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Nostalgia and political analysis: A perspective from the Israeli case

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Abstract

I argue here for the relevance and importance of the study of nostalgia for political analysis. Focusing on the case of Israel, I propose that a study of nostalgia can yield, at least in the case at hand, insightful views of political reality that other approaches to the study of politics may fail to expose. Specifically, I focus on a nostalgia prevalent among the dominant Ashkenazi ethno-class, accompanied by a Mizrahi 'counter' nostalgia. I argue that these nostalgias tell us volumes – like other nostalgias can do – about the ways people and their socio-political groups understand their world and their place within it in the present and formulate their hopes for the future. In this, nostalgia proves to be an important part of the toolkit of the study of politics, alongside the study of political myth and symbols.

Keywords

interpretive politics, nostalgia, Israel, Palestine, Zionism

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Introduction

Allow me to 'reverse' what has become a traditional structure of social-scientific articles and open with the concrete before considering its more general reasoning:

Reflecting on the ethics of memory, Avishai Margalit (2011: 271–5) turns naturally to discuss the political significance of nostalgia. Noting that as a 'moral sentiment' nostalgia can become dangerous, he explains that nostalgia 'tends to distort the reality of the time past [. . .] in a morally disturbing way'. Nostalgia 'idealizes its object [. . .] and locates it in a time of great purity and innocence, thus the object [. . .] is enshrined with purity and innocence'. More immediately socio-politically relevant are instances where nostalgia becomes 'vicarious memory', as one's memory is 'plugged' by memories of others.

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A ‘manifestation of moral failure’, the ‘nostalgic kitsch’, thus carries obvious political imports: ‘Memory, like any other form of knowledge, is power. Whoever controls memory and forgetting gains in power’. Nostalgia ‘can easily be put in service of brutality’ justifying acts (such, for example, that would aim to restore the presumed purity of the past) that would otherwise be indefensible. More specifically, there is the matter of the ‘*politics* of memory, namely, the means and the ways in which memory – especially collective memory – is shaped and manipulated by political agencies, for political gains’. Importantly, ‘the politics of *memory* is also the politics of *forgetting*; creating and maintaining social amnesia by political agencies’.

Margalit offers two corresponding examples of nostalgia, which he suggests are equivalent in their ‘systematic distortion’ and ‘idealizing [of] the past’, their promotion of ‘sentimentality’ and ‘kitsch morality’. His examples are taken from the Israeli scene, and they have to do with ‘the conflict in our contested debatable land Israel/Palestine’. Identifying all main actors in this conflict as ‘saturated with vicarious nostalgia’, Margalit ties together, and in effect equates (in terms of their ethical insidiousness) two memories of the past, which he sees as exemplifying the ‘pernicious nostalgia in our promised/punished land’:

> On one hand, some people of my generation and upbringing nourish Ashkenazi nostalgia for the pristine society of the Yishuv (the pre-state Hebrew community in Palestine) and to the early days of Israel, before the invasion of immigrants from Islamic countries. On the other hand, there is the counter nostalgia of some immigrants from Islamic countries, saying, we lived happily in our innocent and pure communities in Marrakesh, and Bagdad, based on respect for parents and elders, till you soulless Ashkenazi transposed us to your state and ruined, beyond repair, our innocence and beautiful form of life. (Margalit, 2011: 274)

Yet, contrary to Margalit’s bundling together of the two cases (I will dub these, for the sake of simplicity, respectively as the Ashkenazi and the Mizrahi nostalgias) as exemplifying the same ethical–political import of nostalgia, it is not hard to see that there are some obvious, politically crucial differences between the two. The two nostalgias are held and propagated by groups that occupy different social classes and have distinctly different access to power and privilege. To put it simply, one is the nostalgia of the dominant, the other the nostalgia of the dominated (at least as far as we focus solely on the Jewish-Israeli majority; as I will mention shortly, the Palestinian minority’s presence also looms large here, but rather implicitly so).

Needless to say, the two nostalgias both remember and forget (rather: silence) elements of the past they valorise. Yet looked at politically, that is: with a consideration of the political, power-related implications of this remembering/forgetting they clearly differ from each other: While the Ashkenazi nostalgia forcefully erases or silences the Palestinian presence in the ‘purity’ of the ‘pristine’ Good Old Land of Israel (it is interesting to note that Margalit himself, while immediately situating this nostalgia in the ‘contested debatable land Israel/Palestine’ leaves this silencing out of the story, making it primarily about the relation between Ashkenazi and Mizrahi Jews in Israel), the Mizrahi nostalgia, at best, silences chapters of discord between a Muslim majority and a Jewish minority in Arab and Muslim lands.

Each of the two nostalgias also offers a rather radically different political horizon (even if not a political programme per-se) than the other. They each offer, in other words, a view into motivations for political action, allow us an understanding of how the political agents involved view themselves and their political counterparts and teach us something

about potential future courses of action they may be prone to take. And these quite clearly are of a different political import:

The Ashkenazi yearning for the 'good old times' of the 'pristine society' of the Yishuv and early Israeli statehood, 'before the invasion of immigrants from Islamic countries' (and, we may add, when it comes to the period of early Israeli statehood, after the expulsion of Palestinians from the land) has an obvious eliminatory aspect to it, both in its memories and its forgetting. A political embodiment of this nostalgic memory/forgetting would conceivably also yield a striving for silencing those disturbing Mizrahi Others, who have gradually become more vocal in the Israeli public and political spheres while maintaining the silence(ing) of the Palestinians. What one is nostalgic for here is exactly the absence of these disturbances. (If we wish to stick to the purity metaphor, we may see them as no less than contaminations.) The group that shares this nostalgia has held the privileged position in the Israeli configuration of power, and it bemoans a sense of its undermining by newcomers and other Others. To jump straight into the political hotbed of what Margalit calls the 'conflict in our contested debatable land Israel/Palestine', the political message entailed in this Zionist Ashkenazi (settler) nostalgia is that a so-called solution to the conflict – the very meaning of peace – would aim to yield these silences, to recreate a political reality where Mizrahim (and Palestinians, always present but often only implicitly so, in matters of Israeli political culture; and here simply erased from the picture, their dispossession composing the background of the pristine past) are absent, and Ashkenazi Israelis are able to enjoy undisturbed the good of the land that is now theirs. 'Pernicious' indeed.

On the contrary, what Margalit labels the 'counter nostalgia' of Israeli Mizrahim (to use the common, although not uncontested term for Israelis who hail from Islamic and Arab countries) offers as a political horizon inclusivity that is gravely missing from a political reality determined by what is often called (a misnomer nonetheless) the Jewish-Arab conflict. The memory of a generally – relatively, even – peaceful conviviality in Arab and Muslim countries that was violently disrupted by the nationalist project of establishing a nation-state for Jews in Palestine suggests political trajectories that are indeed *counter*-intuitive to the nation-statist, eliminatory mind-set: It yearns for a time of cohabitation and mutual respect between Jews and Muslims (even if it does not go all the way to question the basic Jew vs Arab binary, the Zionist construction of which preceding – and enabling – the actual uprooting of Arab-Jews from their homelands and the dispossession of the Palestinians). The range of solutions to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict such a nostalgic horizon may offer (although this conflict is not its primary concern, and it, too, leaves the Palestinians silent) is indeed starkly different politically – but also morally and ethically – from what the Ashkenazi yearning for the 'Good Old Land of Israel' may yield.

It may not be out of place to ask why Margalit labels this Mizrahi nostalgia a 'counter' memory. What does it stand *contra* to? If the original (Ashkenazi) nostalgia is about the Mizrahi (and, less directly but as forcefully, Palestinian) absence from the scene, then this Mizrahi nostalgia agrees on the basic distribution: It, too, yearns for a time when Mizrahim were not in Israel (it leaves unattended the question of the Ashkenazi presence there). Here, in the Mizrahi nostalgia, the settler-colonialists (rather, those who were brought into the settler-colonial project after its course has been set) yearn to leave the colony and to return to what they dare call their (old) home. Why, then, call this a 'counter memory'? On one level, it clearly speaks against Zionist Ashkenazi hegemony and its 'settler memory' (Bruyneel, 2021), remembering (or dreaming; here lies the political impetus of this

memory, invented or otherwise) a time outside of this hegemony. In this sense, 'counter' here bears a more immediate political import: the nostalgia at hand speaks *contra* power, or at least yearns for a configuration of power different from the present one. It is about the yearnings of the dispossessed, the marginalised, to be less so. On a deeper level (which Margalit must be attentive to), it also stands in contradiction to a certain narration of the Jewish past, which lies as a somewhat hidden geological layer of the Ashkenazi nostalgia: What Salo Baron (1963: 240) called a 'lachrymose' narration or memory of the Jewish past as one, continuous and long list of persecutions, pogroms, and all out misery, a (meta-)historical background against which the Zionist idyl in Palestine (including its justification of the dispossession of Palestinians) is defined and shaped. The Mizrahi nostalgia contrasts this bleak image with a generally rosy – or maybe simply less catastrophic, more nuanced – image of cohabitation that renders the ethno-nationalist upheaval of life in what Zionist ideology derides as 'exile' less urgent, if not outright needless, its price (paid both by the uprooted Jewish communities and the dispossessed Palestinians) unjustified.

Nostalgia and the study of politics

The two instances of Israeli nostalgia (it is safe to assume that no student of Israeli society would argue with Margalit about the prevalence, and basic outlines of these nostalgias; they are common currency in Israeli culture) offer, then, competing, conflicting even, political horizons, which could potentially be translated into political action. More importantly, the two nostalgias offer the observer of Israeli society a detailed look into such foundational aspects of political reality as the way in which political agents understand their being-in-the-world, their grievances, preferences, and yearnings. Crucially, the point of view offered by the study of these nostalgias spells out such attitudes towards these matters that may be otherwise too unpalatable or unacceptable to certain mindsets (say, a self-perceived enlightened, liberal-democratic point of view) and would most likely be denied when addressed directly (in public opinion surveys, for example).

In this regard, nostalgia proves to be a valuable tool for political analysis. The Israeli case at hand suggests a more general notion, by which the study of nostalgia can yield an insightful view of politics that other approaches to the study of politics may fail to expose. Nostalgia is often approached dismissively. Historians tend to judge it as shallow, kitschy. In this, it is just like myth: both are obviously 'distortions' of the past, but both have obvious political imports. And it is my suggestion that we study nostalgia with the same level of seriousness that we have come to study myth as an important element of socio-political reality (see Bottici, 2007; Bouchard, 2017; Flood, 2001; Hosking and Schopflin, 1997; Nicholls, 2016; Smith, 1999).

To be clear: my concern here is not with the politically concerned critiquing of nostalgia, but with the analytical usage of it for the study of politics. It goes without saying that nostalgia is far from being a neglected topic of commentary and study, as it would be futile to try and survey the literature on nostalgia, which covers such diverse fields as psychology, history, literature, art, and anthropology (to name but a few of these). Furthermore, as an object of political criticism, nostalgia has nourished many a brilliant intervention, some of which enjoyed a lasting impact on political discourse, especially so, it seems, in the American case (e.g. Hofstadter, 1948; Lasch, 1984; Schlesinger, 1955).

Closer to my aim here, nostalgia is also often evoked to explain certain political developments. These explanations often suggest (and rarely explicate) a causal scheme, where

nostalgia, or the yearning entailed in it, motivates political action (the electoral successes of Brexit and its advocates in the United Kingdom and Donald Trump's 'Make America Great Again' are exemplary in this regard: Campanella and Dassu, 2019a, 2019b; Mitchell, 2021). Yet these are often retrospective scholarly exercises, seeking to explain, in hindsight, how certain political programmes have triumphed, contradicting what many commentators thought would happen. Often, commentaries identifying these and other cases as instances of nostalgia employ the concept of nostalgia to highlight the irrational nature of the motivations behind these developments.

What I would suggest instead, following the lessons offered by the Israeli case, is that we approach nostalgia as we would other cultural forms to understand how agents instil their reality with meaning, how they understand their world and their place within it, and how they might choose to act in pursuing the horizons opened (or narrowed) for them by these understandings and meanings. As Richard Hofstadter (1948: 1) noted, dealing with what he saw as the American obsession with nostalgia, the (constant, sentimental, and distorting) reference to the past speaks volumes about how the agents involved see their future: Nostalgia can be both retrospective and prospective. As Barbara Cassin (2016: 30) puts it, the 'nostalgia of the past' is also a 'strange memory of the future'. Or, in Svetlana Boym's (2002: xvi) phrasing, 'Fantasies of the past determined by needs of the present have a direct impact on realities of the future. Consideration of the future makes us take responsibility for our nostalgic tales'. Nostalgia allows the observer, then, a view into a prevalent worldview, an outlook of what is to come, against the background of which the agents shape (also) their politics.

To a certain degree, the critiquing of nostalgia is trivial, tautological even: it goes (almost) without saying that we often tend to embellish our pasts; and to call something 'nostalgia' is by a certain, prevalent definition to identify it as a mirage, as an image of something that never really was, a beautified and 'cleansed' version of our pasts. But this is not to say that a critical study of nostalgia, or more importantly the study of a political culture through a study of its nostalgia(s), is without merit. On the contrary, it is my argument that exactly because of its naive nature, nostalgia offers us a clear insight into the political self-perception of the group sharing this narrative, or image, of its supposedly unblemished past.

Furthermore, given the 'recreational' nature that often characterises the practice of nostalgia (the cultural exercise of digging for the past, recreating it, celebrating it, etc. demands resources, from time to money), nostalgia can prove to be helpful in studying those who benefit from the prevalent configuration of power. Of course, Others, too, have nostalgias. But given that the political study of the powerful is more challenging since the prevailing configuration of power tends to hide behind images, ideas, symbols, and myths it depicts as collectively appealing, nostalgia holds the potential of offering us an uncommonly intimate view of what the powerful tend to fantasise.

In short, I would argue that the study of nostalgia should be an integral part of the toolkit of the students of politics, standing alongside the study of political myths, symbols, and collective memory. To illustrate this argument, or rather the merit of the study of nostalgia for political analysis, I will be returning later on to the Israeli case. Specifically, I will focus on manifestations and outgrowths of what Margalit identifies as the nostalgia of his generation and ethno-class, that is, the middle-class, Zionist, Ashkenazi nostalgia. Given the prevalent configuration of power in Israel, which puts this ethno-class at the centre of power, it is safe to identify this as the nostalgia of the powerful.

Nostalgia, meaning, and power

Clearly, the very notion that the study of nostalgia can or should be part of political analysis is indebted to an interpretive approach to political science, committed to the notion that the main task of the students of politics is to understand *why* people act the way they do. It is, in other words, part of a larger social-scientific worldview that sees social analysis as complete only when it allows an understanding of behaviour. This necessarily also involves a reconstruction and analysis of how the political agents view their world and instil it with meaning (Bauman, 1978; Bernstein, 1983; Rabinow and Sullivan, 1987; Taylor, 1971).

And nostalgia is one of the cultural, social, and political forms that function to articulate and maintain this meaning instilling process:

> Nostalgia is an essential, narrative, function of language that orders events temporally and dramatizes them in the mode of 'things that happened', that 'could happen', that 'threaten to erupt at any moment'. By resurrecting time and place, and a subject *in* time and place, it shatters the surface of an atemporal order and a prefab cultural landscape. To narrate is to place oneself in an event and a scene – to make an interpretive space – and to relate something to someone: to make an interpretive space that is relational and in which meanings have direct social referents. (Stewart, 1988: 227)

Moreover, like myth, nostalgia offers multi-layered and multivocal narratives, speaking to various audiences in diverging ways. As Boym (2002: xvii) puts it, 'Nostalgia speaks in riddles and puzzles, so one must face them in order not to become its next victim – or its next victimizer'. This suggestive nature of nostalgia's messaging highlights that whatever is the nature of our scholarly engagement with nostalgia, analysing it necessitates interpretation.

The narratives – and meanings – nostalgia tells or propagates are often constructed *against* the prevalent socio-political reality, enabling an alienation or distancing of the latter, hence allowing us – at least potentially so – to approach it without being immersed in it. Nostalgia 'is a pained, watchful desire to frame the cultural present in relation to an "other" world – to make of the present a cultural object that can be seen, appropriated, refused, disrupted or "made something of"' (Stewart, 1988: 228). As Kathleen Stewart explains, following Pierre Bourdieu, this allows us a view into how a certain 'self' draws images of distinction that position that same self in a politically privileged position:

> Culture is 'seductive' only from the 'point of view' of a 'self' whose (polemical) cultural practice it is to construct codes of distinction and good taste – a pure aesthetic that is rooted in an ethos of elective distance from the contingency of the natural and social world. Here the desire is to purify, reify, and miniaturize the social world and so to make a giant of the individual self. Here, individual life narratives dramatize acts of separation-freedom, choice, creativity, imagination, the power to model and plan and act *on* life. From here there is the danger of being drawn in by images that are 'larger than life' or have 'a life of their own'. (Stewart, 1988: 228)

Yet as Stewart is quick to note, there is also an alternative approach to nostalgia, that of the Others: 'in an "other" place there are "others" whose practice it is to speak from "closeness" and contingency, to "talk back" to codes with the informality of anticodes and to back talk "distinction" with universalizing ethics of personhood'. This is a quintessentially subversive stance since it strives to reform the prevalent configuration of power.

It does so by rendering it no longer obvious and given, but rather contested, offering alternative contexts in which to create meaning and to understand reality:

> For these 'others' on the 'margins' the social world is not reified and fixed but thrown into flux and doubleness. Talk is double-voiced, codes are visible from one mode of attentiveness and quite invisible from another so that they refer, inescapably, to the context of their social use. Here it is recognized that everything 'depends'; meaning can only be made and read in a 'context' that is not just a 'background' for the 'text' but its very inspiration – its enabling condition. Here texts are contingent and they are *about* contingency. From here nostalgia is a painful homesickness that generates desire and not, in itself, 'seductive' or debased; it would be said that seduction and debasing are things that *people* do and not things inherent in a cultural form. Like other cultural practices in places like this, nostalgia sets in motion a dialectic of closeness and distantiation; its goal is not the creation of a code based on empty distinctions but the redemption of expressive images and speech. (Stewart, 1988: 228)

This distinction between the nostalgias of the dominant and the dominated is echoed in Gayle Greene's (1991: 298) insistence that we distinguish between, on one hand, nostalgia that is primarily 'a forgetting', a depiction of the past that is 'merely regressive' and reactionary, and, on the other hand, nostalgia that allows a memory or a reconstruction of the past that is liberating ('feminist memory' is Greene's example of such a liberating nostalgia). It is important to note this distinction since it can help us avert a 'hostile critique' of nostalgia (as both Stuart Tannock (1995) and Michael Kenny (2017) warn against). Rather, as Kenny (2017: 256) insists, it allows room for studying 'the different affective, sentimental and ideational roles that various kinds of nostalgia practice perform'.

This distinction between nostalgia that is primarily a regressive, reactionary forgetting, seeking to reify the prevailing configuration of power – a nostalgia that gives the self that sees itself as 'larger than life' a life of its own – and nostalgia that undermines this configuration by contextualising it and by remembering what the powerful wish to forget can shed much light on the two nostalgias discussed by Margalit. The Ashkenazi dominance seeking to reaffirm (and recreate) itself as the 'natural' order of things by propagating a forgetful nostalgia for the 'Good Old Land of Israel', for times where everything was 'simple' and 'pure', contested by a Mizrahi 'dialectic of closeness and distantiation', propagating a nostalgia that seeks to 'redeem' an alternative interpretation of political reality, where the prevailing configuration of power will no longer be 'a given'. I explore this matter in more detail below.

Israeli nostalgia

Arguing against what he saw as a certain contemporaneous political preoccupation of his socio-political cohort, Gideon Levy, a regular contributor to the liberal newspaper *Haaretz*, sought to contextualise this preoccupation within what he insightfully identified as a recurring pattern in Israeli political culture: Nostalgia. There is, he argued, 'a tried-and-true tendency in Israel: the longing for what used to be, and even more so, the longing for what never was'. Identifying the dominant spirit of the time of his writing as 'dystopian', Levy found his cohort's reaction to it as fitting a pattern: 'Israel has always longed for its past and embellished it [. . .] we were taught to miss the right things and not to know the rest'. Levy (2019) offers a first-hand account of the prevalence of nostalgia

itself in the very young years of Israeli nationhood, which correspond with his and his cohort's childhood:

> Israel has always longed for its past and embellished it. In 1960, Hed Arzi Music issued a double album, 'Hayo Hayu Zmanim' ('Once Upon a Time: Israeli Hit Tunes of Yesteryear') [. . .] At barely 12 years old, the state was already longing for its past. They were the first records in most Israeli homes. We played them dozens of times, in a premature, over-the-top bursts of nostalgia. It's how we were taught to miss the right things and not to know the rest. Sixty years later and the song's the same. (Levy, 2019)

Levy identifies three core elements in this 'nostalgia of deceit' and the embellished past it fantasises, echoing or reformulating what Margalit (above) summarised as 'Israel the beautiful and the just, before the scoundrel came to power': '[T]he exemplary democracy, the free media and the glorious secularism that thrived here once and are no more'. Yet, as must be the case with every nostalgia, 'The truth is that things were [. . .] not as good as people say'. He thus goes on to contrast the message instilled in this nostalgia with the rather grim reality of the past is valorises. But what is important for our purpose here is the obviously political nature of the message propagated by this nostalgia: It is about political preferences, self-perception, and discontent of a liberal-Zionist class who views its predominance as waning.

What this nostalgia allows us is exactly a view – an intimate one, at that – of the self-construction of the Israeli liberal, secular left, and by implication, a view of what its political programme may be aiming to yield. In other words, it is exactly this first-person-plural, the 'we' that dominates Levy's column that must be interpolated: because it is nostalgia that defines – at least in this specific cultural-political context – the 'we'. Or more accurately, it defines what the spokespeople of this 'we' would want it to look like, shaping political agency, and directing its hoped-for future. As Boym (2002: xiii) reminds us, the word nostalgia is a compound of *nostos* (we, us) and *algia* (longing). And this compound holds volumes in terms of political significance: *Algia* can bring 'us' together; it can create empathy with others, and it can motivate us to achieve goals that are quintessentially political. But it is exactly that 'we', *nostos*, the first-person-plural, that defines what the wider (national, social) 'we' looks like (or should look like): who is in and who is not. Ultimately, it creates division when leaving those 'strangers', the 'not us', out.

In the case at hand, the first-person-plural offers a rather exclusionary notion of the collectivity that makes the Israeli 'we'. This can be seen, for example, in the geographical imagining of this nostalgia, as this 'dreamy, idyllic re-imagining of the nation endorsed a selective relationship with the past and mapped it out onto the country's geography accordingly' (Rotbard, 2005: 68). As Sharon Rotbard observed, the nostalgia's 'selective relation to the past' is apparent in, among other things, the geography of the 'Good Old Land of Israel':

> Except for the White City [the nostalgic imagining of Tel-Aviv, which functions as the 'capital city of the Good Old Land of Israel'] there are no other urban settlements in this land, neither of veterans nor of newcomers, there is no trace of the Baron [Rothchild] settlements [who preceded the Zionist colonies and did not fit the Zionist ethos], and of course there is no trace in it of the Palestinian places, present (including Jerusalem) or absent [i.e., erased – physically or mentally – following the 1948 war]. This land is composed mostly of the unique mythological frontier of the Labour movement's settlements. (Rotbard, 2005: 68)

As Rotbard further observes, there are common themes between the 'selective' geography of the nostalgic 'home' and the just-as-selective notion of the past it fantasises:

> Just as the geography of this imaginary country [. . .] was (in the terms of Michel Foucault) 'heterotopic', so its history was heterochronic – Good Old Eretz Israel was doomed to remain always 'old' (that was what made it so 'good'), but not so old as to encourage its inhabitants to actually investigate the period which preceded Labour[-Zionist] settlement, as this had already been declared ancient and antique. In any case, history should have been left far enough in the past that it would not interfere with today's reality, and therefore its time was never the present. (Rotbard, 2005: 69)

Music, too, plays a central part in this Israeli nostalgia. As Edwin Seroussi (2014: 40) notes, 'Israeli sonic nostalgia' was already ubiquitous in the years immediately after the foundation of the state. This 'relentless turn to the sonic past' (Seroussi mentions the same 'Hayo Hayu Zmanim' musical review and LP as epitomising it) was dominated by a (socially, politically, ethnically, and ideologically) well-defined elite, 'a group of canonic agents in the cultural scene [. . .] and state-controlled mass media [. . .] all of whom were related to the Palmach military units'. The contents of its programme were similarly distinctly sectorial, captured in 'the song repertoire of the pre-state secular Ashkenazi Zionist settlements'. Not much later on, the same Zionist sonic repertoire was further canonised by 'Israel's ultimate pop icon' (Arik Einstein who, paradoxically enough, considering his and his immediate cohort's role in perpetuating this authoritative nostalgia, was also taken to be representing Israel's counterculture (Rotbard, 2005: 64–69)) in a series of albums titled 'The Good Old Land of Israel'. This soundscape, too, worked to exclude and forget as much as it functioned to remember and define a 'we'. Via its various canonisations and symbolic fortifications (importantly, this soundscape became the soundtrack of Israel's civil, national holidays), this sonic repertoire

> served as an agent in the delineation of the canonic Zionist repertoire by means of the exclusion of soundscapes that existed on the ground during the 'heroic' pre-state (*Yishuv*) and early state periods, such as those of private, religious, non-Western, and urban spaces. (Seroussi, 2014: 40–41)

Critical commentators have directly addressed the political import of the Ashkenazi nostalgia: One such commentator, for example (Mehager, 2021), argues that the Ashkenazi nostalgia is a cultural-political device meant to deny the secular-Ashkenazi sector's liability for the 1948 dispossessions and deportations of Palestinians. Positioning the Ashkenazi nostalgia squarely at the centre of the Israeli configuration of power, the commentator ties the Palestinian catastrophe of 1948 with the emergence of an Ashkenazi, secular elite in the early years of Israeli statehood. The emergence of this configuration of power was driven by

> the dispossessing of Palestinian lands and property after the 1948 war. The Ashkenazi group, who composed the demographic majority among Jews during the war and was the forefront of the actions of deportation and dispossession [of Palestinians], is the one who enjoyed the 'distribution of the loot' of the Palestinian catastrophe.

The nostalgia at hand, then, functions to conceal, as it were, an inconvenient truth: 'The systematic marking of the 1967 occupation [as opposed to the 1948 war] as the core

problem – bringing an end to which will allow us to return to the 'Good Old Land of Israel'' amounts to an attempt to 'normalise and reify the power relations and distribution of resources in the 1948 lines [i.e., after the Palestinian catastrophe has taken place]'. On the contrary, the collective interests – and nostalgias – of Mizrahim in Israel were shaped as 'a mirror image' of the Ashkenazi group.

> While according to Leftist Zionist Ashkenazi historiography [popularised and mythicized in the nostalgia at hand] a fair and vibrant social-democracy was established here [in Israel], the Mizrahi public remembers the first decades of Israeli statehood as an era of resource deprivation and subjugation in all aspects of life.

Another commentator (Noy, 2020) sees the Ashkenazi nostalgia as immediately driven by the perceived threat to the privileged position enjoyed by Ashkenazim by a resurging Mizrahi constituency. As he puts it, as soon as the Mizrahim appear on the public sphere, nostalgia shows up (*mizrahim bashetah – nostalgia bapetah*). The 'deceiving, distorting, forgetting and erasing' nostalgia, 'tightening the tribal lines in face of a common enemy', decrying the loss of the good old homeland, is but a tool in the arsenal of the Ashkenazi upper-class's fight to preserve its power.

Similarly, other commentators (Zubaida and Nurielli, 2020) see the nostalgia at hand as propagating a 'justification for the Zionist-Ashkenazi cultural-political interests'. Going back to the geographical representation of the nostalgia (the 'Good Old Land of Israel', with its epicentre in the 'While City' of Tel Aviv), they highlight the ways in which this nostalgia functions to 'cleanse' the space from 'unwanted populations', aiming to achieve the 'dream' of 'a White City for white residents'.

A Zionist nostalgia?

Perhaps the most illuminating aspect of Israeli nostalgia is the fact that it exists in the first place, 'persist[ing] tenaciously in Israeli cultural spaces' (Seroussi, 2014: 36). For, if by 'Israeli' nostalgia we mean a sentimental memory of an *Israeli* past, we must first confront the fact that the State of Israel itself is relatively young, its society – having arrived in the country mostly after the establishment of the state – even younger. Moreover, as Levy testifies (above), this nostalgia was already a dominant feature of Israeli culture in the early 1960s, barely a decade after the establishment of the state, when its population was growing rapidly through waves of immigration. To a substantial degree, this yearning for a long-gone past is taking shape when Israel, and Israeli society specifically, do not have much of a past to talk about in the first place. Moreover, the longing at hand is not for the (long and real) Jewish past in Europe (or more specifically: East Europe, from where most of the Ashkenazi elite has arrived) and other parts of the world. Rather, it is focused on the 'Good Old Land of Israel', a contested territory that has for generations been home mostly to non-Jewish Palestinians. In other words, this Ashkenazi nostalgia (unlike the Mizrahi one, we must note) does not yearn for the places that were the original 'homes' from which Zionists or Israeli Jews have arrived in Israel. Instead, it yearns for a place that has been – distinctly so, given the context of an ongoing, violent conflict over the land – home to its Others.

Moreover, if we consider the nostalgia at hand as a yearning not exactly or primarily to a past but to a mythic notion of a place – specifically, to one's 'home', one's 'nativity' (when Johannes Hofer coined in 1688 the term and identified nostalgia as a medical

condition, he described it as ‘the sad mood originating from the desire for return to one’s native land’ (quoted in Boym, 2002: 3)) – this Ashkenazi nostalgia emerges as even more perplexing: The dominant ideology around which it coalesces – Zionism – argues exactly that the subjects of this nostalgia – Israeli Jews – are now, in the present, finally home, after millennia of exile (meaning: being away from home). Having advocated a nationalist outlook by which Jews are ‘out of place’ in Europe and elsewhere and insisting that they should ‘return’ and be replanted into their historical homeland, Zionism was ultimately successful in bringing these members of the Jewish nation to their ‘real home’. Moreover, as Hagar Kotef (2020) suggests, this concept of home plays a major role in the construction of the settlers’ subjectivity, their very self.

Note that the Ashkenazi nostalgia both Margalit and Levy describe does not suggest it is home in Europe that is the object of yearning. Zionism has taught its subjects that the Land of Israel – and then, more importantly, the *State* of Israel – *is* their home. Even more so: *theirs*, also in the sense of belonging to them, the settlers, not to the contemporaneous inhabitants of the land (and compare this to the Mizrahi yearning for home in the Arab or Muslim world, which Margalit equates with the Ashkenazi nostalgia).

So why the nostalgia for home, which is the very same contested territory over which they have come to dominate, guided by Zionist ideology? Why is it that this cohort – a pioneering, leading class of the Zionist enterprise, an enterprise aimed at bringing about a bright future of strengthening national revival – are besieged by nostalgia? What is it exactly that they are missing and yearning for?

Clearly, the Israeli case at hand deals (also) with the problem of the contested nature of the Israeli claim to the nativity in the Land of Israel, which has been, as a matter of historical fact, someone else’s home. It is, in other words, about the colonial aspect of the Zionist enterprise (Evri and Kotef, 2020; Mamdani, 2020; Zreik, 2016). As the party who has been newly settling in the contested land, Israelis have very little by way of ‘memorative signs’ (Boym, 2002: 12) of their non- or (pre-) Israeli history. In this, Zionism follows a rather well-trodden path. As Boym reminds us, there is something rather universal, lying at ‘the very core of the modern condition’, in ‘the [nostalgic] sentiment itself, the mourning of displacement and temporal irreversibility’. The ‘promise to rebuild the ideal home’, a motivation that ‘lies at the core of many powerful ideologies of today, tempting us to relinquish critical thinking for emotional bonding’ is indeed powerful – and dangerous: ‘Unreflected nostalgia breeds monsters’. Confusing ‘the actual home and the imaginary one’, fashioning a ‘phantom homeland, for the sake of which one is ready to die or kill’, nostalgia is simply too important a political fact to be ignored (Boym, 2002: xvi). And the Israeli, Zionist case is no exception.

This, then, is the political analytical aspect at play here: The prevalence of the nostalgia betrays an Israeli uneasiness with the collective sense of home – or the apparent lack of such a homely sense. A contrast between a prescribed (by the dominant ideology) feeling of finally arriving home and reality of a violent contest over the land and, maybe more latently, an Israeli sense that ‘we are not home after all’ is a key to understanding the Israeli collective being-in-the-world.

Furthermore, the Zionist project of modernising the Jews and returning them to their home/land has been a self-consciously revolutionary endeavour, rebelling against what this nationalist ideology depicted as a two-millennia-long past of Jewish passivity and servility (captured in the Zionist ‘negation of exile’ ; Don-Yehiya, 1992; Raz-Krakotzkin, 2013). To a large extent, Zionism builds itself *against* the Jewish past. Yet nostalgia, its ‘affective yearning for a community with a collective memory’, is ‘a longing for

continuity in a fragmented world'. It emerges as a 'defense mechanism' to counter the 'accelerated rhythms of life and historical upheavals' of modernity (Boym, 2002: xiv). It would, in other words, make a lot of sense if the nostalgia at hand was devised to counter the Zionist ideology. This is, indeed, the case with the Mizrahi nostalgia recounted by Margalit, expressing a yearning to return to a (Jewish) home that is in the Arab or Muslim lands and rejecting in effect the Zionist notion of the ingathering of exile in the ancient homeland. Yet the Ashkenazi nostalgia, which presents itself as staunchly Zionist, makes very little sense in this context. The nostalgic subjects are (mostly loyal, as they are clearly benefitting from it) heirs to a (Zionist) revolutionary ethos. They are yearning for the status that was allowed to them – being the supposed owners of the land – exactly because of this revolutionary rupture from the past.

In other words, the Ashkenazi nostalgia deals directly with what Edwin Seroussi calls Zionism's 'time paradox' – its charged relation to its Jewish past – which stems from the tension between the ideology 'advocating the reintroduction of the Jews to the unilinear progress-oriented stream of (Western) history' and the simultaneous 'promoting a return to a mythical past of national independence conceived, of course, in modern terms' (Seroussi, 2014: 35). This has motivated a grand cultural-political project of dealing with the past, aptly termed by Yael Zerubavel (1995) as the 're-covering' of roots.

Nationalism, nostalgia, and 'home'

It has already been noted as a staple of modern history that when we at hand is a national collective – a collective formed around and under the pressure of the gravitational core of nationalist ideology, served by the apparatus of the sovereign nation-state – a preoccupation with the past and a glorification of certain elements within it as the 'golden era' of national self-determination are discernible (Smith, 1997, 1999). This preoccupation is a generative imagining of the national collective and its past (Anderson, 1998) culminating, in Eric Hobsbawm's (1983) famous phrasing, in the invention of its tradition(s). Indeed, the past is the main pillar of most myths of nationhood (Hosking and Schopflin, 1997). Which makes the fact that '[t]raditionally, the field of nationalism has not paid a great deal of attention to nostalgia' (Muro, 2005: 573) regrettable indeed.

Here, Boym's typology, distinguishing between 'reflective' and 'restorative' nostalgia proves especially helpful:

> Restorative nostalgia stresses *nostos* and attempts a transhistorical reconstruction of the lost home. Reflective nostalgia thrives in *algia*, the longing itself, and delays the homecoming – wistfully, ironically, desperately. Restorative nostalgia does not think of itself as nostalgia, but rather as truth and tradition. Reflective nostalgia dwells on the ambivalences of human longing and belonging and does not shy away from the contradictions of modernity. Restorative nostalgia protects the absolute truth, while reflective nostalgia calls it into doubt. (Boym, 2002: xviii)

Restorative nostalgia is the staple of nationalist ideology, and especially of national revivalist movements, who 'engage in the antimodern myth-making of history by means of a return to national symbols and myths and, occasionally, through swapping conspiracy theories'. It 'puts emphasis on nostos and proposes to rebuild the lost home and patch up the memory gaps'. Needless to say, this is not how nationalists would want to see themselves. Restorative nostalgics 'do not think of themselves as nostalgic; they believe that their project is about truth'. On the contrary, reflective nostalgia 'dwells in *algia*, in

longing and loss', preoccupied with the very remembrances of things past. Shying away from meta narratives, 'inhabiting many places at once and imagining different time zones', reflective nostalgia 'loves details, not symbols'. It 'lingers on ruins [. . .] in the dreams of another place and another time' (Boym, 2002: 41).

Note that both types of nostalgia have a political and ethical import: While it should be clear enough why restorative nostalgia, the core of nationalist ideologies, *is* political, we should not relegate reflective nostalgia, with its obsession with longing itself, to the sidelines of the political, dismissed as 'merely a pretext for midnight melancholias'. Rather, 'At best, reflective nostalgia can present an ethical and creative challenge', with obvious political implications. It in effect questions the nationalist meta-narratives, seeding doubt and offering competing points of view (Boym, 2002: xviii).

Based on this typology, Boym further suggests that we distinguish between 'national memory', which is 'based on a single plot of national identity' – captured in restorative nostalgia, and 'social memory', best captured in reflective nostalgia, 'consist[ing] of collective frameworks that mark but do not define the individual memory'(Boym, 2002: xviii).

The interaction between these two types of nostalgia is discernible in the Israeli case discussed here: What both Margalit and Levy point at is the fact that within a national collective and under a heavy hand of nationalist ideology – or, to use Boym's typology, under the heavy hand of 'national memory', serviced by a restorative nostalgia (i.e. the Zionist meta narrative of 'return', 'redemption' and 'the ingathering of the exiles') – various 'social memories', serviced by 'reflective nostalgias', may form, pitting one sector of the allegedly unified 'nation' against the other, offering competing evaluations of political reality and directing political action in diverse ways.

The Mizrahi nostalgia at hand follows rather loyally the outlines of what Boym calls 'off-modernist' nostalgia. As she explains, 'The adverb *off* confuses our sense of direction [. . .] it allows us to take a detour from the deterministic narrative of twentieth-century history'. Off-modernism is a contrarian stance to modernism, critiquing 'both the modern fascination with newness and no less modern reinvention of tradition'. This 'off-modern tradition' combines longing for the past with a sense of present estrangement. It fulfils a crucial function as a 'strategy of survival, a way of making sense of the impossibility of homecoming' for those 'off-modernists' who came from traditions located at the sidelines of the colonial West – that is, the traditions that the West has viewed as marginal or provincial(Boym, 2002: xvi–xvii).

The Mizrahi nostalgia of the 'good old times in the Arab and Muslim lands' takes a similar 'off' stance vis-à-vis the modernist nationalist narrative of the ingathering of exiles and redemption by way of modernisation and politicisation of the Jewish people. It is, in other words, the 'off-modernist' nostalgia of those marginalised by the Israeli political culture, a 'strategy of survival' of those who find themselves stripped of their identity and tradition by a newly invented national tradition. Especially so since for them a return 'home' (in the Arab and Muslim lands) is mostly impossible due to the prevalence of a political conflict between sides that identify as mutually exclusive 'Jewish' against 'Arab'. (Rendering, that is, the very notion of 'an Arab-Jew politically oxymoronic'.) As Boym (2022: 55) explains, reflective nostalgia is a mourning – not a melancholia: the thing that is lost, that which is mourned, is lost in concrete, not abstract terms.

In this, this Mizrahi nostalgia is complimented by the arguably more politically successful nostalgia propagated by the Shas party and the socio-cultural movement it has led – consisting mostly of Israeli Jews who trace their roots to Arab and Muslim

countries – of 'returning the old crown to its glory'. Famously, this slogan is open enough to interpretation to allow the party's leadership and its constituency to each read it differently. While for the Orthodox-rabbinical leadership it speaks mostly to its hope of restoring a certain interpretation and practice of Jewish law to prominence, for the constituency it reads mostly as propagating a 'counter memory'. It suggests that Jews in Arab and Muslim lands enjoyed a glory prior to the degradation caused by their immigration to Israel, painting the Arab-Jewish past in obviously nostalgic hues (Chetrit, 2002; Yadgar, 2003).

Conclusion – The Israeli lesson on taking nostalgia politically seriously

The Israeli case exemplifies, I hope, the merit of the study of nostalgia for political analysis. Nostalgia tells us volumes on the ways in which individuals – and the socio-political groups they are part of – understand their world, their misgivings of the present, and their hopes for the future.

Needless to say, it would be wrong to suggest any kind of 'causal' and 'rule like' relation between nostalgia and political action; human reality is simply too complicated to follow such a path (Gadamer, 1989; MacIntyre, 2007: 88–108; Taylor, 1971). But it is exactly the interpretive opulence allowed to us by nostalgia that is of immediate political-analytical value. It allows us a view into a rather intimate collective self-perception, helping us to see the formation of identities and the articulations of conflicts which could otherwise be sanctioned as illegitimate by a predominant political culture and the ideology it nourishes from. Furthermore, it directs us in multiple directions in our search for the meaning of politics. The media of nostalgia are numerous, and political meaning is to be found in countless arenas that are sometimes neglected by students of politics, such as music, film, popular culture and high art.

There are also obvious limitations to the use of nostalgia for political analysis. Maybe most obvious of these is the case of what Boym calls 'reflective' nostalgia, the immersion of oneself in the longing itself, in *algia*, which functions, to a large extent, to postpone action. Here, the line between nostalgia and political behaviour or action is too winded to allow us to offer a convincing interpretation or understanding of real-world events. Indeed, to a large extent, the sentiment of this reflective nostalgia is 'anti-political', reifying what Mary Midgley (1996: 17) warned against as the (misleading) dichotomy of Idealists vs Realists. It positions the nostalgic in a contrarian position to the 'real world' of the present political machination in the context of which one is experiencing – and exercising – this *algia*. But this, too, is ultimately a form of being in the world that is clearly political. It expresses a misgiving about the present, a critical judgement of it. And in extreme cases, it can even lead to a crisis of legitimation, where too many of a polity's subjects are busy longing for something else.

As is the case of interpretive political science more generally, the study of nostalgia, too, is firmly grounded in a specific context – cultural, historical, lingual, socio-political, etc. It resists, in other words, an easy rule-generalisation of the kind positivist political science tends to prefer. Yet, I would argue – without diving into the vast epistemological conflict that has determined the shape of the discipline of the study of politics for almost a century – that it is exactly this kind of analysis – the local, the particular – that allows us a glimpse into human truths that are universal.

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