

The City of *al-Zaman al-Gamîl*: (A)political Nostalgia and the Imaginaries of an Ideal Nation

*La ville du « bon vieux temps » : La nostalgie (a)politique et les imaginaires
d'une nation idéale*

مدينة الزمن الجميل: الحنين لماضي غير مُسيس وخيالات الدولة المثالية

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(A)POLITICAL NOSTALGIA AND THE IMAGINARIES
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SUMMARY

This article examines online communities dedicated to remembering Egypt's "good old days" (*al-zaman al-gamîl*). It focuses on communities that frame themselves as "apolitical nostalgics" longing for a past that they refuse to define through historical or political periodization. Based on forty-eight months of observation of Facebook communities centered around this discourse and analysis of descriptions of this "better past" provided by thirty-two of its members, the article presents some of the features of this nostalgia for an ideal nation, city, and citizen of the past. It argues that this nostalgic discourse is primarily a means of negotiating ideal social imaginaries that correspond to the ideals of the Egyptian conservative middle-class rather than merely a form of escapism or resistance to the bleak neoliberal authoritarian present. It investigates some of the moral and aesthetic values that shape these ideal social imaginaries by outlining the features of what they describe as a "stable society" and the roles of the state in maintaining and restoring this imaginary of the "good life." As such, the article contributes to broader discussions on how imaginaries of the nation are articulated through nostalgic discourses on social media.

INTRODUCTION: ONLINE MEMORIALS

How is the past recalled to discuss national and societal grievances in the digital age? In his book, *Zeitgeist Nostalgia: On Populism, Work and the 'Good Life'*, Gandini (2020) argues that nationalist nostalgic sentiments breed and prosper across social media platforms worldwide. Against the background of global economic crises, wars, coups, and the rise of authoritarian regimes, people from different walks of life are seeking refuge in the past – in times when the world was less confusing. As such, social media communities dedicated to nationalist nostalgia emerge as sites where discourses on the “purity,” “authenticity,” and “goodness” of the past are pitted against the “messiness,” “ugliness,” and “meanness” of the present. The architecture of these platforms – their filter bubbles and echo chambers – aggravate the users’ sense of estrangement, isolating them from encountering opposing or alternative narratives. Meanwhile, these confined echo chambers enable them to organize, negotiate, and disseminate their own narratives. One asks: can the discussion of collective memory on these digital platforms inform alternative imaginaries of the nation?

This article investigates social media, particularly Facebook, in post-2013 Egypt as a site of cultural production home to numerous online communities dedicated to commemorating the nation’s “good old days.” In her seminal article “Unstable Icons,” historian Lucie Ryzova (2015) diligently tracks how vintage photographs from the late 19th and 20th century were widely circulated and interpreted over Facebook groups and pages during Egypt’s political upheaval as proof of “a glorious past” often pitted against “the bleak present.” These photographs were a means of negotiating Egypt’s past political projects, from the liberal monarchy to Nasserist pan-Arab socialism and the Muslim Brotherhood’s Islamic revival (Ibid). She explains how the discourse of *zamân* (back in the olden days) or *al-zaman al-gamîl* (literally “the beautiful time”) carries a positive judgment of the past that is contrasted with the present. In less than a decade, some of these Facebook communities have refashioned themselves as “apolitical,” refraining from publishing images of political leaders and prohibiting their members from engaging in political discussion. In this article, I expand on Ryzova’s work by shifting the focus away from the iconicity of the photographs and towards the online communities built around them. I focus mainly on the ideologies of the members of these communities and what they seek by joining and subscribing to these online groups. I primarily ask: what does it mean to long for a past without politics? And how does this emerging “apolitical nostalgia” differ from other nostalgic narratives centered around political projects?

In this article, I focus on the individual interpretations of *al-zaman al-gamîl* held and expressed privately by thirty-two members of the group *Suwar Misr Ayyâm Zamân* (Old Photos of Egypt) hereafter referred to as *Suwar-Zamân*. These individual interpretations of the past are the basis upon which the discourse of *al-zaman al-gamîl* is co-produced online. They bring together the

members of this online community that shares and circulates vintage photographs as evidence of their ideas about the history and identity of Egyptian society. These interpretations, I argue, correspond to an imaginary of a “good life”, or at least to an imaginary of a “less-bad life.” The morals and values embedded in these interpretations give form to the vision of the ideal nation, the ideal city, and the ideal citizen of the past. It is by examining simple “acts of aesthetic ordering” (Winegar 2016), of explaining what is “ugly” about the present and what is “beautiful” about the past, that we can reach a better understanding of the ideologies behind this “apolitical” nostalgia.

To this end, this article presents a novel conception of nostalgia as a means of negotiating ideal social imaginaries rather than as a means only of escapism or resistance. It also contributes to the growing literature on the hopes, frustrations, and political ideologies of the contemporary Egyptian middle-classes. It is organized into four sections: First, it outlines a theoretical take on nostalgia as a vehicle for producing ideal social imaginaries. Second, it examines the context in which the discourse of this “apolitical” past emerges. Third, it analyzes three main themes within this discourse: (1) the moral and aesthetic orders of the past, (2) the features of its stable society, and (3) the role of the state in restoring the good old days. Finally, I conclude with a discussion of how these ideal imaginaries of the past shape the perception of its proponents’ contemporary Egypt.

NOSTALGIA AND THE IMAGINARY OF THE IDEAL

Egyptian intellectuals and cultural critics wrote extensively against the growing sentiments of nostalgia. In his article, “The malady of nostalgia ... the malady of whatever”, Khaled Raouf (2016) considers nostalgia to the vibrant cosmopolitan 19th and 20th century Alexandria to be “the failure of dealing with reality and the present; in fact, it is the failure to deal with the past itself.”¹ As the title evidences, nostalgia is presented as a “malady” – a sickness that plagues a society and should be eradicated. This sentiment echoes one of the earliest conceptualizations of nostalgia as it first appeared in the 18th century: a pathological condition, akin to hysteria and melancholia, that induces a strong sense of longing and alienation that controls individuals and prevents them from comprehending the present (Boym 2001). This intellectual attack on nostalgia is not devoid of reason; nostalgic expressions flourish after revolutions (Ibid, 42) and might sometimes be perceived as a form of passivist

1 Rightfully, and in line with the works of other social historians of Egypt, Raouf argues that the nostalgia to the multi-cultural glamorous life of Alexandria has silenced and dismissed the painful realities of the working-class Egyptian in that era who suffered from the exploitation of colonial powers and their allies.

refuge from a bleak present. Yet, while nostalgia can be a coping mechanism during periods of instability (Boym 2001; Gandini 2020; Saleh 2021; Stewart 1988), addressing it solely as a form of escapism would be a simplistic approach that dismisses its creative potentials. On the other hand, conceiving of nostalgia as a form of resistance against erasure and forgetting risks overstating a cultural practice, particularly if nostalgic subjects or groups did not articulate their remembrances as a form of resistance. Thus, how to conceive of nostalgia beyond the narratives of escapism and resistance?

I argue here that one way of approaching this dilemma is examining the nostalgic narrative itself as an imaginary of an ideal world, society, and subject. For Benedict Anderson and Charles Taylor, the “imaginary” is a cultural model that is both learned and widely shared (Strauss 2006). Both Anderson and Taylor chart a top-bottom approach to understanding how a society is imagined by its constituents (Ibid). For Anderson (2006), “imagined communities” are the basis of the modern nation-state that contribute to the consolidation of new identities and political groups. Through the proliferation of printed texts, readers developed a sense of belonging to a larger community that shared their languages, interests, and concerns, and thus they “imagined” themselves to be part of a bigger social body (Ibid). Taylor (2002, 106) defines the “social imaginary” as “the way ordinary people imagine their social surroundings [...] often not expressed in theoretical terms; it is carried in images, stories, and legends.” This social imaginary is a complex formulation that “incorporates the sense of the normal expectations that we have of one another, the kind of common understanding which enables us to carry out the collective practices that make up our social life” (Ibid). As such, examining nostalgia as a discourse in which the imaginary of the ideal nation is negotiated offers insights into the values, expectations, and frustrations of the proponents of *al-zaman al-gamīl*. It reveals how they imagine themselves as ideal citizens in an imagined ideal nation.

This approach builds on the conceptualization of nostalgia as “a cultural practice that provides a moral critique of the present” (Saleh 2021, 30). It analyzes nostalgia as the imagining of alternative futures, or as Kathleen Stewart (1988, 227) defined it, “a function of language that orders events temporally and dramatizes them in the mode of ‘things that happened,’ that ‘could happen,’ and that ‘threaten to erupt at any moment.’” This act of ordering and categorizing past events is mainly informed by how individuals imagine their collective histories and their alternative futures.

IN THE BACKSTAGE OF THE (A)POLITICAL

Some of the online communities dedicated to *al-zaman al-gamīl* are structured around a strong political ideology that is refined and articulated through the circulation of content and daily interactions among members. There is a clear

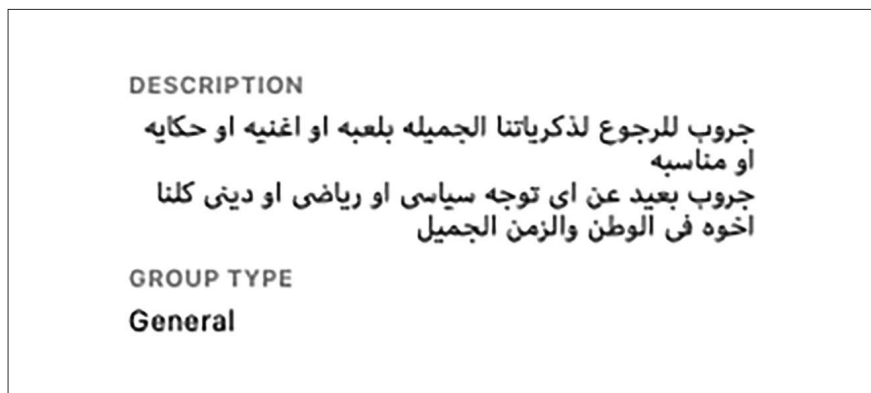


Figure 1. Group description captured by author in December 2018

separation between the royalists, who long for the pre-1952 Egypt, and those who perceive post-1952 to be the “better past.” Each of the two camps have their own groups, guarded by administrators and strict regulations that maintain the homogeneity of the narrative. However, I am concerned here with a *generic* presentation of *al-zaman al-gamîl*, that is, groups dedicated to the past in its totality without abiding by any temporal or political frameworks. This type of group was a site of political contestation in the years 2013 and 2014, when President Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood was ousted (Ryzova 2015). Since the stabilization of the current political regime of President Sisi, the nature of daily discussions in these groups has drastically changed. They have become largely depoliticized. For some of their administrators, politics was “a divisive topic” – one that could create unwarranted troubles. One of these groups (Figure 1) describes itself as “A group to get back to our beautiful memories, songs, stories, and events... a group that is far from any political, religious, or sports-teams identifications. We are all brothers in the nation (*al-watan*) and in *al-zaman al-gamîl*.”

As such, *al-zaman al-gamîl* is presented as a unifying site of belonging, one that is equated with the homeland or the nation (*al-watan*), and also, one where individual affiliations are not tolerated. This aversion from politics and bid to be perceived as “apolitical” is part of the larger depoliticization of social life in post-2013 Egypt. Yet, the fear of being perceived as a potential political subject is not the only reason behind it.

In my private encounters with the administrators of these groups, most of them have expressed an ambivalent relationship to the 2011 revolution. One of them, a retired restaurant manager named Ashraf, explicitly mentioned, “I am not sure what came first [...] did the revolution happen because we [Egyptians] were devastated? Or are we devastated because of the revolution?” He argued, “we will never know what really happened in 2011, nor what happened before and afterwards.” Ashraf expressed his doubt in both

Egypt's political players and his own ability to judge historical moments. He stated repeatedly that he established this group "to bring together like-minded people" who "share a belonging to the past."

Ashraf's willingness to speak of political matters in private and his insistence on banning political discussions in his public group are similar to what Nina Eliasoph (1998, 6) called a state of "political evaporation" in which "the citizens' circles of concern shrink when they spoke in public contexts." In depoliticized public settings, Eliasoph argued, community organizers avoid speaking about broad political concerns; on the frontstage, they insist upon speaking only on matters of self-interest. Meanwhile, in private settings, or in the backstage, they speak eloquently about their political views. According to Eliasoph, this state of "political evaporation" occurs when citizens fail to expand their sense of selfhood to grasp the interplay between their private worlds and the political world around them. However, citizens cannot completely disengage or disregard the surrounding political world (Ibid). Thus, Ashraf's insistence on being perceived as an "apolitical subject" is in itself a political position. Yet the question remains: what does the term "political" mean to Ashraf's "like-minded people?"

As I approached the administrators of these groups seeking a chance to meet offline, my request was usually politely rejected. My interlocutors were happy to be interviewed, but only through their screens and online profiles. Many of them did not share their identities with me; some of them continued using profile names such as *Rawâyah al-zaman al-gamîl* (the smells of the good old days) and *Amîrat al-mâdî* (the princess of the past). A multitude of reasons might be behind their decision to limit our correspondences to digital screens, including growing anxieties about researchers who might be "spies" or "agents of foreign powers" and "parts of conspiracy theories" propagated by state-funded media after 2013 (Aly 2019), or even their skepticism that the online world is a site worthy of serious research. This online ethnography of *al-zaman al-gamîl* relied on extensive chatlogs, and critical discourse analysis of digital vernacular texts². While I did have access to the online private and public ideas of the administrators, the private ideas of the group members remained inaccessible to me until an unplanned encounter with the moderators of the group *Suwar-Zamân*.

Suwar-Zamân is a generic nostalgic group moderated by five administrators who strictly forbid "talking politics" (*al-kalâm fî-l-siyâsa*), urging the members "not to publish or discuss their political opinion, and not to criticize

2 This article is part of a research project on online nostalgia for the ideal nation in post-revolutionary Egypt that started in September 2017. In cyber-ethnographic fields, text carries more weight than it does in offline fields. Text is one of the few ways in which identity is performed and emotions are circulated between users (Kuntsman 2009, 58-59). As such, textual analysis is a central part of this online/offline ethnography.

any person or historic symbol,” but rather to focus on “discussing Egypt’s great heritage.” For them, “politics” meant “political figures” who symbolized political regimes and ideologies. The group includes members who long for the pre- or post-1952 eras, those who long for the 1970s-1990s, others who argue that the Pharaonic past constitutes the “good old days,” and a minority that thinks of the Ottoman Empire as “the golden age of the Islamic nation”. These interpretations appear in the daily communications and discussions on the group, in which members often post widely circulated vintage photographs, snippets of magazines, videos of artists on talk-shows, and even modern photographs of historical monuments.

Unlike other groups and pages whose *raison d’être* was the collection of “rare and unique vintage photographs” (Ryzova 2015), the members of this group seemed to care less for the image. Socializing and bonding over the discourse of *al-zaman al-gamîl* seemed to be the main purpose of this group. Posts of images or videos are used as supporting evidence or an excuse to start a conversation. For example, one of the most popular posts in the group was a video posted by an administrator that contains a series of low-resolution photographs of a young Nubian girl smiling. Inscriptions from the walls of a Pharaonic tomb. A 19th century Swiss deli with Egyptian workers. Vintage photographs of early automobiles and the citadel of Cairo. A Muslim man praying on top of the pyramid. A colored photograph of a group of people hustling after a public bus, probably in the 1970s. School children hanging on the backside of a public bus. Boats in the Nile passing by an agricultural village. Students of a military school. The Corniche of Alexandria. A view of the agricultural village of Giza from the Nile showing peasant women filling water vessels with the Pyramids in the background. Aerial view of Tahrir Square in the 1950s-1970s. An orientalist postcard of poor working children. Coptic Orthodox Monastery of Saint Paul. Farmers working in the field. The square of Ibrahim Pasha in Khedival Cairo. And finally, a photograph of Azhari Shiekhs eating together (Figure 2). The images were organized neither chronologically nor thematically; they appeared in random sequence, echoing a “generic” representation of Egypt and Egyptianness that echoes the nationalist clichés set forth by the state in its official media representations. The video was accompanied by the song *Bawâbat al-Halawânî* (Al-Halawani gate) from the 1992 nationalist historical television drama of the same name. This audio-visual collage thus recycles some of the main tropes of post-colonial Egyptian nationalism like the assertion of unity and the co-existence between various ethnic and religious groups, the celebration of military men and religious clerks, and the categorization of heritage along the periodizations of Pharaonic, Coptic, Islamic, and Modern. Despite the popularity of this audio-visual collage, none of the members commented about the content of images, nor the different – and often contradicting – political projects they represented. Instead, they lamented the lost “beauty” and “simplicity” of *al-zaman al-gamîl* without raising any contentious remarks about the past.

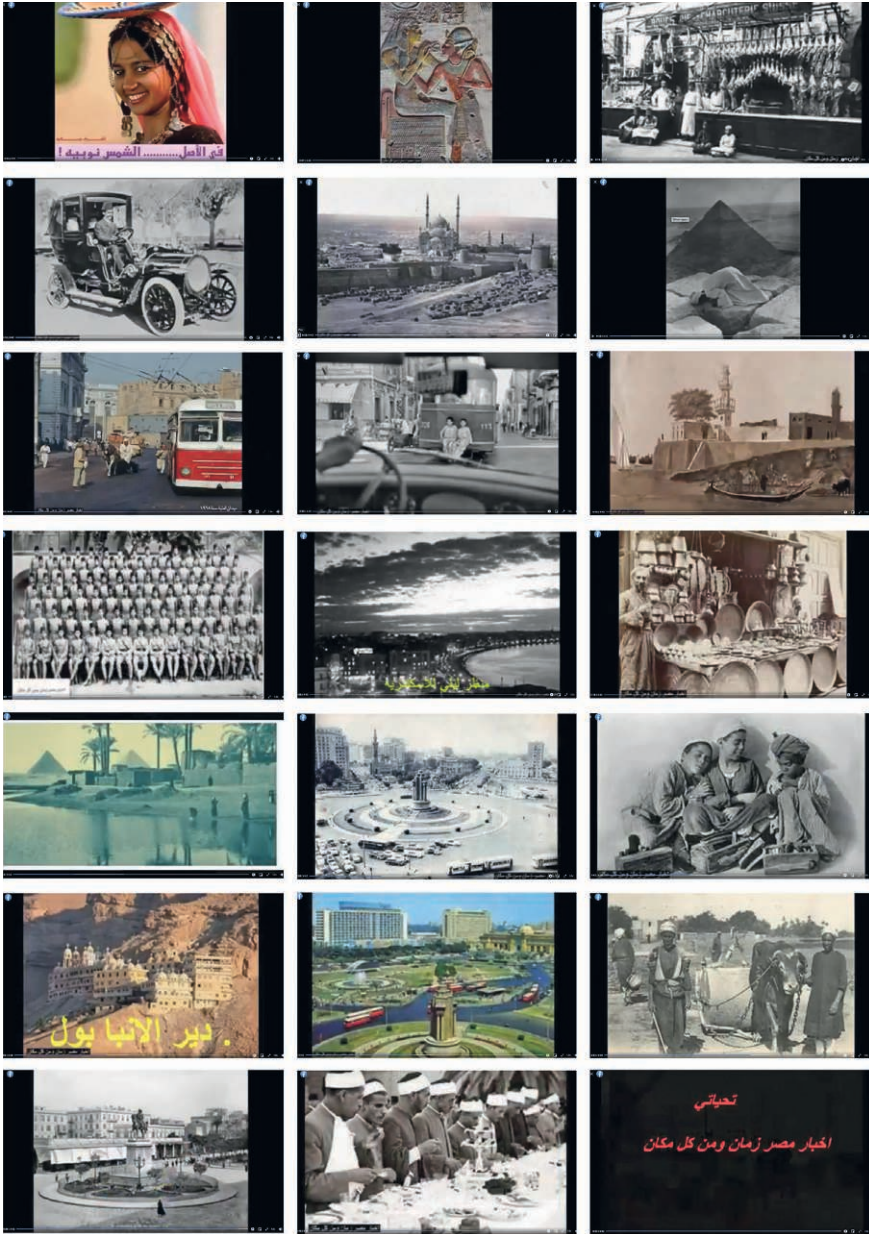


Figure 2. Stills from popular video in Suwar-Zamân.

There was an established familiarity among the active members of the group. Obituaries were often published for deceased members. Greetings and congratulations for career accomplishments, the marriage of children, or the birth of grandchildren also appeared occasionally on the discussion wall.

Thus, publicly, the discourse of *al-zaman al-gamîl* in this group is co-produced between three main actors. First, the affordances of the platform that enables members to interact and allows administrators to shape the narrative. Second, the images of the past that are extracted from their earlier context and given another meaning. Third, and most importantly, the privately held individual interpretations of the past that once expressed publicly becomes part of the public discourse itself.

In August 2019, during communications with the administrators of the group *Suwar-Zamân* one of them mistakenly posted our private correspondence to the main page of the group, publicly revealing my identity to their 195,000 followers. In a frenzied panic about the unknown researcher amongst them, the members of the group showered me with questions about my own identity³. After explaining my research interests and responding to their skeptical questions about my institutional affiliation, some expressed their willingness to be part of the research. One of these members replied to the public post: “asking us about our opinions here [over the Facebook group] is not scientific. For us to speak freely, you need to make us a questionnaire (*istibyân*).” Indeed, questionnaires are not the conventional method for conducting online ethnographies. But responding to the desire of my interlocutors to have a “more private” and “structured” means of communication granted me access to their private worlds – or, in Eliasoph’s words (1998), to their “backstage,” where their political visions of the past were articulated⁴. The questionnaire enabled the thirty-two group members to express themselves outside the confines of the group regulations and away from their Facebook personas. As such, I deal with the production of the questionnaire and the answers it yielded as part of the ethnographic endeavor itself. The questionnaire in this article is similar to Facebook chats, or email correspondences; it is medium of eliciting texts from online interlocutors⁵.

3 To conduct this research, I used my own personal Facebook profile that has been active since 2007, showing a clear image of myself and my professional affiliation. Although I could have established a separate “research account,” I concluded that my digital history would enable me to establish trust with my online interlocutors, who cared to feel that the person approaching them is a “real person.”

4 Eliasoph adopts the distinction between the “backstage” and the “frontstage” from the sociologist Erving Goffman (1956).

5 Since I did not have full control over the sample of respondents, I do not apply the normative statistical modeling analysis that is applied to questionnaires. Furthermore, it would be hard to argue that the respondents were representative of all members of the group, yet, the fact that they volunteered to answer it indicates that they were eager to be seen as representative of its goals and ideals.

The questionnaire was comprised of open-ended questions about the participants' demographics, their interpretation of *al-zaman al-gamîl* (what is beautiful about it, to what was it lost, and how), their relationship with the medium (when and why did they join Facebook and the other nostalgic groups they follow). The majority of volunteers who cared to respond were males (n=20) above 50 years old, against a minority of women (n=12) of the same age group. None of them claimed to be a decedent of an aristocratic family or even a rich one. They proudly defined themselves as "the middle-class" of Egypt. They all had white-collar jobs. They were governmental employees, high school teachers, accountants, engineers, doctors, and owners of small businesses. Now mostly retired, they reported spending at least three hours a day on Facebook surfing pages and groups akin to *Suwar-Zamân*. The responses they generated might seem to an avid observer of Egyptian popular cultures to be part of the common sense of ordinary citizens who belong to different strata of the conservative middle-class. Nonetheless, my goal here is to scrutinize these common assumptions and unpack the political ideologies and worldviews behind them.

In the following sections, I present an analysis of the texts solicited via the questionnaire. I coded them with: "beauty/ugly," "city/countryside," "formal/informal," "mourning/longing," "belonging," "morality," "order," "good life," "state/national project." I later grouped these codes under three main categories that speak to the aesthetics of the past, its moral and societal frameworks, and the place of the nation-state within the discourse of *al-zaman al-gamîl*.

(Be)Longing to/for "better" images

In their descriptions of *al-zaman al-gamîl*, the respondents emphasized a sensational, essentialist dichotomy between the "beautiful," "meaningful," and "kinder" past and the "alienating ugly" present. One respondent, R-17, a thirty-eight-year-old accountant from Aswan, suggested that the present be called *al-zaman al-mafqûd* (the lost time). He wrote, "in spite of all the technology, we remained underdeveloped, on an endless downward spiral of failures." Thus, it is a "lost time" as "we" [the Egyptians] did not advance in it. Most of the respondents named the present "*zaman al-maskh*" (the time of freaks), after the cry of actor Adel Imam in the film *The Yacoubian Building* (2006). In an iconic scene, set in the streets of Khedival Cairo in front of the statue of the leading nationalist entrepreneur Talaat Harb, Zaki El-Dessouki, the elegant elderly aristocrat played by Imam, raves about the lost glory of Egypt, whose capital was once "better than Paris"; its streets were cleaner, its architecture was more beautiful, and its people were elegant. He laments what Volait (2013) considered a nostalgia to the aesthetics of the *belle époque*. El-Dessouki and the online members of *Suwar-Zamân* consider the present to be a "freak of all sorts", a mutant creature that took over their lives and their cities.

As Iskandar Abdalla argues, mass-mediated images are often the source informing the Egyptians imaginaries of *al-zaman al-gamîl* (Abdalla, n.d.). The respondents longed for the “proper” characters in the movies of the 1950s-1960s and the television series of the 1970s-1990s that “provided the people with idols to look up to.” To express what they meant by *al-zaman al-gamîl*, they referred to the “respectability,” “refinement,” and “sophisticated manners” presented in movies such as *al-Aydî al-nâ’ima* (Soft Hands, 1964) and television series such as *Layâlî al-Hilmiyya* (al-Hilmiyya nights, 1987-1995). These media productions belonged to a realist developmentalist genre that, according to Abu-Lughod (2005), was used as a pedagogical tool to create the modern Egyptian subject. Respondents agreed that art should be “meaningful and purposeful” in the sense that it should provide spectators with “moral messages” and “elevate their tastes and senses.” To contrast the past and the present, they stressed the differences between the films of “*zamân*” and the contemporary films of “*al-‘ashwâ’iyyât*,” (which literally translates to “informalities,” but often refers to urban slums). Unlike the “proper” films of the past, the plots of “slum films” (*aflâm al-‘ashwâ’iyyât*) are based on gangster wars and vigilante stories that “[propagate] immorality and vulgarity.”

A scorn for “informality” overshadowed the respondents’ descriptions of the present, which was constantly equated with “ugliness” and “unruliness.” R-12, a retired medical doctor from Alexandria, expressed his disenchantment with the “encroachment of ugliness (*zahf al-qubh*) into our cities.” He referred to the continuous demolition of heritage buildings and the rapid construction of “monstrous ugly towers blocking the sun.” R-12 framed this encroachment as an endangering force that threatens the erosion of the “authentic character of Egypt,” arguing that “those who grow up amongst ugliness cannot produce beauty.” However, “informality” was not only conceived of as an aesthetic of ugliness, but also as evidence of systematic failure, an incompetence that plagues “state-bureaucracy,” “economics,” and “public morals.” R-9, a retired engineer, wrote: “informality is everywhere, starting from the manners of individuals to the way our cities and economics are organized and managed [...] we live in the times of urbanization (*tamaddun*) without any real civilization (*tahaddur*).”

“Order” (*al-nizâm*), is thus one of the main aesthetics of *al-zaman al-gamîl*; through it, boundaries and categories become more intelligible. The respondents stressed the differences between the “ordered urban city” and the “countryside.” Both were conceived of as loci of the ethics and morals of the past. The countryside (*al-rîf*) was often discussed as a monolithic site of “Egyptian authenticity” where the values of “good-neighborliness and gregariousness” were still meaningful. R-7, a salesman in his fifties from Sharqiya mentioned that “*al-zaman al-gamîl* can be best seen in the countryside. People there are still kind-hearted, selfless, capable of fostering familial ties.” On the other hand, urban cities were described by two different yet complementary forms: the “popular neighborhoods” (*al-manâtiq al-sha’abiyya*) and the “refined neighborhoods” (*al-manâtiq al-râqiya*). Both were presented as

equally representative of *al-zaman al-gamîl*. Popular neighborhoods were described as an extension of the countryside, as sites of social solidarity and kinship, while the “refined neighborhoods” were perceived as places of lost wealth and glamour. R-13, a housewife from Cairo, described “cycling in the streets of Maadi freely without experiencing sexual harassment.” These districts were seen as middle-class contact zones where people from different religions and nationalities existed with a “civil code of conduct.”

Accordingly, the respondents’ interpretations of *al-zaman al-gamîl* do not fit comfortably into the elitist nostalgia for the “cosmopolitan era” (Hanley 2008) nor the “aesthetics of the belle époque” (Volait 2013) and not even into the “neoliberal nostalgia” that appeared in Mubarak’s late years to promote social and political (neo)liberalism and recasting “the whole post-independence (1952) era as one of failures and false starts” (Ryzova 2015, 55). Though their interpretations had features similar to these types of nostalgia, they conveyed a different essence. Their definitions of *al-zaman al-gamîl* spoke to basic human rights and forms of dignity that the respondents had been stripped of. They spoke to the ideal of the “good life.” *Al-zaman al-gamîl* was “the time in which people could afford a midday nap,” where “older people could find a place on the tram.” They mourned “affordable family picnics” and “family visits after work.” Their *zamân* was the time when individuals had more control over their lives and daily schedules and enjoyed a space to exist in within their cities. As such, at the heart of this longing for *al-zaman al-gamîl* are sentiments of helplessness and suffocation from the pressures of the present.

Features of a stable society

One of the most conspicuous themes among proponents of *al-zaman al-gamîl* was their fixation on categorizing social life. To them, *al-zaman al-gamîl* represented a “stable society” with clear features and unblurred characteristics.

R-16, an active participant in Suwar-Zamân who spends four hours daily engaging with similar Facebook groups, stressed that clear class stratification was the marker of the ordered past and a guarantee for the “stability” of its society.

Al-zaman al-gamîl is the period from the 1930s to the 1990s that was marked by psychological calmness (*al-hudû’ al-nafsî*), tolerance, and social compassion between social classes, simply because these classes were clearly demarcated by unblurred boundaries. There were three main categories:

1. The high class (*al-tabaqa al-’uliyâ*), including the rulers, powerful statesmen, and business owners
2. The middle-class (*al-tabaqa al-wustâ*): small employees and professionals
3. The poor: daily wagers, peasants, and seasonal workers

In this system (*al-nizâm*), the rich helped the poor with compassion without arrogance or disdain. The poor served the rich with love and faithfulness without considering class, material, or religious differences. The poor lived in

co-existence and co-operation, sharing each other's happiness and misery. All social classes felt safe, secure, and psychologically calm. When we lost this categorization system, we lost al-zaman al-gamîl. Nowadays, these classes are fragmented.

The histories of working-class struggles definitely inform us that R-16's imaginary is far from realistic; Egypt has witnessed numerous mobilizations for social justice and popular movements against capitalist, colonialist, and neoliberal powers. However, I am more interested here in examining the underpinnings of this imaginary than in negotiating its facticity, mainly because his assumption that a class hierarchy can be devoid of exploitation and resistance is widespread amongst the members of these online communities. R-16 defined himself as "a simple citizen of modest origins." After his retirement, he became a freelance typist in several print shops around his popular Cairene neighborhood *al-Marg al-Gharbiyya*. His life follows a downward social mobility from stable – yet poorly paid – government employee to daily wager. So why would he long for a social hierarchy that might not be in his favor? Could this be interpreted as a crisis of imagination, in which citizens fail to imagine alternative worlds? Or is it a realistic attempt to reform or enhance the status quo?

The complexities of R-16's imaginary of the society of *al-zaman al-gamîl* lie in the ultimatums it presents. On the one hand, it assumes that a class-based society is inevitable. In fact, it is the main prerequisite for "safety and social stability." It groups the "poor" (*al-fuqarâ'*) as one monolithic entity that should accommodate one another, and should serve the rich without any reservations. On the other, it presents the rich as compassionate and responsible power holders who selflessly help the less fortunate. Thus the ugliness of the present emanates from the disturbance of this delicate balance and the resulting emergence of new unidentifiable social groups. In this imaginary, a specific social contract prevails: one that is based on accepting one's own position in a capitalist – yet relatively merciful – world. In classical Durkheimian terms, R-16's described a modern society, one that is held together through division of labor and the interdependence between its members. Through "organic solidarity" the different members of a society with different social and economic and activities roles manage to hold their society together, like the organs of the same living body that are cohesively interdependent (Durkheim 1933). Yet, such a reading of R-16's description risks erasing the specific cultural frameworks that inform this ideology. R-16's view on the ideal society is widely shared among other respondents and the online proponents of *al-zaman al-gamîl* who often stress values like endurance (*al-tahamul*), and satisfaction (*al-ridâ*), contentment (*al-qanâ'a*) as the main qualities of the past authentic society. These values are usually publicly recalled within the group if ever a member refers to historical protests that happened in Egypt or any of its neighboring countries. They are recalled to abort any discussion about political

mobilization and to frame protestors as “greedy,” “selfish,” and “unrealistic” subjects who oppose the “law and order” of a society.

R-16 is neither a delusional nor a self-hating working-class subject as the nostalgia skeptics of *al-zaman al-gamîl* would argue. His insistence on this order that does not really serve him emanates from his own interpretation of the nation’s history. He later argued that we lost *al-zaman al-gamîl* because we have indulged in “negative exported ideas that do not fit our own society [...] such as socialism and the current blind capitalism that has done nothing but aggravate class-envy (*al-hiqd al-tabaqî*) and cause it to fester.” In his personal view, none of Egypt’s modern political projects worked – neither the Nasserist socialist dream nor the capitalist or contemporary neoliberalist projects, mainly because they are “exported ideas” or “mere theories” as he defined them later. R-16 could be seen as an example of contemporary Egyptian conservative thought. Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy defines conservatism as a political ideology and a social attitude that is “skeptical of abstract reasoning in politics, and that appeals instead to living tradition, allowing for the possibility of limited political reform” (Hamilton 2020). Conservatism exhibits the standpoint of paternalism and authority. It is about upholding social order and traditional social hierarchies, rejecting any attempts to reconstruct society based on abstract principles (Ibid). Tradition is the anchor of conservatism that is immune to reasoned critique, as conservatives perceive intellectuals to be “arrogant and dangerous” (Kekes 1997, 365).

To other respondents, the ideal world of *al-zaman al-gamîl* pivoted around the presence of a strong middle-class. To R-2, a female translator from Alexandria, “it is the time when the middle-class was in control of shaping the identity of the society and its core notions.” This tendency to frame the middle-class as the main representative of the nation is not new to the Egyptian context. Schielke (2015) demonstrated how middle-classness became a site of a normality shaping people’s aspirations. In this imaginary, the middle-class is defined by the “nuclear family” (*al-usra al-saghîra*) in which strict and conservative gender norms are maintained. R-2 further explained her take on the family of *al-zaman al-gamîl*: “The lines were clear, a man was a man, a woman was a woman, and everyone knew their place. Everyone in the family showed dedication and endurance to maintain its values and its unity.” Another respondent, R-21, a retired high school teacher from Alexandria, defined *al-zaman al-gamîl* as the 1960s–1970s when “the notion of the small family, the extended family, and the nation were still meaningful.” The nuclear family then is imagined as part and parcel of a bigger frame of kinship and belonging that extends to the nation-state.

The biggest danger faced by the “purity of *al-zaman al-gamîl*” were foreign ideas of “freedom.” The respondents were preoccupied with the “dominance of Western thought” that have crept over young Egyptians and the “obsession with personal freedoms that have threatened the stability of the society.” Some even mentioned that “we lost everything beautiful

under the guise of freedoms.” Most of the respondents did not clarify what type of freedom they perceived to be dangerous to society; they consistently framed “freedom” as a Western foreign concept that is associated with “chaos,” “messiness,” and “the current moral collapse.” R-31, a former judge in his late 50s, from Cairo, argued:

People have confused freedoms with manners. They have either understood freedom wrongly, or understood “the wrong” as freedom. In both scenarios, the result is a mess (*fawdâ*). [...] young men and women have adopted weird and foreign lifestyles, and can no longer be controlled by their parents.

For the respondents, freedom is dangerous as it threatens patriarchal power, it threatens their ability to control their children which endangers the moral framework of the whole society. Their fixation on the “dangers of freedoms” comes in the context of a wider moral panic that calls upon the state to actively take responsibility for safeguarding “family values.”⁶ These interpretations of a “stable hierarchal society” are embedded within a conservative worldview which adopts an apolitical and moralistic language.

Where is the State?

The private negotiations of *al-zaman al-gamîl* allowed its proponents to reinterpret some of the meanings of the “state” (*al-dawla*), the “government” (*al-hukûma*), and the “rulers” (*al-hukkâm*). To most of them, the state was responsible for the loss of the good old days because of its corruption, its negligence, or the incompetence of its leaders. According to R-17, who has previously dubbed the present “the lost times” (*al-zaman al-mafqûd*), *al-zaman al-gamîl* was lost for “the political and the economic deterioration of the state”. The rise of poverty levels and the lack of the basic state-subsidies that maintained the dignity of ordinary citizens led individuals to become “self-absorbed, forgetting their duties towards the societies they live in.”

Some considered the “rulers” to be extensions of the earlier colonial powers. R-19, a retired marine-engineer from Suez, wrote:

Poverty, ignorance, and illness. This is a triangle of horror that the colonizers implanted in our nation, and unfortunately our leaders have also built on it. They have kept us trapped within this triangle to maintain control over our resources and keep us subjugated.

6 Egyptian ideological and repressive state-apparatuses have a long history of ostracizing and prosecuting individuals on charges of “violating societal morals.” See for example, the criminalization of TikTok female influencers accused of “threatening family values” (Ahmed 2020).

At the same time, most of the respondents put their hopes in the “state” to restore the glory of *al-zaman al-gamîl*. They argued that regaining the good life requires a “political and popular will” as “the state is the only actor that could push for change, restore morality and provide dignity for everyone,” as R-17 wrote. However, other respondents emphasized that change comes from individual intentions first and then the state will inevitably change. R-31, a retired judge from Cairo, asserted that the only ways out of the “swamp of the present are going back to ethics and tradition first, and respecting the law and state institutions second”. For R-4, an accountant from Cairo, and others, the state had to come up with a “serious reformation project” (*mashrû‘ islâhî haqîqî*).

“Al-zaman al-gamîl is the time in which the nation and the citizens were taken care of; when the state had a strong foundation. Al-zaman al-gamîl starts with Mohamed Ali Pasha [...]. He brought experts from all over the modern world to build aesthetic monuments (al-surûh al-gamâliyya) like al-Refaai Mosque and the Opera House [...] making people more appreciative of arts and aesthetics. The state played a major role in establishing a particular aesthetic, that fostered the emergence of intellectuals who nourished Egyptian cultural life [...] until the 1960s, when the State stopped producing and reverted to consuming what was already there. Al-zaman al-gamîl ended when leaders lacked the will to preserve the appearances of the state (mazâhir al-dawla). They only had the will to remain in power.”

As such, the ideal nation-state is the strong state that provides care and dignity for its citizens. It is also aware of its own civilizing mission, capable of establishing monuments for both religious traditional institutions and the modern ones alike. The ideal state should be aware of its role in refining tastes and producing purposeful aesthetics. In return, the ideal citizen is the one who is receptive to the state’s efforts. Intelligentsia play a leading role in this world-order. They are the main “producers” of cultural life. This cycle of cultural production needs to continue; otherwise, *al-zaman al-gamîl* is lost. To R-4 and others, the fate of the nation is only in the hands of the government and its leaders, who symbolize the state. This is a feature that differentiates Egyptian conservative ideology from other conservative ideologies in the UK and the USA for example, where conservatives conceive of the government and its elites as a danger to their personal freedoms (Grossberg 1993). Popular Egyptian conservatism has a *statist developmentalist tone*, where the state is imagined to be the guardian of proper aesthetics, “family values” and the protector from “dangerous” freedoms.

Finally, it is crucial to point out that the respondents of this questionnaire have centered the tension between two approaches to make sense of the present demise of the nation that continues to haunt the public discourse in Egypt. These two approaches are neither contradictory nor incompatible. The first approach relates the demise of the nation to the individuals and their behaviors. The second approach interprets this as the result of corrupt leadership. To

a significant number of the respondents, this demise occurred through both ways from the bottom-up and from the top-bottom. The fact that the members of this group are forbidden from “talking politics” with one another contributes to festering this unsettled tension, leaving the question of “how did we lose *al-zaman al-gamîl*” unanswered.

CONCLUSION: A GOOD LIFE WAS POSSIBLE

This article outlined how within the depoliticized public life in post-2013 Egypt, the “apolitical” nostalgic discourse of *al-zaman al-gamîl* is informed by a conservative middle-class imaginary that longs for a strong state, a well-defined social hierarchy, and an aesthetic of purity, beauty, and order. This conservative imaginary of the past is skeptical of abstract reasoning and adheres to traditional, authoritative, patriarchal frameworks. It seeks to establish clear dichotomies between what is “authentically Egyptian”, and what is “foreign”; what is “purposeful” and what is “dangerous”. In the absence of a politicized public sphere where different ideas about the past and present could be discussed, the online proponents of *al-zaman al-gamîl* continue to recycle nationalist clichés that do not challenge the state representations of the nation and nationalism.

To this end, the article proposed thinking of nostalgia: neither solely as a means of escaping a difficult present nor as a form of resistance, but rather as a site of negotiating ideal social imaginaries. *Al-zaman al-gamîl* is then a discourse in which the concept of the ideal citizen, city, and nation-state are deliberated. It is a microcosm of an ideal world. This version of *al-zaman al-gamîl* differs from earlier forms of nostalgia for the elitist cosmopolitan era that are intertwined with neo-liberal nostalgia for colonial times. This version does not solely focus on the wealth and glamour of the past; it is more attuned to the ideal of the “good, dignified life.” On a daily basis, the members of *Suwar-Zamân* and other nostalgic Facebook communities insist that a better life existed, and perhaps could still exist. Yet, the inability to publicly discuss politics leaves these individual interpretations of *al-zaman al-gamîl* largely unchallenged.

Finally, the discourse of *al-zaman al-gamîl* is not only representative of the past, it is also constitutive of the contemporary moment. To its proponents, *al-zaman al-gamîl* presents a standard against which the social, political, and economic qualities of present-day Egypt are measured; it is a point of reference to which the present and the future are compared.

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