SHOOTING SOCIETY

Documenting Contemporary Life in Malta

edited by
Carmel Borg
Raphael Vella

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Adding life to years

Marvin Formosa

The 21st century will be an era of unprecedented positive ageing. During the past one thousand years, the life expectancy of Maltese citizens has climbed from 47 to almost 80 years. Most of us will live longer than the previous generation, and the epicentre of economic and political power will shift from the younger to the older cohorts. The conventional ominous stereotypes of decline, decrepitude, and dependency, will be a thing of the past. In the late twentieth century, profound advances in medical technology and intense changes in labour relations, social programmes, and demographic formations, blurred the chronological boundaries that set apart childhood, middle-age, and later life. This postmodern life-course has generated new avenues for self-care and self-definition in later life, thus empowering older adults to innovate resourceful roles and ways of life both for themselves and for incoming cohorts. Recent decades have witnessed the creation of a population of relatively affluent retirees whose income and expenditure have come close to, and in some cases even exceed, those of younger people of working age. At present, the third age - that is, that span of life ranging from fifteen to twenty years between the end of one's career and the onset of frail old age - arises as a cultural field, whose dynamic derives from consumption. It is no longer possible to regard retirement as a residual component of the class structure since the collective identity ascribed to people in later life has been subverted. Retirement has become an area so fragmented in its social, economic, and physical expression,

Michael Ellul
Smoke and memories, 2008

Michael Ellul
Mellieha, 2010

that class and gender are no longer the key players in shaping key divisions and unities in later life. Instead, later life in contemporary industrial societies is characterised by consumerist processes that promise a distance from an 'aged' or 'old' status. Frail elders constitute the 21st century equivalents of the paupers of the workhouse, and even for those lucky enough to keep their distance from such identity hazards, the fear of losing that capacity remains one of the key lines of fracture in later life. The private sector lost no time in capitalising on such sentiments by expanding its markets to develop products that mask the ageing process. The sale of anti-ageing products such as nutrition, physical fitness, skin care, hormone replacements, vitamins, supplements, and herbs, has become a global multi-million dollar industry even though academic literature did not find that the use of such products affect the ageing process. Fantasies of immortality deprive and undermine the meaning of old age and death itself. However, old age cannot be something that is avoided. Rather than seeking a 'liberation from old age' through the promise of eternal youth, we should strive for 'the liberation of old age' that is achieved through the construction of a meaningful 'third age' free from the constraints of middle age. Old age should be a valued time of life, a time characterised by resilience, creativity, transformation, and above all, fun and exuberance.