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**The Worker Student Scheme 1978-1987:
Consistencies and Contradictions in Labour's Socialist Politics.¹**

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On Monday, 28th November 1977, the word spread around, at what was then the Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology (MCAST), otherwise popularly referred to as the Polytechnic, that Maltese Prime Minister, Dom Mintoff, was to address students and staff that evening. The Prime Minister duly entered the auditorium of MCAST and officially announced the introduction of reforms in Higher Education centring round a ‘worker-student’² scheme.³ In a nutshell, the salient points raised by the Prime Minister were the following:

- ▣ There would be two universities; the ‘old’ university (the University of Malta) and the ‘New University’ (the former MCAST)

¹ I am indebted to Godfrey Baldacchino, Carmel Borg, Jennifer Camilleri, Dominic Fenech, Michael Grech, Manuel Mangani and Mario Vella for their feedback on entire or specific sections of draft versions of the text. The usual disclaimers apply.

² See report in *L-Orizzont* 29, Nov. 1977 and in *The Times*, 30th Nov. 1977, Mintoff actually used the term ‘Student-worker’ and it is this term that was used in popular parlance. However the amendment to the Education Act refers to a Worker-Student’ scheme, hence my adoption of this term. See Act XX1-1978 (Act to amend the 1974 Education Act), *Government Gazette* No. 13,508, 7th July, 1978.

The Prime Minister also stated, at the 28 November meeting, that teachers who are to teach higher forms need to obtain a degree from abroad. See *L-Orizzont*, 29 November, 1977, p. 7. This did not materialize as teachers with degrees from the University of Malta, including the newly announced BA in Education (subsequently to become B.A in Education (hons), B.Educ (Hons) and B.Ed (Hons),) taught not only in the higher forms of secondary schools but, in certain cases, also at sixth form level.

³ Much earlier, the *Malta News* of February 9, 1976 (several months before the 1976 General Elections) reported Labour election candidate, Vincent Moran, subsequently Minister of Health, as stating in a meeting that the State was going to provide financial help to students who would be working “shoulder to shoulder” with “common workers”. See news item titled ‘Government to Introduce Grant System for ‘varsity students’
In 1977, the scheme had already been mentioned by the Prime Minister to clinical year medical students at a meeting at Castille held on 7th October. These imminent reforms were also mentioned by the then Minister of Education, Philip Muscat, at a seminar organized by the Zejtun branch of the Labour Party’s Socialist Youth Movement . (Savona-Ventura, 1999, p.30). He also mentioned the reforms at a rally organized at the MCAST auditorium by the Polytechnic Students Union on October 14. See *The Times* (Malta) October 15, 1977.

- ▣ Tertiary education would become strictly utilitarian, i.e. tailored to the perceived needs of the economy
- ▣ The university student would alternate five and a half months of work with five and a half months of study at University.
- ▣ Students were to be provided with a basic wage throughout the year, paid monthly at the same rate during both the study and work phases as well as during the one-month vacation period.
- ▣ Students were to be sponsored throughout their period of study
- ▣ Salaried employees were also allowed to join the scheme with the possibility of retaining their salary while carrying out their studies under conditions similar to those for mainstream students.
- ▣ Degree programmes offered by the faculties of science and arts will be phased out as new degrees, tailored to the country's needs, will be introduced.

This paper

In this paper, I will take a look at the main issues surrounding the concept of the worker-student scheme and the way they were put into practice during the scheme's almost ten year period of existence (1978-1987). I shall analyse them in the context of the Malta Labour Party's then professed socialist politics (Mintoff is on record as having spoken, in the build up to the 1976 elections, of a 'socialist generation' and the manifesto for these elections emphasized a socialist Malta).⁴ What are the contradictions and consistencies regarding what have come to be regarded as key concepts in a socialist politics of education?

Build up

Information had, before November 28th 1977, been spreading around that new degrees were going to be introduced and that a reform concerning Higher Education was about to be proposed (see

⁴ The electoral manifesto for the 1976 elections bore the title of '*Lejn Malta Soċjalista 'l Quddiem fis-Sliem*' (Towards a Socialist Malta. Forward in Peace). See also Briguglio, M (2001), p. 67. At a Mosta meeting on 28th February 1976, Dom Mintoff is reported to have said: "The people have learned that we have to live and work for each other. This is the beginning of a socialist generation." <http://reflectionsofaworldcitizen.blogspot.com/2007/07/dom-mintoff-advocate-of-socialism.html>

Accessed 1 January 2011.

footnote 2). The previous day, the Minister of Education, Philip Muscat, had announced the imminent introduction of a degree for teachers.⁵ Well before the introduction of what were in effect ‘radical’ University changes (Azzopardi and Lauri, 1985, p. 16; Portelli, 1994, p. 256), rather than simple reforms, concerns had been expressed, even by a Royal University of Malta Commission, including distinguished sociologist, Ralph Dahrendorf,⁶ “to consider ways of nudging the university from being an appendix of the professions into a modern place of learning” (Dahrendorf, 1978, p. 30, reproduced in Austin, 1981, p. 135). It needed to be more responsive to the development needs of the country (ibid.). This was reflected in a statement on tertiary education in the country’s 1973-1980 Development Plan (OPM, 1974). There was, for instance, reluctance, until then, to include applied science courses such as engineering at the university. There were also important pronouncements regarding economic restructuring which had to be carried out with 1979 in mind.⁷ Prime Minister Mintoff had called on all Maltese people to work towards the 1979 goal, as stated in the title of a newspaper report regarding a speech he delivered soon after winning the 1976 elections.⁸ I suspect Mintoff used the 1979 end of military facilities agreement⁹ as a target date to put pressure on everyone to expedite the process of restructuring which Labour had taken upon itself to carry out since gaining government in 1971. This was a sort of Maltese equivalent to Tanzania’s ‘we must run while others walk.’ This restructuring was

⁵ See report in *L’Orizzont* of the 28th November 1977.

⁶ Ralph Dahrendorf had first met Dom Mintoff when visiting the country as part of a German government delegation in 1970; from 1969-1970 he served as Parliamentary Secretary of State in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. He later accepted to serve as Chair of the Royal University of Malta Commission appointed by Prime Minister Mintoff and was subsequently Chair of the Commission for the Development of Higher Education in Malta. At the time, he was Director of the London School of Economics. Professor Dahrendorf later resigned from his position on the Malta commission as a result of his disagreement with the Malta government regarding what he felt was its imposition of the worker-student scheme. In a letter dated 6th June 1978, Professor Dahrendorf informed Mr Mintoff that he could no longer advise him on higher education, either informally or as a member of the commission (see Schembri, 1982; Busuttill, 2009).

⁷ 1979 represented the target date for the closure of British military bases in Malta and the end of rent payment for these services.

⁸ See front page report in *The Times* (Malta), Friday September 24, 1976.

⁹ On 26 March 1972, the Labour Government led by Dom Mintoff in negotiations with British Defence Secretary, Lord Carrington, changed the 1964 agreement between the two countries and signed a new agreement with Britain according to which the UK government was to pay 14 million sterling per annum for the rent of military bases. The agreement was to expire by March 31, 1979.

intended to modernise and change what the Labour government must have regarded as antiquated ‘pre-industrial’ society structures.¹⁰ This had implications for the University and the rest of the tertiary education sector as the class of relevant professionals had to be expanded. One had to move from that of the mainly traditional coterie of ‘pre-industrial society’ professionals (see Larsson, 1977) (notaries, lawyers, doctors, priests, teachers, literati – typical of what Gramsci regarded as the subaltern intellectuals of Italy’s southern agrarian bloc) to a broader sector in which doctors become also salaried employees in a national health scheme (Vella, 1989, p. 172) and which comprises engineers, managers, accountants, public administrators (see Vella, op. cit; Sant in Mayo, 1986, p. 15) and eventually, ICT specialists.

A series of events and pronouncements concerning university personnel and students, and the University more generally occurred in the preceding years and months.

- In 1975, the University’s then Student Representative Council staged a campaign for the immediate introduction of a grant scheme at the University (Delia, 1976, p.32).¹¹
- The 1976 Labour electoral manifesto mentioned the importance of MCAST and University being accorded similar prestige and working together as one sector to avoid duplication; they were called on to share facilities.¹² After the reforms were introduced and debated in parliament and in sections of the public sphere, Mintoff confirmed this intention in his reply to a letter by Dahrendorf, on 13 May 1978. Mintoff indicated that, since taking office in 1971, his government started “to prepare the way for the absorption of the Polytechnic by the university once its standards had been raised sufficiently.” (Schembri, 1982, p. 146) and goes on to write

¹⁰ Mario Vella (1989) argues that the absence of a local industrial bourgeoisie forced Labour to take upon itself the tasks of economic restructuring for industrial development which placed it in a contradictory situation. It had to present its strategy as one of compromise – a compromise between the aspiration of the working class, employed for the most part at the RN Dockyard and other military sites, which constituted its power base and the “need to mobilize foreign as well as local private capital in productive sectors.” (p. 194) More recently, he wrote, in a similar vein, “The MLP needed to be seen as a socialist party in order to mobilise sufficient working class enthusiasm for its strategic programme, an enthusiasm it could have hardly worked up had it presented its programme as what it ultimately and objectively was the modernisation of Maltese society to enable it to sustain the belated development of an export-led industrial capitalism fuelled by foreign investment and technology.” (Vella, 2009, p. 378)

¹¹ In 1971, the Nationalist government had, a few months before the general elections, abolished tuition fees for full time courses for Maltese students at the University (Zammit Mangion, 1992, p. 83).

¹² MLP Electoral Manifesto for the 1976 elections *‘Lejn Malta Soċjalista ‘l Quddiem fis-Sliem’* (Towards a Socialist Malta. Forward in Peace), section on Higher Education, p. 101.

that “even though we are now setting up a new university, it is still our hope that the two should eventually merge into one liberal institution which would be adequately responsive to the needs of the nation, open to all sections of the community independently of their financial or social standing and giving a real, not apparent, contribution to the cultural life of the country.” (Ibid, p. 147)

- The same manifesto also mentioned that the education provided by these institutions should be limited to those professional courses and other areas of study which a small country like Malta can afford to provide at the highest possible level; as for those other areas, especially Science areas, where the country cannot reach the desired level or which are deemed not economically viable, opportunities were to be provided for students to carry out their studies abroad.¹³
- Efforts for collective occupational mobility (being regarded as University teachers) on the part of MCAST lecturers, especially those in engineering.¹⁴
- Misgivings about certain appointments and non-appointments at University; the Prime Minister had ordered an inquiry into the situation concerning the Chair of Physics.¹⁵
- A long doctors’ strike and the involvement of medical students in the dispute (see Savona Ventura, 1999). On 5th October 1977, a number of medical students chained themselves to the railings outside the Prime Minister’s office. Castille after the Medical School did not open on time that year as lecturers, who participated in the strike, had been suspended and many students were forced to continue their studies abroad; this action culminated in scuffles with the police (Savona Ventura, 1999, pp.24-25).
- controversy surrounding the housemanship period of new medical graduates (Savona Ventura, 1999);
- An unfavourable report concerning the performance of Malta’s economy, particularly the manufacturing industry, published by an Australian visiting professor in the Department of Economics (Metwally, 1977).¹⁶

Outcomes

These events could well have had a bearing on the reforms introduced. There were varied reactions to the reforms as announced by Mintoff. Pro-Labour Party spokespersons heralded the

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ I am indebted to Professor Albert Leone Ganado for this point.

¹⁵ See Campusino in *Sunday Times* (Malta) 9th October 1977 regarding the Prime Minister’s call for an inquiry into allegations concerning an appointment to the Chair of Physics. See Mintoff’s statement in parliament, regarding the shortcomings outlined by the Board of Inquiry, as reported in *L-Orizzont*, Tuesday 29 November, 1977.

¹⁶ This led to the expulsion of Lino Briguglio from the Malta Labour Party after Lino Briguglio, a member of the University’s Department of Economics, openly supported Metwally’s findings.

reforms as a victory for the working class¹⁷ and as a means for providing working class youth with the wherewithal to proceed with their studies irrespective of their financial situation.¹⁸ Other sections of the Maltese press, as well as student activists and prominent spokespersons, vehemently criticised these reforms heralding them as representing the death knell of what was once regarded as a venerable institution of higher learning (this was also mentioned by some foreign commentators: Austin, 1981; Varley 1978). The reaction ranged from acceptance to acrimonious rejection of the reforms. Certainly the strictures raised by Professor Dahrendorf, in his letter of 6th June 1978 and his subsequent statement in the *Times Higher Education Supplement* (no. 344, 16 June, 1978, p. 30), were a constant source of reference in the widespread criticisms of these reforms. It gave the detractors ample ammunition to reject and denounce these ‘reforms’ outright.

Needless to say, many of the students and academics involved in this widespread criticism were very much concerned that the courses in which they were enrolled and the faculties to which they belonged were being unceremoniously phased out. And yet, the University teachers’ association, later to join forces with the Malta Union of Teachers (then Movement of United Teachers), managed to come out with what seems to have been a workable plan for reforming the university sector (see Vella Bonavita et al, 1977) “on the basis of the ideas set out by the Prime Minister in a meeting” with the association (Ibid, p.1). The well thought out plan for educational reform had some interesting proposals and its authors clearly recognised that the university was in need of reform. It proposed, among other things, the creation of new faculties, one of which bringing the Humanities and Education (one of the proposed new faculties) together (Ibid, p 5). Law and Theology were to become graduate schools which would be attended by graduates from the proposed faculties of ‘Humanities and Education’ and

¹⁷ See statement by the then Minister for Justice and Social Affairs, Guze` Cassar as reported in *L-Orizzont*, Monday 19th December, 1977, p. 16. The title of the news item was ‘Ir-riformi fl-edukazzjoni se jifthu toroq godda ghal ulied il-haddiem’ (the Educational reforms are going to carve out new openings for workers’ sons and daughters).

¹⁸ See for example Education Minister, Philip Muscat as reported in *It-Torca*, 11 December, 1977, p. 3. He stressed that these reforms were meant to prevent students from being a financial burden on the family.

‘Business, Administrative and Social Studies.’ (Ibid, p.6). Alas, this proposed system of reform seems to have fallen on deaf ears since, in addition to the developments enunciated by Dom Mintoff at the November 28th MCAST meeting, the actual ushering in of the worker student scheme in 1978 led to the following:

- ▣ the abolition of the Faculties of Arts, Science and Theology
- ▣ end to (or at best a moratorium on) research at higher degree level
- ▣ the institution of new faculties, such as those of Education and Management, with degrees being offered in education, public administration, business studies and accountancy
- ▣ engineering becoming an integral feature of the university, initially at the New University and subsequently at the University of Malta.
- ▣ the transformation of the Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology (MCAST) into the New University
- ▣ eventual amalgamation, in 1980, of the New University with the ‘Old University.’ Once again they became the University of Malta.

(See Bonavita *et al*, 1977; Schembri, 1982; Spiteri Campbell, 1984; Caruana, 1992)

Social relations

The abolition of established faculties and their replacement by new ones, consisting primarily of teaching staff who had previously served at MCAST, led to much bad blood. Members of the old established faculties were offered the chance to join the new faculties. While a few academics sought pastures new elsewhere, the majority remained at the university. Fully qualified academics (in possession of a PhD and with publications to their credit) found themselves working with academics with lower qualifications. Relations between academic staff members were ‘uneasy’ to say the least, and especially so when the two institutions were amalgamated into one university within one physical

space (the cost of duplication is very high in small nation states and it seems that having two universities became unsustainable).

Sponsorship

The issue of sponsorship was key to the worker student scheme. It was mainly people from the public sector and state enterprises who benefited from the 'Worker-Student' scheme, since the private sector seemed very reluctant to sponsor its employees and prospective 'worker-students.' Then MLP President and Chairperson of the Commission for the Development of Higher Education, Alfred Sant, commented thus in an interview with me carried out in 1986:

The private sector has, up to now, largely stayed away from sponsoring students, except for some businessmen who have sponsored their next of kin. (Sant, in Mayo, 1986, p. 15)

Here is a breakdown of the way sponsorships were carried out between 1979 and 1985.

1979 Gov 302, state enterprises 37 private 117

1981 Gov 204 state enterprises 57 private 50

1983 Gov 238 state enterprises 64 private 41

1985 Gov 192 state enterprises 41 private 3

(Department of Education 1985),

Reluctance by the private sector to sponsor students, except for that particular familial situation mentioned by Alfred Sant, to which I would add the odd 'you scratch my back and I scratch yours' situation of exchange among friends, is to be expected, given the situation concerning training and development within micro-enterprises such as the ones prevalent on the island. In microstates, it is common for the state to shoulder a substantial part of the responsibility for the vocational preparation of

persons. Small companies do not enjoy the necessary ‘economies of scale’ to render in house training a viable option. They also face the danger of ‘poaching’ (see Mayo, 2007; Mayo, 2010), possibly a major concern when forking out money to sponsor a University student earmarked for a position within the firm. Furthermore, even large firms such as SGS Thomson (now ST Microelectronics) would poach fresh graduates in engineering who had been sponsored by the Malta Government or a state enterprise.¹⁹ One can also surmise that fear, on the employers’ part, of such a sudden and radical initiative by the government, which rendered the term ‘reform’ quite a misnomer (this is why I place the term in single quotation marks), as well as their traditional prejudice against anything forthcoming from the MLP camp, must have also contributed to this situation. They, for the most part, formed part of that class of importers who, together with the freewheeling professional, financial, insurance, large retail, landowning sectors (Vella 2009, p. 383) and the rest of the *petite bourgeoisie* (Sciberras and Vella, 1979, p.19) including shopkeepers and government employees, have traditionally constituted the power base of the Nationalist Party which is historically the political representative of merchant capital (see Vella, 1989, p. 166).

GRADUATE NUMBERS

Student numbers at university continued to rise during the period characterised by the worker-student scheme, as indicated by the following statistics. They indicate the number of graduates per year, at both undergraduate and graduate level over a twenty year span (1970-1990) including therefore the period preceding the introduction of the worker student scheme and the years during which the scheme started being implemented and its graduates reached the completion of their studies. This includes 1990, the final year of the period when a number of graduates had commenced their course under the worker-

¹⁹ I am indebted for this point to Dominic Fenech, a University academic, and currently Dean of the Faculty of Arts, who worked closely with the Rector (his designation was that of Rector’s delegate) in the 80s.

student scheme. The highest figure – 432- was registered in 1982 and this can be explained by the fact that no graduation took place in the autumn of 1981 because of the General Elections and this number includes graduates who commenced their studies in 1977 under the previous system, evening BA students who commenced their course in 1977 and, in certain cases such as education, two cohorts of the same course. With the exception of 1983 which registered an all time low for this period,²⁰ the numbers for other graduation years, consisting mainly of worker-students or students who commenced their studies under the worker-student scheme but who graduated following the change of government and therefore the abolition of this scheme, compare favourably, for the most part, and at times substantially exceed those prior to the introduction of the scheme. This statement, however, needs to be qualified. One must keep in mind that post-1977, we are witnessing figures for an institution which effectively combines two previously distinct institutions one of which (MCAST) included what were previously two other institutions, namely the two colleges of education (St Michael’s Training College –the men’s teacher education college- and Mater Admirabilis –the women’s teacher education college). On the other hand, a number of courses previously provided by MCAST (secretarial studies and catering) were not included among the list of courses provided under the worker-student scheme at university. The later figures also include students who commenced their courses in Theology, including a BA degree in Philosophy and Human Studies at the Archbishop Seminary at Tal-Virtu and ended the course at University when the Faculty of Theology was reinstated at the University of Malta following the change of government.

1970	119	1981	no graduation
1971	205	1982	432
1972	152	1983	83

²⁰ There were no MD and B.Ed (Hons) graduates that year and the BA, BSc degrees had just been phased out.

1973	268	1984	134
1974	193	1985	219
1975	236	1986	267
1976	156	1987	252
1977	214	1988	422
1978	167	1989	387
1979	185	1990	409
1980	182		

sources: Register of Graduates Alumini homepage, <http://www.um.edu.mt/alumni/registers>, *List of Graduates 1980-1985* University of Malta including Appendix 1 and II providing degrees conferred 1970- 1977 and 1980-1985²¹ Graduation programmes 1986-1990.

Rethink?

The abolition of degrees in the humanities, social sciences and natural sciences is one of the features of the changes brought about by the Labour government in its attempt to render higher education utilitarian (see Wain, 1987, pp.30-31). This was, to say the least, a very controversial move, arguably the most controversial aspect of the ‘reform’. In his May 1978 reply to Dahrendorf, Mintoff did not mince his words when denouncing the Faculty of Theology and the Department of Philosophy

²¹ The percentages of female graduates between 1980 and 1990: 24.72% (1980); 28% (1982) 6% (1983); 17% (1984); 22% (1985); 27.71% (1986); 26.98 % (1987), 36.72% (1988), 34.62% (1989) and 42.54% (1990). Calculated from *List of Graduates 1980-1986 University of Malta*. The major increase in 1990 occurred through BA and B.Ed (Hons.) graduates. The major increases in 1988 were in the B.Ed. Hons and B.Pharm courses where the number of females surpassed that of men, 45-26 in the former case and 24 -20in the case of pharmacists. There was also an increase in the MD course where men still surpassed women 23-41. In 1989, the highest percentage was recorded in the B.Ed (Hons) course 54-25. The rate of female participation in engineering was extremely low for the entire decade with only 11 female graduates in electrical engineering and a mere two female graduates in mechanical engineering. If one compares these percentages of female participation to that calculated for 1977 (based on the alumni list on the alumni section of the University website, then calculating it as a percentage of the total number for 1977 provided in the *List of Graduates 1980-1986 University of Malta* that alas does not give the sex breakdown)* then one arrives at a percentage of 36.91 % which compares favourably with the percentages for the 1980-1990 period. This is probably due to the presence of graduates in the BA and BSc degrees which came to an end with the 1978 reforms and were reintroduced after the change of government in 1987.

* Appendix II listing degrees awarded from 1970-1979 http://www.um.edu.mt/__data/assets/pdf_file/0018/166320/1980-1985.pdf

as bastions of conservatism where dogmas rather than new ideas are disseminated, stating that they hardly provided the sort of campus for the free discussion of concepts and ideas. (In Schembri, 1982, p. 146).

It was impossible at the time to pursue a degree in the arts and social sciences, or the natural sciences for that matter, unless one studied abroad or else took advantage of the provision made available by the University of London through its External degree programme. As for evening students, it looked as though the 1976/77-81 B.A. evening degree course was the last of its kind, thus seeming to bring to an end an aspect of University Continuing Education (henceforth UCE) provision which dated back to 1960 (Mayo, 2003). The other option, post 1978, was to enrol in a degree course offered by the Faculty of Theology which no longer formed part of the University of Malta as a result of the ‘reforms.’ The Faculty of Theology continued to provide accessible evening qualifications for the laity, upgrading its provision, in this regard, to degree level. Through its Institute of Religious Studies, the Faculty introduced a B.A. degree in Religious Studies with lectures held at the Catholic Institute, Floriana. The B.A. Religious Studies degree was a much sought after degree. It filled a void at the time, being the only B.A. evening degree available on the island in the early eighties. Furthermore, the Church, as the sponsoring institution, never had any problems in obtaining prestigious international recognition for the qualifications it awarded. (Mayo, 2007) A full time course leading to a BA degree in Philosophy and Human Studies was subsequently established and initially held at the Archbishop Seminary at Tal-Virtu. This was initially held under the aegis of the Faculty of Theology. Following the change of government, the course was transferred to the University of Malta.

Attempts were made to provide short courses in the Arts and other areas. An Extension Studies Board (ESB) was in place in the seventies and early eighties. It offered short courses in a variety of areas. These include: “Popular education”, defined as “raising the interest level and awareness of the

general public”; “specialised courses” defined as “ad hoc courses for specialised groups to raise their level of competency and proficiency” and “enrichment courses.” The notion of outreach was underlined: “The University should go out to the people and organise courses where it best suits the participant. This applies especially to Popular Education.”²² The work of this board however fizzled out in the 80s. Of course, as a memo by the Chairperson, Roger Vella Bonavita indicates, many lecturers were reluctant to teach such courses given the demise of the programmes to which they had been committed as Faculty of Arts and Sciences lecturers.²³

Around 1983, courses in the Arts and in Maths, Logic and Computing were introduced at evening diploma level. The idea for such programmes was communicated to the Rector at a meeting held at the House of Representatives addressed by two Ministers.²⁴ They turned out to be courses that allowed participants to progress from one diploma level to another. Those who proceeded to the final level finally ended up with a bachelor’s degree. The fact that such a development was allowed to occur suggests that the policy regarding the Arts and Sciences at University was not cast in stone and that there was room for negotiation. There might have been a variety of reasons for such a development, possibly a sense of unease, felt in influential political and government circles, regarding the way the

²² Red 20 in University Registry File Number 467/82. Letter by the then ESB Chairperson, Dr Francis Chetcuti, to University Council President, 18th November 1982.

²³ Some were reluctant to teach courses or give lectures in programmes organised by the ESB, probably in view of the dismantling of the Faculties of Arts and Science to which they had been attached. The then ESB Coordinator, Mr Roger Vella Bonavita, states, in a memo to Registrar, that “There is a considerable feeling in certain faculties against the Extension programme. This is only partly because of the upheavals in tertiary education in recent years.” Red 28 in University Registry File Number 039/81.

²⁴ I am indebted to Dominic Fenech, Rector’s delegate at the time who was present for the meeting with the two ministers, the Minister of Trade and Economic Planning, and the Minister of Education, at the House of Representatives.

Humanities and Sciences were being handled. There was also a separate evening course, held in 1984, leading to a Diploma in Journalism.²⁵

Socialist principles in education

Once the scenario surrounding the situation concerning university education 1978-1987 has been laid out, I will now seek to examine to what extent these ‘reforms’ and related measures have been consistent with a party professing to promote a socialist politics, as was the case with the Malta Labour Party at the time. Much has been written regarding the basic foundations of a socialist education (see, for instance, Castels and Wustenberg, 1979; Livingstone, 1983; Youngman, 1987). There is always the danger, however, that one abstracts when singling out important principles (see Sayer, 1987 and Vella, 1989, pp. 200, 201). I will therefore try to extrapolate a few recurring themes in a socialist education bearing this important caveat in mind. Education, as well as political action in general, is context bound. Here are some recurring concepts that seem to have some relevance in the context of the Malta Labour Party’s efforts in university education between 1978 and 1987.

- ▣ It is common for socialist projects in education to be characterised by the *education-production nexus*. Marx’s notion of a ‘polytechnic education,’ developed in the Geneva Resolution of 1866 (see Castles and Wustenberg, 1979, cited in Livingstone, 1983 : 186, 187) is a very important source of reference here (see also Marx and Engels, 1998, p. 40; Friedrich Engels’ question 18, no. 8, 1998, p. 78). This notion was very common in Third World socialist politics where universities were meant to contribute to the country’s development through cooperation in national projects. The classic example here would be the role of the University of Dar es Salaam in Tanzania during the time that Julius K Nyerere served as President (Nyerere, 1979). It played

²⁵ University of Malta Guidelines for the Diploma in Journalism evening course, 1984. Communications Studies eventually became an area in its own right, and a Centre for Communications Technology was developed, in the early nineties, for this purpose.

an important role within the framework of 'education for self-reliance.' Paulo Freire also develops this notion in Letter 11 to Guinea Bissau when he served as consultant to the newly installed revolutionary government in the former Portuguese colony in Africa on its achieving independence after a long bloody war of liberation (Freire, 1978).

- ▣ The ideal in the above context is for a *structured relationship* to be developed between education and the world of work. The central idea is for consciousness to derive from contact with and reflection on the real world. In short, there should be no bifurcation between theory and practice.
- ▣ What renders the notion of such a relationship distinctive within the socialist tradition, at least in its theoretical formulation, and not always its practice, is the emphasis on *praxis*, a Greek concept which dates as far back as at least the time of Aristotle. It entails action upon reflection for transformative action. At times, as in Marx's early writings, it refers to action upon the world of one's practical activity –the community, the polis, etc. More distinctively, in *Capital*, the focus is more specifically on reflection upon the world of economic production. This entails a critical engagement with the world of work. The notion of praxis lies at the heart of some major works in the socialist tradition, particularly Antonio Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* (the 'philosophy of praxis') and Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.
- ▣ Major works within the socialist tradition and even those by authors who would not claim to be socialist but who advocate an education for social justice, such as the School of Barbiana students who wrote *Letter to a Teacher*, inspired and directed by Don Lorenzo Milani, would emphasise the *communal and collective* dimensions of learning. Learning is not just an individual activity but also a collective activity.
- ▣ There is a tendency, within socialist experiments in education, to give prominence to the *social sciences*, particularly political economy, and to a *non-conventional study of the arts and sciences*. This was very much the case with the various activities in Germany, Britain, Italy, Australia and Canada that constituted 'independent working class education,' (see Sharpe, Hartwig and O'Leary, 1989; Simon, 1992) and the labour colleges and mechanics' institutes in the UK. With regard to a non conventional approach to the arts, the work of Raymond Williams, Richard Hoggart and later Stuart Hall, Richard Johnson and Angela McRobbie, especially in relation to that area known as 'cultural studies', became prominent.
- ▣ Widening access to education at all levels for underprivileged groups. Trade unions, socialist parties and other organizations connected to both, strove hard over the years to render institutions of higher learning and education in general less exclusionary. They did so through many ways, including the setting up of colleges that allowed access to prestigious universities, one important example being Ruskin College, Oxford. Well known socialists such as R.H. Tawney were active in workers' education associations intending to render higher learning institutes more accessible to working class persons. These efforts were also complemented internationally by those of left minded and socially conscious priests (Fr Jimmy Tompkins in Antigonish and Cape Breton, NS, Canada) to extend university access to industrial workers, farmers, fishermen etc. and to ally university research and education to their immediate communal causes (e.g. Cooperative development in Nova Scotia, Canada).

- ▣ Dismantling structures that are perceived to contribute to the reproduction of privilege. The most left wing, Marxist or simply socialist inspired writings in sociology of education, based on empirical research, are intended to indicate how the educational system, and other institutions, help reproduce class and other forms of privilege. It goes without saying therefore that a socialist oriented programme of education would be characterised by attempts to dismantle, as much as possible, structures perceived as reproducing privilege. For instance, the Socialist Education Association, which for seventy five years has been affiliated with and serving as a think tank on educational matters for the Labour Party in the UK, underlines its commitment to an “non-selective education service, which has equality of opportunity and lifelong availability of adequate provision throughout the UK within which compulsory education is free and suitably resourced.”²⁶

Contradictions and Limitations

The kind of socialism adopted by the Malta Labour Party during its years in government at the time is generally held to be one characterised by pragmatism (Sant, 2004, p. 113), with its roots firmly embedded in the European socialist tradition but, because of the country’s history as a colony, characterised by the presence of an occupying military force (what Edward Said calls ‘direct colonialism’), having strong affinities with the type of socialism developed in Third World countries (ibid.). The major contradictions, judging from an evaluation report commissioned by the then Department of Education (Ministry of Education),²⁷ a well developed dissertation submitted at the time and other published reports (Schembri, 1982; Spiteri-Campbell, 1984; Department of Education, 1985) include the following:

- ▣ EDUCATION-WORK: The major thrust of this reform was to bring university education closer to the world of work. This, as we have seen, has strong echoes of other experiments in socialist education elsewhere. This notwithstanding, evaluation reports indicate that, in many cases, the students were accorded different treatment in terms of tasks assigned (Department of Education, 1986, p. 9). There is also the criticism that the work and study phases appeared as separate

²⁶ See first aim of the SEA on its website: <http://www.socialisteducation.org.uk/us.htm> Accessed 30th December, 2010.

²⁷ For a critique of this report see Azzopardi and Lauri (1985)

components without any connection whatsoever between them. There was no well coordinated project combining the two phases and the report states that there is a separatist attitude among certain departments unconcerned about what goes on outside the study phase (Ibid, p. 10). This would seem to militate against the notion of praxis, that is to say the bringing of theory and practice together and bringing proper reflection to bear on the world of action, in this case, action in the world of work. The fact that this aspect of the reform is highlighted in the evaluation report suggests that, had the reform been allowed to develop, further work in this area would have been carried out.

- ▣ REFLECTION: The study period was not long enough, according to students and lecturers' complaints, to provide proper assimilation and reflection (Department of Education, 1985). Once again, this can serve to undermine any process of praxis that could emerge from bringing the worlds of academia and work together. Interestingly enough, the model of work and study, introduced in China by Mao, allotted more time to study than to work and Mintoff is on record as having stated, in his reply to Dahrendorf of 13 May, 1978, that "...whether the period should be one of six, or of four or of three months is not a fundamental decision but one of details which should be examined from time to time" (in Schembri, 1982, p. 149).
- ▣ SERVICE TO THE COMMUNITY According to the 1985 evaluation report (Department of Education, 1985, p.21), students, when interviewed, saw work as just a source of revenue, a means of obtaining the wherewithal to proceed with their studies. That sense of service to community and country's development, so much emphasized in the socialist tradition, was not being fostered. The top-down manner in which this drastic change to the tertiary level education system was introduced might have been one of the reasons for this.
- ▣ CONSENSUS The previous point is closely connected with the issue of consensus. Not enough social consensus was generated to render this a collective effort. This was also aggravated by the degree of party political polarization that characterizes politics on this island. It is a well documented fact that the best socialist projects occurred when a revolutionary momentum was there (see, for instance, Arnove, 1994).
- ▣ PATRONAGE: While the statistics earlier on indicate that the State and state funded companies bore the brunt of sponsorship, one must not forget that the original attempt was to seek

sponsorship from private employers as well as the State. There was an attempt for the cost of university education to be partly shifted onto the private sector with the implication being that the demands of the private sector would have a bearing on the kind of education provided by the university. This could easily be seen as an attempt at privatization of the Maltese university system, hardly in synch with socialist thinking in the field. Furthermore the student was rendered dependent on the employer with all sorts of ramifications, in terms of being used as strike-breaker during industrial and other disputes (this occurred with student teachers during a teachers' two day strike in 1978) and in terms of having their potential militancy curbed.

- ▣ **HOLISTIC REFORM** The reform at the top of the educational system was not backed by major reform at bottom and rest of the system. For this reason, the issue of access remained problematic in so far as provenance of students is concerned. As countless sociological research, especially research in the sociology of education, has shown, much of the social differentiation would have already taken place within the primary and secondary school years by the time students vie for places, in a selective system, at tertiary level. In fact the more selective the system of entry to university becomes, the more likely it is to benefit those who can draw on superior resources, often owing to class background, and who would have made these resources count during the compulsory schooling years.

- ▣ **ARTS and SCIENCES:** Undoubtedly the most controversial measure adopted was that of suppressing the arts and sciences, including social sciences. The fact that there was a rethink later on indicates that this measure did not go down well within certain sections of the Labour camp. The question to be asked is: what role should the arts and sciences play within a socialist vision? We have seen earlier on that there is a whole tradition within socialist contexts regarding the arts and sciences, with a rich literature to boot. In the 1976 Electoral Manifesto, the Labour Party mentioned, in the section on Higher Education, the need to boost artistic and other cultural production and envisaged developing and institute in this regard (MLP, 1976, p. 101). Furthermore, even Mintoff mentioned, in his reply to Dahrendorf, that it was his government's intention to see the university developing into a hive of cultural activities which could be carried out also for the benefit of workers and their families during their leisure time (see Schembri, 1982, p. 149-150). The decision to introduce or re-introduce areas in the humanities and social sciences via evening courses indicates some concern with making these

areas widely accessible, targeting those who cannot afford full time study at university. A brief reaction, in a teacher's magazine, by a then Labour Party member to comments made by the then MLP President with regard to the arts and humanities can be indicative of some of the tensions felt within certain sections of the Labour camp.²⁸

CONSISTENCIES

SOCIALIST ECHOES: The worker-student scheme, with its twin project at sixth form, the 'pupil worker' scheme, could easily evoke memories of several well known socialist experiments in education. The pragmatic form of socialism adopted by the Mintoff government, which included parallels with third world countries, owing to the Maltese islands' legacies of colonialism and the government's non-aligned stance, immediately echoes the following: Marx's notion of a polytechnic education, as propounded in the Geneva Resolution of 1866 (see Castles and Wustenberg , 1979, cited in Livingstone, 1983, pp. 186, 187); Nyerere's educational programme for Tanzania whereby each school had to develop its own means of subsistence and the university had to contribute directly to the country's development (although departments of Sociology, English etc were not suppressed) (Mayo, 2001); Paulo Freire's advocacy of a fusion between education and production in his advice to the PAIGC²⁹ leadership in Guinea Bissau (See Letter 11 in Freire, 1978, pp. 99-120); the system in China under Mao which involved a 2-4-2-4 (two months working-four months studying-two months working-four months studying) process (Chu, 1980, p. 79) - the Cultural revolution was barely 10 years old and had a considerable effect on the Left worldwide.³⁰ These ideas immediately come to mind. Some of the images celebrating the education and work concept, that surrounded the large entrance hall of the then New University in the autumn of 1979 to celebrate the first graduates of the Worker-Student scheme, certainly evoked this kind of socialist philosophy. Quite striking was the illustration depicting a young man and woman, one holding a tool (although none of the actual work carried out by Worker -students was manual) and the other a book.³¹ This notwithstanding, most of the

²⁸ See John Baldacchino's (1986, p. 4)) comments, from a declared socialist perspective, in reaction to an interview delivered by MLP President Alfred Sant to *The Teacher*, April 2006, which appeared in the subsequent issue of the same journal. Baldacchino was a Labour Party member at the time.

²⁹ *Partido Africano da Independência da Guiné e Cabo Verde* –African Party for the Independence of Guinea Bissau and Cape Verde; the party strove for a union with Cape Verde which did not materialise. The party's main ideologue and co-founder was Amilcar Cabral.

³⁰ The Labour government had forged strong relations with China (very much directly involved in a number of projects including the Red China Dock, and import substitution projects). Less than a month before announcing the reforms, Mintoff paid one of his frequent state visits to China where he met, among others, President Hua Kuo-Feng.

³¹ An eyewitness account. I happened to be there at the reception and studied at the New University at the time.

literature that served to evaluate the worker-student scheme indicates that much of the inspiration derived not from these sources but from the North American cooperative university model. Mintoff referred to this model in a parliamentary debate when refuting the accusation that the worker-student model did not work elsewhere. Dahrendorf had stated, in his letter of resignation in 1978, that “Others in the world have tried it...It produces either unhappy workers or under-qualified students or both. It adds nothing to education or social integration.” (In Varley, 1978, p. 20) In the parliamentary debate, Mintoff singled out Northeastern University Boston³² as the prototype for universities developing cooperative education programmes, the only difference being that their model of a worker-student scheme is controlled by employers rather than workers (Schembri, 1982, p. 42) One can also mention in this regard (see Spiteri Campbell, 1984, p. 11) the model adopted at Canada’s University of Waterloo which, at the time of writing, is said to have the largest co-operative education program in the world, with more than 13,000 students enrolled over three semesters. It is a model of cooperative education which has spread to more than 100 colleges and universities across Canada.³³ The cooperative university model in North America alternates a semester of study with an equal amount of time in paid employment and this process of alternation goes on until graduation. Furthermore, in keeping with the local and pragmatist character of the kind of reforms introduced by the Malta Labour Government, one cannot but recall the apprenticeship scheme at the old R.N. Dockyard School and subsequently R.N. Technical College at Senglea (Ghirlando, 1993; Sultana, 1992; Mifsud, 1997), the split between study and work occurring not between semesters but within the week.³⁴

- ▣ CONCERTED DEVELOPMENT EFFORT: An attempt was made to bring all parties (universities and employers) on board to contribute to the development needs of the country. This is in keeping with many socialist experiments especially in former colonies in the so-called Third World. Again the Tanzania example during Nyerere’s presidency comes to mind. That employers and workers representatives were to have a say on university matters was also positive (Zammit Mangion, 1992, p. 120) also given the fact that this institution is sustained by local taxes. This makes the presence of

³² <http://www.northeastern.edu/experiential-learning/cooperative-education/> See also blogs on <http://www.timesofmalta.com/articles/view/20090620/local/german-sociologist-who-resisted-mintoffs-education-reforms-dies> both accessed 19th January 2011.

³³ <http://cecs.uwaterloo.ca/about/> Accessed 16th January, 2011.

³⁴ I am indebted to former apprentice at this college, Victor Mifsud, for this point. Many of the successful college students furthered their studies in Malta and abroad graduating in such areas as economics (like Victor Mifsud) and most particularly engineering. This school gave rise to a crop of fully qualified Maltese engineers, many of whom ended up teaching engineering at University (Ghirlando, 1993, pp. 545-546).

the social partners, including worker representatives, even on University Council, all the more appropriate. One ought to mention that this period also coincided with the establishment of the then Workers' Participation Development Centre (now Centre for Labour Studies) at university (one of its major tasks was to monitor the participatory self-management experiences introduced in different firms). The University was meant to contribute, through staff and students, to national projects. This was more a desideratum than a reality. Academics representing the University on televised budget debates in parliament were often subject to derisory comments by the Prime Minister and MPs from the same party (the opposition had boycotted parliament as a result of the 1981 election result which was considered 'perverse' – the Labour Party secured a majority of seats despite obtaining a minority of votes).

- ▣ ACCESS: The 'reform' represents an attempt to provide access, within a 'meritocratic' framework, to those traditionally left out of university education. This might appear *problematic* in light of sociological research concerning the classic relationship between social class and educational achievement but it could easily be argued that such a change was *important* in a context marked by distinction and alternative access routes to power. In his analysis of the scheme, former educational planner and Deputy Director in the Ministry of Education, Joseph Zammit Mangion (1992) states "Certainly, the idea of giving students a worker status and a salary (even though it might have been hardly earned) intended to enable poor students and those coming from the working classes to obtain a University education was an excellent one based on the rights of students to a remuneration, and on the principle of introducing a work element and work experience in University studies, thus producing a more mature person and graduate." (p. 120) The scheme did more than this. It allowed full time employees to join the scheme while retaining their full salary throughout the whole year. This bold move rendered the university accessible to those who otherwise would not have availed themselves of this institution on a full time basis. This aspect is often given short shrift in analyses of the 'reform' which generally concentrate on the situation concerning mainstream students. It is a major contribution to the history of adult education in the country. It was mainly employees in the public and state enterprise sectors who were allowed to avail themselves of this opportunity. Alas, the private sector was reluctant to 'play ball.'

☐ EARNED MONEY and EMPLOYMENT: This change in the university educational system, echoed also at Government Sixth form level and in such vocational education projects as the Extended Skill Training Scheme (introduced in 1979), set the ball rolling for financial assistance being part and parcel of the Maltese tertiary education set up. While dismantling this scheme after obtaining power in 1987, the Nationalist Party still maintained the idea of financial assistance through the conversion of the worker-student salary into a stipend without any work commitment on the students' part. Contrary to Zammit Mangion's assertion ('even though it might have been hardly earned') the salary obtained through the Worker Student Scheme was *earned* money which, in my view, had some moral justification. It is true that student employees were paid a lesser amount than regular employees in the same job³⁵ but then one must bear in mind that this salary continued to be paid also during the five and a half month period of study as well as during the one month vacation period. The planning involved in so far as student intake is concerned, though controversial and problematic in terms of the 20 points bonus awarded to those who emerged from the Government sixth form (detractors referred to it as 'obscene'),³⁶ as credit for their work experience,³⁷ did ensure the availability of a job on successful completion of the university course (Spiteri Campbell, 1984, p. 25). It was a question of not simply 'employability,' as is the case with the present-day international neo-liberal discourse in education, but also 'employment.'

☐ CHILDREN OF SEMI-SKILLED, UNSKILLED PARENTS: Excellent empirical research by Carmel Schembri (1982) sheds light on the provenance, in terms of social class background, of

³⁵ Maltese legislation allows for younger workers to be paid at lesser rates than older ones, especially if they are in training. I am indebted to Godfrey Baldacchino from UPEI and the University of Malta for this point.

³⁶ The 20 points bonus (later reduced to 10 points) and the *numerus clausus* imposed on several courses served as gate-keeping devices. The points bonus was perceived by many as being directed at those who did not attend the government sixth form. This has to be seen in light of the Labour government's efforts and subsequent 1984 campaign to make private church schools free of charge with the financial cost involved to be shared equally between government and church, 'lira b'lira' (literally a Maltese lira by government for every Maltese lira spent by the church authorities). These schools eventually became free of charge under a Nationalist government through the Church-State agreement of 1989. The financial cost was borne (in the form of teachers' salaries) exclusively by the Maltese government in return for the church giving up its unused land so that projects having a social purpose can be developed. A subsequent attempt at developing a golf course across one of these territories was halted on the grounds that this project was not of any social benefit.

³⁷ There was criticism of this also from beneficiaries of the 20 point bonus on the grounds that, as one of them put it to me through personal correspondence, it "was highly insulting to those of us who attended Msida Sixth Form. It implied that we could not make it into University without extra points." This is a familiar criticism of 'affirmative action' measures. Electronic correspondence 3rd January 2011.

university students as a result of the worker-student scheme. Although this research confirms international sociological research findings regarding the predominance of students from traditional middle class milieus (including private schools) at university, there has been a noticeable increase in the number of students at university whose parents were either semi-skilled or unskilled and with either only primary or no formal education at all. Quantitative data, based on results from questionnaires, show that 37% of university students, at the time of his research, claimed that they would not have made it to university without the financial assistance provided through the worker-student scheme. (Schembri, 1982, p. 109)

Furthermore, faculties which traditionally attract working class students, e.g. engineering and education, now began to form part of university; as indicated earlier, there was formerly much resistance to this.

- **RETHINK OF ARTS, MATHS AND SCIENCES:** The reintroduction of courses in Arts, Maths and other areas, via evening diploma courses made these *accessible* to full time employees who could not attend university on a full time basis. Had the scheme been allowed to develop it would have been interesting to see what shape the arts and sciences would have taken following their gradual reintroduction. Would have they remained the preserve of only full time students at honours degree level or would have honours degree studies in the area been made available to those who could not afford full time studies? The degrees given at the end of the diploma evening courses were at general level (equivalent to an English ‘Ordinary’ degree), since it was deemed at the time that evening courses cannot be at honours level (this has now changed with honours evening degrees being provided in Youth Studies, Theology and Work & Human Resources). Those following the philosophy course, for instance, had another area added to their certificate of studies – ‘psychology’ – even though their course of studies was mainly in Philosophy.³⁸ One could not have a BA General degree in only one area, according to the University of Malta’s regulations. At the time of the award of the degree, the change in government (May 1987) had already taken place. On another note, computer studies featured among the courses provided at diploma to degree level, as well as Educational Administration, Journalism, Mediterranean Studies and Communication Studies. There was also a demand for Management and Law. (Sant, in Mayo, 1986, p. 16)

³⁸ Information obtained from course participant and final degree recipient.

CONCLUSION

This was undoubtedly the most far reaching reform carried out in education by the Malta Labour government in its uninterrupted sequence of periods of office from 1971 till 1987. It arguably supersedes the attempt at introducing comprehensives in the 70s and the subsequent retraction with the introduction of Junior Lyceums and other types of schooling, from area secondary schools to craft centres and opportunity centres in the 80s, as well as the introduction of trade schools in the 70s. The reaction in the establishment quarters was largely negative and acrimonious. MLP spokespersons and sympathizers have often argued that there has been a series of attempts, since Labour was elected into power in 1971, to derail any kind of reform being introduced (see Darmanin, 1985; Sant, in Mayo, 1986; Vella, 1989). As Sant (in Mayo, 1986, p. 14) admits,

In the Labour Movement, we are not afraid of self-criticism and we have admitted that our major mistake is namely that of pressing too far forward too soon in implementing reforms;³⁹ the priority of modernizing and reforming the antiquated structures of this country sometimes lead us to underestimate the importance of organization, and the strength of reactionary forces.

Labour was never the party of the establishment in Maltese society and its leadership, as well as rank and file, knew this only too well. One can argue that a ‘siege mentality’ seems to

³⁹ This reflection was not lost on the next Labour government which ran the country for only two years (1996-1998) because of a snap election. The then Minister of Education, Evarist Bartolo, tread cautiously when it came to education reforms as reported in *L-Orizzont*, 5th June 1998, with the heading ‘M’hu ser jsir l-ebda terremot fis-sistema edukattiva ta’ pajjizna.’ (there will be no earthquake in our country’s educational system). See also the then Minister’s column in the Sunday newspaper *Kulhadd*, 7th June, 1998 ‘Morna Ahjar l-Iskola’ (We have done better at school) and his later statement as Opposition Spokesperson on Education “In education, it is better to move slowly and on the basis of national agreement than pretend to go fast leading to national disorientation.” Original in 28th March 1999: “fl-edukazzjoni ahjar nimxu ‘ftit’ u bi qbil nazzjonali milli taparsi nimxi ‘hafna’ b’disgwid nazzjonali” (see Borg and Mayo, 2001, p. 72).

have made its presence felt inside the Labour camp and the slogan '*min mhux maghna kontra taghna*' (those who are not with us are against us') attests to this. For this reason any sort of dialogue from outside, stemming from those perceived by this leadership to have hitherto enjoyed privilege, was a non-starter. Reforms were carried out in a top-down (see Varley, 1978) and heavy handed manner and, as Vella (1989) states, not in the most coherent, consistent and well planned manner possible (p. 172). Even Mizzi (1995), who provides quite a balanced view of the reforms and was not prepared to accept Dahrendorf's verdict uncritically, referred to some shortcomings in this regard. This made it difficult for such reforms to garner popular support.

As is almost always the case in a politically polarized society as is Maltese society, detractors and supporters of the system would want to win their games 6-love, 6-love (and even the work of people outside this form of polarization, such as Varley, 1978, often falls into this category⁴⁰). One rarely obtains a balanced view of the project, heralding its most positive aspects and criticising its most wayward ones. I sought to do this in this paper, tackling the subject not from any neutral standpoint (education is never neutral and research is never value free) but as someone viewing this project from a socialist perspective, examining the way it can be reconciled or otherwise with a socialist tradition in education and bearing in mind (1) that such socialist traditions are varied and not monolithic (2) that the Maltese brand of socialism was characterised, for the most part, by a pragmatist approach. The evaluation report of 1985 (Department of Education, 1985) seems to suggest that some changes were likely to be made in the ensuing years, though the change of government in 1987 brought an end to any effort in this

⁴⁰ His "Predictably, university degrees in Malta will soon be little more than certificates of satisfactory attendance and will have the international currency such awards deserve" (Varley, 1978, p. 23) proved to be wide off the mark.

regard. The whole project, dismissed as ‘stupid’⁴¹ by the incoming Minister of Education, in the buildup to the 1987 elections, was dismantled save for one aspect – financial support which took on the form of a stipend rather than a wage.⁴²

The system helped increase the number of students from low SES families (still a minority in relative terms – see data in Schembri, 1982) making it through to university without being ‘a strain on their parents.’ This is important and laudable from a socialist and equity perspective. This having been said, no higher education reform alone can increase access on the basis of social justice without a proper reform at all levels of the educational system. In my view, this requires a wide ranging reform that ensures that state schools are the best in the business where effective and meaningful learning through different pathways is ensured and followed up. Furthermore, any reform needs to provide parity of esteem between academic and vocational pathways, a problem in a country still suffering from the classic British colonial legacy of a bifurcation between the two streams. Cuba’s much lauded University of Havana with its superb science and medical faculties, is part and parcel of a sound and undifferentiated (private, public) educational system where students excel in such domains as languages and mathematics (see Carnoy and Marshall, 2005). Its fine doctors and health workers come from across the entire social spectrum.

Furthermore, one must bear in mind the old sociological adage that education on its own does not change things; it is not an independent variable. It can however *contribute* to social and

⁴¹ See interview given by Ugo Mifsud Bonnici to *The Teacher*, October 1986 (in Mayo, 1986, p.11). He argued that the work-study periods were “counter-productive” and that “this stupid scheme should be dismantled forthwith.”

⁴² The stipend served to increase the number of students attending university, also given the reinstatement of the faculties of arts and sciences and new programmes over the years. 1250 graduated in 1995. (Baldacchino, 1999, p. 209. By 1996, the university student population had grown to 6, 500 (ibid.). The numbers continued to rise to reach an estimated population of 9970 as the University went through and continues to go through a process of massification (Information provided by Registrar’s Office, University of Malta, 28th October, 2008).

economic change. In this respect, the idea of a structured relationship between professional education and work experience was a step in the right direction,⁴³ as was the introduction through the reform of new professional courses at university, including engineering, management, labour studies (albeit part-time), administration, accountancy and education (even though teachers were traditionally included by Gramsci and others among the class of subaltern intellectuals, specifically however in a *meridionale* ‘pre-industrial’ society context – once again, one must be wary of the danger of reifying and abstracting). One must ensure, however, that university education entails more than just preparing people for work, however important is this aspect of education. In addition to Dahrendorf’s warning to Mintoff (“the notorious difficulties of manpower planning in a changing world” –3/5/1978⁴⁴), other people, who have critiqued the notion of excessive vocationalisation in education, have argued that formal institutions of learning, encumbered by bureaucracies, are not the most appropriate institutions to cater for the constant fluctuations of the economy (see Sultana, 1992, p 298). If anything I would argue that university education ought to prepare people to *engage critically* with work. People should be formed as social actors rather than just producers or, worse, passive consumers. Otherwise any such proposed attempt will be no different from that which forms part of the current dominant neoliberal paradigm of thinking about education.

The dominant neoliberal paradigm promotes an all pervasive market oriented and strictly instrumentalist approach to education placing the focus on employability which does not necessarily mean employment (Gelpi, 2002); an attempt to turn a ‘jobs crisis’ into a ‘skills

⁴³ Nevertheless, some criticism is necessary here. As far as education is concerned, there were cases when pupils spent a whole year being taught a subject (secondary level) or all subjects (primary level) by two student teachers who swapped places half way through the year. This means that throughout one year the pupils were in the hands not of a fully fledged qualified teacher but of prospective and therefore still not qualified teachers. This should have provided cause for concern among the parents and pupils involved. For a study of the work-phase, particularly with regard to student-teachers, see Zahra (1986)

⁴⁴ In Schembri, 1982, p. 142.

crisis' (Marshall, 1997, p. 59). The task for any genuine socialist or social-justice oriented progressive movement, in this day and age, is that of thinking and acting beyond the simply instrumentalist framework. While the economic imperatives of development cannot be discarded, one should conceive of the university, and any other educational institution for that matter, as providing important spaces where one recuperates the notion of and makes valuable contributions to the development of a genuinely democratic and socially inclusive public sphere. They should also constitute spaces where the very nature of past and contemporary production is discussed critically from a social and bio-centric perspective (Milani, 2001). The humanities (including social sciences) and natural sciences (the latter ironically given tremendous importance in countries that served as examples of 'actually existing socialism') have an important role to play in this regard, provided that they are revitalized in terms of present day concerns and issues and rendered accessible to one and all, irrespective of work schedules, financial situation and social location.

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