

Michael Briguglio's Blog

Sociologist from Malta

Thursday, November 28, 2013

The Humanities and University - Michael Briguglio

*Graduand's Speech – Faculty of Arts – University of Malta
Wednesday 27 November 2013
Jesuits' Church – Valletta
Michael Briguglio PhD graduate in Sociology*

It is a pleasure to speak on behalf of graduates on such an important day. I feel especially privileged as in these past years I was a PhD student and a member of academic staff at the same time. Not to mention the various other commitments and responsibilities in my life. In a day and age of postmodern plural and fragmented identities, probably most graduates have had to juggle with many aspects of their identity.

My speech will focus on the Faculty of Arts, located in the Old Humanities Building at Tal-Qroqq, an intellectual and architectural landmark of the University of Malta.

As a kid, I remember running around near this building when my father, who was and still is a University lecturer, used to take me there, little thinking that one day I will end up working in that building.

As an undergraduate student, I was busy involving myself in student activism on campus, much of it near the Old Humanities building. And now I am here, praising the Faculty of Arts for being what it is, namely the soul of the University of Malta.

I think that the Humanities - which are the focus of our Faculty – encourage students to be reflexive, to think critically, to ask questions, to think outside the box, rather than to simply follow pre-established and strictly utilitarian criteria.

In a global society characterised by rapid change - a runaway world, as sociologist Anthony Giddens puts it - these skills are necessary not only for economic advancement but also for a better quality of life and for care of the self in the construction of our identities.

If one looks at the Humanities from a purely pragmatic and functional perspective, the Faculty of Arts at the University of Malta is a success story. In this regard, I will refer to a tracer study covering graduates between 2003 and 2012 by Manwel Debono, Director of the University's Centre for Labour Studies.

Debono found that that there is a high employment rate for Faculty of Arts graduates. When the survey was carried out, less than 6 per cent of graduates were unemployed and seeking employment, and most of these had just graduated.

As regards the rest, almost 77 per cent were in full-time employment and almost 11 per cent were in part time employment. The study found very few significant differences as regards gender outcomes, and also showed that almost 63 per cent of graduates from the Faculty of Arts felt that their jobs matched their expectations. Debono's study also found that fresh graduates were likely to improve their job conditions later on.

The most common career paths were in teaching and the public service, though others were employed in other areas including tourism, heritage, transport, communication, social and health care, environment, diplomacy and finance. Postgraduates are more likely to work as professionals.

But I wish to return to the argument that the value of the humanities does not start and end with employment potential.

Literary critic Terry Eagleton has much to say in this regard. In his view academic disciplines such as history and philosophy distinguish universities from technical training facilities or corporate research institutes. At the same time, he insists, humanities should not be isolated from other disciplines. Lawyers and engineers, amongst others, should study humanities, as these enable a critical reflection on human values and principles.

In this regard, there are different views and antagonisms, which, in an Althusserian sense, are reflected in the humanities. The basic reflexive condition of disciplines such as philosophy, sociology, history and literary criticism conveys their status as being entangled in the social antagonisms of our times. There is no such thing as neutral analysis, and the same event or text may be read and interpreted differently by different analysts. If industrialisation was seen as a beacon of progress by

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modernists, it was also seen as having a dehumanizing effect by those within the romantic movement. Postmodernists celebrate diversity and pluralism, traditionalists see decadence and doom.

This does not mean that every person who has an opinion is an academic within the humanities. Academic analysis in the humanities must be systematic, analytical, investigative and must be based on clear evidence. In an academic context, 'the ultimate tribunal of truth', to borrow a term from discourse theorist David Howarth, is the academic community.

Indeed, Michel Foucault argues that in any social formation one finds regimes of truth, or the discourses which are in a more powerful situation than others. Be it the dominant religious discourse in the middle ages, the dominance of science in modernity, or the consumerist treadmill of our times, there are always some truths which are more equal than others.

Yet, different truths are represented in the antagonisms of our times. For example religious values are held in high esteem by many today despite the assumedly evolutionary and scientific predictions put forward by various thinkers a century ago when they presumed that religion would disappear in the modern world. But religion itself becomes individualized and interpreted differently by different social actors. For example in Malta, many Catholics voted in favour of the introduction of divorce legislation.

Science may have its own internal rules and factual methods of proof, yet scientific truths can also be subject to different interpretations. When questions are raised on supposedly monolithic scientific discoveries and predictions, the adversaries of the technocrats of truth are sometimes labelled as being 'alarmist', 'irrational' or 'emotional'.

Yet science itself becomes human when we realise that side-by-side with magnificent and functional discoveries, there are also questions of ethics, interpretation and mistakes. For example, is animal testing ethical? Are genetically modified organisms acceptable forms of food? Was the Fukushima nuclear disaster an eye-opener on over-reliance on technocracy?

Mary Shelley's 'Frankenstein' remains an inspirational critique on the supposedly infallible status of science. This product of literary genius is reflected in social theory such as that of Ulrich Beck, famous for his 'Risk Society' thesis. In a world of supposedly rock-solid certainty, we constantly manufacture risks.

Problems which we ourselves create, are problems which we cannot always solve, and science no longer holds the key to all solutions. Yet, reflexivity equips us with the critical consciousness required to question things. Hence the importance of the humanities. Science discovers, the humanities reflect and hope.

I therefore hold that there is a future for the humanities, for thought itself. In this regard, Jean Baudrillard tells us that just as no-one has invented the architectural project that would put an end to all others, just as no-one has invented the city that would end all cities, no-one has invented the body of thought which would end all thought. Consequently, the Sisyphus of Camus, the eternal beacon of hope, has his existence guaranteed.

In relation to what I have just spoken about, and from a pragmatic perspective, I believe that science and the humanities can co-exist, and actually need to co-exist. While science presents us with discoveries and proofs, the humanities offer open-mindedness and the need to steer-away from the imposition of a single intellectual infrastructure. Both are essential for University.

The Faculty of Arts is already embarking of this. One example in this regard is the HUMS Programme, where academics from the humanities and medical science have formed a multi-disciplinary community. This augurs well for other like-minded endeavours.

I conclude by appealing that, rather than being dull functional factories, Universities should increasingly act like a melting pot of knowledge, empowering students with skills and a sense of critique which are essential to meet the risks and opportunities of our times, ranging from employment to everyday encounters and situations. I believe that our University is a positive example in this regard.

On behalf of all graduates, I would like to thank academic and administrative staff at the University of Malta, fellow students, and our loved ones.

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*This speech can also features in the website of the University of Malta:
<http://www.um.edu.mt/news/campus/?a=201698>*

Posted by Michael Briguglio at 9:04 am



Labels: Albert Camus, David Howarth, Humanities, Jean Baudrillard, Lino Briguglio, Louis Althusser, Manwel Debono, Mary Shelley, Michael Foucault, Sociology, Terry Eagleton, Ulrich Beck, University of Malta, Writing



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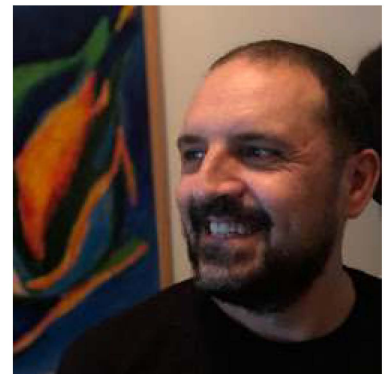
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