

REGARD FOR HISTORY AND HISTORIANS

The University History Society has continued with its voluntary activities and we are proud to present another edition of our journal-digest *Storja*: this year *Storja 2001*. Initiatives during the past two years have included the Annual Andrew Vella Memorial Lecture at the Istituto Italiano di Cultura in Valletta, research-based lectures by graduates, video discussions, a stand in freshmen's week on campus, and the occasional social outing, in addition to *Storja 98*, which has sold out. We believe that undergraduates and graduates with an interest in history generally, and Maltese History in particular, benefit from this work, and on the whole appreciate it. *Storja* continues to be an important source of reference on unpublished research works undertaken at Malta, as well as an opportunity for graduates presenting any history-related dissertation or thesis to publish, as well as have their topics listed and abstracted for future reference. Other researchers may also contribute articles, as has been the case since *Storja*'s inception way back in 1978, in Professor Vella's time.

Given the prevailing circumstances, we wish to underline a fact, which ought to be self-evident but is not, that the historians at University are intimately interested in history teaching. This is not a monopoly of schoolteachers, as the Department of Education seems to think. We can only look upon with misgiving at any attempt by the said Department or Ministry completely to exclude some of our leading historians, because they work at University, from programmes such as those undertaken by the Council of Europe about historiography, nationalism and related topics in twentieth century European history. For this reason, too, we are publishing in this issue a contribution in this area made at a symposium in Brussels, at the express invitation of the Council of Europe in Strasbourg. We also see no reason (and this is a widespread feeling) why the leading professional historians and authors seem never to be consulted by government on anything, perhaps on the mistaken assumption that *education* is a province catered for exclusively by colleagues in the Faculty of Education. This is only one out of ten faculties in our University; it is also one of the most recent. As for pedagogical skills, we firmly believe that you cannot teach what you have not internalized as a discipline.

There is no teaching without learning in the first place, just as there cannot be a University of Studies, worthy of its name in any European context, without original research, academic publications and institutional respect for scholars in their working lives. Who decides on history syllabi in the upper forms of secondary school? What accounts for last June's dismal school-leaving exam results, not only in English, even in Maltese?

We have an abundance of plagiarism and regurgitation around, sometimes from publishers and institutions, who should know better. This is epitomised by the commercialized non-stop photocopying of bits and pieces of books, even on campus. What became of the swipe card which would ensure that students use at least a part of their stipends to actually acquire books they might read as such, from preface and introduction to bibliography and index, and refer to later on in life?

If history is 'the best liberal education in the world', there is no reason why graduates who possess the discipline should limit themselves to the teaching of it, although that may seem like the safest option at first glance. In other countries, graduates with a history background assume all kinds of managerial and executive positions, and we hope to see more of that happening here too. They also gravitate towards the media and if they are worth their salt, and do not become power maniacs, they could give a major contribution there, changing the 'discourse' of lowest common denominator bandwagon mediocrity, which is grossly threatening our mental and spiritual well-being.

Although history textbooks in the upper forms of secondary schools leave much to be desired, if they may be said to exist at all, we are pleased to note that interest in history, even among undergraduates, is on the increase. The spadework and efforts of some colleagues at the Junior College, other Sixth Forms and indeed the upper forms of certain secondary schools, may have something to do with that too. Although a regard for academic-intellectual meritocracy, including merit awards for research achievers, has remained in perpetual hibernation since the deficient 1979 and 1988 education acts, on the positive side we feel that teaching through modules helps to mitigate the disorienting effects of the credit system; that synoptic questions, although perhaps more difficult at first, are better tests of a student's meaningful, coordinated absorption of knowledge and syncretic powers of analysis, or other-

wise; and that faculty trends towards seminar discussions and an ambience for more of these, as opposed to teaching-by-preaching, should continue to be encouraged. Equally, we are sorry that not every student can get an 'A' for every assignment; and even more sorry to hear talk of abolishing closed book exams. We do not mind if this position does not endear us to the marketing agents of Encarta or internet servers.

We are concerned about the state of some of the still available primary sources, which both students and scholars will need to make use of in the course of their studies. There has been progress at the Santo Spirito, where archival materials relating to the last two centuries are being largely conserved, and we are pleased that post-graduate specialisation in this field is slowly becoming possible. In other archives, however, such as the notarial archives in Valletta, the situation is worrying. Why cannot such archives, and others, be microfilmed? This would not cost the earth. There is also a need for more qualified staff in this domain. Professional historians may know something about that. Ever since 1978, the *Storja* school's historiographical vision has never been antiquarian or particularistic; we are interested in the pursuit of understanding and in the discovery of meaning, in case studies which can illuminate what is universal even in the particular.

There is much room for a greater regard for history and historians institutionally and in the country at large. The narrow and fixed view that historians only exist, at best, to write books and teach their classes about them, as if they were hermits, is resource-wasteful nonsense. An occasional sound bite is not it either. In other countries, historians have been given access to senior positions of advice and influence in matters ranging across the spectrum of public life and international affairs, not excluding education. Having an independent mind ought to be an asset, not a liability. Not in Malta, where politicians and their adviser-assistants may think they know it all. Although there are a few genuinely interested *dilettanti*, not a single politician is an historian; the last one probably was Mgr Alfredo Mifsud a century ago, and he was really a librarian. Joining the E.U. without an acquired sense of history, including a consciousness of our own, would be a sure recipe for getting swamped as a nation.

The recurring criticism in the media against intellectuals for not speaking out

should take into account not only the often trivial qualities of public 'discourse' itself, including loads of media hype; it should also consider the systematic emargination of humanistic scholars, scientists and intellectuals from the body politic's mainstream, whether by accident or design. Hence the resounding silence, otherwise known as *ennui* or, to use a post-modern term, estrangement. The problem is not simply individual, it is infrastructural, it is directional. Rank or even specialisation have ceased to matter; academic leadership seems like a relic; the surging tide is: each person to himself: survival to get along. Perhaps academics have always been individualistically inclined but if so, more so now than before. Is it fragmentation? Money talk rarely borders on genius or even inspiration. A 'colonial civil service' mentality in the management of academic affairs will not brighten up any prospects for students, scholars or society's lifestyle, nor act as an incentive to the disillusioned as they try to make ends meet. That does not make a university. Is anyone listening?

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