

# The Structure-Agency Interplay: Sociology of the Arts in Malta

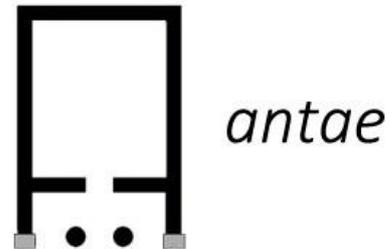
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## The Structure-Agency Interplay: Sociology of the Arts in Malta

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‘The point of departure of the sociology of art is the question: How is it possible that works of art, which always originate as products of human activity *within* a particular time and society and *for* a particular time, society, or function—even though they are not necessarily produced as “works of art”—can live beyond their time and seem expressive and meaningful in completely different epochs and societies? On the other hand, how can the age and society that produced them be recognized in the works?’

—Hanna Deinhard, *Meaning and Expression*.<sup>1</sup>

‘Structuralism and hermeneutics can be made into fine bedfellows’

—Jeffrey Alexander, *The Meaning of Social Life*.<sup>2</sup>

### Introduction

Why is there a need to study art sociologically? How can sociological investigation explain the contextual factors that influence art production? Can the artists’ agency be left out in the analysis?

My concern in this article is on the structure-agency interplay in the arts in Malta. This exploration is couched within sociological discourse on the arts, presenting an exemplary case of studying structural factors influencing art practices as well as the reflexive deliberations of artists. One way to explain this dichotomy is by drawing from a recent and transnational cultural research project entitled *A National Oasis?*, conducted by BJCEM (Biennale of Young Artists from Europe and the Mediterranean), on the geopolitical peculiarities of the artistic scenes in the “peripheral” states of San Marino, Montenegro, Kosovo, and Malta. Such analysis explores discourses on “periphery”, to make sense of such geo-cultural locations as polemical fields in relation to their dis/similar cultural, economic, and political morphology. This article focuses exclusively on Malta, without assuming a lineal trajectory of cultural conditions especially in light of diverse economic and political histories.

A sociological study of the arts can be generally characterised as an exploration of groups of people who work together to create art: the social network involved in such creation, the reception of audiences, its intersection with race, gender and class, and the causality for different interpretations to art. The examination of the social context in which art is produced

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<sup>1</sup> Hanna Deinhard, *Meaning and Expression: Toward a Sociology of Art* (Boston, NY: Beacon Press, 1970), p. 3.

<sup>2</sup> Jeffrey Alexander, *The Meaning of Social Life. A Cultural Sociology* (New York, NY, and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 26.

by artists, managed, curated, and engaged with by audiences may serve to reveal how art functions in a society and what implications it has on the way we live.<sup>3</sup>

Primarily, though not easily, it is worth understanding what makes something “art” by referring to Howard Becker’s definition:

When we say ‘art’, we usually mean something like this: a work which has aesthetic value, however that is define; a work justified by a coherent and defensible aesthetic; a work displayed in the appropriate places (hung in museums, played at concerts). In many instances, however, works have some, but not all, of these attributes.<sup>4</sup>

This field of research examines network of cooperation of art production and consumption, social relationships, and the way the personality and agency of artists interlaced with their own reflexivity influences art. Thus, this article treats the artists’ agency as the outcome of continuous interaction between both dispositions and reflexive deliberations. This dichotomy has caught the interest of many sociologists; however, many “classical” studies within the field of the sociology of the arts have focused more or less on structural conditions, consequently ignoring agency.<sup>5</sup> More recent studies on arts sociology focus more on artworks and the application of agency.<sup>6</sup>

### **Sociology of the Arts: Structure and Agency**

The relationship between social structure and agency is an ever-evolving dialogue in which social structures shape individuals and vice versa. Structure and agency should not be treated as if they were in opposition to each other but rather both the concept of habitus and human agency can be reconciled into a single theory<sup>7</sup>—both reflexive deliberations as well as the role of social context on dispositions need to be given equal importance in making sense of actions.<sup>8</sup>

“Classical” studies in the sociology of the arts place more emphasis on structural discourse rather than artists’ agency, and through these art is often viewed as mirroring the society it was created in; research within this tradition, therefore, looks at works of art to learn more about society. Janet Wolff, in her book *The Social Production of Art*, argues that every act done by the individual is located within a social structure:

Everything we do is located in, and therefore affected by social structures. It does not follow from this that in order to be free agents we somehow have to liberate ourselves from social

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<sup>3</sup> See David Inglis and John Hughson, *The Sociology of Art—Ways of Seeing* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan Press, 2005).

<sup>4</sup> Howard Becker, *Art Worlds* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1982), p. 138.

<sup>5</sup> See, for instance, Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (London: Routledge, 1984), and the work of Vera Wolff.

<sup>6</sup> See Edward de la Fuente, “‘The New Sociology of Art’: Putting Art Back into Social Science Approaches to the Arts”, *Cultural Sociology*, 1(3), (2007), 409-425.

<sup>7</sup> See Margaret Archer, *Structure, Agency, and the Internal Conversation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

<sup>8</sup> See D. Elder-Vass, ‘Reconciling Archer and Bourdieu in an Emergentist Theory of Action’, *American Sociological Association*, 4, (2007), 325-346.

structures and act outside them. On the contrary, the existence of these structures and institutions enables any activity on our part, and this applies equally to acts of conformity and acts of rebellion. [...]. All action, including creative or innovative action, arises in the complex conjunction of numerous structural determinants and conditions.<sup>9</sup>

The making of art is influenced by its relationship to various technologies, media, social systems of production, supporting personnel, training, and patronage. Artists are seen as dependent on mechanisms, processes and institutions for rewarding or refusing their works, what Vera Zolberg, in *Constructing a Sociology of the Arts*, refers to as ‘midwives of art’.<sup>10</sup> Such forms of constraints include the Church, royal families, private patronage, the state bureaucratic administration, and the commercial market.

In recent years, theoretical debates in the cultural sociology of the arts have been centred on the problem of reductionism and of artworks and agency.<sup>11</sup> During the last decade, there has been an increase in theoretical debates in the cultural sociology of the arts, focusing on the application of agency, just as there has been the introduction of a meta-critical approach of the notion of reflexivity into sociology of art in order to deal with issues of post-Bourdieuian sociology.<sup>12</sup> In this manner, the ‘new sociology of art’, as proposed by Edward de La Fuente, is very much more oriented towards material culture studies with emphasis on autonomy and agency.<sup>13</sup>

It is not only the autonomy of painting released from representation, but an artwork released from the meaning attached to it. Artworks need to be interpreted through a sociological imagination—a term coined by C. Wright Mills to refer to ‘the awareness on the relationship between personal experience and the wider society’.<sup>14</sup> Such awareness steers one away from the usual quotidian thoughts, thinking away from the familiar routine of everyday life by adopting a new perspective. This is done in relation not only to one’s own culture as experienced in everyday life, but also away from representations that determine symbolic meanings.

John Berger, in *Ways of Seeing*, emphasises how the way one positions oneself makes a significant difference when making sense of art.<sup>15</sup> The way individuals see things is affected both by what they know and what they believe in. It is only after acquiring the sociological imagination that one can view the world in a clear vision by making sense of historical processes within larger social context and their impact on a person’s biography.

Similarly, Sociology of the Arts students are encouraged to explore how meanings in the art world are produced within the context of social, historical and economic conditions. Students

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<sup>9</sup> Janet Wolff, *The Social Production of Art* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1981), p. 9.

<sup>10</sup> Vera Zolberg, *Constructing a Sociology of the Arts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

<sup>11</sup> See Antoine Hennion and Line Grenier, ‘Sociology of Art: New Stakes in a Post-Critical Time’, in *The International Handbook of Sociology* (New York, NY, and London: Sage Publications, 2000), pp. 341-355, and the works of Edward de la Fuente and Tia DeNora, as referenced here throughout.

<sup>12</sup> See David Inglis, ‘Politics and reflexivity in the Sociology of Art’, *Sociologie de l’Art, L’Harmattan*, 1, (2010), 113-135.

<sup>13</sup> See de la Fuente, “‘The New Sociology of Art’”.

<sup>14</sup> C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959), p. 5.

<sup>15</sup> John Berger, in *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin Books, 1972), peddled this idea of liberating images by speaking about the need to open one’s eyes and look at the painting away from the meanings attached to it.

taking the Sociology of the Arts study-unit at the University of Malta, for instance, are encouraged to engage in critical discussions on the arts in Malta by making sense of the contextual factors influencing the arts as well as the reflexive deliberations of artists.

### **Contextual factors influencing the arts: The Maltese context**

In analysing the Maltese context, it is pertinent to examine the present social structures and cultural conditions, in particular the patterns of accommodating the “modern” with the “traditional”:

On the one hand, ‘tradition’ was associated with Catholic morality, a way of—particularly family—life based on it. [...]. On the other hand, it was associated, particularly by younger Maltese, with a ‘backward’ and increasingly anachronistic orientation to the world, that bore the hallmarks of Church hegemony. Similarly, ‘modernity’ encompassed an inherent ambivalence. On the one hand, it was associated with education, material wealth and progress, but on the other hand with material excess and the erosion of ‘traditional’ morality.<sup>16</sup>

Nevertheless, recent changes in Malta indicate a more liberal society and a move away from the Church’s influence on art production, one example of this being the legal reform of the articles that protected the Church from vilification.<sup>17</sup>

Another aspect worthy of consideration when making sense of artistic practices in Malta is the geopolitical situation and its degree of insularity in Malta, as a small island state. The question of insularity in Malta is often centred on the economic dimension: ‘a diminished and constrained state of small economy: insufficient population and labour market, diseconomies of scale, absent entrepreneurship and capital, [...] [with] high dependency upon imports and exports’—in short, it is a popular belief that small equals weakness, powerlessness and vulnerability.<sup>18</sup>

Common identifiable features of small states include their high degree of economic openness, their insularity or “enclaveness”, their resilience, weakness, and dependence.<sup>19</sup> A number of studies on Malta refer to the development challenges posed by small state due to their size—

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<sup>16</sup> Jon P. Mitchell, *Ambivalent Europeans: Ritual, Memory and the Public Sphere in Malta* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 16.

<sup>17</sup> Discussion on freedom of expression in the arts during the last decade resulted in the reform of obscenity, blasphemy, and pornography laws. Such changes came about after several cases of censorship of artworks. An exemplary case of this is when in 2009, Anthony Neilsen’s play *Stitching* was banned to be performed by Unifaun Production in Malta. During the same year, the author Alex Vella Gera and editor Mark Camilleri of the student pamphlet *Realtà* were prosecuted for offending public morals by publishing *Li Tkisser Sewwi*—an article that was considered as having content of a sexually explicit nature. On the latter, see Alex Vella Gera, ‘Li Tkisser Sewwi’, *Ir-Realtà*, October 2009.

<sup>18</sup> Godfrey Baldacchino and David Milne, ‘Introduction’, in *Lessons from the Political Economy of Small Islands: The Resourcefulness of Jurisdiction*, ed. by Godfrey Baldacchino and David Milne (London: Macmillan, 2000), pp 1-16, p. 4.

<sup>19</sup> See Paul Sutton and Anthony Payne ‘Lilliput under threat: the security problems of small island and enclave developing states’, *Political Studies*, 41, (1993), 579–593.

once again, some of the challenges include its openness to international trade and high dependence on imports due to their small economic size.<sup>20</sup>

Malta, as a small state, is particularly vulnerable to external events, what Godfrey Baldacchino refers to in three distinct ways—‘in the suddenness of impact, in the intensity of effect and in the rapid speed of penetration’.<sup>21</sup> Due to its long history of dependence and influences from foreign rule, then, it is important to recognise that the dialogic relationship between global processes and the local conditions is manifested in the everyday life experiences of people. This network of trust, the degree of reciprocity—as well as nepotism and clientelism—is prevalent in small states.<sup>22</sup>

### **The Transnational Research Project**

As explored above, small states are fundamentally different from larger states, not only for their geographical size but in terms of the social, economic and cultural contexts which make up their micro environment—in turn, a number of sociological studies examine the vulnerabilities and challenges of small states.

The concept of liminality, opaqueness, and ambiguity of art production in small states were questioned by the BJCEM transnational cultural project, involving an ethnographic study with artists in various small states. The main purpose of this two-year nomadic project was to build a transnational platform able to critically question the ideas of territorial remoteness, cultural marginality and geopolitical smallness through both artistic and cultural research. The main purpose of this research, therefore, was to obtain a deep understanding of structural factors in small “peripheral” states that influence art production and consumption. This was made by direct participant observation in the counties in question and interviewing artists and curators alike. The agency of artists and their reflexive deliberations were also studied in this transnational project, the aim of which, far from presenting a clear answer to this complexity, indeed emphasises the opacity of the situation.

Each artistic practice located in a specific context is in fact a condensed expression of facts and socially-constructed artefacts. Taking Malta as a small island Mediterranean state, locating art practices within this specific context may result in looking for another standpoint to disclose the liminal, “marginal” identity of the “European” Mediterranean area.

The research program was designed to develop a platform to discuss issues of remoteness and insularity and question the visibility and mobility in the arts. First, fieldwork was held in San Marino in July 2016, in the isolated and small town in Montegardino. This was in turn

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<sup>20</sup> See *The Economic Vulnerability and Resilience of Small States*, ed. by Lino Briguglio and Eliawony J. Kisanga (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2004), and Lino Briguglio, *A vulnerability and resilience framework for small states* (report prepared for the Commonwealth Secretariat, 2014).

<sup>21</sup> Godfrey Baldacchino, ‘Far Better to Serve in Heaven than to Reign in Hell: Malta's Logic of Relating to the European Union’, in *Competing Strategies of Economic Development from Small Islands*, ed. by Godfrey Baldacchino and Robert Greenwood (Charlottetown: Institute of Island Studies, 1998), pp. 213-238, p. 225.

<sup>22</sup> On this last statement, see Robert Putnam, *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993).

followed by a field study in Kosovo and Montenegro, and, subsequently, fieldwork here in Malta. The final presentation of the research was presented at the Biennale of Young Artists from Europe and the Mediterranean, as one of the most important cultural events in the Euro-Mediterranean region, in Tirana, Albania in May, 2017.

## Research Outcome

The research process included interviews with artists and curators in the visited countries. In view of the structure-agency dichotomy, the challenges and opportunities of art practices in the research programme were studied through an analysis of structural and cultural conditions as well as by first-hand knowledge obtained from art practitioners and curators.

This research highlighted the controversial shortage of cultural professionals in “peripheral” cultural and artistic systems in relation to the concentration of artistic legitimisation processes in cosmopolitan European “centres”.<sup>23</sup> The results of this research were presented in a publication and public discussion during the *Mediterranea 18: Young Artists Biennale* in Tirana, May 2017.

One common denominator of the small states studied was the issue of independence and the value of its historical and political symbols as claims to define its distinctive cultural identity. All the locations studied had their independence in their recent history, with Kosovo being a self-proclaimed autonomous country in 2008, becoming the Republic of Kosovo after declaring its independence from Serbia.<sup>24</sup> In an attempt to create a distinctive cultural identity, art discourse in Kosovo hardly mentions the cultural conditions that produced the setting for the Kosovian modernist art scene while still a part of Yugoslavia, thus making it difficult to contextualise works of art produced in the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>25</sup>

Malta's colonial past and its independence in 1964 poses interesting questions on the dichotomy of cultural independence/dependence and the influence on art practices and cultural consumption in Malta. Vicki Ann Cremona analyses political changes in Malta during the pre- and post-colonial years and the relationship between theatre and political protests during the post-colonial period.<sup>26</sup> She examines this relationship and how it contrasts with recent theatre productions in Malta that are relatively unchanging, this possibly due to what can arguably be characterised as a general decline in political involvement—according to Cremona, theatre productions were concerned about emphasising a new national identity during the post-colonial period.

National identity in the arts is also the focus of the Maltese artist Pierre Portelli, in his work entitled *Stradamerkanti*, which examines historical inscriptions carved in stone on the

<sup>23</sup> See *Opacity*, ed. by Alessandro Castiglioni and Simone Frangi, (Italy: Postmedia Books, 2017).

<sup>24</sup> It is important to note that not all UN or EU countries recognise Kosovo, and this might in itself show more nuances to the understanding of “liminal” and “periphery”.

<sup>25</sup> See Eremire Krasniqi, ‘In the Now: Childhood for Everyone, Forever Again’, in *Opacity*, pp. 65-70.

<sup>26</sup> Vicki Ann Cremona, ‘Politics and identity in Maltese theatre: Adaptation or innovation?’, *The Drama Review*, 52(4), (2008), 118-44.

buildings of Merkanti Street in Valletta.<sup>27</sup> Such project narrates the history of national identity based on the layering and erasing of collective contributions of popular culture throughout the years; here, the artist makes sense of the meaning of independence through inscriptions and the way erasing and rewriting, as in a palimpsest, symbolises the removal of power. In another artistic project on the concept of identity, Pierre Portelli and researcher Georgina Portelli are working on is *REL.INK Indelible Narratives*—an investigation into the history of tattoos typical of Maltese port workers, fishermen, and soldiers of the military marine.<sup>28</sup>

This relationship between dependence and independence was clearly present in the structuring of the artworlds in studied locations. All countries in this research experienced shortcomings of institutional presence—an absence that has always been taken on by artists themselves. In the case of Malta, institutional presence started emerging especially in the last decade with the booming in the culture and creative industry, particularly in view of the fact that Valletta will be hosting the title of the European Capital of Culture in 2018. Within this context, Malta's cultural infrastructure is growing in importance by way of strategic investments of various artistic projects. In particular, the Arts Council Malta (ACM)<sup>29</sup> is continuously working to increase mobility of artists and accessibility for the general public to the arts. Furthermore, the new national museum of Art in Malta, *MUŻA*, is working on recognising the needs of each individual to access arts and culture.<sup>30</sup> Nevertheless, further empirical research is needed in the process of cultural development in its drawing attention to the various facets of audience engagement and development.

### Insularity and the artist

The BJCEM project outlined the cultural peculiarities of each location, examining how these intersect with their disparate social and economical histories. In the case of Malta, the question of insularity of artists was observed in three features.<sup>31</sup>

First is the artists' need to train and work abroad: all the artist-run projects examined during this research in the different locations showed a desire to internationalise, to study and work abroad in big European cities that open doors for more opportunities than their homeland. It is worth noting that this is not only a recent phenomenon of the globalised age. During the first half of the twentieth century, artists in Malta aimed to study in Italy or the United

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<sup>27</sup> See <<http://www.pierreportelli.com/BIO>>. [Accessed 6 October 2017].

<sup>28</sup> Insights on the narratives of these men and the symbolic identity significance of their tattoos were presented by Pierre and Georgina during the BJCEM research project. The exhibition is displayed in the Malta Maritime Museum (7<sup>th</sup> October to 30<sup>th</sup> December), in collaboration with the Library Information and Archive Sciences Department of the University of Malta, and also with Arts Council Malta. See 'Rel.Ink—Indelible Narratives', *Visitmalta*. <<https://www.visitmalta.com/en/event-details/2017-10/rel-ink-indelible-narratives-10922>>. [Accessed 6 October 2017].

<sup>29</sup> The ACM is the cultural advisor to the Government and works on the Cultural Policy and strategies for the arts.

<sup>30</sup> See Alexander Debono, 'MUŻA rethinking national art museums and the values of community curation', *Malta Review of Educational Research*, 8(2), (2014), 312-320.

<sup>31</sup> See Valerie Visanich, 'The Arts in Small States: The Case of Malta', in *Opacity*, pp. 79-86.

Kingdom,<sup>32</sup> and Maltese artists in the first half of the twentieth century continually defied the established artistic tradition established by the Malta Government School of Art—the principal training centre for artists at that time.<sup>33</sup> In fact, the few selected artists who had opportunities to study in Italy and the United Kingdom came back to Malta aware of the shortcomings at the Malta Government.<sup>34</sup> Such artistic training abroad was pivotal in the development of the Modern Art Circle movement, whose artists were concerned with developing 'a new vision, a tendency to seek, investigate and explore the hidden realms of truth and beauty'.<sup>35</sup> More recently, the ACM, aware of the need for artists to train and travel abroad, reoriented its strategies and is now focusing on providing more opportunities for grants to artists in different funding schemes. This restructuring of the ACM included the development of funding opportunities to assist operators in the cultural and creative sectors to maximise their potential as well as more mobility opportunities for artists.

Second, in small states like Malta, there is considerable status overlap of artists, mainly because they are usually employed in another day job and are artists solely on part-time basis. This practice needs to be contextualised within the working practice in Malta—primarily, the value put on job stability and working on indefinite contracts. Nevertheless, in light of the current boost in the local creative industry and the increase funding opportunities, artists are now more than ever encouraged to work full-time.<sup>36</sup>

Third, the small geographical size of Malta has considerable influence on patterns of cultural consumption due to the same crowd of art practitioners and audiences visiting cultural events. Such events offer a space for sociability for acquaintances and friends who share a common interest in the arts. It is also a way to strengthen one's network, or to 'cultivate connections' as Godfrey Baldacchino calls it.<sup>37</sup> Such practice is not unique to Malta but also common in isolated towns and small cities elsewhere, where a thriving creative sector is far away from

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<sup>32</sup> See Joseph Paul Cassar, *L-Arti Moderna*, (Malta: PIN, 2000).

<sup>33</sup> The Malta Government School of Art trained students in fairly tight control, giving high priority to technical excellence. Students under the tutorship of Edward Caruana Dingli, who was arguably one of the most influential artists of twentieth century Malta, were trained into being faithful to observation of nature and nurturing a desire to capture and render it; such a conception of art was centred on the imitation of nature that represented perfection. The course was structured with the first stage involving studying linear perspective and free-hand drawing and, if an artist proved himself, he would be promoted to the painting and modelling class. See *L-Arti Moderna*.

<sup>34</sup> Artists like Frank Portelli, Hugo Carbonaro, and Antoine Camilleri defied the established artistic tradition established by the Malta Government School of Art after studying abroad. They understood the need for change in art to reflect its time and were inspired by the new forms of expressions and art movements that were taking place in contemporary Europe. This was a turning point in the history of modern art in Malta, having artists working in different styles and deconstructing the established boundaries of art.

<sup>35</sup> Joseph Paul Cassar, *Pioneers of Modern Art in Malta*, (Malta: PIN, 2010), p. 136.

<sup>36</sup> Malta's creative economy is currently driven by some 3600 enterprises, employing about 7500 people and is growing at an average of 9% per annum. See Creative Economy Working Group, *Creativity Works: A Report on Malta's Creative Economy and a strategy for the Cultural and Creative Industries* (2015). <[https://www.artsouncilmalta.org/files/uploads/misc/PART%201%20-%20Preface%20and%20Creative%20Economy%20Report%20\(8\).pdf](https://www.artsouncilmalta.org/files/uploads/misc/PART%201%20-%20Preface%20and%20Creative%20Economy%20Report%20(8).pdf)>. [Accessed 6 October 2017].

<sup>37</sup> Godfrey Baldacchino, 'Social class in Malta: Still our daily bread', *Centre for Labour Studies, Biennial Report 2011-2013, University of Malta*, (2013). <[https://www.um.edu.mt/data/assets/pdf\\_file/0010/191197/biennial\\_doc\\_2012.pdf](https://www.um.edu.mt/data/assets/pdf_file/0010/191197/biennial_doc_2012.pdf)>. [Accessed 6 October 2017].

any major capital of cultural activity. The importance of cultivating connections, or what Jeremy Boissevain calls ‘friends of friends’, are considered as key for one’s success in small states.<sup>38</sup>

## Conclusion

The theoretical framework of this paper is buttressed on works that explore the relationship between structure and agency within discourses on sociology of the arts. Recent works within this field gave prominence to material culture and the need to go beyond the decoding process of the arts and focus on the agency of artworks. With reference to the transnational cultural research, this paper demonstrates that while the agency of artists and artworks are pertinent in making sense of art scenes, it is also necessary to contextualise such art scenes by understanding the geopolitical conditions and their impact on the art world. Such conditions include its size, geographical location, and socio-economic situation. This is especially the case for small states that have peculiar situations of dependence/independence, and/or “peripheral” and ambivalent relations to other “central” European hubs.

In this regard, the study of art sociologically is a prerequisite. Sociology of arts, research, and specialisation make it possible to make sense of the arts beyond the work of the artist in contextualising it within its social space and within the socio-economic and cultural condition in which it was created and in which it is experienced today. Art production and practices are not to be seen in a vacuum, but within their own time and space.

Recent studies on cultural sociology emphasise the autonomy in the arts and the way cultural structures are not to be treated as epiphenomena of political and economic structures.<sup>39</sup> The autonomy of cultural forms is seen as pertinent in altering existing economic and political structures. There is, currently, missing academic research on establishing the way cultural structures are operating in relation to current political and economic structures in Malta. Such analysis merits in-depth research, which, while not the focus of this article, needs to be tackled elsewhere.

The study of the sociology of the arts allows one to see the art world with new eyes—by examining the contextual framework, historical, socio-economic and cultural conditions that have had significant impact on art production and practices. There is a need for greater acknowledgment of this discipline, especially in light of a growing increase within the creative industry in Malta. A sociological analysis in the current changes in the artistic and cultural scene in Malta provides an enriching dimension, one needed for making sense of social realities and peculiarities of the location.

To some extent, such peculiarities were analysed in the BJCEM project involving “peripheral” countries. Ethnographic accounts with artists revealed how they faced challenges due to lack of funding opportunities. However, it would be naïve to pinpoint

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<sup>38</sup> Jeremy Boissevain, *Friends of Friends: Networks, Manipulators and Coalitions* (New York, NY: St. Martin’s Press, 1974).

<sup>39</sup> See Footnote 11.

similarities of the states studied in the BJCEM project without a complex analysis of the different histories, socio-economic developments, and cultural conditions that shape their distinctive characteristics. Similarly, it would be equally naïve to consider their small geographical size and so-called peripheral location as the main feature contributing to their similarities and their presumed differences.

My contribution to this argument is that one cannot study such reflexive modes in a vacuum without taking into consideration the contextual factors they exist in. It is worth arguing that artists are not simply determined by the social structures with no reflexive deliberation in producing arts. Indeed, such agency is to be taken into account when exploring the more critical and less predictable artistic practices, especially in the last few turbulent decades in Malta.

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