
ASPECTS OF BRITISH COLONIAL POLICIES AND MALTESE PATTERNS OF BEHAVIOUR

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In this essay an attempt is made to relate some aspects of Maltese social life to the policies implemented by the British Colonial Administration. The emphasis is on economic, political and religious institutions. The aim is to provide a sociological interpretation of certain processes and patterns of behaviour as these may relate to certain historical events. The evidence for these events is drawn from published secondary sources. Therefore in these respects, at least, there is no claim for originality. Nor does this account present a comprehensive assessment of the extent of British colonial impact on Malta's socio-economic life. Important areas which were deeply influenced by the exercise of colonial power structure, like education, health and sanitation are barely touched upon or simply mentioned in passing. Certain concepts like that of "elites" or "culture" which are widely used in this essay are intended as usually understood by sociologists. Thus the former refers to a political, economic or status minority which may be entrenched at the top of a society, group, or other social category whether this is openly democratic or not. The latter refers to the ideas, values and norms influencing social behaviour and defining inter-relations rather than simply to any artistic or literary heritage.

The period of British rule over Malta, stretching for a century and a half, is highly significant because during this time many characteristic aspects of Maltese social, political and economic life became firmly established. Undoubtedly the island experienced many upheavals during that period. Yet in some important respects the British simply continued filling a role which had been left vacant after the Knights' departure. And, ironically, the Maltese leaders themselves, who had protested strongly against the Order's return, expected Britain to play that role. True they also expected Britain to safeguard their interests, to revive the economy and to grant some form of representative rights.¹ But essentially they expected Britain to act as "*il piu' paterno dei governi*" and in this sense recognized the British king as their sovereign. For this reason British colonial administrators found little difficulty in suppressing any ideas of self-government and civil liberties which may have been nourished by a few 'political agitators'.² As a result the important

1. *Dichiarazione dei Diritti degli Abitanti di Malta e Gozo* (Malta 1802).

2. As the Maltese leader Portelli submitted to the Austin and Lewis Commission (1836): "The Maltese under the government of the Order of St. John of Jerusalem were accustomed to repress the sentiments of liberty..... and were restricted by the

changes which had been taking place in Europe, inspired by the French Revolution and the nationalistic movements of the period, did not gain ground within Maltese society — apart from a few of its urban and intellectual elites — until many decades later. Although the Order had been swept away precisely by these changes and ideologies, the new colonial administration which replaced it succeeded in establishing itself into the “old role” because it rallied the support of the main traditional social institution — the Maltese Church.

Towards the end of the Knights' rule, some ideas of revolt had actually found their way into Malta — following the usual route for novel ideas — from abroad. These ideas had been an unmistakable by-product of the French revolution. In fact, when Napoleon threatened to take over the Island, not a shot was fired in defence of the Order's “rights”. A Maltese delegation made it quite clear to the Order that they had no intention of resisting the French.³ However, as the French had disregarded their initial promises to safeguard the Maltese religion and “privileges” so soon after their take-over in 1798, the Maltese naturally felt that they had merely exchanged one form of despotism for an even worse one. Indeed, the Order's rule, though absolutist, seemed paternalistic by comparison for, after all, the Knights had brought prosperity and security into the Island and they had been generous with their employees and proteges. When the French authorities in Malta started imposing heavy taxes and despoiling the churches so as to make up for revenue lost after the Order's departure, some reaction from the local leaders was inevitable.⁴ It is well-known how, with the help of British, Portuguese and Neapolitan vessels, a blockade was organized on the French garrison who had locked themselves up in Valletta. They eventually surrendered and some Maltese leaders promptly asked for “British protection”. It seems, in retrospect, that these Maltese leaders had naively nourished unrealistic expectations from the British. Malta became officially a British “protectorate”

general system of absolute governments.” quoted by H.I. Lee, *Malta 1813-1914: A Study in Constitutional and Strategic Development* (Valletta, Progress Press, 1972), p.12. As Canon Don Francesco Saverio Caruana, one of the Maltese Generals during the French Blockade informed the gathering of the Assembly in Mdina on 4 September, 1798, “the ancient flag of Malta was nothing more than an historical reminiscence while what Malta then needed was the protection and aid of an existing power.” Anon, “Why Malta Chose Britain”, *Times of Malta*, 25 June, 1976, p.15 and 26 June, 1976, pp.6-7. Such an attitude dominated the pattern of fatalistic dependence to British paternalistic colonialism for many decades afterwards.

3. B.W. Blouet, *The Story of Malta* (London, Faber, 1972,) p.156.

4. The church, whose interests were directly threatened by the French, played an important role in this revolt. As a result, probably for the first time since the Monroy uprising the Maltese of all social classes were united for a common, national cause. During this short period all the social divisions which had emerged under the Knights, were bridged. However, they re-appeared soon after — only to be exploited to the full by the British Imperial administrations.

through the Treaty of Paris in 1814 though Britain had really retained full control over the Island since 1800. The British initially hesitated as they were not sure of the value Malta had for them. Soon, however, they changed their minds and established on the Island an important defence base for their Mediterranean fleet and a centre for entrepot trade with Europe and the Eastern parts of their expanding empire. Therefore while it is generally true that the many changes which took place during the nineteenth century were mainly of a "quantitative" rather than a "qualitative" nature, it is also true to state that in many aspects of life the amount of "quantitative" changes was so much as to bring about, in sum, a radical or "qualitative" break with the past. They generally followed a pattern which had been established under the Knights — but at a much more accelerated pace. This was because the British, on their part, had very narrowly defined interests in Malta, namely, that of exploiting its strategic values.⁵ They sought to interfere into local affairs as little as possible — except, of course, when their strategic interests required such interference. Where it suited them, on "internal" matters, they very conveniently professed their liberal philosophy of "*laissez faire*". Yet as military efficiency often depended upon civilian compliance and cooperation, the colonial administration could not escape getting heavily involved in managing local affairs. In so doing they introduced various social and material reforms often against the opposition of the local "elites" and other sections of the population. Other innovations, particularly of an ideological and political kind, generally entered Malta later as a result of informal association between the Maltese and the British and continental persons they came into contact with or as a reaction to colonial policies rather than by the conscious design of the colonial administrators. These ranged from the demand for political autonomy to the setting up of trade unions and reformist political movements.

5 Actually Britain was initially slow in recognising Malta's strategic value. Even Nelson who was mainly instrumental in securing British dominion over it wrote in 1799: "To say the truth, the possession of Malta by England would be a useless and enormous expense; yet any expense should be incurred rather than let it remain in the hands of the French." Cf. Lee, *op.cit.* p.14. Subsequently, however Britain's decision to retain Malta was based upon a reappraisal of the Island as a fortress in imperial defence. "Such a role necessitated government by one who, unfettered by local obligations, was responsible to the Secretary of State alone". Lee *op.cit.* p.16. The 1811 Royal Commission stated that "the military authority should be free from all restraint in superceding the civil power whenever the security of the Island appeared to demand it". (*Ibid*). In the same vein, a century later, Joseph Chamberlain stated in 1902 in the House of Commons, Britain's interest in Malta in this way: "We hold Malta solely and entirely as a fortress essential to our position in the Mediterranean. Not as an ordinary colony but as a fortress..... In a fortress anything like open agitation against the Government is a thing that cannot be tolerated on the face of it." Quoted by H. Frenzo, *The Maltese Colonial Experience 1800-1964* (Valletta, Libyan Arab Cultural Institute, 1977), p.6 mimeo. See also Lee, *op.cit.* p.217.

Under the British, the Maltese population trebled in size — from about 100,000 in 1820 to about 330,000 in 1960.⁶ The geographical spread of the population shifted from the countryside to the urban and suburban areas around the harbours where about half of the population are now concentrated. The heavy dependence of the economy upon foreign sources continued to keep pace with the increase in population. The ability of government to provide direct and indirect employment became the determining factor in the living standard of the population as a whole. In fact this became another important tool at the disposal of the colonial administration through which it influenced the people's minds as it controlled their fortunes. This applied to civil servants, to industrial workers, and especially to those enlisted in the armed forces and in ancillary services. The enlargement of the dockyard around Cottonera to cater for British naval repairs on a large scale was a case in point. This establishment provided the largest, and until recent times a unique concentration of industrial workers in Malta. For that reason it also provided the "cradle of the Maltese workers' movement" — as it is popularly known. Frendo points out: "This fact is highly important in the country's social history during the colonial era, because the proletariat, on the whole, was favourably disposed towards the colonial regime, not so much because it agreed with its politics, but as a result of the fact that thousands of jobs were secured at a rate of pay which was not any worse, often rather better, than that paid to workers in private enterprise, on the farms, or indeed in the lower ranks of the Civil Service."⁷

The pattern of the British colonial policy in Malta was clearly indicated in the Royal Commission Report of 1812. The Commissioners decided that "The Maltese temperament was incompatible with an ordered system of representative government". Such a "conclusion" provided a convenient justification for colonial policy. Admittedly it was partly prompted by a first hand experience, by the Commissioners, of fundamental disagreements, intrigues and personal rivalries among the Maltese elites. But the memory of the effective, national resistance organized by them against the French was still vivid as to belie that conclusion. In any case, "complete authority" was to be vested in the Governor aided by a small advisory council made up of Maltese and Englishmen selected by him. The Commissioners also recommended that "The Roman Catholic faith was to be maintained and protected". In these respects the pattern applied in other British Crown colonies was to be followed here.⁸ The man appointed to establish this policy in Malta, Sir Thomas Maitland, had been singled out for the success of his "benevolent despotism" in Ceylon a few years previously. As Lee points out: "His governorship was ... a continuation of the benevolent despotism of

6. Since then it has remained roughly at the same level due to the general acceptance of family limitation and emigration.

7. H. Frendo, *En Route from Europe to Africa: Malta, Her People and History* (Malta, AZAD, 1978), p.4 mimeo.

8. Lee, *op.cit.* p.17.

the Grand Masters, but far superior to it as a system by reason of its efficiency and even less popular than it because of its essential lack of any real sympathy with the Maltese people.”⁹ He reorganized the civil administration and placed Englishmen at the head of every department. The Maltese were excluded “from all but the lowest offices”. As a result of such measures the latter “began to feel like strangers in their own country”.¹⁰ On their part the English officials were often accused of “arrogance”, “conceit”, “insolence” and of being ambitious of showing their authority (towards) all classes of people”.¹¹ The exclusion of Maltese from high positions in the military service and in the dockyard continued throughout the period of British rule and this provided a constant source of friction and resentment among some aspiring Maltese individuals,¹² though the majority were generally complacent and submissive.¹³ In the civil service, however, as a new “middle class” of educated Maltese gradually emerged, who had been socialized in the British style of government, who had developed pro-British loyalties and who could thus be relied upon to carry out acceptable policies, most of the administrative posts were handed over to them. It was, in fact, the development of such a “new middle class” — as distinct from the traditional “elite class” — which contributed to the emergence of rival political interests and parties in the latter half of the 19th century and which continued to dominate Maltese political life throughout the greater part of the twentieth century.

Maltese political and economic developments have never been so intricately bound together as under the period of British colonial administration.¹⁴ This resulted from their policy of retaining absolute control over

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9. *Ibid.*, p.18.
 10. *Ibid.*, p.19 and p.237. In a recent article, A.D. Smith has argued that the emergence of “nationalism” as a movement for autonomy in colonial territories “has been preceded by attempts to make the relevant ruling bureaucracy more scientific and effective.” As a result of the exclusion of local elites from these centralizing forces, they “furnish the chief recruits of the nationalist movement”. A.D. Smith, “The Diffusion of Nationalism: some Historical and Sociological Perspectives,” *British Journal of Sociology*, 1978, Vol. 29(2), pp.234-248. In Malta’s case this happened in the nineteenth century with the emergence of the Nationalist Party and after the failure of the Malta Labour Party’s integration proposals and the threat of Dockyard closure in 1958.
 11. *Ibid.*, p.19 and p.26.
 12. *Ibid.*, p.75: British recruits were officially considered to be “men of a superior class” to the Maltese. Even after a “Royal Fencible Regiment” was set up for Maltese recruits in 1825, it had an inferior establishment, pay, rations, and barrack accommodation to British forces stationed in Malta. *Ibid.*, p.76.
 13. Maitland actually disliked the “cowed servility” of the Maltese which was, ironically, provoked by the type of government he exercised over them.
 14. As Busuttill observes: “Malta’s economic history makes little sense unless incorporated into the history of her political life”. S. Busuttill, *Malta’s Economy in the Nineteenth Century* (Malta, Union Press, 1973), p.1. Yet Price (*op.cit*) fails to re-

the reins of government — ignoring the constant pleas for autonomy from any aspiring local political leaders. And this was made possible by the increasing dependence of the economy upon military expenditure. Such measures offered no stable and secure means of livelihood but fluctuated according to the political situation which prevailed internationally and the strategic decisions taken by the Colonial and War Offices in London. As Busuttill has pointed out: "The economy of the Maltese Islands under Britain took the form of an artificial cycle determined not by the vicissitudes of the market, but by the exigencies of military security. War marked the upswing of the Maltese economic cycle; the return of peace was always the harbinger of a downswing."¹⁵

Throughout most of the nineteenth and early part of the twentieth centuries the social condition of the population was very bad. It often verged on starvation. This was partly the result of a policy which, like Maitland's, "did not aim at securing the best interests of the Maltese, but of Britain in the fortress of Malta. Not primarily concerned with the effects of (such) policy on the people but with the results of it in maintaining a secure strategic base in the Mediterranean".¹⁶ This situation was officially acknowledged in the report of the 1838 Royal Commission who blamed the government for the poor state of affairs. "The islanders," the Commissioners reported, "were in a most miserable condition. Due to official policy, the educated among them were a handful. The nobles, formerly the backbone of Malta, were starving. The rest of the population fared even worse".¹⁷ The Commissioners strongly condemned the manner used by many of the Englishmen who ran the Island, whom they depicted as "vulgar, offensive types". Reforms, however, were not easy to implement. Not only was it difficult to raise any money through local taxation, but the Maltese elites often instinctively suspected that any reforms would hit them adversely by diminishing their incomes, power or prestige among the population. They thus fomented popular discontent and raised a public outcry against any reforms whether of a badly needed drainage system or of the equally ailing educational set-up. Such an opposition was generally aimed at extorting from the British government a measure of local autonomy by making Malta appear as ungovernable without their participation. In reality, however, the vast major-

alize this and maintains that Maltese politicians were generally involved in purely political and cultural issues.

15. S. Busuttill, *op. cit.*, p.1. This pattern was established from the very start of British rule. "Great prosperity had been experienced during the Napoleonic Wars, and with a period of peace the Island was faced inevitably with an economic depression". Lee, *op. cit.*, pp.39, 244. See also, C.A. Price, *Malta and the Maltese — A Study of Nineteenth Century Migration* (Melbourne, Georgian House, 1954), pp.109-112, 208-9. G. Mangion, "Per una Storia di Malta nel Secolo XIX", *Studia*, 1965.

16. Lee, *op. cit.* p.22.

17. Reported in Busuttill, *op. cit.* p.9.

city of the population was subservient and compliant. This often puzzled the British administrators and made potential leaders appear as isolated "agitators". In 1878, for instance, the Secretary of State, Sir M. Hicks-Beach, could only attribute "the absence of any complaint of oppressive taxation from the Maltese to their ignorance, when the burden of taxation did fall in undue proportion on the lower classes".¹⁸

Therefore the most common Maltese response to their powerlessness in the colonial situation was their "quiescence and fatalism, the sense of inferiority and dependence arising out of the paternal tradition" which has impressed several foreign observers.¹⁹ Among the most deep rooted Maltese values governing their daily lives are those of sobriety and thrift. The successive periods of relative prosperity and extreme depression which have characterized Malta's economic fortunes for centuries, have brought home the importance of "saving for a rainy day".²⁰ In adopting these attitudes they were certainly influenced by Church teachings. Yet, as Price observes, "when it came to a question of the 8th Commandment, poverty often defeated Canon Law in the struggle which took place in the minds of Maltese faced with complete destitution".²¹ Thefts became so common that police protection and legal redress became practically useless. Offenders often threatened litigants and prosecutors with even worse retributions. Price concludes: "The Maltese may have been quiescent vis-a-vis his government and social order; he was certainly not quiescent as regards his neighbour's property".²² During the present century the police have become better equipped and organized so that their control over criminal activities is effective. Besides the widespread prosperity and social services have reduced the need for widespread thefts. Public begging which was also widely practised in the nineteenth century has almost completely disappeared.²³

Another characteristic Maltese response to their powerlessness, however, is still very much in evidence. This refers to the constant grumbling and other informal expressions of discontent which one hears in daily conversations on almost any topic of public interest. The Maltese have retained an unrealistic image of what to expect from Government partly as a relic of

18. *Ibid.*

19. M. Miegé, *Histoire de Malte* (Paris, 1840), Vol.1, p.168. H. Bowen-Jones, *et.al.*, *op.cit.*, pp.112, 334. Price *op.cit.*, p.19.

20. The results of a survey conducted by the author in 1976 show that even nowadays the traditional Maltese virtues of "ghaqał" and "bżuliġa" are still widely held by Maltese workers.

21. Price, *Ibid.*

22. Price, *Ibid.* A detailed account of the way bands of thieves were organized was described by the Royal Commission of 1836.

23. The official numbers of "professional" mendicants were listed in the early censuses published in the 19th century. Price, *op.cit.*, reports that in the mid-1830s there were as many as 2500 beggars reported in the villages alone. See also Lee, *op.cit.*, pp.45-46.

their past experiences under colonial rule. These expectations have also been encouraged by the attitudes of local politicians in their electioneering practices since the setting up of self-government in 1921. As a result, the concept of "il-Gvern" (the Government) is often "vaguely referred to by many Maltese — particularly those living in rural areas — as a remote centre of authority which is endowed with every conceivable power and which is held responsible for many economic and social problems".²⁴ In the context of such unrealistic expectations coupled with the absence of any formal channels of protest or representation, informal grumbling takes an added significance. The British colonial administrators taking a sarcastic, superior view had labelled it "Maltese gemgem" and their successors, the Maltese politicians in government, are equally puzzled by it.²⁵

The Maltese language itself was obviously an excellent medium for grumbling against the foreign colonizers unable to speak it. This way it has served as a safe outlet and a defence against foreign intrusions. More recently it has also served as a positive national rallying symbol through which what is typically Maltese can find its true expression.²⁶

In times of distress, particularly during times of war, outbreaks of cholera in the nineteenth century and other national disasters, the church usually came to the rescue as "the ultimate protector of the population".²⁷ Parish priests, in particular, were the undisputed leaders on the village level and anyone who aspired to local leadership needed their support. On its part, the Church like the other traditional elites, tended to suspect that any reforms introduced by the British administrators would intentionally or as a by-product, threaten its place in Maltese society. Accordingly it was easier for Britain to come to terms with the situation by maintaining good relations with the Church as the only powerful organization which could offer any effective opposition to their rule.²⁸ They also chose to ignore, as best

24. Bowen-Jone, *et.al.*, *op.cit.*, pp.158,344.

25. For example: Reno Calleja MP: "Undoubtedly the rule of the present (MLP) Government has confirmed that the Maltese people are professional grumblers." "Maltese Gemgem," in *Il-Hajja*, 9 February, 1973. See also: E. Mifsud, "Who are the Grumblers?," in *L-Oriżont*, 29 November, 1975. A. Darmanin S.J., "Grumbling," in *Problemi ta' Llum*, March, 1978, pp.79-83. Boissevain, *op.cit.*, (1975) p.7. Lee, *op.cit.*, (1972) p.21.

26. Gullick, "*Language and Sentiment in Malta*", pp.1-12; p.10. Cf. also C.J.M.R. Gullick, "Issued in the Relationship Between Minority and National Language: Maltese reaction to Non-Maltese Speakers of Maltese." Paper delivered at 1975 meeting of the Society for Applied Anthropology, mimeo. E.L. Zammit, "Adult Education: The Role of R.U.M.", *Journal of Educational Affairs*, Vol.1, No.1, pp.40-45; p.43.

27. Busuttil, *op.cit.*, p.9.

28. As the maintenance of cordial relations rested on mutual consultations which to a large extent depended on the personality of the local Bishop, the British were keenly interested whenever the succession of a new Bishop had to be decided. The various complications which this choice involved are illustrated by D. Fenech,

they could, any political agitation from other quarters and to appeal directly to the people's material interests. Any changes which they felt were necessary were usually presented in the name of "progress". This is particularly evidenced by the long political struggle stretching for half a century to introduce certain changes in the educational medium of instruction — particularly in supplanting Italian, the traditional language of the Church, law courts and the local elites, with English and Maltese. As Britain was a protestant country the Maltese Roman Catholic hierarchy was always on the alert against any hidden attempts at anglicising Malta. The other local elites had enough evidence to prompt their resistance to any attempt to supplant their traditional privileges by a new, pro-English middle-class which they saw emerging.

Eventually two camps were set against each other in a long-drawn out battle which went far deeper than the original issues warranted. The language dispute symbolised what H. Frenco has typified an opposition between the "Colonial dynamics" and the "patriotic consensus". The former comprises the (a) domination of one society by another; (b) modernization of techniques and living styles; and (c) the gradual assimilation of the colonized social, political and economic structures into those of the colonial country. The latter comprises (a) a demand for political and social autonomy; (b) the assertion of traditional values and structures, and (c) organized resistance often passive, through all means available including alignment with other foreign powers and symbols as a means of leverage to the overriding weight of the coloniser.²⁹

The type of "resistance" which was commonly adopted by the average Maltese, as already stated, generally avoided a direct confrontation with the overriding powers of the coloniser. It was only on those rare occasions when a convergence of various issues was evident that some mass protests, or even riots, could be organized.³⁰

For the most part the British administration managed to keep issues apart and usually to manipulate or exploit situations where the interests of one section of the population were opposed to those of another. A case in point is the "language controversy"³¹ in which the country became po-

The Making of Archbishop Gonzi (Malta, Union Press, 1976).

29. H. Frenco, *The Formation of Maltese Political Parties* (D.Phil. Thesis, Oxford, 1976), *L-Evoluzzjoni ta' Partiti Politiċi fil-Gżejjer Maltin 1880-1926* (Floriana Cultural Institute, 1977) Mimeo.

30. The most spectacular riots occurred in 1919 when several sections of the population, each of which had its own particular grudge, joined forces in spontaneous demonstrations in the streets of Valletta. Some Maltese were killed and many wounded when the British soldiers opened fire on the crowd. These riots are generally credited with constraining Britain to grant a more liberal constitution to Maltese representatives democratically elected in 1921. Cf. Frenco, *Ir-Rivoluzzjoni Maltija tal-1919* (Malta, A.C. Aquilina & Son, 1970).

31. *Vide* p.42, *Supra*.

larized into two opposed camps engaged in a political confrontation over issues which on the face of it appear as having a relatively minor importance. It is not necessary here to enter into the detailed ramification of this prolonged dispute.³² What matters is that the real though latent issues overshadowed by this controversy developed into a bitter politico-religious crisis in the Thirties and again in the Sixties when different political and religious leaders were on the scene. These crises followed the entrance into the political arena and the temporary coalition between two representative parties, one with its roots in the "working class" and the other among the "new middle class". Both of these "classes" had come into existence as a direct result of colonial policies in Malta.³³ Frendo has shown how this "party" had its foundations laid in the nineteenth century beginning with Sigismondo Savona's "Reform Party" in 1891 and has evolved through various splits and new foundations into the present-day Malta Labour Party.³⁴

Likewise the present-day Nationalist Party has its roots in the "Partito Antiriformista" founded in 1884 by Fortunato Mizzi — having also passed through various permutations. In fact, this polarization between two political camps had occurred as early as the 1830's and the issue concerned the best way of dealing with the British colonial masters.³⁵ The "anti-reformist" side opposed any social and economic reforms introduced by the British Administration until constitutional liberties had been granted in advance. The "reformist" side was ready to compromise autonomy on humanitarian and utilitarian grounds. The "Anti-reformist" or "Nationalist" movement was constituted of the traditional, professional elites often in alliance with the Church hierarchy both of whom feared that any "reforms" would eventually remove their privileged status in Maltese society. They rallied behind them the majority of the local population who held them in high esteem. Thus, apart from combating the professional elites, whose privileges it sought to curtail, the "reformist" movement became successively involved in a bitter clash with the Maltese Church authorities. Such a clash was inevitable in view of the powerful, central position which the Church enjoyed in Maltese society and the new aspirants to local power had to re-define its jurisdiction and limit its influence over men's lives.

32. Cf. *Esposizione Documentata della Questione Maltese*, (Tipografia Poliglotta Vaticana, 1930). E. Dobie, *Malta's Road to Independence* (University of Oklahoma Press, 1967), pp.38-107. A brief account is in Austin, *Malta and the End of Empire* (F. Cass & Co., 1971) pp.7-20 and in Boissevain, 1965, pp.9-12.

33. The "new middle class" was composed of pro-British importers, contractors and traders who flourished on the presence of the large garrison stationed in Malta and also of the civil servants and other employees in the civil administration. The "working class" was mainly composed of drydocks and other Admiralty employees who constituted the bulk of the industrial working force around the Grand Harbour.

34. Frendo, *The Formation of Maltese Political Parties*.

35. Lee, *op.cit.*, ch. 5 pp.8-109.

Eventually the "reformist" movement was also bound to conflict with its previous ally, protector and source of its inspiration — the British colonial overlords.³⁶

The role played by the Church in Maltese politics in a natural consequence of the central part it plays in social life as a whole. As such it merits further consideration. Dench maintains that under the British, the Maltese "national church became projected into a new and more significant position as defender of the faithful population against an alien system of government."³⁷ It can also be said that this role had essentially been played by the Maltese church for several centuries under the Knights, long before the arrival of the British.³⁸ Yet, the replacement of the Catholic Knights by the Protestant British added a new dimension. It created a precarious situation with the local church becoming relatively isolated from the dominant colonial administration. It has been shown that the British interest in Malta was limited to its strategic values. Once this had been safeguarded, Britain was quite uninterested in Maltese domestic affairs. It even offered the local Church a measure of protection in exchange for its promotion of the people's loyalties towards their earthly sovereign. In other areas of social and economic life, however, British strategic interests inhibited local initiatives. These might have tampered with the centralized efficiency of a "fortress" administration. As most other areas of Maltese life — vital areas like economic and political activities — were beyond the control of the local population, "the energy and interest of the Maltese seem to have become displaced, as so often happens among powerless minorities, into religious activity and contemplation."³⁹ Accordingly the people's interests were concentrated on religious symbols which became the object of personal and collective pride and satisfaction. Not only was it important to save one's soul through leading a good life according to established moral principles and participation in religious ritual as presented by the Catholic Church anywhere, it also became important to contribute one's share to the parish church's physical aspect and its cult of patron saints which are celebrated everywhere with great pomp annually to this day. Class conflicts and political rivalries were likewise sublimated under an unending competition between "*partiti tal-festa*", often in the same village, each celebrating its own patron saint in the

36. After the failure of the MLP proposal to integrate Malta with the UK in 1958, the party has adopted an anti-British policy. Cf. Mintoff, "Isolation is no answer", *Times*, 1968.

37. G. Dench, *Maltese in London* (London, Routledge, 1975) p.11.

38. As David Martin has observed "a nation denied self-determination by another dominating society will either seek sources of religious differentiation or use the pre-existing religious difference as a rallying point." D. Martin, in G. Walters (ed), *Religion in a Technological Society* (UK, Bath University Press, 1968) p.35. Cf. M. Vassallo, *Religious Symbolism in a Changing Malta in Contribution to Mediterranean Studies* (Malta University Press, 1977), pp.232-249.

39. G. Dench, *op.cit.*, p.11.

best way it can.⁴⁰ Boissevain has also demonstrated how local rivalries over the cult of saints are often intermingled with national political contests. This is because a number of political and economic functions have been developed by the Church in the absence of secular structures which would not emerge due to the colonial situation.⁴¹ Moreover, parish priests and other priests often acted as their parishioners' patrons and intermediated for them with civil authorities and other influential persons.⁴² Thus the Maltese Church, even more than it did during the Knights' rule, assumed the role of national protector of the local population, represented their interests, provided leisure and other expressive pursuits, ordered people's lives and commanded their loyalties. As Dench has concluded: "Much of the passionate interest in religion displayed in Malta has therefore been escapist, and the alleged fatalism of the islanders simply a pursuit of spiritual goals rather than material — over which the Maltese individually and collectively enjoyed so little control... The central position of the church has for generations channelled political debate into essentially symbolic and unrealistic issues.⁴³ It is in this context that the language dispute and the political-religious controversies of the Thirties and the Sixties need to be interpreted. For the emergence of a new "reformist" movement initially implicitly and later explicitly challenged the traditional place occupied by the Church in Maltese social life. Ultimately, however, the Church was led into assuming this role by the circumstances of colonialism which imposed strict controls in certain vital areas of social life and adopted an indulgent, permissive attitude in others. The Maltese had been effectively reduced to a minority status in their own country. In such a situation, "a mixture of petulant irresponsibility and fatalism was a perfectly rational response to British paternalism."⁴⁴

Thus paradoxically there was, under the British rule, a parallel development of both centralization and localism. Such opposite tendencies are still evident today in many spheres of Maltese social life. The 1973-1980 Development Plan, for instance, stresses that "Malta has a greater degree of social cohesion and solidarity" than other countries but also acknowledges the existence of deep internal divisions.⁴⁵ Such contrasting statements

40. J. Boissevain, *Hal Farrug: A Village in Malta* (New York, 1969), ch.7.

41. Boissevain, 1965.

42. Patronage, in fact, is one of the basic institutions in Maltese society — as it is in other Mediterranean societies — and usually expresses an image of society in religious terminology with God on top as the Supreme Patron followed, interrelated strata of patrons and clients in a hierarchy. Cf. M. Kenn, *A Spanish Tapestry* (London, 1961). Boissevain has elaborated a model of Maltese social interaction based upon friendship networks of patrons and clients. Cf. *Friends of Friends* (Oxford, Blackwell, 1974).

43. G. Dench, *op.cit.*, pp.12-13.

44. *Ibid.*, p.13.

45. *Development Plan for Malta 1973-1980* (Valletta, OPM, 1974) p.205.

about the Maltese social structure are commonly made and manifest dual normative standards of reference. The "ideal" and the "real" are worlds apart.⁴⁶ It can be argued that Maltese culture offers a typical example of what Parkin has called the "subordinate value system" in relation to the "dominant value system" implanted by successive generations of colonial domination. "The subordinate class tends to have two levels of normative reference, the abstract and the situational... The generation milieu of these values is the local underclass community."⁴⁷ Not only were the Maltese powerless in tackling their own problems but they often lacked any alternative solutions of their own other than those imposed upon them "from above". They thus felt compelled by sheer necessity and the general circumstances of colonial presence to adapt themselves even if this implied the transgression of traditional norms. Whenever this happened, however, it was accompanied by strong public condemnations from local religious sources — as a means of safeguarding the "well-being of society" in general and of traditional institutions in particular. The incidence of prostitution which is a common form of Maltese criminality at home and abroad is a typical example of the types of dual constraints confronted by many Maltese individuals.⁴⁸ Dench has attributed this notorious form of Maltese criminal behaviour in London to a "central dilemma in colonial Maltese society, revolving around the discrepancy between an extremely strict set of moral principles on sexual matters, and a practical reality of extensive prostitution in the Island, meeting the needs of the large garrison."⁴⁹ He argues that this situation particularly manifested to the Maltese "their dependent status and inability to control their own lives."⁵⁰

A less noticeable yet more important response to British colonialism on the part of Maltese individuals was the widespread resort to patronage. This practice has deep roots in Maltese society colouring social interactions at every level. Thus in spite of its widespread condemnation as a corrupt practice — giving some citizens an unfair advantage over others — everyone admits that it is arguably the most effective way to secure scarce resources ranging from a house to a telephone.⁵¹

46. Cf. E.L. Zammit, "Some Social Aspects of Maltese Development". Paper presented at a Seminar on "Development — The Maltese Experience", Ruskin College, Oxford and Young Socialist League, University of Malta, (April 1977).

47. Parkin, (1975) pp.94-95.

48. Zammit, (1971).

49. Dench, *op.cit.*, p.107.

50. *Ibid.*

51. "Patronage" or "clientelism" is, of course, a typical asymmetrical form of social relationship which often develops in situations of unequal access to scarce resources. Those who dispose of such resources put their dependents under a personal obligation, expect their esteem and services in return. While such relationships tend to predominate in Mediterranean and other "traditional" societies they are by no means confined to these. Recent reviews of such studies are found in: E. Gellner and J. Waterbury (eds.) *Patrons and Clients* (London, 1977) Duckworth & Co. and

In the colonial context, Malta itself was in the situation of a "client-state". Its economic and political dependence upon the "mother country" was well known. Internally it still incorporates a highly paternalistic set of social and religious institutions with a self-conscious system of patron-client relations challenged by a monopolistic and centralising politico-bureaucracy.⁵² In the situation which developed under British rule where most economic activities — including employment opportunities — were under their direct control,⁵³ the colonial administrators had at their disposal an unlimited supply of patronage potential. Unlike some other colonies, the local administration of the civil service has long been entrusted to Maltese personnel who readily followed the patronage pattern which had been firmly established since the times of the Knights. These bureaucrats/patrons therefore, joined the ranks of the traditional professional, clerical and other influential persons whose clientele resided in the villages or their immediate localities. With the advent of representative government most of their power passed on to the elected deputies who needed the support of electors and had rather more to offer in return. To the clients, of course, patronage presents a possible way of coping with a generally difficult situation through a personal intervention with power holders. Patronage, of course, depends upon the inadequacy of formal institutional arrangement to provide for the needs of the powerless. From the colonial viewpoint, the availability of widespread resort to patronage— though offending their declared principles and official policies — served an important divisive function.⁵⁴ This it provided an important concomitant to a nominally "paternalist" policy.⁵⁵ The latter's is basically "a collective form of social organization" in which "all subordinates basically stand in the same relation to the paternalist."⁵⁶ The ideological basis which justifies paternalism as a manner of administration rests

J. Davies, *People of the Mediterranean: An Essay in Comparative Social Anthropology* (1977). Weingrod and Boissevain have shown the extension of patron-client relationships into the system of political parties. A. Weingrod, *Patrons, Patronage and Political Parties. Comparative Studies in Society and History* (1968), pp.377-400. Boissevain, *op.cit.*, (1965 and 1974).

52. Boswell, (1978) pp.1-2.

53. S. Busuttil, *op.cit.*

54. As Catanzaro and Reyneri have pointed out: "Polarization can generate conflicts only when a social group is in contact with another, the members of which have similar occupational income and social status. Where class conflicts do not occur, we have a ruthless individualistic struggle to enter the employment benefit and security system. R. Catanzaro and E. Reyneri, *Multiple Job Holding and Class Structure in a Southern Italian Town* (1978), p.8.

55. "The principle of benefits shows clearly one of the most important aspects of clientelistic associations: paternalism." M. Caciagli and F. Belloni *A Contribution to the Study of Clientelism: The New Clientelism of Southern Italy* (University of Malta, 1978), p.2.

56. N. Abercrombie and S. Hill, *Paternalism and Patronage* (in B.J.S. Vol 27, 1976), pp.413-429; p.414.

upon the care and relationships of parents towards their children in an ideal-type family and ultimately of God, the Divine Father of all men. This implies that "people tend to be treated as members of a group who share a similar position rather than as individuals who have unique relationships with the paternalist..... benefits become common to the whole group rather than varying from person to person, and the customary regulation of relationships develops for all."⁵⁷ Thus though in the Maltese situation paternalism and patronage were both essential tools for the colonial system, they ultimately militated against each other.

In recent years there have been various attempts by colonial and local Governments at reducing and possibly eliminating Malta's dependence upon paternalism or its "client state" once and for all. Ambitious investment and industrialization programmes were promulgated aimed at transforming the Maltese economy. This was the declared objective of a series of official reports and development plans since World War II.⁵⁸ These suggested ways of diversifying the economy in view of a succession of anticipated rundowns of British service establishments in Malta. Such measures brought about a heavy loss of foreign exchange, employment and other economic setbacks on Malta. For these reasons there was a general consternation and an antagonistic reaction in Malta each time such plans were effected. The development plans also aimed at raising the social living levels of the population to that of accepted western standards through education and the establishment of statal agencies to act as official brokers and cater for people's needs without recourse to personal favours.⁵⁹ This has been viewed by some ob-

57. Abercrombie and Hill, *op.cit.*, p.414.

58. In addition to five development plans covering from 1959 to 1971, the most important reports were: W. Woods, *Report on the Finances of the Government of Malta* (London HMSO 196, 1946). G.E. Schuster, *Interim Report on the Financial and Economic Structure of the Maltese Islands* (Malta, Government Printing Office, 1950). T. Balogh and D. Seers, *The Economic Problems of Malta* (Malta, Government Printing Office, 1955). W.F. Stolper, *et.al.*, *United Nations' Economic Mission to Malta* (U.N., New York, 1964). Lord Robens *et. al.*, *Joint Mission for Malta Report* (Malta, Department of Information, 1967).

After its return to power in 1971, the Labour Government announced its determination to revise the Financial and Defence Agreement with Britain of 1964. A new treaty was signed with the intention of accounting for "the financial requirements needed to enable Malta to achieve economic independence in the shortest possible time". Subsequently a new development plan was published with the aim of realizing this goal. *Development Plan for Malta 1973-1980* (Malta OPM 1974) p.4.

59. Boissevain has argued that these "social and political" goals were explicitly formulated by Labour Party development plans whereas the previous Nationalist Party plans were merely interested in promoting economic growth. He sees in this change a logical sequence in "*Maltese perceptions of progress and development*". Boissevain, *A Causeway with a gate: the Progress of Development in Malta*, in S. Wollinan (ed): *Perceptions of Development*, (Cambridge University Press, 1978) p.14.

servers as representing a progressive trend in Malta towards "a modern, rational, bureaucratic and industrial world" in which there is no need or even room for traditional patrons and clients.⁶⁰ It is, of course, highly debatable whether these efforts are effectively promoting a lasting form of economic and social "development" or only a "modernized" form of neo-colonial dependence.⁶¹ "Modernization" refers to a diversification of the economic base and the consequent changes in living styles, consumption and employment patterns for those directly or indirectly affected by such a transformation. A standard criterion to measure the extent of "modernization" in a particular country is that of economic growth. Such processes can, of course, take place within a neo-colonial context where economic, social and political activities in one "client state" remains on the periphery and to depend upon its "mother country" as the source of its growth. On the other hand, in the case of true "development" the dependent country itself generates its own wealth. This is achieved through the contribution of the mass of its people who are rallied behind local leadership and inspired by a local ideology. Some scholars have attempted to attribute the failure of "under-developed" countries to "develop" to a persistence of "traditional" thinking and to a failure of a strong, central government in such countries.⁶²

Indeed what happens in many "under-developed" former colonies is that their available political and intellectual leadership, their economic elites and their dominant ideologies are only conducive to "modernization". Economic activities, particularly in satellite firms owned by large, international companies which provide employment, higher incomes and consumption levels, depend not on local sources but on activities generated at the "centre".⁶³ Nevertheless, as A. Black has argued, one needs to specify the historical conditions which produce the available leadership and ideologies in particular former colonies. This involves "a clear specification of the particular, historically-determined class structures and struggles through

60. Boissevain has expressed such a view in "When the Saints go marching out", in Gellner and Waterbury, *op.cit.*, (1977) pp.81-96. This view has been challenged by Boswell *op.cit.* (1978) p.7.

61. P. Schneider, J. Schneider and E. Hansen, *Modernization and Development — the Role of Regional Elites and non-corporate Groups in the European, Mediterranean. Comparative Studies in Society and History* (1972) Vol. 14, pp.328-350. For a recent re-statement of this problem: P. Schneider and J. Schneider "Culture and Political Economy in Western Sicily" (1977).

62. N.J. Smelser "Mechanisms of Change and Adjustment to Change" (1962) in T. Burns (ed): *Industrial Man*. (Penguin 1969) pp.43-68. Similarly, the "end of ideology" theorists have sought to explain the persistence of widespread industrial and class conflicts in Italy and France despite a developed industrial base to "extra industrial elements of society" such as "issues concerning the place of religion and the traditional status structure". Mann, *op.cit.*, (1973) p.11.

63. As argued by P. Schneider and J. Schneider, *op.cit.*, (1977).

which the system is actually worked out.”⁶⁴ Only then can one explain the contrasting development paths followed by the undeveloped neighbouring countries like Malta and Sicily.

A quick glance at the changing patterns of employment in Malta in recent decades reveals that in this respect planned development has had a remarkable degree of success. The hand-over of government controls to local politicians proceeded apace with decisions to reduce British military spending on the Island.⁶⁵ The constant threats of large scale redundancies provided an ideal incentive for workers to rally behind their leaders in the Labour Movement. The need to create alternative employment for those who were losing their jobs with the Services also presented a constant challenge to successive local governments to restructure the local economy.

In retrospect it appears that as the Maltese politicians battled endlessly among themselves — as a by-product of the divisive policies pursued by the British colonialists — both sides unwittingly ended up having very similar beliefs and fears. Thus, for instance, both the dream of some prominent Nationalists of a political unification of Malta to Italy in pre-war years and that of the Malta Labour Party plan to integrate Malta with Britain in the fifties, had two basic things in common. They both stemmed from a profound disenchantment with the Maltese citizens' inferior status to that of their colonial masters and an equally deep conviction that Malta was powerless to stand on its own feet in a hazardous world. In this context, the achievement of political independence in 1964 along with the decision to abandon Malta's "fortress role" after the complete departure of the British Services in 1979, are indeed important milestones in Malta's socio-economic history. Yet it would be unrealistic to expect these events to signal the actual termination of the influences of former colonial policies on Malta's social life. These are likely to remain with us — even if imperceptibly — for some time to come.

64. A. Black, *Tourism and Migration — Causes and Effects in Social Change* (1978), p.4. For instance the Maltese tendency to hoard savings rather than indulge in conspicuous consumption makes sense when considered in the historical context of a siege economy and traditional insecurity.

65. One of the most important decisions was that stated in the Defence White Paper of 1957. The threat to close down H.M. Dockyard and other Service establishments in Malta led to the downfall of the proposal to "integrate" Malta with Britain, subsequently, to the Labour Government's resignation. *Defence Outline of Future Policy* (HMS, Cmnd 124, 1957).