

Physical education as a means of biopower in inter-war Malta

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Abstract: This article investigates Michael Foucault's concept of biopower and its prevalence within the Maltese education system during the inter-war period. The study of primary sources shows biopower to have increased in the inter-war years, most notably through the development of physical education. Physical Education or P.E., as it was called at the time, became a tool for the promotion of the colonial ideal of being British. As a result, biopower became a distinctive marker of gender identity, particularly for males. Imperialism was equated with the development of a muscular model for the Maltese boys. Overall, however, this model of masculinity remained relatively weak as Malta lacked the infrastructure and resources needed for a state's use of biopower.

Keywords: biopower, British, colonial, Malta, education, masculinity

In *The Will of Knowledge: The History of Sexuality* (1976) Michel Foucault outlines the development of his concept of biopower and its impact on the idea of sexuality. Importantly, this theory describes the controlling of the body and gender identity by an outside authority such as a sovereign state and the growing sophistication of their power to control how people live.¹ The dominance of an authoritative power within Foucault's theory creates an 'axis' of three inter-related concepts: discipline, biopower, and governmentality.² The expansion of state infrastructure including universities, secondary schools, barracks, workshops, and the emergence of political practices and economic observation during the classical period created an 'explosion of

1 M. Foucault, *The will to knowledge: the history of sexuality*, Vol. 1, R. Hurley, (trans.), (London, 1998), 136–8.

2 R. Sánchez García and A. Rivero Herraiz, "'Governmentality' in the origins of European female PE and sport: the Spanish case study (1883–1936)", *Sport, Education and Society*, Vol. 18 (2013) 497.

numerous and diverse techniques' for achieving the 'subjugation of bodies' and 'control of populations', that is for achieving biopower by which is meant: the 'subjugation of bodies' and control of populations'.³ Discipline was embodied within institutions such as schools and this is reflected in the apprenticeship and education programmes encouraged by the state.⁴

With the help of primary sources, this paper will attempt to explore how physical education was used within the Maltese education system as a means to promote biopower during the inter-war period. It will argue that the development of physical education within Malta has characteristics of biopower. In particular the sources stress a heightened awareness of the ability for greater discipline over the body as a 'machine' as well as the idea of the 'species of the body', which created a greater desire to care for the body.⁵ In addition a difference between the sexes and gender identity was promoted through contrasting education programmes for boys and girls. This paper will also argue, however, that what is most obvious within Maltese physical education is that the biopower which it creates is an extension of British colonial influence rather than Maltese state power.

Firstly, a more detailed definition of Foucault's theory of biopower is needed. Biopower is intimately linked to Foucault's conceptualization of power which does not have a central focus but rather works 'in a myriad of networks as relations of power'.⁶ More precisely biopower is linked to the type of power exercised over the body, including the manipulation of the image of sexuality, and the ability of outside forces to control this power. Biopower represents a departure from the previous form of power over the body, which was essentially 'a right of seizure': of things, time, bodies and life itself which resulted in the ancient power authorities had to 'take life or let live.'⁷ The evolution of this power over life created two basic but complementary forms of development. The first focused on the idea of the body as a machine, 'its disciplining, the optimization of its capabilities, the extortion of

3 Foucault, 140.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid., 139.

6 Sánchez Garcia and Rivero Herraiz, 497.

7 Foucault, 136–8.

its forces, the parallel increase in its usefulness, and its docility'.⁸ Foucault defines this as an '*antagonism-politics* of the human body'.⁹ The second form of biopower focuses 'on the species of the body' and the mechanisms of life which serves as the basis of the 'biological process: propagation, birth, and mortality, the level of health, life expectancy and longevity, with all the conditions that can cause them to vary'.¹⁰ The supervision of these processes is affected 'through an entire series of intervention and regulatory controls' which Foucault describes as a *biopolitics* of the population.¹¹ Foucault argues that as a consequence of this the instruments of the state, including the education system, are directed toward the performances of the body and to the processes of life, highlighting the development of state power from simply the right to 'take life or let live' into an ability 'to foster life or disallow it to the point of death'.¹² Biopower is most prevalent in today's society through the efforts of modern states to take action over the perceived obesity epidemic and to encourage the reduction of fat and sugar in the diets of their citizens to promote good health. This ideology has also permeated into civil society and many companies today have taken up the mantle of improving the health of their workforce.

Foucault's Marxist outlook influences him to argue that this controlling of the body by an outside authority ultimately leads to the repression of population. This consequently facilitates the development of capitalism owing to its ability to 'control the insertion of bodies into the machinery of production'.¹³ This act leads Foucault to condemn biopower's 'indispensable' role in the development of capitalism.¹⁴ By the time of the inter-war period however, capitalism has long been established throughout the world, including Malta. Techniques of biopower arguably continue to facilitate capitalism on Malta through the training of boys in apprenticeship schemes, described as 'workshop[s] for practical training' which taught the boys marine and electrical

8 Ibid., 139.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid., 138.

13 Ibid., 140.

14 Ibid.

engineering.¹⁵ In the sociology of education Marxists believe that such apprenticeship training facilitates the exploitative nature of capitalism as such schemes legitimize cheap labour. Despite this argument, the long-term establishment of capitalism already within Malta renders the capitalist analysis of biopower of secondary importance for the subject of this paper.

Of greater interest is how, through the use of physical education, biopower was able to reflect the colonial ideals of Britain, serving to further maximize Britain's control over the Maltese population. This is seen most obviously in Malta's adoption of Great Britain's 1933 *Syllabus of Physical Exercises for Schools*.¹⁶ This syllabus was adopted in 1933, when the Secretary of State for the Colonies suspended Malta's self-government constitution and dissolved its legislative assembly.¹⁷ Malta was returned to direct rule by Great Britain through a local governor, increasing the levels of British influence across the island, not just in aspects of education.¹⁸ The lack of Maltese government autonomy at this time begins to explain its weak influence of biopower in the education system. The suspension of the Maltese government over the direct governing of the country would have rendered it less able to reflect their own values in the physical education system.

The British had already made efforts to imprint their own standards on the Maltese education system before 1933. The Board of Education was formed in 1920 with the function of assisting and advising 'the government in matters pertaining to education'.¹⁹ The Board was quickly solicited by an educational expert from Great Britain, Hon. W. Bruce, who composed an exhaustive study and report on the education system in Malta, suggesting 'much needed reforms'.²⁰ Bruce believed in the need for a 'radical revision and expansion of the primary school curriculum' to include amongst other subjects such as, Physical Education.²¹ Bruce's suggested reforms were overshadowed by the 'Language Question', however, and the reforms were never

15 Chief Secretary's Office, 'Report on the Blue Book: 1936: presented to both Houses of Parliament by Command of Her Majesty', University of Malta (London, 1937)

16 Board of Education, *Syllabus of Physical Training for Schools* (London, 1933)

17 J. Zammit Mangion, *Education in Malta* (Malta, 1992) 48.

18 Ibid.

19 Ibid., 42.

20 Ibid.

21 Ibid.

implemented, delaying some of the influence of imperial Britain on the Maltese education system.²² There was an increase in British imperial influence in 1927, however, when Lord Gerald Strickland's pro-British Constitutional Party took control of government.²³ The party 'greatly promoted' the subject of Physical Education in addition to their promotion of Empire Day, which was celebrated through the medium of sport exhibitions and children's competitions.²⁴ The use of sporting events to promote the empire highlights the direct relationship between Britain's imperial influence and their efforts to exercise their own form of biopower on the Maltese population. The 1933 new syllabus was a further development of this. Written by the British Board of Education, the prefatory memorandum stated the Board's belief that 'physical training at school should be the ground work of healthy exercise and recreation' in life after school.²⁵ This shows the desire of the British state to promote the good health of the species of the body, using school and education as a tool to supervise and intervene in the life of the population.²⁶ The British hoped that this influence would extend into the future, ensuring a continuation of their dominance.²⁷ The passing of the second Compulsory Attendance Act in 1928, which raised the age of compulsory education to 14, already began to ensure that the new syllabus had an increased potential to influence and dominate the Maltese population.²⁸

The syllabus promoted an image of gender which was founded on a belief that the differing body structure of boys and girls created the need for a 'fundamental distinction' between the physical activities of the two sexes.²⁹ It was believed that the programme for girls should be made up of organic, skill-based activities which focused on flexibility and agility.³⁰ For boys a 'good physical appearance' was a key part of their good

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid., 46.

24 Ibid.

25 D. Kirk, *Physical education futures* (London, 2011) 107.

26 Foucault, 139.

27 Ibid.

28 Zammit Mangion, 45–6.

29 J. Buttigieg, 'The place-value of physical culture in education with special reference to physical education in the Maltese islands', Unpublished B.Ed Thesis, University of Malta (1953) 30.

30 Ibid.

health and so the physical training syllabus promoted activities which could aid in this such as athletics.³¹ In the sources, however, reports regarding male physical education dominate and little attention is paid to the physical education of girls. This could suggest that the gender identity of girls created through biopower was underdeveloped in Malta. What is more apparent is that the male dominance and focus on masculinity of wider society was also represented within the physical education system.

Malta's upholding of the 1933 curriculum results in their population being subjected to British controls of biopower during the inter-war period. This influence is reinforced in further facets of the physical education system in Malta, and teachers of physical education who had British training seem to have been viewed as superior. In a letter of application for the position of Sports Instructor, a Mr A. Godrich promoted his English education.³² His letter of application was short and the inclusion of this information suggests that he believed this to be important in aiding him in a successful application. Another example of the importance placed on those with an English education is seen in a letter which requested the use of the yard of Senglea Elementary school for physical training in 1935.³³ The letter expresses a desire to make better use of the opportunity to be coached by a qualified English instructor, professing a hope to get 'full benefit from the experience' once an adequate training area could be found.³⁴ These British educated instructors would have a greater understanding of the British ideals and would be far more effective in promoting them, reinforcing the colonial use of biopower in physical education.

Previous to the 1933 *Syllabus of Physical Exercises for Schools* there seems to be little organized physical education within the Maltese education system. This meant that meaning that biopower had little influence, again highlighting the huge impact of the colonial imprint. This is evidenced in the education report within the *Reports*

31 Ibid., 90.

32 N[ational] A[rchives] of M[alta], 'Mr A.R. Godrich applies for a position as port Instructor at the Lyceum,' ED, (129/1934).

33 NAM, 'Requesting to use the yard of Senglea Elementary School for physical training,' ED, 45/1935.

34 Ibid.

on the working of government departments for the years 1934–35.³⁵ There is no mention within the report of ‘physical training and games,’ which in later reports becomes a headed topic of itself.³⁶ The report admits that physical education in Malta is a ‘weak point’ and that there is ‘little time for recreation’ within the curriculum owing to ‘the school timetable [being] so necessarily overloaded that there is no opportunity for the playing of games’.³⁷ The report also suggested a lack of teachers who were able to act as the leaders of physical training ‘or even have the games spirit’.³⁸ The 1934 *Blue Book* shows that a new physical training instructor, Mr Arthur Rizzo, was hired that year to provide further physical education.³⁹ The next year Rizzo is praised for his work and given a raise suggesting that the government valued his position and believed him to be performing an important role.⁴⁰ Popularly known as ‘Turu Rizzo’, Rizzo himself was a huge promoter of sport generally in Malta, having formed a part of the water polo team which was Malta’s sole representative in the island’s first participation in the Olympic Games at Amsterdam in 1928, whilst also achieving record-breaking long-distance swimming feats between 1927 and 1929.⁴¹ Further exploration of government employment records in the *Blue Books*, however shows that he was the only new physical training instructor hired across the whole island, despite the recent insertion of the physical education syllabus. This is interesting as another source shows that there was other interest in this case from Mr A. Godrich, in the position of sports instructor within the education system.⁴² Godrich was turned down because of a ‘lack of vacancy’ despite there being so few physical training instructors on the island. This suggests that the Maltese government was reluctant to spend too much money on the development of an infrastructure for physical training. This lack of organized physical education shows

35 NAM, ‘Reports on the working of Government departments for the years 1934–35,’ GMR 1932.

36 NAM, ‘Annual Report on the working of the Education Department 1936–37,’ GMR 3851.

37 NAM, ‘Reports on the working of Government departments for the years 1934–45’.

38 Ibid.

39 Chief Secretary’s Office, ‘Report on the Blue Book: 1934: presented to both Houses of Parliament by Command of Her Majesty’ (London, 1935)

40 Ibid.

41 A.J. Leaver, *History of water polo in Malta 1919–1988* (Malta, 1990), 14–18.

42 NAM, ‘Mr A.R. Godrich applies for a position as port Instructor at the Lyceum’.

biopower to be weak during this period. However, in the 1934–35 report’s analysis of future developments within the curriculum, the gradual introduction of the 1933 *Syllabus of Physical Exercises for Schools* is mentioned, signposting the greater role that biopower will come to have in the physical education of Maltese children.

A further signpost is the application of an unnamed Maltese student to Carnegie Physical Training College in England.⁴³ The College boasted high standards of physical training and the Maltese director of education personally sends the application calling it a ‘special request’.⁴⁴ The application of a Maltese student to a physical training college of such high repute suggests that Malta already had the potential to provide higher levels of physical training and consequently extend the potential influence of biopower across the islands. This assessment is supported by evidence of initial developments to provide for more advanced levels of sport. One of these developments was the construction of a new Empire Sports Ground in 1933 which facilitated the competing and viewing of sports such as football, boxing, and athletics.⁴⁵ The construction of sporting faculties were supported by the formation of official sporting bodies, the first of these being the Amateur Swimming Association (ASA) in 1925.⁴⁶ This organized sporting body would aid in the promotion of sport in Malta, however, the Association quickly sought affiliation with the ASA of Great Britain, again showing the strong ties and influence the colonial country had over Malta.⁴⁷ The ASA was joined by the Malta Athletics association and Malta Olympic Committee in 1928 which highlight further efforts to promote competitive sport in Malta.

Further evidence of the growing role of biopower is the prevalence of biopolitics, a branch of biopower already within the Maltese system, seen in the long term establishment of methods of supervision over the population. The population checks in the *Blue Books* is evidence of this and these were joined by the 1934–35 report’s more detailed discussion of the physical and moral welfare of Maltese children.⁴⁸ Whilst biopower

43 NAM, ‘Carnegie Physical Training College’, ED, 34/1936.

44 Ibid.

45 Carmel Baldacchino, *Great moments in football* (Malta, 2008), 86.

46 Leaver, 13.

47 Ibid.

48 NAM, ‘Reports on the working of Government departments for the years 1934–45’.

was not fully developed within the structure of physical education these reports show a state already partaking in biopolitics and supervising the biological process of the body. This is evidenced in ‘physical and moral welfare’ report within the *Report on the Working of Secondary and Elementary School 1938–39*, which declared: ‘we are leaving no stone unturned to avail ourselves every opportunity to improve the health and raise the standard of living of the future citizens of Malta’.⁴⁹ Alongside further physical education the report discussed the promotion of health and hygiene and religious courses to facilitate further the well-being of children.⁵⁰ The wider development of this into the second form of biopower: anatomo-politics of the human body is seen in the 1930’s *Blue Books* where there is evidence of efforts to provide for the growing population. Additional schools and playgrounds were planned across the island, both key tools in the extension of biopower through physical education. Progress was slow however and schools which had begun to be constructed in 1930 such as Dingli and Mosta were registered in the 1936 *Blue Book* as still being built.⁵¹ In 1935 the requested use of Senglea Elementary School playground for the physical training of boys because there was ‘no other available space where sportsmen can train’, shows the continuation of a lacking infrastructure for the encouragement of physical education.⁵² This suggests that the instruments for the promotion of biopower remained weak in Malta throughout most of the inter-war period.

The importance of physical education for the promotion of biopower lies with the anatomo-politics of the human body and Foucault’s idea of the body as a machine with a need for discipline.⁵³ The concept of discipline has the most impact on physical education which can both ‘disperse, mark and fix the populations’ as well as ‘train bodies of individuals of their movements and gestures provide optimum efficiency.’⁵⁴ Discipline

49 NAM, ‘Report on the working of Secondary and Elementary Schools: 1938–39’, GMR1432.

50 Ibid.

51 Chief Secretary’s Office, ‘Report on the Blue Book: 1930: presented to both Houses of Parliament by Command of Her Majesty’, University of Malta (London: 1931) and Chief Secretary’s Office, ‘Report on the Blue Book: 1936: presented to both Houses of Parliament by Command of Her Majesty’, University of Malta (London: 1937).

52 NAM, ‘Requesting to use the yard of Senglea Elementary School for physical training’.

53 Foucault, 139.

54 G. Rail and J. Harvey, ‘Body at Work: Michel Foucault and the Sociology of Sport,’ *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 12, (1995), 165.

constitutes a concrete form of power, providing a tool for the domination of bodies; however, this power is a departure from the previous repression of lives and instead suggests of an ‘investment’ in the body.⁵⁵ The development of this ideology during the interwar period in Malta is evident in the sources. The *Annual Report on the Working of the Education Department 1936–37* records that the level of physical training in the Lyceum and in the elementary schools was ‘satisfactory’. The report detailed that in the junior Lyceum every class had a football team and played at least one football game every ten days, encouraging competition through league and house matches as well as the Laferla Cup, which had been named after Albert Laferla, the Director of Education during the period.⁵⁶ Football, alongside athletics and cricket, all sports enjoyed in Great Britain, were promoted and played by the boys.⁵⁷ In addition it is revealed that special after-school classes were ‘well attended’, and that the boys were ‘enthusiastic’ about sport, suggesting that the insertion of physical education into the curriculum was accepted and even enjoyed.⁵⁸ The importance of male physical fitness is apparent and the report focuses solely on the training of the boys and their instruction at both the Lyceum and elementary schools by male teachers, helping to reinforce traditional ideals of masculinity through biopower and reflecting the continued dominance of males within wider society.⁵⁹ Again, however, this 1936–37 report still suggests of an underdevelopment of biopower: satisfactory levels of physical training could not be reported at the senior Lyceum and it was noted that there was still a lack of gymnasiums, playing fields and football pitches.⁶⁰ The Maltese appear to have a mixed reaction to the insertion of physical education into the curriculum and while the headmaster of the Lyceum reported that the sporting spirit of the boys was ‘wonderful’ there were those boys, including the captain of the first football team, who had ‘at times, backed out’ of matches ‘on the flimsiest pretences’, again suggesting that the influence of biopower in Malta was underdeveloped.⁶¹

55 Ibid.

56 Chief Secretary’s Office, ‘Report on the Blue Book: 1936’.

57 Ibid.

58 Ibid.

59 Ibid.

60 Ibid.

61 Ibid.

The last report of the inter-war period: the Report on the working of *Secondary and Elementary Schools 1938–39* again gives further evidence of the progress of the insertion of physical education into the Maltese education system.⁶² By this time all elementary school classes have provisions for physical training, which ‘also figures’ in the syllabus of the Teacher’s Training School, Lyceum, Preparatory School and Government Orphanage.⁶³ This was supplemented with evening classes in the Sliema area and the government’s provision of two new playing fields at Imriehel and Mosta.⁶⁴ At this time there were three teachers within the elementary schools who taught physical education and two masters-in-charge of sport at the Lyceum.⁶⁵ The presence of more physical education teachers and the expansion of their training within the Teacher’s Training School suggest that the subject had become more institutionalized in Malta. Training in the teaching of physical education would bring more structure to the subject and with greater structure it would be likely that there would be greater discipline, increasing the anatomo-politics of the human body.

Used in combination these sources suggest the slow progression of the Maltese physical education system during the inter-war period. What is most evident is how the physical education system reflected the ideals of the British, allowing them to control the structure of biopower and promote their perceptions of gender identity onto the Maltese population. The promotion of the British ideal is understandable as Malta followed the 1933 Syllabus of Physical Exercises for Schools, providing the Maltese government with little opportunity to impart their own form of biopower into the system. The syllabus advocated the greater discipline over the body as well as greater care for it, both key features of biopower. Again the sources highlight these features being inserted into the Maltese physical education system, for example in the use of structured sports, inducing athletics and the promotion of health and hygiene and religious courses to further facilitate the well-being of Maltese children.⁶⁶ Finally, the sources also highlight the believed ‘fundamental distinction’ between boys and girls that required

62 NAM, ‘Report on the working of Secondary and Elementary Schools: 1938–39’.

63 Ibid.

64 Ibid.

65 Ibid.

66 Ibid.

contrasting education programmes and shaped gender identity.⁶⁷ The division of gender extended further than the curriculum and the dominance of males and masculinity is also highlighted in the subject matter of these sources. Reports on the physical education of boys dominate, suggesting their physicality to be of greater importance at this time. Although the use of biopower over girls within the physical education system was still developing in Malta this extends beyond the inter-war period. As a result, in Malta, the biopower within the physical education system during the inter-war period promoted masculinity and male dominance in addition to promoting the biopower of Imperial Britain.

67 Buttigieg, 30.