

VALLETTA'S CAPITAL AND THE NATIONAL STORY

Monuments serve as a dialogue of history orchestrated by the state towards its populace: so presenting past personages in an abstract form points to a lack of clear thinking on how best to reconstruct Valletta's public space for a proper cultural identity

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THE emergence of multiculturalism in a world in search of democratisation seems to have aroused a new awareness of one's national identity in an atmosphere of diversity. Researchers from different countries seem to be putting their own social collective memories under the lens to find out more about the characteristics that unite their communities in seeking a forward-looking path.

In recent months this was clearly manifested by phenomena and events that seem to have provoked the reactive outpouring of public expressions of nationalism conveying sympathy and solidarity following terror attacks on communal traditions. The Nice carnage on the French national day, July 14, and the Berlin massacre on December 19, attacking one

of Germany's surviving winter traditions – the popular Christmas markets – came close in the wake of strong public violations previously hitting Paris and Brussels.

Fairly or not they were all perceived as being a consequence of recent immigration mobility, the perpetrators of the attacks having been a handful of Muslim Arab criminals living in Europe. The ripple political effect appears to be getting out of hand as evidenced by the rise of extreme populist movements challenging the stability of long established liberal democracies such as that of the United Kingdom, Austria and the United States with France, Germany, the Netherlands and Italy lining up for their share of nationalistic, possibly unexpected upheavals in scheduled elections during 2017.

Historical background

The majority of European nations were established during the first half of the nineteenth century after actively searching for symbols, traditions and meanings of nationalism and identity. Emmanuel Joseph Sieyès in *Le Tiers État*, published on the eve of the French Revolution, opines that nations exist in the state of nature and are ultimately the source of power, will and law. They may slumber through centuries but continue to exist beneath the debris of history until the moment of their rebirth.

Reacting to discourse on patriotism in 1973, historian John Schaar opined that he believed a nation exists only in repeated acts of remembrance and renewal, through changing circumstances; he insisted that 'the patriot keeps his eye on the past, on places and things, on traditions'. In the USA it was perhaps the collective memories of ethnic groups that achieved the biggest visibility in recent times, mostly after Alex Haley's *Roots*.

The TV series was launched in 1977, based on the book, published a year before. With hindsight one could say that it must have generated the greatest American dream, when the United States elected its first coloured president in the new millennium, now completing his term after eight years in office.

American historian Michael Kammen reports that towards the end of the 1980s, 'the vigorous winds of strident nationalism' became less fashionable; initiatives were thus taken to find alternative ways of remembering, such as placing plaques at suitable sites in honour of neglected heroes. In 1981, a National Trust board member from Jacksonville, Oregon offered a long awaited definition of cultural heritage: an accumulation of large traditions, social, racial and religious, frequently built up from beyond time and memory. This seems to have encouraged private and public cultural societies to dedicate 55 per cent of 8,000 museums in the United States to history by the end of the decade.

During the last decades of the 19th century, beginning of the 20th, Europe, experiencing rapid social transformations, called for new devices to ensure social cohesion and identity. Industrialization, democratization and the expansion of mass electorates ushered in new methods of how to maintain public loyalty. To create these bonds new nation states tried to secure mass conformity with the help of new symbols, such as flags, national anthems, military uniforms, and new celebrations and rituals.

Britain witnessed the revival of royal ritualism to counterweight the dangers of popular democracy, while Italy was the only European nation which had to construct its traditions from scratch by inventing public ceremonies, erecting public monuments and developing education, justifying Azeglio's famous phrase 'We have made Italy, now we must make Italians'.

New traditions were also in store for the colonies. From the 1870s, in India and Africa, Britain set out to create a secure and usable past fitting the countries where 'authority was achieved'. Cohn (1983) gives a clear example of the British inventing a tradition in India with the modification of the Indian army uniform to include turbans, sashes and tunics, making it appear to be an 'authentic' local trait.

No civil commemorations

Contrastingly during the same 19th century on this Island colony Malta's politicians seem to have been struggling with how to identify with a culture originating in Italy or England. To a certain extent, under the British, Malta could still balance its newly introduced commemorations – colonial jubileations marking coronations and other trivialities of the British Empire – by its numerous holy days.

These liturgical observations included only one commemoration of a seemingly secular nature, that of the Knights' 1565 victory over the Ottomans. In all probability, it survived because the Catholic Church marks the Birth

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of the Blessed Virgin on the same day of the historic victory on September 8. Up to Independence in 1964 Malta enjoyed no other civil commemoration except those of the Empire.

This dearth of non-religious commemorations meant that for centuries the Maltese never invented any tradition that could unite them outside religion, reflecting an identity without a civic collective memory. Liturgy and the British Empire seem to have restrained secular nationalism in what Smith (2009) calls the evolution of the community's identity. The 1919 Sette Giugno popular rebellion produced four Maltese victims felled by British military gunfire in Valletta. At the time, the four heroes were immediately recognized by the workers, the intelligentsia – most of it Italianate in culture – and political groups, as symbols of nationalism.

Almost all social sectors united, with many of them gradually grouping themselves into better organized political parties to force London award Malta its first responsible government in 1921. Not unlike the 1798-1800 victims, the 1919 dead under British rule could only be remembered out of the public sphere, another 'blocked' colony-induced practice. Most of us have selective memories of what we learnt about the past, and in time may realise that part of the past could have been mobilized to serve partisan, ecclesiastical or other purposes.

Servile lethargy

While several secular masses in Europe cultivated common dress codes and activities, such as organized support for their own national and regional football teams, in the same vein, Malta seems to have fared best at inventing two major unusual activities for decades: a set of two opposing loose forces of Maltese football supporters one for England, the ex-colonizer, and the other for Italy, the Island's old terra madre, as if the Maltese had no nationality of their own.

The colonial years had produced this presumed historical malady that is blocking out what is one's own for what one considers to be superior to one's native heritage and identity. Under British rule one could comprehend an amount of lethargy induced by servility towards one's national memory, but after independence society was expected to change faster and feel freer in its own sovereignty to construct a vigorous liberated memory. Post-independent authoritative decisions or indeed omissions do not always indicate this is happening, though.

After erecting a Sette Giugno monument at the Addolorata Cemetery in 1925 – away from the British gaze – Maltese society had to wait another 61 years to erect a proper national monument to its past heroes in the main square in Valletta. In 1986, a Labour government built the monument, while the succeeding Nationalist one, three years later, upgraded Sette Giugno – as the event came to be known – to one of the five national days of the country.

The first official celebration of this event, enjoying the support of both political parties represented in the Maltese parliament, took place



A gloomy view of the President's Palace during Yuletide, covered up for festive projections, shows lack of respect for the office of the Republic's highest authority.

in the same year, consolidating a widespread sense of identification. But unfortunately, if not also ironically, in 2009, merely 20 years later, this significant national monument, belonging to a united collective memory, was relegated to an obscure corner of Valletta on the peripheral bastions of the city by a government whose party, the Nationalist Party, way back in 1919 had politically exploited the original event and helped generate the anti-British memory for quite some time.

Auspiciously at the end of 2016, after a popular consultation exercise, the monument was returned to its rightful place on St George's Square, restoring a memory balance in a space otherwise dominated by an out-size British royal insignia facing the republican President's Palace. Atop the Main Guard, under the crest an inscription recalls how 'by the love of the Maltese' – who were informed of Malta's imperious absorption into the British Empire three and a half years after the Paris and Vienna post-Waterloo Congress – the Island became a British protectorate.

Contrary to what was asserted in the recent 2016 A Strategy for Valletta public consultation draft published by the Planning Authority in June (<https://opm.gov.mt/en/Documents/Public%20Consultations/A%20Strategy%20for%20Valletta%20-%20A%20Public%20Consultation%20Draft.pdf>, page 14), in 1813, first governor Thomas Maitland, after receiving orders to remove the Knights' escutcheons in Valletta and replace them with the British coat-of-arms, not only did not 'ignore' such orders but erected several huge coats of arms around the palace.

Lord Bathurst's order to promote public loyalty to the British Crown knew no bounds:

Maitland put up similar royal insignia in the palatial courtyard, in the Bibliotheca, in Merchants Street (bizarrely superimposed on Zondadari's bust), in St Paul Street at the entrance of the Old University and another huge replica on top of Victoria Gate replacing Porta Marina, besides a number of others in Floriana.

In postcolonial spaces 'the stories of the past... are always contested; which milestones to celebrate; which tragedies to mourn; which figures to venerate and which to delete'. Independent republican Malta still appears to continue 'venerating' this perceived 'superior' past, unwittingly manifesting a national sense of presumed inferiority among nations. Moreover this is blocking other possible local monuments – Vassalli's is a case in point – which deserve their rightful place in the capital.

Furthermore the numerous British royal crests in Valletta complement the odd 20 other colonialist monuments to governors and lesser known British officials obtrusively including Queen Victoria in Republic Square by the side of the same palace. One can only speculate that when this spring, Britain triggers Article 50 to leave the European Union, possibly in the same palace, it will feel better knowing that it does so in a building where Britannia remains the symbolic ruler of another EU capital. Valletta appears to be blocking its own national story to relate instead that of the dominating ex-colonialist.

Filling historical gaps

On the road to celebrating Valletta as the European City of Culture in 2018 a number of initiatives have been taken some of which fully respect residents as should be the case. Though it is wise to address the capital's citizenry when altering Valletta's landscape one must also remember however that the peninsular city also tells the national story. National monuments – only a handful of substantial ones exist in Valletta – should replace less significant colonial memorials like that of the 1816 Lieut. Col. Edwards, Maitland's secretary in Ceylon, occupying pride of place in front of the lift at the Upper Barrakka Gardens.

In recent years and since the building of Renzo Piano's artistic modern idiom at its entrance, Valletta seems to be taking a favourable stance towards abstract expressions of historical personages and events, perhaps not always with the expected success. The 2015 Valletta Summit monument on Castille Square remains tied in knots. Along with La Valette's statue, hastily erected in 2012 in the small square behind the converted Opera House ruins 450 years too late, last December another new monument found its place in the precincts of the same Piano complex: this time it was the turn of the city's original architects Laparelli and Glormu Cassar to receive homage in a contemporary variety.

It may be wise to move with the times and present quasi-abstract images as long as the message comes through. Monuments are erected to serve as a dialogue of history orchestrated by the state towards its populace even if at the expense of some private entity (as in the case of La Valette and Laparelli-Cassar memorials) and therefore possibly not forming part of an integral long-term plan.

Identity formation

The recently published report on history questions as tackled by O level history students uncovers the confusion in the minds of certain students regarding the visual display of our past through monuments. Some students (happily over 60% passed) did not succeed to answer correctly a question about Malta's prime ministers whose effigies decorate Valletta's corners in different poses.

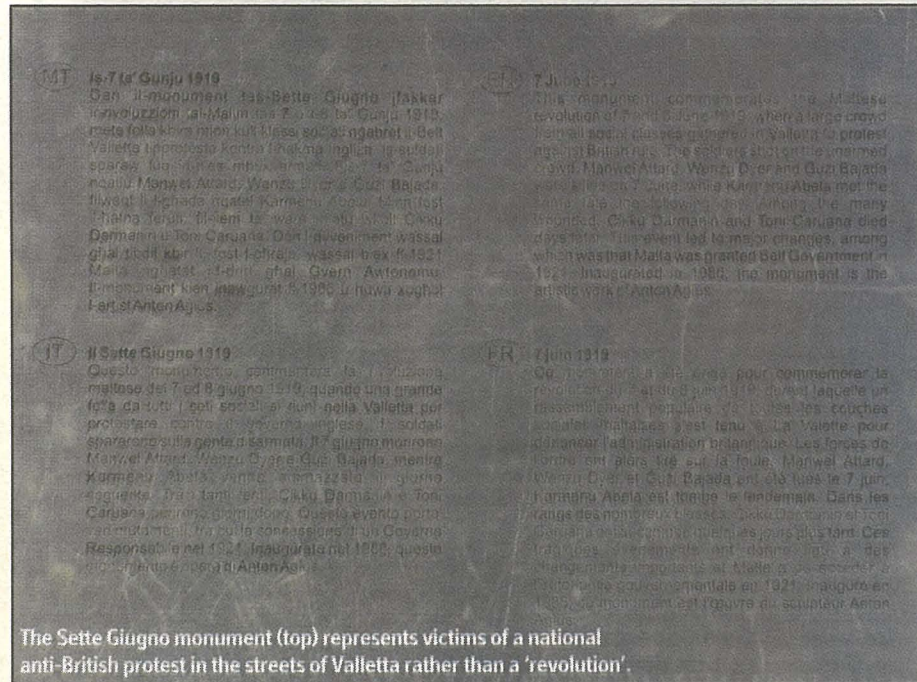
A lack of testimonials of Napoleon Bonaparte's one week stay in Valletta in 1798 – a commemorative indication where he landed would not be amiss – led students to mistakenly believe the French Emperor was a post-war Maltese political leader. One can imagine Laparelli's and Cassar's fate as to what historical information this new vague memorial is able to convey about the latter's early contribution to Malta's identity through the building of a city that put the Islands on the map.

Such initiatives to represent hitherto little-exposed past personages in an abstract form, while fitting in with contemporary expression may on the other hand point to a lack of clear thinking on how best to reconstruct Valletta's public space testimonials for a proper cultural identity. Planners may be overlooking the important role of the capital city as the guardian of the national story, which needs to be told and understood.

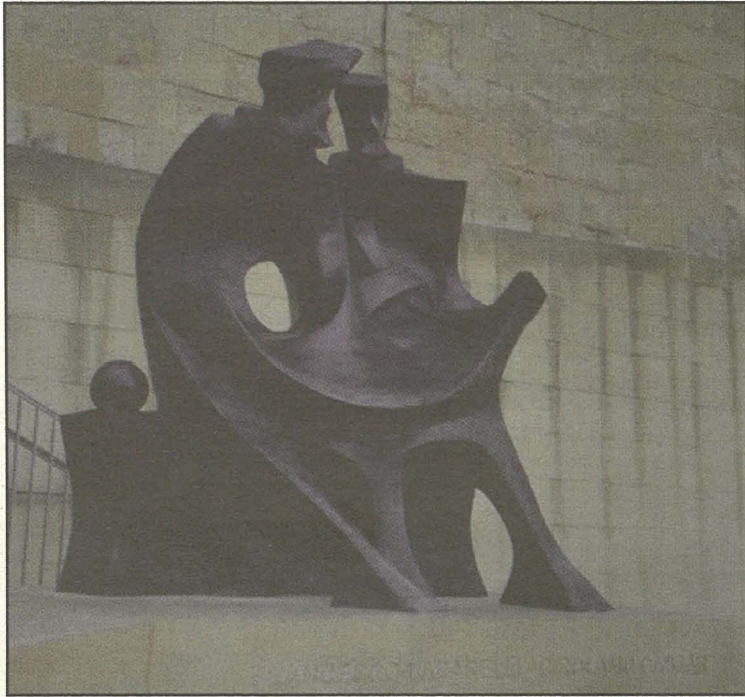
A practical step that might help in the short term would be to follow the example of Austria where every national monument, memorial or architectural gem is marked by a pennant with the national colours (just plain red and white) accompanied by brief but essential information. This has been excellently done in the case of the newly placed Sette Giugno on St George's Square. A plaque in four languages succinctly explains the whole event – except perhaps for the word 'revolution' – technically one might qualify it as a strong national protest.

Nothing wrong in opting to generate monuments in a modern artistic idiom but without bothering to fill in the historical gaps we missed during the 19th century with clearer imagery we risk plodding ahead rather than marching towards this vital objective. The known is trustworthy while the unknown may not always be immediately trusted.

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The Sette Giugno monument (top) represents victims of a national anti-British protest in the streets of Valletta rather than a 'revolution'.



Laparelli-Cassar newly placed monument near Parliament – will it gain lost ground in promoting deserved recognition of the Valletta builders?