Unapologetically Political and Sociological: Developing and Renewing Museum Spaces

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In the context of Malta's Valletta 2018 commitment to maximise, popularise and 'Europeanise' its cultural spaces, this paper examines the role of national museum spaces in the contemporary era of cultural hybridity, liquidity (Bauman, 2000) and mobility. Departing from a critical pedagogical framework, the paper examines how 'national' cultural sites which have historically served to reproduce hegemonic 'imagined communities' (Anderson 1991), can be genuinely transformed into 'ecologies of cognition' (de Sousa Santos 2006). These are dynamic public spaces where cognitive justice and democracy are affirmed. The role of curators as mediators of knowledges and as adult educators within mainly state-sponsored institutions will be interrogated. Also problematised is the notion of 'national' and 'permanent collection' in a Maltese context which is dynamic and cosmopolitan. In the final analysis, this paper will contribute to the ongoing search for greater participation of the Maltese publics in the formulation of national imaginations through active engagement in museum experiences.

Engaging the 'National', arguing for the Democratic

In a piece titled *The Agnostic Museum*, Clelia Pozzi (2013) proposes a theoretical framework that may, in her view, provide a basis for the democratisation of the 'national' museum. Pozzi asserts that by decoupling the nation from the state, one could reclaim the independence of the nation from the geographic and administrative configuration of the state. She argues that it is possible to reinvent the 'national' museum as an authentic democratic space, one which does not simply serve the hegemonic state. The social space of the museum needs to be re-imagined as independent of the 'juridical structure' (Pozzi 2013: 8) of the state. For Pozzi, such a separation contributes to a political conversation on how museums can be transformed into democratic public spaces, particularly in contexts marked by an increasing polyphony of voices.

Locating the national museum within radical democratic politics, Chantal Mouffe writing in the same volume as Pozzi, is averse to the notion of 'exodus' and 'desertion' (2013: 17) of public institutions as an act of liberation from what are perceived as hegemonic spaces that de-legitimise non-representative forms of cultural production and 'absolute democracy' (2013: 18). When disengaging the national museum, Mouffe argues, one prevents attempts at interrogating public spaces with the intent of transforming them into sites of struggle and, ultimately, into genuine democratic spaces involving different power relations. Mouffe refutes the idea that museums are instruments of the dominant state and rejects reformist labels attached to any attempt to engage them critically. She argues that these dismissive attitudes are 'profoundly mistaken' (2013: 18), and ultimately, reproduce the very same processes of hegemony that cultural deserters' claim to be struggling against. We are in agreement with Mouffe. We believe that political configurations can be altered and that hegemony is transient,

never complete and never static. We argue therefore that engaging the institutions, their tensions and contradictions, is key to conceiving of democratic spaces today.

Critical Pedagogy and Museums as Transformative Sites of Practice

Recognising that museums are neither neutral nor operate outside the state, the success of resisting and subverting hegemonic practices within museums depends on a deep understanding of the state; the 'glocal' forces that structure and mould public institutions such as national museums; the role of museums in the reproduction-transformation dialectic; the strategic role of curators as impresarios of cultural production and selection; and the role communities ought to play in the struggle for the democratisation of 'national' museums in mobile societies. The ascendency of knowledge as a critical factor in economic growth underlines the politically loaded and ethically challenging issue of what and whose knowledge is being recognised, valorised and officially affirmed and who is making the arbitrary decisions regarding the selection of culture***s*** and knowledg***es***. Literature interrogating whose knowledge counts, linking the production of knowledges with equity and participatory democracy, argues for knowledge democracy as an alternative paradigm to social injustice based primarily on cognitive injustice (Escrigas *et al*. 2014).

Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2006), a prominent exponent of cognitive democracy, proposes the concept of 'ecologies of knowledges', focusing on excluded knowledges from 'the other side of the line' (2007: 45). Santos' vision goes beyond the tokenisation of folk and popular culture through the inclusion of artefacts in geographical proximity to concrete representations of 'high' cultures. Informed by an ethical commitment towards knowledge production that intervenes in reality, cognitive democracy is premised on the ability of knowledge intermediaries to connect different kinds of knowledge and facilitate dialogues among different cultures while imagining new ethical realities and commitments (Escrigas *et al*. 2014). Borg and Mayo (2003) alerted the Maltese curatorial community to the potential colonial appropriation and exoticisation of 'other' knowledges when analysing institutions such as the National Maritime Museum and St John's Co-Cathedral in Malta. They argued that, while local museums have become more pedagogically astute, Maltese curatorial experiences need to be more democratically accessible, reciprocal and socially inclusive. They ought to engage in a pedagogical experience that is democratically enriching.

Museums and Community Engagement

Complementary to the issue of cognitive justice is community engagement involving a politico-pedagogical approach. While problematising hierarchical, 'official' knowledge relationships, community engagement promotes genuine collaboration between institutions and communities in knowledge production, application and exchange. This allows for a contestation of knowledges, none of which are neutral as they reflect particular standpoints/ interests. This collaboration takes place in contexts informed by reciprocity and co-ownership of the socialisation of knowledge production. Committed to promoting the quality of life in a community, those who participate in community-engagement practices base their work on the problematisation of the overinstitutionalisation of knowledge and the valorisation of experiential knowledges as key to transformation.

The central pedagogical principle in genuine community-institution partnerships committed to decolonising knowledge is that the initial act of epistemological curiosity, leading to co-discovery and co-production of knowledge, arises from themes generated by the community whose members are the intended beneficiaries of the reflection process and consequent action. In addition, such partnerships are generally long-term, nurtured over a period of years, and respectful of the cultural characteristics of the local rather than isolated special-interest events.

The Community-Engaged Curator

A commitment to social transformation, predicated on equity and social justice, calls for a pedagogical relationship with communities that rejects approaches that turn communities into 'spectators of their own realities' (Freire 1970a) often perpetuating their subordinated forms of being. Operating within a social transformation paradigm, the community-engaged curator denounces 'pulpit pedagogy' (Borg & Cardona 2008: 3) to announce a pedagogy based on the realisation that horizontal interactions with communities are essentially educational in nature, politically committed and based on critical readings of the world. This is not a question of replacing one expert knowledge with another. It is more a question of challenging some of the assumptions of conventional established knowledge, including the curator's own a-priori knowledge, through interaction with the perceptions and thoughts of community members. Fresh insights and fresh takes on things can be brought to bear on the discussions. Curatorial work informed by such a critical pedagogical stance entails not simply an aesthetic or descriptive experience but, on the contrary, an ongoing form of socio-political engagement.

Communities are invited to co-curate their accumulated quotidian experiences as subjects of their own historically situated and embedded knowledges. 'Cultural action for freedom', as Freire (1970a) notes, constitutes an act of human solidarity. The community would be involved, in this context, in co-selecting the themes and artefacts of the curatorial experience. They would generate, with curatorial engagement, reflections on the themes, co-select texts for the exchange of their experience with other publics and co-monitor the final draft before the experience is opened to the production of multiple texts. Aware of the dangers of 'cultural invasion', radically engaged curators refrain from being authoritarian and instead, share their authority with the community. This 'democratic authority' (Shor 1992) entails respect of the learners and the disposition to learn and relearn from them. It is the learners who bestow authority on the curators who operate in a directive manner. They lead but do so democratically, exposing themselves and the relevant learning communities to self- and mutual interrogation as well as transformation in a context of ongoing mediation and contextualisation, interdisciplinarity, border-crossing, socio-cultural gap reduction, solidarity and communal emancipation. The ultimate test of a radical pedagogical relationship between curators and communities is the extent to which the curator becomes nomadic in his/her indefatigable search for more productive dialogues with publics and communities. This relationship is also marked by the extent to which these engagements would lead to authentic representation of marginalised voices and transformative action that can well include transformation in the participants' relation with knowledge (Allman 2001).

The museum thus extends its peripheries to offer spaces where the traditionally observed and the observers meet, exchange ideas, narrate stories, create theatre, recreate narratives, write collectively, share personal and socially relevant artefacts and build reflective relationships.

While avoiding romanticising popular knowledge, the community-engaged curator dialogues with community members in an attempt to enable them to produce and interrogate knowledges which are worth communicating. As an illustrative case, one of the authors engaged in a number of literacy encounters with communities that led to knowledge production in areas ranging from education, workers' rights, health and the environment to housing, community empowerment and the internet and third-age issues (Borg & Formosa 2015). The knowledge-creation process, built on the notion that community members are intellectuals and not spectators of the experts' knowledge-production spectacle led to the production of prose, poetry and folk singing. In so doing, the participants helped create a context that extended from the immediate community to an international popular education conference (Borg & Formosa 2013; Brown 2014). The power of such multiple ways of producing knowledges is indicative of the Maltese museums' potential to move from providing static representations to offering dynamic and community-oriented democratic spaces.

ECoC and Community Engagement

The social dimension features prominently in the rhetoric of several official bid preparation documents (e.g. bids for European cultural capital designation). Most documents have promoted the cultural diversity of Europe, intercultural dialogue and greater mutual understanding between citizens of Europe and beyond (Colin Borg *infra*). Authors of bids often exert a conscious effort to promote, in writing, the engagement of those who do not feature in the cultural landscape of their city and to create new opportunities for a wide range of citizens, including marginalised and disadvantaged groups, to attend or participate in cultural activities. Despite this emphasis on the importance of public engagement, however, the official sources provide relatively little concrete information on what cities did to engage citizens as 'spect-actors' rather than spectators, to echo Boal (1993), not to mention the absence of data regarding the long-term social impact of ECoCs (Garcia & Cox 2013).

In terms of genuine inclusion of minority groups, the Palmer/Rae Associates study (2004) notes that data from an analysis of Rotterdam 2001 demonstrate lower engagement by the local ethnic minority populations. The study concludes that mainstream cultural events often experienced difficulty attracting ethnic minorities and peripheral communities. This challenge was shared, for example, by Liverpool 2008 (Garcia *et al*. 2010) which reported a 7% participation rate of persons with disability which is significantly lower than the expected figure for this category when taken as a proportion of the city's and the national population (Garcia *et al*. 2010).

Lanoue *et al.* (2011) report several examples of tensions between ECoC organisers and communities, with communities often accusing organisers of prioritising tourist-oriented, profit-driven events over authentic community-oriented activities. The data that emerge from this study confirm that for all the rhetoric on inclusion and ECoC, little transformative action in the area of social equity is taking place

A panoramic view generated from the limited literature addressing community engagement in the context of ECoC indicates that, in general, cities are interested in popularising participation. However, it seems that the strategy used in the process is often patronising, centralised and tokenising in its approach to enable authentic voices to emerge as protagonists in the city's cultural production. In fact, the data available suggest that there were very few instances when communities engaged less as audiences and more as actors in a

transformative process. The related tensions indicate that, in general, hierarchical approaches, manifest in pseudo-consultation processes, commercial interests, 'grandstandism', geographic concentration of events and gentrification of urban spaces, constituted major hindrances to genuine communal dialogues based on problematisation of taken-for-granted knowledge. Problematising (problem posing in Freire's sense) can help underline the transformative potential of the ECoC. It is to this potential for problematising, resisting and subverting hegemonic and sanitised narratives in our museums, in the context of Valletta 2018, that we now turn.

Museums and beyond

We focus, in light of the above considerations, on a number of museums. Some of these are situated in Valletta and one is situated outside the city. The Valletta 2018 European Cultural Capital designation extends beyond the city itself to include the rest of the islands of Malta and *Għawdex* (Gozo). This is because of the small size of the over-all territory involved. We focus primarily on national museums such as the National Museum of Fine Arts which is currently undergoing the initial stages of conversion to MUŻA (*Mużew ta' l-Arti* – Art Museum), occupying a larger space than the one that houses the collection at present. We also focus on St John's Co-Cathedral which, despite being a solemn place of Roman Catholic religious worship, is available for most times during the day as a museum; an entrance fee is charged. We then cross over the Grand Harbour separating Valletta from the maritime city of Birgu, known by the appellation of 'Città Vittoriosa', (Cutajar *infra*) to focus on a national museum there. Birgu is strongly connected to the capital city in that it served as the seat of the Order of St John, following its departure from Rhodes, before Valletta was built in the sixteenth century.

We will look at collections and seek ways of rendering them relevant to contemporary life. What do they tell us about present life and present communities? Conversely what do they avoid telling us about these very same communities given that, like curricula, museums are selections from the culture***s*** of society? It is a well-known sociological adage that what is not said is as politically important as what is said. Furthermore what do the exhibits indicate about the context in which they were created and its role in social development, the effects of which can still be felt today? How do museums allow space for critical reflection on contemporary power structures and life-worlds? Furthermore, and this is key, how can museums develop as appropriate spaces for the holding of current socially relevant debates? How can they enhance their role as sites of cultural contestation?

The authors are unapologetic about their approach which has a strong political, sociological dimension. For those who cling to strong disciplinary classifications, in Basil Bernstein's terms, this would sound anathema. Pierre Bourdieu reminds us that Sociology and Art 'do not make good bedfellows' (Cit. in Tanner 2003: 1). There was however a time in Europe when there was no differentiation between the two as art was seen in terms of its surrounding socio-cultural contexts (Tanner 2003: 6). This persisted until the areas, 'Sociology' and 'Art History', became firmly ensconced within academia and sought their own separate identities, especially from the second half of the 19th century which saw an expansion in modern higher education and hence increasing disciplinary specialisations and boundaries (Tanner 2003: 8). Our approach, hopefully, represents a throwback to that older period when the view was quite holistic.

Valletta allows ample opportunities for ruminations based on unsettling questions of the type mentioned above. Our modern world is obsessed with 'speed', (Taylor 2014a & b) an obsession which has multiple social ramifications. Mark C. Taylor declares that 'the cult of speed is a modern phenomenon' and goes on to cite Filippo Marinetti, author of the *Futurist Manifesto*, who declared: 'We say that the world's magnificence has been enriched by the beauty of speed' (cited in Taylor 2014b: 36).

It is very difficult not to think, in this context, of the gradual increase in movement in the sculptures by Maltese artist Antonio Sciortino, currently housed in the Museum of Fine Arts, which evolve from the ballet and tennis court rhythms to the ultimate 'turbo-like' speed of horses. In full flight, the horses capture the adrenalin rush of fierce competition. Antonio Sciortino (1879–1947) was no profound ideological follower of the politico-artistic currents of his time. He was however receptive to styles that were prevalent in Italy during the time he spent there, from Art Nouveau and Art Deco to Futurism itself. In his work, nature is represented as being subservient to technology, in a manner reminiscent of the character Loerke in D. H. Lawrence's *Women in Love*. This is a very important characteristic of the 'profound shift in cultural values' that 'occurred with the advent of modernity and modernisation: with the emergence of industrial capitalism, the primary values governing life became work, efficiency, utility, productivity and competition.' (Taylor 2014b: 36)

The Sciortino sculptures, complemented by imaginative prompts or what Freire would call 'hinge themes', can easily generate discussions on how art and the artistic styles reflected the change in values taking place. These values continued to be reinforced, not least following 'the transition from mechanical to electronic technologies' (Taylor 2014b: 36) that made speed increase significantly. In Taylor's view, these values might have allowed capitalism to thrive but now threaten its future and the future of the planet itself. The earth is made to operate on rhythms it cannot sustain, to its own detriment and that of those who directly make it function.

Things of beauty can still provoke a whole series of disturbing questions which, in a genuinely democratic public sphere, would be allowed to emerge as the work of art becomes an object of investigation, conjuring up ideas which can be regarded as forms of resistance to the dominant narratives. Similarly worthy of investigation, in this manner, are the many landscapes and *vedute* of bygone Malta, some hearkening back to the 18th-early 19th century, as in the work of the Swiss Louis Du Cros (1748–1810), and to the middle and late 19th century. Among the latter are landscapes of the Neapolitan Gerolamo Gianni (1837–1895). A typical example would be Gianni's depiction of Tarxien (*Tarscien*) House viewed from a distance. Mental juxtapositions involving Gianni's bygone landscape and images of the contemporary site can easily raise issues concerning the vanishing rural spaces of the Maltese islands. Clear demarcations between town/village and countryside are no longer existent. The ravaging of planet earth has its contextualised manifestation in a construction-driven economy. It is as if the whole island has been turned into one large construction site. This becomes all the more urgent in an age when public spaces are globally being subjected to commodification and speculative encroachment. Juxtapose this against an illustration of contemporary views and we have an example of art serving as a vehicle for resistance to capitalist encroachment.

There is a flip side to this however, since these paintings, with their mathematical simplicity and neatness, and appreciation of vernacular architecture (cubical houses huddled beneath the dome's imposing matriarchal image – Mayo 1997: 77) can easily transport us to a nostalgic world in which pastoral life is romanticised, the mood being 'quietistic' (oblivious to

the social upheavals of the time), paying lip service to the prevailing social conditions. Then we come across the aesthetically tasteful (to some) representations of idyllic 'happy' peasants singing while indolently plucking guitar strings, a form of exoticisation of a peasant class immersed in, at times, abject poverty. This comes across as a form of 'orientalism' – a false construction of a 'reality' at the furthest remove of the realit*ies* lived by those the artist purports to depict.[1] The peasant in the painting could well have indulged – as a form of escapism from a life of abject destitution – in the 'cup that inebriates' as do those figures in a 17th century tapestry in the museum by the Antwerpenaar painter David Teniers II.

Paintings such as the earlier one by Gianni also connect with contemporary reality through juxtaposition between past and present. So do the 'bourgeois' depictions of the 'quaint' *kampanjol* (peasant), by Edward Caruana Dingli (1876–1950), especially when juxtaposed against the more dignified rendering, by Antonio Barrera (died 1967), of fishers at work, once again in the context of primary production. The latter can raise issues concerning the dignity of work, the eventual organisation of the working class, and the present losses of hard-earned gains of this social class as its members and their representatives are forced to adapt to 'Capitalist realism' (Fisher 2009) and precarious living. 'Social Realist' paintings of the 19th century, and their 'neo-social' realist versions of the 20th, with their clear depiction of basic living, provide stark reminders of the vulnerability which has been the staple of labouring class life, well indicated by Robert Tressel in his classic *The Ragged Trousered Philantropists*. This condition reappears, as *precarieté*, in the present day *tertiarised* economic scenario. We would add that people living this precarious existence today often cling to the delusion of their living a middle-class life; this militates against any form of class consciousness of the kind augured by Marx himself inspired by the Paris communards including Gustave Courbet.

The main collection in the Museum, that of 17th century art, with its representations of stoicism and faith affirmation through bloody deeds, raises interesting issues concerning past and present. We have witnessed resort to religious fanaticism and militarism in the form of Isis, Al-Qaeda, Boko Haram and Shabab, or actions of lone 'gung-ho' Neo-Nazis and self-declared 'Christians' such as Anders Behring Breivik[2] with his massacre of 77 people in Norway (many of them children). How do the museum's images of fanatic faith affirmation, as manifested through 17th century art, including theatre, and throughout the 'body politic' itself (see Lyons 2015), connect with present day sensitivities? Of course, we must emphasise the importance of aesthetic discussions – elegant cold colouring – as in Moïse Le Valentin de Boulogne – powerful design, superb sense of composition, *tenebroso* effects, overall 'bravura' and, in many, Caravaggists, or Dutch-Caravaggists, artificial shafts of light (Matthias Stom, *c.* 1600–after 1652). All these heighten the dramatic intensity of the scenes. We would argue that, if steered carefully, the discussions can also enhance the paintings' contemporary relevance, striking a chord with contemporary visitors and their social and individual preoccupations. There could be interesting connections made between 17th century Counter-reformation religious zeal and contemporary violent, fanatic and militant faith affirmations. Would such discussions render the museum a space to foster greater understanding of the different faces of fiery militant religious fanaticism?

Needless to say, 20th-century paintings, including those falling under the rubric of 'Sacred Art', strike even more sonorous chords. Giuseppe Schembri Bonaci (2009) leads us in this direction with his study on 20th-century Maltese artists Willie Apap (1918–1970) and Emvin Cremona (1919–1987). We would explore here how paintings affirming Catholic religious

faith influenced artists in the 12th century as well as today. 'Sacred Art', in a traditional figurative idiom, continued to hold sway deep into the 20th century. See, for instance, Willie Apap's 'Benedizione' in the same national collection.[3]

Issues concerning representations and the Church, including legacies of Eurocentric representations of the 'Other' in the popular imagination, bring to mind another important site, arguably the most attractive site for visitors to Valletta. It is a place not solely for the appreciation of the union of all arts in the Baroque idiom but also for stimulating cultural debate and contestation. The reference here is of course to St John's Co-Cathedral, formerly the conventual Church of the Order of St John which ruled Malta for almost 300 years, turning some of its sites into beacons of Baroque splendour, while also providing impressive fortifications. The Church is of course heralded for its baroque ostentation where painted vault, carved walls and marble tombs on the ground constitute an impressive ensemble. It is renowned internationally for this and for works by Caravaggio (1571–1610), Mattia Preti (1613–1699), and sculptures by Alessandro Algardi (1598–1654), among others, not to mention a fine set of Flemish tapestries from the loom of Judecos de Vos based on designs by Rubens and other Flemish greats. We would argue that, in addition to all these, this church constitutes an ideal space for a critical reading of a country's much-heralded artistic heritage. Often reflected in this patrimony is an unmistakably eurocentric, masculinist (male-aggrandizing) and racist politics of representation which, though calling for an historicist interpretation of events, can still prey on popular sensibilities. We refer, for instance, to the representation of the Saracen 'other' in sculptures and carvings. Alterity is here rendered 'exotic', often in a highly-exaggerated manner. The figures concerned become an integral part of the ostentatious Baroque setting. What effects does this orientalising representation have on the popular ('collective'?) memory, adding to legends regarding Saracen invasions of our islands in the past? This has become part and parcel of popular lore,[4] while also having contributed to certain unsophisticated approaches to writing history reflected in school textbooks until recently. The situation is exacerbated by and has possibly contributed to contemporary media Islamophobic representations. Recent projects focusing on providing a 'multi-vocal' (Hodder 2008: 196) approach when presenting archaeological heritage such as Muslim tombstones at Rabat (Barbara 2013), can be instructive in this regard. Relics of past affluence, for the few and not the many, as with St John's, and other historical remnants of bygone Malta, offer opportunities for a dialectical confrontation between past and present for a democracy which, in the words of Jacques Derrida, is 'still to come' (Derrida in Borriadori 2004: 121)[5] – a democracy always in the making, predicated on understanding others through genuine dialogue. In this regard, the critical questions raised turn such an artistic gem of a place into a site for resistance to age-old hegemonic concepts and modes of (mis)-representation. How can museums generate awareness and debates around the politics of human disposability?

Churches such as St John's Co-Cathedral and many others, not least one situated a few metres away, raise another issue. This is the Church of St Paul's Shipwreck, one of the three parishes in Valletta situated in an area which has historically constituted the heart of Malta's merchant capital class. It contains a fine baroque processional statue of St Paul by the acclaimed 17th-century sculptor Melchiore Gafà (1636–1667), regarded by the English Art historian, H. D. Molesworth (1965) as one of the genre's prominent exponents.[6] It also boasts other works of immense artistic value including ornate silverware. St Paul's Church is well

known for its rich collection of silverware, very much tied to families within the surrounding community, as is the case with much of the silverware in churches throughout the Maltese Islands. This silverware is annually placed on public display on the eve of the feast-day which falls on 10th February. This presents an opportunity to raise important and disturbing questions regarding the politics of disposability.

Once again bearing Eduardo Galeano's (2009) work in mind, we would question the provenance of the gold and silver, the role of slavery in this context, and the subjugation and extermination of thousands of indigenous people and imported slaves which occurred in the process of extracting mineral resources from the mines of Protosì in present day Bolivia, other parts of Latin America, and elsewhere. Early forms of mining for these resources led to entombment (mentioned also by Marx in *Capital* Vol. 3), death, and disabilities resulting, for instance, from the use of mercury. Moreover, Seville is the city that housed the strong-room (*Casa de Contratación*) for the gold and silver that came to Spain from Latin America through the ports of Cadiz. In fact, large portions of precious mineral resources were shipped to Northern countries whose banks had a hold over Spain because of debts incurred, and this contributed significantly to Europe's economic development: 'The Spaniards owned the cow, but others drank the milk' (Galeano 2009: 23).

There is no evidence to date that the silver on display at St Paul's or St John's and that of other churches in Malta and Gozo derived from this terrible human carnage, one of the most brutal forms of 'Otherising' known in history. Nevertheless, any exposition of gold and silver in museums, churches (notably the Seville Cathedral and its gold 'Retablo Mayor' with 48 panels ironically depicting the life of Christ) sends shivers down our spine, especially after having read Galeano's work. How many indigenous were killed and maimed in the extraction of the resources? How many, as intimated by Galeano, were killed by their mothers, like Seth in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, in order to be spared such an ordeal? Once again critical museum pedagogues may avail themselves of these artefacts to raise questions concerning who was – and still is – deemed worthy of living and of being exterminated, thus working to link the past and present in a dialectical manner. The same way of thinking that led the conquistadors to dispose of indigenous lives many years ago persists today among those who exterminate humans considered 'other' in many ways; from those who are abandoned to suffer persecution, to natives scythed down in the Amazon and elsewhere, victims of speculative Capitalism at its most rapacious, to innocent people bombed in their cities for different and often dubious reasons, to those fleeing wars and poverty who are allowed to perish in the Sahara desert or the waters of the Mediterranean. It is the same Conquistador legacy of thinking all the way. Displays such as those in our churches, dating back to times that coincide with the Hispanic imperial 'booty' years, as mentioned by Max Weber (Weber 1958: 20),[7] should make us reflect on this reality, still a contemporary one. Critical pedagogy differs from more conventional educational experiences in museums insofar as it focuses on not only precious 'things of beauty' but more importantly the tragic and violent histories that lurk beneath them.

Musueums as Popular Public Sites

Institutions, we have argued, are not monolithic and this certainly applies to museums. While museums can play a part in cementing cultural hegemony, they can also contain some of the seeds for resisting and renegotiating hegemonic relations. Like schools, museums are culturally selective, often de-contextualizing artefacts by extricating them from their original surroundings,

while, at the same time, rendering the mundane monumental. In de-contextualising artefacts, they make them alien to people who would often enjoy them in their original surroundings. A Preti painting in a Roman Catholic Church (e.g. the Martyrdom of St Lawrence at Birgu Parish Church or a representation of St Catherine at the Żurrieq parish) is an object of devotion and a source of communal pride among the common folk of the locality. It can, on the other hand, appear alien to them in an art gallery setting (English and Mayo 2012: 103).[8]

Museums can, however, be conceived of the way Paulo Freire, Henry A. Giroux, Antonia Darder, Michael W. Apple and other critical pedagogues conceive of schools and other institutions – *sites of contestation* and *reconstruction*. In studies with colleagues Bernard Cauchi, and, more recently, Leona English, we focused on specific types of museums, notably ethnographic and also maritime museums. One of our studies (Borg *et al.* 2013) deals with Malta's National Maritime Museum, which is located in a region closely connected to the country's maritime history, the city of Birgu. The museum is surrounded by a community that includes elderly members who, in their younger years, earned their living at sea at a time when a substantial part of the country's economy revolved around the British naval presence in Malta.

Besides providing an account of its permanent exhibition, we also explore possibilities for this museum to develop into a popular public place. Doing so would mean embracing the voices of the subaltern and not only those of dominant groups. The latter are typically reflected in memorabilia, models, and uniforms belonging to the time of either the ruling Order of St John or the colonizing British occupational force. We argue that one should accord space to the 'universe of knowledge' of common folk who engage in recreational pursuits and specific forms of creative cultural production (manifestations of Gramsci's notion of the 'popular creative spirit'?) that can be traced back to the surrounding maritime cultural milieu. We suggest, for instance, that ample space be accorded to representations connected with the popular *regatta.* The *regattas* are rowing contests held on 8th September and 31th March, both national feast days. They are events that capture the popular imagination in the country's harbour area.

Among other things, our work proposes the use of recent technology to capture the oral popular history of this region, thus giving prominence to the voices of those who for too long have been immersed in what Freire might call the 'culture of silence'. This approach would render the site a decolonizing space. Oral history offers great opportunities for capturing the authentic voice of the seafaring community that traditionally belonged to the localities surrounding the Malta Maritime Museum. The community where the Museum is situated provides an invaluable wealth of real Maritime experiences (Borg *et al*. 2008: 105), and it has been heartening to see this issue constituting the basis of contemporary cultural productions such as the 'Lore of the Sea' project[9] in collaboration with the artist collective Rubber Bodies or the *'Qatt ma ninsa'* (I'll never forget)[10] community theatre project, involving popular recollections, around Birgu.

Furthermore, the display, concerning what was for several years, the major source of livelihood in this region and in the country, namely the Dockyard, is also found lacking when it comes to the affirmation and representation of subaltern popular voices. The Dockyard's employees were, for several years, the nearest thing the country had to an industrial working class. While the role of the Dockyard workers is immersed in the history of Maltese class struggle and labour politics, much of this history has been concealed or sanitized in the display.

There is little concerning the role of women as part of the seafaring community. Such examples include the experience of poverty and destitution resulting from intermittent work, widowhood caused by tragic deaths, solitude as a result of the male spouse's long trips at sea, washing sailors' clothes for a pittance and at piece rate, religious vows for safe return of spouses and offspring, prostitution (to serve the garrison's needs), and so on (Borg & Mayo 2010: 39; English & Mayo 2012: 104).

These are just a few of the suggestions that emerge from our research concerning museums that are conceived of as sites of cultural politics, a museum that resists and challenges dominant class-based and colonial narratives. This museum, more than the others discussed in this essay, presents opportunities for greater communal representation and reaching out, as well as communities *reaching into* the museum itself. Resistance and renewal would thus become features of such a cultural repository of subjugated knowledges.

In this regard, we feel that the one type of museum which needs to emerge in the various localities of Malta and Gozo and which can be truly representative of different cultures existing within their surrounding communities, would be the *Community* or *People's* museum. Such a museum is conspicuous by its absence in Malta. A museum about the city of Valletta is being developed at the refurbished Fort St Elmo. One hopes that it will eventually begin to reflect the lives of ordinary citizens and not simply those who ruled the islands from their position of privilege, colonial, ecclesiastical or other. It would hopefully encourage reflections on life in the different quarters throughout the city and should be complemented by similar museums in other localities throughout Malta and Gozo, exemplars of 'history from below' that can enjoy wide communal ownership. Local councils should play an important role in setting up a community or people's museum. There should also be budgetary provisions for this proposed cultural development which would move hand in hand with the development, by the same council, of community cultural and educational projects. It is these museums that would hold out the promise of having truly popular sites of cultural resistance, contestation and renewal. There is however a constant battle to be fought, against monopolization (by a select few), ossification and exclusionary 'social capital' that might well foreground the interests of some and marginalise the interests of many others. A museum of this type is overdue. If rendered dynamic and genuinely inclusive, it would serve as an antithesis to the dominant narratives encountered in the surviving traditional Maltese museum milieu. Equally overdue are a comprehensive 'Crafts museum' (although this would rekindle the old fine arts/crafts debate and arguments regarding whether there is cause for separation or juxtaposition) and a 'National popular portrait gallery'.

In the latter case, this museum would subvert the traditional elitism of these types of galleries by representing people from all walks of life and cultural activity. Such activities would range from sport to rock music placed alongside portraiture of the traditional kind, rendering the museum into a genuine mosaic of Maltese society past and present.[11] Such a museum would appeal to the interests of local and foreign visitors alike. Sketches such as Debbie Caruana Dingli's water colour depictions of an intense looking football figure, Kenny Dalglish 'in the dug out' (on the pitch's sidelines) or a smug rock front-man, like Freddie Mercury, would help render this a truly popular spectacle, hence an international and national popular portrait gallery. The key operative word here is 'popular' to render such a portrait display devoid of its traditionally restrictive 'elitist' connotations. It would be a museum which, once again, resists, contests and serves to transform narratives surrounding citizenship,

public memory and who is worthy of dignified representation. These types of effort can help the museum contribute to the ongoing development of a substantive 'national-popular' democratic public sphere.

Notes

1. Evarist Bartolo (1993), present Minister of Education and Employment, raised this issue in his preface to an edition of Ġwann Mamo's (1993) social satirical novel *Ulied in-Nanna Venut fl-Amerika* (Grandmother Venut's Children in the USA), an indictment of the mass poverty that led many to emigrate to far-off lands in search of employment.
2. He is reported to have blamed, on internet postings, Europe's left-wing parties for destroying the continent's Christian heritage by allowing mass immigration of Muslims. CBS News 18th February 2013 http://www.cbsnews.com/news/a-look-back-at-the-norway-massacre/ Accessed 11th April 2015.
3. One can be *for* or *against* but not *without* the Catholic Church in contemporary Maltese art (cf. contributions to Vella, 2008).
4. See the Malta chapter in the European Network Against Racism (ENAR) report on racism in Europe for 2011/12. Gauci & Pisani, 2012.
5. Reproduced in Giroux, 2014: 144.
6. Gafà, who died young at 31, has works at the Bode Museum in Berlin, the Fogg Museum at Harvard University, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, NYC, Palazzo Venezia, Rome, the Hermitage St Petersburg and many other places, including Roman and Peruvian churches, besides private collections (Sciberras 2006). There are works by him at Rabat, Mdina and in the Fine Arts collection being transfered to MUŻA.
7. Capitalist adventurers whose 'activities were predominantly of an irrational and speculative character, or directed to acquisition by force, above all the acquisition of booty, whether directly in war or in the form of continuous fiscal booty by exploitation of subjects' (Weber, 1958: 20) … all this in contrast to the more methodical, calculating brand of Northern capitalism which suggests an 'elective affinity', as posed by Max Weber, with the Protestant ethic.
8. This can partly explain why, of the two Gafà brothers (Lorenzo 1638–1703, architect Melchiorre, 1636–1667, internationally acclaimed sculptor), it is Lorenzo who is given most prominence in their city of birth, Birgu, despite his relative international obscurity compared to Melchiorre's standing. It was Lorenzo after all who designed the St Lawrence Church, now parish and formerly Conventual church of the Knights, and the Santa Scolastica monastery church close by. There is no single work attributed to Melchiorre in the city and, unlike Lorenzo, he does not have a single plaque to his name.
9. In the words of the collective it is 'A project merging art, history, and site together to create novel new experiences with Sea ... a two part event, encompassing an exclusive tour and the dramatised performance itself, that is orientated around 5 artifacts from the Museum's reserve collection. The performance takes the artifacts from the reserve collection and places them inside of its narratives. Narratives that have been devised and scripted from facts and recounts of stories salvaged by the curator of the Maritime Museum.' From the collective's website: *http://www.rubberbodiescollective.com/lore-of-the-sea.html* Accessed 24th December 2015.
10. This community theatre project is described on the relevant website thus: 'Ten young actors from TMYT (Teatru Manoel Youth Theatre) spend two months discovering a multitude of stories related by the general public during Qatt ma Ninsa – Life at Sea, stories that make up the character of this very special city. The resulting performance weaves everyday stories and historical fact into the imaginary narrative of four characters who fall in and out of love, meet their friends, families and ancestors, tell stories from their past and share their hopes and fears. This narrative journey into Birgu's imaginary past takes the shape of a promenade performance, leading audiences around Birgu's historical sites, where its long and diverse history, its maritime and military links, its stories,

troubles and victories can still be seen in the facades and streets.' : http://valletta2018.org/cultural-programme/qatt-ma-ninsa-birgu/#sthash.oSjrjjgb.dpuf Accessed 24th December 2015.

11. Photos such as those which greeted visitors on entry to Valletta, several years back, would find their place here.

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