

## **MALTA IN THE THROES OF MODERNITY AND POSTMODERNITY – A REVIEW ARTICLE**

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“Malta may well be a small society, but this a big book” – the observation made by the preeminent British sociologist Anthony Giddens in the closing paragraph of his highly complimentary “Foreward” to the recently published volume *Maltese Society: A Sociological Inquiry* (Msida, Malta: Mireva, 1994) edited by Ronald G. Sultana and Godfrey Baldacchino. A big book, indeed: well over seven-hundred pages comprising, in addition to Giddens’ substantial “Foreward”, thirty-five separate essays by thirty different authors, concise introductions to each of the six sections in which the essays are thematically clustered, a very useful general index, short bio-bibliographical notes on the contributors, and, most valuable of all, a finely wrought introductory chapter (“Sociology and Maltese Society: The Field and Its Context”) by Sultana and Baldacchino. The range of topics treated is enormous: class, gender, economic development, party politics, consumerism, the mass media, emigration, education, drug abuse, the family, labour relations, popular cultures, tourism, the environment, and more. The methods of analysis adopted by the individual contributors also vary greatly.

The contents of *Maltese Society* are heterogeneous. Yet, this volume should not be mistaken for a potpourri of loosely related articles by diverse hands; it is neither a miscellany nor quite an anthology. In selecting and arranging the materials for this volume, the editors wisely refrained from yoking them all together into a single, overarching account of the socio-economic, political, and cultural state of Malta at the present time. They adopted criteria for inclusion flexible enough to accommodate the most disparate viewpoints. The thematic and methodological diversity that characterises this “sociological inquiry” (as it is subtitled) reflects the editors’ anti-dogmatic approach, their willingness to bring into relief a multiplicity of voices, perspectives, and ideological tendencies. As a result, this book, besides stimulating serious reflection on a plethora of social issues and problems of special concern to Malta, could also serve as a starting point for a critical assessment of the current state of Maltese sociology – and, one hopes, it will generate the kinds of informed discussions, salutary conflicts, and carefully designed research programmes which, in the view of its editors, are needed to invigorate intellectual exchange on the island. Most readers will surely find Sultana and Baldacchino’s editorial procedures extremely refreshing. For

who has not grown tired of the doctrinaire tones and the petty partisan posturing that stultify much of what passes for public social debate in Malta?

None of this should be taken to mean, however, that Sultana and Baldacchino are neutral observers of the Maltese scene or of the current trends in sociology. Their openness to diversity bears no resemblance to the posture of lofty detachment typically adopted by the non-judgmental pluralist or by the putatively impartial chronicler. They are only too aware that the sociologist is always somehow or another implicated in the phenomena she or he describes; they recognize that sociology is not an “objective” science – at least not in the same sense as say, Newtonian physics claims to be – for every sociological account simultaneously helps forge and is forged by the very object of its study. Sociology produces certain kinds of knowledge and by so doing it participates, directly or indirectly, in the ordering and re-ordering of social structures, and hence in the complex mechanisms of power. Sociologists make choices: they select what elements of society to focus on, what perspectives to adopt, what rhetoric to employ, what organizing principles to use, and so on. Each one of these choices and the sum total of their effects determine whether and to what extent the sociologist’s work bolsters or undermines, reproduces or breaks away from the dominant and/or oppositional views circulating within the existing social order. To be sure, traditional sociologists (like the heirs of the Enlightenment in all the disciplines) naively assume or disingenuously pretend that they can transcend perspectival limitations in order to look omnisciently and disinterestedly at the whole of society and apprehend it in its totality. Such sociologists purport to be removed from the operations of power and to be engaged in nothing more (or less) than the dispassionate quest for truth. As Sultana and Baldacchino point out, however: “The privileging of one totalizing discourse which presumes to represent ‘the truth’, has historically been a boon to certain social groupings and a bane to others. Truth-claiming is ... another manifestation of the social exercise of power” (p.5).

It would be easy – much too easy and trite, in fact – to ascribe the heterogeneity of the materials collected in *Maltese Society* quite simply to the increasing complexity and multiplicity of the problems that the people who inhabit the island presently confront, or should be confronting. If that were all there is to it, then this volume would have little new to offer. After all, for decades now, commentators on the Maltese scene have been making the same observation, namely that the process of modernization has given rise to a slew of problems, divergent interests, conflicting ideas and values, new fears and needs, unprecedented struggles, novel desires, and so on. To say that Maltese society and the issues it must wrestle with have become heterogeneous is to reiterate a cliché. The heterogeneity encompassed by *Maltese Society*, however, does more than just mirror the multifariousness of the phenomenon

it sets out to examine. It serves another purpose and stems from a specific motivation; it is a critical assault on the seductions of what one might call grand narratives, or metanarratives, or totalizing discourses—i.e. those synoptic or holistic accounts of reality which often acquire the power of myth for they beguile a society (or a group within society) into believing that beneath the contradictions, the conflicts, the proliferation of differences encountered in everyday life there exists a common essence, a fixed and shared identity which binds it together organically or “naturally”, as it were. In the opening paragraphs of their introductory essay, Sultana and Baldacchino assert that these narratives by which societies define themselves “are social constructs of identity”; in other words, there is nothing “natural” about them, which is why “they are never innocent” (p. 2)

The theoretical and critical views enunciated by Sultana and Baldacchino share several affinities with the formulations of some exponents of poststructuralist thought. Their remarks on narrative, for instance, immediately bring to mind Jean-François Lyotard’s observation (in *The Postmodern Condition*) that the defining characteristic of postmodernity is the “incredulity towards metanarratives.” Likewise, their reflections on the ineluctable relationship between power and knowledge echo the ideas of Michel Foucault; and it is fair to surmise that their “awareness of the textuality of everyday life” (p.5) is indebted to the insights of Jacques Derrida. At the same time, however, Sultana and Baldacchino explicitly declare their opposition to certain postmodern trends. Specifically, they decry the exaltation of individualism, and they do not wish to allow the appreciation of difference to degenerate into a value-free (or value-less) relativism. They want to combat, as they put it, “the paralyzing belief that all social representations are equally legitimate, irreducible to any substance” (p.5). This is another way of saying that while fully cognizant of the need, indeed the obligation, to consider seriously and with an open mind the different voices and the different positions currently circulating the various fields of the human sciences, Sultana and Baldacchino also want to practice a sociology that intervenes in society – a sociology that is fully appreciative of difference(s) but also actively seeks to make a difference. Here, Sultana and Baldacchino reveal their affinity with Karl Marx; echoing the best known of his ‘Theses on Feuerbach’, they forthrightly assert their intention to “move away from merely interpreting the world to imagining a world as it could and should be, and to struggle collectively in giving birth to that kind of world” (p.6)

Lest this last affirmation should conjure up images of sociologists dashing from their desks, classrooms and research libraries straight to the barricades, it is important to bear in mind that the way one interprets the world can itself contribute to changing it. In fact, the theories and methods of interpretation set forth by Sultana and Baldacchino can themselves bring about significant

change if they induced a critical re-evaluation of the stories which Maltese society habitually tells itself about itself. There exists in Malta, as in every other nation, a virtually inexhaustible stock of stories which embody or represent the people's self-image and self-understanding. These stories are ubiquitous; in their many different forms they pervade popular and high culture alike, as well as folklore and everyday conversation. Most of them are variations on the same basic set of themes with recurring motifs. The salient themes and motifs stand out in sharpest relief in the stories associated with the monumental events in Maltese history such as the Great Siege, the expulsion of the French, and World War II. They portray the Maltese as one people, cemented together by a fierce allegiance to the Catholic faith, long-suffering, brave, resilient, strict in their morals, resourceful, generous, hospitable, culturally bound to Europe, and, of course, patriotic. Because they help inculcate a strong sense of the oneness (i.e. the single identity and homogeneity), the admirable qualities, and the distinctive character of the people who constitute the nation, these stories acquire special prominence in crisis situations. In times of war, for example, or during periods when great internal tensions threaten to break society apart, the quintessential elements of these stories are invoked in order to galvanize the people, induce them to overlook their differences, and make them rally around a common cause. At the same time, though, these stories also function as the repositories of many platitudes and *idées reçues*—i.e. of those unexamined “truths” which mainstream culture reproduces, transmits, re-circulates, and disseminates so incessantly that they become rooted as “common sense” or as quasi-sacred traditional values. In this respect, these narratives of national identity are reductive, a hindrance to understanding, and, even worse, they can be put to very dangerous use. (How dangerous? One need only look at the current situation in the Balkans.) The reductiveness, the blindness, and the danger are attributable, in large measure to the failure or the refusal, for whatever reason, not only to accept but also to appreciate difference and heterogeneity. It is precisely this failure that Sultana and Baldacchino have taken steps to redress with their volume.

Politicians and religious leaders are wont to refer to “the Maltese people” as if they constituted an undifferentiated mass or a monolithic entity. While this convention merits critical scrutiny and should always be regarded with profound suspicion, there is nothing terribly unusual about it. When, however, the phrase is routinely employed with the same connotations and underlying assumptions by the majority of political, cultural, and social analysts, one cannot help but be alarmed—at best, it is a symptom of intellectual laziness or incompetence; at worst, and more likely, it indicates a renunciation of independent critical thinking, a debilitating propensity to seek refuge in old formulas rather than to open new paths of inquiry. I remember reading with

horror and dismay the proceedings of a “Round Table” symposium organized a decade ago by the “Ċentru Tmexxija Soċjali” of the “Moviment Azzjoni Soċjali”. During a period of convulsive national turmoil, a panel of intellectuals from opposite sides of the political divide were brought together and invited to discuss the possibility of transforming Malta into an international peace centre. In his introductory speech, the coordiextranator of the conference – an individual with a diploma in social studies from Oxford who served on the board of directors of the “Ċentru Tmexxija Soċjali” – declared that Malta’s greatest resource is its people. (To support this thesis and amplify it he quoted nothing other than two letters by satisfied tourists published in the local papers. One of them commented on “the natural friendliness and kindness of the wonderful people of Malta”. The other one professed to be impressed by “your strong family attachments, your beautiful and well-behaved children, your welcoming attitude... your happy, peaceful way of life.”) The people of Malta, he proclaimed, possess such extraordinary qualities, such a rich culture, such wonderful values, such creativity that they can not only transcend their own internal differences and become an exemplary model of a peaceful society for the rest of the world, but they also have the wherewithal to bring about a rapprochement between Christianity and Islam! (The persistence of the assumption that Malta can serve as a bridge between the West and the Arab world is quite baffling since the majority of Maltese know next to nothing about Islamic culture and share many of the same anti-Arab prejudices prevalent in much of Europe and the U.S. Here is another instance of the chasm that separates Maltese self-representations from the verifiable realities of life on the island). What is most dispiriting about this kind of partly exhortatory and partly triumphalistic rhetoric is not so much its banality, but the fact that it was uttered without embarrassment (so much so that it was later reproduced in print) in the company of distinguished representatives of Malta’s intelligentsia. That such vacuity should pass for a serious social thought in any context is nothing short of stupefying; that it should be offered as a point of departure for a series of discussions on how to heal the deep divisions which threaten peaceful co-existence on the island is not just lamentable but profoundly disturbing.

Rhetorical pieties about national identity only serve to paper over differences and contradictions; they retard understanding and in so doing they actually contribute to the exacerbation of conflicts. Hence the need to resist the allure of those grand (and grandiose) accounts of Maltese society which falsely reassure us that the divisions wracking the islands’ population are due to the malign intentions of irresponsible politicians and to the impact of extraneous forces (foreign customs, alien ideologies, etc.), and that deep down, underneath the seeming fragmentation, there subsists a Maltese essence waiting to be rediscovered and recuperated so that, as with the retrieval of the

Holy Grail, harmony and peace will prevail once again over the land. A very powerful antidote against the seductiveness of metanarratives is a sociology that forswears essentialist explanations (i.e. those accounts of Maltese society which are based on the assumption that there is such a thing as a Maltese essence or quiddity) and seeks, instead, to complicate our views of Maltese society, introduce new critical methods for analyzing its many different elements, and bring to the fore phenomena which have hitherto been consigned to the margins. *Maltese Society* provides the lineaments of such a sociology. In place of one “big picture” it places before us a number of different sketches, each one of which foregrounds a specific issue, social formation or practice. The emphasis on specificity and particularity is a major strength of this volume, or at least of its best chapters. There is no more effective way of getting rid of generic categories (such as, “the Maltese people”) and of inane shibboleths (such as, “the Maltese are inherently warm and religious”) than by narrowing the focus of one’s inquiry and conducting analyses that pay attention to the particularity, the historical specificity of the phenomena under investigation.

There are numerous ways of differentiating the constituent elements of any given society. The most obvious and frequently used categories of differentiation are race, class, and gender. Race is not a pertinent category when it comes to analyzing the composition of Malta’s population—in this respect Maltese society is homogeneous. It would be a mistake to think, however, that the signs and effects of racial and ethnic prejudice are absent or minimal in Malta. In their very revealing essay on “The Maltese Community in Metro Toronto: Invisible Identity/ies” (pp. 211-23). Carmel Borg and Peter Mayo, report that they were “exposed to incredible fascist arguments” when interviewing Maltese emigrants in Toronto. As they correctly point out, the racial prejudice displayed by the Maltese abroad has its roots in the home culture. The insistence with which cultural, religious, and political leaders harp on the “Europeanness” of the Maltese is far from innocent or innocuous. So adamantly and anxiously do many Maltese from all walks of life reiterate their European identity that they barely (and rarely) manage to conceal their disdain for other races and ethnic groups, especially Arabs and blacks. The anxiety surrounding this issue, when has much to do with the peripheral geographic location of the island, has had and continues to have very significant socio-political ramifications. Godfrey A. Pirotta’s essay, “Maltese Political Parties and Political Modernization” (pp. 95-112), supplies many useful points of departure for studying the ways in which the “issue of Maltese racial identity”, as he aptly labels it, is intertwined with island’s political history under British rule and with economic as well as political developments in post-colonial Malta.

The question of class figures very prominently in *Maltese Society*; not only do many of the essays in the book touch upon it either directly or indirectly, but the opening chapter of the first section is Ronald G. Sultana's "Perspectives on Class in Malta" (pp. 27-53). Few, if any, issues in social and political discourse generate as many polemics, crude as well as theoretically sophisticated analyses, and contradictory attitudes as does the question of class. It comes as no surprise, then, that Sultana, after a lucid, succinct exposition of the theoretical contours of two foundational concepts of class (Karl Marx's and Max Weber's), finds it necessary to engage in an argument against the polemical view that economic class divisions and inequalities are fabricated by self-serving politicians. The question of whether or not Maltese society has class structure is not interesting *per se*, for the answer is exceedingly obvious; but it does give rise to two very interesting corollary questions discussed by Sultana: (a) what is the degree of class consciousness in Malta and how do people perceive and account for hierarchical social distinctions? and (b) "In whose interest does the denial of the existence of class work? Who stands to gain and who to lose by a belief that there is no structured inequality in the economic relations predominant in Malta?" (p.34). Sultana makes an additional point in his essay, and it is a crucial one; namely, that Malta like every other country "has its own pattern of structural inequalities" (p.33). Hence, it is not sufficient, even though indispensable, for the sociologist to be familiar with existing theories of social class structure. Theory needs to be accompanied (indeed, it should simultaneously inform and be informed) by the kind of detailed, historically precise material analyses that are especially sensitive "to local peculiarities in the power structure".(p.50)

Sultana laments the fact that there are large gaps in our knowledge and understanding of class relations in Malta, their historical development, the various ways in which they intersect with political power and the mechanisms of the State, and how they manifest themselves culturally and in civil society in general. Many of the essays in *Maltese Society* make significant contributions toward remedying these lacunae. Especially valuable is Mario Vella's essay, "That Favourite Dream of the Colonies': Industrialization, Dependence and the Limits of Development Discourse in Malta" (pp. 55-77). Here, Vella displays a combination of theoretical sophistication, exhaustive research, a keen historical sense, critical acumen, and independent thinking that is, and to say, rarely encountered in the works of Maltese intellectuals. The primary value and originality of Vella's essay resides in its critical reassessment of the history and the current state of Malta's political economy. Many of his insights, however, also pertain directly to class analysis. In the course of his exposition he draws attention to the specific makeup of the Maltese bourgeoisie and the role it played in the peculiar development of capitalism in Malta, both prior to and after independence. The Maltese

bourgeoisie, unlike most of its European confreres with whom it routinely identifies itself, did not fulfill a progressive social function: quite the contrary – rather than being an agent of modernity, the Maltese bourgeoisie, for the most part, resisted it. Many of Vella's views, which strike me as compelling and more often than not convincing, are bound to provoke controversy, and this could prove fruitful if it compelled Maltese social historians and social critics to study more assiduously than they have done thus far the specific character of Maltese social formations.

Most of the chapters in *Maltese Society* that deal directly with the situation of the working classes, their relations with owners, managers and the State, the conditions in which they labour, as well as other issues germane to the study of labour and the relations of production on the island are especially poignant. This due, in large measure, to the efforts that authors of these chapters evidently made to get close to their objects of study; they have focussed on specific issues, gathered valuable empirical data, and interpreted them with care. (This should not obscure the fact, however, that research in this field “has been very sparse”, as E. P. Delia points out in his essay “A Labour Market in Transition” (pp. 461-481). One cannot help but wonder how policy makers reach decisions when their sources of information are inadequate – do they rely on intuition and improvisation?) In his “Maltese Orientations to Work” (pp.483-504), Edward L. Zammit supplies a much needed corrective to the widespread assumption that “Maltese orientations are simply a reflection of those which prevail in other nearby European countries” (p.484). He brings into relief the distinctive features of what one might call the Maltese work ethos, but at the same time he avoids the pitfalls of generalization by paying attention to the ways in which orientations towards work in Malta “vary among the different worker categories” (p. 485). Not only are Maltese attitudes towards work not uniform, but they are also constantly changing. The shifts in orientation towards work are both a reflection and a major cause of the changes occurring in society at large, hence Zammit's findings should be of as much interest to the cultural critic as they are to the sociologist of labour. These changes, of course, have their most direct and visible impact “on work-related issues such as human resource management, unionisation, and industrial relations” (p. 504), as Zammit also makes clear. Some very important “work-related issues”, especially as they pertain to the mechanisms of power at play in industrial relations and the democratization of the workplace, are discussed in illuminating detail by Alfred Grixti in his case-study. “The Locus and Distribution of Power: The Phoenicia Hotel Dispute” (pp. 537-552), and by Godfrey Baldacchino in his two essays “Worker Cooperatives in Malta: Between Self-Help and Subsidy” (pp. 505-520) and “Workers' Participation and the Control of Labour” (pp. 573-590).



In mainstream culture one frequently comes across images of the industrious Maltese worker going about his task willingly and cheerfully. Political and religious speechifying is rife with reference to the dignity of work. Critics of exploitation and of the alienating effects of labour in a capitalist economy are frequently denounced for fomenting class hatred and of promoting dangerous, revolutionary ideas. Yet, no amount of wishful thinking or imputations of ideological bias can convincingly attenuate the brutal realities described by Ronald G. Sultana in his empirical study of the exploitation of child labour, "School Children in Malta's Twilight Economy" (pp. 521-536), and by Benny Borg Bonello in his factual account of the dehumanizing working milieu at a local clothing factory, "Threads for Survival: Workplace Conditions in a Clothing Firm" (pp. 522-571). Each one of these essays provides a vivid example of how the relentless drive to raise productivity and generate greater profits strips workers of their dignity, stunts their development and renders them expendable. The under-age workers described by Sultana expend their energies performing "unskilled and often simple jobs (which) offer little opportunity to move on to other, better paid, safer or more interesting occupations" (p. 534)—many of these young people will, in all likelihood, remain forever trapped in a subaltern, peripheral social position. The women in the clothing factory studied by Borg Bonello are little more than "trained gorillas", the kind of efficient, unthinking workers theorized by Frederick Winslow Taylor and actually brought into existence by Fordist industries during the early decades of our century. Paradoxically, all of this is permitted to happen in the name of economic development. But how can one conscientiously associate the word "development" with labour practices that recall Dickensian England and with methods of production viciously satirized by Chaplin more than half a century ago in *Modern Times*?

Needless to say, in order to understand the processes of exploitation, one would have to consider various other factors besides the insatiable greed for profits. The attitudes, desires, motivations of the exploited merit as much serious consideration as those of the exploiters. Sultana and Borg Bonello treat these matters at some length, as well. Both of them point out, among other things, that what compels certain workers to tolerate their demeaning jobs is the prospect of immediate, short-term financial gain. They are anxious to earn money now rather than tomorrow; in other words, they are unwilling to postpone their entry into the work force until after they acquire a full education or training in advanced skills, even though such a postponement would greatly enhance their prospects of securing jobs that are much more rewarding in the long run. The reason, or one of the main reasons: they cannot defer their desire to participate in the "rituals of mass consumption". Borg Bonello makes the following pithy observation about the symbolic

relationship between the exploiters and the exploited: "In the process of aspiring to an idealized Western standard of living, the factory girls have unwittingly become the fodder on which the system feeds and grows" (p. 570). The relationship between consumerism and attitudes towards work is a complicated one. Even more complicated is the relationship between consumerism and class perceptions. Sultana, who examines these relationships in another perspicacious essay, "Towards a Sociology of Consumption in Malta" (pp. 163-185), notes that among Maltese people subjective perceptions of class divisions are "influenced more by differential patterns of consumption than by occupation. In other words, consumption becomes a way of establishing differences between social groups rather than merely expressing such differences" (p.181).

Some of the essays in *Maltese Society* draw attention to a category of social differentiation that is even more fundamental than class. Gender inequity cuts across class lines; it is as evident in the upper echelons of the social hierarchy as it is in on the factory floor. In her essay on "The Visibility and Invisibility of Women" (pp. 80-93), Pauline Miceli focusses on the "relationship between gender, power and poverty." Some progress has been made in the juridical sphere that helps alleviate the plight of women but, as Miceli correctly points out, modifying the law to rectify some of the grossest anomalies "will not in itself empower women to make themselves visible in decision making positions" (p. 87). Increasing numbers of women "are making careers for themselves in law, medicine, banking and business" (p. 89), but this provides little cause for cheer when one considers the near total absence of women in policy-making positions—only one woman in parliament, only one woman magistrate, and just few token women in corporate board rooms. Patriarchy and masculinity constitute a nearly impenetrable bastion of privilege and power which even the most talented women find it nearly impossible to breach. On the lower levels of the social and economic ladder, the situation of women is not only worse but verges on the catastrophic. Poverty, family demands, discriminatory customs, low self-esteem—these are just a few of the factors that entrap many women in a subordinate position. Miceli's essay demonstrates what profound and extensive social transformations must still take place in Malta before gender equity can be achieved.

Genuine transformation in gender relations, as in virtually every other sphere of social life, only occurs when new values, new ways of interpreting reality take root in the terrain of culture—a process that is never straightforward but immensely complicated, slow, and conflictive. There is no essay in *Maltese Society* that fails to appreciate the intricate ways in which culture is woven into (or helps weave) the social fabric. Furthermore, a substantial number of essays focus directly on some aspect or another of

Maltese culture. Some of them deal with specific facets of popular culture, such as the mass media, soap opera viewership, and rock music; there is also an essay on the function of gossip, and another one on dialectal differences as class or status indicators. These essays, though certainly useful and worth reading, are not among the best ones assembled in the volume. Cultural studies and, particularly, the study of popular culture are still in their infancy in Malta. In order for cultural studies to develop, social scientists and humanists must undertake to surmount the artificial boundaries of their disciplines and, possibly, embark on interdisciplinary or cross-disciplinary research projects. Jeremy Boissevain's "A Politician and His Audience: Malta's Dom Mintoff" (pp. 409-420) offers a good example of how rhetorical, political and social analyses can be fruitfully intertwined. Another essay by Boissevain, "Festa Partiti: Parish Competition and Conflict" (pp.271-284), produces fresh insights through an amalgam of cultural criticism and sociological reflection. Not quite as successful are the essays which concern themselves with the impact that structural economic change and the increasingly powerful currents of cosmopolitanism are having on the religious culture, family values, and traditional customs of the island. In his essay on "Secularization" (pp. 285-300), for example, Carmel Tabone devotes more pages constructing a theoretical framework for dealing with the question of the relations among religion, modernity, and social change than he does discussing the myriad ways in which religion permeates social and private life in Malta. It is an essay that displays scholarly erudition, it reveals the author's familiarity with the work of major sociologists, but it sheds very little light on the specific operations of "religious hegemony" (to use Tabone's apposite phrase), on how this hegemony is being contested, and so on.

Whereas in Tabone's essay there is a disparity between the sophistication of the theoretical exposition and the relative weakness of the critical analysis he performs, some other essays suffer from a disparity between the sophistication of the statistical instruments that are employed and the somewhat rudimentary interpretations or critical evaluations of the statistical information gathered. Thus, for instance, Anthony Abela in his two essays – "Values for Malta's Future: Social Change, Values and Social Policy" (pp.253-270) and "Drug Abuse Among School Children" (pp. 669-684) – relies very heavily on statistical analysis, presenting a tremendous amount of data culled from extensive surveys, but venturing little more than rather general and, at times, trite conclusions. A case in point is Abela's detailed reporting of the results of the "Pride/Caritas Malta School Drug Survey" conducted in 1991. Among other things he tabulates the information that has been obtained concerning the consumption of alcohol by Maltese youths. (Curiously, the data in this case are not broken down according to gender). It turns out that a very high proportion (circa 80%) of Maltese teenagers consume alcoholic beverages

of some kind or another (beer, wine, or hard liquor) and an almost equally high number of them have easy access to alcohol. Reflecting on these figures, Abela draws two conclusions: (a) that there seems to be a need for an education for the prevention of early use" of alcohol; and (b) that, perhaps there should be "an enforcement of legal restrictions in the sale of cigarettes and alcohol to minors" (p. 674). The first conclusion merely states the obvious, whereas the second, while sensible in the abstract, is of dubious relevance. In the United States, where the sale of alcohol to minors is controlled much more strictly than the sale of guns, consumption of alcohol by underage drinkers has reached astronomical levels and continues to grow. Meaningful conclusions about the consumption of alcohol by Maltese youths can be drawn only if and when the available data are examined within the specific socio-cultural context of Malta. For an illustration of the kinds of questions that must be posed in order to approach such problems in a fruitful manner, the reader can turn to another essay which deals with some of the same issues, namely Alexander M. Baldacchino's "Substance Abuse: Focus on Alcohol" (pp. 617-634). In the introductory paragraphs of his essay, Baldacchino makes the following noteworthy observation: "From a sociological perspective, understanding the problem of substance abuse involves understanding the social context through which it is constructed as a problem, and not just a question of coming to terms with the behaviour itself" (pp.618-619).

In spite of all this, Abela's gathering of statistical data is extremely valuable. Studies like his make available the raw materials, as it were, for other investigations. Maltese sociologists are severely hampered by the unavailability of detailed and reliable factual information. Yana Mintoff Bland's essay on "Cancer in Malta: Trends in Mortality and Incidence of Breast Cancer" (pp. 187-210) is admirable for many reasons, not the least of which is the author's ability to make such creative and original use of the limited body of empirical data she could gain access to. Michael Tanti Dougall makes very good use of official statistics from the Police Department in his study of "Patterns of Crime" (pp. 635-654), but as he points out more empirical research needs to be carried out "since a high percentage of crimes remains unreported" (p. 653). Information on those who inhabit the outer margins of Maltese society—to whom Maureen Cole draws attention in her essay "Outsiders" (pp. 595-616)—is even harder to come by. In fact, one might say that the victims of family violence and rape, the handicapped, single mothers, homosexuals, the destitute, etc., have thus far occupied as marginal a status in sociology as they have in society as large.

Whatever the limitations of sociological knowledge and sociological scholarship in Malta might be, the essays in *Maltese Society* offer clear evidence that much progress is being made in the effort to arrive at a better understanding of the complexity and heterogeneity of life on the island. What

is urgently needed now is for the insights of researchers and scholars to reach a wider audience and thus raise the level of public debate. There is too big a gap between, on the one hand, the rather simplistic ways in which many of the most pressing, consequential issues facing Malta are debated in the mass media, in the public square and in the political arena, and, on the other hand, the thoughtful and critically nuanced treatment of the same issues by certain intellectuals. Reading the discussions on privatization and on the state of the environment that appear in the press, one is struck, even horrified, by the writers' or speakers' failure to grasp the true import of the problems entailed and by their inability (or unwillingness) to consider multiple approaches to the issues involved. By contrast, one cannot but be impressed by the depth of understanding and the fine critical intelligence that inform the two essays in *Maltese Society* that address precisely these issues—i.e. Mary Darmanin's "Privatization: Policy and Politics" (pp. 441-456) and Edward Mallia's "Land Use: An Account of Environmental Stewardship" (pp. 685-705). Upon reading Mallia's essay I was led to wonder: What else is needed to persuade every person on the island that drastic measures need to be taken immediately to rescue what is left of Malta's environment? Is it the case that essays like Mallia's never reach (or are ignored by) not just the general reading public but also civic and political leaders? Why is there such a disjuncture between certain intellectuals and the rest of society? Certainly, it cannot be because intellectuals (or, at least, not all of them) have chosen to ignore the concrete, everyday concerns, needs, and problems of society at large—many of the essays in *Maltese Society* offer evidence to the contrary. These are questions that the future work of sociologists and cultural critics may profitably address.

*Maltese Society* makes a vital contribution to Maltese sociology. Even more importantly it is an open invitation to all thoughtful readers to set aside the habitual ways of describing, explaining, and discussing their society, and to critically reassess their views and assumptions. At the same time, though, *Maltese Society* is only a start. There are many other aspects of Maltese Society that require detailed study—so many, in fact, that Sultana and Baldacchino should be induced to produce another volume, even one as big as this one. Maltese society is so complex that it cannot be adequately encompassed in a single volume; furthermore, it is changing so rapidly that no sooner is one set of inquiries completed than a set of new ones needs to get launched.

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