Sultana, R.G. (1994) 'Towards a sociology of consumption in Malta', in R.G. Sultana & G. Baldacchi Maltese Society: A Sociological Inquiry (Mireva, Malta), pp.163-186.

8

Towards a Sociology of Consumption in Malta

Ronald G. Sultana

Introduction

Most Maltese, upon being asked to identify a key characteristic feature of the social formation they inhabit, would probably mention the relatively recent emphasis on the consumption of durable and non-durable goods. Of course, persons must consume in order to satisfy 'basic needs'. What is of sociological interest is first of all the way such 'needs' have been defined historically and cross-culturally, for there is very little which is natural or essential about the way in which modern persons consume goods and services which many consider they cannot do without. As Bocock (1992, p. 122) correctly argues, 'basic needs are not easy to specify in detail, and, in any case, they never arise outside a social, cultural, historical context'.

Secondly, sociological inquiry focuses on the way the overproduction of goods in modern society generates a culture of consumerism. Thirdly, this shift in culture is interrogated in order to explore the meaning that consumption has for the consumer and for groups of consumers.

All three aspects are of interest and relevance to the study of Maltese society, and each is addressed systematically in the following sections.

From Frugality to Consumerism

Given Malta's dependency status over the centuries, it is not surprising that 'frugality', 'thrift', and 'sobriety' became a characterizing virtue of the people, celebrated in many proverbs and sayings (Zammit, 1984, p. 12). Indeed, when the Labour Government was faced with the international recession of the 1970s, and was obliged to ask people to 'tighten their belts' (Boissevain, 1986a), it appealed to this traditional virtue in order to legitimize policies unpalatable to consumers. These included a wage freeze and local monopolies that limited the availability of goods as well as sharply restricted choice in brand-names for the same type of goods on the market.

On the other hand, the setting up of a welfare state and a general redistribution of wealth under the socialist government led to higher incomes which fuelled new consumer 'needs' among the working-class and lower middle-class segments of Maltese society (cf. Sant, *The Sunday Times*, 5 September 1992, p. 7). These groups now had the wherewithal to aspire for the same consumer goods and services enjoyed by the more moneyed local classes, and to follow foreign role models in terms of life styles. More women keep a job after they are married and have children, and whether this engagement in the labour market is on a full-time or part-time basis, or in the legal or underground economy, the fact remains that more money is brought into the family budget. Children too make a contribution to that 'fund' by their participation in the twilight economy (cf. Sultana, 1993).

In addition to this, one can claim that, generally speaking, the Maltese have been earning more – in 1976 the per capita income

was Lm712, while in 1990 it had become Lm2,219 – and spending more – in 1983 the Maltese spent about Lm160.7 million (at constant prices), while in 1991 they spent around Lm229.7 million (Ministry of Finance, 1992).[1] Indeed, Briguglio (1988, p. 55 ff.) has documented how the average propensity to consume, or the ratio of consumption to disposable income, has undergone a pattern of upward shifts from 1973 onwards. Trade statistics for 1991, (Ministry of Finance, 1992), providing a breakdown of imports by final use, similarly show a significant increase in importation of consumer items (in Lm million, at current prices), as follows:

	1986	1987	1988	1989	1990	1991
Consumer goods	82.2	92.5	102.5	108.4	114.4	147.6

Post-war Malta has seen village and city streets transformed, architecturally, into shopping boulevards, and larger sites have been specifically constructed in order to accelerate the process by which citizens are reconstructed as consumers, who either buy or who gaze, window-shopping, symbolically consuming that which they cannot afford to own. Pedestrians are therefore engulfed in an architecture which proposes to structure their experience of life, and public space is increasingly under pressure to accommodate commercial transactions. The economic policies of the Nationalist government, elected into office in 1987, have clearly fanned the flames of a consumeristic culture. The end of the wage freeze had 'an expansionary effect (both real and psychological) on income earners and their consumer expenditures' (Scicluna, 1991, p. 4). In addition, there was now to be 'unlimited choice' through the freeing of imports. There has, indeed, been a proli-

---

1 There is a danger here of conflating 'Maltese society' into a homogeneous unit. It is thus important to keep in mind that the trend towards higher earnings, while true for all categories of workers, is weighted differently across the different groups (cf. Tonna, 1993, p. 32).

feration of sites of consumption where imported – hitherto exotic – goods have been displayed to titillate every taste. The Department Store phenomenon, for instance, has now hit Malta and Gozo, with Standa, British Home Stores, Plaza, and the Lm2 million *'Tiġrija Palazz'* complex, among others, becoming established, in the last five years, as the new meccas for the insatiable consumer. Trade Fairs, with their dual roles as markets and sites of pleasure, and customarily held once every year for the past 36 years, have proliferated in number. Fourteen fairs are planned by the Trade Fairs Corporation for 1994 (*Il-Ġens*, 25 June 1993, p. 13). From a total of 48,200 visitors to the first edition of the Fair in 1952, record attendances were registered in 1991 (160,000 visitors) and 1992 (over 170,000) (*Malta Independent*, 4 July 1993, pp. 6, 7).

Such shopping centres, the modern version of the *'suq'*, become 'the busiest concourse of human activity and movement, the main focus for all those warm bodies doing things and supplying endless possibilities for observation, humour and interaction' (Willis, 1984, p. 21). The centrality of that activity has recently been emphasized in Malta by a legal notice extending shopping hours to late in the evening in certain zones (*The Times*, 28 June 1993, p. 24).

There is no doubt that the freeing of the market has proved popular. People can now find in shops what they see advertised on Italian television channels, and what they have come across in shopping malls abroad. The chances of frustration of desire and pleasure in this regard have been minimized, at least for the wealthier groups in Malta. Indeed, the Nationalist Party election posters for 1992 cashed in on the attraction of consumerism, and portrayed a supermarket trolley full of imported goods. It thus drove home the point that consumer needs would continue to be satisfied if it were re-elected into government for another term. On its part, the Labour Party recognized the drive for consumption among the Maltese middle class and affluent workers, and that aspirations and values have changed (Mifsud, 1991, p. 5; Sant, *The Sunday Times*, 5 April 1992, p. 7). Despite its traditional left-wing critique of consumerism, therefore, the Labour Party has had to come to terms with the fact that to deny citizens consumer products is tantamount to committing political suicide.

A Consumerist Culture?

But is this to say that the Maltese are consumeristic, or are they merely materialistic? Are we simply engrossed by the fundamental needs of survival, or are we increasingly becoming engrossed by consumption for its own sake? The difference is important, for, given the conditions of scarcity that have haunted the people for generations, it stands to reason that concern about the fulfilling of basic material needs should be high. The point is whether the Maltese are increasingly becoming more attracted by 'superfluous' consumer goods, whether affluence (for some groups at least) leads to the creation of new appetites and needs which then must be satisfied through expanded consumption. In this case, the

> reference point is often the 'good life', the typical American dream purveyed through television adverts and films of informal consumption, cans of coke, tight jeans, flashy cars and Hollywood glamour.[2] This is a world of pictures, images to be consumed first with the eyes and ears to make you want to really consume in order to be like that. Consume an image to make you really consume to be like the image. The image may always be elusive and illusory. Its pursuit may be never ending. But this insatiable appetite is just what commerce needs. Ever greater consumption is necessary to try to get closer to the ever retreating image. It may be crazy, but at least you're buying (Willis, 1984, p. 22).

The extent to which this kind of consumer culture has made inroads into our ways of feeling and being can be gleaned from a number of sources.[3] In the following sections I will look at the way the

---

2 This, at least partly, explains the latest TV hit in Malta, Beverly Hills 90210.

3 Here I only refer to a few of these sources. Further research could look into the patterns in the volume of consumption of luxury items such as automobiles, for instance. The Trade Statistics published by the COS do not, unfortunately, give details of the number of vehicles imported by type (e.g. BMW, Mercedes, Volvo, Audi and other high status vehicles). Attempts to get this information by interviewing importers proved fruitless: this researcher's letters were not even acknowledged. Another important aspect of research on consumption would be

Maltese spend their money, since expenditure is a good indicator of what people value. I will then argue that this consumer culture has taken hold of a number of areas of our lives, and that its meaning needs to be interrogated.

How Do the Maltese Spend Their Money?

The Household Budget Survey (Retail Price Index Management Board, 1993), carried out by the Central Office of Statistics over a twelve-month period between October 1988 and September 1989, is a good source of information if we wish to appraise patterns of consumption. The study focused on a sample of 1,300 households representing the households of wage/salary earners of average size and with reasonable income. This represented, therefore, a limited sample, not representative of the Maltese population in general.

The study is nevertheless particularly useful because comparisons can be made with similar studies carried out in Malta in 1971/72 and 1980/81, as well as with those reported for other nations (mainly European). The Maltese households in the 1988/89 sample, for instance, reported an average gross household income of Lm66 a week, which represents an increase of 40 per cent over that reported by a similar group of households from April 1980 to March 1981 (RPIMB, ibid., p. 7). What is of most interest in this context is the way households spend their money. Especially indicative are changes in the proportions of the total household expenditure devoted to different commodities and services. Table 1 below presents the relevant data:

---

the gathering of information related to credit purchases of the Maltese. In this way, one would be able to gauge the propensity of people to consume even though they do not immediately have the means to do so.

Table 1. Average expenditure of all households

Item of Expenditure	Weekly expenditure 1980-81*	Proportion of total expenditure 1980-81	Weekly expenditure 1988-89	Proportion of total expenditure 1988-89
	cents	%	*cents*	%
Food	1607.7	41.9	2060.1	36.8
Beverages and tobacco	364.5	9.5	481.8	8.6
Clothing and footwear	406.7	10.6	460.8	8.2
Housing	153.5	4.0	218.5	3.9
Fuel, light and power	119.0	3.1	158.6	2.8
Durable household goods	234.1	6.1	292.3	5.2
Transport and communication	379.9	9.9	750.6	13.4
Personal care and health	214.9	5.6	355.8	6.4
Education, entertainment and recreation	188.0	4.9	463.0	8.3
Other goods and services	168.8	4.4	360.3	6.4
TOTAL	***3837.1***	***100.0***	***5601.8***	***100.0***
Other payments	344.7	–	985.5	–

**Estimated*

The table above shows clearly that total expenditure exclusive of 'other payments' has gone up by 46 per cent since 1980/81, with less funds being allocated to food (down from 42% to 37% of total expenditure), and more spent on transport and communication (from 10% to more than 13%), education, entertainment and recreation (up from 5% to 8%). The figures indicate a decline (from 59.6% to 51.7%) in the importance of household expenditure on basic necessities (food, clothing, housing, light and power), and a shift from the 'goods' component of the index to the 'services' component.

These statistics are borne out by the most recently available figures on private consumption expenditure (Central Office of Statistics, 1990, p. 13). Thus, if we compare trends in the patterns of consumers' expenditure (at 1973 prices) between 1981 and 1990, we note an increase in expenditure on food by 41%, on

recreation, entertainment, education and cultural services by 49%, and on transport and communication by 62%. Total private consumption expenditure in the domestic market increased by 40% during that period.

Table 2. Average expenditure of households in various industrialized countries compared to Malta.

Item of Expenditure	Belgium	Denmark	Spain	United States	France	Italy	Japan	Germany	Great Britain	Malta
Food, beverages and tobacco	19.1	21.3	22.0	13.1	19.4	21.7	20.4	16.5	21.1	45.4
Clothing and footwear	7.5	5.5	9.0	6.6	6.5	9.6	6.4	7.7	6.2	8.2
Housing, fuel, light and power	16.7	27.4	12.6	19.3	18.8	14.3	19.2	18.4	19.5	6.7
Durable household goods	10.9	6.5	6.6	5.6	8.1	8.8	6.1	8.8	6.9	5.2
Personal care and health	11.0	1.9	3.6	15.3	9.2	6.3	10.8	14.3	1.3	6.4
Transport and communication	12.9	16.3	15.7	14.5	16.8	12.9	10.2	15.1	17.7	13.4
Education, entertainment and recreation	6.5	10.0	6.5	10.0	7.3	9.1	10.2	9.0	9.5	8.3
Other goods and services	15.4	11.1	24.0	15.6	13.9	17.3	16.7	10.2	17.8	6.4
TOTAL	*100*	100	*100*	*100*	*100*	*100*	*100*	*100*	*100*	*100*

It is instructive to compare this information with data on household expenditure for 1989 in a number of other countries:[4]

As with other developing countries, the average household in Malta spends a relatively high percentage of its budget on basic necessities such as food. But this pattern is changing and two surveys published by the Ministry for Youth and Culture (1992) confirm the trends reported in the Household Budget Survey and

[4] Source is Mermet (1992, p. 337). Maltese data collapsed from the Household Budgetary Survey of 1988/89 (RPIMB, 1993).

clearly show that more and more people are spending more and more money on books, magazines, leisure activities, cinema, entertainment, and so on. Businessmen are reading these as 'indications giving a clue to the way customs and habits are changing ways of life', and are proposing the systematic monitoring of the market in order that they 'can meet and satisfy our people's changing demands'. (A. Galea, President of the Malta Trade Fairs Corporation, opening address reported in *The Malta Independent*, 4 July 1993, p. 7.)

A Change in Values?

These changes in patterns of spending are significant. But does this indicate, as Galea seems to believe in the excerpt quoted above, that values have changed radically? It is after all significant that the Maltese generally tend to save a good percentage of their total income, as if their historic experience of 'feast and famine' shifts serves as a restraint on consumption, and instigates them to prepare for 'a rainy day'. It is also significant that between 1983 and 1992, savings and time deposits in Maltese banks increased at a nominal annual mean rate of 11.8% (Ministry of Finance, 1992). Abela's research into the value systems of the Maltese (1991, p. 265) suggests that, at least with reference to the early eighties, the Maltese were rather more materialistic than consumeristic. Thus, when compared with Europe, Malta did not emerge as a post-materialist society, for its inability to overcome the problem of scarcity led it to have predominantly traditional values/preoccupations dependent on material concerns rather than on such issues as the environment, for instance.

This emphasis on attending to material needs emerged clearly when we consider the efforts placed by various classes of Maltese to generate finance. Reporting on the European Value Systems Study Group carried out in Malta in 1984, Abela (1991, pp. 110-1) notes that 40% of the 467 Maltese respondents – in contrast to only 12% of other Europeans – replied that they would find extra work for the rest of the week to earn more money in answer to the question: 'How would you occupy your time if you were to receive a full week's pay and be required to work only three days a week?' Similarly, Delia (1987) has noted the high participation rates of Maltese in the underground economy, and estimates that

the hidden economy could be as high as 20% of the Gross Domestic Product. The Household Budget Survey indicated that more than 10 per cent of the average gross household income came from part-time or overtime work. Elsewhere (Sultana, 1993) I have noted the extent of participation of school age children in the twilight economy, and have argued that leisure for leisure's sake is strangely missing or severely curtailed for children [and for adults] in what is, for tourists, a leisure island.

It seems to be the case, then, that the Maltese belong to a 'bicycle society' which has developed 'Cadillac tastes' and where, in a sense, they become 'puritan by day and playboy by night' (Bell, 1976). People thus take on two, three, and sometimes four jobs in order to generate the capital required to meet the demands made by the life-style aspired for. School age children with part-time jobs during term and/or holiday time, for instance, spend much of their money on food, clothes, discos and other leisure activities.[5] With these students as well as with adults, (Abela, 1991, p. 123), one notes the struggle to satisfy consumer 'needs' by sacrificing more time to work. Theft, another indicator of a consumer culture, generally indulged in by those who aspire for goods they cannot afford to buy, is also on the increase, and has become visible enough to constitute a political issue. Thus, there were 93 cases of theft reported in 1986, and this statistic rose to 117, 171, 227 and 237 in the interim years up to 1990 (COS Abstracts, 1990, p. 41).

It can be hypothesized, and there are indicators to that effect, that there has been a shift from materialism to consumerism in Malta since the early eighties. That is to say, the concern with generating finance is there, but increasingly this capital is being used for the satisfaction of increasingly sophisticated 'needs'.

That the infrastructure for the generation of these 'needs' is there, and that a consumer culture is on the increase, becomes

---

5 The data were collected as part of a research project in trade schools in Malta. A questionnaire was distributed by the author among 680 fifteen year old students in their third year of trade schooling. (For more details regarding the Trade School Research Project, see Sultana, 1992.)

clear when we consider another 'sign of the times': sophisticated advertising. Slick image making is considered in the literature on consumption as the ultimate strategy for the generation of desire for things produced – or, in the case of places like Malta, for things imported. For, as Willis (1984, p. 22) has pointed out,

> first we must consume 'signs' – adverts, images, symbols, representations – to make us want to be something else, to create 'new' appetites and needs which then must be satisfied through expanding consumption.

Advertisements are everywhere, and have proliferated with the multiplication of media channels in Malta, as these depend on advert revenue in order to function. Most of the advertising agencies in Malta have been set up in the last decade and a half.[6]

The Meaning of Consumption

It has been argued above that the popularly held assumption that consumerism has made inroads into Maltese culture can be corroborated by a reasonably wide range of evidence. It would be important to move on from that recognition to a sociological analysis of the meaning of this shift in feeling and being, to interrogate the significance of this phenomenon in terms of such issues as the formation of taste, the pursuit of status and aspects of the experience of personal gratification.

Concern about Consumerism

Consumerism in Malta is generally regarded in a negative light by those who purport to analyze its significance. This particular viewpoint is influenced greatly by the Catholic Church, which has often expressed grave concern regarding the qualitative and

---

6 Information obtained through a telephone interview with 15 of 26 advertising agencies/companies listed in the Business, Trade and Professions Guide (1988), and in the Yellow Pages (1993). 3 of these were set up in 1990, 5 in the 1980s, 2 in the 1970s, 3 in the 1960s, and 2 in the late 1950s.

quantitative change in the patterns of consumption of the Maltese. It has often decried the secular mentality that a culture of consumerism gives rise to, a mentality which cannot be compatible with Christianity (Segreterija Pastorali, 1993, p. 10).

The Catholic Church has, on various occasions, denounced the conspicuous consumption displayed in otherwise religious occasions, such as the celebration of holy communion, weddings, (cf. Boissevain, 1987; Abela, 1991, p. 114), and feasts (Sullivan, *The Malta Independent*, 20 June 1993). Commenting on a statement by the Gozitan bishop about wedding extravaganzas, *The Times* leader noted its agreement, saying

> Weddings have become too expensive, starting from the expensively printed invitation, to the wedding dress bought in Catania – after a special trip there, of course – and the dresses of the half dozen bridesmaids and flower girls and boys, to the rented suits and top hats, to the elaborate flower arrangements on the altar and all around, to the colour video, and photographer, to the taxis and Rolls Royce, to the country palace, and the going-away dress, and that inevitable honeymoon on the other side of the world. It has become really expensive getting married or marrying your children. It is not enough that they have to buy land and build their own house or villa and furnish it before they move in with all the latest, in equipment and taste, from the best dealers. Your son or daughter has to go one better than everybody else also at the wedding ceremony and reception (*The Times*, 30 June 1993, p. 4).

The sense of disapproval regarding extravagant consumption is sounded by the very people who have an avid interest in consuming. Thus one of the groups we have some information about, University students, while clearly enthusiastic to consume comfortable life-styles, nevertheless worry about the implications of a consumer culture. A survey on 'Consumerism and Solidarity' carried out by the University Students' Catholic Movement (Abela, 1989) shows that 97% of Maltese university students think that consumerism is increasing, and that 76% felt that the Maltese ought to be willing to accept a lowering of their standards of living for the sake of more justice in the world. The fact that most of these same students were unwilling to forego their own consumer interests in favour of solidary/communal values is highly indicative of the 'pleasures of consumption' , which will be considered below.

This same pessimism is shared by the Left, which follows the Catholic Church in condemning consumerism. Their concern is captured brilliantly by Arthur Miller in his play 'The Price', (1985, Act 1, quoted in Bocock, 1992, p. 120), where one of the characters says:

> Years ago a person, he was unhappy, didn't know what to do with himself – he'd go to church, start a revolution – something. Today you're unhappy? Can't figure it out? What is the salvation? Go shopping!

The concern on the part of the Left with regards to consumerism is that increasingly, the model of commercial transactions is invading other aspects of the 'life-world' (cf. Habermas, 1987). The attractive packaging of goods and services has, for instance, been extended to the political arena. Indeed, in a key article on 'The Labour Party – Future Directions', Mifsud (1991, p. 4) argues that

> In the modern world, it is not enough to have a good product to sell. The marketing dimension is as important as the quality dimension. In trade, the packaging is as important as the product itself. The same rules apply to politics. Our opponents, while having an inferior product, have better knowledge of the marketing behavioural sciences.

The leader of the Labour Party claimed, after the loss of general elections in 1992, that, effectively, citizens had been duped by the sophisticated images projected by the Nationalist Party election campaign. He in fact maintained that the Labour Party's problem 'was that though we had substance, we lacked style; the government, on the other hand, lacked substance, but had good style; so style won over substance, in my opinion' (Sant, *The Sunday Times,* 5 April 1992, p. 7). Much of the issue was therefore couched in terms of image-making, an interesting and significant linguistic transposition from the field of consumption to the field of politics, where citizens are constructed as 'gullible consumers', who were being 'duped by false values such as those based on money' (Sant, *The Times*, 31 March 1992, p. 32).

The arch pessimists who denounced consumerism have been sociologists influenced by the Frankfurt School theorists who developed a critique of mass culture. Authors like Horkheimer and Adorno as well as Marcuse (cf. Bronner & Kellner, 1989)

considered that the ever-increasing range of consumption goods and services provided by capitalist society numbed citizens' critical faculties, enveloping them in a 'bread and circuses' world where they were distracted and pacified.

As Clarke & Critcher (1985, pp. 95 ff.) have argued with reference to the consumption of leisure in contemporary Britain, a consumer culture constructs and positions citizens not as members or customers, but as consumers. The citizen-member has a commitment to the institution/social formation s/he is part of, and sees to it that the latter is run on his or her behalf, in such a way that membership grants the right to collective control. The citizen-customer interacts with the institution in such a way that mutual expectations are respected, so that a contract evolves in such a way that each partner is satisfied.

> The consumer, however, has neither the commitment of the member, nor the informal contract of the customer. His or her expectations are altogether more specific: the maximization of immediate satisfaction. If goods or services are not provided in the manner or at the price required, then the consumer will go elsewhere (Clarke & Critcher, ibid., p. 96).

For critical theorists, who were wont to see the media and the culture industry as pervasively dominant in their influence, the positioning of the citizen as a consumer involves a serious qualitative loss. In the first place, a consumer culture promises that which it cannot deliver, for the benefits that can be had by the citizen, (namely, 'free choice' from a wide range of goods), as well as the rights associated with that benefit (namely, the negative right of not to buy, or to go elsewhere) are based on the profoundly unequal distribution of wealth and income. Those with scarce material resources can ill afford to 'choose'. Secondly, the construction of the citizen as consumer gives rise to what Marcuse (1964) refers to as 'false needs', ones

> which are superimposed upon the individual by particular social interests in his [sic] repression: the needs which perpetuate toil, aggressiveness, misery and injustice... Most of the prevailing needs to relax, to have fun, to behave and consume in accordance with the advertisements, to love and hate what others love and hate, belong to this category of false needs (Marcuse, 1964, pp. 5, 9).

Life, and serious engagement in the fulfilment of humanity's

vocation, freedom, are trivialized, and commodities become ends in themselves. It is in this way that advertising succeeds in attaching

> images of romance, exotica, desire, beauty, fulfilment, communality, scientific progress and the good life to mundane consumer goods such as soap, washing machines, motor cars and alcoholic drinks (Featherstone, 1990, p. 7).

In Malta, these kinds of concerns are gaining ground as image-making becomes more 'professional'. Commenting on the manipulative streak in advertising, Flores (*The Times*, 29 June 1993, p. 5) refers thus to beer adverts on the local television network:

> An unshaven young man sits under the shade at an open-air cafe...then a raving beauty trots past on interminably long legs. He ogles her, smiles at her and reaches out with a glassful of sparkling foam. She smiles back, swivels back into stride and makes it all look like a joke.

Or, as McLuhan (1951, p. 68) wittily put it,

> When producers want to know what the public wants, they graph it in curves. When they want to tell the public what to get, they say it in curves.

Alternative Views on Consumption

The domination model presented most powerfully by the critical theorists and by the likes of Ewen (1976) has been challenged, with some authors arguing that 'far from being the passive victim of commercialism's juggernaut, the consumer has progressively been recognized as having substantial and unpredictable decision-making power in the selection and use of cultural commodities' (Willis, 1990, p. 138). It is a known fact that consumers are discerning, as witnessed by the lack of success of certain products, such as digitial watches, which, while cheaper and multi-functional relative to the classical watch, failed to capture the consumer market (Mermet, 1992, p. 344). In other words, advertising alone will not necessarily dupe consumers, whose value system as well as aesthetic taste, however much socially constructed it is, does allow a margin of discrimination between products. In addition to this, the domination model is insufficient because adverts must find a responsive terrain if they are to be effective. As D.J. Boorstin (1962) noted

> The deeper problems connected with advertising come less from the unscrupulousness of out 'deceivers' than from our pleasure in being deceived, less from the desire to seduce than from the desire to be seduced (Cited in *The Penguin Thesaurus of Quotations*, 1976).

That consumers are not simple dupes can be seen by their ability to strike back and to fight for their rights. There is thus a new arena for the struggle for citizen rights, away from the sphere of the work place to that of leisure, or at least 'self-maintenance'. There is an international consumers' movement consisting of over 150 organizations in about 100 countries, which, since 1979, includes Malta (Magro, 1989, p. 13). Locally, consumer rights have been gaining in importance. A Consumer Protection Act was passed in 1981. A white paper on 'Rights for the Consumer' was tabled in 1991, a Department for Consumer Affairs, attached to the Ministry for Food, Agriculture and Fisheries, was set up in 1992, (*The Times*, 3 April 1992, p. 20), and many local newspapers, including *The Sunday Times*, *L-Orizzont* and *L-Alternattiva*, began featuring a regular customer service column. The sphere of consumption is in fact being seen by some as the locus for the exercise of concerted citizen action, (cf. Micallef, *The Times*, 5 July 1993, p. 5), at least partly against 'the most important lobby on the Maltese islands after the Catholic Church – the importers, with their Chamber of Commerce and multiple political networks within the Nationalist Party' (*Society*, 1991, p. 34).

In addition to this, studies by members of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) have argued that consumers actively appropriate elements of popular and youth culture generated by the media, and re-work them to generate personal satisfaction and meaningfulness. Willis (1990, p. 21) powerfully sums up the argument thus:

> human consumption does not simply repeat the relations of production – and whatever cynical motives lie behind them. Interpretation, symbolic action and creativity are part of consumption. They're involved in the whole realm of necessary symbolic work. This work is at least as important as whatever might originally be encoded in commodities and can often produce their opposites. Indeed some aspects of 'profanity' in commercial artifacts may be liberating and progressive, introducing the possibility of the new and the socially dynamic... People bring living experiences to commerce and the consumption of cultural commodities as well

> as being formed there. They bring experiences, feelings, social position and social memberships to their encounter with commerce. Hence they bring a necessary creative symbolic pressure, not only to make sense of cultural commodities, but partly through them also to make sense of contradiction and structure as they experience them in school, college, production, neighbourhood, and as members of certain genders, races, classes and ages. The results of this necessary symbolic work may be quite different from anything initially coded into cultural commodities.

Indeed, as Cohen's study of East End Youth has suggested, the consumption of such fashion styles as a safety pin through the nose, a shaven head, or dressing up as 'mods', can have a powerful effect on the individual. It can be, for him or her, a source of significance, self-esteem and collective identification (Cohen, 1972).

The reworking of cultural commodities leads us very neatly into the consideration of the ways in which consumption becomes meaningful to the consumer. Such a focus entails an analysis of

> the emotional pleasures of consumption, the dreams and desires which become celebrated in consumer cultural imagery and particular sites of consumption which variously generate direct bodily excitement and aesthetic pleasures (Featherstone, 1990, p. 5).

The Pleasures of Consumption

The sense of celebration, the importance accorded to rites and rituals, the persistence of pre-industrial forms of social togetherness within the ambit of feasts, festivals, fairs, carnivals, souks, is quintessentially Mediterranean (Boissevain, 1965). While often garbed in a superficially religious dress, these occasions are, in Malta, an opportunity for the expression of popular culture, where everyday mundane reality, with its official, regulated, civilized behaviour is shed in favour of excitement, pleasure, 'excessive' consumption, and the 'direct and vulgar grotesque pleasures of fattening food, intoxicating drink and sexual promiscuity' (Featherstone, 1990, pp. 14-15, following Bakhtin, 1986; Stallybrass and White, 1986). The participation in a religious feast in Malta, not as a tourist but as a Maltese – a villager celebrating the village's feast – and who 'lets go', is in fact the partaking of a dream world that no longer exists, that harks back to a half-forgotten past (Boissevain, 1992). Clothes are new and hair has

been styled for the occasion; bursts of colours and of noise link earth to the sky; the steady stream of half-familiar faces linking the past with present, the constant urge to consume: food, drink, feast specialities, refreshments offered by neighbours, friends. The brass band enveloping all the senses, marching, lifting the spirit away from a tired world to a communal unity, stealing souls from each window, from each street where it passes, with the big belly-rumbling drum calling out the most primitive and most sensual, as youths tumble about, jerking each other in a drunken frenzy of corporeal oneness. No wonder that parish priests presented a document to the Maltese prime minister, complaining that feasts had become pagan occasions where excess and not devotion ruled the day, and asking for civil intervention in the re-establishment of order (*Il-Ġens*, 18 June 1993, pp. 1, 24)!

These pleasures of consumption are reproduced, albeit moderately, in media images, rock videos, the cinema, advertisement clips, and department stores. For some theorists, such as Baudrillard (1983) and Jameson (1984), the world of modern consumption is the 'liminal space' par excellence that is left, where the everyday world is 'turned upside down and in which the tabooed and fantastic [are] possible, in which impossible dreams [can] be expressed' (Featherstone, 1990, p. 15). A consumer culture therefore

> uses images, signs and symbolic goods which summon up dreams, desires and fantasies which suggest romantic authenticity and emotional fulfilment in narcissistically pleasing oneself, instead of others (ibid., p. 19).

Consumption and the Formation of Identity

Other sociologists have focused on the sphere of consumption in terms of its function to form identities and to cultivate social bonds or distinctions. It was Simmel and Veblen who pointed out that consumption in modern, and particularly urban societies, was no longer primarily related to the satisfaction of biological needs, but rather to the construction of social identities. Simmel (1903), for instance, argued that the anonymity and indifference characterizing urban culture led individuals to

> cultivate a sham individualism through the pursuit of signs of status, fashion, or marks of individual eccentricity (quoted in Bocock, 1992, p. 126).

The person in the metropolis therefore consumes in order to transmit messages to others, whom s/he meets fleetingly and superficially, of whom s/he wishes to be taken to be. Veblen (1953) similarly argued that the self-differentiating function of consumption applies to groups as much as to individuals, so that patterns of taste are cultivated by status groups and classes in order to distinguish themselves from others. Such status groups engaged in 'conspicuous consumption' in order to display who they were, and to impress upon others their social distance.

Patterns of consumption are therefore seen as socially structured ways in which goods are used to demarcate social relationships (Featherstone, 1992, p. 8). A number of sociologists have in fact shifted their attention from the sphere of production to that of consumption, and from an economistic to a social definition of class, in order to explain how modern societies are shaped and the ways in which they operate (Bocock, 1992, p. 120). Indeed, as Zammit's research (1984, pp. 130-133) has shown, Maltese people's subjective understanding of class divisions have been influenced rather more by differential patterns of consumption than by occupation. In other words, consumption becomes a way of establishing differences between social groups rather than merely expressing such differences.

As Bourdieu (1984) has so clearly shown, anything can be used as a 'positional good', from language and clothes, to leisure activities, house furnishings, food, and manner of eating, walking and other bodily dispositions. The value of a positional good is extrinsic to itself, and an object or a style associated with high status during a particular period can easily fall out of grace and vice versa. The current popularity of Maltese farmhouses and old 'houses of character' with upper middle-class couples is a case in point. What were previously the abodes of uneducated farmers and poor villagers have become a status symbol, to the extent that Boissevain (1986b) has noted a pattern of residential inversion, with lower middle class and working class couples buying/building modern houses in government estates, and wealthier groups moving into rural enclaves. Similarly, private education is booming as a status marker in contemporary Maltese society, with an increase from 88 institutions catering for 20,230 students in 1983/84 to 119 institutions catering for 22,599 students in 1990/91 (Central Office of Statistics, 1993).

This attempt at distinguishing oneself and one's group from others takes place on shifting ground, since there is a tendency for those with lower social status to emulate the consumption patterns of those 'above them'. As Featherstone (1992, p. 5) points out, 'the satisfaction derived from goods relates to their socially structured access in a zero sum game in which satisfaction and status depends upon displaying and sustaining differences within conditions of inflation'. Status groups will attempt to exercise 'social closure' through a variety of ways. They privilege their life-style as a 'referent', and restrict access to the limited circle. It is in this way that people use goods in order to create social bonds and distinctions.

On the other hand, the excluded fall prey to what Young and Wilmott (1975) refer to as a 'psychological disposition' to want what those above them in the social structure already have. Even if we quarrel with this notion of a biologically determined 'disposition' and argue along with Clarke & Critcher (1985, p. 28) that 'emulation is not a universal human characteristic but a set of attitudes and behaviours necessary to a high consumption economy, continuously induced by powerful instruments of persuasion', the fact remains that the life-styles of 'the rich and famous' are imitated. In addition, there does tend to be 'stratified diffusion' whereby, due to the mass production of goods and services, groups who could not afford consumer good 'A' at point t1 are likely to be able to afford it at point t2, by which time the wealthier groups are enjoying consumer good 'B' (Young & Wilmott, 1975, p. 19).

The urge to emulate, whether natural or constructed, takes place in a situation where

> an ever-changing flow of commodities make[s] the problem of reading the status or rank of the bearer or the commodities more complex. It is in this context that taste, the discriminatory judgement, the knowledge or cultural capital, which enables particular groups or categories of people to understand and classify new goods appropriately and how to use them, becomes important (Featherstone, 1990, p. 9).

This need to learn – how to dress, speak, move, use and edit one's body, and so on – leads to the rise of 'cultural intermediaries' (Bourdieu, 1984) and culture magazines which instruct the new middle class, the new working class and the new rich how to

value, use and display new goods. It is therefore not coincidental that these kinds of products of the new cultural intermediaries – magazines, radio and television programmes, newspapers – are produced and consumed in increasing numbers in the Maltese market.[7]

Conclusion

This chapter has argued that the study of the volume, patterns and meaning of consumption in the Maltese islands – in other words, the analysis of the ways in which Maltese people consume goods, services and symbols they produce and/or import – is crucial to the sociological understanding of the local social formation. While consumerism and conspicuous consumption have attracted the attention of the media and other figures in the public sphere, they have not been the subject of systematic sociological analysis and interpretation. The theoretical and empirical interrogation of such issues in the present paper outlines the general contours of the field, suggesting foci for future investigation.

References

Abela, A.M. (1989) 'Il-ġustizzja soċjali fl-Ewropa', *Problemi ta' Llum.*

Abela, A.M. (1991) *Transmitting Values in European Malta*, Malta, Jesuit Publications and Rome, Editrice Pontificia Università Gregoriana.

Abela, A.M. (1992) *Changing Youth Culture in Malta*, Malta, Jesuit Publications.

Anon. (1991) Review of 'Rights for the Consumer', *Society*, 12.

7 It has proved very difficult to obtain hard data on this aspect of consumption. Telephone interviews with three publishers/importers of such magazines suggested that the last decade has seen an increase in the variety of fashion and life-style magazines. Some of the more popular ones, such as *Images*, and *Weddings*, are produced locally. A survey conducted by MISCO for the Ministry of Youth and Culture (1992a, p. 29) shows that the most popular types of magazines bought in Malta were 'women's magazines' (16.3% of all respondents, 44.5% of magazine readers), followed by 'magazines regarding well-known people' (6.8% of all respondents, 18.5% of all magazine readers).

Bakhtin, M. (1986) *Rabelais and his World*, Cambridge, MA, MIT Press.
Baudrillard, J. (1983) *Simulations*, New York, Semiotext(e).
Bell, D. (1976) *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*, London, Heinemann.
Bocock, R. (1992) 'Consumption and life-styles'. In Bocock, R. & Thompson, K. (eds) *Social and Cultural Forms of Modernity*, Cambridge, Polity Press.
Boissevain, J. (1965) *Saints and Fireworks: Religion and Politics in Rural Malta*, London, London School of Economics Monographs on Social Anthropology, 30.
Boissevain, J. (1986a) 'Rhetoric as resource: Malta's Dom Mintoff'. In van Bakel, M.A. et al. (eds) *A Multi-Disciplinary Approach to Big-Man Systems*, Leiden, Brill.
Boissevain, J. (1986b) 'Residential inversion: the changing use of social space in Malta', *Hyphen*, vol. 5, 2.
Boissevain, J. (1987) 'Changing bethrothal and marriage ceremonies in Malta: 1960-1986', Paper presented at the International Society for Ethnology and Folklore Conference, University of Zurich.
Boissevain, J. (ed.) (1992) *Revitalizing European Rituals*, London, Routledge.
Bourdieu, P. (1984) *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, Harvard, Harvard University Press.
Briguglio, L. (1988) *The Maltese Economy: A Macroeconomic Analysis*, Malta, David Moore Publications.
Bronner, S.E. & Kellner, D.M. (1989) *Critical Theory and Society: A Reader*, New York, Routledge.
Central Office of Statistics (1990) *Trade Statistics*, Malta, Government Press.
Central Office of Statistics (1993) *Education Statistics 1990-1991*, Malta, Government Press.
Clarke, J. & Critcher, C. (1985) *The Devil Makes Work: Leisure in Capitalist Britain*, Houndmills, Macmillan.
Cohen, P. (1972) 'Sub-cultural conflict and working class community'. *Working Papers in Cultural Studies*, 2, University of Birmingham, Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies.
Delia, E.P. (1987) *The Task Ahead – Dimensions, Ideologies and Policies: A Study on the State of the Maltese Economy*, Malta, Confederation of Private Enterprise.
Ewen, S. (1976) *Captains of Consciousness: Advertising and the Social Roots of the Consumer Culture*, New York, McGraw-Hill.
Featherstone, M. (1990) 'Perspectives on consumer culture', *Sociology*, vol. 24, 1.
Habermas, J. (1987) *The Theory of Communicative Action, Vol. 2: Lifeworld and System: A Critique of Functionalist Reason*, Boston, Beacon Press.
Jameson, F. (1984) 'Postmodernism: Or the cultural logic of late capitalism', *New Left Review*, 146.
Magro, J. (1989) 'The agenda for consumers: what next?', *Society*, 1.
Marcuse, H. (1964) *One Dimensional Man*, London, Routledge.
Mermet, G. (1992) *Francoscopie*, Paris, Larousse.
McLuhan, M. (1951) *The Mechanical Bride*, New York, Vanguard Press.
Mifsud, A. (1991) 'The Labour Party – Future directions', *Society*, 9.
Ministry of Finance (1992) *Economic Survey*, Malta, Government Press.
Ministry of Youth and Culture (1992a) *A Cultural Assessment of the Nation*, Malta, MISCO.

Ministry of Youth and Culture (1992b) *Participation in Sports*, Malta, MISCO.
Retail Price Index Management Board (1993) *The Household Budgetary Survey*, Malta, Government Press.
Segreterija Pastorali (1993) *Lejn Knisja Adulta: Pass Deċisiv lejn Pjan Pastorali*, Blata l-Bajda, Media Centre Print.
Scicluna, E. (1991) *The Outlook for the Maltese Economy in 1992 and Beyond: A Sober Assessment*, Malta, Malta Federation of Industry.
Simmel, G. (1903) 'The metropolis and mental life'. In Levine, D. (ed.) (1971) *On Individuality and Social Form*, Chicago, IL, University of Chicago Press.
Stallybrass, P. & White, A. (1986) *The Practice and Politics of Transgression*, London, Routledge.
Sultana, R.G. (1992) *Education and National Development: Historical and Critical Perspectives in Vocational Schooling in Malta*, Msida, Malta, Mireva Publications.
Sultana, R.G. (1993) 'Practices and policies in child labour: lessons from Malta, *British Journal of Education and Work*, vol. 6, 3.
Tonna, B. (1993) *Malta Trends*, Blata l-Bajda, Media Centre Print.
Veblen, T. (1953) *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, New York, Mentor.
Willis, P. (1984) 'Youth unemployment: thinking the unthinkable', *Youth & Policy*, vol. 2, 4.
Willis, P. (1990) *Common Culture*, Buckingham, Open University Press.
Young, M. & Wilmott, P. (1975) *The Symmetrical Family*, Harmondsworth, Penguin.
Zammit, E.L. (1984) *A Colonial Inheritance: Maltese Perceptions of Work, Power and Class Structure with reference to the Labour Movement*, Msida, Malta, Malta University Press.