

PATHWAY TO ENLIGHTENMENT: A DIMECHIAN ANALYSIS OF POSTCOLONIAL EUROCENTRIC BIAS IN MALTESE ACADEMIA

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Abstract

This article explores the existence of a postcolonial Eurocentric bias in Maltese academia and its broader implications for Maltese society. Obtaining a doctoral degree is traditionally considered to be an important rite of passage into the world of academia, rendering the choices early career academics make about *where* they pursue their studies particularly insightful. Three strands of quantitative analysis were carried out to investigate a foreign-local dynamic in the choice of awarding institutions among early-career Maltese academics. A sample of 370 publicly accessible online profiles of full-time academics at Malta's two largest higher education institutions, as well as an additional 87 profiles from two Cypriot institutions added as controls, provided compelling data to test the hypothesis that Maltese academics demonstrate an aversion to obtaining a doctoral degree at home. The findings confirmed a clear bias in favour of foreign institutions located exclusively in the United Kingdom and other Western countries. An in-depth discussion follows as to why this is so, adopting mainly a postcolonial perspective and an alternative *Dimechian* theoretical framework. The argument is developed that a postcolonial Eurocentric bias in academia ultimately reinforces persistent collective colonial inferiority and dependency complexes, silences potentially useful locally-contextualised knowledge, and sabotages the long-term educational, social,

economic, and political development of Maltese society in a contemporary neo-colonial global setting. The article mainly aims to encourage more meaningful and critical debate about the genuine decolonisation of Maltese academia, the development of a more authentic Maltese academic tradition, as well as the broader implications of continuing deference to Western academic monoculture.

Keywords: Malta, Maltese, postcolonialism, neo-colonialism, decolonisation of higher education, Eurocentrism, Western epistemology, inferiority and dependency complex, academic monoculture, Manwel Dimech, Dimechianism

Introduction

Over and above the primary responsibilities of senior academics to teach and conduct research, a so-called “third mission” (Predazzi, 2012; Compagnucci & Spigarelli, 2020) seeks to define the precise form their broader contributions to society should take, particularly where public funds are involved. This article departs from the central assumption that local academics indeed have an important social responsibility, but such a responsibility is to the majority of Maltese society and not to a select few in possession of sufficient wealth and power to direct policy and dictate prevailing narratives. More specifically, their responsibility should serve, through the creation and dissemination of knowledge, the main goal of *enlightenment*. The term enlightenment is used in the context of an alternative theoretical framework based on the pragmatic philosophy of 19th/20th century Maltese critical educationist and anti-colonial activist Manwel Dimech (1860-1921). Postcolonial Eurocentrism is taken, in this sense, as a

potentially ruinous impediment to the capacity of academics to make any genuine contribution to the welfare and long-term educational, social, economic, and political development of Maltese society.

Doctoral capital and the associated choices Maltese academics make about where to pursue their doctoral studies are employed to investigate postcolonial Eurocentrism within Maltese academia, first, on the basis of a hypothetical foreign-local divide in choice of awarding institutions, second, as an odds ratio taking Cyprus as a comparable control country, and third, using a basic statistical modelling approach incorporating various additional factors influencing the foreign-local choice distribution. Finally, in light of the evidence presented for a postcolonial Eurocentric bias in Maltese academia, some broader implications are finally discussed in the context of Malta's place in a neo-colonial global setting.

The term "Eurocentrism" is used throughout the text in reference to any worldview that centres Europe, and the West more broadly, at the global core, as the undisputed world-leading purveyor of universal values, rationality, and logic. The terms "West" and "Western" are intended to generally reference the countries of the modern European Union (EU), most of North America, and Oceania. The manner in which both terms are used, is intended to imply that *Eurocentrism* is endemic in, and indeed a key defining characteristic of, *Western* societies. "Academia" refers to the community of specialists directly engaged in knowledge creation and dissemination through research, scholarship, and other

contributions to education and the public intellectual development of society. Higher education institutions are frequently mentioned and taken as an important component within the broader totality of academia.

As a further disambiguation of terms, “colonialism” and “neo-colonialism” are used in a distinctly Maltese context. In other words, *colonialism* refers to the type exercised specifically by the British (and experienced by the Maltese), from 1800 to the years between 1964 and 1979, and *neo-colonialism* refers more specifically to the Western-dominated economic system to which a sovereign Malta has been exposed ever since gaining responsibility for its own foreign policy. It is important to note that neo-colonialism does not just refer to exploitative economic relations *between* countries, but also to the exploitative relations that must exist *within* each country to sustain the broader power structures in which global wealth is redistributed from the poor to the wealthy. “Postcolonial Eurocentrism” as a combined term is intended to specifically imply a form of Eurocentrism reinforced and exacerbated by the effects of prolonged exposure to colonial subjugation.

Finally, the term “Dimechianism” (or “Dimechian”) has been used by local scholars to describe a specific strand of anti-colonialism, anti-clericalism, and socialism in the context of early- to mid-twentieth century Maltese politics (Chircop, 1991; Callus, 2013; Zammit Marmarà, 2013), following Dimech’s own deportation by the British and later demise in exile. In this article, however, the

term is used more broadly to capture the elements of Dimech's general philosophy espoused through his writings and their subsequent interpretations that foreground education as an emancipatory form of social and political activism. This position is discussed in more detail throughout the text.

Colonialism, higher education, and academia

Postcolonial education theorists argue that Western-style universities were set up around the world in part to groom indigenous elites to help spread the values, ways of life, and general cultural norms of European colonisers (Tarc, 2009; Tikly, 2009; Andreotti, 2011; Peters, 2017). This idea is quite problematic in light of the assertion that 19th and 20th-century European colonialism, contrary to popular belief, has not ceased to exist. Colonialism can be thought of as a manifestation of a much deeper and more enduring fundamental driving force, that of *ideological imperialism*. According to Tuhiwai-Smith (2021), ideological imperialism manifests through history in new and evolving forms of global exploitation, with its current iteration commonly referred to as *neo-colonialism*. Critical scholars have argued that, on balance, capital flows from countries of the Global South to countries of the Global North through an intricate system of neo-colonial economic exploitation rooted in the global power structures established during the modern to late-modern colonial era, coinciding with the early spread of global capitalism. Furthermore, neo-colonialism ensures that global wealth inequality is reinforced through policies of international financial

institutions, which disproportionately represent the interests of the wealthiest (formerly colonising) countries (Harche, 1980; Nandy, 2005; Tikly, 2009; Obamba, 2013; Bah, 2016; Shahjahan, 2016; Smith, 2016; Zucman, 2019).

So if colonialism still exists (albeit in a revised form), a question of grave concern naturally arises; where do the Western-styled colonial universities fit in? More specifically, what role do Western and Westernised higher education institutions play today in grooming classes of elites to help spread the values, ways of life, and general cultural norms serving to sustain and reproduce contemporary forms of neo-colonial global, and associated domestic, exploitation?

Collective inferiority and deference to the West

In colonising not just territory but also hearts and minds, a sense of inferiority was reinforced in colonised peoples, with the ultimate effects of normalising oppressive colonial exploitation and promoting unquestioning acceptance of unjust power hierarchies as a central and entirely natural feature of human relations (Tarc, 2009; Tuhiwai-Smith, 2021). Traditional colonial universities subtly and effectively reinforced European and Western hegemony by galvanising a Eurocentric Western epistemology as the central, universal, objective, and value-free source of all great knowledge (Goonatilake, 2005; Andreotti, 2011; Tuhiwai-Smith, 2021). Heleta (2016) and Cupples (2019) maintain that Western-style universities continue to serve as sites for the reproduction of

Eurocentrism and Western superiority well into the 21st century. In the context of post-apartheid South Africa, Heleta (2016) argued that Western worldviews have remained entrenched in higher education at the expense of more inclusive global perspectives, experiences, and epistemologies, ultimately serving to universalise the West and provincialise the rest.

It can be claimed with little controversy today that many Maltese people openly identify as Europeans, or as Westerners. It is interesting to note, in this sense, unapologetic attempts by some Maltese historians and scholars to reproduce metropolitan renditions of Maltese history, accentuating Maltese European-ness while actively whitewashing, for instance, significant Arab influences on Maltese genealogy, culture, and language (Goodwin, 2015). Historically, Montebello (2009) traces Maltese Eurocentrism at least as far back as the 16th century, when the islands were in the possession of the Knights of St John and fashioned as a last line of defence against the Ottoman threat, or a Southernmost bastion of Christian Europe. Indeed, it can be argued that Malta continues to this day to identify in the face of the irregular migration “threat” as a Southern “edge” of the European continent (Baldacchino, 2016). Fulfilling the role of intermediary between the more “developed” European mainland and “developmentally arrested” worlds to the South and East (Grima, 2016), Malta’s self-identity seemingly remains pre-determined by its position in a colonial-racist hierarchy. Initiatives aimed at progress are thereby reduced to little more than vain attempts to become *more* European, *more* Westernised. But like the burdened mythical

Sisyphus repeatedly pushing a large boulder up to the top of a hill only for it to roll back down again, acting out Eurocentric biases is, by definition, an exercise in futility. To accept natural inherent European superiority is to also accept the colonial hierarchy itself, along with its immutability and mutually constitutive superior *and inferior* categories.

Dimechianism for a postcolonial Malta

Well over a century ago in British colonial Malta, Manwel Dimech recognised that the Maltese were suffering from an inferiority complex (Callus, 2013), or a “mental block”, keeping them restrained in a child-like state of dependency (Montebello, 2009), hopelessly and chronically unable to improve their lot. He resented, for instance, Maltese kowtowing to the British and showed particular concern about Maltese cheerleading for British military-colonial conquests in South Africa. Considering the support shown among various strata of Maltese society for more recent US-led, Western-sanctioned wars in the Near East, North Africa, and elsewhere (as evidenced by typically pro-Western local mainstream media coverage), we can only wonder what Dimech would make of Maltese inferiority and dependency today. According to Vella (1994), in spite of annual celebrations of Maltese freedom taking place since 1979, the economic boundaries surrounding that freedom remained, and arguably still remain, largely unexamined.

McLeod (2010) explained how a native bourgeoisie typically emerges in newly independent nations victimised by modern to late-modern colonialism, to replicate previous colonial patterns of exploitation that, on balance, favour foreigners and local elites more so than the majority of members of its local population, ultimately preserving political and economic dependency on former colonial masters. It is illogical to assume that Malta somehow escaped all possible adverse postcolonial conditions after over a century and a half of direct exposure to British colonialism (as the prevailing narrative often seems to imply). Of course, local elites thriving in post-colonial Malta are unlikely to challenge the very same narratives that help reproduce their own privilege. In a classic case of what Herman and Chomsky (2002) call “manufacturing consent”, Malta curiously retains a sense of nostalgia and pride about its “special” ties to Britain and Europe. Maltese apologists for British colonialism maintain that *Malta’s* colonial experience was mostly positive, while conveniently ignoring the well-documented contemporaneous atrocities and general brutality exhibited by the British Empire elsewhere (Hanes & Sanello, 2002; Anderson, 2005; Bender, 2016; Tharoor, 2016; Gordon, 2017; Kelly, 2018; Lindqvist, 2018; Tudor, 2019; Docherty, 2021; Dalrymple, 2022; Elkins, 2022; Menger, 2022). Historical revisionism surrounding Britain’s dark colonial past eliminates crucial context, and risks blindsiding former colonies like Malta to the predictable cultural and socio-economic aftermath of colonialism, along with continuing injustices under neo-colonialism.

Public sentiments that just so happen to support the interests of elites, and help reproduce the status quo, as Herman and Chomsky (2002) argue, exist not by coincidence but by design. For a population capable of internalising a sense of gratitude to former colonial masters, it is not much of a stretch to fathom similarly gracious acceptance of blatant nepotism and corruption, daylight robbery of public resources, and rapacious, unadulterated neo-liberal capitalist greed as a prerogative among a tiny minority of untouchable economic elites. It was Dimech who unexpectedly presented a credible threat to the prevailing exploitative order in his day. By forcing public emancipatory discourse in late 19th/early 20th century colonial Malta, he promoted the bold claim that the Maltese people were capable of handling their own affairs, respecting themselves and each other and being responsible for their own security and protection (Montebello, 2014). Callus (2013) emphasised that Dimech's legacy is one to be sustained and nourished. It should not be allowed to fall into historical obscurity, but rather, to serve as a catalyst for positive change at any point in history. It is in this same spirit, that academics in the 21st century find themselves well-placed, in light of their responsibility to society, to challenge systemic exploitation, corruption, environmental destruction, and the entrenched, largely unexamined mentalities that enable them.

Dimechianism as a research philosophy

According to Montebello (2009; 2014), while Dimech recognised unjust conditions in society, he was less interested in theorising

about them as he was in acting to change them. Montebello posits that Dimech developed a comparable form of philosophical pragmatism contemporaneously with John Dewey (1859 - 1952). Both were evolving and applying earlier forms of utilitarian British empiricism in their own unique educational and political contexts. In lieu of an original formally consolidated treatise by Dimech, Montebello presents a masterful abridgement of this practical, non-speculative philosophy of action, described by Dimech himself as “ħsieb għall-għemil,” or “thought for action”. In summary, actions are good when they make a positive practical contribution to emancipation, otherwise, they are bad. Emancipation is intended in a utilitarian sense, in terms of the greatest happiness and contentment for the most individuals in a community. When knowledge, which contains within it a propulsive form of power, leads to emancipation, it is “dawġ” (light).

Montebello specifically defines knowledge in Dimechian terms as, “useful information for the personal, social and/or political emancipation of all people.” (2009, p 55). Knowledge acting to the contrary is, by extension, “dġam” or darkness. Light, therefore, is not to be understood in the traditional Eurocentric/Copernican sense of Enlightenment as liberation from ignorance through reason but rather as the process of useful knowledge propelling people into *emancipatory* action for the greater good. The propulsive quality of knowledge is a key concept because, for Dimech, knowledge contains intrinsic power, and *access* to it discharges such power towards the attainment of emancipation. The issue of access to knowledge essentially highlights the

important role of education in Dimech's logic, as well as, more broadly, the responsible exchange of ideas and information in society through a free press unencumbered by coercive power (be it corporate or state power). The Dimechian conception of knowledge, and by extension, of knowledge-creation, therefore, has profound implications for contemporary academic researchers in Malta.

Axiologically, a Dimechian framework for researchers presupposes studies with a scope for enlightenment that accrue value in their capacity to precipitate emancipation through knowledge. The present study problematises the presence of a postcolonial Eurocentric bias in Maltese academia by considering it a source of darkness in Dimechian terms. By conceptualising thought teleologically with an emphasis on action (thought for action), as well as differentiating his emancipatory, material form of enlightenment from European-Enlightenment rationalism, Dimech's ideas justify epistemological positions for research based on empiricism and materialism. Quantifiable, publicly accessible data sourced from real-world settings are therefore weighed as evidence in the broader discussion on the role of local academics in this work. Finally, Dimech's own historical struggles permit various theoretical perspectives for interpreting the material effects of, among others, imperialism, religious conservatism/post-secularism, and class conflict, underpinning, for instance, what Camilleri (2018) calls the three traditional "pillars" of material exploitation in Malta, namely, the British colonial government, Catholic Church, and privileged local elites. Within a Dimechian

framework, therefore, the question can be posed; is Maltese academia complicit in the enculturation of a class of elites whose thoughts and actions, even if inadvertently so, contribute to the perpetuation of unjust neo-colonial patterns of exploitation in Malta? More specifically, is there a postcolonial Eurocentric bias at play in Maltese academia, and if so, is it fundamentally innocuous or insidious?

Doctoral capital in Maltese academia and the foreign-local dynamic

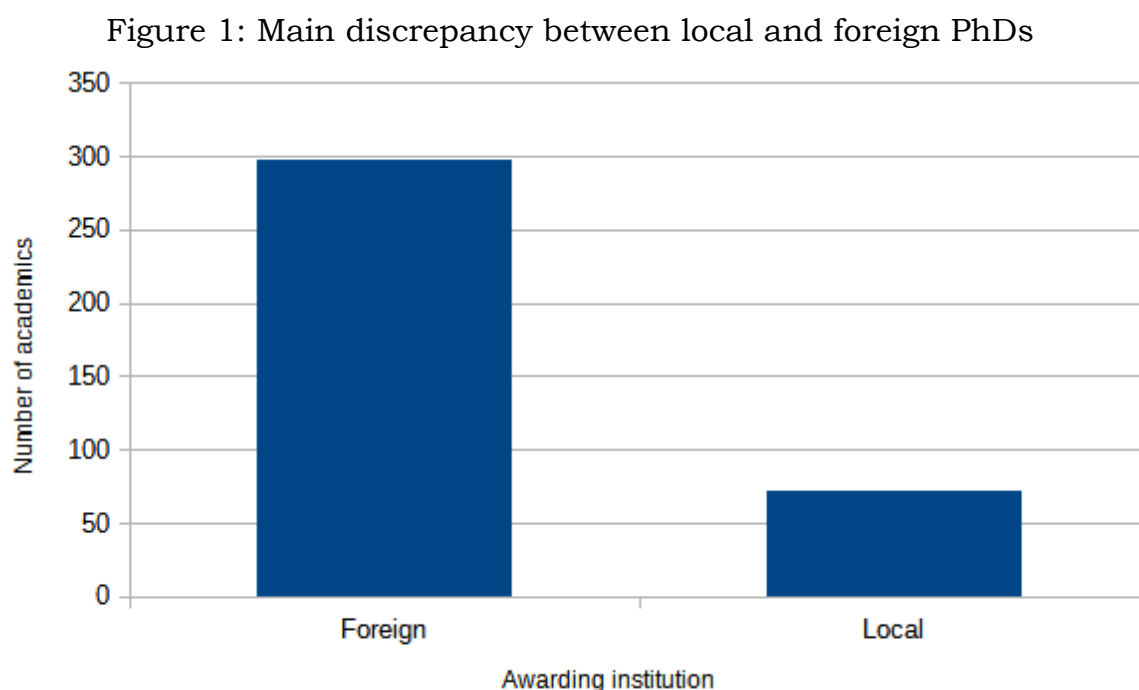
The choices early career academics make can reveal much about the prevailing cultures, attitudes, and beliefs within the academic communities they aspire to join. Walker and Yoon (2016) specifically discuss the notion of “doctoral capital” as a significant factor influencing the development and enculturation of academics. Obtaining a doctoral degree, or more commonly, a Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) degree, is widely considered a “rite of passage” into the world of academia (Amran & Ibrahim, 2012). In practical terms, PhD programmes often share universal features that transcend individual institutions, faculties, and disciplines, varying not so much according to their structure (Leshem, 2020) but more so according to perceptions of prestige surrounding their different awarding institutions. Bedeian et al (2010) showed that PhD graduates from more prestigious institutions enjoyed better career success and more recognition for the same work than those who studied at less prestigious institutions. Early career academics must therefore make important decisions about where they intend to pursue doctoral study and in the process, likely

entertain extant assumptions and perceptions, as well as recommendations from already-established academics, similarly reflective of their respective academic cultures.

In South Korea, where a local doctoral degree programme has existed since the 1980s, Jung (2018) showed that a foreign-local dynamic emerged with regard to the choice of awarding institution, as evidenced by a persistent dependency on foreign PhDs (mostly from the US), particularly in elite institutions. Jung attributed this dependency, at least in part, to pressure on academics to write and publish in English (and in Western journals). In Malta, however, where a local PhD programme has existed since 1974 (Leshem, 2020), English-medium instruction is prevalent (Sciriha, 2001), so the pressure to write and publish in English would not necessarily discourage local Doctoral study as it has in Korea. Considering also the logistical, practical, and financial advantages of pursuing a PhD locally as opposed to abroad, one would expect, all things being equal, local doctoral study to be a relatively popular choice among early career Maltese academics. An analysis of 370 publicly available full-time academic staff at the two largest further and higher education institutions on the islands (the University of Malta [UM] and Malta College of Arts, Science & Technology [MCAST]), however, suggests otherwise. The foreign-local dynamic in the context of doctoral qualification selection represents an understudied phenomenon in the Maltese academic literature, so three strands of analysis were carried out for a more in-depth examination of the choice distribution.

First strand of analysis – Simple ratio

Noting the postnominals reported by full-time academics at UM ($n = 350$) and MCAST ($n = 20$) on their public online profiles (UM, 2022; MCAST, 2022), a foreign-local choice distribution emerges as shown in Figure 1.



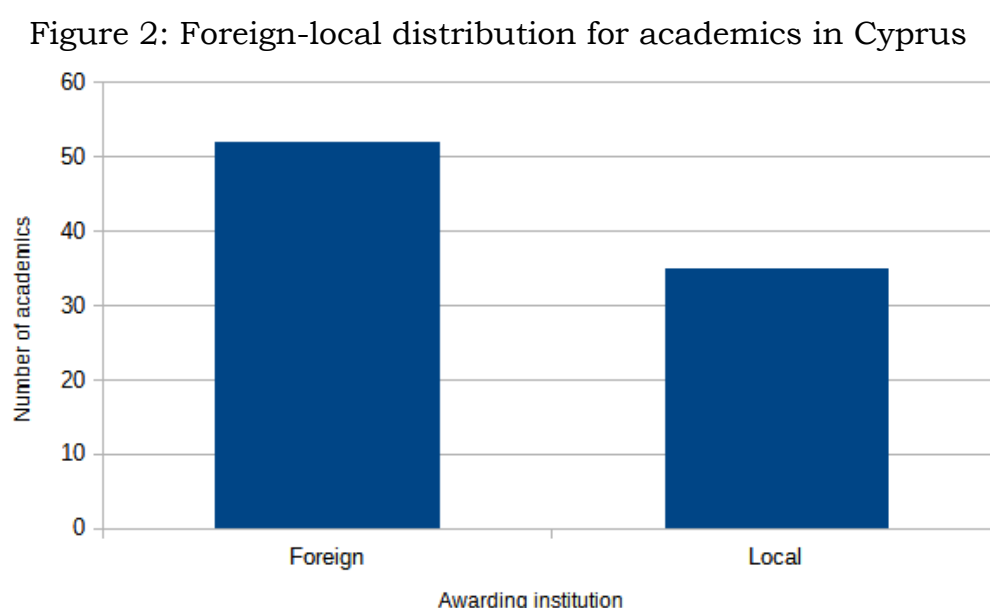
Of the Maltese academics sampled, 298 (81%) had a foreign PhD, as opposed to just 72 (19%) with a local PhD. At a ratio of 4.14, we can say that Maltese academics working in local higher education were just over four times as likely to have a foreign as opposed to a local PhD. Based on the standard error formula from Bland and Altman (2000), a 95% confidence interval was constructed around the ratio (95% CI = 3.20, 5.36) to infer statistical significance. Given the prior assumption of an expected equal foreign-local split ($H_0 = \text{Ratio} = 1$), a clear trend emerges in favour of studying abroad. The

prior assumption of an even split, however, is arguably somewhat arbitrary. In other words, is it reasonable to begin from the assumption that Maltese academics *should* be equally likely to pursue doctoral study either locally or abroad?

Second strand of analysis – Odds ratio; Fellow small state as a control

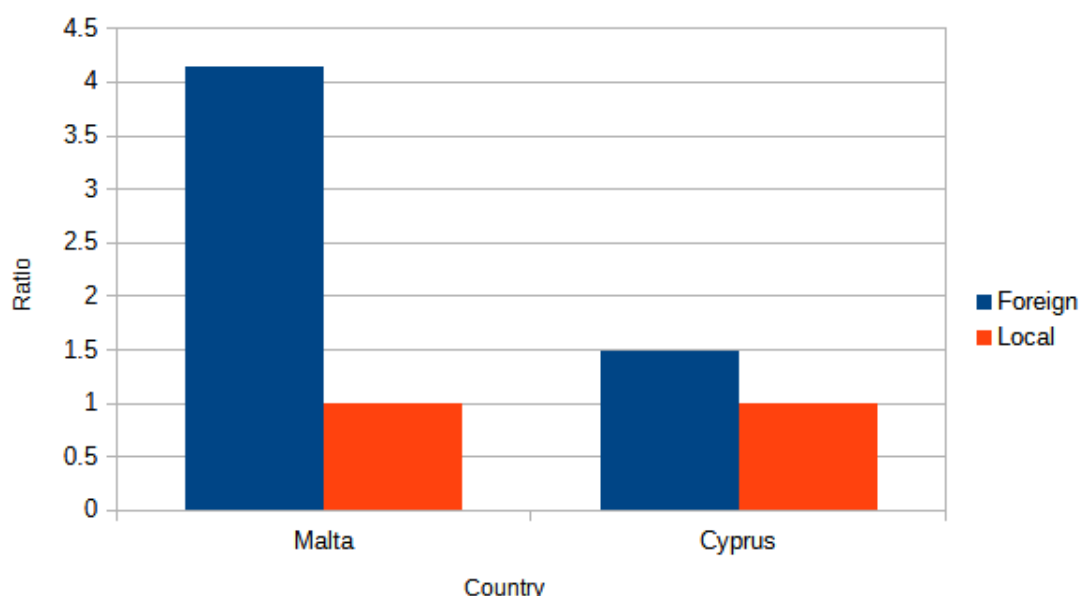
An element of control was therefore added to the analysis. Starting instead from the assumption that foreign-local discrepancies should be roughly equal across two comparable countries and taking Cyprus as that comparable country, 87 additional publicly accessible academic profiles from the official websites of the University of Cyprus ($n = 71$), and the University of Nicosia ($n = 16$), were included in the dataset to generate an odds ratio. Malta and Cyprus (excluding the Northern part of the island designated *the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus*) are by no means “identical twins”, but the two microstates do share some striking similarities (Pace, 2020). They are the only two islands in the Mediterranean, following long histories of imperialist domination, to become independent states. Both were ruled by Romans and Arabs, as well as Knights (although Cyprus was a possession of the Templar as opposed to Hospitaller Knights). Like Malta, Cyprus was also exposed to the British colonial mission. Albeit over a shorter period, British colonialism left far more enduring scars on Cyprus, however. Both countries later assumed policies of non-alignment during the height of the Cold War (Cyprus doing so with arguably greater dedication), and both experienced stints of Euroscepticism in the 1990s (Ozmatyatli & Ozkul, 2013; Ioannides, 2014; Pace,

2020). Ultimately, however, both countries have been part of the EU since 2004, having been prior members of the Bologna Process, rendering the Cypriot comparison as a second strand of analysis, more compelling than a mere hypothetical equal foreign-local split. The Cypriot data yielded the distribution shown in Figure 2 (University of Cyprus, 2022; University of Nicosia, 2022).



According to the data, foreign ($n = 52$) outnumbered local ($n = 35$) PhDs among Cypriot academics, at a (non-significant) ratio of 1.49 (95% $CI = 0.97, 2.28$). Taking into account the odds ratio between foreign and local PhDs in Malta as opposed to Cyprus ($OR = 2.79$, $CI = 1.69, 4.59$), early career academics in Malta were almost three times as likely to favour doing a foreign PhD than their Cypriot counterparts. In other words, we can confidently make the claim that Maltese academics were significantly more likely than Cypriot academics (nearly three times as much), to choose doctoral study abroad rather than at home. Figure 3 shows a direct visual comparison between the two ratios.

Figure 3: Difference in foreign-local ratios in Malta and Cyprus



Tables 1 and 2 show a more detailed breakdown of the most popular countries for doctoral study (attended by at least two local academics), in both Malta and Cyprus.

Table 1: Breakdown of origin of foreign PhDs in Malta including locations within the UK

<i>Country of institution</i>	<i>N</i>
UK	237
(England)	(214)
(Scotland)	(17)
(Wales)	(4)
(Northern Ireland)	(2)
Italy	14
United States	8
Ireland	7
Germany	5
France	4
Canada	3
UAE	3
Portugal	2

Table 2: Breakdown of origin of foreign PhDs in Cyprus including locations within the UK

<i>Country of institution</i>	<i>N</i>
UK	22
(England)	(21)
(Scotland)	(1)
United States	13
Greece	5
Austria	2
France	2
Canada	2
Crete	2

Both Maltese and Cypriot academics appeared to favour studying either in the UK or US first and foremost, followed by their closest EU neighbour/s (Italy and Greece respectively), *before* considering their own respective local option/s. Foreign countries in both cases were exclusively comprised of “Western” (or “Westernised”) countries. The Malta-Cyprus comparison is worthy of more study in its own right, but for the purpose of this discussion, Cyprus was considered simply as a control, or a means of further contextualising and grounding the Maltese data.

Third strand of analysis – Statistically modelling the foreign-local dynamic

Table 3 shows further analysis of the additional factors contained in the data extracted from the Maltese profiles. These included resident institutions (UM or MCAST), academic fields of study (social sciences [humanities, public health, education, economics, business], or “hard” sciences [earth and physical sciences,

medicine, ICT, engineering]], assumed gender, and location of Master's degree (if reported). The counts, odds ratios, and weighted odds ratios for all variables were included in this part of the analysis to understand their combined influence. The weighted odds ratios were derived using the Cochran-Mantel-Haenszel equations (Cochran, 1954; Mantel and Haenszel, 1959), and generally approximate the exponentiated coefficients in a logistic regression model, with all explanatory variables included (without interaction terms).

All effects on PhD location						
		PhD awarding institution			OR	WOR
		Foreign	Local	Totals		
Institution	MCAST	18	2	20		
	UM	280	70	350	2.25 (.51, 9.93)	2.25 (.92, 5.54)
Field	Social	175	40	215		
	Hard	123	32	155	1.14 (.68, 1.91)	1.08 (.79, 1.47)
Gender	Male	202	46	248		
	Female	96	26	122	.84 (.49, 1.44)	.83 (.60, 1.14)
Master's	Foreign	128	19	147		
	Local	87	38	125	2.49 (1.59, 5.44) *	2.93 (2.04, 4.22) *

Table 2: Counts, totals, odds ratios, and weighted odds ratios complete with 95% confidence intervals

* Denotes statistical significance at the 95% confidence level

From a modelling perspective, with the foreign-local divide taken as the endogenous variable, and the above four factors as exogenous, only one had a statistically significant effect (while controlling for all others in the model), according to the confidence intervals of the weighted odds ratios. Reporting having done a

foreign Master's degree, had a significant effect on choosing a foreign or local PhD. In other words, holding resident institution, field of study, and gender constant, academics were nearly three times ($OR = 2.93$, $95\% CI = 2.04, 4.22$) more likely to do a foreign PhD, if they reported already having done a foreign Master's degree. If there exists any such continuity in the overall postgraduate pathway, then it becomes all the more important to understand why Maltese academics are more likely to initiate this pathway abroad in the first place, specifically inside institutions in mostly British or other Westernised countries. The model also indicates, given the non-significance of the remaining three factors, that the bias is ubiquitous in local academia. In other words, women and men, academics employed at UM and MCAST, as well as researchers in the social as opposed to hard sciences, are all equally as likely to study abroad in Western countries as opposed to locally.

Discussion – An innocuous or insidious trend?

Before a deeper, more critical analysis of the findings can be undertaken, initial reactions to a prospective postcolonial Eurocentric bias in doctoral institution selection, are worthy of examination. More specifically, a proper critique is in order, of the apathetic position that the foreign-local discrepancy can be explained in simple and purely innocuous terms, and is the result of a perfectly reasonable, rational, and indeed *only possible*, reaction to the practical and inescapable realities of contemporary life. Maltese academics might overwhelmingly overlook the option

of studying at home due to major structural or administrative problems in the provision of local PhDs. Such an explanation, however, necessitates, in turn having to identify what factors could have possibly allowed the systems surrounding local PhD provision to fall into such an obviously dire state of neglect. Perhaps it is more realistic that local institutions simply suffer from a lack of important material resources or facilities. But if this was the case, given the higher costs traditionally associated with research in the hard sciences, we would expect to see a higher proportion of foreign PhDs in this category, but according to the third strand of analysis, we do not.

Further to Jung's (2018) focus on the prestige of awarding institutions, it can be argued that many foreign institutions available for doctoral study are ranked higher on international university league tables than local alternatives, presenting another possible explanation for the bias. However, the legitimacy of such league tables is questionable, given their obvious bias towards the standards and values of Western institutions (Hamm, 2005). This reasoning would consequently engender a further analysis of precisely why local academics embrace such rankings so uncritically. The fact that Maltese academics would be so swayed by appearances of apparent prestige in Westernised institutions furthermore betrays the false colonial logic of submission to natural, inherent, and unquestionable Western superiority (and inferiority). Also, the data show that having a local or a foreign PhD does not vary significantly across the two largest higher education institutions on the islands, rendering the prestige aspect (in terms

of eventual appointment in elite institutions) of doctoral capital as argued by Bedeian et al (2010) and Jung (2018), inconsequential in the context of Malta's smallness.

Perhaps early career academics are overwhelmingly targeting specific universities abroad because particular experts in their chosen fields just happen to be affiliated with those institutions. This seems perfectly reasonable at first, but it exposes the more disconcerting underlying problem that so few local potential supervisors and their areas of expertise would be considered relevant by Maltese early career academics in the first place. A lack of interest in the specific expertise of local academics suggests a devaluing of local academics and a lack of interest in locally-contextualised research problems that would most likely require a local supervisor. In such a scenario, it is difficult to see how a lively and engaging locally-contextualised body of knowledge and authentic academic tradition could ever even get off the ground. The bias in the data appears increasingly symptomatic of an inferiority complex when the discussion centres less around an affinity for studying abroad but rather an antipathy for studying in Malta. Is it, as Dimech might have thought, a mix of lingering inferiority and child-like dependency on imperial masters?

The dark, insidious nature of the bias tends to reveal itself in dismissive, angst-laden, knee-jerk reactions against the very proposition of adopting more locally-contextualised stances, more inclusive global perspectives, and alternative epistemological positions. The current "end of history" state of affairs, a status quo

to which there is no reasonable alternative, appears on the one hand far more preferable to complete catastrophe, disconnectedness, and epistemological collapse on the other. But if these are really the only possibilities, then virtually any attempt, however modest, to create more emancipatory, useful knowledge, or more just, equitable, and sustainable socio-economic policies, can be immediately and conveniently dismissed outright by those in whose interests it is for things to remain exactly the way they are. Irrational fear or suspicion of alternatives exemplify, to quote European Enlightenment-inspired philosophical parlance, the classical Greek logical fallacy of *reductio ad absurdum*.

A global fetish for Western epistemology

Scholars and researchers in peripheral, semi-peripheral, or non-English-speaking countries are already expected to not only publish their work in English (Curry and Lillis, 2015), but also tailor its very essence to fit the scope of high-impact journals located in Western countries (Hamm, 2005). According to Hamm, like universities in international league tables, journals assume a hierarchical structure, with top spots on international rankings invariably occupied by publications based in Western countries. In short, academics who do not follow and engage with North American/Western literature are dismissed as parochial (Smandych, 2005). This is especially ironic since parochialism implies narrow-mindedness, insularity, and a rejection of cultures and ideals other than one's own. As part of their civilising missions, colonial powers like the British Empire saw fit to reject a world's worth of diverse cultures, worldviews, and ideas and

simply impose their own. Yet, while this could be considered one of the most gargantuan demonstrations of insularity in World history, accusations of provincialism and narrow-mindedness are, to this day, rarely levelled at Western academics publishing research relevant to Western countries in Western journals.

Fearing false charges of parochialism, Maltese academics are, like those in other partially or fully peripheral countries, diverted away from working on locally-contextualised research problems that matter to the majority of members of their own society, in attempts to conform to whatever high-impact Western journals decide is relevant. Dimech's conception of knowledge emphasises the importance of its *usefulness* as a function of the attainment of enlightenment through emancipation. The question becomes, therefore, *who* is the knowledge created by Maltese academics supposed to be useful for, exactly? Could it be that "parochialism" really just means useful to the "wrong" people? Long after the supposed decline of colonialism, academics on the periphery are still compelled to look at themselves, and their societies, through the eyes of their former colonisers. The resulting silencing of local indigenous knowledge constitutes what Spivak (1999) calls "epistemic violence". According to Dotson (2011), acts of epistemic violence privileging Western worldviews are effective at concealing social, cultural, and, ultimately, economic activity that, on balance, favours the West in real material terms.

Spivak (1999) argued that, far from being objective or atheoretical, mainstream Western science endorses an ideology of

consumerism, parading as the philosophy of a classless society, ultimately serving to advance a global neo-liberal, neo-colonial agenda. Epistemic violence is thereby positioned at the very heart of neo-colonialism. Dimech demonstrated an early sensitivity to this epistemological character of colonialism. He understood, for instance, that dangerous patterns of thinking could be reinforced by habits as simple as the use of certain proverbs in everyday speech (Zammit Marmarà, 2013). The interplay between thought and action for Dimech, as such, appears to be dialectical, and intimately related. For researchers today, Dimech's *thought for action* suggests that created knowledge must be *useful*, and if it is to contain a propulsive emancipatory force, then its utility must, by default, serve and be accessible by those in need of emancipation. A bias towards Western institutions for doctoral study among Maltese early career academics, and the broader encroachment of academic monoculture it represents, is problematic because a postcolonial Eurocentric bias at the very heart of Maltese academia essentially compromises thought, and severs the dialectic. Without emancipatory knowledge-creation, the synthesis of thought and action is impossible.

Conclusions - Towards enlightenment

Sultana (1994) argued that Maltese society tends to lack collective class consciousness, with its members more likely to try and improve their lot individualistically through the accumulation of status symbols (level of education, type of work, material possessions, etc.) associated with more prestigious or *higher*

classes. An inherently hierarchical structure in Maltese society is thereby reproduced, as people prefer to exist within its constraints, rather than disrupt it. This is not surprising following such a long history of exposure to a doctrine of submission and acquiescence preached by colonial masters and the considerably influential local Catholic Church (Montebello, 2009). In Dimech's day, ecclesiastics were the peoples' intellectuals, and their message was loud and clear, to continue to "serve [their] masters quietly and honestly" (Chircop, 1991, p 54). Consequently, Maltese society has traditionally lacked any meaningful collective penchant for solidarity, liberation, revolution, or radicalism of the kind embodied by Dimech. It seems poignant to ask, therefore, *if* academics really can consider themselves people's intellectuals today, has the message changed at all? Are the predominant values being propagated still ultimately reinforcing colonial mindsets, a sense of submissiveness, and a collective will to serve an unjust system quietly and "honestly"?

The evidence presented here suggests that academics in Maltese academia today are just over four times as likely to have done their PhD in the UK or some other Western country than they are to have done it locally (where they ultimately end up working). Furthermore, taking Cyprus as a valid comparable country, Maltese academics are nearly three times as likely to do this as their Cypriot counterparts. Also, the bias appears to be ubiquitous across gender, field of study, and resident institution. These findings support the idea that Maltese academics are adopting a biased, postcolonial Eurocentric worldview while negotiating one

of the first and most important decisions of their academic careers. This lends unfortunate credence to the claim that contemporary higher education institutions in Malta, continue to serve the aims of traditional colonial higher education, grooming indigenous elites to promote the values and ways of life of (neo-) colonial masters.

So while on the surface, the robes of the peoples' intellectuals may have changed, it would appear their central message has not. If academics hold any social responsibility whatsoever, a more rigorous engagement with the theoretical and philosophical underpinnings of contemporary Maltese and international research and science is warranted, without fear of dismissal on the grounds of parochialism, myopia, or failure to adhere to the kind of methodological orthodoxy endorsed by top-ranked Western journals (Chamberlain, 2000). Just as Heleta (2016) has argued in the case of South African higher education, a thorough decolonisation of Maltese academia is in order, to rethink, reframe and reconstruct it around a centre of Maltese interests and affairs. A crucial step to this end must involve a more honest examination of how early career academics, at the very highest qualification levels in Maltese education, are being "groomed" by virtue of their choices about where to study, as well as more serious consideration of the potential dangers of failing to provide an effective alternative to Western academic monoculture. By embracing more Maltese, Mediterranean, and global perspectives, experiences, and epistemologies, Maltese academics may perhaps become truly empowered, to cease looking at themselves and their

own society through the eyes of global imperial masters, and instead pursue, in Dimechian terms, a pathway to enlightenment.

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