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Nostalgia as Critique: Memory and Meaning in the Making of Modernity

by

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An Abstract of

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This paper explores the political-epistemic implications involved in utilizing nostalgia as a neutral expository term. My main claim is that purportedly impartial, theoretical accounts of nostalgia are partisan acts of criticism that are necessarily entangled in what they intend to objectively study. I suggest that claims of neutrality in the diagnosis of nostalgia are a kind of pretense the function of which is to conceal certain sociocultural and political value judgments about memory and its appropriate place in relation to time, history, and modernity. These claims, I contend, are not only encumbered by a variety of political impressions about time, history, memory, and modernity, but also work to corroborate a certain story about the world and the nostalgic subject's place in it. Criticisms of the nostalgic subject, like the nostalgic subject's expressed wants, convey a series of sociopolitical and cultural attitudes, assumptions, attractions, and commitments which motivate a particular imagination of the self and the other.

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Preface

Perhaps our most common intuition about nostalgia is that it connotes a feeling of melancholic yearning for the past. Yet the term can and often does mean much more than our basic instincts suggest. While longing for the past may be a key feature in any definition of nostalgia, the term has expansive applications. The anthropologists Olivia Angé and David Berliner declare that nostalgia is not merely an account of one feeling towards the past but a way to describe a range of loosely related phenomenological encounters in and through time. In their words, nostalgia captures "an array of memory discourses and practices that sometimes share little commonalities."[1] Contemporary scholars of nostalgia are generally in agreement with Angé and Berliner, believing the term to be inherently ambiguous, multilayered, and thus beyond precise classification. We can observe this in the sociologist Janelle Wilson's claim that it is "difficult to reach conclusions [about nostalgia] which can be stated in definite, absolute, [or] certain terms" because the very idea eludes systematization and synthesis.[2] The sociologist Fred Davis similarly observes that nostalgia is "a heavily fringed word and [is] therefore susceptible to semantic vagueness, drift, and ambiguity."[3] Implied here is the Wittgensteinian notion that any given meaning of the term depends on the language-game in which its use participates. If nostalgia does not necessarily presuppose an immutable definition, then as a single label it may accrue "a family of meanings."[4]

[1] Olivia Angé and David Berliner, "Anthropology of Nostalgia – Anthropology as Nostalgia," in *Anthropology and Nostalgia*, eds. Olivia Angé and David Berliner (New York: Berghahn Books, 2015), 5.
[2] Janelle Wilson, *Nostalgia: Sanctuary of Meaning* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Publishing, 2014), 8.
[3] Fred Davis, *Yearning for Yesterday: A Sociology of Nostalgia* (London: The Free Press, 1979), 7.
[4] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Singapore: Blackwell Publishing, 2009), 41.

Curiously, however, there is one specific use of the term nostalgia that is presented as though it transcends, uniformly stabilizes, and meta-analytically explicates the aforementioned ambiguity. This utilization of nostalgia does not communicate a phenomenological rendition of what it means to yearn for the past, but presents a purportedly neutral-diagnostic calculation of others' sundry feelings of longing and the family of meanings attached to them. As the literary critic Jean Starobinski puts it, this nostalgia is a discursive instrument of moderating proportions—"a *model* permitting us to understand the significance of our emotions [by] propos[ing] a form for them."[5] It is thus a way to "coldly" comment on the memoric wants of individuals or movements apart from their particular beliefs and phenomenological standpoints regarding the past, present, and future. Put differently, the diagnostic employment of nostalgia functions to evaluate the nostalgic subject's felt attraction to the past by taking a "critical distance" from their feelings.

What interests me about this conceptualization of nostalgia is that its professed suitability for neutral diagnosis appears to be complicated and challenged by the fact that negative political claims about the nostalgic subject often attend its usage. As the literary theorist Svetlana Boym claims, "[n]ostalgia is something of a bad word, an affectionate insult at best."[6] At worst, it is a vituperative indictment of the nostalgic subject, whose rueful expressions are watched with suspicion and dismissiveness. Within contemporary cultural and political discourse, "diagnosing" someone with nostalgia is typically more than a mere explanation for why they seem to possess an unabating attraction to some erstwhile time, place, or experience. It is more importantly a critical claim about the very

[5] Jean Starobinski, "The Idea of Nostalgia," *Diogenes* 54 (1966): 82.
[6] Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 11.

practice of remembering and a way to scrutinize the nostalgic subject's political relationship with time in order to characterize them as, for example, feeble, confused, deluded, helpless, or even dangerous. Are these assessments incidental to the diagnostic expression of nostalgia? Or are they, rather, naturally implicated in its use?

This paper will attempt to answer these questions by exploring the political-epistemic implications involved in utilizing nostalgia as a neutral expository term. My main claim is that purportedly impartial, theoretical accounts of nostalgia—while presented as a way to critically appraise a range of phenomenological experiences and their associated consequences—are necessarily entangled in what they intend to objectively study. Echoing Wittgenstein's claim that all language-games participate in the assumptions of a "form of life,"[7] I question nostalgia's neutral, meta-analytic use and suggest that claims of dispassionate diagnosis are a kind of pretense the function of which is to conceal certain sociocultural and political value judgments about memory and its appropriate place in relation to time, history, and modernity.

Chapter one begins with the argument that the diagnostic application of nostalgia is by definition a partisan act of criticism because it is motivated by a network of sociopolitical and cultural assumptions about memory, time, history, and modernity. By surveying recent critical discourses on nostalgia, I map the continuities among these assumptions and show how they channel deontological imperatives that are subtly obscured by an underlying pretext of neutrality. I defend the view that the use of nostalgia as a diagnostic term functions to regulate and discipline the nostalgic subject's claims, wants, and feelings according to a labored distinction between facts and values. In

[7] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 15.

developing this argument, I focus on the often-cited distinction between reflective and restorative nostalgia introduced by Svetlana Boym to show how the diagnosis of nostalgia is entangled in political-axiological claims about time past, time present, and time future.

Chapter two focuses on nostalgia's etymological development from a medical term to one of political slander. Rather than arguing for the common view that the political implications of nostalgia only began to take full form beginning in the nineteenth century, I argue instead that it has always been simultaneously enmeshed in the medical origin and use of the term. I claim, in other words, that the contemporary political connotations associated with the diagnostic application of nostalgia are inextricably bound up with the term's original medical meaning. I demonstrate this by pointing to certain sociocultural and political assumptions—especially about modernization and progress—which have remained stable in discourses about nostalgia beginning in the seventeenth century up until the twenty-first century. I contend, therefore, that nostalgia was never "non-political," even as an originally medical-nosological construction, and that the political-diagnostic use of the term today is not an appropriation of some superannuated psychoanalytic usage but a fulfillment of the term's original function.

My final chapter argues that the act of diagnosing nostalgia (i.e., of using nostalgia as a "neutral" expository term) serves the important political purpose of emptying the range of feelings being scrutinized from their own analytic potential. I propose that pejoratively attacking someone as a "nostalgic" not only dismisses their claims about the world, but discursively affirms the epistemic regime of modern life and

denies the desire for radical transformation. I defend these claims by analyzing recent discourses on so-called Muslim nostalgia. I focus on these discourses for the simple reason that we live today in the age of the Muslim question which, in the words of the political theorist Anne Norton, is a time when "the figure of the Muslim has become the axis where questions of political philosophy and political theology, politics and ethics meet."[8] I contend, therefore, that claims of Muslims nostalgia present one of the most apparent ways in which the term is used as a form of political assault. I argue that the critical charge of nostalgia against Muslims communicates two subtle but unfounded epistemic pretensions: (1) that modern life must channel "secular knowledge," and (2) that premodern "un-secular knowledge" is obsolete and serves no productive purpose in the contemporary world. I challenge the validity of these pretensions and claim that the myth of their truth forces a comprehension of "modernity" and "pre-modernity" not as historic designations but as epistemic categories which respectively delineate the anthropological contours of progress and regress.

I claim, in conclusion, that so-called neutral diagnoses of nostalgia are not only encumbered by a variety of political impressions about time, history, memory, and modernity, but also work to corroborate a certain story about the world and the nostalgic subject's place in it. Criticisms of the nostalgic subject, like the nostalgic subject's expressed wants, convey a series of sociopolitical and cultural attitudes, assumptions, attractions, and commitments which motivate a particular imagination of the self and the other.

[8] Anne Norton, *On the Muslim Question* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 2.

Chapter One
The Politics of Nostalgia Between Reflection and Restoration

Two Nostalgias

There is a peculiar discontinuity between the assorted sensibilities implicated in the direct experience of nostalgia and the way in which nostalgia is "etically" used as a diagnostic term to homogeneously characterize that experience. In its discursive capacity, nostalgia can seem to channel different and perhaps even incommensurable connotations. On the one hand, nostalgia points to the near or distant objects of our longing and imbues them with some form of personal, social, cultural, or political value. On the other hand, nostalgia points to a kind of malfunction of the mind and evaluates the experience of longing according to that fact. These denotative differences present nostalgia as something of an unstable referent. Is it to the meaningful sensibilities and their memoric objects that nostalgia refers? Or is it, rather, to a malady of the imagination—what the cultural historian Christopher Lasch calls "a crisis of nerve, an inability to face up to the realities of modern life"?[9] This chapter examines these questions.

The political scientist Kimberly Smith suggests that nostalgia is one term shared between two distinct yet interrelated epistemic registers. The first of these identifies a cognitive experience pertaining to "a set of feelings and our interpretations of or beliefs about those feelings."[10] This nostalgia is one's phenomenological encounter with the worlds of the past, present, and future as embodied in the act of longing. The other

[9] Christopher Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven: Progress and Its Critics* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1991), 114.
[10] Kimberly Smith, "Mere Nostalgia: Notes on a Progressive Paratheory," *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 3, no. 4 (2000): 509.

nostalgia communicates a *theory* intended to objectively account for the cognitive experience's "psychological origin and meaning."[11] This nostalgia is not an experience but a conceptual apparatus. It serves to evaluate the act of longing and "factually" explain the "value-laden" psychosocial phenomena typically associated with the first sense in which the term is used. Smith notes that "although we may detect the feelings we associate with nostalgia among ancient peoples," the theory of nostalgia is thoroughly modern as it concerns recent ways of being in the world.[12]

At the same time, theorizing nostalgia as a fact-retrieving device is not a development over some previous expression in the term's history. Nostalgia's theoretical dimension is coterminous with the term's nosological origin in the seventeenth century, when the Swiss physician Johannes Hofer formed a portmanteau of the Greek words for "return home" (*nosos*) and "grief" (*algos*) to interpret what seemed then to be an unprecedented outbreak of homesickness.[13] Hofer's introduction of the term served two purposes: it diagnosed an ailment of the mind, and it gave form to the feelings implicated in the expression of that ailment. While those experiencing what Hofer called nostalgia did not at first comprehend their condition using his neologism, the term very quickly became the standard measure by which to describe *and* diagnose a certain temperament.

By the twentieth century, nostalgia was no longer used to identify a medical condition. But as Smith notes, the term's diagnostic connotations endured in sociocultural and political discourses. Nostalgia became, and continues to be, a way to detect certain associations "between memory and action, memory and truth, and memory and politics"

[11] Ibid.
[12] Ibid.
[13] Carolyn Kiser Anspach, "Medical Dissertation on Nostalgia by Johannes Hofer, 1688," *Bulletin of the Institute of the Study of Medicine* 2, no. 6 (1934): 381.

so as to expound upon a variety of "political phenomena from fascism to feminism."[14] In his recent study on the philosophical mechanisms of fascism, for example, Jason Stanley explains that nostalgia and "the central tenets of fascist ideology" are closely linked.[15] For Stanley, nostalgia's "mythic" rendering of the past threatens to reproduce traditional, patriarchal, and oppressive power structures in the present. Nostalgia is used by Stanley not only as an analytic tool to identify certain feelings about the past, but to mark out dangerous misuses of memory vis-a-vis action, truth, and politics born out of the misplacement of those feelings.

What we find in Stanley is evidence of the common scholarly view that nostalgia has moved away from its original medical meaning and morphed into a term of political diagnosis. More importantly, we also find evidence of Smith's claim that contemporary uses of nostalgia, while purporting to be neutral, are quietly motivated by particular political assumptions about memory, time, history, and modernity. These assumptions are not always apparent, but can often be observed in the fact that nostalgia is cited in order to *criticize* specific forms of engagement with the past—those deemed to bear undesirable consequences for the political projects of the present and future. This is certainly the case with Stanley.

In many cases, expository uses of nostalgia lead to great insights; in Stanley's study, we find many. At the same time, these uses are often blind to the political assumptions which animate them as well as the many implications—political, epistemic, or other—that attend said blindness. Using nostalgia as a device to analyze the values which inhere in the experience, and thus distinguish the "real facts" from the "felt facts,"

[14] Smith, "Mere Nostalgia," 505.
[15] Jason Stanley, *How Fascism Works: The Politics of Us and Them* (New York: Random House, 2018), 5.

necessarily presupposes a set of motivating values that inform that usage. For example, descriptions of the nostalgic subject's disordered, untrue, or incoherent beliefs about the past cannot but imply precursory values about what it means to hold ordered, true, and coherent ideas about the past. Thus, while the theory of nostalgia is meant to provide a broad and neutral evaluation of the mercurial feelings which constitute the cognitive experience of nostalgia, it functions in practice as a way to moderate our expressions of those feelings. In other words, nostalgia's theoretical application has the effect of regulating the space between what is sensible and senseless with regard to the past according to an implicit, galvanizing distinction between "necessary" (objective) facts and "mere" (subjective) values. The distinction between what is a "fact" and what is a "value" as it pertains to the past sits at the core of our theoretical uses of nostalgia and, to echo Hilary Putnam, "functions as a discussion-stopper, and not just a discussion-stopper, but a thought-stopper."[16] Among other things, it prevents us from thinking about the phenomenological experience of nostalgia as containing a capacity for critical evaluation in its own right. This is why, for Smith, the ambition for an impartial, theoretical employment of nostalgia seems to be precluded *a priori*.

Some theorists have sought to overcome this problem by introducing new metanarratives by which to understand nostalgia. The literary theorist and authority on nostalgia, Svetlana Boym, is an instructive example. Boym disaggregates the experience of nostalgia into its "reflective" and "restorative" tendencies as a way of simultaneously preserving its phenomenological value and affirming its propensity for delusional thinking. Reflective nostalgia for Boym marks a kind of poignant rumination on the lost

[16] Hilary Putnam, *The Collapse of the Fact/Value Dichotomy and Other Essays* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 44.

but desired past. It has the quality of accepting the irrevocability of time past, of embracing the irony of longing for what is permanently lost, and of registering the feelings of melancholy and mourning through a critical engagement with time, history, memory, and modernity.[17] Restorative nostalgia, by contrast, "takes itself dead seriously" in the endeavor to revive a prelapsarian past.[18] It approaches the past as an uncorrupted, static moment in which truth, tradition, and community are contained and by which, imperatively, the present must be made to conform. As Boym puts it, restorative nostalgia tries to "conquer and spatialize time" by treating it like a destination—a motherland we must travel to by "reconstructing emblems and rituals of home and homeland" in the present.[19]

Reflective nostalgia is tamer and also more productive. In treasuring the memories of the past, it acknowledges the (albeit painful) fact of irrecoverable time as a way of inspiring alternative, critical conceptions of contemporary life, and thus acts to "temporalize space" (instead of spatializing time).[20] This act of temporalizing space emerges out of a phenomenological disposition that Boym terms "off-modernism." In her words, the off-modern persuasion constitutes "a tradition of critical reflection on the modern condition that incorporates nostalgia" by moderating and complicating our relationship to time past, time present, and time future.[21] To engage in off-modern thinking is to scrutinize the way nostalgia tantalizes us with the idea of repeatable time in order to examine the prospects of alternative forms of modern meaning and feeling. This

[17] Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 49-50.
[18] Ibid., 49
[19] Ibid.
[20] Ibid.
[21] Ibid., xvi.

is what Boym suggests is constitutive of reflective nostalgia and decidedly absent in restorative nostalgia. The latter is, in some sense, an *anti-modern* affect. The former is *inherently* off-modern, acting "not merely [as] an artistic device but [also] a strategy of survival, a way of making sense of the impossibility of homecoming."[22] If restorative nostalgia turns the past into a motherland, reflective nostalgia, to borrow L.P. Hartley's famous expression, turns the past into a "foreign country"—an exoticized desideratum that is perennially out of reach.

Interrogating Boym

In certain respects, Boym's judgments about nostalgia echo those which predominated in the mid-to-late twentieth century. Many of the themes which figure in her analysis are no less present in the works of thinkers like Fred Davis, Susan Stewart, and David Lowenthal, among others. Lowenthal, for example, notes that "[inasmuch as] nostalgia is a symptom of malaise, it also has compensating virtues."[23] The axiological bifurcation of nostalgia into "good" and "bad" is simply more developed in Boym, and it is arguably for this reason that she has become a standard authority on the subject. Indeed, there is hardly a recent work on nostalgia except that it refers (often reverentially, and seldom critically) to Boym, with particular attention paid to her differentiation between the "good" (reflective) and "bad" (restorative) instantiations of the experience. Boym's dual categories of nostalgia have thus become the basis for a wide range of explanations, from the innocuous fact of our recent cultural appetites for the aesthetics of the late twentieth century, to the dangerous fact of rising right-wing movements across the world today.

[22] Ibid., xvii
[23] David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 13.

I do not want to suggest that the enduring interest in Boym's two nostalgias is due only to their utility as philosophical heuristics. This is indeed one significant reason. But in another important sense, Boym's ideas remain relevant because they help us see that contained in the experience of nostalgia is more than a cache of aesthetic sensibilities inspired by the encounters of our lived pasts. The experienced past does not exhaust the breadth of our nostalgic visions and their attending ambitions. If it did, we might not be able to explain how and why the objects of our nostalgia can seem at times dislocated from the space of our direct experiences; it is certainly not impossible to feel nostalgia "second-hand." Nor, for that matter, would we be able to say with any assurance why it is that we can feel nostalgic even in the direct presence of those places or objects which inspire our sentiments of loss and wanting. Whether we are thinking about the lived past or the distant past, our nostalgic attitudes about time disclose a certain way of seeing and desiring the world.

Indeed, the idea of the past in the nostalgic's recollection instantiates a mode by which the world is envisioned and interpreted. When the aesthetic sensibilities and lived conditions that provided the groundwork for that envisioning disappear, the temporal possibilities they presented also seem to be lost. Nostalgia might be described as an affective contention with that fact. For what is restrained to the past are not only those things which have been lost in the present but, perhaps more importantly, the potential futures once imagined from their vantage point. The end of a time thus marks the end of a certain disposition from which pictures of the future are seen. This may be one reason we look back at past times with painful affection, for while the futures we pictured in and

through them did not end up taking form, the personal and cultural memories we hold of "then" serve as a kind of sanctuary against the "now" that actually came to be.

Without dismissing these insights, it must be noted that the discourses on nostalgia that Boym has helped to consolidate (and which have developed further as a consequence of her having done so) are blind to an important and enduring misjudgment—similar to the one alluded to earlier with respect to Stanley. While the distinction between reflective and restorative nostalgia is presented as though it were the outcome of a natural epistemic discovery, it is in fact predicated on a series of political commitments which are obscured by a subtle pretense of neutrality. Put simply, Boym's positive descriptions of reflective nostalgia and negative descriptions of restorative nostalgia are not plain identifications of facts per se; by virtue of carrying deontological imperatives, they are concomitantly *claims of political proportions*.

Consider the manner in which Boym's dual nostalgias not only outline the parameters of meaningful discovery and meaningless delusion in the act of remembering but also tacitly assign values to time, memory, modernity, and history in the form of normative imputation. Reflective nostalgia is critical in its relationship with the past. It can engender alternative visions of modernity. Its operationalization of memory and conceptualization of history "rightly" participate in the idea of linear, unrepeatable time. It is "lucid" about the facts. By comparison, restorative nostalgia misuses memory and misunderstands history. It is delusional about the past and about time more generally. It fails before the facts of modernity. It is not critical, but dangerous.

Part of what motivates these juxtaposed interpretations is a secular presupposition about the appropriate contours of the public and the private, especially as they are

situated between felt desire and political ambition. In a way, then, the difference between reflective nostalgia and restorative nostalgia takes the form of the "secular" and the "un-secular," respectively, with desirability ascribed to the former and undesirability ascribed to the latter. Drawing on the anthropologist Talal Asad, secularism so construed empowers "human beings to see the world as it really is; it does this by establishing a distance between self and external reality, something that primitives (so Europeans believed) can't do."[24] Adherence to and acceptance of this separation is believed to act as a remedy for any feelings of "loss and pessimism about the advent of modernity[.]"[25]

Reflective nostalgia is experienced by the self with a capacity for this separation. This kind of a self is what Charles Taylor terms the buffered self—"the self which is aware of the possibility of disengagement."[26] In this case, it is the self which can introspectively recognize the "fact" that nostalgia is ultimately a consequence of some cognitive fault, and so too the necessity to "take a distance from this feeling[.]"[27] In the space of this distance, creative possibilities blossom (in the form of the "off-modern"). In disregarding this distance—as restorative nostalgia does—dangerous possibilities loom. Notice that reflective nostalgia is critical, constructive, and creative precisely because it is "buffered" in its approach toward, and desire to revive, the lost past. If indeed it "ontically revives" any elements of the past, it does so with and through rather than in pure opposition to the pervading regime of modern life, often taking the form of what the historian Gary Cross calls "consumed nostalgia."[28]

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[24] Talal Asad, *Secular Translations: Nation-State, Modern Self, and Calculative Reason* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 16.
[25] Ibid.
[26] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 42.
[27] Ibid., 37
[28] Gary Cross, *Consumed Nostalgia: Memory in the Age of Fast Capitalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 11-12.

In contrast, restorative nostalgia is un-critical, un-constructive, and un-creative because it seeks to immediately mold the present in the image of a static past. It appears to make the mistake of translating "inner" feelings as "outer" politics. The distinction between these two nostalgias thus assumes a Lasswellian posture about the point at which the non-political becomes political, namely, in "the displacement of private affects upon public objects."[29] Of course, both nostalgias participate in the act of affective displacement on a variety of levels, yet only restorative nostalgia is explicitly classified as political because it displaces its affects on the *wrong* objects. Curiously, Boym and the countless many who mirror her claims fail to acknowledge that the identification of only one of these nostalgias as political *is* political.

Separating nostalgia into its reflective and restorative tendencies does not fulfill the intended goal of transcending the narratives on reverie and reality which have historically regulated the use of the term since it emerged as a medical neologism in the seventeenth century. Nor is the Boymian taxonomy of nostalgia quite the critical metanarrative it is often thought to be; it is ultimately a sophisticated political restatement of precisely what it seeks to un-state. Even though, in its reflective form, nostalgia is "rescued" from a number of longstanding negative assumptions—including that it is merely a form of delusion, or a kind of weakness in the face of modernity, or a dangerous impediment to progress—this occurs by remapping and expanding said assumptions onto its "restorative" form. In other words, nostalgia in one sense is redeemed, but this is done by pathologizing it in another sense.

[29] Harold Lasswell, *Psychopathology and Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1930), 173.

Restorative nostalgia remains to be a means by which to diagnose an ailment, even if that ailment is identified in socio-political rather than nosological language. As with physicians in the preceding centuries for whom nostalgia was a diagnostic term that identified the illness of homesickness, it is for Boym (and the myriad others who reproduce her arguments) a way to identify the political illnesses associated with anti-modernism and a variety of traditionalisms. This is apparent in the way Boym refers to restorative nostalgia as a "rational delusion" which, in aiming to revive the time of tradition, threatens to enact political violence and terror "with a nearly apocalyptic vengeance."[30] Moreover, physicians contending with the novelty of nostalgia as a disease often believed it to be a reaction to the advent of modernity. Boymians, too, place an emphasis on the idea of modernity's ruptures. Between the medical and the political, the idea that nostalgia is reactive instead of proactive has remained fairly stable.

My intention here is not to offer a defense of restorative nostalgia. Boym (like Stanley) has certainly identified something important in associating a certain kind of nostalgia with aggressive political tendencies. But her identification of that association is overstated and, precisely because it is overstated, it has an unjustifiably broad measure of indictment. What can end up counting as "politically dangerous" simply for bearing the stated hallmarks of what Boym calls restorative nostalgia are any number of sociocultural or political phenomena/movements that cannot with any seriousness be lumped together with, for example, Stalinism or Nazism in the twentieth century—two evils Boym rightly claims were built on promises of restoring an ideal past.

[30] Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 43.

Where, for instance, might the various anti-colonial and indigenous resistance or liberation movements of the twentieth century be placed, many of which were nationalistic, conservative, traditional, invoked images of a preserved past, and generally meet many if not most of the criteria for restorative nostalgia? Should the Algerian struggle against the French or the Indian struggle against the British be included under the umbrella of restorative nostalgia? It is often forgotten, especially in the case of India, that liberation took an originally violent form, that the indigenous "conspiratorialized" the colonists (conspiratorial beliefs for Boym mark an important feature of restorative nostalgia), and that national identities were developed on the promise of "bringing back" what was swallowed up by colonialism. It is never seriously considered by Boymians that the "nostalgic conditions" which may lead to authoritarianism are precisely those which may inspire anti-authoritarian movements as well. Furthermore, why *wouldn't* the colonized subject appeal to the past, the pre-colonial site of life, and seek to "restore" it in the endeavor to imagine a post-colonial future? Resistance and liberation movements can and often do think about the past, present, and future in ways that disturb the idea of secular, linear history—what Asad calls "the privileged measure of all time"[31]—which is entangled in the articulation of Boym's two nostalgias. The pre-colonial past may be gone, but it remains to be a point of narrative access for the imagination of a liberated future. What is strange or even incomprehensible about this fact from the colonial entity's standpoint is often perfectly clear—even banally so—from the perspective of the nostalgic subject.

[31] Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 43.

Asad notes that invocations of the past are common among revolutionaries, who seek not "an impossible return" but rather a way to "provoke and challenge the present."[32] For them, the past is not something that is "over and done with, simply the object of disinterested knowledge or sentimental memory."[33] It is more importantly a reality that is "copresent with *now*."[34] The past can be, and often is, a standpoint from which to legitimately critique the present.[35] Thus, while nostalgia bears an important association with the past, it is about much more than that. As the geographer Alastair Bonnett puts it, nostalgia is fundamentally "a declaration of distance from one's object of desire."[36] That desire may be found *through* the past but is not necessarily encompassed *within* it. When nostalgic desires extend between and beyond temporalities, our ability to understand them in the language of linear time becomes complicated.

What the Critic Misses

Critics of nostalgia rightly understand that a wistful reach for the past is not just a matter of feeling, for the nostalgic is ultimately expressing, by virtue of their desire, a (typically political) value toward the memoric contents attached to that feeling.[37] Yet they often fail to understand that their diagnostic uses of nostalgia similarly identify their own political values about the "correct" way to operationalize memory. What I am trying to express here is that diagnostic uses of nostalgia are not innocent. Nostalgia, to borrow a helpful expression from Smith, is not a "neutral analytic device," though it is often

[32] Asad, *Secular Translations*, 48.
[33] Ibid., 49.
[34] Ibid.
[35] Ibid.
[36] Alastair Bonnett, *The Geography of Nostalgia: Global and Local Perspectives on Modernity and Loss* (London: Routledge, 2016), 16.
[37] Smith, "Mere Nostalgia," 509.

employed as if it were.[38] As a term of political disparagement, it works to pathologize and discipline "improper" engagements with the past and auxiliary concepts like time, modernity, and history. This is why the perceived nostalgic is "vulnerable to the charge that they are irrational, that they have misunderstood the meaning of the emotion and its proper relation (or non-relation) to action."[39] In the same way that, for example, nostalgia was historically cited by colonial powers to explain and discredit anti-colonial movements, it is today (mis)used by many in order to identify and confute political agendas that are deemed "dangerous" by any expedient measure of the term. Nothing prevents the pejorative use of nostalgia from referring to the "danger" posed to the projects of continued occupation, continued imperialism, and continued authoritarian subjugation. Indeed, among its other uses, this is a common way in which the term is applied today. To claim that someone is "suffering from nostalgia both explains and delegitimates their political stance."[40] It is a way to restrain certain engagements with time and certain uses of memory by identifying them as stubborn, irrational expressions of "psychological resistance to the forces of modernization[.]"[41]

Returning now to the question I posed in my opening paragraph: Is nostalgia a meaningful relationship with the past, or just an error in thinking? At least for Boym and likeminded theorists, it is both. But what determines whether it is one or the other is fundamentally a political calculation about the values of time, history, memory, and modernity. This is apparent, for example, in the way specific "notional families" implicitly track the difference between reflective nostalgia and restorative nostalgia.

[38] Ibid., 505.
[39] Ibid., 509.
[40] Ibid., 506.
[41] Ibid.

Reflective nostalgia is continuous with the secular, "private," non-political, and "off-modern," while restorative nostalgia is continuous with the un-secular, "public," political, and "anti-modern." These classifications represent a political difference insofar as the logic of one notional family (that of reflective nostalgia) is adopted and involved in the effort to define, discuss, and decry the other (that of restorative nostalgia).

But there is a third question we can ask, which is this: Why does it even matter whether nostalgia is meaningful or meaningless, constructive or destructive, and lucid or delusional? Why do we always seem to return to some version of these questions when we think about nostalgia? Smith offers perhaps the best answer. In her words, debates over nostalgia matter because the very term is "an important weapon in the debate over whose memories count and what kinds of desires and harms are politically relevant."[42] It sits at the center of "struggles over the creation of collective memory precisely because it is a key concept in the political conflict over modernity[.]"[43]

Further exploration of this third question is warranted. The next chapter investigates how and why nostalgia became a term of political condemnation and what pejorative characterizations of nostalgia convey about our understandings of history and time. I will trace the etymological origin of nostalgia as a nosological category and attempt to show how its present use as a term of political slander is not a transformation of its original medical meaning *but a fulfillment of it*. Both the "older" medical and "newer" political uses of nostalgia are deeply tied to cultural and epistemic shifts born out of our commitments and implicit enmeshment in the hegemonic tenets of modernity and progress.

[42] Ibid., 507.
[43] Ibid.

Chapter Two
Modernity, Progress, and the Discursive History of Nostalgia

Nostalgic Continuities and Discontinuities

The previous chapter problematized the attribution of neutrality to the diagnostic use of nostalgia. My claim so far has been that the very idea of a theoretical nostalgia rests upon a network of political assumptions which necessarily obviate any claims of impartial diagnosis. As I have suggested, these assumptions proceed from the term's origination in the study of medicine during the seventeenth century. But there is still a need to detail the nature of these assumptions and understand how and why they developed in the first place. This chapter begins with this aim in mind.

The idea that nostalgia's political connotations have existed since the term was first coined to describe a disease is not exactly popular. The prevalent scholarly view posits a disruption in the term's discursive function and applications between the seventeenth and twentieth centuries. This disruption is generally believed to have resulted from a range of epistemic developments that modulated our social, cultural, and scientific attitudes about the world and our place in it. As we gradually came to know more we also came to "know better" than the doctors who treated nostalgia like a physical illness. The literary theorist Andreea Deciu Ritivoi typifies this view in her claim that nostalgia's semantic relocation from its original space in medicine to its current place in theory marks a significant shift in our "philosophical assumptions about the nature of personal identity."[44] This includes, in her view, a change in our approach toward the notion of

[44] Andreea Deciu Ritivoi, *Yesterday's Self: Nostalgia and the Immigrant Identity* (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002), 6.

normality over time. As she argues, "nostalgia as a pathological phenomenon was never fully articulate—and [was] eventually abandoned—because the doctors who espoused it failed to see, and reflect upon, the implications for a conception of the 'normal' person."[45] This is a valuable point. Nostalgia as an illness insinuated ideas of human normality and abnormality that could not be accommodated to the gradual social, cultural, and scientific adjustments which unsettled the ontological boundary between stasis and change in modernity. This may have been one reason nostalgia was ultimately purged from the study of nosology.

Still, there are two problems with this understanding that need to be addressed. First, in focusing on what has changed with nostalgia, Ritivoi apparently overlooks the importance of what has largely remained the same with it. She specifically neglects to acknowledge that nostalgia's displacement from the realm of medicine did almost nothing to erase its negative pathological undertones; these remain in the theoretical use of the term today. While nostalgia is no longer of serious concern to contemporary medical researchers, this is but one fact about its historical development. Nostalgia is still used critically to speak about individuals of a certain political temperament as though they are victims of a serious and dangerous disease. The discursive context in which nostalgia is used may have evolved, but the basic assumptions doctors had about the nostalgic subject three centuries ago are hardly different from the ones many social, cultural, and political critics continue to express today. It is not clear how nostalgia's contemporary pathological connotations are significantly different from those present in the early medical use of the term. The belief that this is so merely because the term's

[45] Ibid.

discursive context has changed is a weak assumption that requires more robust argumentation for its defense.

The second issue worth mentioning is that although nostalgia was conceived as a treatable disease, its rise across Europe was accounted for according to political points of reference. This begins, in fact, with Johannes Hofer's introduction of the term. In his medical dissertation on nostalgia, Hofer makes frequent references to the "fatherland" and "homeland" in his explanations and infers that one's longing for these stems from novel experiences with the foreign, adding that although his study is limited to "the Helvetian nation," he must assume that the disease itself has taken over "the remaining tribes of Europe."[46] Indeed, the idea of a changing Europe was tacitly at the center of medical discourses on nostalgia. Following Hofer, nostalgia was widely cited by medical practitioners to explain why afflicted individuals were specifically disabled by the various social, cultural, political, scientific, and even environmental changes that were shaping modern Europe. For many, nostalgia threatened not only the individual, but also modern Europe; the nostalgic subject's wants were concerning precisely because of their "regressive" sociopolitical implications. In a way, then, physicians treating nostalgia were doing so to heal their patients *and* protect Europe from the nostalgic impulses of its subjects. These considerations should complicate the fashionable sentiment that nostalgia "stopped" being medical at one point in time and "started" being political at another.

Some might object to this line of argumentation by noting Hofer's disengagement from issues of politics, society, and culture in his invention and identification of nostalgia. But this view is incorrect. The reality is that Hofer simultaneously cited

[46] Carolyn Kiser Anspach, "Medical Dissertation on Nostalgia by Johannes Hofer, 1688," *Bulletin of the Institute of the Study of Medicine* 2, no. 6 (1934): 383.

nostalgia to diagnose a disease of the mind and communicate important details about the nostalgic subject's political mood. Right from the start, Hofer found in nostalgia a means by which to identify "the patriot." The disease of nostalgia may have been severe and in need of treatment, but for Hofer it also communicated an auxiliary reality about one's love for their country. Svetlana Boym acknowledges this, stating that "Hofer seemed proud of some of his patients; for him nostalgia was a demonstration of the patriotism of his compatriots who loved the charm of their native land to the point of sickness."[47]

A study of later medical engagements with nostalgia further confirms that political claims were never incidental to its diagnosis. Less than half a century after Hofer introduced nostalgia into Europe's medical lexicon, we find an increasing reference to it by a peculiar kind of practitioner: the military doctor. "Even if not mortal," the anthropologist Nauman Naqvi tells us, "nostalgia incapacitated its victim for any form of disciplined labor, and this is perhaps why, after Hofer, the overwhelming majority of studies of nostalgia were associated with its occurrence among soldiers."[48] Europe was entering a transformative stage in its cultural identity, marked in particular by the facts of mass urbanization, the evolution of the nation-state, and the rise of modern armies which Naqvi says included an "extensive mobilization of populations for military purposes."[49] Nostalgia had thus become a fairly widespread phenomenon as travel to faraway places became more frequent and life rapidly changed in tandem with Europe's modernizing identity. European soldiers arguably felt these changes more than anyone else and for that

[47] Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 4.
[48] Nauman Naqvi, "The Nostalgic Subject: A Genealogy of the Critique of Nostalgia," *Centro Interuniversitario per Le Ricerche Sulla Sociologia Del Diritto e Delle Instituzioni Giuridiche,* Working Paper no. 23 (September 2007): 13.
[49] Ibid., 14.

reason were suffering from nostalgia in larger numbers (indeed, soldiers were even among the first of Hofer's own patients). For the modern European army, which was motivated by the dual imperatives of modernization and progress, the pandemic of nostalgia was a serious problem. At a time of greater European expansionist and colonial adventures, the indisposed nostalgic soldier who wished only to return home stood as an impediment to the achievement of the army's long-term objectives.

Thus unlike Hofer, whose political comments about the nostalgic subject were largely approbatory, this subsequent generation of European doctors described their wistful patients in condemnatory terms. If nostalgia for the "old country" was once an admirable act of patriotism, it had become a danger to the goals of modernization and progress. Boym notes that "nostalgia both enforced and challenged the emerging conception of patriotism and national spirit. It was unclear at first what was to be done with the afflicted soldiers who loved their motherland so much that they never wanted to leave it, or for that matter to die for it."[50] But if that answer was unclear for Hofer, it was perfectly clear for the doctors who came after him in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: the nostalgic subject needed to be disciplined lest their wistful desires impede Europe's forward movement. In the best case, this entailed what Naqvi terms an "intensive disciplinary regime for the nostalgic soldier" to ensure productivity.[51] Rounds of military exercises and other physical pressures intended to preoccupy the mind and attenuate the nostalgic impulse were not uncommon. In many cases, however, soldiers were verbally abused for being weak, foolish, primitive, and even unpatriotic in order to

[50] Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 5.
[51] Naqvi, "The Nostalgic Subject," 18.

snap them back into shape. In the worst case, direct physical punishment was brought upon the nostalgic subject. Naqvi notes two examples that are worth reproducing here:

> [I]n 1790, Dr. Jourdan Le Cointe revealed in the book, The Health of Mars, that "nostalgia can be defeated by inciting pain or terror. One should tell the nostalgic soldier that a 'red-hot iron applied to his abdomen' will cure him immediately." Even more dramatic is the account of a Russian general who, "in 1733, at a time when, having ventured into Germany, his army had fallen prey to nostalgia: 'he had it announced that the first to be sick would be buried alive…'" The general actually carried out his threat the day after "'on two or three, with the result that there was no longer a single case [of nostalgia] in the entire camp.'"[52]

What we can infer from the above is that the relationship between nostalgia and patriotism which previously existed in Hofer's mind became inverted as a consequence of the increasing degree to which the critical project of modernity was changing the very idea of Europe in public consciousness, and with it the very conditions of nationalism. Naqvi claims that the modern European military was in fact "a key institution in the creation of national feeling."[53] It effectively displaced the geographic primacy of patriotic sentiment and abstractly relocated it within itself; being a "modern" patriot meant steadfastly supporting the imperatives and goals of the nation-state and its army. Nostalgia for "the old country" was thus relieved of its patriotic connotations.

If nostalgia was resented because it was unpatriotic, it was feared because it was "spreading" at an apparently unstoppable rate and threatened to reverse the progress made in the way of modernization. New modern knowledges about the world necessitated new modern approaches, imperatives, and concerns in it. But, as Naqvi puts it, "the nostalgic [soldier] is represented in these knowledges as a figure of resistance to modernity—indeed as a sign of the non-modern in the midst of modernity, soliciting the

[52] Ibid., 22.
[53] Ibid., 17.

rigorous discipline of its epistemic-institutional complexes."[54] Soldiers from the countryside were particularly vulnerable to the charge of nostalgia because they were seen to be the uncouth savages for whom modernity was a frightening novelty they could not comprehend.[55] They were, in other words, a problem to be solved. In a strange way, nostalgia was as much an unpatriotic abdication of a modern progress-driven Europe as it was a consequence of the concerns, considerations, and complexes of European modernity.

Modernity and Progress as Conservative Regimes

It is necessary to elaborate on what is meant by modernity and progress given their conceptual proximity to the critical charge of nostalgia. The intellectual historian Wael Hallaq notes that enduring disagreements over the exact meaning and beginning point (or even end) of modernity makes it difficult to offer a precise definition. Because modernity can be explained with great variation by appeal to its values, its sociopolitical associations and consequences, or its genealogy, Hallaq claims that "perhaps the only conclusion one can draw is that modernity is an incomplete project."[56] I do not endeavor to challenge this view by proposing an exact definition of modernity, nor am I interested in interrogating the disagreements which complicate our understanding of the term. Because modernity is, at once, a historical category, a contemporary condition, and a set of normative claims and imperatives, it often eludes conceptual clarity. I am satisfied to state that modernity is an epistemological regime that engenders a certain culture of thinking in and about the world. The same, I contend, can be said about progress. What

[54] Ibid., 8.
[55] Ibid., 16.
[56] Wael Hallaq, *Reforming Modernity: Ethics and the New Human in the Philosophy of Abdurrahman Taha* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), 79.

concerns me, then, is how the cultures of modernity and progress feed and are fed by the critique of nostalgia.

Bruno Latour suggests that any given definition of modernity has at its base a perspective on "the passage of time."[57] Modernity, for Latour, necessarily connotes "a new regime, an acceleration, a rupture, a revolution in time. When the word 'modern', 'modernization', or 'modernity' appears, we are defining, by contrast, an archaic and stable past."[58] Our beliefs about what constitutes modernity (e.g., freedom, secularization, urbanization, individualism, or democracy) are thus expressed against social, political, scientific, and moral concepts we attach to obsolete forms of life located in the idea of "premodernity." However modernity may be defined, what is important is that the term acquires its meaning in juxtaposition to a certain picture of a former world. In other words, it draws a picture of what is to be desired and promoted against what is to be rejected and impeded *in time*. This is why, Latour argues, modernity "is always being thrown into the middle of a fight, in a quarrel where there are winners and losers, Ancients and Moderns."[59] Modernity is something to be preserved and defended, supported and encouraged, pursued and commended—it is a purposive activity. In the words of Michel Foucault, it is "a mode of relating to contemporary reality; a voluntary choice made by certain people; in the end, a way of thinking and feeling; a way, too, of acting and behaving that at one and the same time marks a relation of belonging and presents itself as a task."[60]

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[57] Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern,* translated by Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 10.
[58] Ibid.
[59] Ibid.
[60] Michel Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?" in *The Foucault Reader,* edited by Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon, 1984), 39.

Approaching modernity as a task signifies a politics of periodization insofar as meaning is imputed onto the past and future according to the defining values of the present. The idea of history in modernity channels a distinct function, part of which involves an abdication of the past for the purpose of ameliorating the future. Modernity participates in a conception of time that delineates the beginnings and ends of periods by reference to the existence or inexistence of its own values. It is thus a protractible moment; it can remain so long as the values deemed to define it subsist. In a way, then, the categories of "modern" and "premodern" or "contemporary" and "ancient" born out of the lexicon of modernity function as extra-historical designations which, ironically, shape the way we approach and understand the very facts of history and time.

Modern modes of thinking and being seem to pronounce, to great effect, the human being's agency in the processes of historical change. A serious implication of this attitude is that the progression of time is subjected to the perceived development of the human creature; the former is defined by the latter. Our sense of time in modernity is substantially anthropological in its measure. That time and history are anthropological subsumptions does not mean that there ceases to be a past or future beyond the fact of human existence, but rather, as the cultural historian Helge Jordheim puts it, that "the proportions of history [become] human proportions: durations, intervals, rhythms, and speeds."[61] The imputation of anthropological value to the facts of time and history in modernity alter what Reinhart Koselleck calls our "space of experience" on the one hand and "horizon of expectation" on the other. It turns progress into "the first genuinely

[61] Zentrum für Theorien in der historischen Forschung, "Helge Jordheim - Times of Nature, Times of History: Koselleck in the 21st Century," YouTube Video, 1:12:13, November 4, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o1na_EYM--g.

historical concept which reduce[s] the temporal difference between experience and expectation to a single concept."[62] The very notions of "past" and "future" become reformulated—the former dependent for its meaning on human experiences, the latter dependent for its meaning on human expectations. For Leon ter Schure, the modern idea of progress thus "temporalizes" history in such a way as to remove our expectations of the future from any connection to the experience of the past.[63] As a result, "[t]he present becomes a permanent period of transition. This indeed becomes characteristic of the experience of modernity."[64]

Progress appears to convey what the political scientist Gabriel Almond calls a "philosophy of history," which was born through modernity between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.[65] Like any philosophy of history, Almond claims the idea of progress takes a stance on the following five matters:

> (1) the direction of the historical process, whether progressive, regressive, linear, curvilinear, or cyclical; (2) the rate of historical change, whether incremental or characterized by quantum transformations; (3) the agent (or agents) of historical change, whether it (or they) is (are) a divine force (or forces) controlling history or a divine plan instituted at the beginning and then working itself out in history, as in the idea of Providence; or whether the agent is human reason and effort; or whether the divine and human together operate in some ratio or combination; (4) the substance of historical change, that is, the areas of historical transformation and their interaction, as knowledge, crafts, and arts, material growth and welfare, political institutions and ideas, and moral and spiritual values, and how they are all linked together; and (5) the identity of the bearers of history, whether they be Greeks, Jews, Christians, Muslims, or some larger identity as civilized man or all humanity.[66]

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[62] Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 268.
[63] Leon ter Schure, *Bergson and History: Transforming the Modern Regime of Historicity* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2019), 41.
[64] Ibid., 42.
[65] Gabriel A. Almond, Marvin Chodorow, and Roy Harvey Pearce, "Introduction," in *Progress and its Discontents*, eds. Gabriel A. Almond, Marvin Chodorow, and Roy Harvey Pearce (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 1-2.
[66] Ibid., 2.

Progress as a philosophy of history promulgates a unidirectional, incremental, secular-anthropological conception of time by which all people are assessed and according to which all forms of knowledge—political, artistic, scientific, and so on—develop. This is a view of history and time that is palpably at odds with premodern conceptions of the world—conceptions by which the nostalgic subject is often identified. There is a felt dissonance between nostalgic and progressive imaginations of time and history because the mere expression of the former appears to be a repudiation of the latter's assumptions and convictions. The idea of progress is premised on the notion that humans can (and indeed must) perpetually elevate themselves to higher states of being in the accumulation of true "historical" knowledge. Our view of what it means to be human is fundamentally touched by this assumption. But the stubborn nostalgic subject appears unconvinced of the "modern's" progressive intimations.

The general promise of the philosophy of progress is that new, improved states of existence can and will be constructed with the inevitable passage of time. For some, however, this is a claim of desire that approaches fantasy because it is premised on two conflicting principles: (1) that the future must be better than the past, and (2) that in order for historical progress to materialize, the principles of modernity must be perpetually sustained and reanimated. In other words, the material realities of modernity in the present—derived from our experience of modernity in time past—must be endlessly replicated in order to achieve "improvement." When modernity is treated as an ideal in this way, progress functions to *sustain it* in history, not overcome it. This is why Foucault describes modernity as a task, but—to appropriate a phrase from Walter Benjamin—

perhaps it is better to say that progress forces us to construe modernity as an "infinite task."[67]

Benjamin is rather critical of the idea of progress, viewing it as inherently catastrophic.[68] This is because although the claims of progress depend on the notion of perpetual development, they in fact participate in the reproduction of routine. In his words, "[t]he concept of progress is founded in the idea of catastrophe. That it continues like this, *is* the catastrophe."[69] Esther Leslie calls this "the continuation of business as usual."[70] This is precisely why believers in progress can fail to witness the many tragedies that occur in its name—socially, politically, economically, and environmentally for example. Indeed, as Leslie states, for Benjamin "progress becomes a dogma at that moment when it is no longer a socially critical concept, but has become a *Geschichtphilosophie* which measures the bad infinity of 'the tension between a legendary beginning and a legendary end of history'."[71] If modernity prescribes an ideal mode of existence, progress is the instrument of its perpetual actualization.

Thus, progress is not simply the "neutral" idea of development. It is what the cultural historian Christopher Dawson calls a millenarian orientation that "evoke[s] all the enthusiasm and faith of a genuine religion"[72] and which, by identifying modernity as its salvific destination, acts as "the working faith of our [contemporary] civilization."[73] The political philosopher, John Gray, defines progress similarly as a myth of immanent

[67] Tamara Tagliacozzo, *Experience and Infinite Task: Knowledge, Language and Messianism in the Philosophy of Walter Benjamin* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018), 1-5.
[68] Esther Leslie, *Walter Benjamin: Overpowering Conformism* (London: Pluto Press, 2000), 168.
[69] Ibid., 169.
[70] Ibid., 168.
[71] Ibid., 177.
[72] Christopher Dawson, *Progress and Religion: An Historical Inquiry* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2001), 157.
[73] Ibid., 15.

salvation which purports "that the growth of knowledge and the advance of the species go together—if not now, then in the long run."[74] He adds: "To believe in progress is to believe that, by using the new powers given us by growing scientific knowledge, humans can free themselves from the limits that frame the lives of other animals."[75]

Christopher Lasch suggests that such assumptions are what brought about "nostalgic yearning for bygone simplicity—the other side of the ideology of progress."[76] While acknowledging that nostalgia is "not to be equated simply with the remembrance of things past," he goes on to state that it "is better understood as an abdication of memory."[77] What Lasch says next is worth reproducing in full:

> Now that we have begun to understand the environmental limits to economic growth, we need to subject the idea of progress to searching criticism; but a nostalgic view of the past does not provide the materials for that criticism. It gives us only a mirror image of progress, a one-dimensional view of history in which a wistful pessimism and a kind of fatalistic optimism are the only points of reference, a criticism of progress that depends on the contrast between complex modern societies and the close-knit communities allegedly typical of the 'world we have lost', as Peter Laslett calls it in his study of seventeenth-century England.[78]

Lasch is, like Gray and Dawson, rather critical of the idea of progress. But he is no less critical of nostalgia because he believes it "tends to replace historical analysis with abstract typologies—'traditional' and 'modern' society, gemeinschaft and gesellschaft—that interfere with an imaginative reconstruction of our past or a sober assessment of our prospects."[79] Lasch might be perfectly justified in his views here if his definition of

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[74] John Gray, *Straw Dogs: Thoughts on Humans and Other Animals* (New York: Farrar, Straus, And Giroux, 2007), xiv.
[75] Ibid., 4.
[76] Christopher Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven: Progress and Its Critics* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1991), 14.
[77] Ibid.
[78] Ibid.
[79] Ibid.

nostalgia was not problematic. Lasch's idea of nostalgia as "one-dimensional" participates in precisely the discursive cliches I mentioned in my previous chapter which need to be dispensed with. Increasingly, there is a recognition that nostalgia cannot seamlessly be encompassed by the dichotomous registers of progress and regress, modernity and premodernity, or rupture and continuity which have characterized existing discourses for many decades now. The geographer Alastair Bonnett, for example, argues that nostalgia is neither a passive nor reactive outcome of modernity's spatiotemporal disruptions, but rather a critical attitude in its own right, equipped with the capacity to challenge and disrupt contemporary assumptions of being in the world. As he puts it, "one of the most troublesome, and most interesting, aspects of nostalgia is that it complicates distinctions between modernity and non-modernity and between what is 'authentic 'and what is 'invented'. Nostalgia transgresses and affronts modernity's hubris, it both emerges from and doubts the reflexive, critical capacities of the destabilized modern subject. Because it is 'in and against modernity' nostalgia opens up room for us to question modernity and the way that certain forces and forms acquire the status of being modern."[80]

I wish to push Bonnett's claims further. Nostalgia provides us with more than a capacity for critique; it carries a constructive propensity for worldbuilding. And it is precisely for this reason that "diagnosing" nostalgia (or using it as though it were a neutral analytic device that locates a "natural," static phenomenon) is a political act, for it works to empty non-standard modes of interaction with time, history, and modernity from their own "worldbuilding potential." The epistemic regime of progress has turned the

[80] Alastair Bonnett, *The Geography of Nostalgia: Global and Local Perspectives on Modernity and Loss* (London: Routledge, 2016), 6.

ideal of modernity into the principal object of social, moral, and political conservation. The common critique that nostalgia is “regressive” or “conservative” is in this sense superficial and serves to obscure important details about our modern epistemic assumptions. My next and final chapter examines these issues in closer detail.

Chapter Three
Nostalgia and the Muslim Question

Conceiving the Muslim Question

In chapter two, I explained how the discourse on nostalgia is historically embroiled in political claims about modernity and progress. In this final chapter, I analyze contemporary instantiations of these political claims with a special focus on how and why they often encircle the figure of the Muslim—arguably the focal point of "nostalgic disdain" today.

Western political theorists have recently taken an interest in what is often called "the Muslim question"—the issue of what is to be done about the disquieting presence of Islam and the figure of the Muslim in our modern secular world. It is, Anne Norton claims, the chief political-philosophical question of our time, characterized largely by national and international fears over security.[81] The Muslim question is in many ways like the Jewish question of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The figure of the Muslim has replaced that of the Jew as "the feared agent of global terrorism" and chief security threat to modern nation-states and the nation-state system.[82] Whereas the Jewish question once marked the terrain over which a number of modern struggles around "faith and secularism, progress and loss, alienation and community, [and] equality and difference" were fought, these conflicts are currently unfolding on the terrain of the Muslim question.[83] This is apparent in the fact that "Islam is marked as the preeminent danger to politics; to Christians, Jews, and secular humanists; to women, sex, and

[81] Anne Norton, *On the Muslim Question* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 2.
[82] Ibid., 5.
[83] Ibid., 2.

sexuality; to the values and institutions of the Enlightenment. In relation to Muslims and Islam, liberty, equality, and fraternity become not imperatives but questions: Liberty? Equality? Fraternity? They are asked of Muslims and Islam. They are asked of us all."[84]

The political theorist Salman Sayyid offers a similar view. The Muslim question is for Sayyid an umbrella term for "a series of interrogations and speculations in which Islam and/or Muslims exist as a difficulty that needs to be addressed."[85] He adds that "the Muslim question is a mode of enquiry that opens a space for interventions: cultural, governmental and epistemological. How a fifth of this planet's population comports itself in the world depends on its answers. The Muslim question encompasses the difficulties associated with the emergence of a distinct political identity that appears to be transgressive of the norms, conventions and structures that underpin the contemporary world."[86]

Both Norton and Sayyid suggest that the Muslim question has less to do with Islam and more to do with modern anxieties about the present and future of the contemporary global order. Norton specifies that while Muslims and Islam are the objects of various interrogations, assaults, and suspicions around the world, this is primarily a consequence of the West's unraveling in modernity. For Norton, "what is at stake is the value of Western civilization. The figure of the Muslim stands like a sentinel marking the limits of the West: the state system, human rights, civil freedoms, democracy, sovereignty, [and] even the simple requirements of bare life."[87] Sayyid suggests that the

[84] Ibid., 2-3.
[85] Salman Sayyid, *Recalling the Caliphate: Decolonisation and World Order* (London: Hurst & Company, 2014), 3.
[86] Ibid.
[87] Norton, *On the Muslim Question,* 5.

isolation of the Muslim as an object of scrutiny, attack, or concern is an unsettled reaction to the presence of Muslimness "in a world in which there is no epistemological or political space for it."[88]

The complexity of the Muslim question requires more attention than I am able to provide in this paper (including a critique of the limited, Western-centric manner in which Norton, Sayyid, and others not mentioned here define the Muslim question). I mention it, however, because of the conspicuous and almost ubiquitous presence of nostalgia as an analytic device in the various contemporary discourses which problematize Muslimness. Nostalgia is frequently treated like special key that unlocks the longstanding mysteries surrounding Muslim violence, stagnation, and lack of assimilation in the world. In the narratives which form the Muslim question, the charge of nostalgia appears to have a unique home. The following cases will help to illustrate this.

Problematizing Muslimness

In a column titled "Light Comes From the West, Nostalgia From the Middle East," the essayist and poet Salman Masalha remarks that, unlike the intellectually and scientifically developed societies of the West, Arab-Muslim societies are victims of arrested development because of their preoccupation with a "glorious past and the greatness of Islam."[89] Masalha points at first to the Quran in an attempt to explain this state of stagnation. As he puts it, "Muslim 'intellectuals' have been reiterating for generations that all truth and knowledge can be found in the Koran. Anyone who holds such a view, like a donkey, is guaranteed to remain behind forever." But Masalha

[88] Sayyid, *Recalling the Caliphate*, 8.
[89] Salman Masalha, "Light Comes From the West, Nostalgia From the Middle East," *Haaretz*, August 28, 2013, https://www.haaretz.com/opinion/.premium-nostalgia-holding-back-the-arab-world-1.5325615 (accessed December 19, 2021).

ultimately claims that nostalgia is the root of the problem. His curious conclusion is that Arab-Muslim societies "will never experience a renaissance" unless they revolt against "the principal obstacle to progress," namely, the "incurable illness" of nostalgia that dangerously beckons them back to a "tribal and religious past."[90]

Some discourses are less bombastic, but no more informed. The economist Guy Sorman, for example, does not believe that the Quran in particular, or any attachment to the Islamic tradition in general, account for the violent, un-modern backwardness often ascribed to Muslims. Yet, like Masalha, Sorman concludes that "misplaced nostalgia" is the problem.[91] Citing the sociologist Jacques Berque's idea that "Islam is what Muslims do with it," Sorman claims Arab-Muslim societies are uniquely troubled because their relationship to tradition is premised on nostalgia. Non-Arab Muslim communities, on the other hand, are better off because their particular cultures engage in non-nostalgic visions of the past and future. In his words, Muslims are less violent the more distant they are "from the Arab sphere of influence," adding that "bomb-planting jihadists are as much Arabs as they are Muslims, and that, in fact, all their references are drawn from a largely imaginary past."[92]

Variations of this narrative abound, and they are not always about Arab-Muslim societies. Following the controversial alteration of the Hagia Sophia from a museum to a mosque in 2020, for example, many critics cited "Ottoman nostalgia" to explain the

[90] Ibid.
[91] Guy Sorman, "Misplaced Arab Nostalgia Has Produced a Generation of Jihadists," *CapX*, April 4, 2016, https://capx.co/misplaced-arab-nostalgia-has-produced-a-generation-of-jihadists/ (accessed December 19, 2021).
[92] Ibid.

development.[93] The political scientist M. Hakan Yavuz asserts that the mosquing of the Hagia Sophia is a worrying signal of the Turkish President's desire "to become the modern sultan or caliph of the Sunni Muslim world," adding that "he and his most loyal supporters espouse a political agenda predicated on nostalgia for the former Ottoman grandeur." This nostalgic impulse, for Yavuz, sustains "an imagined, ahistorical conceptualization of the former Ottoman Empire" which stands to challenge the "progressive, enlightened secular identity" of the modern Turkish nation.[94]

There is little value to the pedestrian platitudes which characterize the above commentaries. Yet I have choses to highlight them precisely because they effectively reflect, with a sort of crude clarity, the implicit assumptions about time, history, memory, progress, modernity, and even religion which are often latent in the pejorative charge of nostalgia. Such criticisms of nostalgia do not occur in a neutral space; they are necessarily implicated in a certain story about the world—that it was once besieged by religious ignorance, and that it is now on a unidirectional path toward progress, guided by the secular values of the Enlightenment. As part of this story, modernity is seen as a triumphant moment emerging out of a permanently perished and discarded past—a past upon which the present victoriously stands. The past, present, and future are dislocated from each other; the figure of the Muslim is conscripted to the past. Time is understood not as a relation of imbricated durations, but as disconnected intervals which track the

[93] M. Hakan Yavuz, "Erdogan and the Hagia Sophia: Nostalgia for the Ottoman Empire," *Berkley Center for Religion, Peace & World Affairs*, July 21, 2020, https://berkleycenter.georgetown.edu/responses/erdogan-and-the-hagia-sophia-nostalgia-for-the-ottoman-empire/ (accessed December 19, 2021).
[94] Ibid.

historical moments of separation between myth and science, religion and secularism, and modernity and premodernity.

Against these assumptions, nostalgia for a "dead" past simply makes no sense. It is no surprise, then, that Masalha, Yavuz, and Sorman should problematize the Muslim past as a site of various dangers to the modern world. Nostalgic Muslims—by the mere fact of their enduring traditional commitments—are figures who threaten to smuggle a wholly undesirable past into the present (or, perhaps more appropriately, drag the present back into the past). They stand to perpetually threaten and interrupt the continuation of the modern story by disturbing the intuition that the present is a teleological moment in the transition between the superannuated past and the utopian future. When used as a term of political disparagement, then, "nostalgia" often communicates—and attempts to compel—a certain picture of contemporary life. It works to discursively delineate those cultures, peoples, communities, societies, and ideas which are deemed closer in proximity to the modern, progressive, secular, and "enlightened" contemporary order from those deemed anti-modern, regressive, dogmatic, and barbaric. Historical literacy plays, at best, a superficial role in the emergence of such attitudes. More appropriately, it is according to these attitudes that our contemporary feeling of history is colored, shaped, and—crucially—enforced. When we pejoratively refer to Muslims as "nostalgic," therefore, we are often saying more than something about their place within and impact upon history. Rather, we are identifying a set of conditions we consider to be antithetical to the imperatives of a modern, secular life.

Such critiques of nostalgia harbor provincial biases insofar as they communicate a sense of what modernity, time, progress, and memory (among other things) mean with

exclusive reference to a chain of historically European encounters and experiences (it is no coincidence that both Masalha and Yavuz explicitly defend the Enlightenment in their attacks on the Muslim nostalgic). But they also harbor a sentiment of anti-Muslim prejudice insofar as they pathologize Muslim behaviors, beliefs, and attitudes about the past. Indeed, by identifying Muslim engagements with the Islamic past as a sign of a present threat, and pejoratively calling them "nostalgic," these critics essentially implicate themselves in the logic of racist thinking. When cited by critics of Islam or Muslims, the experience of nostalgia seems to possess a magical quality, as it often stands to explain a range of loosely related "facts" about why, for example, scientific and intellectual decline pervades Muslim societies, why Muslims are particularly violent, or even why Muslims continue to think and write with seriousness about their antiquated tradition in a modern, secular world. Muslims seem to be exceptionally susceptible to nostalgia's effects, and the world more seriously jeopardized by the purportedly exceptional condition of Muslim nostalgia.

In the critical discourses which make up the Muslim question, the aforementioned assumptions are arguably most transparent in the enduring concern surrounding the caliphate, for which nostalgia is both an explanation and the essential problem. These discourses are not only concerned with the danger posed by abominable and tyrannical manifestations of the so-called caliphate like the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), which Muslims have overwhelmingly repudiated,[95] but with the *latent danger* of "Muslim nostalgia" that precedes and exceeds any Muslim political formations in the

[95] Jacob Poushter, "In Nations with Significant Muslim Populations, Much Disdain for ISIS," *Pew Research Center*, November 17, 2015, https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/11/17/in-nations-with-significant-muslim-populations-much-disdain-for-isis/ (accessed December 19, 2021).

modern moment. The dangerous presence of ISIS is often linked to the more sinister reality that Muslims continue to be "nostalgically swayed" by an archaic religious commitment to the general idea of the caliphate. It is assumed that so long as the idea of the caliphate commandeers Muslim sentiments, any number of individuals and groups will inevitably attempt, at some time or another, to instantiate this medieval imperative in our modern, cosmopolitan world. The problem, in other words, is not simply that some Muslims are misconstruing the function and implementation of the caliphate, but that the caliphate—however it may be construed—is an idea of any memoric significance to Muslims in the first place.

In an article published by the Foreign Policy Research Institute, for example, it is suggested that defeating ISIS and preventing its possible resurgence requires a confrontation of "nostalgia narratives" given their impact on Muslim "communities of potential support" for the terror group.[96] Along the same lines, a terrorism report by the Heritage Foundation claims that the end of ISIS does not mark an end to the ideological threat posed by the caliphate, for the idea will endure even among "purportedly non-violent" Muslims.[97] A crushing military defeat of ISIS is therefore not enough; Muslim nostalgia must be prevented from "becoming too widespread."[98] A similar report by the Center for Strategic Communication at Arizona State University makes no mention of the word nostalgia, but strongly alludes to it in advocating from among "three measures to counter the extremist narrative of the Caliphate" the strategy of "de-romanticizing" it,

[96] Colin P. Clarke and Haroro J. Ingram, "Defeating the ISIS Nostalgia Narrative," *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, April 18, 2018, https://www.fpri.org/article/2018/04/defeating-the-isis-nostalgia-narrative/ (accessed December 19, 2021).
[97] Robin Simcox, "The End of the Caliphate and Its Consequences for Islamist Recruitment," *The Heritage Foundation*, July 15, 2019, https://www.heritage.org/terrorism/report/the-end-the-caliphate-and-its-consequences-islamist-recruitment (accessed December 19, 2021).
[98] Ibid.

specifically by "promoting knowledge of its true history" to Muslims.[99] The mere historical assertion "that the Caliphate was a unifying system of government for Muslims" is considered an "extremist" romanticization of the past. Any and all Muslims who echo such ideas are to be viewed with suspicion and concern as possible extremists. Of course, the security threat posed by groups like ISIS is significant and must be addressed with urgency by Muslims and non-Muslims alike. This is not in question. What is in question is why, in the above discourses, the figure of the Muslim is the securitized object of concern, and nostalgia the ultimate problem.

The figure of the Muslim is seen not as a purposive agent in these narratives but a sort of automaton susceptible to intellectual hijacking by the pestilent idea of the caliphate, which spreads like a contagion and threatens to instantiate an un-modern political order by way of its nostalgic hosts. To neutralize the danger of the caliphate, we are told the roots of Muslim nostalgia must ultimately be addressed. There is virtually no concern in these narratives to delineate "negative" approaches toward the caliphate from potentially "positive" ones. The very idea of a "positive caliphate" is in fact precluded from consideration. The attempt to articulate even a political theory in its name may be a provocative act of extreme proportions—in fact, for many, it is.[100]

Consider the fact that when the intellectual historian and political thinker Ovamir Anjum published his essay on the idea of the caliphate in 2019,[101] a number of hurried

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[99] R. Bennett Furlow, Kristin Fleischer, and Steven R. Corman, "De-Romanticizing the Islamic State's Vision of the Caliphate," *Arizona State University Center for Strategic Communication*, December 31, 2019, https://csc.asu.edu/wp-content/uploads/pdf/csc1402-deromanticizing-islamic-state-caliphate.pdf (accessed December 19, 2021).

[100] Mohammad Fadel, "Can There Be Muslim Political Theory?," *Critical Muslim Studies*, October 27, 2014, https://criticalmuslimstudies.co.uk/can-there-be-muslim-political-theory/ (accessed December 19, 2021).

[101] Ovamir Anjum, "Who Wants the Caliphate?," *Yaqeen Institute for Islamic Research*, October 31, 2019, https://yaqeeninstitute.org/read/paper/who-wants-the-caliphate (accessed December 19, 2021).

responses indicted him for dangerously "romanticizing" the Islamic past. The political scientist Muqtedar Khan argues, for example, that Anjum's essay is "dangerous," a "fantasy," and an "uncritical glorification [of the past]…[that] has no place in a serious discussion of global security."[102] Khan's reasoning is that "the caliphate is not based in historical reality—much less in normative Islam."[103] Others have similarly claimed that Anjum's essay projects and perpetuates an ahistorical view of the Islamic past that needs to be challenged, even to a point of silence. Yet these are odd criticisms, not only because they are in fact anticipated and preempted by Anjum (he explicitly decries what his critics fault him for in the essay), but also due to the fact that they seem to miss one crucial fact: the very purpose of Anjum's essay is to disturb the standard categories of political and historical thinking which constrict our intellectual engagements with the past and foment the very sorts of "uncritical critical discourses" on nostalgia in question here. To claim that Anjum's essay engages in a kind of dangerous "myth-making" is just a euphemistic way to indict him and his ideas as irrational. As Talal Asad reminds us, "the word 'myth' [is often] used as a synonym for the irrational or the nonrational, for attachment to tradition in a modern world, for political fantasy and dangerous ideology."[104] This is why, to borrow Sayyid's words, it has become a prevalent theme of our time to understand Muslim identity as "a rather fragile and superficial basis upon which to build a political structure."[105] Tradition cannot stand to support or secure a significant global order of politics because building a world on the basis of a myth is both unsustainable and

[102] Muqtedar Khan, "The Dangerous Fantasy of the Caliphate," *Newlines Institute for Strategy and Policy*, November 13, 2019, https://newlinesinstitute.org/counterterrorism/the-dangerous-fantasy-of-the-caliphate/ (accessed December 19, 2021).
[103] Ibid.
[104] Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 23.
[105] Sayyid, *Recalling the Caliphate*, 125.

dangerous. This assumption stems in part from the seldom spoken conviction that viable political orders must be based upon methods of knowledge formation which are scientific and critical—that is, stable and productive—and hence "universally" applicable. Religion, while often claiming to express universal truths, is not the stuff of modern science but rather that of premodern myth. Because its claims are not amenable to objective verification and hence "proper" public manipulation, religion lacks the capacity to instruct a meaningful, material order of politics. This explains why, according to Sayyid, "identifying oneself as Muslim in matters of devotional practices may be fairly sturdy at the individual or congregational levels," but cannot be the basis for "great power formation."[106] The attempt to build a substantial political anatomy upon the capricious variability of faith-based principles is at best incoherent and at worst dangerous. Given that religion is taken *prima facie* to be a largely private affair today, it is conceived as a tangential force or factor in public politics—as something to be explained by larger orders of power but which itself cannot be cited as a final explanation. The common conclusion about religion is that it ought to be restrained in its explanatory scope because, in the words of the political scientist Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, it is "essentially peripheral, and [thus any] reflection on international politics is pursued as if it concerned an autonomous space that is not fundamentally disturbed by its presence."[107]

The Muslim nostalgic is presented as a problem to the modern world because he appears to extrapolate the meaning of tradition beyond the theoretical confines that define

[106] Ibid.
[107] Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, *The Politics of Secularism in International Relations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 3.

the private domain to which the category of "religion" is characteristically relegated in the Western imaginary. This unjustified extrapolation unsettles the space between the premodern and modern and, in so doing, challenges the political purpose these ideas serve in conserving our pervading narratives on progress and regress. For the critic, it simply makes no sense for anyone—Muslim or not—to desire antiquation instead of modernization. The appeal to nostalgia is meant to explain this confusion and the mysteries which engulf the figure of the Muslim. In reality, what nostalgia accomplishes in these expository interrogations of Muslimness is no different from what it does in general discourses about the nostalgic other: further obscure what is intended for clarification (the other's memoric disposition), and reveal surprising details about what is believed to be perfectly unobscure (the self's "objective" purpose).

Chapter Four

Conclusion

The discussions in this paper have sought to challenge the prevailing assumption that our attitudes, comments, and criticisms of nostalgia are what they often pretend to be: neutral. The political assumptions which color our use of the term may be difficult to detect, but this does not mean they are absent. More often than not, there is a specific reason for diagnosing someone with nostalgia in social, cultural, and political discourse—to identify that which is dangerous, regressive, or un-modern for example. It is also, perhaps more importantly, a method for tacitly expressing one's own sociopolitical and cultural persuasions about what is progressive, modern, or even simply "right." None of this is to say that there are no serious critical accounts of the nostalgic experience, or that nostalgia can never meaningfully be discussed as regressive, dangerous, or undesirable. My claim, however, is that the contemporary critique of nostalgia is seldom innocent, and seldom without consequences. Perhaps the most notable consequence of the discourses surrounding the critique of nostalgia is that they can limit the scope of our thinking and imagination, not merely about the past, but about the future as well. Far too often, nostalgia creeps into our discourses as an easy alternative to the novel conceptual thinking that is otherwise called for and prevents us from seeing that *any* imaginative engagement with the future depends on an imaginative engagement with the past. Yet this important detail is nearly impossible to appreciate from behind the limiting prism we find ourselves in when our freedom to speak nostalgia into sociocultural and political discourse imperils our freedom to think in more serious, more interesting, and more productive ways about such concepts as time, history, and

modernity, as well as the way memory plays a role in moderating and complicating these categories.

The critic's fault lies in the political assumption that their own "objective" claims about the nostalgic's "subjective" wants are not based in a network of underlying values and beliefs about the central concepts of modernity. It is partly this imperceptiveness which foments, for example, the kinds of discourses about Muslims highlighted in my third chapter—that they are violent, unenlightened, premodern figures roaming the spaces of modernity. Such narratives draw us farther away, not closer, to meaningful understandings of the "nostalgic other," and prevent us from realizing that the conceptual categories we take for granted need to be interrogated anew. This includes, for example, the trite affiliation of the "premodern" with the "un-secular" and "regressive," and the modern with the "secular" and "progressive." A rigid commitment to these standards prevents us from thinking seriously about the way so-called nostalgic impressions of time are often contemporaneously of now and then, of today and yesterday, and of tomorrow too, as well as the way they communicate, to appropriate a phrase from Talal Asad, a notion of "complex space and complex time" which suffuses a simultaneity of temporalities "that imply more than a simple process of secular time."[108] The banal critique of nostalgia hampers the possibility of seriously engaging with these ideas and what they mean for the worlds of yesterday, today, and tomorrow.

There is much that has been left unsaid in the course of this study which requires further investigation, including a more positive account of what nostalgia is, does, and means. What we may cursorily glean is that the object of the nostalgic's desire is not

[108] Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 179.

always grounded in an arbitrary emotional impulse, nor is it an impossible return to the past that is necessarily sought. It is, perhaps, something as plain as the search for the epistemic possibility of imagining back into the world a certain way of life that appears to have been foreclosed by a collocation of material conditions we often identify with modernity. Indeed, sometimes nostalgia mourns neither a place nor a time per se, but the loss of the epistemic capacity by which to express oneself and relate to others in space and time.

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