

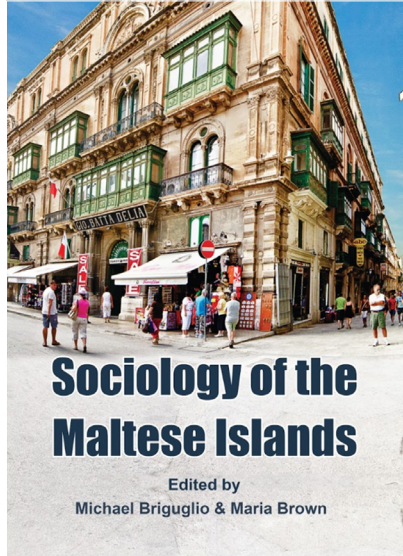


Change and Continuity

**Review article by Edward L. Zammit
of 'Sociology of the Maltese Islands', edited by Michael Briguglio
& Maria Brown (Luqa, Malta: Miller Distributors, 2016)**

*If there is anything about Malta which strikes any observer, local or foreign, it is the rate of change which the country has undergone in recent years. Changes are visible on all fronts: physical, economic, political and above all social. It is no wonder, then, that the subject of change is the one common denominator which underscores all the essays in the volume edited by Michael Briguglio and Maria Brown, entitled *Sociology of the Maltese Islands* (2016). One cannot help wondering what someone like Herbert Ganado would write if he were to update his famous books, aptly entitled 'Rajt Malta Tinbidel' (I have watched Malta change).*

According to the editors, this book is intended 'to provide a broad sociological introduction to the various areas of Maltese society in public and scholarly debate and research'. It is directed at a wide readership including students, researchers, policy makers, journalists and the general public. This broad spectrum partly explains the different levels and styles adopted by the different contributors – ranging from scholarly essays which may appeal to students of sociology and other social scientists to others adopting a journalistic style which may appeal to the general public. All the papers are well documented



and - apart from a few, rare exceptions – there is little overlap or repetition in the arguments and observations made by the various authors.

In his perceptive and thought provoking 'prologue' to this new book, Godfrey Baldacchino presents some interesting hypotheses which may well provide a paradigm for a balanced analysis of Malta's social changes which are illustrated by the various writers and are also personally experienced by one and all. He argues that, rather than seeing traditional Maltese culture and way of life as giving way to modernity and globalisation, it makes more sense to see Malta's role as being that of serving as a 'cosmopolitan hub' for its coastal neighbourhood. This has been indeed Malta's 'geographical destiny' throughout the ages. Baldacchino states that the essays in this book illustrate Malta's dual role characterised by *both* tradition and modernity as it has lately become 'a hub' or 'a base' for international business interests for their global corporate operations. In the process, he sees the modern trends and lifestyles as 'unsettling' the current markers of social class, gender, family, ethnicity and particularly 'environmental sustainability'. Hence, it makes more sense to speak of 'Maltese societies' where the old ways often coexist with the new.

There is a wide range of subjects covered by the various authors of papers in this volume. Some of these deal with topics which have traditionally been the focus of sociological analysis. These include social class, family life, work, education, religion and development. To these, a number of other subjects are included not merely because of their sociological interest but also because of their contemporary relevance such as consumerism, gender, leisure, demography, ethnic or race relations, environment and the media. The subject of politics is explored from various angles not merely reflecting the editors' centre of interest but also the Maltese people's obsession with it. There are essays on political parties, governance, policy making and social control. As noted above, the majority present a useful descriptive, factual and historical account of events and developments which have been implemented over the years in each field. There are also five or six papers which, in addition to factual information, present an analysis of trends and events which is well grounded in established sociological literature. I will now focus on these papers in the following paragraphs.

Angela Abela's comprehensive and incisive account of family life in Malta is a good illustration of Baldacchino's (above) hypothesis. She starts her paper by noting the 'dramatic and unprecedented changes' which Maltese families have undergone over the years in the context of the much publicised secularisation. However, she also states that despite the increasing participation of women in the workforce, the people's increased prosperity, the introduction of civil marriages, divorce, and single parent families, marriage is still considered as an important stage in the family lifecycle for young Maltese adults. She sees the process of globalisation as accelerated by Malta's accession to the European Union as well as by the widespread use of communication technology, internet, and social networking. Yet she firmly believes that people's 'yearning for safety, love and a meaningful connection with significant others as being so vital for our existence that we will continue to hold on to the family as a special place from where all members expect warmth, care, nourishment and support'.

Abela's paper presents a well-documented account of the impact of economic and demographic changes on families. This is followed by an explanation of gender roles and the impact of 'gender re-shifting' within families. The new courting practices, the status of marriage, and divorce are discussed in the context of the waning influence of the Catholic Church.

But she also points out that since the introduction of divorce in 2011, very few remarriages involving a Maltese bride and / or groom have taken place. She further argues that, given the relatively small numbers, the majority in the divorce referendum had actually voted 'in support of the rights of the minority'. Additionally, the author raises some important questions about caring responsibilities for the young, the elderly and the needy which traditionally were catered for within families. She is concerned about the way these responsibilities are nowadays being compromised by the pressures of work, consumption and recreation.

Abela further discusses a number of other challenges which are confronting today's families in Malta, including the low rate of fertility, the unprecedented rise of births outside marriage and the new form of poverty which is often connected to the breakdown of the traditional family. She also presents data which confirm the importance of education towards effectively meeting these challenges.

The question of secularisation and the diminishing influence of the Church in social and political life are also tackled by other contributors to this volume and this is not surprising considering that, arguably, this is one area where change is most evident. In their paper on the media, Brenda Murphy and Carmen Sammut state that the years following EU membership saw the rise of an assertive civil society challenging the hegemony of traditional power holders, including that of the Catholic Church. The issue of secularisation is directly tackled by Mario Vassallo who states that, whereas for centuries the Church gave Malta's life and identity a definite character, this is no longer the case. He cites a number of studies which confirm that people are not as interested in the afterlife as in the past but rather in the 'here and now' issues. This change is also evidenced in the decline in weekly Mass attendance over recent decades – though the figure now seems to have settled at around 50% of the population. He concludes that, while the Maltese generally still cherish the church and affirm their adherence to it, their participation in the liturgy and religious functions has become more of 'a pick and choose' practice. The Church and its teaching are constantly being evaluated by individuals and are much more prone to being challenged.

Clearly the concepts of work, social class and development are as relevant for sociological analysis today as they have always been. The science of sociology in the nineteenth century emerged in response to the dramatic

social and economic changes which were taking place at that time in the context of the industrial revolution. To a large extent, the issues which were raised by the founding fathers of the discipline are still relevant in today's post-industrial society. The centrality of work and the way work is organised were among the main concerns of the classical sociologists, principally Marx and Durkheim. In their paper on work in Malta, Manwel Debono and Saviour Rizzo draw upon the established sociological concepts and theories in order to analyse Malta's industrialisation process and work patterns since the middle of the twentieth century. They state that, as a result of the efforts of the trade union movement, the workers' attitudes and preoccupations have shifted from those about basic survival and security to those about the attainment of consumer goods and services. These shifts reflect the successive and successful economic restructuring of Malta's economy - from one based on the presence of the UK military services to routine manufacturing and more recently to new technology and the services' sector. Of particular interest is the authors' account of the way in which Malta's government - in conjunction with the trade unions - dealt with the recent (2008) global financial crisis. An active labour market policy was adopted 'by offering a stimulus package to the industries in distress to help them regain their economic viability'. As a result, unemployment in Malta has remained among the lowest in the EU both throughout the crisis and since then. The authors also discuss the presence of undeclared work which is seen as significant, the importance of labour law and of a vigilant trade union movement for the maintenance of adequate labour standards.

Yet a number of challenges still abound in Malta's labour market. These include the relatively low level of highly qualified and highly skilled workers required to meet the current demands of employers and to fill the new vacancies available - a problem which is further accentuated by the low level of skills which do not match the demand. Additionally, the notable segment of the population who are described as being 'at risk of poverty', the resurgence of atypical and precarious occupations, and the problem of 'undocumented migrants' are among the challenges currently faced by Malta's government and trade unions.

As Noel Agius shows in this paper on Development, despite the economic progress achieved over the years, Malta's GDP per person in purchasing

power terms still ranks in the 15th place among EU member states. He claims that the current challenge for Malta's economy is how to attract and maintain sustainable, high value added investment. Simultaneously, it has to provide decent employment to vulnerable groups, narrow the gaps in income disparities and keep check on social exclusion and poverty. The question therefore which arises is whether there is, imperceptibly the development of a new underclass in Malta.

As noted above, the study of social class is as old as sociology itself. In their paper on this subject, Maria Brown and Marvin Formosa, present a critical review of the studies of social class in Malta which, they contend, may be classified as falling either within the Weberian or the Marxist tradition. The former emphasises the wide distribution of wealth, the increasing number of professionals, the allocation of privileges based on the meritocracy of educational capital and occupational prestige. All this suggests the existence of a stratification system based on status and political patronage which is buttressed by the fact that most Maltese workers tend to perceive class structuring in harmonious rather than conflicting views. Brown and Formosa point out that the 'Weberian' analysis of Malta fails to explain 'the reproduction of class differences by education or how power holders also possess high levels of economic resources'. On the other hand, the Marxist approach provides a sharp distinction between the different classes. It shows how particular class formations are engendered by the economy and offers the reasons for conflict among them. Brown and Formosa are also critical of this approach as it fails to account adequately for gender differences which permeate all classes. Furthermore, it overlooks both the influence of political parties and of the Catholic Church with their networks and alliances which overshadow all social classes in Malta. For these reasons, the authors adopt a sceptical view of both these 'orthodox' approaches to Malta's class analysis as they fail to explain the *unique nuances* and *idiosyncrasies* characterising Maltese society. The shortcomings are mainly attributed to Malta's long established service economy, its sizeable underground economy (including a reluctance on the part of many workers to fully declare their income), the persistence of parochialism, patronage and political tribalism and a lack of adequate statistical data particularly on the interplay between education and social mobility. In this context, their paper suggests that future studies

of Maltese class dynamics should explore how cultural processes are embedded within socio-economic practices and how inequality is produced and reproduced in both economic and social practices. Such an approach would enable class cultures to be viewed simply as modes of differentiation rather than of collective mobilisation.

Along with family, work and social class, education is another major field of enquiry to which sociologists have always paid particular attention. The paper by Maria Brown and Peter Mayo present a comprehensive review of education in Malta in the light of both local and international sociological studies. In addition to a detailed description of Malta's educational setup at all levels, the paper presents a critical analysis of recent policies and policy documents adopted by Malta's education authorities. The authors are particularly concerned with the not so hidden agenda to associate education almost exclusively with employability and economic growth. They argue strongly that 'unless economic growth is coupled with a strong politics of social justice and equitable resource redistribution it remains a problematic goal.'

The book also contains two fresh and original papers by Valerie Visanich, one on the Arts and the other on Consumption and Leisure. Both are explicitly grounded in sociological theory and throw interesting insights on the local scene. As an example of the way that the arts reflect the structure of society, she refers to the active participation in the village *fešta* by individuals in middle-class and professional occupations. She explains this partly in terms of the multi layered 'omnivore theory'. For such persons, the *fešta* – in addition to other factors – produces a feeling of belonging to their community and a place of informal familiarity and sociability. Furthermore, the author shows how Maltese artists also play an active role in shaping and redefining social structures, as exemplified by the recent relaxation of censorship laws partly in response to their pressures. Likewise, in her paper on consumption and leisure patterns in Malta, Visanich argues that Maltese individuals do not passively adopt Western trends without adapting them to local socio-economic and cultural conditions. She refers to the most widespread practices of leisure and consumption in contemporary Malta, such as regularly eating out, holidaying abroad, the use of smart phones and other 'cool' symbols, especially by the young. While associating these trends with the recent growth in GDP and in

average disposable incomes, she also notices an increase in the number of individuals living in a dire financial situation. Nevertheless, despite the similarities with 'Western' trends in leisure and consumption practices, by contrast in Malta there are many individuals who value saving and who hold substantial financial assets. In fact, the author points out that the value of these financial assets correlates positively with educational attainment and work status. Therefore once again, these observations seem to confirm the hypothesis proposed by Baldacchino, Abela, Vassallo, myself and others that in Malta traditional values and lifestyles often coexist with the new modern forms of behaviour. This also explains why the conscious efforts by Dom Mintoff, at the height of his political power, to turn the grass roots of his own party into a fully-fledged working class movement had such a limited and short-lasting impact. The only lasting vestiges of his efforts which persist are side-lined within the confines of 'old labour'.

As noted above, there are other chapters in this volume which, despite their interesting and informative content, could not be reviewed in this brief account due to space limitations. There are chapters about the different life stages (childhood, youth, ageing), politics (parties, elections, and governance), social policy (gender, sexuality, crime, social exclusion and social control) and other contemporary issues (tourism, demography, race relations and the environment). They all include a wealth of objective data which is highly relevant for anyone interested in Malta. Most of the papers were written by sociologists working in different departments at the University of Malta.

On a personal note: since change is the leitmotif of this volume, I would like to note the remarkable change which sociology has undergone since I started lecturing in it many years ago. It is deeply gratifying to witness its development in our university from a relatively unknown subject – often confused with social philosophy – into a fully-fledged academic discipline. The editors of this volume, along with the authors of its papers (including some of my former students) deserve praise for rendering such a valuable service to sociology and to Maltese society.

* An earlier, amended version of this article was published in the *Escape* magazine of *The Sunday Times of Malta* (16th October 2016).