



Let Us Say This Again, Opaquely

A Natural Oasis? A Transnational Research Programme 2016-2017

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A Transnational Cultural Project on the Arts in Small States: The Case of Malta

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INTRODUCTION

The maxim *small is beautiful* is often applied to small-island states. It is also a fact that small islands are often faced with vulnerabilities and challenges for their remoteness and insularities. This article examines such peculiarities of small states focusing on art practices from a sociological approach. Can sociological investigation ignore the contextual factors, the limitations and challenges of a small geographical territory and its influence on art production and practices? This was one of the main questions tackled by the BJCEM (Biennale of Young Artists from Europe and the Mediterranean) transnational cultural project, involving an ethnographic study with artists in various small states. This full cultural immersion in Euro-Mediterranean small states aimed at mapping the differences and similarities in constraints and challenges of artistic practices. The working sessions of the BJCEM programme *A National Oasis? A Transnational Research Programme* aimed at deepening curatorial and cultural knowledge of visual, performing arts and cultural studies in small-states. It explored the geopolitical peculiarities complexity of territories such as of San Marino, Montenegro, Kosovo and Malta.

This article specifically focuses on one location that was part of the project location, the small state of Malta. Reference to this location is made not to suggest identical challenges faced in small-states within the Euro-Mediterranean region. In effect, I contend that the distinctive socio-economic and cultural conditions of these locations contribute to different peculiarities.

There are various aspects worthy of analysis, including the institutions of power in Malta, such as the Church and its work on censoring the arts throughout the years. However, this article specifically focuses on the notion of insularity outlined by referring to three features – artists' need to train and work abroad, the status overlap of the artist, and the patterns of cultural consumption.

Drawing on from knowledge obtained from this programme and from interviews with art practitioners in Malta who participated in this project, this article explores briefly the ambiguous, or what Mitchell (2002) calls 'ambivalent' situation of Malta, in relation to its art production and practices. The arguments brought forward are positioned broadly within a discourse on the dichotomy between structure and agency in the sociology of the arts theoretical framework.

THE TRANSNATIONAL RESEARCH PROGRAMME AND BJCEM

The aim of the research programme was to develop a platform to discuss issues of remoteness and insularity and questions on visibility and mobility in the arts. The first meeting was held in San Marino in July 2016, in an isolated small town in Montegardino. This was followed by a field study in Kosovo and Montenegro. Subsequently, fieldwork was carried out in Malta. The final presentation of the research is to be 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. This Biennale is a multidisciplinary event that proposes and showcases creations of seven different artistic disciplines – visual arts, applied arts, show, music, images on the move, literature and gastronomy.

My self-reflexivity, as the representative of Malta in this project, needs to be outlined for a better understanding of my standpoint that influenced my interpretations. My area of work and specialisation is within Sociology – a discipline which shaped my own sociological imagination and critical analysis of everyday situations. Seeing the world for the sociology lens enabled me to observe cultural peculiarities and distinctiveness of the locations visited. Despite the fact that the group of researchers spent days in the studied locations and mingled in with artists and curators, the locations visited were often seen from what Urry (2002) calls the 'tourist gaze' – not from the standpoint of an authentic habitant but from the curious tourist point of view eager to experience a different culture through vision, taste, smell and sound.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: STRUCTURE AND AGENCY IN THE ARTS

It has often been argued that human action is the outcome of continuous interaction between dispositions and reflexivity (Archer, 2003, Elder-Vass, 2007). There is a need for the structure-agency understanding when making sense of the

arts practices in Small States. Despite not focusing specifically on the situation of small states, this dichotomy has caught the interest of many sociological works. Most 'classical' studies in the sociology of the arts, like Bourdieu (1984) and Wolff (1981) have been couched more or less in the structural discourse rather than focusing on the agency of artists.

Janet Wolff (1981) in her study *The Social Production of Art* maintained that every act done by the individual is located within a social structure. The existence of these structures and institutions facilitate any activity of the individual whether it is an act of conformity or rebellion. The practical activity and creativity are in a mutual relation of interdependence with social structures. Wolff (1981) argued that works of art are not solely produced from the inspiration and innate genius of the artist. The making of art is clearly influenced by its relationship to various technologies, media, social systems of production, supporting personnel, training and patronage.

Nevertheless, 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 (DeNora, 2006). 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 (Inglis, 2010). In this manner, the 'new sociology of art', proposed by De La Fuente (2007), is very much more oriented towards material culture studies with emphasis on agency.

PECULIARITIES OF MALTA AS A SMALL-STATE

In view of the structure-agency dichotomy, the challenges and opportunities of art practices in the research programme were understood both from understanding structural and cultural conditions as well as by first-hand knowledge obtained from art practitioners and curators.

In recent years, various studies have focused on small states, emphasising their vulnerabilities and challenges (some of these studies include Baldacchino, 2002; Briguglio & Kisanga, 2004). Small states are fundamentally different from larger states, not only for their geographical size but in terms of their social, economic and cultural context which make up their micro environment (Baldacchino, 1995).

Malta is a small island state on the periphery of the European Market. Malta, an archipelago of two major inhabitant islands, has a total land area of 316 km². It is located 93 km south of Sicily in the Mediterranean Sea. It gained its political

independence from Britain in 1964 and joined the European Union in May 2004.

Discourses on the Maltese insularity, its provincial identity and often parochial mentality, as a small island state is worth considering when making sense of the assumption of a Maltese cultural backwardness or 'slower motion' changes (Visanich, 2012). This is very much influenced by 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 (Mitchell, 2002, p.16).

The economic dimension of small states received consideration and attention by scholars. Baldacchino and Milne (2000) clearly explained this by referring to the assumption that small states like Malta are often associated with "a diminished and constrained state of small economy: insufficient population and labour market, diseconomies of scale, absent entrepreneurship and capital [...] high dependency upon imports and exports" (Baldacchino and Milne, 2000, p.4); in short it is a popular belief that small equals weakness, powerlessness and vulnerability. Armstrong and Read (2002) delved into the issue of economic integration of small states entering regional trade agreements. They studied the accession of Cyprus, Malta, Slovenia, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania into the European Union. They asserted that the integrative proposals may not always fit the distinctive characteristics of micro states, leading to negative effects on their economies and the need to implement political strategies to combat negative effects.

Small states are said to be characterised for sharing common identifiable features, including their high degree of economic openness, their insularity or 'enclaveness', their resilience, weakness and dependence (Sutton and Payne 1993). A number of studies in Malta (Briguglio 2002, Baldacchino, 1998, 2014) refer to the development challenges posed by small state due to their size – some of the challenges include its openness to international trade and high dependence on imports due to their small economic size (Briguglio, 2014).

As a small island state, Malta is particularly vulnerable to external events, in what

Baldacchino, referred in three distinct ways – “in the suddenness of impact, in the intensity of effect and in the rapid speed of penetration”. (Baldacchino, 1998, p.225). Due to its long history of dependence and influences from foreign rule, the dialectical relationship between the global processes with local conditions is manifested in the everyday life experiences of people. The network of trust, the degree of reciprocity (Putnam, 1993) as well as nepotism and clientelism are prevalent in small states and islands.

CULTURAL SPECIFICITIES OF MALTA AS A SMALL ISLAND STATE

The question of insularity is not only felt within the economic sector, but also within the cultural and artistic sector. Herein, I will outline three features - The need for artists to train and travel abroad, their status overlap, and the patterns of cultural consumption.

First, the notion of insularity associated with small states, often manifests itself in the need for artists to train and work abroad. This need for international connection is pertinent for artists to extend beyond the territory of a small state. This is not only a recent phenomenon of living in a globalised age. Artists in the first half of the twentieth century have been defying the established artistic tradition after studying in Italy and the United Kingdom and came back to Malta aware of the shortcomings at the Malta Government School of Art – the principal training centre for artist at that time. Artists like Frank Portelli, Hugo Carbonaro and Antoine Camilleri were critical of the art that was being produced locally and aspired to keep abreast with the major art movements that were taking place in Europe at that time. They understood the need for change in art to reflect its time and were inspired by the new forms of expressions. 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 (Cassar 2000, 2010).

The experience that Maltese artists obtained from Italy and the United Kingdom and their influence of such art movements gave birth to the Modern Art Circle movement. The artists of the Circle were concerned with developing “a new vision, a tendency to seek, investigate and explore the hidden realms of truth and beauty” (Cassar, 2010, p.136). In this respect, the Modern Art Circle was the first movement to bring about cultural change in the artistic scene in Malta. Following its revolutionary footsteps are art groups like *Start* whom in the 1990s exposed the art of installation to the Maltese public. The need to train and travel abroad is felt more than ever and it is why the Malta Arts Council reoriented its strategies recently and

is now focusing on providing grants for artists in different funding schemes.

It was only during the last decade, that investments and funding were targeted to build a creative industry. In January 2007, a number of think-tank sessions, known as the Valletta Creative Forum (VCF) were held at the National Centre for Creativity to try to pinpoint the challenges of the art world in Malta. The aim of these series of working groups was to produce proposals for a road map to better the opportunities for artists and overcome these challenges. These discussions put weight on the need to invest in the creative industry and provide opportunities for cultural development, especially through funding. This was followed up by investment for the cultural and creative sectors with increased allocation for public cultural institutions in the 2008 budget.

The restructuring of the Malta Council for Culture and the Arts in 2014, was intended to enable a large entity working on a strategic development of the cultural and creative sector and consolidate a stronger agenda for the creative economy. This restructuring also included the development of funding opportunities to assist operators in the cultural and creative sectors to maximise their potential as well as more opportunities to artists for mobility.

Second, it is significant to note that another peculiar characteristic of art practices in a small state like Malta is that artists usually have, what Godfrey Baldacchino (2013) describes when speaking about Maltese work patterns in general, considerable status overlap. Parallel to the working Maltese practice, an artist in Malta is usually employed in another job and thus not dedicating his/her time on art practices on full-time basis. The reason for this is often twofold. First, the mentality of job stability and working on indefinite contracts is valued in Malta. Second, due to lack of sustainable funding opportunities, art practitioners usually opt to work on the arts part-time while having a guaranteed monthly income from their full-time job. This tendency is slowly shifting with the current boost in the local creative industry and the increase of funding opportunities for artists. 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 (CreativeWorks, 2015).

Third, the small geographical size of Malta influences its patterns of cultural consumption. This is exemplified in the way cultural creators attend each other's projects resulting in having the same crowd of art practitioners visiting cultural events. Such events become a field for sociability and a way to strengthen one's network, what Baldacchino (2013) calls 'cultivate connections' This relative isolation is not unique to Malta but is certainly rather common in remote towns

and small cities elsewhere where a thriving creative sector is many miles away for a major capital of cultural activity. The importance to 'cultivate connections' of one's personal contacts, or what Boissevain (1974) calls 'friends of friends' are considered as key for one's success in small states (Sultana, 2006).

CONCLUSION

This BJCEM project gave participants an opportunity to try to make sense of the similarities and differences of research locations, as small states and often considered peripheral locations. Despite efforts for the participants of the project to immerse themselves as much as possible in the culture of the each location visited for a few days, it was hard to escape the tourist gaze.

It would be naïve to pinpoint similarities of these locations without a complex analysis of their 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. This article attempted to make sense of some of the cultural conditions found in one small-state Euro-Mediterranean location – These included the need for artists to train abroad, the part-time status of artists and the patterns in cultural consumption. Nevertheless, a more complex analysis, taking into consideration other factors, like social class for instance, are absent in this brief analysis on art production and consumption. This can be tackled elsewhere.

Indeed, the recent increased importance paid to the arts and culture in Malta, including increased opportunities for artists for mobility schemes, is shifting perceptions on art and artists. Prioritisation of the arts, is often reduced to the increased awareness of their social and economic benefits of the creative industry. This change is to be seen within the context of the transformations in the art world during the last century that reoriented the aims and values of artistic activity toward a more critical and less predictable practice.