What did you just call me? A study on the demonization of political parties in the Netherlands between 1995 and 2011

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Chapter 1
Demonization Conceptualized

Introduction

In recent years two monographs have been published about demonization. The first *Liars! Cheaters! Evildoers! Demonization and the end of civil debate in American politics* is in the field of political science (De Luca and Buell, 2005), and the second book *The Psychology of Demonization: promoting acceptance and reducing conflict* is in the field of psychology (Alon and Omer, 2006). While both offer many interesting theoretical considerations, neither includes empirical analyses or indicates how demonization should be studied empirically. In fact, the only study I'm aware of that shows empirical results is by Van Praag (2005), who studied the demonization of the late Dutch anti-immigration politician Pim Fortuyn.[7] This study certainly has its merits, in that it provides a definition of demonization, as well as an indication of how to measure it. However, despite these valuable contributions, the central concept and its operationalization are not extensively discussed. This dissertation therefore builds upon all these previous studies to provide a clear conceptualization of demonization that enables examination of the practice of demonization, the circumstances under which politicians decide to demonize, and its consequences.

Defining demonization

Alon and Omer (2006) describe demonization as "the suspicious and fearful attitude toward the presumed enemy, the attempt to unmask his underlying destructive intentions, the feeling he eludes us, and the wish to expel or destroy him remind us of what fighting demons is supposed to be like" (p. x). Although this description of demonization is informative, it does not offer a clear definition of the concept. The authors mainly describe what psychological process demonization encompasses - *an attitude, an attempt, a reminder* - for the person who demonizes, thus diagnosing demonization as the feelings of the demonizer.

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7 However, also see Walter and Van Holsteyn (2006) for a descriptive analysis of the demonization of Fortuyn in political cartoons, and Schafraad et al. (2009) who tentatively measured demonization of far right parties in the media.

De Luca and Buell (2005) offer two definitions of demonization. First, they describe demonization as casting the aspersion of being demonic on others "too easily" and "without proper cause" (p. 4). Second, they describe demonization as "a sustained and illicit effort whose purpose is to thoroughly stigmatize individuals, types of persons, or groups whether for political or other advantage, righteous belief, or both." (p. 5). Like Alon and Omer, De Luca and Buell begin from the view of the demonizer. They stress two aspects of demonization. First, demonization implies immoral behavior: *casting an aspersion* means that the demonizer makes a false or misleading claim, while the demonizer does this *too easily* and *without proper cause.* The authors specifically use the word *stigmatize,* which has a negative connotation to it: hurtful branding. In addition, the claim is *illicit*. Second, the authors indicate that demonization can be used as a strategic tool, possibly serving to gain political or other advantage.

The most striking difference between the descriptions of Alon and Omer and that of De Luca and Buell is that the former start from the fear and danger that comes with fighting the presumed enemy, while the latter mainly stress the condemnatory nature of the act. Still, the two descriptions are also in agreement. The demonizer, according to Alon and Omer, is someone with the wish to expel or destroy, a notion that integrates well with De Luca and Buell's belief that the demonizer is thoroughly trying to brand someone.

Remarkably, these descriptions also contain elements that are highly subjective and difficult to operationalize. Schafraad et al. (2009) also conclude that demonization is hard to conceptualize and measure due to its normative nature. For instance, when is a charge *too easily* made and what is a *proper cause*? Or how do you determine if someone was *suspicious* and *fearful*? And is it a necessary condition that the actor has both feelings at the same time? Since the authors refrain from empirical analyses, they probably disregarded these problems.

Van Praag (2005) defines demonization as portraying a person as the personification of evil. In this study I build upon this definition. However, before proceeding further, it is useful to consider the etymology of the term. Originally, the concept stems from the religious domain, and the

Oxford English Dictionary describes 'to demonize' as 'to make into, or like, a demon; to render demonical; to represent as a demon'. In turn, a 'demon' is described as 'an evil spirit; a malignant being of superhuman nature; a devil', its antonyms are 'angel' and 'God'. Thus, a demon is associated with the devil, who represents not just evil, but absolute evil, while an angel and God are figures that represent absolute good. Consequently, the addition of the term 'absolute' seems appropriate when it concerns a careful definition of demonization, since demonization encompasses more than mere evil, it encompasses *absolute* evil. Taking into account the etymology of the term, I therefore define demonization as *portraying an actor as the embodiment of absolute evil*. Evidently, this prompts the follow-up question of what exactly should be considered 'absolute evil'.

To collect data, Van Praag searched several Dutch newspapers for articles where the word 'Fortuyn' was used in combination with respectively: Mussolini, Hitler, Mussert, Le Pen, Haider, Dewinter, fascist and/or racist. Although these search terms make clear what the author considers to be evil, no systematic method was used to develop a lexicon of search terms. It is unclear why other leading figures from the Nazi-regime, or other terms that are strongly associated with the Second World War, such as deportation and *Mein Kampf*, are not included. It is also unclear why the terms racist and fascist are included, while the term Nazi is not, and it appears odd that politicians like Le Pen and Haider are included, because these politicians are primarily equivalents to Fortuyn, and as likely as Fortuyn to be demonized themselves. So, while the conceptualization of demonization by Van Praag is very useful, his operationalization needs further refinement.

Although demonization can theoretically occur in all kinds of social spheres, such as sports or science, this study is limited to demonization in the political domain. Next to the strong religious associations, demonization appears most often related to this domain (De Luca and Buell, 2005). However, even within the political domain, the interpretation of what constitutes 'absolute evil' varies across cultural and historical contexts. For instance, nowadays in the Middle East many can be expected to see the United States (US) government as the embodiment of absolute evil, while in the US the embodiment of absolute evil is expected to be Al Qaeda/Bin Laden nowadays, and in the US in the 1950s, communism and/or fascism were probably perceived to be the most evil regimes.

To a great extent the concept of demonization can thus be seen as an empty vessel that varies in its exact content dependent on the context in which it is placed. Limiting the analysis to demonization within the political domain, I argue that a valid operationalization for the concept can be provided for by an analysis of the specific context that is studied. In this study, that specific context is the Dutch political domain between 1995 and 2011.

Demonization in the Dutch political domain, 1995-2011

Van Praag (2005) contends that the embodiment of absolute evil is primarily related to the Second World War and the related evil –isms of fascism and Nazism. Given the sentiment in the Netherlands after the Second World War, these historic linkages are not surprising, especially because, since the end of the War, organizations associated with fascism and Nazism have been regarded as highly dangerous and therefore heavily combated (Fennema, 2000; Van Donselaar et al., 2009).[8]

Disgust at Nazism/fascism is, of course, not exclusive to the Netherlands. Adler-Nissen (2014) states that Nazi-Germany is considered a paradigmatic case of 'evil' in international relations, and that it represents one of the most lasting negative state images. In many Western European countries, such as the Netherlands, Belgium, Germany, France and Austria, it is illegal to found a fascist party, and being a member or founder of a Nazi/fascist organization can lead to legal prosecution (Houwink ten Cate and In 't Veld 1992; also see Van Donselaar, 1995). Going even further, laws in these countries forbid bringing the Nazi-salute and denying the Holocaust. The fact

8 It should be noted that many definitions of fascism refer exclusively to the regime of Hitler in Germany and the regime of Mussolini in Italy as the manifestation of this ideology. Although authors have formulated broader definitions that also encompass other political movements they are generally very reluctant to use the term fascism for movements or regimes outside the historical period of approximately 1920 to 1945 (Fennema, 2005). Furthermore, most authors who define fascism outside this historical period do refer to the fascist movements or regimes within this period as the most exemplary for fascism. For instance, in his book *Fascists,* Mann defines fascism as "the pursuit of a transcendent and cleansing nation-statism through paramilitarism" (2004: 13) and stresses that the regimes of Mussolini and Hitler are most emblematic. Hitler can thus be regarded as one of the founding fathers of fascism (Fennema 2005). For this thesis, the terms Nazism/fascism will be used interchangeably.

that the legal repression of Holocaust-denial is actively upheld, despite that being inconsistent with the highly valued principle of freedom of expression, shows how powerfully and deeply embedded the events of the Second World War are in a collective moral discourse.

The horrors committed by Nazis/fascists before and during the Second World War, not only resulted in a strictly historic and judicial condemnation of Nazism/fascism, above all they resulted in a moral rejection. Braun (1994: 181) states that "while morality plays an important role in modern historical writing, it seems to be inherent in the interpretational process as an element of the drama of the historical narrative rather than in the sequence of past events". Although Braun points to the interpretative dimension of any moral judgment, he argues that in the case of the Holocaust this formal argument is misplaced. The Holocaust has such a moral magnitude that it is unparalleled. According to Braun (1994: 181): "Survivors and humanists alike argue that the Holocaust possesses an explicit moral meaning that should be represented in all historical narratives" (also see Lang, 1992). Walzer (1977) too illustrates the moral magnitude of the Second World War, formulating several criteria that must be fulfilled in order for a war to be legitimate and just. Wars that do not fulfill these criteria are, in principle, unjust. Still, Walzer makes one exception, the moment he calls a 'supreme emergency'. When this occurs all criteria of justice are off the table, and the only thing that matters is that the 'good guys' win. According to Walzer one should "do justice unless the heavens are (really) about to fall" (p. 235). The sole example of a supreme emergency Walzer provides is Nazism: "Nazism lies at the outer limits of exigency, at a point we are likely to find ourselves united in fear and abhorrence" (p. 235). It appears, then, that overwhelming immorality such as Nazism can make immoral behavior moral again.

As a consequence of the deeply rooted historical, judicial and moral rejection of Nazism, ever since the Second World War it has became a civil task to identify (neo-)Nazism in its infancy, in order to eliminate it. The Dutch writer and commentator Zwagerman (2009) argues that Dutch dominant intellectual mores and values have been largely formed by post–war generation intellectuals who were all brought up with the notion that

Nazism is the purest form of evil. Guided by the slogan 'never again', non-repetition of this absolute evil became the societal norm and a civic duty. Van Donselaar (1995) too states that the Second World War provides the bedrock of what is considered good and evil. Art (2006: 161) draws similar conclusions for the German case, arguing that most German politicians feel compelled to "react to the slightest sign of right-wing resurgence". The fact that anti-immigration parties have received more attention in scientific work than other party families may illustrate that academics feel a similar duty (Art, 2006).

Despite calls for a universal condemnation of the Holocaust, the embodiment of absolute evil remains in the eye of the beholder. In other words: an absolute condemnation is subjective. Some will argue that Stalinist rule is equally, or even more detestable than Nazism/fascism. Since twenty million people were killed under Stalinist rule, one could argue that the horrors caused by Stalin and Hitler are quite similar. Nonetheless, Van Ree notes that while selling or trading of *Mein Kampf* is illegal in numerous countries, none of Stalin's works are forbidden.[9] Smeets argues that Stalin is considered folklore while Hitler is still a metaphor for contemporary mass murders.[10] Indeed, in countries like the Netherlands, Belgium and France, there is no remembrance of the horrors that took place during the Hungarian revolution, nor is denial of Gulags forbidden.

Pels (2003) argues that, for Western Europe, Nazism/fascism is considered more evil than Stalinism, because the horrors originated and took place on its soil and in its political communities. This observation makes sense. After all, the more directly people relate to or are affected by an event, the more meaning the event has for them. Most Western European countries organize annual national commemorations for the victims of the Nazi/fascist regime and also celebrate their day of liberation: no other historical event is institutionalized in such a way in so many different Western European countries. The Holocaust is thus perceived as an *Einzigartigkeit* and regarded as an unique and incomparable event. As a result of the institutionalization

9 See 'Het belang van vrij debat' *De Groene Amsterdammer*, 19-01-2002.
10 See 'Aantekeningen bij Stalin' *De Groene Amsterdammer*, 08-03-2003.

of the commemoration of the Nazi atrocities, the perception of absolute evil becomes part of the collective memory, including for those born 50 or 60 years after the war.

The scope and magnitude of the horrors that took place during the Second World War, as well as the institutionalized condemnation of these horrors, make credible the argument that most inhabitants of the Netherlands agree with the idea that the Nazi/fascist regime represents absolute evil. Although other reactions are possible, like glorification and/or ignorance, these are expected to be much less dominent. When having to indicate absolute evil within a certain context, it is *the dominant perception* that counts. Assuming such dominance, it is probable that even individuals who do not share the dominant point of view, know that to be compared to Hitler, is a most severe insult.

This perception of Nazism/fascism representing absolute evil most likely reinforces itself over time. That is, in history books, movies and novels stemming from Western culture, the horrific uniqueness and importance of Nazism/fascism and the Holocaust are repeatedly underlined. The repetition of this point of view arguably further strengthens the perception.

To sum up, in line with Van Praag (2005), demonization is defined as *portraying an actor as the embodiment of absolute evil*. Within the context of this study, the Dutch political domain between 1995 and 2011, Hitler is regarded as the ultimate demonic figure and Nazism/fascism as the political regime that represents absolute evil, and demonization is defined as *portraying a political actor as the embodiment of Nazism/fascism*.

Demonization placed in the realm of political communication

Having defined demonization in general as well as in a specific context, the question of what its status is in the political debate remains. On a continuum from friendly to hostile communication, demonization is the extreme of the scale. Other forms of negative communication do also exist, such as shaming, questioning, provoking and strong criticism, but such forms are arguably less hostile. De Luca and Buell (2005) state that they sharply contrast demonization with knee-jerk attacks and extremely harsh censure of positions. Although the authors advocate a conceptual distinction between different forms of negative communication, they state that such differences cannot be determined by abstract definitions (also see Schafraad et al., 2009). They feel that deciding where the dividing line between demonization and other harsh attacks is, itself poses a deeply moral and political dilemma. De Luca and Buell are correct in pointing out how difficult it is to distinguish between demonization and other forms of negative communication. However, once what constitutes 'absolute evil' in the specific cultural and historical context under analysis is determined, a distinction can be made. The theoretical section above concludes that nowadays in the Netherlands, calling a politician a Nazi is demonization, while calling the same person a liar is not.

The most problematic distinction is between stigmatization and demonization. De Luca and Buell (2005) describe demonization with the help of stigmatization as "a sustained and illicit effort whose purpose is to thoroughly *stigmatize* individuals, types of persons, or groups whether for political or other advantage, righteous belief, or both." (p. 5, italics added). Schafraad et al. (2009) too resort to stigmatization to tentatively measure demonization. When discussing stigmatization, *Stigma. Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* by Goffman (1963) is important. According to Goffman a stigma is an attribute that is deeply discrediting, sometimes also called a failing, a shortcoming or a handicap. He speaks of a 'spoiled identity', which determines that people who carry such an identity will be met with hostility and/or aversion. A stigmatized person is reduced "from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one." (p. 12). Stigmatization generally concerns certain kinds of groups, like disabled people, jobless people, homeless people or ethnic minorities. Referring to Goffman in the context of state-stigmatization, Adler-Nissen (2014) argues that stigmatization produces and reproduces a distinction between 'us' and 'them' pointing to the 'normals' and the 'deviants'. Stigmatization thus entails that certain individuals are shunned. Along the same line, Linden and Klandermans (2006) argue that stigmatizers turn characteristics of their targets into a stigma to indicate that the bearer of

this stigma is morally defective and should be avoided.

Although the concepts of stigmatization and demonization show many similarities (depicting someone as a lesser being, often followed by exclusionary practices), stigmatization is a more general concept and demonization is more specific: stigmatization covers a whole range of attributes, while demonization is solely concerned with the most extreme allegation one can make. Besides, while demonization is considered first and foremost a political concept, stigmatization is considered first and foremost a sociological concept. Stigmatization primarily includes rejection by society based on a perceived weakness, failure or handicap, often recognized by physical appearances, while demonization implies a rejection based on the perception that an actor harbors evil, often recognized by intellectual expression. Stigmatized people are perceived as abnormal, but not necessarily dangerous.

Another way to distinguish between demonization and other forms of negative political communication is to consider the connotations of the allegation. I argue that, in theory, demonization suggests the legitimization of (political) elimination. If you portray an actor as the embodiment of absolute evil, it follows that the elimination of this actor is legitimized, or, at least, it is logically impossible to argue against this elimination since no good is done harm. Alon and Omer (2006) state that demonization forbids all forms of facilitation, since this would only bring the demonized closer to meeting his/her harmful goal(s). Accordingly, in their definition of the concept, they emphasize "the wish to expel or destroy him remind us of what fighting demons is supposed to be like" (2006: x). Stigmatization implies that the relevant actor is shunned or avoided, but in general it does not concern a wish or legitimacy to destroy. Stigmatization tolerates the existence of the relevant actors, but demonization does not, at least not in theory; evil must always be destroyed, root and branch.

In summary, demonization is the most extreme form of negative (political) communication. It is distinguished from other forms like shaming, mild criticism and strong criticism by the severity of the claim. Demonization concerns an equation to absolute evil, and nothing less. Although the

distinction between stigmatization and demonization is somewhat blurred, the concepts differ from each other in terms of range, origin and implication.

Motives for demonization

De Luca and Buell (2005) emphasize two main motives for demonization in their definition: gaining an advantage and expressing a belief. I call these two forms 'demonization as a strategy' and 'demonization as a warning'. Demonization as a warning encompasses the need to alarm people by expressing a genuine fear of the return of Nazism/fascism. This purpose relates well to the notion of a "fearful attitude toward the presumed enemy" (Alon and Omer, 2006: x). Demonization as a strategy, on the other hand, implies that the demonizer aims for the (electoral) impact of associating someone with the horrors of the Second World War. Demonization is now primarily used as a political tool, and the demonizer does not act out of fear, but after carefully calculating the effects. This purpose fits best with the idea that demonization can help to gain "political advantage" (De Luca and Buell, 2005: 4). Mouffe (2005) for example argues that the battle for winning votes back from Austrian politician Jörg Haider was characterized by "a strident moral condemnation of Haider's xenophobia, and by his demonization as 'Nazi'." (p. 73). Elbers and Fennema (1993) argue that, after the Second World War, any association with Nazism/fascism is a political kiss of death.

Although the theoretical distinction between demonization as a strategy and demonization as a warning seems obvious, both motives may often play simultaneous roles. In other words, one can honestly fear the return of Hitler while using demonization for its own gain. Moreover, assuming that demonization is completely based on a genuine fear of the return of Nazism/fascism and the purpose is to alarm other people, strategic considerations may also play a role. After all, the demonizer's aim is for the accusation to have the greatest impact. To the extent that a political strategy aims at taking out the competition while safeguarding and increasing one's political power, the objectives for demonization as a warning and demonization as a strategy, are thus the same. When a(n electoral) threat becomes greater, strategic

responses are likely to increase, but the same is true for fear: when a threat becomes larger, fear grows stronger and the chance of expression increases. So, while the two motives are theoretically distinct, it is hard to distinguish them empirically.

Limitations

De Luca and Buell (2005) argue that demonization is distinguished from appropriate moral censure in the care given to the charge, as well as by the truth. Setting the degree of care aside for a moment, De Luca and Buell maintain that when a claim is true, it does not concern demonization. Two problems arise. First, how do you determine if a claim is true? Second, is it possible to demonize a (neo)-Nazi? Suppose the demonized decides whether or not the claim is true. The demonized probably always denies the validity of the claim since it jeopardizes his or her reputation.[11] The demonized has a greater incentive to refute the claim than to acknowledge it. It is hard to imagine someone saying: "Yes, you are right, my intentions are similar to Hitler's". In general people complain when they are being demonized. If on the other hand, the demonizer decides on the truthfulness of the claim, it is also very unlikely that he or she will argue against its content. After all, he or she is the one who made the allegation in the first place. Even if the purpose of the demonization is gaining a political advantage and the content of the claim is not entirely representative of the demonizer's feelings, it is still unlikely that the demonizer withdraws his or her own words, because such modification affects an actor's credibility.

Demonization can also result in strong (public) rejection of the claim. In which case, the demonizer is usually considered unfair. Depending on how broad or strong the protest is, the demonizer might consider refuting the claim. However, people who genuinely fear the return of Nazism will probably not be affected by any (public) rejection. Above all, they consider it a civic duty to report this kind of evil when they see it.

A final option for assessing the truthfulness of a claim is to let an impartial actor decide. The institutionalized way to do this is to go to court. Besides, it being clearly impractical to assess all claims in court, this presupposes that when the demonized does not bring the case to court, he or she is not demonized.

Clearly it is highly problematic to determine whether or not a claim is true, but I do not consider this to be an essential element of demonization. The simple fact that an actor is portrayed as a Nazi or fascist is, in the historical context of this study, a very extreme allegation and can therefore be interpreted as a case of demonization. However, the effect of the allegation differs. Obviously if you demonize a full-fledged neo-Nazi, this will probably have minimal impact and serve little purpose. The people who take note of this demonization are not likely to be shocked, nor will the person demonized be shocked. Arguably, demonization has the most effect and purpose when it concerns actors who 'graze' the features of Nazism/fascism, but who deny any relationship with these ideologies.[12] It is hardest for these actors to convince the public that the allegation is false.

Clearly, the operational definition of demonization, *portraying a political actor as the embodiment of Nazism/fascism* introduces a bias towards the political right. Thus parties on the right side of the political spectrum are expected to be more prone to demonization than parties on the left. This could, of course, be different in other contexts. For instance, if communism is considered the political regime that represents absolute evil, a bias towards the political left is expected, and if Al Qaeda is the political movement that represents absolute evil, a bias towards Muslims and Muslim organizations is expected. In other words, the ideology or origin of the regime or movement that represents absolute evil can vary, and the direction of the bias depends on the time and place under analysis. Returning to this particular study, left-wing parties, it is expected, are more likely to escape the charge than right-

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11 It should be noted that some political actors are most likely to perceive it advantageous to claim that they are demonized in order to win the sympathy vote. However, this is distinct from the question whether an actor would validate the content of an actual insult addressed at him/her.

12 Van der Brug et al., (*forthcoming*) argue there are three sorts of anti-immigration parties in Western Europe. First, parties that are explicitly neo-Nazi/fascist, such as the German *Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands* (NPD) or the Greek *Laïkós Sýndesmos - Chrysí Avgí*. Second, parties that originated from Nazi/fascist *groupuscules*, but have been transformed into more moderate parties, such as the Dutch *CentrumDemocraten* (CD) or the Belgian *Vlaams Blok* (VB). Third, parties such as the Dutch LPF and PVV that are ideologically very similar to the latter group, but are not the offspring of Nazi/fascist clubs. Arguably, the latter two party groups are most prone to demonization.

wing parties.

Finally, in theory it is possible that in a given context, nothing represents absolute evil, other than the devil itself. In such a case, demonization does not belong to the range of allegations an actor can choose from. This assumption is difficult because it leads to the question of whether you can demonize someone simply by stating that the actor is the devil. While this is actually the most accurate operationalization of 'absolute evil' and is correct in theory and in practice in the religious domain, in other domains, particularly the political, demonization transcends this obvious operationalization, drawing on what always was or became the 'proverbial devil' in the domain under analysis.

Conclusion

Building further on Van Praag (2005), demonization is defined as *portraying an actor as the embodiment of absolute evil*. To a large extent demonization should be seen as an empty vessel that varies in its exact content dependent on the context in which it occurs. A valid operationalization for the concept can be provided for by an in-depth assessment of the specific context in which it is used. In the context of this study, the Dutch political domain between 1995 and 2011, Hitler is regarded as the ultimate demonic figure and Nazism/fascism as the political regime that represents absolute evil.

Demonization is the most extreme form of negative (political) communication, distinct from other forms like shaming, mild or even strong criticism by the severity of the claim. Demonization only concerns an equation to absolute evil, and nothing less. Although the distinction between stigmatization and demonization is somewhat blurred, the concepts differ from each other in terms of range, origin and implication.

Two main motives behind demonization are visible: demonization as a warning and demonization as strategy. Demonization as a warning arises from the urge to alarm people by expressing a genuine fear for the return of Nazism/fascism. Demonization as a strategy, on the other hand, implies that the demonizer aims at the (electoral) impact of associating someone with

the horrors of the Second World War. Although the theoretical distinction between demonization as a warning and demonization as a strategy appears clear, the two forms can hardly be studied exclusively: one can honestly fear the return of Hitler while using demonization as a rhetoric tool to smear the opponent.

In summary, this chapter provides a basic theoretical framework for further analysis of demonization. However, not all theoretical implications have been addressed or discussed as thoroughly as possible. In the remainder of this dissertation, other aspects of demonization will be raised, and some of the theoretical implications already discussed, will be analyzed in more detail.