

3.3 The Social Class in Malta: Still our Daily Bread?

GODFREY BALDACCHINO

This paper resurrects 'the social class' debate, after frequent allusions to the 'middle class' by the (now) Prime Minister of Malta in the 2013 general election campaign. A recent and timely study of social class in the United Kingdom may now also shed some useful light on the unfolding and transformation of social class/es in contemporary Malta. The topic goes beyond bread and circuses.

Preamble

There are two, strikingly different reasons why I am here flogging what some may consider to be a dead horse.

First, Prime Minister Joseph Muscat made the "middle class" a focus of his successful 2013 general election campaign. Tacking to the political centre to woo disgruntled Nationalist voters, but without alienating his hard core sympathisers, he reiterated time and time again that the policies of a new Labour Government would help the middle class – to progress; even to create "a new middle class" that would guide the country to a new prosperity. He would be speaking in Maltese and yet use the phrase "Middle Class" in English, suggesting some degree of symbolic and iconic value. (To be fair, Muscat also spoke about the need to provide opportunities to the increasing number of workers/families in the precariat (see more below) to improve their 'life chances'.)

Second is the publication of a recent journal article, the first of a series, that is analysing the results of what is, thanks to modern information and communication technology, the most extensive study of social class in the United Kingdom, based on 161,400 responses to a 2011 BBC web-based survey dedicated to this topic (Savage, et al., 2013). One of the co-authors of this article, Professor Fiona Devine, at the University of Manchester, is the visiting external examiner to the Department of Sociology at the University of Malta.

Like bread, social class used to be the staple fare: the bread and butter of sociological analysis. No self-respecting social commentator could avoid referring to the term; moreover, 'the working class' was the siren call of many left-of-centre parties and governments up until the late 1970s.

Things then started to change. Like bread, the item has been overtaken by events and developments. Our cuisine has been enriched and rendered more complex by various new ingredients – sweet potatoes, anyone? – and even the nature of bread has changed to reflect new tastes and dietary preferences – would you like yours whole-wheat? Likewise, new social cleavages and markers of distinction – gender, ethnicity, queer studies – have come to dominate social research. Globalisation, deindustrialisation, deregulation, neo-liberalism and subcontracting sent the traditional working class into a tailspin from which it has not yet recovered, and perhaps never will. The research spotlight now is more likely to fall on immigrants, homosexuals, single parents, pensioners, youth, or those with a disability. Class, like the white industrial urban proletariat that spawned the concern in the first place, seems to be on the way out, a decadent and redundant brand, with few tears being shed. It became possible to critique society without referring to class at all, and get away with it. Indeed, man (*sic*) does not live by bread alone.

And yet, the brand has considerable staying power: it still excites, evokes reactions, generates conversation and invites polemic. In this brief article, I will engage with the principles of social class research in Malta, explain their relevance to our changing labour market, and offer some signposts for future local studies. Moreover, as someone who has dabbled in writing about social class, I am especially interested in how the insights emerging from the UK study can shed light on similar socio-economic and occupational transformations in Malta.

Seven Social Classes in Britain

The Great British Class Survey (GBCS) departs from a three-way classification of the components of social class: *economic* (savings, income, value of one's property, if any); *cultural* (leisure, musical, eating and holiday tastes, as well as educational qualifications); and *social* (number of social contacts reported from a range of occupations; and the social status associated with these). In this respect, it opts for a more Weberian approach to social class (though there is not explicit political capital category) and is strongly influenced by

Bourdieu-type concerns with capital, whether economic, cultural or social, as power resources. The GBCS is also inductive: hence, it builds its social classes, and the rationale behind them, as they arise out of the data, using “latent class analysis”. There are no *a priori* assumptions about how many social classes there should be, and how they should be divided.

The result is seven social classes: interestingly, seven is also the magic number at the basis of the ‘Goldthorpe class schema’ that reflects the employment structure in the UK of the mid-1970s.

Some of these classes are carry-overs from the past; others emergent from contemporary labour conditions; and others still finally identifiable, not because they are new, but because they could not be identified effectively in previous studies that had to deal with much fewer respondents. Briefly:

- *An elite*: rich, owning expensive property, commanding significant savings, well connected, graduated, engaged in professional or senior managerial work, enjoying the theatre, the arts, classical music, and overseas holidays;
- *An established middle class*: well paid, decent savings, well connected, graduated, possibly of ethnic extraction, engaged in managerial occupations (including the civil service), liking mainstream ‘highbrow’ culture but also “emerging cultural capital”: say, dining at ethnic restaurants, enjoying rock music, and maintaining a facebook page.
- *A technical middle class*: prosperous, very well connected but with occupational groups of a lower status, suggesting social isolation; mainly engaged in scientific and technical work;
- *New affluent workers*: with moderate income, high property values, high “emerging cultural capital”, mainly coming from non-middle class backgrounds;
- *Traditional working class*: moderately poor, modest savings, but own their own homes; not well connected, and overwhelmingly engaged in traditional working class occupations;
- *Emergent service workers*: relatively young, engaged in sport, music and internet activities; moderately connected; but can only afford to rent and stay in inexpensive houses with their limited savings; and
- *A precariat*: economically poor, hardly any savings, likely to rent, unlikely to have attended university, possibly unemployed or engaged in insecure employment or self-employment.

In the UK context, it is possible to determine the relative geographical concentration of these classes in terms of specific regions: such as the affluent South-East, the rust belt in Northern England, or the peripheries of North Wales and Northern Scotland.

Somewhat Similar in Malta ...

The Maltese situation is, in some respects, comparable. In spite of the small country size, certain residential areas have a significantly higher graduate presence than others: a tracer survey had identified 'the Three Towns' (Attard, Balzan, Lija) and 'the Three Cities' (Cospicua, Senglea, Vittoriosa) at the opposite ends of this scale (Baldacchino, 1997). The expansion of tertiary education at the University of Malta and MCAST has led to high levels of young educated workers with high cultural and high social capital - but not necessarily high economic capital: only a few professions and management grades (medical doctors? CEOs of large organisations?) can claim to command high economic resources; in most others, the situation is mixed. Just having a professional degree or licence is no guarantee to an above-average salary; just as it is no guarantee that you will secure a job that is a good fit with your professional training. Size of firm is one key variable here: the smaller the employing firm, the less likely that one can deploy one's specialisation or command above-average salaries. As in other liberal democracies, the price to be paid for expanding access to higher education is a condition of over- and mis-qualification; a growing gap between educational competence and actual job expectations and requirements.

Malta, like Britain, has also witnessed the rise of new affluent workers. These are mainly associated with new occupational segments, especially those reflecting the rise of a new semi-professional and technical class – such as software developers, information technology specialists – who may be employed or self-employed, are typically well paid yet have working class backgrounds. We need to look mainly at MCAST as the main vehicle for the emergence of this occupational cluster.

At the other end of the labour market, and while the conditions of the salariat improve and are protected by (and including European Union) labour law, part-timers and contract employees may experience fairly insecure working conditions. Hire and fire practices, with minimal employee protection, can be rife in the more loosely supervised and regulated segments of the labour

market: youths, women, the underqualified, and family members working in small, family-run businesses are likely to bear the brunt of these practices.

... Yet Somewhat Different

But then the Maltese situation is also somewhat different from the one prevailing in the UK. Indeed, should a study similar to the 2011 GBCS be undertaken in Malta, we can confidently expect a much higher response rate, in proportional terms: 161,400 out of a population of 62 million in the UK is just a 0.25% sample, achievable in Malta with a sample of 1,042 respondents: the typical size of locally run weekend poll.

Most local social scientists who have articulated their views on social class – some of their work is provided in the bibliography – have considered the tough specificity question: to what extent can we validly deploy the social class concept into the Maltese context? Or, put differently, what aspects of the local oblige an idiosyncratic rendering of social class? Although approaching this quandary from different perspectives, there is a fair degree of agreement that social class in Malta begs its own structure, and analysis.

- First of all, we need to remind ourselves of *the historical absence of a local industrial proletariat*; Malta has always been a primarily service economy. Even though, amongst the world's small island states, Malta has been fairly successful in attracting foreign industrial capital, we have never had more than 30% of the workforce engaged in manufacturing. Most of the workers at the Dockyards/Drydocks/Shipyards, hailed as the 'aristocracy of labour' in their heyday, were, technically speaking, service workers (shiprepair is a service industry; shipbuilding is manufacturing). Even so, the manufacturing star has waned: in 2011, it contributed about 18% of GDP, and 15% of all employment in Malta; half the comparable figures from 1980.
- Second, is the *considerable status overlap* that many working Maltese practise habitually: a condition described by Delia (1994, pp. 473-4) as a 'total labour supply function' where, say, a full-time public servant may also be employed in another job (usually, part-time) or even be self-employed. Multiple paid jobs are common, though more so for men than women (both are now breadwinners; but she still bears the brunt of home and family management). This easily places many Maltese in contradictory class locations, at least from an employment perspective.

- Third, is the (again considerable) proportion of Maltese who are *engaged in small and micro enterprises* (with up to 10 employees), typically run by family members or close associates. Informal labour relations prevail here; and word of mouth agreements dominate. Working conditions may be tough; but authority, discipline and supervision may be lax. Around a third of all employees (and various self-employed) in Malta – around 50,000 persons – operate in such circumstances.
- Fourth, and noting the very specific challenge of undocumented migrants who land on our shores, we could now claim to have a *distinct and specific underclass of immigrants* who often operate in the underground economy and with minimal rights and safeguards.
- Fifth, and moving from occupational to socio-political capital, who can afford not to *cultivate connections* that (could) translate into special concessions or privileges? Most Maltese are, and make it a point to be, zero degrees of separation away from those perceived as power holders or power brokers (and including politicians). A dense social field, low social distance, and a relatively large political elite (65 members of parliament; hundreds of local councillors, plus various other hopeful candidates and party apparatchiks) suggests that a friend in the right place is priceless: *ahjar habib fis-suq milli mitt skud fis-senduq*. With a state apparatus that is all pervasive, and still responsible directly or indirectly for almost one third of all employment and so much value added – indeed, does ‘civil society’ exist in Malta, except to lobby or exploit the state and its largesse? – this sounds like a shrewd and rational strategy. (The Maltese know which side their bread is buttered on.) Whereas, in a society like Britain, connections are most likely only or largely with members of one’s own class (and as confirmed by the GBCS study), and thus can be used to define one’s class position, the situation in Malta is probably more fluid and dynamic.

This alluring promise of access to power, conflicting world views, and the weakening of manufacturing, suggests that most Maltese prefer being clever and wily manipulators rather than outright proletarians. Theirs is a lite sympathy with the class label. This may be the rationale behind the lingering high levels of trade union affiliation in Malta – around 50% of all workers are still members of at least one union – in spite of the decline in the traditional recruitment grounds for trade unions.

Mario Vella (2010) has interpreted Joseph Muscat's middle class pitch as an appeal for a shared vision of the future; and not so much about one's location in a class structure. Presumably, and wiser after the 2013 election result, this is a vision of a broad swath of the electorate that feels that it has been pinched from various ends and has decided that it has been pinched enough: by a higher cost of living, by lower purchasing power, by a decadent and self-absorbed political elite. These voters have had their bread taken out of their mouth. In this light, the middle class, Vella tells us, is an "interpellation", a subject produced by social forces and whose members need not share social origins or conditions. Whether, *pace* Daphne Caruana Galizia (2010), we eat pizza (a modern-day rendering of bread) or steak, we can all be members of this disgruntled majority.

Even Dr Muscat's current definition of the middle class is explicitly anchored in the sphere of consumption and conceptualisations of one's livelihood; a far cry from the 'workerism' of 'Old Labour', barely 20 years ago (Briguglio, 2001). The company manager, the educated public servant, the hotel waitress and the call centre operator can break bread together, and hope for better times.

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