Sweet nationalism in bitter days: a commercial representation of Zionism

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ABSTRACT. This article identifies several theoretical approaches to the role of culture in the construction of national identity. Embedded in the presently emerging approach, which emphasises the relations between popular culture/consumerism and national identity, this study focuses on a specific consumer good manufactured in Israel in the early 2000s, the height of the second Palestinian *Intifada* (uprising): small sugar packets bearing portraits of the patriarchs of Zionism. The analysis of this product, employing semiotic analysis, interviews and focus groups, locates it in the five 'moments' of du Gay's 'circuit of culture' (i.e. identity, representation, production, consumption and regulation). Three main general arguments were stated, empirically examined and largely sustained: (1) Consumer goods are used not only for constructing national identity but also as a means for 'healing' it; (2) in their 'healing' capacity, representations of nationalism on consumer goods do not add new elements to representations offered by the 'high' official version of nationalism but replicate them in a simplified way; (3) while trivialising the insights and concepts that originated in 'high' culture, consumer goods expose the prejudices, stereotypes and rules of inclusion and exclusion that in 'high' culture are often hidden in a sophisticated manner.

KEYWORDS: circuit of culture, consumerism, national identity, popular culture products, representation, Zionism.

Introduction: nationalism and its popular cultural and everyday life representations

Until the end of the twentieth century the discussion of nationalism – the major analytical concept of contemporary political sociology – did not consider popular culture or everyday life practices as a significant arena for examination (e.g. Edensor 2002: 1–2; Edensor 2006: 528; Fox and Miller-Idriss 2008: Introduction). At the time, the moguls of nationalism studies focused exclusively on 'high', 'official' and 'traditional' cultural products as the means of representing and cultivating nationalism. Thus, Gellner (1983)

underscored the national significance of 'high' cultures as opposed to the majority, i.e. 'low' cultures, which he characterised as 'wild', local, spontaneous and unreflexive. Similarly, Hobsbawm stressed the role of the elites in the 'invention' of the nation, albeit he also recognised the role of the 'assumptions, hopes, needs, longings, and the interests of the ordinary people' (Hobsbawm 1991: 10). Regarding this first theoretical approach, Smith (1991) seems to be the closest to acknowledging popular culture and everyday life practices as a component of nationalism, but he still underscored its 'official' and 'historical' manifestations. Even Anderson (1991) in his discussion of the term 'imagined community', claimed that languages and the print media, especially the novel and the newspaper, were the primary carriers of nationalism, because 'these forms provided the technical means for 're-presenting' the kind of imagined community that is the nation' (Anderson 1991: 25).

This widespread downplaying of the 'mundane' by both theories of nationalism that are more 'essentialist' and those that underscore its 'social construction' aspect is reflected in the numerous studies carried out in various countries on textbooks used in the educational system. It is argued that these textbooks reflect the representation of nationalism as perceived by the educational establishment, operating as the state's 'executive arm' in educational affairs (Hofman 2007; LaSpina 2003; Paxton 1999).

The second theoretical approach to nationalism went one step further in the direction of acknowledging the role of popular culture and its manifestations in everyday life in the construction of national identity. Their main contribution was that quotidian, constantly repeated representations of the nation build a sense of national solidarity in the citizenry. The examples they gave included sports events, graphic designs on coins and bills, the national flag hanging unnoticed on public buildings, as well as in used cars agencies. In this context, Michael Billig (1995) coined the term 'banal nationalism'. According to Billig, banal nationalism refers to ideological habits: 'Daily, the nation is indicated, or 'flagged', in the lives of its citizenry. . . . In so many little ways, the citizenry are daily reminded of their national place in a world of nations. However, this reminder is so familiar, so continual, that it is not consciously registered as reminding' (Billig 1995: 6, 8). A second example of this second approach's understanding of nationalism can be found in the works of Edensor, who stated that 'national identity is grounded in the everyday, in the mundane details of social interaction, habits, routines and practical knowledge' (2002: 17).

The third theoretical approach that studied the process of national identity construction introduced the 'bottom-up' perspective by scrutinising the economic market and the daily acts of consumption. Thus Fox and Idriss state that 'Ordinary people are not simply uncritical consumers of the nation; they are simultaneously its creative producers through every day acts of consumption' (2008). Caldwell, who studied food consumption in Moscow in the 1990s as a manifestation of national identity, interprets the Russians' food consumption as a means of differentiating between their national 'us' and the 'others': 'The creation of a nationalist cuisine represents an opportunity to

reclaim a set of standards and practices that defines them as Russians and marks their unique cultural experiences' (Caldwell 2002: 315). Hence, nationalism can and should be expanded in the context of popular culture to everyday consumer goods, in the same way as goods are 'communicators, not just utilities' (Featherstone 1987: 57) in the age of consumerism. This view goes hand in hand with the ever-increasing contemporary understanding that 'the boundaries between the culture and economics are collapsing' (Warde 2002: 185).

As we will show, some of these everyday products are intriguing displays of nationalism that can help us decode important elements of nationalism, particularly its social construction. But we wish to go one step further: Our first argument is that popular goods are not only used for national construction but can also be used as a means for national 'healing' or 'rehabilitation'. This is often achieved by juxtaposing the nation's dismal present state of affairs with the days of yesteryear; nations look back at a mythical golden age as exemplars of what they may achieve in the future (e.g. Bhabha 1990).

Secondly, as most studies belonging to the above-mentioned third approach to nationalism indicate, consumers are active 'producers' of their national identity by interpreting, reinterpreting, and negotiating the meaning of various cultural artifacts. However, in their 'healing' capacity, representations of nationalism as they appear on consumer goods will not be 'original', i.e. they will not add new elements to representations offered by the 'high' official version of nationalism, but rather replicate and at times even trivialise them. This is due to the fact that when a nation is immersed in a state of crisis that calls for healing, it makes perfect sense for the producers of popular culture goods not to be 'original' but to use the well-known and highly inculcated verbal, visual and symbolic expressions of nationalism already produced and disseminated by the 'high' culture agents.

Thirdly and paradoxically, as will be shown later, when the display of nationalism on consumer goods replicates or trivialises insights and concepts that originated in 'high' culture, they also present its fundamental and unadorned elements. Thus, the prejudices, stereotypes and rules of inclusion and exclusion that are often disguised in heavy layers of jargon or hidden by sophisticated wording in 'high' culture products, are revealed in consumer goods.

Dispensable nationalism – a case study

The early 2000s was a difficult period for the Israeli-Jewish public – the second Palestinian *intifada* (uprising) was at its peak, and several unyielding social, economic and political conflicts developed internally, a brutal combination which put the country under tremendous pressure. Concomitantly, a series of small, disposable sugar packets appeared on the shelves of supermarkets in central Israel (metropolitan Tel Aviv), and in some cafés in the same area, which is the urban, cultural, secular, and financial center of Israel. Whereas

such sugar packets usually carry the logo of different brands of coffee, in this case one side of the packet showed a picture of one of the founding fathers of Zionism (the revival movement of the Jewish people that emerged in late nineteenth century Europe), and the other side depicted a short biographical text. The series, entitled 'Patriarchs of Zionism', comprised thirty-four figures.

Coupling a disposable consumer product such as sugar with individuals of prominent national stature aroused our curiosity and prompted us to examine the issue. The theoretical model that we chose in order to explain this distinctive product (since we believe it combines all relevant components of our case study) is the 'circuit of culture' model (du Gay, Hall, Janes, Mackay and Negos 1997). This model was found most helpful for our purpose because it combines in a highly articulated manner the three key concepts of our study, i.e. culture, consumption and national identity. du Gay's model's main argument is that it is insufficient to deal with the mere production of cultural artifacts, in our case – the sugar packets. Instead the 'biography' of such artifacts should be based on the articulation of a number of distinct processes whose interaction can and does lead to variable and contingent outcomes (*ibid.*: 3). du Gay's model includes five 'moments': (a) *Representation* (the message and the question relating to who is represented and how); (b) *Production* (the producer's motives); (c) *Consumption* (the reception of the product and the target audience); (d) *Identity* (what is created and recreated through different representations, extending beyond individual and group identity into a larger collective identity); (e) *Regulation* (in fact, in a free market context deregulation, manifested by the ability of individuals to display their own preferences in the public sphere). It is noteworthy that according to this model each moment of the circuit is taken up and reappears in the next one. Thus, representation is an integral element in the next moment – production, and production in turn affects the consumption process, and consumption affects the way in which identities are constructed or regulated (*ibid.*: 4). Moreover, the order of the different moments of the circuit is neither unchanging nor linear – representation does not necessarily come first or production second, nor does the direction of influence necessarily go in a specific and fixed path.

Representation, identity and (de)regulation: who is 'in' and who is 'out'?

Representation is an 'essential part of the process by which meaning is produced and exchanged between members of a culture. It [involves] the use of language, of signs and images which stand for, or represent things' (Hall 1997: 15). This culture 'moment' has two aspects: (a) Quantitative: Who is represented (and who is not), and (b) Qualitative: How that individual is represented (Greenberg, Mastro and Brand 1994; Gross 1998; Tuchman 1978). In general, the hegemonic group in a society is the main producer of 'high' culture and in this capacity often tries to symbolically annihilate 'other' societal groups that propose an alternative narrative concerning collective key issues, such as the founding and the founders of the nation. Often only those

truths that the hegemonic group wishes to highlight will be reflected in the choice of those entitled to representation. The choice of a 'founding father' or a nation patriarch is usually decided upon by the state's official agencies. Thus, the national story/identity is formulated with the help of bureaucratic commemoration mechanisms. For example, the Bank of Israel decides whose image will be printed on which bill (Mishory 2000). Municipalities decide after whom to name roads, streets, university campuses, hospitals and public parks, and committees nominated by the establishment determine who is entitled to a memorial and the memorial's venue (e.g. Pintchevski and Torgovnik 2002). The 'high' culture national story is also replicated in the textbooks to which pupils are exposed throughout their studies in the education system. Clearly, these 'texts' replicate the narrative of the hegemonic groups.

When a commercial manufacturer selects the list of 'founding fathers', the choice does not depend on official decisions or priorities; a free market is by its nature only loosely regulated by official agencies. Thus, the question arises: which narrative did the manufacturer of sugar packets decide to present and why?

Assumption 1: On the face of it, commercial companies are free of official dictates, the manufacturer is not restricted to the mainstream narrative, and thus can propose alternatives. However, we also assume that in the interest of making a profit, and particularly against the background of the national identity crisis and the external violent conflict Israel was experiencing in the early 2000s, wearing the hat of the nation's 'healer', the manufacturer followed the more 'communicative' hegemonic selection, and – despite the fact that he/she was free to do so – avoided the selection of controversial individuals; this is a clear-cut example of 'self-imposed' regulation of representation.

As mentioned earlier, while the quantitative aspect of representation relates to the question of who is in and who is out, its qualitative aspect relates more to the reasons for inclusion or exclusion, or in other words, to the 'story' of each figure – what did he or she do in order to 'deserve' inclusion in the national 'pantheon'.

Assumption 2: We assume that in times of national crisis only those activities and actors which were directly related to building of the nation will qualify for representation. Hence, the texts about the individuals selected to be 'in' will focus on their accomplishments in developing national visions and future scenarios as well as settling the land and military activities in defense of the state.

Production: why and when?

'Production is an integral part of the company way of life that informs intra-organisational decisions and activities' (du Gay et al. 1997: 43). In terms of production, we asked why the manufacturer initially chose the motif of the founding fathers of Zionism to decorate the packets of sugar and the box in which they were packed. In other words, what motivated the manufacturer to choose a motif that is so unusual in the visual world of everyday consumer

goods, particularly as sugar – unlike pizza, sushi, kidney pie or gefilte fish – is not a specific 'national/ethnic' food?

Here we primarily addressed the *timing* of the product in both cultural and national terms. Regarding the cultural aspect, we asked whether a connection existed between the choice of the motif and style of the packets and the fact that the dominant style in the Israeli market in the early 2000s – when the product was launched – was 'retro'. During this period the market was flooded with copies of furniture, household goods, clothing, jewelry, and even packaged food products, mainly jams and baked goods, all in the style of the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries. This was an antithesis to industrial mass production which was considered to be of inferior quality compared to the high-quality artisan production of the past.

Assumption 3: Against the backdrop of the immense popularity of the retro style, the manufacturer's choice of the founding fathers of Zionism as the visual motif was also based on the 'vintage' quality of their pictorial images. Their portraits, like pictures of a wood-burning fireplace or a lace tablecloth and flower-decorated china, were designed to sell the product, as they also represented something antique, cosy, and non-controversial.

From a national point of view, the timing was more complex. As briefly explained earlier, on one level the 1990s and the early 2000s were characterised by the rapid erosion of national consensus. Disagreements related to foreign affairs and security issues, particularly in the context of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. Secondly, they related to the character of Israel as a Jewish and democratic state (e.g. Kimmerling 2001). This, in turn, heightened polarisation between secular and religious Jews and exacerbated disagreements between Zionists, post Zionists and anti Zionists. On another level the sugar packets appeared on the shelves in the late stages of the second Palestinian *intifada* (2004), at the height of a violent national struggle which exacted a heavy toll of casualties. However, while the Israeli–Palestinian confrontations were taking place, 'normal' life did not come to a halt as a matter of principle: Maintaining daily routine under fire was widely considered and praised as an indication of national vitality.

Assumption 4: In a period characterised by serious external physical threat (the *Intifada*) together with the disintegration of the common denominator within the Israeli-Jewish population, there was a need to reinforce unifying, 'healing' values by stressing widely acknowledged national symbols. The commercial choice of the founding fathers of Zionism as the visual motif on the packaging of a consumer product such as sugar was not accidental but rather based was on the manufacturer's reading of what would sell best.

Consumption and identity: who receives the message and how?

Consumption, in our case, is closely related to the classic economic definition: 'the purchase of a product and its exchange – value, or price. . . . Individuals consume in this way when they buy a piece of property or an object – such as

an antique – whose value is likely to increase over time' (du Gay et al. 1997: 86). However, as mentioned earlier, this case study also refers to the cultural construction of the term 'consumption' as it involves other connotations related to lifestyle or national identity: 'Consumption has to be recognized as an integral part of the same social system that accounts for the drive to work, itself part of the social need to relate to other people and have mediating materials for relating to them. Mediating materials are food, drinks, and hospitality of home to offer, flowers and clothes to signal shared rejoicing or mourning to share sorrow' (Douglas and Isherwood 1996: viii).

Matters of consumption are thus affected by one's sense of identity. While Sela-Sheffy maintains that 'the social construction of Israeli identity is often viewed too restrictedly as a straightforward political act' (Sela-Sheffy 2004: 479), we adopt a more commonplace view that Israelis' sense of identity is indeed deeply political (e.g. Ben-Rafael and Sharot 1991). The formation of an individual political identity is often explained by two distinct theoretical frameworks: the first places stronger emphasis on the specific age group's timing and context of political socialisation (e.g. Abramson 1976), whereas the second places stronger emphasis on the age of the individual (e.g. Torney-Purta 1995). Thus, according to the first theoretical framework the individual will carry throughout life the same political worldview shared by the relevant age cohort, while according to the second framework the individual's political views are prone to change together with the aging process.

Assumption 5: According to the first theoretical framework, if consumers were politically socialised in an era in which there was great respect for national 'sacred symbols', they are more likely to resent the use of such symbols, such as the portraits of the founding fathers of Zionism, for the sole purpose of creating a 'retro' atmosphere, and consider it sacrilegious. On the other hand, if consumers were socialised in an era in which reverence for national symbols was diminished, they will be less likely to oppose the use of symbols such as the patriarchs of Zionism on consumer goods, for example, the sugar packets, and enjoy the 'retro' ambience which the series projects.

Assumption 6: According to the second framework, it is assumed that the younger the age group, the greater the distance between its members and the historical figures and events. Therefore, we expect the product discussed here to 'resonate' less with them. Furthermore, as younger people tend to be less respectful of national symbols, we assumed that they would be less 'offended' by the use of the portraits of the patriarchs of Zionism as a means for promoting sales.

Methodology

The methodology used addressed all five moments of the circuit of culture. The following tools were used: content analysis, interviews, focus groups.

1. Representation/Identity

- Mapping the individuals chosen by the producer to appear on the packets according to relevant socio-demographic parameters such as period and area of activity, gender, ethnic origin, degree of religiosity.
- Analysis of the short texts printed on the packets with special attention to depiction of the individual's contribution to the Zionist project.

2. Production/Regulation

- Interview with the producer/graphic designer of the product.

3. Consumption/Identity

- In order to examine the age-related hypotheses, three focus groups were selected: students in their mid-twenties (mean age = twenty-four), individuals in their early fifties (mean age = fifty) and senior citizens in their mid-seventies (mean age = seventy-three). The mid-twenties group comprised undergraduate college students, the fifties group comprised academics and professionals, and the mid-seventies group comprised pensioners, all professionals with high school and academic education. Most of the participants in the three groups were middle class, secular and urban.
- In order to examine the degree of resemblance of the producer's 'logic' of selection of the patriarchs of Zionism and mainstream logic, each participant was first asked to compile a list of ten personae who, in his or her opinion, should be included in this category. It is worthy of note that at this initial stage the participants had *not yet been exposed to* the sugar packets, but were asked to compile their own lists. The participants were then presented with the list of figures on the sugar packets, *but were not yet exposed to the origin of this list*. In other words, at this stage they had no idea that the list reflected the selection on the sugar packet series. Each participant was asked to briefly write what s/he knew about the individual on the list. The participants were then presented with the sugar packets and asked an open question about the use of the pictures of the founding fathers to decorate an everyday, disposable consumer product such as a sugar packet.

Findings

Representation/identity

Who is in and who is out?
The mapping of the sugar packet individuals showed that the manufacturer's choice rendered a selection which was fully compatible with the figure of the ideal Zionist as it appeared in history textbooks.

- Political 'color': The selection was not politically 'neutral'; representation of the leaders of the Labor movement (Left-wing Zionism), the dominant political party in the prestate and the early years of the state (the 'golden era'), was considerably greater than that of the Revisionist (Right-wing Zionism) and the Liberal Zionist political camps.
- Gender: The thirty-four individuals in the series included only one woman – Henrietta Szold, who was involved in typically 'feminine' endeavors – childcare and health. Women involved in actual pioneering activities were excluded from the series, reflecting male dominance in the hegemonic Zionist ethos.
- Religion: Of the thirty-four individuals in the series, only two were Orthodox Jews. In both cases, the emphasis in the text on the back of the packet was more on the *non-religious* spheres of activity that distinguished these two patriarchs. The secular nature of classic Zionism is further represented through the choice of A. D. Gordon, who is described as 'the reviver of the idea of labor as a key concept in renewed Judaism in the Land of Israel . . .. He advocated physical labor which he viewed as the only way to obtain spiritual exaltation and redemption of man's existence.' As for Jewishness – only two of the patriarchs in the box were not Jewish: Balfour and Wingate, both included due to their significant contribution to the establishment of the State of Israel.
- Ethnic origin: All patriarchs in the series are of Ashkenazi (European) origin, the hegemonic socio-demographic group in the prestate and the early days of the state.
- Spheres of activity: The dominant motifs, often combined in one personality, are military defense activities (with nine of the thirty-four figures characterised by 'military undertakings') and politics (with fifteen of the thirty-four characterised by their political activities). Very few 'cultural' figures, all 'high' culture icons, are included in the series: Haim Nachman Bialik, Israel's national poet; Naftali Herz Imber, who wrote the national anthem, and philosopher Martin Buber. Like the school textbooks, the manufacturers also underrated the contribution of individuals in the economic, health or educational spheres to the Zionist enterprise. The interpretation of Zionism reflected in the series is therefore more a national-political movement and less a national-cultural one.

Timing: In terms of the period covered by the series, the thirty-four figures were mainly active *before* the establishment of the State of Israel (1948) and in the formative years (late 1940s and 1950s). This choice of the manufacturer was apparently designed to avoid antagonism based on contemporary political conflicts among prospective consumers as well as a kind of sentimental clinging to the nation's 'golden age'.

Visual elements: The graphic design of the portraits on the packets and box was in the style of old photographs (sepia, grainy brown). However, the uniform appearance of the pictures was obviously not authentic since the

original pictures were taken at different times and venues, by different photographers, using diverse techniques. The texts on the back of the packets were printed in an archaic, crowned font, but – as will be discussed later – the information itself was simple and up-to-date. The box's design included 'patriotic' elements such as a sepia photo of the Towers and Stockade type of settlement (*Homa Umigdal*, a collective settlement built as a stronghold to withstand Arab attacks during the British Mandate period in 1936–9) (Side A); and key figures in the history of the people and the State: Ben-Gurion, Zabotinsky, Ben-Yehuda, etc. (side B)

Verbal elements: The linguistic register of the texts on the back of the packets was standard – simple but not superior. The messages on the box itself were distinctly advertising/consumer-oriented: 'For hosting, travel, military and reserve duty [a patriotic element], and special events' (side A), or 'Compact, easy-to-use, ready-for-use, elegant, informative, educational' (side B), or 'In a pull-out drawer package' (side C).

The text on the packets is also interesting from the point of view of the information that the manufacturer chose to provide, aware of the fact that little space was available and the number of words was limited. The text portrays Zionism as harmonious, ignores ideological disagreements, and systematically deletes all traces of nonconformity. Thus, even the text pertaining to entirely political figures omitted their party affiliation, thereby raising their status from that of a politician to that of a statesman who belongs to 'the entire nation'. For example, the text about Ben-Gurion does not mention the fact that he was the leader of the major political party, Mapai. The Zionist dimension is also emphasised with respect to individuals who were not 'classical Zionists', such as the Jewish scientist Albert Einstein, a Nobel Prize laureate and one of the greatest scientists, of whom the text states, 'Active in realizing the goals of Zionism along with [Haim] Weizmann'.

The emphasis on military affairs is also evident in the short texts, even with respect to individuals who were not generally considered as having any military dimension. Thus, on the packet depicting the national poet Bialik, the editor decided to include the sentence: 'His poetry of fury and admonishment led to the establishment of Jewish self-defense'. The military aspect is also related to self-sacrifice – a very prominent motto in mainstream Zionism – someone who not only defends the country but also risks his/her life for the sake of the nation and the homeland.

In general, it may be said that the choice of those worthy of representation on the sugar packets was based on an antiquated perception of the national pantheon, before it was 'repopulated' following demands of groups that were initially excluded – women, the Orthodox, and *Mizrachim* (Israeli Jews of Middle Eastern origin). In this sense, we may say that the series reflects the mainstream reading of the history of Zionism, the chronological order and the 'heroes'. The manufacturer replicated the story and targeted the broadest and most superficial common denominator of Zionism while completely ignoring

contemporary Israeli critical schools of thought such as the feminist, post-colonial or *Mizrachi* discourse.

Production/regulation

In an interview with the graphic designer and producer of the product,[1] several interesting points emerge which shed light on the essence of quotidian nationalism. The designer noted that those involved in the production did not view the project as a 'national mission', but rather sought to fill a vacant consumer niche. The idea was to create a unique brand of an easily transportable package of sugar packets, after determining that no such product existed on the Israeli market. Lack of competition was also the reason underlying the pricing decision – the packets were far more expensive than the 1 kg sugar packets. The box was priced at $2.50 for 250 grams compared to eighty cents for a 1 kg sugar packet at the time. In other words, this was an 'up-market' product and, at least initially, its target audiences were the coffee shop clientele and people who could afford to pay more for a specially designed package for domestic use. Furthermore, according to Mr. Kook, the motive underlying the decision to choose the visual motif of the founding fathers of Zionism was purely commercial: it was designed so that the product on the shelf would catch the buyer's eye. Alternatives were also considered; for example, children's drawings. The idea was rejected because the product they wanted to sell was not directly relevant to such pictures. In contrast, packets used during reserve duty or on trips are well matched with the idea of 'love of country'. Hence it seemed appropriate to use a visual dimension which was also associated with love of country, particularly against the background of the prevalent sense of national identity crisis. This, in turn, led to the choice of the founding fathers. Still, the graphic designer noted that they wanted the image to speak in different 'voices' to different age groups – it would remind older people of formative experiences, and youngsters would relate it to the retro style trend. As will be discussed later, this strategy apparently achieved its aim.

It appears that the number of individuals was solely based on the practical consideration of how many packets could be produced from a single printer's sheet, and had nothing whatsoever to do with a fundamental decision as to the composition of the gallery of founding fathers. Moreover, each box was packed randomly, indicating that there was no attempt to give the buyer a full 'set' (similar to children's football player cards).

Consumption/identity

As mentioned earlier, each focus group was first asked to list ten people that each member deemed worthy of being included in the gallery of founding fathers. The group members knew nothing of the purpose of their assignment or its relation to the sugar packets. The most interesting finding was that the

lists were similar despite age and background differences. All groups first chose the founding father of Zionism – Theodor Herzl – and Israel's first Prime Minister, David Ben-Gurion, followed in order of frequency by the Zionist philosopher Ahad Haam, the leader of the Zionist Revisionist movement, Zeev Zabotinsky and the first President of Israel, the scientist Haim Weizmann.[2]

Despite the basic similarity between the lists, a difference was found between the groups in the degree of congruence between the names on the group members' lists and the series of patriarchs in the box. The lowest degree of congruence (thirty-seven per cent) was found, as assumed, in the youngest age group. Analysis of the individual lists of participants in this group indicates that some of them actually did not differentiate between key Zionist and Jewish figures. For example, they included biblical figures (e.g. King David), along with Israeli Prime Ministers such as Golda Meir, Yitzhak Rabin, Ariel Sharon, and Shimon Peres, and even Knesset members from the early 2000s. It is worthy of note that Yitzhak Rabin came only fourth in the list of patriarchs of Zionism of the young group. This is probably due to the fact that the members of this focus group were in their teens when Rabin was assassinated in 1995, and since then, various establishment bodies (including the Ministry of Education and the media) have made an effort to establish 'Rabin's heritage', which made him a father-figure for these young people but not so for the older groups.

Findings show fifty per cent congruence between the lists compiled by the oldest group members and the figures on the packets. Their lists included individuals whose historic distribution was smaller than that in the young group's list. However, they also included figures from Jewish history, mainly from the end of the nineteenth century to the 1930s, who were not undisputedly patriarchs of Zionism.[3]

The greatest congruence with the series (sixty-five per cent) was found in the middle-aged group. This accuracy may be the result of the similarity of the manufacturer's and this group's chronological and educational background, or their shared 'cultural capital'.

As mentioned earlier, in addition to creating their own lists, the participants in the three groups were also presented with the list of the principal Zionist figures (not knowing that they were taken from the sugar packet series) and were asked to write a sentence or two about each of them. The fifties group was most knowledgeable, and a significant number of members of the seventies group also identified the individuals on the list. Not surprisingly, the young people were the least knowledgeable. It should be noted that while the knowledge demonstrated by the fifties group was most accurate and extremely similar to the description on the packets, some of those in the seventies group demonstrated extensive historical knowledge. The youngest group's descriptions of the fields of activity of the figures on the list were often inaccurate, at times even far-fetched.

At this stage the participants were presented with the sugar boxes. Open discussions were conducted in the form of unstructured interviews. Our aim was to learn what the participants thought about the use of the patriarchs on a consumer product; who, in their opinion, was 'missing' from the box and should be added; what they thought was the reason underlying the decision to manufacture the packets; and whether they had seen them in cafés. All three focus groups – the students, the middle-aged and the senior citizens – were asked to relate to both the visual and textual aspects of the product. The general approach in all three groups was that the retro fashion trend was the key to understanding the product's design. As one of the middle-aged interviewees stated, 'The issue of sugar packets is well known, and I think that it is part of the effort exerted by Tel Aviv cafés to be "in the past" and not in the present. I know of several cafés that have such packets, not only with these pictures, but others from the early days of Tel Aviv. Some cafés even keep old books, in a condition which makes them difficult to read, on a small shelf in the corner of the coffee shop.'[4]

In general, the reaction of the twenties group was matter-of-fact, as was their criticism. This group – socialised in the 1990s, a period characterised by a relatively intense pluralist political discourse – commented far more than the oldest group – politically socialised in the early days of the state, a period characterised by strong national mobilisation and conformism – that the series lacked the representation of women, the Orthodox and *Mizrachim*. However, they praised the copywriter and thought the product was a good idea, acceptable, and in keeping with the spirit of the times. The prevailing opinion in this group was that 'the fact that everyone is talking about the sugar packets indicates that the idea worked and wasn't stupid'. Still, there were also those who thought that 'the pictures of the founding fathers on sugar packets was nothing more than a cheap commercial gimmick'. This group also felt comfortable with the texts: 'Short sentences are part of our culture.' There were even some who thought that from a pedagogic perspective the product should be available in their college cafeteria. The positive tone that emphasised the usefulness of the information prevailed over the cynical one: 'It has value; people will learn from it.' Some regarded it as a good opportunity to remember the individuals because 'this is our history'. They noted that 'the goal is only to remind people; it should be used with the younger generation, younger people', and that people of their generation could benefit from taking a look at the back of the packet: 'The idea is directed at the right age, 20-plus – people who took their matriculation exams some time ago and have already forgotten.' It is noteworthy that none of the participants in this age group questioned the narrative or the individuals included (even if, as mentioned earlier, some thought that 'others' could have been added to the list). It is suggested here that this is an intriguing example of the internalisation of the official, mainstream national narrative to the extent that it becomes almost self-evident.

The fifties group also noted that several 'others' were not proportionally represented or were not represented at all in the box. However, sensitivity to the lacunae was culture-dependent: women mentioned the absence of women, and *Mizrachim* mentioned the absence of *Mizrachim*. While in the youngest group cynical reading was only marginal, the fifties group thought that the product was essentially an advertising gimmick:

I see something cynical in this product. It bothers me. There are no limits anymore. It became normal to commercialise everything, including deeply cherished national symbols. This is in sharp contrast to the way I was educated, which was the right way of relating to such serious matters. I would not like to encounter these national leaders on tea bags. I wouldn't buy these packets and I wouldn't want to connect people, who I consider to be our founding fathers, with something you use and discard. Instead of a value scale, everything is reduced to products . . .. These are objectification processes, but it's terrible because it is done to dead people who cannot object to the use of their faces for such purposes. If [the packets] were in a museum as an installation or display, then it would become culturally challenging, a point of departure for a new reading of the national mainstream narrative.

Yet, there were also those in this group who thought that the product was a good way of developing a debate about Zionist history: 'I used the packets as a game with my family. The first time I encountered the packets was on a family vacation in a hotel. We began to collect them from all the tables in the lobby and then sat and checked how familiar we were with our history.'

The seventies age group was the most serious and displayed no cynicism about the issue or the product. One of the participants even 'came to the rescue' of the interviewers and expanded on the biography of each of the national leaders in the box. The discussion itself was replete with nostalgic reminiscences of the prestate and early days of independence. Moreover, the discussion about the founding fathers on the sugar box was intertwined with a discussion of the participants' own role in the Zionist enterprise. While the discussion with the twenties group was interspersed with terms taken from neo-liberal discourse, effectiveness and cost/benefit, the discussion with the seventies group was an example of republican discourse: who contributed to the nation and how. The group's sense of belonging, agreement and contribution to the Zionist enterprise aroused emotional reactions. It is not surprising that some participants in this group were almost personally offended by the use of 'sacred symbols' for commercial purposes: 'I will never buy these packets because it degrades the Zionist idea.' Others, however, asked where the box could be purchased: 'It's very moving, it's nice to remember these important people and I'd like to buy a box to have at home.'

Discussion and conclusions

On the face of it, nothing is more 'nationally neutral' than sugar. Yet, as this small-scale research project based on a case study indicates, premeditated

packaging can make even an 'innocent' food item like this the carrier of a loud and clear national 'voice'. The sugar packets with the portraits of the patriarchs of Zionism echoed the voice of mainstream Zionism. This version of the Jewish national revival movement appears at all moments in the 'circuit of culture 'model. Apparently, side by side with globalisation and a 'border-less world', national contents and symbols can still be found everywhere.

As we indicated in the opening section, three approaches in the scholarly study of the nationalism and culture interface can be discerned. The theories in the first approach paid less attention to the cultural aspects of nationalism, but when they did – they focused on institutionalised 'high' culture. The main theoretical contribution of the second approach was that daily and constantly repeated ('banal') representations of the nation build a sense of national solidarity in the citizenry. The third theoretical approach introduced the 'bottom-up' aspect, by emphasising the significance of consumer goods and daily acts of consumption as undertakings of national identity construction.

This study goes one step further by stating three main arguments, denoted by six assumptions: (1) Popular goods can be used not only as a means for attaining national construction but also as a means for national 'healing' or reconstruction by juxtaposing the dismal national present state of affairs with the nation's 'golden age' of yester-year. (2) In their 'healing' capacity, commercial representations of nationalism will not be 'original' nor will they add new elements to representations offered by the 'high' official version of nationalism, but rather replicate, and even trivialise them. (3) The display of nationalism on consumer goods trivialises the nation's insights and concepts that originated in 'high' culture, and the nation's prejudices, stereotypes and rules of inclusion and exclusion are revealed in consumer goods.

Our first assumption was confirmed: In the interest of making a profit and apparently against the background of a national identity crisis and external violent conflict (the second Palestinian *Intifada*), the manufacturer preferred the more 'communicative' hegemonic narrative, and avoided its more controversial versions. Thus we found that the representations of the group of national leaders on the sugar packets all related to the nation's 'golden age' and were identical to the mainstream repertoire. As mentioned earlier, even the packets' graphic uniformity was designed to create the impression of national harmony, which is of great importance to national 'healing' purposes. Furthermore, the selection criteria in this consumer goods, which, as shown above, excluded women, *Mizrachi* and orthodox Jews, exposed, as expected, prejudices and stereotypes which exist in the 'high' culture versions of Zionism, but are often disguised by heavy layers of sophistication.

The second assumption was also confirmed: The choice of texts about the selected individuals will focus on their undertakings in settling the land and military activity in defense of the state. We found that these activities were emphasised far more than economic, educational, or cultural contributions.

The third and fourth assumptions regarding the primary motivation of the message's producer were only partially corroborated. On the face of it, the manufacturer was motivated almost exclusively by commercial considerations. As a result he opted for the 'retro' style or for a unifying theme. However, we argue that the very fact that he chose this specific theme and not another suggests that he intuited the national need for unity at that time, and he expected to influence the consumers' preferences, even when buying sugar.

The fifth and sixth assumptions concerning the relationship between the political socialisation period, age, and reception of the product were also partially corroborated. The study found that the groups were different from one another in age and political socialisation periods albeit in each group the participants responded to the product with varying degrees of acceptance and negation. In other words, in each age/focus group there were those who liked the product and those who did not. However, the reasons provided by the participants in each age/focus group for their positive or negative attitudes were different, perhaps as a reflection of their respective socialisation periods. Thus in the oldest group (seventies), the reasons for liking or disliking were primarily ideological, in the fifties group it was a combination of ideological and pragmatic reasons, while in the twenties group, the pragmatic approach was the guiding force underlying their positive and negative attitudes.

As we hypothesised, age played a dominant role in the rate of identification of the figures, but the relationship was not linear. Apparently 'rallying around the flag' accounts for the rather surprising finding that regardless of age, all three focus groups agreed on the 'top ten' personalities. This suggests that the 'post Zionist' narrative which is so common in the academic writings of the last decade, has not (yet?) become inculcated in the general public's conceptualisation of national history. At the same time, age differences were also indicated: The highest rate of identification was found in the fifties group, followed by the seventies group. However, the participants in the seventies group remembered in greater detail and depth compared to the younger groups. The twenties group exhibited the lowest rate of identification. It is interesting to note that when the groups were asked to compile their own lists, the three lists were almost identical.

The fact that the young group, which consumes popular culture in greater quantities than the older ones, found it difficult to provide information beyond the names of those they had listed as the Zionist fathers appears to sustain our claim that the nationalism represented in popular culture products is usually superficial. At the same time, the fact that the young people could list the founding fathers suggests that perhaps there is no factual basis for the claim that in the postmodern era the nation-state no longer exists, even if only in its banal form. In contradiction to Bauman's (2000) statement that the romance between the state and the nation is over in the era of liquid modernity, in Israel the partnership between the two seems rather stable, at least as long as the Middle East conflict is still going on.

Notes

1 Mr. Shuki Kook of Studio Shuki Kook (http://www.asd.co.il/expose/?kook).

2 This agreement is also reflected in the fact that most cities in Israel have streets named after these individuals. In fact, the group of students identified the figures on the packets first as 'individuals who have streets named after them'.

3 It is interesting to note that only one participant in this group deviated from the timeframe and included Rabin.

4 The following derisive reference about the product appeared in one of the daily newspapers: 'The day will soon come when the pretty waitress asks you, "How much *zucker* [Yiddish/German] in your *kahau* [Arabic], sir?"'

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