Introduction: Nativism and nostalgia. Temporalities in the politics of race and ethnicity in Europe and the US

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Anyone observing French politics in 2021 could hardly avoid noticing the role played by Eric Zemmour. A journalist for four decades, Zemmour has become a prominent player in the campaign for the 2022 election of France’s next President. Polls suggest the 63-year-old radical right-wing candidate would attract support from a substantial share of the French electorate, ranging between 12% and 15%. Polls are only polls, and it is difficult to foresee 4 months in advance what vote Zemmour will get when the election comes. A more relevant question, however, concerns his probable durable impact on the French public and political debate in general, and on discussions about immigration and Islam in particular –on how racial and ethnic categories will be framed and used in France in the future.

Zemmour’s ideology compares easily with late 19th-century French antisemitic leader Edouard Drumond (Noiriel 2019). The fact that Zemmour was born in 1958 to a Jewish Algerian family who arrived in metropolitan France in 1952 adds some complexity to the story. He was condemned in the courts three times for racist and religious hatred. The originality, so to speak, of Eric Zemmour is that with him, nativism has found a voice never heard before in post-war France. Of course, nativism has long been an
element of the French so-called “color-blind” political tradition and a sub-text in the politics of immigrant integration and citizenship. But it was hard to explicitly advocate and justify this theme in public. The novelty with Zemmour is that nativism has turned into an explicit political program in mainstream French politics. It has become sayable.

Another striking feature is Zemmour’s obsession with France’s (imperial and colonial) grandeur of the past. In his campaign discourse, he has made emotional references to “the land of Joan of Arc and Louis XIV, the land of Bonaparte and General de Gaulle, the land of knights and gentlewomen; the land of Notre-Dame de Paris and the bell towers in the villages”, “a country fading away”. The setting of one of his speeches was intentionally nostalgic: seated in front of gloomy bookshelves, Zemmour spoke in an oversized black microphone –an obvious reference to well-known images of General de Gaulle’s call for resistance against German occupation on 18 June 1940. As Zemmour put it, "It is no longer time to reform France but to save it”:

This country that you look for everywhere, with despair, that your children are nostalgic about without even having known it; this country that you cherish and that is disappearing. You have not moved, yet you feel that you are no longer at home. You have not left your country, but it is as if your country has left you. You feel like a stranger in your own country: you are exiles from within. For a long time, you thought you were the only one to see, to hear, to think, to fear. You were afraid to say so. You have been ashamed of your impressions.1

These feelings of an alienating loss were abundantly illustrated as Zemmour gave the speech, with images of Brigitte Bardot and other French celebrities, and his use of clichés of the heydays of the 1960s. Along with evoking nostalgic feelings, Zemmour emphasized that “We must return power to the people, take it back from the minorities who constantly tyrannize the majority, and from the judges who substitute their legal rule for the government of the people”. And he demanded that “[we] stop handing our children over to the egalitarian experiments of pedagogists and the mad doctors of gender theories and islamo-gauchisme”.2 If elected, he intends to forbid parents to give non-Christian names to their children. Zemmour also has made abundant use of the notion of a demographic “Grand Remplacement” (great replacement), that is, the idea that European governments and their elites are intentionally replacing White Christian populations with Muslims. For Zemmour, “saving France” means saving it from “the great decline with the impoverishment of the French, the decline of our power and the collapse of our school, and the great replacement with the Islamisation of France”.3

It is no accident that Zemmour’s political party was named “Reconquête” (reconquest) in December 2021. The name is an explicit reference to the 15th-century Spanish Reconquista –the expulsion of Jews and Muslims from Catholic Spain in 1492. Its adoption makes clear how much nostalgia in French radical right-wing politics is a matter of regaining what is said to be at risk today –a territory, a land, a culture, a way of life, “ourselves”. Before being a candidate in the presidential election, Zemmour was the author of best-sellers such as Mélancolie française (French melancholia) (2010), Le suicide français: les 40 années qui ont défait la France (France’s suicide: the 40 years that have undone France) (2014); Destin français: quand l’Histoire se venge (French destiny: when History takes revenge) (2018), and La France n’a pas dit son dernier mot (France has not said its last word) (2021).

When the three editors of this special issue proposed to focus on the interplay between nativist claims and nostalgic sentiments in Europe and the US, Zemmour had not yet become a major figure in contemporary French politics. What the three of us wanted to
stress was the rise of nativism in many countries around the world, and the impact of this rise on (the study of) race and ethnicity, racism, and the politics of national identity. We also wanted to provide a better understanding of the role of nostalgia and temporality in the construction of nativist narratives. The recent political rise of Zemmour has certainly helped to sharpen our focus on the nativism-nostalgia nexus and made our questions especially timely and topical. Yet, we also must emphasize that these questions pre-existed the not co-incidental surge of Zemmour in French public and political debates, and, across the Atlantic, the rise of Donald Trump, as well. In the case of Zemmour, his use of French history and the national past should not be surprising because it is, in fact, a perennial feature of nativism.

In this special issue, our objective is to expand, and indeed go beyond, our earlier discussions of how those who adopt nativist perspectives use and abuse the past to make claims about the present, particularly when they speak about race, ethnicity, and religion (see Bertossi, Duyvendak and Foner 2020). Our focus is explicitly on issues of temporality at large. One of our questions is how nativist longings for a lost past interrelate with calls to exclude more recent residents and members of a country. In looking back to the past with nostalgia, what time periods are highlighted in nativist discourse and sentiments? And there is the role of nostalgia in imagining and devising policy for the years to come. Important as nostalgia for the past is in nativist beliefs and politics, nostalgia also suggests a projection of the past into the future. In fact, analyzing nativism and nostalgia involves a consideration of how views of the future as much as the past are involved in drawing exclusionary boundaries. What we propose in this issue, in short, is to address the importance of looking at temporalities –past, present, and future- for a better understanding of race, ethnicity, and the politics of identity in contemporary societies.

Nativism

Contentious debates over belonging and citizenship all across the globe are deeply inflected by notions of the native and nativeness. Both in its nascent stages in Romantic Europe (Leerssen 2018) and in the postcolonial context, national belonging has proved ‘fundamentally autochthonous and productive of a hierarchical separation between national-natives (autochtons) and Migrants (allochtons)’ (Sharma 2020, p. 13). From this perspective, nativeness, if not nativism, has always been core to the idea of the nation. Nativeness as a form of group belonging is fundamentally based on the notion of ‘territorial rootedness’ (Malkki 1992), inherently presupposing ‘a naturalized link between a limited group and a certain place’ (Sharma 2020, p. 4). According to this essentialist relationship between group and geography, ‘true nationals are those who are Native to the territory.’ (Sharma 2020, p. 7). Insiders are considered “people of the place”, while the outsiders are seen as “people out of place”. Inherent in nativeness as a ‘territorializing concept of identity’ (Malkki 1992, p. 25) is a conflation of “culture and people, nation and nature” (ibid, p. 29). When notions of nativeness are invoked antagonistically, it becomes nativism, which we, inspired by John Higham (2002), propose to define as ‘an opposition to an internal minority that is seen as a threat on the grounds of its foreignness.’

It is of critical importance to emphasize that, although we propose to understand radical right-wing discourses as (forms of) nativism, we by no means diminish the
importance of related concepts such as Islamophobia, racism, and populism. On the contrary, we acknowledge that these concepts are not only empirically pertinent, but they share a common core as well: a nativist logic. It is the combination of Islamophobia and nativism, of racism and nativism, and of populism and nativism, that may help to explain the divisive and exclusionary character of today’s political and public debates, which are all, ultimately, concerned with the predicament of the nation’s cultural identity (Kesic and Duyvendak 2019).

Other scholars have hinted at this nativist core as well, but not in terms of a combination. Cas Mudde has recently suggested: ‘Within the core ideology of the populist radical right, populism comes secondary to nativism, and within contemporary European and US politics, populism functions at best as a fuzzy blanket to camouflage the nastier nativism.’ (2017) While Mudde is right that nativism is of the utmost importance, the idea that nativism is hiding under populism (or under racism or under secularism) is not very helpful. It is not the replacement of racism, populism or secularism by nativism, but the combination of nativism and all three forms of exclusion that colours the debates of our time.

It was once thought that liberalism and globalization would consign the nativist logic to the fringes of societies and eventually to history. But if it ever left, nativism has well and truly returned. Not only are well-rehearsed nativist discourses of class, race and religion surfacing in the political mainstream, political liberalism and its emancipatory goals itself is being held up as an ideological benchmark by which to measure whether or not people belong to the nation. Nativists have explicitly used progressive ideals like secularity, sexual liberation and gender equality to their advantage. These ideals are employed as tools of exclusion, implying that ideas often heralded as a counterweight to nativism do not of themselves serve this function.

Birthright citizenship is not a safeguard against nativism either. In France, many politicians and scholars alike would claim that the principle of *jus soli*, or birthright citizenship, made the country color-blind, religion-blind, and class-blind. In the narratives of French republicanism, the country had the ambition to incorporate all those born on French soil, irrespective of their singularities. However, as many scholars have shown (Bertossi 2020, Bertossi, Taché and Duyvendak 2021), nativism has strongly returned to France. Republican, secular and universalist aspirations have not safeguarded France from nativism but exactly the opposite: they might even have facilitated the return of the native.

Whereas *laïcité* (secularism) mobilizes references to the universalistic French political tradition, it has also been heavily culturalized in public discourse over the past 30 years. It has served to draw a boundary between those entitled to belong to the universalistic tradition (and who can be regarded as natives) and those who are not because of their religion. The culturalization of French citizenship has shifted the public notion of *laïcité* from a matter of liberal democratic principles (organizing equality in a plural society) into a question of cultural values and identity. It has yielded ground to a heavily culturalized boundary between “them” (mostly “Muslims”) and “us” (i.e. “we, the modern”) (Scott 2017, Bowen et al. 2013, Bertossi 2016).

The US is an important example of the interplay between birthright citizenship and nativism. Until recently the US was perceived as having a hard and fast twofold safeguard: its principle of birthright citizenship is itself derived from its being, since its foundation, an immigration country. Similar arguments have been made in Australia.
and Canada. However, as many authors (Foner 2000, 2005, 2006, Foner and Fredrickson 2004, Lee 2019) have shown regarding various moments in the histories of these settlers’ countries, nativism was part and parcel of their trajectory. More recently, nativism has resurfaced explicitly, often in entanglements with racism, populism, and Islamophobia.

Nativism and nostalgia

With the rise of new nativist discourses at the core of migration politics in most European immigration societies, (mis)representations of the past are systematically sustained by a nostalgic perspective on a past before post-World War II immigration. Nativist narratives are mirrored in slogans emphasizing that the past should be re-enacted and revived. But not any past: in Europe it is particularly the recent past before the arrival of postwar immigrants from the Global South who are often considered the cause of alleged declines (Bertossi, Duyvendak and Foner 2020).

The result in European societies is what may be called a nostalgic mood based on a temporal classification of the population. A hierarchy is assumed by many political parties, and not only on the radical right, between “natives” and “newcomers.” The emphasis in Europe on temporal differences among citizens, combined with the idea that the past was “better”, makes it very hard for new, “foreign” citizens to become full-fledged citizens. The nostalgic mood effectively excludes them from the national body since, added to the temporal differentiation between groups, today’s nativism includes the theme of “cultural threat” by immigrants and their descendants.

Combining temporality and cultural antagonisms, nativism in contemporary Europe revolves around the “fear of loss of identity as a result of being ‘overrun’ by culturally alien foreigners” (Betz 2017, p. 177). Indeed, perceptions of immigration and multiculturalism have profoundly changed in most European immigration societies over the past two decades. What seemed, at first, to be resistance to progressive forms of immigrant incorporation and new “post-national” and “cosmopolitan” conceptions of citizenship (Soysal 1994, Bauböck 1994, Castles and Davidson 2005), has shifted to a common, and explicit, questioning of the values of political liberalism itself, and of the very possibility that new immigrants or other minorities can become full members of society. The right to full membership is claimed for (and by) those who consider themselves as “native” to the soil, with “newcomers” considered by a large segment of the population to be a threat to the nation-state. This rapid rise of nativism as the dominant public and political discourse about immigration (Balkenhol et al. 2016, Betz 2017, Guia 2016, Mudde 2017) has dramatically shifted debates about citizenship. Citizenship has increasingly been framed as an issue of cultural norms rather than of civic, political, and social rights and duties (Duyvendak et al. 2016, Bertossi 2020).

Three narratives

Nostalgia—the yearning for a past that is long gone– is only one among many possible ways to articulate past and present. What various configurations of the past-present nexus share, however, is that the past is framed in such a way that it becomes a cognitive, moral, and cultural support for claims about who does or does not belong. Elsewhere, we analyzed various framings of the past in relation to the present in terms
of ‘historical repertoires’, which we defined as elementary grammars about how the past is framed in present public debates about immigration (Bertossi, Duyvendak and Foner 2020). We used ‘historical repertoires’ to refer to ways that ‘history’ is used to evaluate and justify the present. In drawing on, and reshaping, ‘historical repertoires’, debates about migration, integration, and national identity can help to promote a nostalgic and romanticized mood about the past that is often found in European discussions of these topics.

As the articles in this special issue will show, there are some overarching similarities in how the past is mobilized. We can identify at least three broad schemas that capture elements and emphases in public discourses on nostalgia and national identity. On the ground, there are cross-national differences in the relative weight given to each of these three schemas; they also may occur in different combinations, depending on the national context. Each national historical repertoire is, in fact, the result of the way the three are combined.

**Schema 1. “Perpetual Grace”: a linear, positive reading of a country’s past and present**

In this schema what is emphasized is the innate grace of a particular group compared to others. An example is how laïcité (French secularism) has become a central element of the definition of the French political tradition of immigrant integration, even if this notion has only been applied to immigrants and their children (and mainly Muslims) since the late 1990s and early 2000s (see Bertossi 2019). The narrative of perpetual grace invokes a continuity between a distant past and the present by excluding periods that do not easily fit into this picture.

From that perspective, the nostalgic component is only secondary insofar as past and present are of equal value. The continuity attached to this narrative about national history suggests that there is no reason to value the past more than the present. Feeling of (nativist) superiority is a linear characteristic of who “we”, as a nation, have always been. However, this schema also emphasizes that supposedly non-native persons can threaten this innate grace. As a result, a strong nativist sentiment can connect hostility to non-native “others” with the idea of a rupture in the ongoing linear development of the native national history: nativists conceive of non-natives as an obstacle to the full realization of their innate grace.

**Schema 2. “Accomplished Progress”: increasingly doing better**

Whereas the perpetual grace narrative depicts national history positively through the invocation of harmonious trans-historical continuity, the second schema does so through representing the nation’s past in terms of discontinuity. In contrast to the first schema that denies conflict within and differences between periods of national history, the schema of “accomplished progress” is predicated on acknowledging the nation’s historical struggles. It views them, however, not only as a central part of the nation’s past, but involves a rather self-congratulatory image, involving triumphs over adversity and conflict.

This schema applies in French debates about the superiority of the French ideology of republican integration, which is seen as surviving even in the darkest periods of French
history (think of the Dreyfus Affair, Vichy, the Algerian war). Despite these crises, France is defined in terms of a persistent and underlying French republican universalism. More than other schemas, this one regards national history as a discontinuous process with conflicts but stresses a trans-historical essence that finds its full realization in the present. Without idealizing the past, the schema of accomplished progress depicts a positive historical process culminating in the ideal state of completion in the present or near future. Consequently, nostalgia is a secondary component of this narrative. Nativist superiority is not based on who “we” were but on the nation’s ability to continuously achieve a better future. This schema is more forward-looking than the first one. Compared to the other schemas, the “accomplished progress” schema is certainly the one where nostalgia is the least mobilized.

Schema 3. “Rebirth now or never”: the promise of the past for the future

In this schema, the national past is pushed to the point of glorified superiority. This national superiority is perceived, not as a product of historical development, but as a trans-historical essence of a static and reified past. If the narrative of accomplished progress depicts the present as the pinnacle of cultural progress, the schema of “rebirth” diagnoses the present as the nadir up to the point of near death. The future appears in two guises in this narrative. In one, the future is seen as an apocalypse, echoing Spencerian notions of inter-ethnic competition and decadent degeneration. Both in Western and Eastern European countries, an emerging public discourse blames two entities (leftist liberal elites and Muslims) for destroying national culture and by extension “Western civilization”. In a second version, the future is presented as a realizable utopia, when the past’s superiority will rise again and an idyllic purity of native homogeneity will be reinstalled. Logically, nostalgic feelings are center stage in this third schema.

Periodization

If nostalgia is an element in nativism, some specific questions about temporality inevitably arise. Nativist beliefs and narratives commonly involve idealized or distorted memories, and even often amnesia about aspects of the past, although, not surprisingly, the content of these nostalgic beliefs as well as the periods they refer to vary by country and depend, among other things, on national histories and contemporary immigration patterns.

In most Western European societies, there is a widespread nostalgia for a past before the huge post-World II immigration from the Global South which is frequently seen as undermining and threatening long-held mainstream customs, values, and ways of life. Connected to these views is a common nostalgia for the days of great European colonial empires, when colonialized peoples were, in a sense, off-stage, subject to rule in their homelands in Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean in a time when few visited, no less came to live permanently in the mother country.

In their article in this issue, Isabel Speelman et Sammy Frenkel write of a nostalgia among those in the two radical-right Dutch parties for a general “better” past, with a
particular emphasis on a 17th-century golden age when the Dutch were a world power given their role in global colonialism and world trade. In his contribution to this issue, Tibor Dessewffy analyzes nativism in Hungary in terms of national identity rather than opposition to foreigners. He argues that in Hungary in the contemporary period of the Orban regime there is no great narrative about, and nostalgia for, one particular earlier golden age but rather a political patchwork that draws on elements from various time periods that “reflect grandeur, power and glory,” including successes in sports, and that are “built into specific political manifestations [which entail] updating and reinventing ...as the political drivers see fit” (Dessewffy, this issue).

Across the Atlantic, the United States, as a settler society with continuous inflows of immigrants over many centuries, reveals a different—and particular—periodization of contemporary nostalgia. Nativist movements, including a nostalgia for a past before large-scale inflows, have, to be sure, been a perennial feature of American life since the founding of the nation (e.g. Lee 2019). In their post-World War II incarnation, however, the nostalgic aspects of nativism have focused on two specific periods. One type of nostalgia among many Americans today, Foner argues in her article, is for a late nineteenth and early twentieth century immigrant past, which glorifies, indeed exaggerates, the successes of the millions of southern and eastern European newcomers who arrived then in contrast to Hispanic, Asian, and Black immigrants who, in the decades since the late 1960s, have come to dominate the foreign-born population. A second type of nostalgia, which looks back to an America of the 1950s, is a more significant component of today’s nativism and xenophobia, involving memories of a mid-twentieth century period, before the onset of large-scale post-1965 immigration and before the civil rights movement, women’s liberation, gay empowerment, and other social and economic changes drastically altered the American landscape. Nativism in the United States today, moreover, is closely tied to ideas about race—and to the nation’s specific sordid history of internal African slavery, legal segregation, and systemic racism against Black people. Anti-foreign sentiment has a lot to do with racism against non-Whites, which in the U.S. context means taking into account the significant number of long-term native African Americans as well as most contemporary immigrants, who are often referred to as racial minorities in the U.S. scholarly literature. A substantial segment of the non-Hispanic White population fears that their privileges as Whites will be eroded given the large non-White immigrant inflows that have greatly expanded the proportion of people of color, and that Whites will soon become a minority in the country (for a discussion of what he calls this demographic illusion see Alba 2020). Donald Trump’s slogan, “Make America Great Again,” not only embodies nostalgia for a time before massive post-1965 migration from the Global South but also for a pre-civil rights era when there was no question of African Americans heading major mainstream corporations, for example, or occupying a range of other elite positions, including president of the country.

In general, nativism, and its nostalgic elements, are closely connected to the realm of electoral politics. In both Western Europe and the United States numerous contemporary political leaders have built on and made appeals for voter support on the basis of nostalgia for days gone by. Anti-immigrant rhetoric by right-wing politicians has had particular resonance on both sides of the Atlantic with less educated voters of lower socioeconomic status—but is certainly not limited to those groups. The political strength of right-wing anti-immigrant sentiment is especially robust in communities suffering economic and demographic stagnation where a high proportion of long-
established native residents have experienced a loss of well-paying, secure, jobs in the context of globalization, economic restructuring, and automation. This includes many communities in eastern Germany, for example, areas of northern France, and various declining industrial towns in northern England as well as in the American rust belt in which residents are receptive to messages from politicians that blame their situation and loss of status on foreigners and non-Whites and explicitly, or implicitly, conjure up images of a better past before postwar immigration (Alba and Foner 2017). In a kind of feedback loop, the enthusiastic response of many long-established natives to anti-immigrant rhetoric from many contemporary political leaders further encourages the leaders to emphasize it as a way to garner support and energize voters (see Ivaldi, this issue, for a comparison of the articulation between populism and nativism in France, Germany, and Italy).

These are not the only political dynamics in nostalgic elements of contemporary nativism, of course, with current-day France representing a particular pertinent case. Eric Zemmour’s appeals to upper middle class voters and a segment of educated affluent youth have tapped into widespread fears that French identity is being undermined by immigration and the so-called Islamicization of France (Meheur 2021). Just which groups in different countries are drawn to political leaders and campaigns that highlight nativism and nostalgia— and which messages have particular resonance to them—is one of the many topics that requires further study.

The future and nativism

Nostalgia by its very definition is about the past, yet understanding nostalgia and nativism entails a consideration of how the future is seen as well. Nativistic movements often involve a view of a future in which key aspects of the actual or imagined past will be restored. In the Netherlands, among those attached to radical-right anti-immigrant political parties, the future, according to Isabel Speelman et Sammy Frenkel, is commonly imagined as a time when the traditional Dutch spirit, cultural values, and ideals will be revived. As noted at the outset, Eric Zemmour’s anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim nativistic appeals in France, and the very name of his new party “Reconquest,” evoke a centuries long period when Christian forces drove Muslim rulers from the Iberian peninsula. In general, nativistic movements tend to imagine—and indeed advocate for—a future in which immigrant inflows are severely restricted and where other measures are implemented to blunt or limit the influence of immigrants and their descendants on cultural, social, economic, and political life. Past, present, and future are thus inextricably linked in understanding the forms, content, and consequences of nativism. The essays in this issue offer a window into these linkages as they explore the temporalities of nativism and nostalgia in a number of different countries. Our hope is that this special issue will stimulate additional research and analyses that adopt a diachronic, temporal perspective in the study of nativism—a phenomenon that, all too regrettably, remains a major feature of our times.
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NOTES


2. “Nous devons rendre le pouvoir au peuple, le reprendre aux minorités qui ne cessent de tyranniser la majorité, et aux juges qui substituent leur férule juridique au gouvernement du peuple” (idem). “Cesser de livrer nos enfants aux expériences égalitaristes des pédagogistes et des Docteurs Folamour des théories du genre et de l’islamo-gauchisme” (idem).

3. Idem.
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