Sacred Island or World Empire?
Locating Far-Right Movements
In and Beyond Malta

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ABSTRACT The paper is structured in four sections. First, we trace the rise of the far right in contemporary Malta and describe its more prominent manifestations. Second, we construct a localistic and 'exceptionalist' analytical framework which emphasizes a particular and insular local political-cultural context; in this first sense Maltese far right movements can be understood partly as a deep rooted response to a historical pathos of identity and nationhood, partly as straightforward xenophobia triggered by irregular migration. We then move on in the third section to look at the ways in which the far right in Malta is linked to and interacts with similar groups elsewhere in Europe. Two processes emerge as being of crucial importance. First, the entrepreneurship of transnationally well-connected mobile individuals; second, the burgeoning in recent years of the Internet and transnational cyber-communities. Seen in this light, the far right in contemporary Malta is, to paraphrase James Clifford, both 'rooted' in local social processes and at the same time 'routed' via transnational exchanges. Our paper argues that one way of resolving this apparent contradiction is to think of the far right as a loose 'global' collection of tropes and ideas which, as a result of specific situations, are embedded—selectively and usually unsuccessfully, and typically by transnational cultural entrepreneurs and self-proclaimed 'elite' individuals—in local histories and narratives of identity.

KEY WORDS: Far right politics, xenophobia, immigration, transnationalism, cultural entrepreneurs, European politics

Introduction
The archipelago state of Malta (316 km² with a population of 402 000) is the European Union's (EU) smallest member state. Since its independence from Britain in 1964 the Maltese polity has been characterized by a bipartisan see-saw formulation that leaves little space for smaller political groupings. The two main parties are the centre-left Malta Labour Party (MLP) and the Christian-Democrat Nationalist Party (PN); the Greens, locally incarnated as Alternattiva Demokratika (AD) (Democratic Alternative), have been actively involved in national politics, with scant electoral success, since 1989. Arguably the three major political processes of these last two decades have been the accession to the EU in 2004, the liberalization of the economy after 1987 and the pluralization and subsequent proliferation of the media in the 1990s. The last, coupled with the rise of new technologies of communication, has made it increasingly possible for emergent movements to engage with the public sphere.

The rise of the local far right belongs within this context. Largely in response to unprecedented influxes of sub-Saharan irregular migrants, a small and highly diverse
number of individuals, groups and political actors peddling far right ideas have been making their presence felt since 2002 or so, reaching a peak in 2004–2005. This paper is an attempt to describe and understand the dynamics of the Maltese far right. We first describe, from a local perspective, the elements making up this heterogeneous category; we then go on to locate it within much broader transnational processes, ideas and practices. Our underlying argument is that sui generis studies of local movements are hardly a productive way of understanding the far right, in Malta or elsewhere.

A note on method and methodology. This paper is based on fieldwork in Malta from 2002 to date. Our main data sources were: first, a number of in-depth interviews with the protagonists and followers of the local far right; second, participant observation sessions at various events organized by far right circles; third, extensive and regular ‘observation’ of online forums and websites (see Jacobson, 1999), notably the well-known ‘Vivamalta’ forum (www.vivamalta.org) and the ‘Imperium Europa’ website (www.imperium-europa.org); fourth, observation of public meetings and the local print and broadcasting media.

Methodologically our approach sought to overcome what Goodwin (2006) called ‘externalist’ limitations that characterize studies which privilege the circumstances within which the far right thrives at the expense of the internal dynamics of the movements themselves. The main reason behind the paucity of ‘internalist’ research on the far right, namely difficulty of access (often accentuated by a lack of political affinity between the typical scholar and the movements being studied), was not really an issue in our case. The third and fourth data sources in particular were not subject to this limitation and we felt we had free access throughout our work; this derived from the personality and approach of the protagonists of the local movements, who turned out to be anything but secretive and/or protective of their space of thought and practice. We are confident that our work represents an in-depth and comprehensive grasp of the field.

The Far Right in Contemporary Malta: The Actors, Roles and Script

The key characteristic of the contemporary Maltese far right is its heterogeneous and formless nature. Nonetheless, one may discern four fairly coherent threads (see Table 1), here listed and described in descending order of extremeness.

| Table 1. Taxonomic sketch of activity and ideology among the contemporary Maltese far right |
|-------------------------------|-----------------|---------|--------|--------|
| Participation in elections    | IE              | Vivamalta | ANR    | AN     |
| Conservatism                  | Ambiguous       | Ambiguous | Strong | Moderate to strong |
| Palingenic mythology          | Very strong     | Variable  | Mild   | No     |
| White supremacism             | Very strong     | Strong    | No     | No     |
| Anti-Semitism                 | Very strong     | Variable  | No     | No     |
| Patriotism                    | Ambiguous       | Variable  | Very strong | Strong |
| Anti-immigration              | Very strong     | Very strong | Strong | No     |
| Transnational connections     | Strong          | Strong    | Moderate | No     |
| Spectacle & performance       | Very important  | Important | Moderate | Weak  |
Imperium Europa

Imperium Europa is formally a one-man show set up and run by Norman Lowell, by far the most prominent far-right personage in contemporary Malta. As a notion Imperium Europa (elaborated on at length in a book of that title; Lowell, 2003) originally proposed the ethnic cleansing of the whole of Europe (‘from Ireland to Vladivostok’) to achieve an exclusively ‘europid’-inhabited continent. In recent years this has been broadened to incorporate North America, South Africa and ‘huge swathes’ of Latin America—what Lowell envisages as ‘two white rings encircling the globe’. Lowell’s ideology presents all the trappings of global neo-Nazi and white supremacist beliefs: Holocaust denial and a rabid anti-Semitism [in a nod to the Nazi film Der ewige Jude (The Eternal Jew) he describes Jews as ‘sewer rats’, among other appellations], racism (particularly that addressed at ‘negrids’), hardline anti-immigrationism and, importantly, a palingenetic vision for the revival of a pre-Christian spirituality (‘cosmotheism’) of which Malta, with its heritage of Neolithic sites, would be a foremost exponent. Lowell also talks of a ‘planetary imperium’ to be born of a ‘cataclysmic crisis’ in 2012, the winners of which would be a global, white ‘spiritual’ elite inhabiting a ‘sacred geography’ punctuated with ‘power points’, which include Malta, Stonehenge and Monte Rosa.

A retired banker, Lowell had been flirting with Maltese public opinion for a couple of decades before really attempting to take centre stage. His first book Credo (Lowell, 1999) caused quite a stir when it hit the stands, particularly on account of its diatribes against Christianity and proposals for eugenics, and earned him a television audience on one of Malta’s most popular talk shows that same year.

Some less extreme parts of the book had actually been published in The Times and The Sunday Times (of Malta) in the early 1980s and late 1990s, in the form of letters to the editor or opinion pieces. Then they attracted very little attention and had largely been dismissed as a curiosity. By 2004, however, and riding the crest of the immigration issue, his vitriolic attacks on blacks and immigrant-friendly non-governmental organizations (NGO) galvanized his role as a spokesman for the emergent far right, not least thanks to a mushrooming of Internet forums, as well as his regular television appearances on a small private station, which aired a series of political debates featuring the minor candidates in the EU parliamentary election of that year.

The press largely reacted with hostility. At the same time it displayed a fascination with his eccentric persona (Vassallo, 2006). The attitude changed to an active indifference, even censorship, in the run-up to the March 2008 general election. This attitude of negation was fuelled in large part by a realization, on the part of the mainstream, that the media coverage Lowell had been given in 2004, despite it having been largely negative, had still raised his profile and made him something of an anti-establishment icon. In this sense Lowell’s success at the 2004 polls (he failed to get elected but got a very respectable number of votes) must have served as an eye opener that the far right was potentially a political actor to be reckoned with.

At the time of writing (spring 2008) Lowell’s popularity is at a low ebb. He retains a regular presence on the Vivamalta website, to which he is ‘affiliated’, and has kept up his contacts with like-minded movements in Britain and the USA. His visibility in the Maltese public sphere, however, has decreased, with one notable exception. On 27 March 2008 Lowell became the first Maltese to be handed a jail sentence (two years, suspended for four) for incitement to racial hatred.
Vivamalta

Vivamalta is essentially a website which brings together, through its online forums, a number of individuals whose views, although strongly divergent in substance on most counts, tend to converge on the themes of race, immigration and sympathy for Norman Lowell’s performances and rhetorical style (if not necessarily his views). Vivamalta attracts hundreds of visitors weekly, of whom around 50 are regulars (although this number has recently been waning). It has also produced an ‘affiliated’ political candidate (apart from Lowell that is), a young university student (www.pathforger.com) who contested and performed miserably in the March 2008 election.

Alleanza Nazzjonali Repubblikana

Alleanza Nazzjonali Repubblikana (ANR) (National Republican Alliance) was set up in 2005 and all but disbanded in 2007. The ANR presented itself as a pressure group which aimed to ‘defend and promote the identity, integrity, and interests of the Maltese nation,’ defined as ‘Latin, European, and Roman Catholic’ (party statute at www.anrmalta.info). Its two main lines of attack were a conservatism based on ‘traditional’ models of nation and family and a strong anti-immigrationist stance. The two were clearly linked, as immigration was represented as the main threat to Maltese models of family and values. The ANR enjoyed several months of fairly high profile presence in the public sphere, notably through public meetings and television appearances.

Azzjoni Nazzjonali

Azzjoni Nazzjonali (AN) (National Action) is a political party set up in 2007 with an aggressive nationalist, conservative and anti-immigrationist agenda—broadly similar to that of the ANR that is. The AN is the brainchild of Josie Muscat, a prominent gynaecologist, private medical care entrepreneur and former Nationalist MP. Its top brass include a well known construction magnate, a lawyer and an ex-ANR university lecturer.

Before embarking on a detailed understanding of the movements’ convergences, a caveat is in order. The question is whether or not there is a continuity between the contemporary Maltese far right and inter-war Fascist currents in Malta. Since the nineteenth century the nationalist anti-colonialist movement on the islands had been characterized by an Italianism (italianità) which it perceived as an antidote to anglicization. The appearance in Italy of Fascism saw the setting up of a local Casa del Fascio (House of Fascism) in the 1920s, to which a good number of urbanite Maltese were drawn (Bonello, 2000). This flirtation with Fascism was cut short, at least officially, when World War II broke out and Mussolini’s Italy became the enemy. The final nail in the coffin was the execution by the British in 1942 of Carmelo Borg Pisani, a Maltese art student who had been persuaded to spy for the Italians.

The contemporary far right is at best only distantly related to inter-war Fascism. A few of ANR’s inner circle are clearly admirers of Mussolini, one of them going to the extent of having ‘DUX’ (‘Duce’, as Mussolini was known) number plates on his car. Likewise, some of the regulars on the Vivamalta forum claim devotion to Fascism, although one must distinguish between rhetorical flourish and ideological constancy. Beyond this superficial level there is no attempt by the far right today to make genealogical
(the qualification is important) connections to Fascism. Norman Lowell has gone so far as to denounce nostalgic ultra-nationalists à la ANR as ‘la destra fossilizzata’ (‘the fossilized right’, presumably an inferior species to his ‘new’ right)—although he regularly pays homage in his speeches to Borg Pisani, and it is interesting that he uses a phrase in Italian to denounce nostalgic Italianate forms of ‘religio et patria’ (‘religion and homeland’, an old slogan of the Nationalist Party)\(^1\).

**Convergences: Putting the Maltese Far Right in a Local Context**

In this section we are interested, first, in exploring how the four movements described above are related and, second, in linking them to a heuristic socio-political context. The first element of convergence concerns genealogy, in the sense that a significant number of individuals now involved in the more moderate ANR and AN were first attracted to the far right by the performances of Norman Lowell (which is also why we give them so much attention in the present work). There is of course a high turnover rate and people come and go and commute between the movements, often altering their discourse accordingly. Thus an AN political candidate might show a moderate countenance to immigration in a television debate and a hardline one in his online ‘avatar’. One might add that as individuals move from more to less extreme—and therefore closer to the mainstream—they tend to disown Lowell, sometimes publicly. Lowell himself has responded by denouncing both the AN and especially ANR as minions of an international Jewish plot. On an informal level, however, the boundaries between the four movements are much less definable.

Formally, then, one notes a sustained difference between the wide-ranging ideas of Norman Lowell (and, by osmosis, some of the regulars on Vivamalta) and the conservative, ultra-nationalist views of the ANR and AN. Significantly, a number of the latter two movements’ exponents have their roots in a militant, underground right-wing formulation that developed in the 1980s, largely to oppose the perceived excesses of the socialist government in power at the time. Josie Muscat, the leader of the AN, led a group called the Front Freedom Fighters, at the time popularly believed to be preparing for a coup d’état. Other groups included the Moviment Socjal Repubblikan (MSR) (Social Republican Movement), a short-lived underground movement inspired by the post-War Italian neo-Fascist Movimento Sociale Italiano (MSI). Tellingly, the ANR (some prominent members of which had been active in the MSR) maintained the parallel in the name they chose for their new group, which echoes that of the Italian MSI’s own restored façade, the mainstream right-wing party Alleanza Nazionale.

Besides genealogy, the second and by far the most important centripetal force that has fostered a convergence of thought and action is immigration. All four movements are strongly anti-immigrationist (although their proposed solutions vary from blasting boatloads of immigrants in the case of Norman Lowell to stricter immigration controls in that of the AN) and their fortunes tend to fluctuate in tune with the volume of immigrant arrivals in Malta—or, more accurately, with the prominence given it by the mainstream media and parties.

Put broadly, the local response to irregular migration has shifted from initial sympathy and commiseration when landings started in 2001, through outright contempt to a cautious coexistence. Anti-immigration rhetoric reached a peak in 2004–2005. A news item broadcast on national television in the summer of 2005, for instance, compared
the ‘invasion’ of migrants with a jellyfish infestation of the Maltese coast that was making
the news at the time (Sammut, 2007). Newspapers published stories of ‘weapons’
confiscated at immigrant detention camps, the potential terrorist threat of migration and
black prostitutes roaming the streets and spreading HIV (Texeire, 2006).2

The tension was not fuelled by the sheer number of migrants or the dramatic context in
which they found themselves in Malta as much as by a palpable expectation that the
situation could be resolved given political will and decisive administration. If the EU was
not willing to help with what the government described as ‘burden sharing’ then Malta
would have to take matters into its own hands, so the popular call went. That is exactly
what the far right’s exponents had on offer with their talk of sinking migrant boats
‘14 miles out’ (Lowell), cleaning the streets of immigrants (ANR) and, more recently,
having them ‘shipped to Brussels’ (AN).

Nonetheless, a series of turning points checked the momentum which the movement
was beginning to harness. The first came in autumn 2005, when ominous racist graffiti
appeared at roadsides, along with minor vandalism to public property. The situation
escalated in early 2006 into a series of arson attacks on Jesuits and prominent journalists—
named enemies of the far right for their championing of immigrants’ rights. Whether any
of the formal movements described earlier were responsible for these arson attacks is
irrelevant (nobody was ever charged). The point is that the incidents broke the far right’s
back after a number of its affiliates were arrested and interrogated for suspected
involvement. Many members defected and, along with the arrest and charging of a number
of protagonists for incitement to racial hatred, the whole debacle had a negative effect
on the far right’s standing in the public opinion, not least since clergy had been targeted
in the attacks.

The second turning point, possibly more critical and enduring, was a shift in people’s
attitudes to immigration itself. Since 2005, despite the fact that immigration figures have
decreased only marginally, the public’s expectation of a quick-fix solution has given way
to a resigned and sober attitude to the issue.

The timing of general elections in Malta on 8 March 2008 could not have been more
providential in that it allowed us to test our long-held contention that the far right’s star as
a formal and political actor in Malta is currently on the wane. In an election with one of the
lowest turnouts in recent years (93%, still very high compared with that in most Western
democracies) the minor parties and independent candidates, but especially the far right,
fared dismally. The incumbent Nationalist Party won 49.34% of the vote, over the Labour
Party’s 48.79%, leaving little ground for any third party. Significantly, ‘protest’ voters
preferred to abstain rather than vote for the far right or other parties.

This was a particular blow to the AN, who, with its talk of being able to break through
Malta’s entrenched political bipolarity and of having the support of a silent majority, had
poured substantial funds into the campaign. The AN managed 1461 votes or 0.5% of the
total votes cast. Following the result the leader Josie Muscat resigned, stating publicly that
it was ‘not worth it’ (he has since reconsidered). Norman Lowell on his part seemed more
realistic about his prospects and went on record as saying that his candidature was more a
token of ‘final resistance’ (to the country’s ‘takeover’ by immigrants) than anything else.
He polled a mere 84 votes. This performance contrasts with parallel ones in contemporary
Europe. Linden and Klandermans (2007), for example, talked of a rise of far right
sentiments in The Netherlands in the 1990s, as witnessed inter alia by successful electoral
results. Likewise Virchow (2007) described the success of the German far right in the 2004
elections and ascribed it to a general disenchantment with politics, allowing far right parties to win over protest votes; he also cited their focus on bread and butter issues like unemployment and reductions in social security and their strong anti-immigration stance.

Despite the connection between the fortunes of the various movements and immigration it would be mistaken to frame the Maltese far right in the context of immigration alone. One also senses that at the heart of the far right’s emergence there is a profound rejection of the Maltese establishment. On the level of the members it is a protest against what they largely perceive as a stale and inauthentic sense of national identity.

Just as other emerging far right parties have done on the continent (Heinisch, 2003), the local movement projects itself as a marginal group (in the sense of being non-mainstream) which claims to defend, and therefore speak for, the rights of the native majority—even though it is fundamentally positioned against it.

The discursive field of the movement happens to dovetail, in substance, with the theory of leading Maltese sociologist Godfrey Baldacchino (2002), who argued that the national interest in Malta has been hijacked by the country’s all-powerful socio-political institutions, the Church and the two main political parties, which he calls ‘the Troika’ (see also Falzon, 2007).

It may be difficult to appreciate just how influential these institutions are in what is to all intents and purposes a modern democratic state, but a few figures will render the general picture. Besides having some 98% of the population declaring themselves Catholic in a country where the Constitution itself describes the Maltese State as Catholic, the country’s parliamentary democracy has been the exclusive domain of the two main political parties since 1966, together enjoying the support of over 95% of the population, split more or less down the middle.

In practice this means that the public sphere and any civic expression within it is channelled through the discourse of these mammoth institutions, outside which all else is marginalized (see Falzon, 2007). The Troika, in other words, comes to represent the primary anchor of identity, acting as an intermediary for the sense of being Maltese. The parties become the quintessential expression of national identity and national interest, as well as the political avenue sanctioned by it. For one to be Maltese one must be either a Nationalist or a Labourite, and definitely a Catholic or having some relation (in whatever way) to Catholicism.

Perhaps the shortest route to locating the discourse of the far right within this set of relations is through a favourite metaphor in Lowell’s repertoire, namely that of ‘il-gaħan Malti’ (‘the Maltese gaħan’). ‘Gaħan’ is a folk simpleton who, in Lowell’s rhetoric, comes to symbolize a mentally comatose Maltese culture. At the same time, and somewhat paradoxically, gaħan is called upon to shake off the slumber foisted upon him by the establishment. The gaħan metaphor—which also found its way into the rhetoric of AN’s Josie Muscat during the 2008 electoral campaign—thus represents a spoof of Maltese society, a caricature of the inability of the Maltese to think independently, in their own interests. In Lowell’s terms, the Maltese gaħan has been hijacked by ‘the two parties and the KKK’ (KKK stands for ‘Knisja Kattolika Korrotta’, ‘Corrupt Catholic Church’; Lowell has also described the two parties as ‘lesbian prostitutes sharing the same bed’).

It is worth noting that on their part the AN and ANR completely sidestepped the criticism levelled at the Church. The formation of the ANR and later AN under the banner of Catholic conservatism came in large part as a response to the perceived sterility of the polity; it was a marked shift away from Lowell’s neo-paganism, visceral racism and anti-Semitism in favour
of a more pragmatic ideological line. The so-called ‘split’ occurred more or less during the summer of 2005, when the different factions of the movement, until then a rather compact if nebulous group, began openly criticizing each other, primarily on the leading far right Internet forum, the now defunct AveMelita. The central controversy surrounded Lowell’s open attacks on the Catholic faith which secured a separation between the Christian conservatives and Italianate, Fascist sympathizing nostalgics and Lowell’s more radical, neo-pagan, or at least anti-clerical, faction.

The AN and ANR, however, still ‘inherited’ (if one accepts the genealogical link made earlier), even if in a less acerbic tone, Lowell’s protest against the two main political parties and their combined undermining of national interest. However, while the critique may be said to have popular appeal in so far as many will recognize themselves in the caricature, fundamentally all it does is confirm the status quo. When it set itself up against the Troika, the far right (as the Green party has been doing unsuccessfully for the past 18 odd years) effectively threatened to undermine the system which supports the national identity they paradoxically claim to want to preserve. In retrospect, its two main platforms, immigration and national interest, have turned out to be completely out of sync with the ‘silent majority’ it claims to represent.

In sum, the far right in Malta amply displays what Griffin (1991) called the ‘basic features’ of such movements, namely organizational complexity and ideological heterogeneity. It can be seen as a melange of ideas, personalities and practices which articulate themselves along the lines of the four movements. At the same time, it does show a sense of convergence on a small number of central themes, which affords it both strength and vulnerability.

How ‘Maltese’ is the Maltese Far Right?

On the one hand our object is ‘Maltese’ in that it is located in Malta, is made up mostly of Maltese people and is embedded in the historical and contemporary realities of the Maltese polity. On the other, a number of factors make it clear that a localistic and exceptionalist heuristic will not suffice. In the following two sections we shall first look at some of the mechanisms of transnational interactions that characterize the Maltese far right and, second, discuss the ways in which its key attributes exhibit a homology with similar movements elsewhere.

A good number of far right actors have biographies of mobility and interaction with similar groups in various countries. In the case of Norman Lowell, for instance, his white supremacist ideas were moulded in the 1970s in what was then Rhodesia. Lowell spent several months immersed in the racial politics that characterized that country at the time and he regularly refers to the experience as having been of epiphanic significance to his thought and beliefs. It gives him a claim to ‘understanding blacks’ and their ‘inherent’, racially defined ‘inferiority’. More recently Lowell has been to London several times to give speeches at gatherings of the ‘New Right’ group, a small UK-based, far right organization of sorts centred on palinesthetic white supremacy and British ultra-nationalism (see founding member Troy Southgate’s website at www.myspace.com/troysouthgate). (Interestingly, the New Right’s journal is called New Imperium.) A number of other individuals draw on biographies of mobility and displacement; some are of transnational parentage or have non-Maltese partners, while others have worked and/or lived in countries where they came across local far right groups.
A detailed description of the Maltese far right’s transnational connections is beyond the scope of this paper, but suffice it to mention the example of links (through direct relations, correspondence or published literature) with various neo-Nazi groups such as ‘The Order’ (a US white supremacist and anti-Semitic terrorist organization active in the 1980s), as well as more moderate movements. Lowell, for example, has corresponded with Britain’s Oswald Mosley (he claims to have ‘stacks of his letters’), insiders of the French Nouvelle Droite, Austria’s Jörg Haider, as well as a host of US extremists (notably The Order’s David Lane, regarded as a martyr by neo-Nazis worldwide). At a recent public meeting he claimed that Malta had been chosen (by far right movements in Europe) as the venue for the launching of the anthem of a ‘new Europe’, in effect George Lehmann’s Ave Europa.

The second factor which enables and fosters the local far right’s transnational connections is information technology. Let us first establish that the Internet has been a pivotal element behind the recent rise of the movement in Malta, for various reasons. First, the Internet is a facet of the public sphere which is inherently very hard to control. This means that it is open to anti-Semitic, racist and other extremist (and potentially incriminating) discourses, which are otherwise censured by editors of mainstream media. Second, online communities constitute a ‘safe’ venue for interaction, not least because interlocutors can, and generally do, use ‘avatars’ to mask their identity. The crucial point, however, is that the Internet, being literally a worldwide web, reterritorializes interaction (see, for example, Featherstone, 1995; Hannerz, 1996; various contributions in Inda & Rosaldo, 2002) and renders the local transnational. In our case it means that the far right is open to transnational input. The Vivamalta online forum in particular attracts posts from neo-Nazis, white supremacists, neo-Fascists and ultra-nationalists based in a number of locations worldwide. It also regularly posts links (in alternative cyber jargon ‘opens threads’) to like-minded movements and invites users of the forum to discuss far right issues. With respect to the ANR, they are ‘affiliated’ (although the exact relation is vague at best) to the Center for Vigilant Freedom, a US-based but largely online (www.vigilantfreedom.org) organization which targets the ‘Islamist threat’.

Norman Lowell, for his part, has benefited greatly from the Internet. His speeches, usually made available online through YouTube (www.youtube.com) and/or Maltese-run websites (notably www.sandrovella.org, a Maltese satirical website), have proved very popular among local youth for their caustic and eccentric assaults on the establishment. Some of his speeches and writings in English are known beyond Malta, recently through his presence on the US-based white supremacist Internet Majority Rights radio site (www.majorityrights.com).

The upshot is that, despite being linked in piecemeal fashion and in various ways to local contexts (through criticism of the Catholic Church, sub-Saharan immigration or anti-Semitic verbal assaults on ‘infiltrated’ national politics), Maltese far right ideas and discourses are anything but ‘local’.

Transnational Homologies

There is another level, apart from that of content, at which the local far right goes well beyond exceptionalist frameworks. In fact—and in spite of the particularities of context—in terms of structure the far right in contemporary Malta is markedly homologous with similar movements elsewhere. In this sense, the recent special issue of the Journal of Contemporary Ethnography (which included case studies of far right movements from
a number of locations) constitutes a useful reference point. In her editorial article, Blee (2007) identified a number of common factors which we found to be readily applicable to the Maltese case.

First, an emphasis on individual motivations and practices which goes well beyond a requisite nod to ‘agency’. As Blee (2007, p. 122) put it, it is essential to differentiate ‘the external façade of the far right from its internal dynamics.’ In the case of the Maltese far right one notes, first, the importance of individual entrepreneurship and, second, the marked disjunctures between the regular formal façade and the variegated informal interior. Norman Lowell, for example, can be seen as a ‘cultural entrepreneur’ in Barth’s (1969) sense, a mongerer of ‘organized culture difference’ (i.e. identity) by bringing together, through his individual biography and experiences, a number of strands of discourse and practices; Josie Muscat represents another significant agent. Further, although subscribers do cross paths at a number of important junctions, one notes a very pronounced heterogeneity of ideas and practice, both between and within the various movements. This gives rise to constant sparring, online as well as in other contexts. It also means that it is very difficult for the far right to evolve into a structured unified movement (or at least number of movements) with a clear and sustained political line of action. In this vein a fact that never ceased to surprise us during our fieldwork was that even ‘hardened’ followers of Lowell, who hardly ever missed an event or went a day without posting online, told us that, on account of his esoteric views, they would not consider voting for him in a general election.

Blee’s (2007) second point concerns emotions. She privileged, as many scholars do, the role of emotions in the making of far right movements. Given the recent spate of literature rehabilitating emotions into social theory (see, for example, Milton & Svašek, 2005; Williams, 2000), as well as the obvious emotionality of far right performance, this is hardly ground breaking. However, she added that it is important to realize that it is not just the ‘expected emotions of hostility, persecution, and anger’ that matter, but equally those of ‘pride, amusement, and sensuality’ (Blee, 2007, p. 123). The coexistence of these contrasting sets of emotions should not come as a surprise; on the contrary, it is a well trodden point that the sacred is created through a process of loss—in Bataille’s (1972) words, ‘Pleasure only starts once the worm has got into the fruit, to become delightful happiness must be tainted with poison.’ Hansen (1999), for instance, writing about the far right Hindu nationalist Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (National Volunteers Organization) in India, noted how a collective ‘grandiose self’, i.e. a community organized around enjoyment, is based not least on a sense of the constant threat of ‘theft of enjoyment’ by outside groups.

In our case there is no doubt that emotions, including those of ‘pride, amusement and sensuality,’ are a defining aspect of the local far right. It is in fact hardly a case of ideology uniting the Maltese far right, but rather one of people with different agendas rallying around a field of emotionality emanating in part from individual charismatic selves. Weber (1947) defined charismatic authority as stemming from ‘a certain quality of the individual personality by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities’ (p. 358). Lowell clearly fits the bill of exceptional figure in the eyes of many followers; at the same time he has never really exerted ‘authority’ in a classical Weberian sense (i.e. as a form of leadership power), acting instead as a charismatic coagulant for an otherwise nebulous following.

Lowell has never modified his ideas to achieve a more respectable image, as other far right leaders have done elsewhere in Europe (Eatwell, 2002). He may always have been
after a crowd, but not the masses. He offered himself as a public performer of the movement’s protest, and the subscribers took up the offer, often pledging little more than conditional support. Nonetheless, and this is precisely why the label of charismatic leadership remains viable at least at a certain level, the heart of Lowell’s charisma is in its symbolism; an emotive dynamic which gives his circle (and the wider group he influences) an essentially ritual character. While the members’ broad endorsement of the movement is meaningful and directed, their political actions are ritualized, in the sense that the ‘identity’ of the group’s actions as a whole (the gatherings and the form that support takes in Lowell’s public performances) is ‘non-intentional’ and archetypal (Humphrey & Laidlaw, 1994). Emotions of anger and frustration abound and are typically directed as immigrants, NGOs and political incompetence; these coexist with a generous supply of emotions of ‘pride, amusement, and sensuality’ generated by Lowell’s irreverent wisecracks and his professed love of wine, women and song.4

In other words, the movement only represents the aspirations of the members in symbolic/emotive rather than concrete terms, a sort of protest by proxy, rallied around banners to which the members only subscribe in form. The gatherings and the online activity become rites in themselves, wherein the subversive context is provided by the proximity to Norman Lowell and his performances, and not through some expectation that the activities will lead to the social changes prescribed by his ideology.

Third, Blee (2007) generalized about attempts by far right movements to reconcile extremist agendas that are consistent with their internal ideologies with more moderate tactics that appeal to a wider base of remits (and possibly voters). In the case of the Maltese far right there are some important differences. As mentioned earlier, Norman Lowell has never sought to be moderate. At the same time he has attempted to resolve the tension between palingenetic global scenarios and the more mundane agendas of locality by differentiating between the ‘Imperium’ and ‘Dominium’ spheres which would come into practice post-2012. At the other end of the spectrum the AN have taken pains to present a respectable face and adopt a ‘moderate’ stance on, say, immigration. But then the AN is a political party that relies on people’s votes for its success, while Lowell is more interested in the dictates of the ‘cosmic will’. (As mentioned earlier, he has never taken his local political programme very seriously. On the contrary, he talks of ‘entering the fray holding our noses.’) In sum, our case confirms Blee’s observation and shows that the degree of modification may be linked in part to the actual political practices of the groups in question.

Blee’s (2007) fourth point concerns what she called the ‘centrality of culture’—as in music, clothing, style, bodily disciplines, ritual and performance. Again, her generalization is very much applicable in our case. With respect to Norman Lowell, the sensational effect of his ideas has certainly played an important role. However, a significant chunk of his following was won on the grounds of his persona and performances. Besides his idiosyncratic sartorial style—which includes jackboots, a range of walking sticks and, often, a tie wrapped around his neck like a scarf—Lowell presents himself as a misunderstood Nietzschean idealist, a victim of his own anachronistic chivalry.

His public performances, which often take place in pubs and restaurants, attract substantial crowds for their entertainment value. Usually propped up on some sort of stage, giving him extra presence, Lowell typically blends his vitriolic attacks on ‘negrids’, Jews and society’s sacred cows with a dose of acerbic political satire, of which there is a serious dearth in Malta. In these settings he is both a spectacle and object of admiration for his audience. One senses a feeling of awe at the display of brazen irreverence which most
spectators deem themselves incapable of. Further, his claims to physical prowess and endurance, both legacies of his earlier interest in the martial arts, strike a chord with members of his inner circle, as well as with more distant spectators.

Lowell’s ability to be overtly outrageous is not to be discounted in a country where large swathes of the population still find it difficult to voice criticism publicly. Within the movement, in fact, Lowell, more than a political leader, represents a symbol of subversion and anti-hypocrisy through which members feel they can vicariously express their frustrations with the system—at a safe distance. (Although, a movement which is based on the eccentric performances of a central personage is bound to be short lived, as the novelty wears off.)

In effect, it is the tragic idealism of Lowell’s persona, this idea of a Nietzschean sacrificial hero, that makes him alluring to the members, even though, paradoxically, it is also what makes him an ineligible candidate to deliver the movement’s agenda. Subscription to his ideology is never complete, even among the diehards (and they are very few), yet even the ones who make every effort to distance themselves from Lowell’s ideas speak of him as a prophetic or at least providential figure; an idealist who is prepared to put himself on the line for his beliefs but also one who will be perpetually bound to that intransigent state of mind.

The whole point about Lowell’s charisma is his idiosyncrasy, and as such he has not spawned any direct imitators. Indirectly, however, many of the individuals drawn to the far right—notably his close circle and regulars on the Vivamalta forum—are able to participate in his ideals of chivalry and martial ‘spirituality’ through various means. Online avatars are often chosen along these lines, and typical ones include ‘Baron Ironblood’, ‘Norman Soldier’, ‘Neverwinter’ and ‘Praefectus’; these names are invariably accompanied by hyperbolic martial images. In part, the importance of such images derives from their role as symbols on which individuals and groups with highly divergent ideas converge, thus fostering a semblance of ‘community’ (see Cohen, 1985).

The scholarship on the far right has rightly focused on choreographed events as collective venues for the specialized performance of far right sentiment. Virchow (2007), for instance, has written about the prominent part played by the Deutsche Stimme (Voice of Germany) Festival, as well as others organized by the National Democratic Party of Germany (Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands) and neo-Nazi ‘groupuscules’, as performative venues for recruiting, holding, and activating followers and enhancing the collective identity of the German far right. In the Maltese case such specialized events have been lacking, with very few exceptions. Lowell’s public speeches are very much one man shows in which the audience is spectatorial rather than participative. Perhaps more relevant are the monthly barbecues organized by Imperium Europa and Vivamalta at a secluded spot in the countryside, and typically attended by the inner circle and a small number of transients. These barbecues are publicized on the Vivamalta website as venues for the participants to sit round a logfire sipping wine and holding conversations on ‘spirituality’ and ‘high politics’, thus ‘renewing’ their ‘bond’ ‘in tune with the cosmos and Mother Nature.’

Conclusion

... the genus ‘fascism’ shows no sign of becoming extinct. Like some wounded hydra, it continues to sprout new progeny .... (Griffin, 1991, p. 182)
Why a ‘Maltese’ far right now, on the heels of a century characterized by the fall of organized fascism? Barde`che (1961, cited in Griffin, 1991, p. 172) holds that although fascism will phenotypically vary from movement to movement because ‘each nation has its own way of saving itself,’ it has in common a palingenetic myth of a new and coming ‘Third Order’ for the West—‘Either the West will go under like a “drowning old man” or “the order of Sparta” will be reborn in a totally new form’ (Griffin, 1991). Griffin (1991, p. 177) went on to argue that, due to the resilience of the palingenetic myth:

> even if fascism will always be successfully marginalized by mainstream politics . . . there is every indication that it will remain a permanent component of the ultra-right in democratized or democratizing societies, providing an inexhaustible well of organized xenophobia and ultra-nationalism.⁵

We contend that if it is at all possible to generalize about far right movements, it must be in the direction of drawing up a list of tropes from which individual movements, be they local or transnational or (as is common) both, will ‘pick and choose’ depending on a number of key variables—the historical circumstances of locality and/or region, the nature of the public spheres within which they develop and, crucially, the vagaries of individual cultural entrepreneurship. Clearly, the advance of new technologies of communication and mobility makes this ‘shopping’ more possible than ever before; it also enables the reterritorialization of these tropes. In the case of the contemporary Maltese far right the tropes of anti-Semitism, white supremacy, social conservatism, ultra-nationalism and palingenetic myth have been embedded, wholesale or in part, in a local context characterized by strong Catholic and pro-European roots and a Church–Party hegemony. Partly because of this very context, the process may not have struck a sustained chord with the electorate and the far right remains a marginal political actor. It is still, however, very much the recognizable progeny of the wounded hydra.

**Notes**

1. The Nationalist Party, at the time of writing Malta’s governing party, is only historically linked to the Italianate early twentieth century formulation. Although it grew out of it and retains some of its symbols, the present party is social democrat and certainly not to be confused with far right movements, as the name might suggest.

2. One should note that the press was to some extent polarized on the issue, with sections of it championing the rights of immigrants.

3. Although Lowell’s recent conviction was based in part on online evidence which he had posted in his name.

4. Lowell’s entertainment value is not to be underestimated. His speeches are among the most frequently accessed online material locally, and from time to time he is invited to give speeches to male circles (work colleagues and such) that are in no sense of the term far right—in these situations his is thought of as after-dinner entertainment. He also regularly boasts that his circle attracts beautiful women—as he put it, ‘women may vote Left, but they sleep Right’.

5. One should note that Griffin is specifically referring to ‘fascism’ rather than the ‘far right’. He defines fascism as ‘a genus of political ideology whose mythic core in its various permutations is a palingenetic form of populist ultra-nationalism’ (Griffin, 1991, p. 26).
References


