Closed Fist, Empty Hand or Open Hand? Globalization and Historical Analogies

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History constitutes our identity, helps us make sense of the world and plays a critical role in persuading people of a particular course of action. Much of the power of history is exerted through historical analogies. We need them to orientate ourselves in the world. International relations theorists from classical Realists (Kissinger, 1964; Morgenthau, 1978), to the English School (Wight, 1977; Bull, 1995), to Constructivists (Hall and Kratochwil, 1993; Sikkink, 1998), inquire into the dynamics of world politics by drawing from historical analogies. More policy-orientated studies use historical analogies to understand issues such as humanitarian intervention (Weiss, 2001) and democratization (Youngs, 1993). Likewise, political practitioners frequently employ historical analogies to cope with decision-making situations. In decisions on war initiations for instance, the Munich analogy often features prominently. In a well-known recent instance, Tony Blair and George W. Bush warned that not to take military action against Saddam Hussein would amount to Chamberlain’s mistake of appeasing Hitler at the 1938 Munich Conference.

Historical analogies are omnipresent and it is important to note their varied influence. Indeed, some analogies lead us seriously astray. There is now, to stay with the above example, a far-reaching global consensus that the Munich analogy was inappropriate in the context of regime change in Iraq. It led many people – including its protagonists – seriously astray. The example of Iraq also illustrates that inappropriate analogies, in concert with other forces, can have severe consequences, including ill-fated resort to war. Yet getting rid off historical analogies to prevent such consequences is not an option. We need them to reason about the
world. Hence, this chapter is a study in methodology. It argues not against the use of historical analogies but examines their use. What procedures are there to help us use them in a fruitful manner?

Drawing from classical theories of rhetoric, I reject claims of objective truth for historical analogies. Instead, I contend that they provide leads for making the world intelligible through debate. My methodological framework encourages open debate about the plausibility of a particular historical analogy in two ways: First, I develop guiding questions for discussing:

(a) the history invoked in the analogy;
(b) the similarities and differences between the invoked history and the phenomenon to be illuminated by the analogy;
(c) the novel insights that the analogy generates for this phenomenon.

Second, I apply the idea of dissoi logoi to the discussion of historical analogies. There is always more than one way to approach a particular issue. Looking at an issue through contending lenses – without necessarily suspending judgment on it – allows for exploring these different angles.

This chapter is organized into three parts: first, I discuss three metatheoretical perspectives on analogies. I label them, borrowing from Zeno, ‘closed fist,’ ‘empty hand’ and ‘open hand.’ Second, I endorse the rhetorician’s open hand and introduce the methodological frame. Third, I discuss two historical analogies of globalization that conceptualize the hierarchical dimension of global order as empire but conceive of empire very differently: the benign empire as celebrated by the proponents of the Pax Americana (henceforth empire) and the exploitative Empire as coined by Hardt and Negri (henceforth Empire).

Closed fist or open hand?

Tracing them back to Zeno, the founder of the Stoa, Cicero (1994:II [VI] 17) discusses two diametrically opposed metaphors for describing the process of making sense of the world: closed fist and open hand. The closed fist stands for logic. This mode of reasoning revolves around the syllogism. True premises form the pillars on which the logician, abiding by stringent rules of deductive inference, discovers a new truth. As compelling as logic may be, however, some aspects of reality elude its rigorous reasoning. The open hand stands for rhetoric. Some things cannot be forced into the closed fist but only captured – albeit more tentatively – by an open discussion and the exchange of arguments.