Hitler the Villain

How might seeing Hitler as an exceptionally evil monster prevent us from addressing the horrors of our own times?

Lesson Objective: The goal is to make a villain like Hitler seem less like an otherworldly monster, and more like a person we might encounter in our daily lives. This task is toward a greater goal of preventing atrocities and disasters in our time and context. By seeing Hitler as a person instead of a monster reveals an uncomfortable truth that many of us are capable of contributing to (or even instigating) horrendous actions.

Resources/Materials:
- access to the Internet for each student (or pairs)

Introduction:
- as a class or in small groups, have the students brainstorm "the most evil villains" (these can be historical or fictional)
- debrief with students: What makes a villain evil? What makes a villain different from someone we might expect to meet in our daily lives?

Content:
- Have your students describe what Hitler was like. Get them to focus on how he often looks (although other characteristics are fine)
- Give students a definition of **"villainification" = the process of creating single actors as the faces of systemic harm, with those hyperindividualized villains losing their ordinary characteristics**
- Villains are often hyperindividualized, or blame is placed on a faceless mob (e.g., a vague nod to society), but neither of these depictions explicitly ask us to weigh our own complicity in parallel contemporary processes.
- We forget that people like Hitler did "normal" things, like we would do, and so we can fail to see that we can be part of serious social problems
- Mention to students that sometimes learning can bring up uncomfortable feelings, sometimes without us realizing it. This next part of the lesson might make people feel queasy, anxious, or even mad. These feelings are ok (if channeled appropriately)
- Have students use your preferred Internet search engine individually or in pairs. Tell them to use the search terms: "Hitler laughing" and "Hitler smiling"
- Debrief with students: How are these images different from typical ones they see? How do these images make you feel? Why might it be weird to see Hitler laughing and smiling?
- Inform students about other famous figures in Nazi Germany (e.g., Göring, Hess, Himmler, Goebbels, Streicher, etc.), but then also talk about those who are not well-known: There were ordinary humans, not unlike us, who shook cans of Zyklon B into the gas chambers, who guarded the death camps, who provided supplies to the Nazis. Some of these were enthusiastic to help the Nazis, but others needed to be coaxed or coerced.
- Discussion questions: Without letting Hitler "off the hook", how might we see others as also responsible? How might we do this without saying "society" is the problem (which is too vague)? A focus on a single individual can prevent us from seeing our own responsibility, but so can blaming society because this conceptualization can be too impersonal.

Application:
- In small groups, ask students to pick one contemporary problem (e.g., at the time of writing this lesson plan: the separation of refugee parents and children in the USA, the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women in Canada, climate change, etc.). Who do we tend to blame (who are the villains?)? How are we also implicated? How might we hold the villains accountable while still seeing how we, too, must take action?

- Example: food consumption. The argument can be made that McDonald's is the villain of the food industry. However, a focus solely on this one corporation not only neglects others in a similar category but also can foreclose thought about how a constellation of factors produce and perpetuate a North American diet that promotes cruelty to animals on industrial farms, damage to bee populations through monocrop farming, chronic health, and other ill effects. As well, we all have responsibility in terms of our consumption patterns, such as the correlation of demand for red meat and greenhouse gas emissions. Ordinary people, living their mundane lives, can easily slip into the sort of thoughtlessness about the issure, with a cumulative effect of creating and sustaining systemic harm (in this case, irrevocable damage to the environment as well as the species with whom we share this planet). This thoughtlessness does not mean that any one consumer —you or anyone else—is to be blamed for creating this situation. Rather, we ought to live in the tension of being neither innocent nor guilty. We can be genuinely thoughtful, examining our (in)actions and change because we realize that what we do (or do not do) matters. Instead of resolving our anxieties and fears by shifting blame onto a villain, we can consider how we might make changes that affect, and are amplified by, our interconnections.

Suggestions for Assessment:
- Ask students to write a brief paragraph on villainification,
- Have students pick another historical figure and find "ordinary" photos of them (e.g., Stalin) and record what they find
- As a larger project, students could research a current event that implicates them and present to the class

For more information on the topic:

Cathryn van Kessel & Ryan M. Crowley. (2017). Villainification and Evil in Social Studies Education, *Theory & Research in Social Education*, 45:4, 427-455, DOI: 10.1080/00933104.2017.1285734

Cathryn van Kessel & Rebeka Plots. (in press). A Textbook Study in Villainification: The Need to Renovate our Depictions of Villains. *One World in Dialogue*,

Dan G. Krutka, & Michael K. Milton (Producers). (2018, January 27). Episode 75: Evil and Villainification in the Social Studies with Cathryn van Kessel and Ryan Crowley. *Visions of Education*. [Audio podcast]. Retrieve from https://visionsofed.com/2018/01/27/episode-75-villainification-in-social-studies-with-cathryn-van-kessel-ryan-m-crowley/