



## Crisis and the social desire for history

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GLOBAL RESTRUCTURING of the market economies has been accompanied by the present crisis in the social welfare system and the exhaustion of the traditional managing role the state occupied in Western Europe. The wide political consent which had been created in European politics, in support of what was taken to be the state's principal responsibility to direct a heavily institutionalised welfare system, is now severely weakened and apparently unsustainable. As a consequence, rapid and erratic changes in society are amplifying unemployment, intensifying varying types of poverty and family instability, leading to the breakdown of customary forms of social solidarity and diffusing a sense of individualist disorientation and anomie. Correspondingly, attempts to legitimise this disintegration of the state's social assistance system in mainstream cultural discourse has largely, though not exclusively, been represented by *endist* postmodernist arguments, mainly by the *end-of-history* thesis (Fukuyama, 1992). Initially, this seemed capable of damaging history as an academic discipline crucial to the cultural discourse of modernity, before it received an exhaustive critique as exemplified by Jacques Derrida's scathing deconstruction of Fukuyama's claim, that 'the triumph of market liberalism' has brought an 'end of history', as a pure ideological hoax (Derrida, 1993). Nonetheless, notions from *endist* thought are still hovering within the main flows of communication, fashioning an ambiguous language that portrays the idea of history as totally insignificant to the contemporary mode of existence. *Prima facie* it seems that the individual has been cleansed from a sense of history.

However, from the wide-angled perspective of the people who, in practical terms, are bearing the brunt of the economic restructuring underway, the *endist* 'free from history' argument serves only to camouflage the abundant gender, age, social class and geographical inequalities shaping our social landscape. This sense of fatalism which *endist* thought presents as the essential attribute of present day existence as confirmed, it supposes, by the compliance shown by the 'silent multitude', is a total misrepresentation of reality. Mute resignation, endemic quiescence and passivity cannot be attributed as essential characteristics of the ordinary working people, most of whom are in a continuous struggle to make ends meet, not least during periodical crises. In this vibrant everyday reality, constant reference to, and re-creation of, the past by the individual in the family and in the community at large, is essential both for the consolidation of a sense of shared identity and for daily survival. 'Looking back to the past' is an impulsive social attitude. People repetitively recollect and use their vast historical memory to tackle specific problems, reduce risk and be able to cope with everyday troubles, not least during times of impending crises. As David Lowenthal asserted, earlier on in 1985, in his 'defence of history': "The past is not dead ... it is not even sleeping. A mass of memories and records, of relics and replicas... lives at the core of our being" (Lowenthal, 1985: 7).

It is this organic intimacy with one's personal and public past that provides a strong sense of temporality and social identity, as well as the stimulus and daily courage needed for survival through recurring predicaments. Hence, the current disintegration of the state social welfare system as we know it brings to the fore this view of the past as a depository of knowledge and experiences through which, to put it in a clear but presently unfashionable way, *lessons are constantly being learnt*. For the community at large, as John Berger puts it, the past is "not for living in [but] a well of inclusions from which we draw in order to act" (Berger, 1972: 24). This is nowhere more evident than during a general



social crisis, when the people's incessant allusions to and remaking of their own personal, family and community histories, intensifies on a shared level, to enable the rethinking, refining, renegotiating and the collective acting out of strategies adapted to deal with common problems.

For the historian, similarly to the rest of the community, social crisis is a time of suspense, irregular changes and intensified social difficulties. For the more critical, it is equally an occasion for an in-depth rethinking of most of the established grand historical narratives. Highly aware of the potential lying in people's histories to help solve pressing problems, a growing number of critical historians are refocussing their research to elaborate alternative theoretical frameworks and explore new methodologies which would enable a more comprehensive understanding of these same historical realities. This challenging intellectual exercise is fostering the idea that history, equally to (Smelner, 2002), if not more than, the rest of the social sciences, has a social purpose, the most momentous being to ameliorate the quality of life of the people.

Sharing in common such a democratic perspective of the past and impelled by the present social crisis, the emerging network of critical social historians is drastically transforming the history research agendas in European universities. This undertaking is accompanied by an extensive historiographical discussion, which is helping to reformulate a strong revisionist approach on the 'origins' and development of the European state welfare system. This means that the previously-held conception of history as linear and irreversible, which reconstructed the history of social welfare in European countries as a stage-after-stage process, rooted in the Middle Ages and reaching its apex in the twentieth century state welfare arrangement, is being contested and disproved. That type of 'progressive' history, which depicted the modern state welfare system as the most advanced social stage in a long historical course, attracted most of the research work at a time when a general political consent regarded this same social welfare system as permanent and irrevocable. On the contrary, the new critical history approach, developing out of the various contesting arguments based on European-wide comparative research, claims that the historical study of social welfare needs to take into consideration the interrelationship of all forms of social care and assistance practised in the various communities during any period in history. This fresh research outline means that in practice historical research needs to centre more on the various combinations of self-help and family care, intermediary social assistance (community-level charitable bodies, religious brotherhoods, guilds and mutual-aid associations) and state social services and institutions (hospitals, dispensaries, schools), to the extents that these were developed, in different locations throughout history.

In support of its contribution to the above historiographic debate on the subject, original research in the Maltese context is making evident the variety of ways in which the urban poor, during most of the nineteenth and early decades of the twentieth centuries, employed informal, intermediate and formal levels of social and health care assistance as part of their daily strategies for the preservation of their households. Repetitively surfacing from this focussed research on the Maltese social milieu, is the application in present circumstances of personal, family and community collective memories by the people in the shaping and acting out of their daily survival strategies, not least with regard to their capability to secure social provisioning and health care.

On the policy making level, this new historical research and theoretical paradigm highlights the potential of the earthly logic and practical wisdom found in people's histories to assist the formulation of new social welfare policies which would help ameliorate the general quality of life and standard of living of



the population. Could a new, sustainable, human-centred, social solidarity network be constructed on the basis of a flexible combination of self and family care, voluntary/ community assistance and formal government institutions? At this point one cannot help but mention that, as part of its deep democratic nature, this suggested 'mixed welfare culture' can also provide internal safeguards against the previous state utilisation of social services and institutions for surveillance and control over sectors of the population. In this way, the controversy, which has characterised the historiography of the welfare state, between the 'progressive' interpretation of the welfare state as positive on the basis that it extended social assistance, health care and public education to the working classes and the Foucauldian concern with state institutions as forms of disciplining the body and intensifying social control (Jone & Porter, 1990; Gladstone, 1995; Thane, 1996) can, perhaps unwittingly, be passed over.

The refocussing of historical research on labouring men and women, the elderly and the hospitalised and their use of social assistance and health care services, requires the development of a more elaborate research methodology. In actual fact, it is always difficult to reconstruct the common people's daily activities in the past because of the lack of primary archival documentation, as the majority of the working poor left very little, if anything, written 'for posterity'. A number of official reports and administrative accounts constitute the bulk of the written sources available and these only provide generic descriptions of the social and economic conditions of what were termed 'the lower classes'. Moreover, these officially-stamped narratives are frequently replete with prejudiced and essentialist notions of the people, conceived as an anonymous homogeneous mass and therefore providing a partial one-dimensional social perspective. For this reason, the setting up of a new research framework entails the systematic evaluation and employment of a mixture of 'alternative' sources which includes oral history, visual material including photography, personal/family records (see Fox & Lawrence, 1988; Roberts, 1995) and other ephemera. Through this roping in of a variety of historical sources, provided by and therefore totally dependent on the support of the community, a more socially-intimate, people-centred reconstruction of the past is facilitated. As it comes to present previously suppressed voices, hidden daily records and personal effects, hitherto considered insignificant to the writing of history, this new research method requires social historians with a critical-pluralistic aptitude and trained to discern, to examine, work with and discuss, the multiple levels - oral, written and visual - forming historical reality.

It was with this main purpose in mind that the *Oral History Centre and Archive* was founded some three years ago within the Department of History. During its relatively short period in existence, the OHC has proved successful in many ways as can be gauged by the growing number of audio and video recorded interviews deposited in its archive and their increasing popularity with researchers, as well as by the long list of elderly persons who are waiting to record their own recollections. This major project undertaken by the OHC, entitled: *Maltese Voices of the Twentieth Century*, intends to record, transcribe, analyse and make available to researchers - and later on to the public - recorded interviews with people from all walks of life on specific themes which have been and still are, neglected by conventional Maltese historiography in general.

Currently topping the list of our oral history projects is the immediate recording of testimonies/ recollections on the various practices of social assistance, provisioning, social solidarity and the use of charitable and government institutions (such as the *Monte' di Pieta'*). At this point, the recording of first-hand reminiscences by ex-patients who experienced confinement or rehabilitation in public health institutions is already generating interest even in their initial planning stage. This oral history venture



has been given a boost during this same academic year with the collaboration of the elderly persons attending our new course on personal reminiscence and life histories, at the University of the Third Age. Most of the elderly attending this programme provided, with conspicuous enthusiasm, personal and community recollections and life/family histories either on tape or script, in addition to family records, photographs and a range of other authentic materials, which are now deposited in the new *Life Histories* and *People Daily Records* sections of our archive.

An initial analysis of a wide sample from these recorded recollections, has provided a wealth of minute details on the practical and social skills employed by family members 'to make ends meet' assure 'a decent existence' and the healthy reproduction of their households, during normal times and in war conditions. One common feature which instantly emerges from these taped interviews and life history records is these persons' shared intimacy with and constant allusions to, their own family and community past, which they themselves perceive as inseparable from their social existence. This oneness with the past structures these people's earthly logic which enables them to deal with the multitude of difficulties which they have come to consider as part and parcel of ordinary existence.

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*Further information about the Oral History Centre and Archive may be found on the website at:*  
<http://home.um.edu.mt/history/oralhistorycentre.pdf>

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