

National

School that spawns activists is to offer courses in Malta

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With the continued controversy surrounding the American University of Malta, another major foreign university planning to open its doors in Malta in the coming months has largely slipped under the radar.

European Graduate School president Hubertus von Amelunxen, however, is not at all concerned that the AUM controversy could negatively affect his university – because, as he describes it, the two could hardly be more different.

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“We are a non-profit university that has never had and will never have any property,” he told the *Times of Malta* while in the country on a brief visit. “If a university is more focused on questions of real estate than curriculum, that’s a problem.”

“I don’t think there’s a problem with foreign universities in Malta; I think there’s a scepticism about what [the AUM] wants to achieve.”

The EGS, which will hold its first residency in Valletta in March, was established in Switzerland in 1994, offering Master’s and doctorate-level degrees from a campus in the remote mountain village of Saas-Fee.

Since then, it has established itself as an unconventional centre for cross-disciplinary study, with a unique focus on collaborative learning and a dedicated commitment to fostering radical social change.

The Occupy Wall Street protests and Spanish political



European Graduate School president Hubertus von Amelunxen: His university’s students learn “the possibility of facing authorities”. Photo: Matthew Mirabelli

party Podemos, now at the forefront of the European anti-austerity movement, both started their life as projects created by students during the course of their studies.

The EGS faculty, meanwhile, has included such names as French philosopher Jean Baudrillard and Slovenian writer Slavoj Žižek.

“We are the most non-academic academia you can imagine,” Prof. von Amelunxen said. “Our faculty is all highly engaged and are here specifically because they are who they are and because they refuse to hide themselves from the broader world.”

The EGS was accredited and licensed in Malta as a higher education institution last year, and is

also fully accredited under the European Bologna process.

While it will not have a permanent campus in Malta, the EGS plans to set up a long-term presence on the island through a series of one-month residencies, the first taking place in March at Fort St Elmo.

The residency will see high-profile academics including American philosopher Judith Butler and Cameroonian political scientist Achille Mbembe delivering intensive sessions on subjects ranging from politics and philosophy to filmmaking, all while living and working with students.

After their residency, students continue work on individual projects in close communication with the faculty. The end result

has been a tight community of alumni which now includes influential professors, activists, politicians and artists.

According to Prof. von Amelunxen, this interdisciplinary approach is a core part of the EGS philosophy.

“Students come to us with a strong grounding in their own disciplines: whether in business, the arts, philosophy or film,” he said. “Here they leave that grounding and broaden their knowledge. It’s like a blossoming: they’re learning, in a highly concentrated way, the possibility of facing authorities, whether of knowledge or culture.”

The decision to establish a presence in Malta – the university’s only one outside Switzerland – follows years of

discussions initiated by the late Fr Prof. Peter Serracino Inglott.

For Prof. von Amelunxen, Malta’s unique geopolitical perspective offers the EGS an opportunity to act as a bridge of thinking and explore the “translatability of cultures” at a time when traditional understanding of culture and borders is undergoing revolutionary change.

“The EGS has always been built on a cosmopolitan view of the world and a very precise ethic and critique of politics,” he said.

Far from the mountains of Saas-Fee, the setting up of the EGS in Malta will test whether this philosophy can take root in a wholly new context, and whether the next Podemos can emerge from a lecture room in Valletta.

Gozo Bishop seeks confession ‘reform’

A series of measures intended to promote the sacrament of confession as a means of reconciliation among those who no longer feel at ease with the Church were announced by Gozo Bishop Mario Grech.

Addressing members of the clergy during the exchange of New Year greetings at the Gozo Seminary in Victoria, Mgr Grech last Saturday called on parish churches to remain open till late at least once a week to offer confession. In addition, efforts should be made to have fixed hours for confession to make it easier for those wishing to reconcile with God, he said.

He also proposed better facilities to ensure more confidentiality during confession, while urging priests to dedicate more of their time to the purpose.

In his address, Mgr Grech had strong words for members of the clergy who viewed this sacrament as a “torture chamber” for those who wanted to repent, or as a form of psychological counselling.

“Confession is not a tribunal, but an experience through which one can be forgiven for his sins,” he said.

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Quoting from a speech by Pope Francis in Cuba last September, he said the clergy “should never get tired” of following God’s example and forgive.

Mgr Grech also criticised those who resorted to confession as a form of “passport” to be eligible for communion, saying it was a much richer experience. “A reform in this sacrament might bring with it a reform within the people and the ecclesial community.”



Mgr Grech delivering his address to the clergy during last Saturday’s exchange of greetings for the New Year. Photo: Mario Mercieca