

AN ASSASSINATION AND A MURDER

The assassination of Daphne Caruana Galicia was an assassination of all of us, and it was paradoxically a murder by all of us, too. It will remain forever the former until the perpetrators are brought to justice, and it will remain the latter until we, civil society, ensure that our institutions are cleansed of passive and active complicity, carelessness, disinterest, naked cynicism, protectionism, cronyism, lies, and the funnelling of dirty money greasing the circuits of local palms. And the murder of us all will only end when our elected and appointed representatives treat us, civil society, with the respect they have long disdained. I wish here to reflect on some aspects of this double assassination by State passive complicity, and murder by public disengagement, because we can gain all or lose all, depending upon how we react to it and what we do with it. For the ball is in our court and we must keep it there jealously guarded because the offence has been done to all of us, and it is therefore us, civil society, that has to set the agenda.

Critical events present us with mirrors in which we must unflinchingly examine not just our institutions and our elected and appointed representatives, but also society, i.e. ourselves. It was accompanied by shock, anger, and a grasping for meaning. The first two are natural but anger has to be directed judiciously, possessively, and finely, lest it be stolen from us by the party machines that would cunningly appropriate it for their own narrow purposes, such that we can only think of expressing our anger through them, clearly what they always want. And the third, the grasping for meaning, has to be navigated carefully. There will be many who will try to normalise this event in accepted modes of thought and emotion: from the despicable glee manifested in a policeman's facebook jibe, to cynicism that it will never be resolved that the conspirators bank upon to remain smugly among us, to the casting of blame by political parties on each other, to conspiracy theories that this was the act of a foreign hand which absolves us of agency as we have always done and which leaves us with the comfort of self-satisfied impotence, to the natural rage against the people in whom we have entrusted the highest institutions of our land and who have cynically and insultingly let us down. But this was something that we allowed to happen, to us, and we, not the politicians, must resolve it. It is not enough to say "Democracy is threatened". It certainly is, but democracy has been threatened every time jobs and favours are dished out to buy votes, acts of silence, complicity, autocensure, and the anaesthetising of conscience that is 'rationalised' and conjured away by the pessimism of place. It is threatened every time we dismiss a political and/or criminal retribution as 'personal'. And it is threatened by us, too, in responding hesitatingly to those natural concerns expressed by our loved ones, who, understandably worried, urge us to temper our ire, our rage, and our disgust that has long been in the innermost hearts of many of us - at least those who wish to lay aside the self-poisoning cynical pessimism coursing slyly in the veins of the body social. And I, too, the mere explorer of these thoughts, question myself as to the different reasons of social abstention that result in silences (of which I myself am guilty), and whether all silences have the same reasons.

This is the defining feature (and dilemma) of a small-scale society that we are destined always to struggle against. Not one battle but a constant war: against a pessimism projected to place, our worst enemy, that is none other than ourselves. But the outcome is not a foregone conclusion, unless we make it so. That would be to connive in our self-emasculatation and to lose the war before it has begun, to condemn ourselves to the eternal cycles of anger, 'rationalisation' that is none other than complacency, and despair. But re-cognition can, and shall, be transformative for this was one outrage too far, an attack on you the reader, your loved ones, on me, a writer who longs to write about other things, and on us all. Certainly 'Democracy has been threatened', because people are not assassinated for untruths, or for personal offense given, but for telling the truth and truths that want to remain hidden by specific people in our midst, perhaps some that many of us know. The political parties would have us think that it is they who guarantee democracy, but they have been part of the disease, sowing cynicism and deceit alternating with bribes, false hopes, and creating victims whom

they caress with the unctuous hypocrisy of grooming paedophiles to devour: from Karen Grech to Raymond Caruana, and now Daphne, with increasing degrees of precision, from collateral, unintended victims to targeted ones. But what they have been doing is flaying alive the body politic, i.e. us, and placing our straw-stuffed bodies on display. And ironically the class of politicians is rarely targeted in this deadly war. The victims of the politics of corruption are Karen, Raymond, Daphne: civilians, ordinary people like John, Mary, Mohammed, and Paul, you and me, casualties of the coupling of politics with corruption. And they dare turn their weapons and terrorism on us, the ordinary public, civil society: by fear, intimidation, court cases, libel suits, and their armies of facebook commentators gloating over the assassination of us all.

We all listened to the Prime Minister's speech, that was measured and I believe heartfelt, but two things struck me, one said, the other unsaid. He said to us that we were all greater than this, and it is only right for a PM to give people hope, to make them think that right will triumph over might, even if at that very moment the conspirators were gloating with grim satisfaction. But on hearing the PM's speech I was disappointed, and perhaps others too, about the lack of reflection that this was not an external threat to society, as he suggested, like some localised infection that has to be tracked down and eradicated like some quotidian murder (many of which remained unsolved), but rather that the cancer was in the body politic, that the conspirators-assassins are produced by our state and society, by the concatenation of power and criminality, for make no mistake about this: this was no mere revenge for some personal slight that Daphne was sometimes liberal with, but criminality hiding behind power, that has power in its thrall, wrapping its tentacles of shadowy financial interests around the highest levels of our state, exposed by her writing, and put into motion by a dispersed cellular army of accountants, banks, clerks, purveyors of stolen explosives, professional experienced planters of bombs and assassins, and local scouts. There is an important law that holds true for all human society: the longer people get away with crimes the greater is their protection; the longer the protection the higher the interests involved. This protection ranges from the top to the bottom, from those in power to their loved ones, for in most cases there will be some significant other who will know the truth and may yet tell all.

The unsaid in the PM's speech? That this is nationally the most embarrassing incident for decades when the pretence that Malta is a European society that protects free speech was laid bare. We have to 'thank' the assassins for proving her right. We deplore the Prime Minister for not having had the courage to admit it and normalising this by turning it into the trite (and even worrying, because it 'goes without saying' unless it is already vulnerable): "nobody has the right to take another person's life". That omission-substitution gets close to a self-concealed hubris, the most dangerous illusion of them all. As an anthropologist I believe people when they say that they asked for state protection and did not get it. I have seen enough cynical State disregard for its subjects in my research not to conclude otherwise. We inhabit the Republic of Indifference in which regrettably we are all complicit. And if you rage against this, husband it jealously. Do not pawn it to those who would pretend to speak your ire in anticipation of your future repayment by compromised silences. For it is you, and your conscience.

A pleasant man when interviewed on TV made a heartfelt plea: "I am only here because I want my country back". But, my dear man, our country has long been devoured by maggots long before we were ushered into more of the same with "Malta taghna lkoll", a slogan designed to appeal to the greed of those who have been taught to view society as a cake to be redivided-up, excluded by the greed of those at the table before, unashamedly ushered in by the parties who turn politics into a football match. Society is not a cake; it is the product of our honest endeavours, each contributing in various modest ways to the common good, including those laying bare how the common good has been hijacked. The purveyors of that slogan should rue the day it was coined, a promised wind of change that we now reap as a whirlwind of cowardly assassinations, the theft of our institutions, and our attempted grinding down in fear, and all for lucre...

But you will not prevail. We, civil society, will stoke our ire and our rage. We shall feed it with actions, demonstrations, turning out in the streets, direct action, outside every International Meeting, Embassy and High Commission, in silent vigils, at every V18 event, taking the initiative, including expanding, by crowd funding, the Reward leading to a successful prosecution, to 5 million euro, because civil society has long lost faith in its elected representatives, and the initiative and the right has now passed to us. We cannot trust our 'representatives' and the institutions of the state; you have broken the pact linking society to the state. We can only trust ourselves, our will, and our determination that we shall get to the bottom of this and expunge this cancer from our midst. Have you not realised that the assassinated can be more dangerous than the living?

I want to conclude by recalling another aspect of Daphne - that she had other interests and loves, including food and the beautiful little things of life, that make us human and fill our lives with colour, and which she explored with passion in her magazine, *Taste and Flair*. I did not know her well, although she was one of my brightest students in the early 90's. Nor did I read her column regularly and I may have cringed at the sometimes sycophantic and obnoxious comments posted by her readers. But in those luscious magazine pages another Daphne appeared, one that left far behind the sordid little world of local nastiness, moral cheapness, and corruption that she exposed so bravely, and emerged cleansed and free. That was the other side to this Antigone who stood up to the hubris of power. I would like us to recall her also in this way, as more than the symbol of free speech that she has been obliged to become by the fateful pulls of her conscience. And I salute with humbled admiration, her quiet, measured, husband, Peter, and her sons, who stuck by their extraordinarily independently-minded plucky wife and mother at the ultimate cost to themselves, and whose concerned unconditional love and support should inspire us.

Prof Paul Sant Cassia