

Book review: A persistent contrarian

Pirotta questions the link between rampant materialism and the erosion of values

[Entertainment](#)[Books](#)[Education](#)[Politics](#)[Review](#)

10 April 2022 | André P. DeBattista |  1

 4 min read

Godfrey Pirotta: Il-Politika ta' Hajti

by Mario Thomas Vassallo

published by Horizons, 2021

Fortunately, Malta now has its fair share of published biographies and memoirs. Often considered the 'stepson' of history, this proliferation of biographies has undoubtedly enriched our historiography and our understanding of Maltese society.

However, a cursory look at this output reveals one glaring omission; there is a lacuna of biographies of Maltese intellectuals and academics. This leads to an ancillary problem; the discussion of their ideas, thoughts and legacies often remains unknown beyond academic literature reviews, thus perpetuating the myth of the inaccessible ivory tower.

Mario Thomas Vassallo's book *Godfrey Pirotta: Il-Politika ta' Hajti* attempts to address part of this gap. The beautifully bound book presents the life and thought of one of Malta's foremost political thinkers, public intellectuals, social activists and public servants who left a mark in a myriad of sectors.

Vassallo's biography presents a thematic account of an academic who does not fear to descend from the impenetrable ivory tower to engage with the broader public. No one can deny that Godfrey Pirotta has done this. His youth activism, his engagement with trade unions, his militancy in the Labour Party, his championing of cooperatives, journalistic commentaries, and his teaching have left a legacy that should be explored and celebrated.

This book seeks to go beyond the party/politician narrative and presents us with another facet of politics; that of the thought-provoking political thinker who ensures some intellectual integrity in the political process. It is, perhaps, a side of politics that has never been explored in Malta.

Professor Godfrey Pirotta was born on November 10, 1947, the fourth of six children. He received his education in the Gżira Primary School and furthered his studies at the St Joseph Technical School in Paola. When he left school, he was employed as a receptionist and accounts clerk at the Comino Hotel and, later, as a postman.

A chance encounter with a psychologist led him to leave his comfort zone and embrace a more active – and public – life.

In 1971, he left Malta for Oxford, studying for a Diploma in Social Studies at Plater College. He then furthered his studies at the University of Reading and, later on, the University of Bath.

“ The book is divided thematically, exploring different facets of Pirotta’s life, values and thought ”

In 1978, he embarked on a lifetime of teaching, first at the Mikiel Anton Vassalli Junior Lyceum and later at the Department of Public Administration within the University of Malta. He taught various subjects, including economics, political philosophy, developmental politics, governance, social politics and public administration.

In this context, I got to know him personally; he taught me for four years as an undergraduate student between 2005 and 2009. His lectures were always interesting and challenging, and he was always incredibly kind and open to students who knocked on his door. Every encounter would be peppered with his anecdotes – many of which are now on record in this book.

The book is divided thematically, exploring different facets of Pirotta’s life, values and thought. Vassallo has a flowing pen, and each chapter is conversational in tone. Thus, reading the book feels as though one is sitting in on a dialogue between two people. It has a rare quality that is not present in Maltese political discussions, for it blends personal experience and ideas while staying away from tittle-tattle and controversy. The author and his subject thus provide an account that is flowing, cohesive and engaging.

Of course, it would be misleading to say that I agree with every position enunciated by Pirotta. We belong to different intellectual and political traditions. He embraces a quasi-dogmatic, partisan left-wing creed with an intense dislike of every ideal that does not correspond to his own. Some arguments are misconstrued, while, on other occasions, he can use broad strokes to discredit and deflate those who do not share his views. Nonetheless, the opinions he presents are still worth engaging with.

And there is much to engage with. For example, Pirotta rightly questions the link between rampant materialism and the erosion of values. He is indignant at the role of personal favours in the electoral process; he stays clear from contesting elections for fear of compromising his integrity. He is concerned about Malta's skin-deep engagement with political arguments. He places great emphasis on truth and justice. Yet, he also values a good sense of humour – a pivotal ingredient to engage with the political world. On this, one can't help but nod in agreement.

Pirotta questions and challenges everything. He does not shy away from being a persistent contrarian. As a lecturer, his style was amiable, challenging and respectful. A generation of politicians, public servants and officials have had the benefit of his insight. As a thinker, he is often incisive and persistent. Mario Thomas Vassallo's book brings together these two strands, weaving a narrative of a life well-lived.

*Independent journalism costs money. Support Times of Malta for the **price of a coffee**.*

Support Us