

Leaving the Villa and Touching a Raw Nerve



Response by Ian S. Lustick



Professor Sergio DellaPergola is one of the most distinguished scholars working on Israeli demographic and migration issues. I am delighted to have the opportunity to respond to his critical consideration of my article published in the previous issue of *Israel Studies Review*. I appreciate his agreement about the political and ideological significance of the question of the Jewish migration balance and about the challenge of arriving at correct estimates of emigration from Israel (3, 8). Making no claim to be a demographer, I am also particularly pleased with his suggestion that demographers and political scientists work collaboratively on these problems. Indeed, I consider this interchange to be a kind of ‘serial collaboration’ that I hope can continue and inspire a wider conversation.

DellaPergola has offered numerous criticisms of my article, related to factual claims, presentational techniques, and under-exploited literatures. I will respond to some of these within the space afforded me to allow readers to infer how I would deal with the others. I must begin by suggesting that in the length of his comment, its sometimes sarcastic tone, and its focus on numbers of immigrants and emigrants, we can identify the two real sources of his displeasure. First, DellaPergola disapproves of a normative position regarding Israel that he imputes to me. Second, he fundamentally misconstrues my argument, thereby holding it to inappropriate expectations. As I shall suggest, by stressing the economic determinants that he sees operating on Israeli migrants and potential migrants and by ignoring my focus on the “re-emergence of the ‘demographic problem’” (Lustick 2011: 33) and the heated debate in Israel associated with *yeridah* and the Jewish migration balance, he fails to engage with, but inadvertently corroborates, my primary theses.

Although much of his critique is expressed with the vocabulary of the professional social scientist, DellaPergola uses his strongest and most vivid language to appeal to what he believes are the political preferences of our

readers in order to inflame them against me and reduce my credibility in their eyes. In this context I am accused of a variety of sins: my “narrative” (1) is “heavily value-laden” (18); my “main thrust” includes a “continuing concern about the contemporary viability, legitimacy, and perhaps desirability of the current State of Israel” (2); I am accused of anti-positivism and of smearing Israeli demographers as “biased, defensive and shrewd manipulators of data” (4); and my “crafty construction” is said to generate “a collective scenario quite close to demonization” (4).

I will not here defend the normative and political views I do have. They are certainly *not* those imputed to me in DellaPergola’s comment. In any case, for me to engage in that kind of conversation would contradict my main (very positivist) point that such considerations are out of place in scholarly and scientific discourse. I do, however, infer support from these accusations for two key theses of my article—first, that the question of the political and ideological implications of the migration balance question touches a raw nerve in Israel, and, second, that the heated public and scholarly debate that has emerged since the end of the FSU *aliyah* reflects the profound disquiet afflicting the Israeli public regarding the future of the country, regardless of its current economic competitiveness at the global level.

In this context, it is important to see, in both the peculiarity of DellaPergola’s criticisms and in the strained interpretations he must use to make them, just how important it is to delegitimize the messenger rather than to respond directly to the message. I am ‘accused’ *both* of being ‘post-Zionist’ *and* of insisting on using the traditional vocabulary, expectations, and concerns of Zionism to frame my research. On the one hand, I am said to be “ostentatiously concerned with an Israel that should absorb large quantities of *Jewish* immigrants, should not feature *Jewish* emigration at all, and should maintain the *Jewishness* of its society vis-à-vis the dangers of ceasing to be a *Jewish* and democratic state” (3; emphasis in original). Strangely, it is precisely this Zionist framing that DellaPergola cites as evidence of my “latent post-Zionist agenda” (3). As he puts it, my investigation of traditional Zionist expectations and propositions about immigration and emigration, by taking them seriously, implies that “if Israel cannot keep to its own normatively biased, inherently unstable, historically improbable mission, it has little proper value and is unavoidably destined to fade away soon from the Middle Eastern and global scene” (3–4). Instructively, this is the exact and explicit position of two scholars whose well-known work I cite extensively: Arnon Soffer and Evgenia Bystrov. It would be interesting to know if DellaPergola would also describe them as ‘latent post-Zionists’ and ‘quasi-demonizers’.

That DellaPergola must strain rather hard to undermine confidence in the reliability of my scholarship is evident in several ways, including two

out-of-context quotations. As evidence of my “indictment” (4) of Israeli demographers, he quotes only the second half of the sentence. Here is the full sentence, in which I have italicized just those words quoted in DellaPergola’s comment (4): “Precisely because the demographic issue is so politically fraught in Israel, and in light of the increasing weight of the migration balance in demographic calculations, *it is difficult to expect Israeli scholars to produce analytically dispassionate efforts to weigh the long-term political significance of emigration*” (Lustick 2011: 58). A second out-of-context quotation is made with respect to the next sentence in the same paragraph of my article. Describing my “narrative” as opposed to “the normative *Homo Israelensis*” (2), he again quotes the second half of a sentence but omits the first half. Here is the full sentence, with only the words quoted by DellaPergola (2) italicized. “Should it be considered a minor problem that cannot be interpreted as having long-term implications, *or is emigration the sign of a massive and virtually inevitable failure of Zionism, leading to the disappearance of the country as we have known it?*” (Lustick 2011: 58). In each case, DellaPergola capitalizes the first letter of the quoted clause without using brackets, thereby indicating, contrary to fact, that the clauses being quoted are complete sentences in the original.

The same pattern of strained exertion to undermine my ‘political’ bona fides explains the rather odd complaint that DellaPergola makes about my use of the word ‘treatments’. Much of my article is organized as a study of the way that the migration balance question is ‘treated’ by different groups of Israeli scholars and other participants in public debate. DellaPergola objects to my use of ‘treatments’ instead of ‘theories’ or ‘hypotheses’. He suggests that in using the word ‘treatments’ I evince some kind of malignant intent by implying “a more active intervention by the researchers to demonstrate—or manipulate—what they perceive as *their truth*” (4). Of course, I am implying nothing of the kind. A ‘treatment’ of a problem is here synonymous with an ‘approach’ to a problem.

An additional criticism intended to undermine the credibility of my scholarship is that I do not sufficiently cite extensive literatures in migration journals and elsewhere about theories of migration in a globalized world and about the self-perceptions of Israeli expatriates. Again, DellaPergola seems to ignore the actual focus of my article, which is on the contours of debate in Israel over demography and migration. But no matter. The fact is that I am quite familiar with these literatures and can show, although not with the space afforded me in an *Israel Studies Review* article, that the patterns of lacunae and the emphases that are present there, as they pertain to or focus on the Israeli case, strongly support the argument I make about a relative lack of attention paid to the relationship between politics and emigration levels. In any case,

most of this literature is dated prior to the aftermath of the influx of immigrants from the FSU.

DellaPergola also faults me for using sources taken from newspapers, think tanks, policy institutes, and other venues as somehow unscientific, even though my focus in the article is precisely on the nature of public debate. By relying on such sources, he suggests, I improperly “infiltrate an otherwise journalistic tale with ‘data’, or rather ‘factoids’ (such as the 50,000 returning Russian immigrants in Moscow, or the 40,000 Israelis in Berlin, or the 300,000 in Los Angeles)” (5). Remarkably, however, although I do make reference, with a citation, to an estimate of Israeli expatriates living in Moscow (Lustick 2011: 61n25)—a judgment corroborated by a recent visit to Russia—these claims about Los Angeles and Berlin simply do not appear in my article. If anyone is infiltrating a ‘tale’ with these ‘factoids’, it is DellaPergola himself.

Accusing me of yet another methodological breach, he points to the supposed truncation of data contained in my figures (7). These figures report data from 1990, rather than displaying immigration and emigration trends from 1948 to the present. But this complaint is based, again, on ignoring the focus of my argument, which is the reaction to the failure of the FSU *aliyah* to ‘solve’ the demographic problem, *and* on ignoring figure 2 in my article, which contains exactly what he contends is missing—that is, a depiction of immigration trends by continent of origin from 1948 onward.

I move now to two final points in this response to DellaPergola’s comment on my article. The first is a factual matter. My own analysis of the data from the *Statistical Abstract of Israel* and other sources produced by Israel’s Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS) led to the observation that “we cannot know for certain that Israel’s migration balance, especially with respect to Jews, has not dipped to or below zero in recent years” (Lustick 2011: 43). This judgment was offered based on low immigration rates, relatively stable emigration rates, and a variety of uncertainties, errors, and confusions in the data-gathering and reporting process, especially as they relate to emigration and to the accuracy of the population register. DellaPergola objects (11), citing CBS data to the effect that in the years 2001–2009 there was a cumulative Jewish migration balance of 75,500. This averages out to an annual positive balance of 8,400. Checking his source (table 2.3 in the 2010 *Statistical Abstract of Israel*), we note that although there was an uptick in the migration balance in 2009 (and, we know, also in 2010), probably due to the acute financial and economic crisis in Europe and the United States, the data that the CBS reports for the cumulative years 2001–2008 include a total migration balance for those eight years as a mere 2,600 Jews. This translates into an annual positive balance of 325, a figure that is well within the margin of error and that certainly supports

my observation about the difficulty of being sure that in recent years the annual balance has not dropped “to or below zero.”

Lastly, I wish to respond to DellaPergola’s characterization of the data I provide with regard to the percentages of Israelis who describe themselves as planning to, thinking about, or uncertain as to whether they will stay in the country over the long term. Such data, he says, are “valueless” without comparative data from other countries (16). This identification of a “weakness” (16) in my article is in fact an excellent opportunity to drive home my point about the frantic discourse in Israel over demography and migration—a discourse that has deep political, psychological, and ideological roots and is not driven solely, or even mainly, by economics.

As a social scientist, I am just as interested in what pollsters ask as in what their respondents answer. Search and you will find dozens of polls, and repeated polls, by Israelis asking other Israelis if they plan to stay in the country. But, instructively, you will find very few such polls in other countries—and that is the point. Israelis are much more anxious and focused on questions of emigration and on the future of their country as a place for them and their children and grandchildren to live than are the populations of other countries with which Israel would like to compare itself.

Even so, it happens that there was a recent poll of young New Zealanders. In commenting on the results of the poll, a newspaper article in June 2011 reported that 24 percent of “Kiwis” under the age of 30 were either “considering” or “definitely leaving to live overseas” (with Australia being favored).¹ The poll was received with shock and distress in New Zealand. Yet the figure of 24 percent for that age group is 40 percent smaller than the number of young Israeli respondents to similar polls who state they are hoping to leave or are considering options to leave Israel. As I reported, for example, a Telesaker poll in 2010 “showed that 60 percent of young Israelis said they would emigrate to the United States if the opportunity to do so were readily available” (Lustick 2011: 48–49).

In general, as polls conducted by Asher Arian and his associates have reported, fewer than two-thirds of Jewish Israelis tell pollsters they are certain they will stay in the country. Compare that with the findings of the Gallup organization, which asks adults throughout the world, “Ideally, if you had the opportunity, would you like to move permanently to another country, or would you prefer to continue living in this country?” Results released in 2011 show that in the previous two years the percentage of residents of the Middle East and North Africa who wanted to emigrate dropped from 23 percent to 21 percent. This is somewhat higher than the 20 percent who in both periods indicated that they wanted to leave the EU, but considerably lower than rates registered among Jewish Israelis by Israeli pollsters.²

In closing, I repeat my endorsement of DellaPergola's suggestion of collaboration between demographers and political scientists with respect to how Israelis are confronting the existential uncertainties they face. After all, in his own work, DellaPergola (2001: 10, 28, 31) has repeatedly emphasized the crucial role that non-economic, political, military, and other disruptions have had in determining the rhythm of mass Jewish migrations. In a way, I have simply asked of Israel the same question about the impact of politics and disruptive non-economic forces on Jewish emigration *from* the country that DellaPergola has asked about the impact of these factors on the immigration of Jews *to* it. As a country that lives in its own self-perception as a 'villa in the jungle', that can no longer expect large inflows of Jewish immigration, that is a target of immigration for millions of frustrated Palestinians, and that offers a globalized world hundreds of thousands of talented and vigorous potential emigrants, a host of questions bearing on Israel's future provide enough work for both demographers and political scientists, whether they work separately or in unison.

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NOTES

1. <http://www.heraldsun.com.au/news/breaking-news/a-quarter-of-kiwis-plan-to-leave-nz-poll/story-e6frf7jx-1226104347634>.
2. See <http://www.gallup.com/poll/148142/international-migration-desires-show-signs-cooling.aspx>. For recent work on Israeli desires to secure foreign passports, see Harpaz (2009, forthcoming).

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