

**Chircop, J. (Ed.). Colonial encounters:
Maltese experiences of British rule 1800 – 1970s,
Malta, 2015, ISBN 978-99957-38-79-2, 514 pp.**

In the introduction to *Colonial Encounters*, John Chircop highlights social relations of collaboration and resistance between native subject and foreign coloniser and how these reflected power relations, hegemonic spheres, and material culture.¹ The choice to examine them from different specialisations gives the book its special character. At the same time, these different specialisations, even if not explicitly, concur in outlining how such relations in turn affected those amongst the natives. Thus, by the 1870s, whilst the formation of the Italian state and the policy of Anglicisation affected relations between coloniser and pro-Italian Nationalists, the enemy for the latter was not the coloniser but collaborators and native upstarts who challenged their social and political leadership.

Concurrently, British-driven infrastructural modernisation provided the bourgeoisie with leading administrative posts whilst merchants and contractors similarly exploited imperial opportunities. Landowners' aristocratic exclusivity and privilege was conserved in higher officer military positions in the Maltese section and inter-marriage with British elite families. Conversely, lower middle and working class members got lower level jobs only after submitting to pro-British and later pro-Italian local patrons (Chircop, pp. 43-4).

Old and new remained inextricably combined. Approximately a century later, Independence did not wipe out colonialism: defence-based technical competence and provision of British money survived "the technical end of British colonialism" (S. Goodwin, p. 70; also SC Smith), and the same ruling sectors continued to jostle to exploit opportunities. Post-war industrialisation sustained importers and contractors as well as a coterie of small traders, professionals and craftsmen. It increased the profits of the landowners. A competitively priced and adaptable proletariat arose, Brincat argues, but no industrial 'national' bourgeoisie (p. 417). What changed was

¹ All references to authors are to this book's contributors or others quoted therein.

capitalist foreign investment substituting decreasing colonial budgets. The accompanying politico-legal superstructure was also transformed from earlier Integration with Britain to Independence-related nation-building.

The volume also presents individuals and it is no surprise to find Dom Mintoff's overpowering presence. Noteworthy is that whilst Smith's study of official and private British documents reports a caricatural "Levantine carpet-seller" (p. 443) and an "erratic and intemperate character" (p. 445-6), another volume contributor attempts to match such outpourings depicting Mintoff as one who 'branded' and 'isolated' opponents, 'wreaked vengeance', was associated with 'terror' as legitimate to secure compliance and an 'artful' exploiter of 'patronage' morality (E. Warrington, p. 373). However, Mintoff was not alone. Caricature reflected a broader canvas. Thus, Sarah Austin, wife of a Royal Commissioner, spoke of a vertical table of civilisation with British, Maltese and Arabs in descending order.

This reflected, according to Chircop, the "profound sense of prejudice and racial-ethnic and cultural superiority" only superficially moderated by a "paternalist civilising discourse" (p. 16). Others did not distinguish: the Maltese are "bastardised Arabs" (ibid. p. 18), and not "good white stock" (DH Plowman). Paradoxically, even Arab nationalists looked down upon Maltese migrants (see JM Hayes for Maltese migration to North Africa). A social class angle indicates how it was the Arab elite that shared such views with their British counterparts. Otherwise, the Italianate bourgeoisie would have sensed the irony in adopting continental cultures that considered them inferiors as Maltese.

Social structure is not pre-eminently elaborated in the volume but arguably presents the most refreshing research here. Chircop manages to "relocate the fishing folk and their communities from the very margins to the centre of historical inquiry" (pp. 329). They suffered colonial inroads that demolished traditional work conditions and habitat, defined by Chircop as "collective dispossession" (p. 351). Nevertheless, whilst the colonial government forced fisher folk out of their traditional fishing territory, it was the local middleman (*pitkal*), supported by a powerful lobby who exploited this community deprived of state assistance and legal protection.

Its struggles never made it into the bourgeois nationalist narrative; worse still, alongside the fellow subaltern goatherds, fisher folk were criminalised by the English press and its pro-British readership. This voiceless sector formed part of the broader class described by police inspector Semini as suffering “poverty, lack of sanitation, endemic unemployment and illiteracy” (P. Knepper, p. 45; also L. Tripp and LA Sawchuk; and especially Sawchuk). H. Vivian Wyatt reports how stubborn goatherds suffering from fatalism, hardship, and misery were forced to desperate measures to challenge governmental attempts to destroy their livelihood and drank untested milk. Many fell ill (p. 203).

Any history of Malta would be amiss without reference to the Roman Catholic Church. Goodwin suggests Roman Catholicism was nowhere else “destined to have so much social and cultural impact on the pre-modern and modern history of an entire people” (p. 67). A pragmatic, “colonial *realpolitik*” government protected its “economic and social vested interests” (Chircop, pp. 20-1) tolerating a national spirit in religious guise such as in celebrating the national 8th September feast. The 1929 Lateran Treaty between the Fascist and Vatican leaderships encouraged *religio et patria* clerics. B. Blouet focuses on Nationalist leader Nerik Mizzi’s identification with “Italianity” and his close encounters with fascist leaders. It was a popular stand (Goodwin, p. 108), shared by members of the Church but also the Judiciary, cultural institutions, school and university. Concurrently, Church leaders and colonial authorities worked together. The local elite did not want to offend the colonials.

Another fixed item in early twentieth century histories of Malta, the Language Question, surfaces in the volume and illustrates the role of intellectuals. From Etruscan (Agius de Soldanis) to Phoenician (MA Vassalli) descent, from de-emphasising Islamic Malta (GF Abela) to post-Independence cleansing of Arabic ‘intrusions’ in cultural initiatives accompanying mass tourism, identity-formation engaged intellectuals. Here, a more robust focus on the ‘molecular’ presence and role of intellectuals would have assisted the text. Oliver Friggieri’s subject-matter but also his personal role, footnoted by Chircop, could have received more attention (p. 34). Elsewhere, Refalo’s reference to Morton’s “intersubjective forms of consciousness” was equally suggestive but he does

not exploit fully the class consciousness theme in terms of economic and hegemonic moments (p. 298).

Beneath the rhetoric of Continental-Phoenician roots, Chircop maintains “these two invented, politically polarised, ‘national identities’ and histories were expressing two conflicting economic and social vested interests” (p. 36). Demythicalising, Pirotta recalls his earlier work on bread-and-butter issues and re-iterates that these “underpinned support or opposition to the English language” (p. 356). Following Hull’s seminal work, Pirotta exposes culturalist reductionism highlighting how English as the official language of the civil service and courts was a threat to traditional professionals. They compromised in their practice: in commercial law, Continental legislation combined with legal procedures following English custom (Refalo); in criminology, English welfare practice combined with Lombroso’s theory (Knepper). Culturalist ideas condensed in politics sustaining interminable in-fighting characterising the political elite, albeit coherent in its western European identity.

Different issues troubled goatherds, fisher folk and migrants. These subordinate sectors were caught on the wrong side of economic development and policy-making. Plowman, a child migrant, recalls Australia’s immigration policy. He records the Rev. Stinson’s 1953 visit to Malta to assist in the child migration scheme. Stinson observed how Arab looks or a skin too dark meant rejection by the “racial and sectarian” Australian team (p. 161). Australia’s demands were met by Malta’s supply: Colonial, Labour and Nationalist leaderships supported migration policies. Plowman quotes Attard’s aptly-titled *The safety valve*: “The people of Malta were told that emigration was the only solution to the problem of over-population and unemployment (...) The efforts to convince those who were unemployed or else had poorly paid jobs soon produced the desired effects” (p. 155).

Another policy targeting the working class was that concerning grain taxation. As Sharp elaborates, grain imports not only supplied a third of the colonial government’s revenue (money not redistributed downwards), grain availability was a deterrent guaranteeing control. When the system failed, four Maltese were murdered by colonial troops during the June 1919 riots (see Falzon and Lanzon’s periodisation of the 1910s for

food imports and price instability; also Billiard for historicising food). Taxation on wheat hit the 112 thousand working class members dependent on wheat twice as much as the 37 thousand upper and middle class with their preference for lesser-taxed meat and fish imported by the business sector.

The volume presents another case of policy as an instrument in social class conflict. “Opportunities for enrichment” for the commercial sector distinct from the nationalist political sector, Refalo argues, were “a function of colonial rule” (p. 296). He suspects that the colonial government’s setting up of traditional and troublesome professionals against the commercial classes “may not have been unintended” (ibid. p. 312). Further conflict within the Maltese ruling class is narrated. Beyond colonial encounters, into post-Independence times, the political sector usurped the place of “the de facto government” of unelected civil servants (Warrington). Further, British-controlled lands bequeathed to Malta were transferred to construction profiteers. Not only does this confirm that the “poor, resources-starved territory” continued to host a financially and socially rewarded “affluent and busy minority” (Refalo, p. 326), it also underpins social class as a unifying criterion for the multiple specialisations.

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