has been exposed to far greater amounts of vitriol, it seems to care far less about its image in the world. Moreover, the remote, but nevertheless existing possibility that the rise of a truly pro-Nazi far right could re-occur makes the comparisons all the more disturbing for German public opinion. This awareness has become a core component of national discourse, fuelling Germany’s continued striving to distance the present from its past, a sort of recurrent denazification.

Even if stripped of its implicit racism and of considerations for the German psyche, the comparison’s usefulness is dubious. Although its appeal is not hard to grasp, particularly in the case of Greece which, unlike Spain or Portugal, directly suffered the consequences of Nazi expansionism (as highlighted by the [current controversy over war reparations](#)), the comparison does not actually help construct a serious debate about Germany’s role in the crisis.

As criticisable as Merkel's policies are, they are far removed from the ones that defined the Nazi project except at the most superficial level of analogy. Indeed, this kind of populist rhetoric is certainly not more constructive or reasonable than generalising southern Europeans as corrupt, lazy or incompetent, [as some of the German press has done](#).

It is problematic, however, to reduce the protests to this specific dimension, namely by [repeatedly highlighting the hitlerised chancellor placards](#) in order to debase the southern European outcry. There is the risk of implying that racism is the driving force behind the protests, which would be disingenuous: Merkel is not being condemned for being German, and the current anti-German sentiment does not stem from Germany's past (not long ago, views on Germany did not prevent German personalities from gaining [acclaim in the South](#)). Southern European resentment stems from perceptions about Berlin's positions and actions throughout the crisis. Agree or disagree with the complaints, it would be intellectually dishonest to pretend that the anger is directed exclusively against Germany, rather than also against the [Troika](#) (especially the [IMF](#)), the [EU](#), [rating agencies](#), and – while he was in power – [Nicolas Sarkozy](#), as well as the protesters' own domestic [banks](#) and [politicians](#).

Furthermore, to reduce an opponent's protest to its most extreme representation, building up a straw man out of chants and posters, is a common strategy of those who do not try – or do not aim – to understand the other side's motivations and more thoughtful arguments. Demonstrations' slogans, while not above criticism, are almost by definition vicious, simplistic and exaggerated. They are not meant as contributions to the debate; their function is as cathartic expressions of discontent. Although they should not be ignored, their simplified messages should also not be taken to represent the bulk of the critique. If nothing else, a serious analysis could at least benefit from clearly differentiating between caricatures used as shorthand at the street level and the more manipulative use of national stereotypes by the mainstream press or political elite. A noteworthy example from early 2012 is the spat between German newspaper *Der Spiegel* and Berlusconi-owned *Il Giornale*, which culminated in a reference to [Auschwitz](#), and which [some saw](#) as a direct indication of the former Italian prime minister's difficult relationship with the chancellor.

Ultimately, the Nazi comparison should not overshadow the debate. It may be an insult that closes down discourse, rather than opening discussion. Yet it is also symptomatic of the sense of disempowerment felt by many citizens of crisis-affected countries, who rely on historical references that have entered the popular imaginary to vent their frustration. As such, the fact that this type of language is being used should not serve to obscure profound social grievances.

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