

Democracy brings History and Hope together through Learning and Education¹

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For six years I have been coming to Larissa. Each year a crisis; each year a different crisis. The progress of our work together is marked by the challenge of dealing with crises. However, each time we plan, we implement and work toward increasing the knowledge and learning of the city.

I remember Jürgen Habermas writing about crises. He says they force us to learn new knowledge. I am also remembering Mikis Theodorakis [Μιχαήλ "Μίκης" Θεοδωράκης] and Fofi Gennimata [Φώφη Γεννηματά]. We remember, we recall, we tell the stories, we celebrate, we listen to their words and play the music again to keep in our minds what has passed into history. Sometimes we just share or like on Facebook. But crises is not a recent phenomenon. Όχι Day has just passed on October 28 is typical of crisis in history and also Liberation of Larissa from German (Nazi) occupation (October 23, 1944). The task is to engage in history (ανάμνηση) and remembering and co-memorating rather than engaging in nostalgia (νοσταλγία) – longing for the past. Historical means an ability to look to the past and remember as a platform for future work.

¹ Paper at Roundtable during Conference on 200 Years of the Greek Revolution: Democracy yesterday, today and tomorrow. Theme: Larissa, the Commune of Thessaly, the Greek Revolution and the Challenges of Democracy today in a time of Crises, November 13, 2021

As you ask this old man to come here today from far away to say some words I recall the words of the great Irish author Samuel Beckett who was asked if he would like to have the past back again: *Perhaps my best years are gone. When there was a chance of happiness. But I wouldn't want them back. Not with the fire that's in me now. No, I wouldn't want them back*" (Beckett, (1959). You will be delighted to hear that I am not going to talk about the Ottoman Empire, or the future. Both of these I know very little about. I know very little about Greek history, the past. I know nothing about the future. But the future does concern me a great deal. We only have the past to rely on and our experience and memories that will have to be transformed in this present moment if we are to face the future.

We have survived covid, so far. We have made many mistakes, we have made great discoveries. We have suffered, as in a war, many casualties and too many are carrying long term injuries. Post covid, long covid, sadness, anxieties, depression, bereavements. Covid is also a social disease. The people we need to survive became the enemy of our own health. We will recover. This is so like all crises such as the Greek Revolution and Civil War. One hundred years ago Ireland had also a War of Independence and a Civil War.

If we attend to our own experience, our imagination and pay close attention we will learn from history. This is why we tell the children and teach in the schools that there is a history, there are stories of war and stories of peace, of successes and of failures. They are ways of forging our own identity as we stand at the point here where the past meets the future. We remember for all these reasons and we remember for other reasons too.

History demands learning – to find out what happened and why it happened. The most popular courses in an adult education programme are so often the local history where people try to recall and tell and understand better not just the past but who they are now and who they want to be in the future.

Your mayor Apostolos Kalogiannis (Απόστολος Καλογιάννης) in a recent interview in the local paper spoke of his memories of Larissa growing-up: He spoke of the courtyards, he said:

I miss the smell of the courtyards.
The beautiful courtyards with the roses, the bougainvillea.
People sitting outside them on sidewalks.
The good morning they said to each other with ease.
The concept of the neighborhood.

This attitude of care and connection is the basis on which a community is built; it is the basis ingredient on which a city grows. Without this care and attention to each other there cannot be a debate with respect and recognition. These experiences of care are the preconditions for democracy and for freedom. Freedom is not always won in battle, though sometimes it is required. One of the great battles of the moment is about how to bring the next generation of young people forward in way that they can care for each other, for nature, for the planet. This does not mean that we are only interested in nostalgia. Vaccines will not solve the next crisis.

History is remembering. And the task for us is to remember, and own the history. Those who are against democracy want to invent their version of the past – a fiction that will support their ideology. History is perhaps the essential element in the effort by authoritarianism to remove democracy. The stories of the past that are told make a government legitimate and so whoever owns the narrative controls legitimacy - to a great extent. It is the current position of the far far right to tell of tales of a glorious past that can be re-created...make America great again. The past is not always so great and the task for us is to make history not just by remembering the past but by making the future...that is the way to make history. So the task of commemorating is to recall the past in a truthful way, warts and all, build on the positive, reject the mistakes and through work and learning make the future. That is how to make history. This is the task of adult education too.

People love local history because it is the story of our own people and our own place and the stories that make up our identity. The risk in history are:

1. The world that values functionality, efficiency, technology, profit, is more likely to drive for a careless modernization such as driving modern infrastructure (metaphorically and literally) through our heritage.
2. The systematic distorting of history for irrational and ideological purposes (Hobsbawm, 1997). A great example of this is the total (almost) deleting of the stories of women – until recently – from the history of most countries – in order to keep male dominance to the fore.

Memory is indeed about looking to the past not to make it a reality again but to make a better future. Somethings however are certain: tomorrow we face greater crises than before (climate change). Politicians and their system made Paris climate change agreements in 2015 and targets were either ignored or deleted. Democracy is the same. Great words in favour of Socrates, speeches about the ways the Ottoman Empire crumbled, but the struggle to be democratic demands learning again and again, constantly. It is the only form of government that demands relentless learning. It is so difficult that it may even be easier to give up on occasion.

The challenge is to make history.

Hobsbawm, E. (1997). *On history*. New York: The New Press.