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Teacher Power and the Struggle for Democracy: an educational movement in Malta

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ABSTRACT This paper gives an account of the formation of a social movement of teachers in Malta, of which the author was a founder-member. The Movement (Moviment Edukazzjoni Umana) was set up by a group of student-teachers wishing to link humanistic perspectives with a critical theory of schooling, and mainly as a political response to a centralised state educational system which was considered to be not only unresponsive to the needs of its students and teachers, but also undemocratic at a number of levels. The Movement's main goal is to develop participatory democracies in school communities, and to work as a pressure group in order to influence educational policy-making at the national level. Towards this end it has embarked on a multi-faceted project which includes the formation of action groups that tackle a diversity of issues. The paper contextualises the setting up and development of the Movement within a theoretical tradition that privileges social movements, arguing that such a perspective can help in shifting sociology of education's preoccupation with the critique of social and cultural reproduction to a more astute and politically effective agenda.

For the very act of sociological analysis is to rediscover the movements of social relations (that is, both social conflicts and cultural orientations) behind power, order, and the mechanisms, whereas the goal of democratic action must be equally to rediscover the action of the dominated and oppressed behind the veils of class domination, historical heritage, or state power ... The first duty of the sociologist is to analyze social action, just as it is produced, consumed, spoken and fought over. (Touraine, 1981a, pp. 84-5)
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Introduction: portraying teachers

In his book *Social Analysis of Education: after the new sociology*, Wexler (1987) gave fullest expression to a mounting disillusionment with the kind of theoretical and methodological work in education that had developed in the seventies and eighties. While the language of critique of the 'new' sociology of education had been particularly important to problematise the hitherto hegemonic view that more (of the same) education was of benefit to all, it also led to a dangerous pessimism about the potential of educational projects to democratise structures and cultures.

That deep sense of pessimism also emerged in the sociological portraits of teachers as 'social actors' within schools and the public sphere. Thus, teachers (as class agents, or as workers caught in a limiting cultural labour environment) have either been ignored and taken for granted (Lawn & Grace, 1987, p. vii), or generally presented as systems-maintenance agents who have neither the will, wisdom nor wit to engage in transformative activity within or outside schools. Some accounts, such as those of Connell (1985), moved away from the early emphasis on mechanistic reproduction within the context of a thesis of inevitability, in order to stress instead "human agency within structural constraints, the 'relative autonomy' of some superstructural sectors, and the idea of hegemonic limits rather than determined necessity" (Burbules, 1986, p. 302). This type of analysis seemed to hold more promise because the struggle for democratic education was portrayed in *international terms*, rather than in *positional terms*. In other words, the emphasis was placed on what gives one group more negotiating strength than the parties with which it interacts rather than on a macchiavellian, overpowering political elite or dominant class (Archer, 1986; Lawn & Grace, 1987; Kean, 1990). The potential of seeing educational work in productive rather than reproductive terms was not realised, however. The same sense of despair, prevalent in the earlier accounts, re-emerged as the likelihood of enrolling teachers in sufficiently weighty numbers in the struggle for a participatory democracy which addressed not only the educational, but the political and the economic sphere as well seemed remote (cf. Sultana, 1987, 1991a). As Archer (1986, p. 78) points out, with particular reference to the work of Anyon (1981) and Apple (1982), the new emphasis on resistance simply led to a more complex *form* of correspondence theory: this time round, incorporation was to take place through contestation. In other words, "all things, though more things, still work together for good reproduction" (Archer, 1986, p. 78).

That sense of scepticism was, of course, empirically founded. Furthermore, given the sustained offensive on education in most countries and the reversal of many of the egalitarian and progressive trends of the social democratic settlement of the 1960s and 1970s, it is not surprising that most discourse on teachers reflects the disillusionment that these frontline,
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tired troops are experiencing. Under what is probably the most serious onslaught from central government ever to be endured by teachers (Crozier, 1989, p. 263), educational theory and practice has fallen on the defence, developing crisis-management strategies rather than proactive projects involving mobilisation and counter-offensives. When the latter kind of activity has been organised, it has taken place within a framework of industrial unionism in favour of better salaries and/or conditions of work, rather than with the goal of developing a truly critical professional unionism which sets into motion democratic processes to empower students, communities and underprivileged groups (Kerchner & Mitchell, 1991).

It is crisis-management, however, which most characterises contemporary activity on the part of the Left in the field of education. Nowhere is this more visible than in the retreat into increasingly abstract theorising and the withdrawal from 'macro' political engagement. The battleground for the educational democratic struggle has increasingly focussed on the classroom, and political work has been constructed almost exclusively in terms of 'micro' strategies within schools. Thus, Kanpol (1989, p. 3) argues, for instance, that the best that progressive teachers can do is to develop individual and/or group resistance, within schools, towards structural and cultural constraints. This kind of approach has become popular in Britain, and underlies much of what passes under the name of 'action research', which in its best moments helps reveal to teachers the "transient and contingent status of their practice in a way which makes it amenable to critical transformation" (Carr, 1989, p. 87). In Northern America we find similar 'micro' strategic political educational activities which aim to do 'consciousness-raising' work with experienced teachers (e.g. Simon et al, 1991), university students (e.g. Ellsworth, 1989) and would-be teachers on college programmes (e.g. Cochran-Smith, 1991). The intention of this political work is to encourage the development of critical perspectives on schooling as well as commitments to 'work against the grain' inside schools.

'Micro' Responses

Many of these 'new' approaches to the political work of teachers are an advance on previous models for promoting change, since they listen to and respect the practitioners' perspectives rather than consider these to be unenlightened and unimportant. But there are grave implications for an approach that focuses solely on an 'interactionist' dimension and which excludes an organised attempt to link grass-roots activity with larger movements. It seems that, in tune with the post-modern decentring of the subject, it has become increasingly difficult to adopt 'master' or even 'grand' narratives (McLaren, 1988), and very tempting to engage in a fragmented and fragmentary 'realism'. In this context, the only way forward seems to be the pragmatic utilisation of the 'spaces' created by the predominant political forces of the time. This is defensive and weak for at least two reasons. In the
first place, as Kean's work (1989, 1990) has shown us, opponents utilising a 'micro' approach are much more likely to be drawn on the ideological and political grounds provided by the wider institutional framework. In the second place, 'micro' responses which involve 'working from within' can, ironically, often lead to "individualised responses: the very ideology (of individualism) that is embodied in Thatcherism and that socialist educators should be challenging" (Crozier, 1989, p. 266).

'Macro' Responses

It has therefore become increasingly obvious that radical educational theory on democracy and schooling, and the role of the teacher in that struggle, has gone the long road of critique without offering much in terms of politically effective alternative educational practice. The more that that critique has become theoretically sophisticated, the more it seems to inherit the same weakness of the tradition which has been its main inspiration over the past two decades. Thus, Therborn's comment on critical theory seems to be equally applicable to progressive work in education, when he argues that "The over-politicization of theory leads logically to the substitution of the theory as a surrogate for politics - an Ersatzpolitik" (Therborn, 1978, p. 91). Gone are the political educational strategies on the Gramscian scale, for instance, or the militancy that Torres (1986) reports in the context of revolutionary Grenada, and the likes of Wolpe & Donald (1983) promoted when they advocated the forging of alliances between educators on the Left with parents, teachers and students. There have been few organised and co-ordinated active responses on the part of the Left as a reaction to the increasingly technicised views of education, to the rise of the new Right and the concomitant re-definition of democracy and citizenship as a respect for the law. There have been, as Crozier (1989) points out in her consideration of the future for progressive and democratic education, a spate of critiques by academics, but rarely have these critiques been translated into the effective movements that, for instance, have characterised the campaign against racism and sexism in education.

Social Movements and Education

One way of moving beyond micro/interactionist perspectives to political work in education is to see the latter as a field of debates and projects which, with the active participation of practitioners and other committed educators, can become a movement in its own right, linking up with other social movements in order to promote a vision of democratic forms of life. The literature on 'social movements', as it is expressed in the French school led by Alain Touraine and Manuel Castells, is a useful theoretical resource for educators who wish to move beyond observing and interpreting events to the active building of alternative educational structures and cultures. For one thing,
social movement perspectives stress the "production of society by itself" (Touraine, 1977), and hence take us away from accounts that portray well-nigh complete control/domination, and which promote a picture of society without actors, buried as these have been within overarching structures, systemic 'needs', or rationalist theories of strategies and decision (Touraine, 1985, p. 782). Social action theory therefore highlights the fact that contestation and conflict rather than social adhesion, control and manipulation are the vital stuff of any social formation, and that actors are not necessarily victims, or structural or cultural 'dopes', but rather potential members of movements for organised contestation. The role of theory, and of sociologists in particular, would be to facilitate the process by which social actors interpret their particular struggles as part of a wider battle that needs to be fought on a number of fronts. In the field of education, this would mean emphasising the relative autonomy of schooling in order to occupy, proactively, this particular contextual site in favour of democratic ends (Touraine, 1985, pp. 782-783), and to build alliances with similar struggles taking place in the public sphere.

History has indeed taught us that democratic struggles have generally not been won as a result of individual action within the classroom or school. Rather, it is only when this kind of activity is placed within a larger political context that the pressures exerted by social movements on particular issues will create the structural and cultural conditions, as well as the critical mass, required for change to come about (Carnoy & Levin, 1985). Carnoy (1983, p. 41) had in fact stated that

"Democracy has been developed by social movements, and those intellectuals and educators who were able to implement democratic reforms in education did so in part through appeals to such movements. If the working people, minorities, and women who have formed the social movements pressing for greater democracy in our society cannot be mobilized behind equality in education, with the increased public spending that this requires, there is absolutely no possibility that equality in education will be implemented."

Social movements in fact represent the organised mobilisation of people, carrying with them as they do the promise to respond to issues that resonate with feelings, anxieties, wishes, dreams and fears in the wider community. Touraine (1985) suggests that the central social movement of our time is the anti-technocratic movement whose main goal is self-management and self-determination, and that this in itself constitutes a major form of counter-hegemonic practice because it interprets very powerfully the attempts of 'society' to liberate itself from 'power' – i.e. the eighteenth century idea of the separation between civil society and state. Touraine's proposition has important analytic and political repercussions, for he is arguing that in today's programmed society, "domination can no longer be challenged by a call to metasocial principles [e.g. order of things, divine rule, natural law, historical evolution, the idea of modernity]; only a direct
call to personal and collective freedom and responsibility can foster protest movements". How the 'new' Right has successfully appropriated these desires and fears and transformed them into a new imagery and language to mobilise large groups of people for conservative/reactionary ends has been documented by Apple (1989) among others. The question arises immediately: should it not be a political strategy of utmost priority for people on the Left to be as responsive to the movements of our times, and to develop a different ‘arch of social dreaming’ in the educational field as elsewhere?

This kind of project calls for new research horizons and the development of new political skills in those of us who would work with teachers in establishing democratic forms of life in education and other social sites. It requires a more astute way of linking the basic insights provided by structuralism and interactionism in order to be able to tease out, in particular historical conjunctures, the possibilities that exist to promote democracy. In other words, the idea of 'movement' should not signify that, once we accept that society produces itself, then there ought to be a vacuous celebration of 'agency'. Rather, we reflect on the historical contingency of forms in order to explore, à la Archer (1979, 1986), such crucial and strategically important questions as when, where, and under what conditions do which parts of the social structure and different social groups exert most influences upon educational activities.[1] It is this kind of “specification of degrees of freedom and stringency of constraints [which] makes it possible to theorize about variations in voluntarism and determinism (and their consequences)” (Archer, 1982, p. 477), and which will give rise to the kind of political work in education that I am recommending.

This is exactly the place where we can begin to appreciate the importance of educational social movements, where, after analysing systemic properties in conjunction with an understanding of educational interaction, we can determine the possibility and the probability of the influence that such movements can exert. Thus, if we accept Archer's (1986, p. 68) premise that “educational systems are differentially penetrable to different social groups; [that] they are never equally permeable to all, and [that] at any given time they are usually impenetrable to some”, we can then start specifying the instances over time in which different types of strategic contestations and negotiations can have an effect in a particular type of society, and to understand who can introduce change, where and how (Archer, 1986, p. 83).[2]

What follows is an account of the formation of such a transformative project in Malta, the Moviment Edukazzjoni Umana (MEU).[3] My intention is to present a case-study to illustrate how a perspective that privileges educational social movements facilitates the development of new ways of conceptualising the link between our work as educators and the quest for democratic and just forms of life.
Struggling for Democracy: social action through the MEU

It needs to be established at the outset that the MEU, of which I was one of the founder-members in August 1990, is not the derived action from a particular theory — indeed, for a long time our action was ahead of our theory, and the sections above represent an attempt to theorise my action in a reflexive manner in order to give shape and form to a number of what were experienced as 'spontaneous' initiatives. It needs also to be established that this is very much a personal account, written after reflecting with other movement members about our 'story'. It would certainly have been more appropriate to have made this a collaborative writing activity, something which I still have to learn to do so that a text bears some of the multiple voices (Lather, 1991) that make up the Movement. Finally, it should be obvious that there are a number of ways of writing about and analysing a movement. Offe (1985, p. 221) suggests three theoretical perspectives, i.e. those which look at a movement from 'below' (or psychological explanations), from 'within' (or social psychological and systems-oriented explanations) and from 'above' (or structural explanations), and that when we combine all three perspectives we arrive at a more complex understanding. While there are strands of all three perspectives in the following account, I stress the French school approach to highlight structural processes, and follow Hannigan’s (1985) and McAdam et al’s (1988) useful categorisational descriptors of movements to highlight the MEU’s context, genesis and defining characteristics as well as its basis for collective action, its organisation, its linkage with external fields, and its outcomes. Above all, the following account reflects both what we are and what we hope to/will become.

Context and Genesis: setting up an educational movement

Malta lies awkwardly, geographically, politically and culturally, between two worlds. Its small size and almost absolute lack of natural resources make it a conditioned state (Carnoy & Samoff, 1990) and, while since its independence from Britain in 1964 it has built up its own form of state capitalism (Vella, 1989), it is still heavily reliant on investment by foreign (mainly European) industrialists who are attracted by low labour costs, a relatively docile workforce, and financial incentives such as tax holidays and low rental costs for factory units. Despite rapid socio-economic development (Briguglio, 1988), Abela (1991) reports that in Malta, unlike most other European nations, there is not much evidence of a culture shift from a traditional to a post-traditional value orientation and since it is “still on the threshold of overcoming scarcity [...], its values are predominantly traditional and dependent on material concerns” (Abela, 1991, p. 265). This is a key to understanding the types of (new middle class, but above all formally
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educated) actors who are likely to be caught up in new social movements, many of which are more concerned about post-materialist values such as care for the environment.

Key elements in Malta's political history after gaining independence from Britain in 1964 were three terms of Labour Party administration (between 1971 and 1987) which saw the formation of a state capitalism of sorts, the development of an indigenous industrial base, and an increasingly top-down state intervention in the economic, educative, moral and cultural spheres (Zammit, 1984). Traditional authority structures represented by the clerico-professional classes were challenged by an emphasis on lessening the differences between social classes (the distance between top and bottom salaries in the civil service were reduced from fifteen to five times, for instance, while in education we find the banning of streaming, the introduction of comprehensives, and positive discrimination in favour of students from state schools applying to enter university courses), an emphasis in favour of secularisation (e.g. attempts to nationalise church property and schools, introduction of civil marriage, setting up of a strong welfare state which competed with traditional church services), the restructuring of health services (with the state tightening its control over doctors) and of university (dissolving most humanities courses, emphasising utilitarian degrees, banning the faculty of theology, introducing a Maltese version of Mao's student-worker scheme). This led to a number of organised reactions by the middle and the growing new middle classes in Malta (Vella, 1989), which consolidated even further the division of the Maltese into two 'nations'; those who support Labour and those who support the Nationalist Party. As Baldacchino (1989, p. 109) notes,

In spite of many policy convergences between the MLP and NP, perceived outcomes of policy decisions as well as the political behaviour of partisan supporters is more consonant to the analogy of ethnic conflict... Given the two-party structure of Maltese politics, sympathizers of the party in opposition tend to view themselves as an oppressed ethnic group.

These two parties have, in Offe's terms (1985, p. 243), transformed themselves from "class parties" into "mass integration parties". As catch-all political groups, they have perforce traded their ideological differences and normative base for the sake of as wide a popular appeal as possible.

A key organised reaction against Labour policies was in the field of education. The teachers' union [4] organised an eight-week strike against the government for its handling of teachers, while parents mobilised themselves successfully against the government's intention to nationalise private schools (Darmanin, 1985). The Nationalist Party was elected in 1987 with the express promise to roll back the state apparatus, and to allow pluralism (key electoral slogans were 'dialogue', 'participation' and 'democracy'). In education this has meant the proliferation of private schools (close to 30% of all students attend these institutions) (Sultana, 1991b), for instance, but it
has not led to the de-centralisation of the state school system (Darmanin, 1990; Farrugia, 1992). Rather, a new Education Act (1988) legislated a centrally controlled National Minimum Curriculum, syllabi and national examination systems applicable to all schools, further threatening any semblance of teachers' professional autonomy in both state and private schools (Wain, 1991).

Such political, economic and cultural information is important if we are to situationally embed the setting up of the MEU as an organised response to centralised state policies, and its potential of linking the contradictions that develop in and between the three levels (Harper, 1989, p. 140). In the political sphere, the freeing of speech (with pluralist media coverage of events) and the emphasis on a discourse of participatory democracy gave further impetus to pressure groups to assert agendas (and counter agendas) such as the protection of animals and the environment (and the right to hunt birds by an opposing pressure group), the civic and labour rights of women (and of men), the tolerance for emarginated people such as homosexuals, the rights of consumers, the rights of parents whose children attend state schools, and so on. As McAdam et al (1988, p. 699) point out, such changes in the structure of political opportunities, i.e. "the receptivity or vulnerability of the political system to organized protest by a given challenging group" are of crucial importance to the ebb and flow of movement activity.

This welter of movements, while evidently not mass, political movements, actually resonate with intensely personal and critical collective expression (Wexler, 1987, p. 228) in response to felt socio-cultural changes, and therefore, even when not organised, refer to historical trends and powerful undercurrents. The key referent for movement (in the Tourainean sense of the word) in education in Malta at this particular historical conjuncture is not 'equality' and 'equity', but rather 'humanism'. The former terms, together with a strong dose of human capital theory, had been the ideological terrain for the Labour Party's educational policies (Sultana, 1991b), and with the delegitimation of many of these innovations (removal of streaming, introduction of comprehensives, removal of end-of-year national examinations, critique of private schooling) during the second and third term of government by the MLP, the pendulum swung back to a tiered, segmented schooling system with the bulk of resources going to junior lyceum, grammar-type schools. In addition to this, labour market development meant that many new occupational opportunities were created in the public sector and in the tertiary sector where most service-oriented activities are directly or indirectly related to tourism. Credentialism became increasingly important, and investment in schooling offered new escape routes out of the lower status (if, in many instances, more financially lucrative) manual jobs. This has led to a situation where students in academic streams are pushed, by parents and teachers alike, into a narrow, examination-oriented and straitjacketed schooling. Close to 60% of primary school students, and over 70% of all students in state schools, go for private
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tuition after school hours and/or at weekends (Falzon & Busuttil, 1988). On the other hand, trade schools and area secondary schools, as well as lower streams in the primary education sector, have become ‘Cinderellas of the educational system’. There are high rates of absenteeism in trade schools, with girls having an absence rate of 33% and boys of 24% (Scicluna-Calleya et al, 1988). This state of affairs led to a number of reactions from the state itself as well as from parents, who felt that either their children were being caught in a never-ending and ultimately destructive academic trap, or else in low-status places which seemed incapable of responding to the real needs of their student population. Indeed the state seems to have realised this when it introduced Personal and Social Education as a panacea in order to humanise institutions on the one hand, and to motivate students on the other (Sultana, 1992a).

Some of these ‘humanistic’ undercurrents were tapped during a course of lectures on Critical Theory and Education with a group of 150 final year student-teachers following a four-year course leading to a bachelor's degree in education. Unlike many of the teacher education courses which Dale (1970) and Cochran-Smith (1991) say characterise teacher socialisation in the UK and the United States, respectively, Maltese teachers are exposed to a critical language from a number of faculty staff, both in philosophy and in sociology of education, with compulsory courses in critical theory, two compulsory courses on education and democracy, and a number of optional courses on gender and class related issues. That language of critique, together with first-hand experience of centralised policy-making during teaching practice sessions, created a resonance in many members of this group who took the project of developing “reflective minds and intentional hearts” (Bell & Schniedewind, 1987) with a great deal of commitment, and especially with those who were already (or had been) involved in other forms of grass roots pressure groups in green and alternative politics, as well as in other movements within the Catholic church. These students' prior experiences were crucial when it came to transform the personal experiencing of education into a political and organised movement. It is also important to say that while Malta's university attracts, as higher education tends to do in many other countries, an overwhelmingly large proportion of its students from middle and upper middle class backgrounds, there is nevertheless a relatively high proportion (between 15 and 20%) of working class students in the Faculty of Education (Schembri, 1991). Their contributions to the Critical Theory and Education course were crucial in order to link what was a rather abstract critique to the textuality of everyday life, and also to provide a connection between the dialectic of organisation and passion which ultimately characterises a social movement.

A group of students used their five-week teaching practice experience to organise themselves into a critical nucleus which challenged the school’s physical environment and resources, as well as the hierarchical social relations between teachers and students. Their action attracted media
coverage and some changes were actually implemented in that school. The students were encouraged to report their activity, an example of the ability of individual social actors to make their own history through collective will formation, during the critical theory course, and the importance of moving on from a language of critique to one of possibility was generally recognised. The next step was to adopt that model and extend it to a wider grass roots base. A core group of student-teachers, lecturers and experienced teachers began meeting, and established general goals. The MEU would create a forum for teachers to discuss education in Malta from a normative point of view; it would serve as a support group for those teachers who did not wish to become incorporated by the utilitarian and technocratic, examination and achievement-centred ideology of schooling in Malta; it would encourage the setting up of grass roots critical/practical nucleii in school communities where teachers, together with students, would identify specific issues related to normative concerns such as justice, equity and caring, which needed to be addressed and develop a programme of intervention and change; it would co-ordinate these school-based projects, with each nucleus reporting to all MEU members on their monthly meeting in order to serve as a model for other teachers and to get feedback; it would set up different action groups in favour of particular agendas.

Initially, recruitment took place from among the student body. As the May 1968 experience has shown us, a site or groups “organised for ostensibly non-political purposes can serve as the settings within which attribution and organization come together to produce collective political action” (McAdam et al, 1988, p. 710). The university provides a context and space; it provides the rudiments of organisation such as leaders and communication technology; and, in our case, through close collaboration with the Faculty of Education, it provided funds to advertise in the press, to send mail to members and to use venues for meetings. The large ecological concentrations of students whose ideological and ideational disposition was similar made recruitment of members easy, and the relative biographical availability of students, in that they had few family commitments, made the initial task of getting the movement off the ground relatively easy. The fact that these students met other teachers during teaching practice, and that many were active in other organisations, meant that snowball recruitment was possible both with experienced members of the teaching profession and with parents. The MEU now counts 200 members, and while young teachers make up the bulk, heads of schools, older and even retired teachers, as well as parents, attend the monthly meetings regularly. Average attendance for these meetings is around 120,[5] which is not an insignificant number considering that there were about 40 and 55, respectively, for the Labour Party’s and the Malta Union of Teachers’ national two-day conference on education in 1991, as a build up to the election in 1992.
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Defining Characteristics and Organisation

The Touraine–Castells perspective emphasises the anti-institutional orientation of social movements, and that the latter can be thus analytically distinguished from established forms. Offe (1985) has actually argued, in a similar vein, that the state tries to co-opt interest groups, especially those emerging from popular strata, by accepting to negotiate as long as they rationalise themselves and, by taking on the qualities of an institution, become more predictable and more easily controllable. The anti-institutionalism of the MEU is not so much in evidence in the spontaneous forms of opposition that it has developed – something which the more radical members of the movement regret at times. Rather, it is seen in the forms of social relations it encourages between and among members, and in the themes it chooses for its organised action in and on schools. The monthly meetings are informal occasions, where planned agendas are often shelved in favour of dialogic participation. This is important since, as Touraine (1981c) points out, social movement organisations run the risk of co-opting and betraying the real concerns of the grass roots, and may end up usurping self-management of groups in their attempt to give the movement political form. Students from school communities have often come to such meetings, and on two occasions completely dominated the session by telling teachers what they felt about schools. Chairpersonship in the core group’s meetings rotate, and any member can attend such meetings at will. There is a move away from the charismatic leadership that is often promoted in party politics in Malta, towards a rational, moral and purposive collective commitment in the re-visioning of education.

The movement’s actions are developed inside and outside state apparata. Nine school nucleii have developed within state schools thus far, and the focus of action for each of these has been different: one has worked on developing cross-curricular frameworks, another is trying to break down authoritarian management at school, while yet another has focused on establishing non-bureaucratic relations between teachers and students through setting up extra-curricular and cultural clubs. Action in state schools is, by definition, popular educational activity, as state schooling is practically the exclusive territory for students from working class backgrounds (Sultana, 1991b). Action outside state apparata consists of monthly meetings where resolutions are taken in favour of specific agendas for action groups to work on. One action group has focused on family and school links in a working class area in Malta. Forty couples attended a series of meetings on education, raised questions related to their children’s needs, and ultimately channelled their anger and frustration into a political form by establishing a parental pressure group, independent of the movement, in order to work for getting more and better teaching resources for their village primary school, and for access to their children's teachers and classrooms.
A second action group took vocational schooling as its focus. It co-ordinated research efforts together with heads of trade schools in order to shift a discourse exclusively located within human capital theory to one that considered the educational and social implications of differential schooling in Malta (Sultana, 1992b). This has led to monthly, and recently weekly, meetings with trade school staff and administrators in preparation for a national conference which sets out to make vocational (working class) schooling an educational priority in Malta. The movement has not only been instrumental in linking passions - such as anger and frustration about the way these schools are used as dumping grounds so that mainstream schooling can proceed unhampered – and organisation, but it has also supported institutional resistance (such as when one of these trade school heads decided to ask students to send a Christmas card to the Director of Education wishing him well, but asking him to, please, send them a full complement of teachers since the school was missing an average of 86 contact hours per week. The better teachers are poached from trade schools in order to teach in the more esteemed junior lyceums, where teacher absence would not be tolerated).

Another action group is developing skills in media and communications. It hopes to produce its own newspaper on educational affairs and is planning television and radio programmes. Until these long-term goals are achieved, the action group has drawn a roster of writers who address educational issues in the local weekly and Sunday press. Linked to this action group is an alternative theatre group, which has already produced a challenging drama on social relations in the school. The group adapted their play for street theatre, and toured different locations in Malta during the summer of 1991. A key action group started out calling itself 'Student Voice', organised research activities with students to record their experiences of schooling, and co-ordinated a national exhibition which portrayed, through student writing and drawing, the school that these students would like. This action group has now decided to draw up a charter in favour of students' rights, and after the grass roots has given feedback on the proposals, the charter will be presented to all political parties and the general public. Through its recruitment and propaganda strategies, the movement has also tapped into projects that had been started on personal initiatives by other teachers prior to the formal setting up of the MEU.

A key to understanding these educational/educative activities in the local context is the fact that while the anti-institutionalism of the movement can be read off its ability to work outside the state as much as inside and against the state (Kean, 1990), it is practically impossible, and probably unwise, for it to work outside (and against) the institutional matrix of the Catholic Church (which is often problematic to me, as an active member who is located outside of that church and faith). As McAdam et al (1988, p. 704) note for the United States, many mass movements in Malta have been organisationally rooted in churches (Abela, 1991, pp. 68ff.). Any access
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to 'the people' in Catholic Malta involves liaising with priests and church movements (such as Third World and charismatic groups).

These provide not only institutional support in terms of building and technology, but also have excellent communicative networks with large groups of people, and are themselves a resource for leaders already experienced in activist careers. As McAdam et al (1988, p. 712) point out, "groups like churches provide a rich and detailed worldview or frame that can be used to encourage activism by any movement that succeeds in appropriating this framework for its own uses". The church is therefore at one and the same time a rich resource, but also an obstacle in so far as, in its institutional form, it blocks certain subjects from critique. Among the most important of these would be the role of private (mainly church) schools in the reproduction of inequality, and more generally its support of patriarchy.

Linkages with External Fields

Touraine, and especially Castells (1983, p. 277) argue that movements must be connect to society through a series of organisational operators such as the mass media, the professionals and left wing political parties. The MEU has so far not been very successful in creating these types of alliances, has not used the media effectively enough, and has certainly not yet channelled its movement through the militancy of Labour Party organisations. We generally fear co-optation by the last mentioned, and hence the dissipation of ideals and ideology. Given the birth of the organised movement in the territory of the university, it has been easy to engage secular professionals (including lecturers in education, architecture, economics and educational officers) as well as, in the light of previous comments, professionals from the church. These 'dissident scientists' (like myself?) have an important role within the establishment in providing the knowledge, competence and legitimacy with which to challenge the technocratic system "on the adversary's own ground" (Hannigan, 1985, p. 444).

A key decision the MEU had to face from its very first meetings was whether or not to develop under its own steam, or whether to infiltrate and form a splinter group within the Malta Union of Teachers (MUT). The MEU chose the first option without excluding the second as a possible strategy in the future, mainly because of the political, even partisan, incorporation of the MUT through its 'obstructionist' role (Darmanin, 1985) during the years of reaction against the educational policies of the Labour administration. Above all else, the industrial rather than professional unionism that the MUT has adopted means that teachers' rights are defended irrespective of, and without reference to, students' rights. A case in point is the total silence of the MUT about what has been described as the 'private tuition industry', where, as I ascertained in an interview with the MUT's General Secretary, the union prefers not to comment because that might go against the interests of its members. In class terms, the MUT does
not represent the interests of popular elements of the Maltese population—in terms of such social/moral issues as a concern for class and gender equity—but the aspirations of its members for professional status and better salaries and conditions of work. The MUT ignored the MEU’s existence throughout 1990, but has recently made overtures, through its General Secretary, showing its willingness to collaborate with MEU in the organisation of our activities, and specifically with reference to our work with trade school heads. The MEU’s co-ordinating group decided against this, fearing the incorporationist dangers that such a move could represent, even though close association would mean access to key educational policy-makers. The MUT, for instance, has regular meetings with the Minister of Education. At the same time, however, Offe’s (1985, p. 235) observation regarding the corporatist strategy of the state in its relationship with unions seems particularly apt for the Maltese case:

...access to government decision-making positions is facilitated through the political recognition of an interest group, but the organization in question becomes subject to more or less formalized obligations, for example, to behave responsibly and predictably and to refrain from any non-negotiable demands on unacceptable tactics.

For the moment, alliances are more likely to be made with other established grass roots movements, from whom we are learning strategies of political action, and through whom we have been given access to personnel in key positions in the media industry in order to promote ourselves.

Outcomes and Conclusion

There are three important levels at which movements can be said to accomplish change, namely through dramatising social issues, through creating normative change, and through bringing about structural change. The MEU is, I believe, working away at all three levels when it creates a space for participants, in schools and at movement activities, where they can work against the hegemonic culture in which words like ‘education’, ‘democracy’ and ‘citizenship’ are used and steeped in a technocratic rationality which

Considers education primarily in instrumental terms and interprets democracy as a system of political management rather than a distinctive form of social and moral life. In such a culture, educational science is inevitably portrayed as quasi-technical expertise in which non-technical, non-expert questions about the moral and social purposes of education are virtually ignored.

(Carr, 1989, p. 36)

Carr thus concludes that it is “scarcely surprising that the idea of an educational science as a form of democratic moral discourse now lacks the social context necessary for its practical application” (ibid.). What the MEU engenders is not only a critique of that social context, but also of ourselves,
its members, who, as Ellsworth (1989, p. 316) has so aptly pointed out, as social agents, "are not capable of being fully rational and disinterested [and particularistic about group rights], and [...] are subjects split between the conscious and unconscious and among multiple social positionings". In my case as a university lecturer, it has meant for me a growing experience where, in a situation that differs from the lecture mode which my institution often constrains me into and which leads to the silencing of my audience, I am learning the art of practising conversation which returns the authority of speech to the speakers, and to listen to the real work and efforts of practising teachers rather than construct their contributions as something that has to be "gotten around, exposed or changed" (Cochran-Smith, 1991, p. 282). As Wexler (1987, p. 233) notes, movements make it possible for people to express their life story, which has the beneficial effect of dissipating authority, including that of the theoretician. These are the kinds of "frame alignment processes" which McAdam et al (1988, p. 712) refer to in order to suggest that, besides an effect on structures, movements can transform the values and perceptions of individual members.

The key challenge for the MEU, framed in Tourainean terms, is whether it will be able to transcend the localism and narrow issue focus, and transform its concern into a systematic critique of the existing social arrangements. In a sense, this is an inevitable process as we find ourselves struggling to define what it means to be 'human' in the contemporary world, what a 'good education' is, why it is that the state ignores or obstructs the valuable work of teachers with students and parents, etc. It is in the movement's struggle against, and for power, that we as teachers build our identity, that the stakes over which the conflicts are crystallised, the opponents identified, and the critique transformed into a programme for action.

The extent to which we will be capable of doing this kind of transformative work as we strive to ignite what is always a potential, 'virtual' (Touraine, 1981c) movement in education in Malta remains to be seen. My role as an 'academic' within the movement is close to the kind of 'sociological intervention' that Touraine (1981c, pp. 191ff.) recommends, where, together with other faculty staff we raise the consciousness of movement members so that they grasp the full scope of the struggle. I find myself interpreting, agitating, organising, working as analyst or secretary by reporting and explaining the results of self-analyses such as these. Ultimately, this is my way of translating critical knowledge into action, of developing a transformative pedagogy in the specific historical conjuncture that situates Malta today, in order to avoid Touraine's (1981c, p. 142) damning accusation to us as intellectuals, when he argues that many of us

are not self-consciously helping the blocked groups to mobilize their cultural resources for the purposes of collective self-realization [...]. We stand,
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fundamentally, in a relation of spectatorship to them, and not as committed interlocutors of this collectively evolving practice.

Our hope in the MEU is that we will, actively and reflectively, represent to the groups we work with the nature of their own struggles, so that these work in their own (class) interest.

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Notes

[1] Archer (1982, 1986) suggests that it is by avoiding a conflation of structure and agency that we can move away from the three mutually supporting assumptions that are shared by the 'old' (neo-Durkheimian theorists of cultural transmission and reproduction), 'new' (the neo-Marxist group) and 'contemporary' (those following the 'world systems' perspective and critical theorists) approaches to sociology of education. These assumptions are that the educational system is characterised by "penetrability" (sic) (and hence that it is "ever open to and reflective of external social relations whose influence penetrates educational practice directly"; Archer, 1986, p. 66); "complementarity" (i.e. the assumption that educational activities always complement the interests of the dominant group or class); and by "homogeneity" (i.e. structural differences between different educational systems become irrelevant to explanation). As Archer shows, the problems with these three assumptions are of a political, not only theoretical or heuristic, nature.

[2] Of course, it is important to situate such movements as one type of negotiation among at least three others and to distinguish, therefore, between movements organised from within the system by educational personnel such as teachers and students, and those kind of negotiations that involve relations between internal and external interest groups (Archer, 1985).

[3] The word 'umana' should not translate into 'humanistic' but rather, in the Maltese language, carries connotative terms/phrases such as 'respect for the dignity and needs of the individual', 'child-centred', 'democratic', 'participatory community' and in opposition to a purely 'academic' form of schooling.

[4] The Malta Union of Teachers was set up in 1919, and elements of its recent history have been documented by Darmanin (1985).

[5] According to an answer given by the Minister of Education to a parliamentary question (No. 29482, 8/10/91), there are currently 2384 teachers in state schools, and 1073 teachers in private schools.

[6] I would like to thank Dr Mary Darmanin, Peter Mayo, Denise Fenech and Mario Mallia, all committed MEU members and friends, who commented on earlier drafts of this paper. I am also grateful for the encouragement and constructive criticism offered by two anonymous referees.

References


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