

Ronald G. Sultana (1958- 2023): An Appreciation

Peter Mayo

Like most people in my country and many beyond, especially in the education research and sociology fields, I was shocked by Ronald G. Sultana's sudden demise at 65. I am still reeling from the phone call I received on the morning of Friday 24th November, from a mutual friend and once collaborator of Ronald's, informing me of his death.

Finding it hard to pull myself together, I begin to feel that Ronald's passing is about to represent a watershed in my relationship with social research in Malta. There is (a) when there was Ronald and (b) post-Ronald if my hourglass allows me more time to experience this fully.

I write this as I am travelling on academic work to a place, I recall Ronald telling me about, that captivated him on one of his journeys, probably from New Zealand, when he was a Commonwealth Scholar there studying Sociology of Education at PhD level, supervised by the renowned Peter D. K. Ramsay, at Waikato University. I too was studying Sociology of Education as a Commonwealth Scholar though at the University of Alberta, Edmonton, Canada, and at Master's level. On both returning to our homeland, we would meet for the first time in a kick off meeting for that year's Sociology of Education programme, as we

were both recently employed by the University of Malta Council, he on a full time basis and I, part time.

We had actually first met at a five day course in thinking, delivered by the late Edward De Bono in 1983, though Ronald never had any recollection of meeting me then. We however hit it off when lecturing at the University of Malta. We seemed to have been cut from the same sociological and political cloth. Left wing politics ran through our veins. We spoke the same language, with he being more ethnographically inclined and I more social theory driven.

We enthused about an excellent group of students we were honoured to teach, from which emerged mainstays in the local social activist, education, literary and eventually academic scenes. Ronald's superb pedagogical approach has often been highlighted. He attributes part of its origins to his being formed as an educator within the Society of Christian Doctrine. He had a healthy respect for the Society's founder, Dun Gorg Preca, a source of inspiration which persisted in Ronald's later more secular years. Wary of the danger of lapsing into hagiography, he would position Preca's pedagogical approach and politics of language against the knowledge struggles of the time, well in anticipation of Vatican II. Of course, Preca was presented as a 'person to think with', his approach juxtaposed against those of Paulo Freire and later Lorenzo Milani, with the necessary provisos in place. The piece he wrote on Preca and the Politics of knowledge, for a book I edited and which I encouraged him to

submit beforehand to the International Journal of Lifelong Education, reveals the tensions between religious class politics and constituted ecclesiastical authority.

By then Ronald had been publishing pieces on transition education and various aspects of the Sociology of Education in middle range and top tier journals, notably, in the latter case, the British Journal of Sociology of Education (BJSE). This became, in my eyes, the leading publication outlet for academic pieces in our specific areas of specialisation: 'get into it and you've arrived', or so I thought. Of course, Ronald made important inroads into Education, Guidance Counselling (his earlier postgraduate specialisation at University of Reading) and Work education and eventually Comparative Education. He combined all these by producing books, initially starting with Mireva and then PEG, before eventually moving into international book outlets, including Routledge before running his own series for Brill which had taken over Sense. Significant was his single authored study on vocational education in Malta (based on what he termed his Trade School Project), launched towards the end of 1992 which was the subject of a very favourable review Symposium in the BJSE. There is also his volume on Education in the Arab World, co-edited with his Palestinian, Canada-based friend, Andre' Elias Mazawi, and his pioneering work of co-editing (with Godfrey Baldacchino) arguably the first full scale volume on Sociology in Malta heralded as a 'big book', because of 'its admirable comprehensiveness', by Anthony Giddens in his Preface. He also published numerous short monographic studies for different

institutions such as UNICEF which enabled him to carry out research in many Arab countries, including Palestine. In addition, he launched a unique journal, the Mediterranean Journal of Educational Studies, which ran into several volumes before morphing into a book series. All this was at the heart of the work of the EURO-Mediterranean Center for Educational Research (EMCER). The main course offered by the Centre was the MA in EURO-Mediterranean Comparative Education Research in which top scholars from Malta and abroad, a whole galaxy of acclaimed international scholars, taught and supervised theses. Some of the Master's and PhD students from the Centre developed into accomplished researchers in their own right and became established faculty at our Alma Mater.

And yet for all his academic and late 80s and 90s engagement as a public intellectual, also being at the heart of a school reform project (the Tomorrow's Schools document), while serving as Faculty of Education Dean during a biannual period in the 90s, when the Faculty was given top priority by the government of the time, he jealously guarded his family time. He regulated his time well.

We, of course, had our differences and fallouts. This was to be expected as we had contrasting personalities. It did not, however, take long for our friendship to be back on track.

He was, in many respects, a quite remarkable man. I was privileged to get to know him within certain carefully delineated

boundaries. He was generous with me, as with many others, though he did not suffer fools gladly. He was certainly most generous in his citations of close Maltese colleagues, something which cannot be said of everyone in a small state like ours.

I shall miss him. I shall never forget his mantra: we are midgets standing on the shoulders of giants.

My sincere condolences to and solidarity with his spouse Rosaline and his two sons and their young families. May he rest in peace.

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