Why do the Maltese ask so few questions?

Jeremy Boissevain*

** This is the substance of a short talk Prof. Boissevain gave on July 19th, 1968 to the elementary and secondary school teachers attending refresher courses held at the Mater Admirabilis Teacher College at Tal Virtu'. It appeared in an edition of "Ferment" that same year. It is reprinted in this context with the author's permission, and is followed first by four responses written specifically for this issue of "Education", and then by Professor Boissevain's reaction to these responses.*

Persons who have taught in Malta as well as abroad, whether at university, training college, or secondary school level, often remark that Maltese students as compared to foreign students ask virtually no questions. This disturbs them: the only sign a teacher has that his students are actually thinking is when they ask questions. Faith in the infallibility of a teacher is possibly necessary with very young children. With older students, however, such faith is perhaps touching but it is a sign that the students have not yet learned to think for themselves. In short that they have not yet learned to ask questions. In Malta there are, of course, as many intelligent people as there are anywhere else in the world. Nonetheless, the views of the teachers indicated above as well as those expressed by some of the contributors to *Ferment* (see the Editorial, and article by Lino Spiteri in *Ferment* May 1968) all suggest that there is a dearth of active intellectual discussion in Malta. In short that there is little awareness of the Maltese proverb: *Il-Mistoqsija oħt il-għerf,* 'The question is the sister of wisdom'. Why should this be so?

As I am a sociologist, I shall try to give a sociological answer to this question.

In Malta there are a number of social and cultural obstacles which prevent the asking of questions. One might say that this is always so in a small, traditional island society. But this begs the question. There are, I believe, at least four important factors which stifle the enquiring mind in Malta. These are the colonial heritage, the hierarchy of infallibility, the smallness of scale, and the language barrier. I shall discuss them in this order.

By the colonial heritage I mean the social and cultural legacy left by the long line of paternalistic foreign rulers who governed Malta's affairs until 1964. These rulers, whether Romans, Arabs, Knights or British, often provided the basic necessities of life. That is, they arranged for the importation of scarce foodstuffs and provided a certain amount of employment. Nonetheless, they all wielded big sticks that made discussion with with them very one sided. This inequality of power has encouraged in Malta a tradition of dependency on outsiders and their culture. This is still evident today in the dutiful preference for anything that is foreign, whether clothing, manners, or language. It is widely believed that if something is foreign it is better.

Besides the unquestioning acceptance of what is foreign, there is another important colonial legacy. People were not encouraged to ask questions. The *status quo* had to be preserved. When critical problems were formulated, they were passed upwards. Decisions were handed down by the foreign elite who monopolised the right and ability to ask and to answer questions. Asking questions might jeopardise the *status quo* and therefore questioning was curtailed. If the questioning of basic colonial premises took place it was suppressed by the superior power of the colonial rulers. This is just what happened in the past during the (therefore) brief periods of self-government. When the representatives of the people began not only to ask questions but to demand answers, the constitution was simply suspended, and governor's rule reimposed (1903, 1930, 1933, 1958). In short, during the colonial period a premium was placed upon dependency, submission and conformity without questioning. This frame of mind is still firmly rooted in all segments of Maltese society. That it is so is really quite understandable after so many centuries of paternalistic foreign rule.

The second major obstacle to asking questions is what I have called the hierarchy of infallibility. By this I mean that Malta is by and large a hierarchically organised society. It is believed that the views of persons who occupy superior position should not be questioned. If a person is superior in rank or office he is therefore right. This is an attitude which permeates Maltese society. This attitude is obviously partly derived from the recent colonial past; but it also derives from the very strong position of the Church. Both colonial powers and the Church are hierarchically organised institutions. Neither are institutions which tolerate questioning. The commands, sermons, ex-cathedra pronouncements, and, alas, the traditional practice of lecturing to students, allow little room for discussion. Discussion after all is no more than the asking and answering of questions.

New ideas usually enter institutions with young people who question the established order controlled by the older generation. The older generation usually has a vested interest in maintaining things as they are. These questions are thus healthy. They must be listened to and answered. In a hierarchy this does not usually take place. Those who have superior positions take decisions which their subordinates are expected to obey. Questioning is regarded as insubordination. Insubordination is punished. Again we see a premium placed upon conformity; a person who asks no questions is not punished.

The third reason why questioning is difficult in Malta is the island's smallness. The hierarchy of infallibility and the strength of the colonial heritage is based partly on this smallness of scale. In Malta each person is at the centre of a large network of people whom he knows, and of whom many know each other. Unusual behaviour or ideas are quickly made known throughout this network. *Malta żgħira imma n-nies magħrufa,* 'Malta may be small but its people are well known', notes the proverb. This points clearly to the high degree of social visibility people in Malta have: it is difficult if not impossible to be anonymous. Most people want others to be like themselves. Certainly they do not want to see them shine or rise above them. Consequently those who ask questions and express new ideas are quickly set upon. Through the network of gossiping relatives, neighbours, and friends these people are pressured into conformity. I need not tell you that this pressure is intense in Malta. It is strongest in the villages and the long established neighbourhoods of the towns and cities where everyone knows everyone else and almost everything they do or think. It is for this reason that students from the villages often find it more difficult to develop a questioning frame of mind than persons, say, from Sliema, where a person can remain relatively anonymous. Persons who live in villages are so used to having each word weighed and filed away for immediate or future use against themselves that they are extremely cautious about expressing opinions which differ. All Maltese face this problem in various measures, for you all have a wide range of contacts all of whom expect you to behave and to think the way they think you should. If you don't they apply pressure. Such a restrictive environment works against asking questions.

The language barrier provides the final and perhaps the most serious obstacle to questioning. To ask questions you must be able to express yourself. In Malta the teaching of all subjects, with the exception of religion and Maltese, is carried out in English. English, however, is spoken and understood imperfectly, especially in the primary schools. Consequently the subject matter itself is generally imperfectly understood. Thus when pupils or students think about their subjects or discuss them informally, they do so in Maltese. Yet if students wish to ask formal questions about their subjects or challenge any ideas, they must do so in English, a foreign language which those they challenge (teachers, superiors) speak better than they. Consequently those who are challenged can dominate the discussion due to their superior knowledge of the language in which the discussions must be carried out. It follows that those whose command of English is not adequate simply do not dare or are not able to ask questions, a situation which reinforces the hierarchy of infallibility.

Furthermore, I suggest that because of the inadequate comprehension of English, students of many primary and secondary schools are placed at a further disadvantage. Basic subjects are inadequately taught, not only because the students do not understand everything, but also almost every lesson becomes at least partly an English lesson. This takes valuable time away from vital subjects.

It is also often claimed that it is important for everybody to speak English because so few people in the world speak Maltese. For this reason, it is argued you must begin to learn English early. Is this the real reason for trying to learn English in the primary school? Holland is also a small country but the teaching of English, German, and French begins in secondary schools. The chief reason it is started so early in Malta, I suggest, is to be able to pass the Civil Service examinations which require a detailed knowledge of English. This requirement was imposed by the English rulers so that employees could carry out their official correspondence in English. This was necessary so that the British could understand what was going on. Conditions have changed. The British have gone. Those who have replaced them, the elected government and the civil servants, all read Maltese and speak it to each other. Why should the early teaching of English not now be abolished?

I suggest that especially at the primary and secondary school level the teaching and learning of basic subjects would be improved immensely if teaching were carried out in Maltese rather than English. It is worth noting that this has long been recognised by the Church in Malta, which wisely insisted that the teaching of religion should be carried out in the language of the country. English could be taught as a foreign language during the last two years of the primary school and, intensively, throughout secondary school. This would provide (as it does in Holland) the knowledge of English required for commercial and governmental contacts with the outside world, contacts with tourists, and the language knowledge that students would require at the secondary and university level.

The point I wish to stress is that if Maltese were to become the language of instruction and discussion at the primary school level, children would be able to formulate questions in their own language. This is after all the language in which they think and in which they discuss with friends and colleagues. Questioning could then begin at an early age.

The traditional emphasis on English is part of the colonial heritage. It was taught so that commands of the English rulers, who refused to learn Maltese, could be widely understood. These rulers have gone now. Surely it is not logical to defend the inadequate teaching of basic subjects such as mathematics and history in the primary schools by arguing, as is so frequently done, that it helps to teach English to future emigrants? Should the educational policy of a country with limited resources be formulated in order to give greater benefits to those who leave rather than to those who remain?

Thus I end by posing a question. It is one which only you can answer. To do so you will have to ask many other questions. I have indicated certain

obstacles to the asking of questions; undoubtedly there are others. Once, however, you become aware of obstacles, I think it becomes possible to overcome them. Independent Malta is faced with new problems which call for careful planning. It is up to you to lay the basis for this through stimulating teachers, colleagues, and students to ask questions. Insist that you get an answer, and don't accept the answer without questioning. The key to planning is, after all, merely the ability to ask intelligent questions about the future.

Contemporary responses to Jeremy Boissevain's 1968 paper by: Dr. Alfred Sant, Prof. Ch. Farrugia, Prof. J. Friggieri and Prof. P. Serracino Inglott.

Alfred Sant
"On putting questions to Ivory Idols"

Is Professor Jeremy Boissevain's article "Why do the Maltese ask so few questions?" (dateline July 1968) still relevant? The article appeared in *Ferment,* a University students' magazine which was published during the second half of the sixties. The question presupposes that the article's conclusions were relevant at the time they appeared.

Boissevain's article did highlight features of social communication and control among us that inhibit the asking of questions -- not least in the educational context. Quite prudently, the article stopped short of relating these features to some overall view of the internal organisation of our society. This would presumably have led to a description of the distribution of influence and power between different Maltese classes and strata, to which then, Boissevain's listing of colonial, hierarchical, smallness and language effects could have been tied. These conditioned the ways by which inquisitive and critical thinking/ communication was inhibited, *given the existing distribution of power, prestige and social influence.*

The magazine *Ferment* itself is an instance of what I have in mind. It was set up around mid-1965 by a group of students, six to seven, one of whom I was. We told ourselves we wanted to promote "independent expression", with a society to back these aims. We launched the first initiatives -- debates in public and issue of *Ferment* -- on an *ad hoc* basis organisationally. Then in mid-1966, we held the first open general meeting to "democratically" elect a proper committee.

That meeting was swamped by student seminarists, all dressed in black, who had never come to any of our meetings before, or showed any interest in what we were doing. All those who had launched the original venture were swept away by a block vote, which we later learnt had been mounted against "the socialists". Well over half of our original number were nationalist or non-commited. Some Jesuit and seminarist students had helped us with the preparatory work; they would known about the coming block vote but never warned us. Subsequently, the publication of *Ferment* lost steam, while public debates were quietly dropped by the new committee, whose members were not much interested in the venture anyway.

The hierarchy of infallibility described by Boissevain, reflected then the fact that social and economic power in Maltese society has traditionally belonged to trading, professional and priestly classes, within the context of the foreign colonial rule also mentioned by Boissevain. Not surprisingly, the dominant strata sought to maintain their influence from generation to generation, by ensuring wide acceptance of the *status quo*. The language question (also in a way featured by Boissevain) revolved around ongoing attempts by the privileged traditional classes to restrict the rest of the population to very limited codes of communication and action. Such restriction would then, by default, promote the maintenance of traditional forms of power.

In this context, critical and inquisitive thinking was tantamount to subversion. Moreover, due to the smallness of the local economy (another of Boissevain's listed factors), the major scope for upward mobility was provided by the civil service. Its very structure reinforced the need for submissive and acquiescent attitudes. Almost always, lower class entrants into the civil service were coopted as supporters of the traditional establishment though theoretically on the basis of their social origins, they should have been antagonistic to its interests.

The point I am trying to make is that Boissevain's description then and now, could only be considered relevant if put in a wider "political" perspective. Thus, the large majority in the group which had launched *Ferment* came from working class to lower middle class families, with no social or family links to clerical and professional networks.

The traditional establishment needed to inhibit critical thinking and had the means to do so. Its forms of social control, although usually falling short of visible coercion, were in Malta extensive and clearly authoritarian in character.

Perhaps inevitably in the circumstances, to be successful, attempts to promote the asking of questions, and therefore to subvert the basis of influence, wealth and power, needed an authoritarian and monolithic component. Assuming that critical thinking and action could develop through well-meaning efforts to encourage spontaneous, grass roots debate was a very naive idea, and doomed to failure, as the *Ferment* experiment demonstrated on a small scale.

So, 22 years or so after publication of Boissevain's article, how have matters changed?

The seventies and eighties undoubtedly witnessed a shift and an erosion of the social power of the privileged trading, clerical and professional

classes. This happened mainly due to government sponsored reform, that partly relied on authoritarian methods of conception and implementation. The final links with the colonial past were severed, although many features of neo-colonialism are still alive and well. The growth and redistribution of social welfare transfers provided the working class with a new resilience, while industrial and tourist development opened up Maltese contacts with the outside world. State initiative and controls diminished somewhat the autonomy of the trading and clerical interests. There was a distinct widening of those strata of the populations having some access to position of decision making and influence.

These developments led to new problems. In and of itself, social change creates disorientation and resistance among people who have to alter lifestyles and thought habits because of it. In Malta, reforms that were conceived or implemented inadequately increased the disorientation and resistance. Moreover, upward mobility ironically served to promote conservative views among people who had just benefited from social reforms. Since they now had acquired something to lose . . .

Most importantly, the traditional power elites did not allow themselves to be cowed by the ongoing social change. They regrouped and modernised their approach. Where formerly they used to dominate by manipulating cabals of notables, now they exert their influence through mass mobilisation and extensive public relations. Their language has been updated to incorporate pluralistic human right platforms, combined with clerical callsigns, designed to keep in line different segments of public opinion. Thus the traditional elites have been very successful in coopting newly emerging, upwardly mobile strata.

The wide ranging tension created by the swift attack on the roots of traditional power during the seventies, and the response to this attack, have led to the contemporary forms of political polarisation. The latter has always existed in our society; indeed it reflects the continuing struggle to dilute the status and power of traditional elites. Today, as in the sixties, people who declare their hand one way or the other -- by asking questions, for instance -- understand that this approach carries its own penalties and rewards, not least in the educational context. As in the sixties, the strategies of personal interaction and presentation that students adopt in classes and elsewhere, will reflect their perception of the penalties they will have to pay, and the rewards they are likely to get for their critical or non-critical stances.

The fact is that the educational establishment is still dominated by representatives of traditional world views and interests. They protect and reward like minded students, at the same time that by their attitudes, they inhibit the open development of views that are critical of the perspectives and interests they hold. In this sense, and despite the rhetoric, May 1987 did not represent a turning point, one way or the other. To illustrate my point concretely, I will mention two cases, one happening prior, the other following the last election.

In 1986 I was asked to serve as an additional examiner for a first degree dissertation at the University, on Maltese international relations. I have rarely seen a work that was so badly drafted from the technical and academic points of view; the thesis also happened to be a very inadequate restatement of partisan journalistic outpourings in the right wing press. The main examiner wanted to give this "dissertation" an A; I wanted to fail it and gave a detailed explanation for my conclusion. That explanation was ignored and I was interpreted as acting on partisan political grounds. I believe that student got his A.

In 1989, as editor of the quarterly policy magazine *Society*, I received an interesting and unsolicited contribution on the local educational system, from a youth whom I did not know but who seemed to have something valid and heartfelt to say. Following some editing, his script was approved for publication. He then contacted me to ask whether he could withdraw his article; he had liked the editing very much, but had just been accepted as a student at the University, and obviously was afraid that his article in *Society* could affect his academic chances negatively.

The mechanisms of control and indoctrination in the educational field remain totally dominated by traditional interests. These still view the momentum for change as a naive and resistible extension of Leoporello's complaints and aspirations: "Notte e giorno faticar /Per chi nulla sa gradir, /Piova e vento supportar /Mangiar male a mal dormir! / Voglio fare il gentiluomo /E non voglio piu servir..."

In short run, critical attitudes -- questions -- will not be allowed unless they can be manipulated for public relations purposes. In the medium run, people will be pushing for a rigorous analysis of the way by which the clerical, trading and professional interests have found it possible to undermine the basis on which social reform could be launched in the seventies.

For those who may feel uncertain about such a conclusion, let it be stressed that we are still fully in the territory first charted by Boissevain in his 1968 *Ferment* article, where he enquired why the Maltese ask so few questions ...

Charles Farrugia

Professor Boissevain's observations are basically still valid today. However, twenty-two years later, I would change the question to "Why do the Maltese ask the wrong questions?", a tendency which applies to Educational issues as to others. Consider, for example, the current discussion on professional status for teachers. The questions asked do not seek answers of substance, such as: "What

are the characteristics of a professional occupation? Which are the special qualities that distinguish professional from non-professional teaching? Do all Maltese teachers operate to the required standards? Can teachers lose their professional status as well as gain it?" Instead, one hears: "Do teachers get a salary rise with their professional status? Will professional status for teachers disrupt the relativity scale in the civil service? Why is so-and-so entitled to the Teacher's Warrant and I am not?" Many questions are asked, most relate to personal rather than universal concerns.

The causes identified by Professor Boissevain still apply, although some have evolved with time and social change. The colonial inheritance survives to the extent that we still regard foreign ideas and products as superior to local ones, even when it is not the case. The school curriculum is one distinct example. Over the years, the Maltese educational system adopted without question curricula that originated in Britain, in the belief that anything which stems from the home of the colonisers has to be unquestionably "good". Since Independence, curriculum changes have been only cosmetic due to a combined attitude of dependency and laissez-faire. It was the policy of the colonisers to imbue the colonised with a sense of submission reinforced by material and cultural dependency. Undoubtedly, the discouraging of pertinent questions formed part of the strategy and many Maltese whose employment depended on the British learned to serve without question. It was a mutually convenient arrangement: the masters did not have to justify their orders, the locals simply followed the rules. In case of misshaps, the latter could not be held accountable. It is not surprising that the mentality survived among those civil servants who had been trained to act precisely that way. It is depressing and self-defeating though, that the avoidance of accountability and haphazard work ethic have become a way of life for too large a number of young public and private employees. Twenty-five years after Independence, the accusing finger cannot be pointed to the wicked ways of the ex-colonial power. We have to ask the right penetrating questions, and seek the correct, even if painful answers.

Professor Boissevain will want, I am certain, to review his analysis of the strength of paternalism and authority in Malta. A decade-and-a-half dedicated to socialist egalitarianism coupled with ten years of nationalist civil disobedience have weakened considerably the local base of authority. The former aimed to obliterate the influence and power of the Church and the so-called ruling class, the latter to undermine the authority of the party in power. Both movements were profoundly successful to the extent that Government Ministers now bemoan "citizens' arrogance". Similarly, parents complain of children's insubordination, teachers of students' indiscipline, priests of people's irreverence, and husbands of women's lib. One could regard these as healthy developments which point to a less docile, more socially aware community, indicators of a mature society that questions the *status quo* in order to improve the social, moral, cultural, economic and physical environment. In truth, however, the questioning smacks more of contentious selfish bargaining than a genuine desire to enhance the community's lot. The tendency is very evident in education where the questions asked do not attempt to penetrate through and establish principles, but to make comparisons, often odious ones. Such questions as "Who is he to tell me what and how to teach, his foreign Ph.D has no relevance to the local situation!", or "Why should her children attend a private school/junior lyceum and not mine?" should be replaced by an honest evaluation of the expert's views and proposals, or a critical analysis of education that is best suited to one's children. Are many Maltese suffering from a severe bout of envy? I suspect so.

The factor of scale, the fact that we Maltese live a fish bowl existence, where everybody practically knows, or knows about everyone else, still plays a prominent part in our social relationships. Often we do not ask penetrating questions as we believe we already know the answer. In our transparent society, it is very hard to keep a secret, and I suggest that it is always very unwise to lie: people either will soon get to know the truth, or they will make it up!

The small scale factor has another dimension which was not so pronounced in 1968. Since then Malta has taken on many national and international obligations, an ever increasing array of tasks and duties which need to be performed regardless of the limited material and human resources. The situation raises questions of priorities: what needs to be done first, what can be left till later. However, the questions asked and the resulting answers reveal a predominant concern with issues that carry strong propaganda appeal. In the educational field, for example, free books, free meals, free transport continue to consume vast sums of education revenue and valuable energy, when the scarce human and material resources can be devoted to improve teaching personnel, curriculum development, sophisticated assessment procedures, more and better remedial education, etc. Do we dare ask the right questions to establish the real priorities?

There was a period in the '70s when it was unpatriotic to speak any language but Maltese. At all levels of schooling, including lecturing at University, everyone was expected to use the vernacular. The practice did not inhibit students from asking the wrong questions. Basically however, Professor Boissevain is correct, for in spite of the wider spread (not necessarily a better quality) of English, many Maltese students are not comfortable speaking a foreign language. I wonder, however, whether this really is a question of language deficiency or whether it reflects attitudes emerging from a weak education. Professor Boissevain hints as much in his last paragraph. We have come a long way in education, but we still have a long way to go precisely because

we have been asking the wrong questions. We have neglected to ask "What is the best type or types of education that our country needs? And how can we best provide it?" Instead we have been saying "How can we expand our educational system? How can we provide more school buildings regardless how ill-maintained; how can we employ more teachers, regardless whether they are sufficiently qualified; how can we keep more young people at school longer regardless of the quality of schooling they receive?" In asking the the wrong questions, we have neglected to seek the right answers. As a result a large section of our young people feel alienated from schools, another large portion regard the process of schooling as most irrelevant, and a high proportion of the rest are filled with book, inert knowledge, conditions which do not encourage any questioning, least of all critical questioning. The great pity of it all is that we all mean well, our short-comings are benign not malicious. I suspect they result from our fear to face the truth about the real extent of our limitations. By not asking questions, or asking the wrong ones, we need never face the stark truth.

Joe Friggieri

I think that, by and large, Professor Boissevain's analysis is still relevant today, twenty-two years after its publication. One further reason which might be added to the four he suggests is the negative influence exercised in this respect by the media, especially newspapers, radio and television.

Our newspapers all serve the narrow interests of their owners. They are dogmatic in their views, sectarian in approach, and leave no room for intelligent and informed debate. Those which are not directly controlled by a political party rely so heavily on advertising that they are not likely to shine as examples of radical thinking. As long as there is a steady supply of juicy apples, nobody will feel a strong urge to upset the apple-cart.

A specific example will clarify this point. In the past fifteen or twenty years Malta's leading newspapers in the English language have thrived on the revenue of property dealers, estate agents and land speculators, all savagely competing for advertising space. How can such newspapers consistently and convincingly promote the view (editorially or otherwise) that Malta just cannot tolerate so much 'development'? And yet this is one of the questions which ought to be raised and discussed as a matter of urgent national interest. The indiscriminate buying and selling of agricultural land for building purposes, the greed of speculators in the tourist business, the total lack of concern for areas of natural beauty and sites of outstanding historical interest, are hidden under the glossy facade of property advertising and full-colour supplements displaying the luxury of new five-star hotels and tourist "complexes".

The destruction of the Maltese countryside, the privatisation of long stretches of the Maltese coast, the rape of Gozo and the villages, are all taken for granted, accepted as inevitable, perhaps even desirable aspects of economic growth. The feeble voice of those who dare ask the critical question is drowned by the cacophony of a horde of traders selling their wares on the free market. The cards are too heavily stacked against the question-raisers.

The same and more can be said about our State-controlled radio and television, whose efficacy as means of propaganda for offical government policy has been tested over the years and never found wanting. Questions may be asked on our broadcasting media, provided they fall within the framework of party-political diatribe. Outside that framework there is very little room for criticism. In-depth, investigative journalism is as rare as smooth roads. New ideas for reform, or for a radical change of course beyond the given parameters, are conveniently discarded either as unimportant (not of "current" or "topical" interest) or as too controversial to be aired in public. State bureaucracy is allowed to get on with its oppressive, systematic inefficiency at the expense of the bewildered, tax-paying citizen. The same applies to private firms and parastatal bodies in their dealings with clients. Many 'services' are offered, but means of redress for jobs badly done are practically non-existent. Hospitals, public transport, telephones, customs, licencing offices, infrastructural works, bear the marks of sheer disorder and crass inefficiency. Delays at the law-courts form part of our folklore: *Meta tidħol taf, meta toħroġ ma tafx.*

So here is one major problem - bureaucratic inefficiency at all levels and failure to provide a quick remedy against injustice - which the media can tackle for the benefit of the common citizen. Instead, they prefer to follow the example of the three monkeys who saw no evil, heard no evil, and spoke no evil. That story has its local variant in the popular maxim of Maltese conventional wisdom *Rajt ma rajtx, smajt ma smajtx.*

In many countries viewers and listeners are given the opportunity to air their grievances. The media play an important role as agents of change and social reform by providing a forum for popular criticism. Not in Malta. Here facile assumptions are made about such fictions as the "mentality of the Maltese" or "the likes and dislikes of the man-in-the-street", on the basis of which those who control broadcasting decide what should or should not be shown.

As a result, very few official policies or decisions get challenged or discussed.

Sociological factors have militated in the past, and to a large extent still do, to discourage Maltese from asking questions. This is clearly and convincingly shown by Professor Boissevain. Better use of the media might help us overcome some of the obstacles he mentions, and lead to a state of affairs where all

matters of public concern are freely and openly discussed.

Peter Serracino Inglott

Professor Boissevain's question: "Why do the Maltese ask so few questions?" seems to assume that there is a simple (and known) answer to the question: "What is a question?"

Let me say at once that I am not raising this point as a philosopher out of admiration for that arch-questioner, Socrates. Quite the contrary. It comes rather out of my direct experience of the reform of religion-teaching in the early sixties. An important aspect of that reform, commended by Prof. Boissevain, was the use of Maltese, instead of English, as linguistic medium. Another was the substitution of the question-and-answer format of the traditional post-Tridentine catechism with a method derived from Cardijn's See-Reflect-Act pedagogy originally conceived for his young workers' movement.

In that context, the question to be faced was, in a way, the converse of that posed by Prof. Boissevain - not "why do pupils ask their teachers so few questions?", but rather "why do teachers ask their pupils so many questions?" The shift from the first to the second question practically forces one to distinguish between kinds of question. Anthony Xerri, a Maltese researcher working in the United States, found out empirically that no less than sixty per cent of the utterances of a teacher in a one-hour lesson were cast in the grammatical form of questions; but almost all were rhetorical. The teacher trundled out all the proper answers, and the pupils were expected to learn them. The question-form, as in the catechism, was not a stimulant to inquisitiveness, but rather an instrument of dogmatism.

This may be so with questioning of teachers by students no less than of students by teachers. Another Maltese writer who has devoted some attention to the art of questioning, Edward De Bono, has espoused the categorisation of questions into two main classes: the 'hunter' and the ' fisherman' types. The hunter shoots with a precise and definite target; the fisherman casts about without knowing precisely which fish will bite, if any. Now had we Maltese asked Prof. Boissevain lots of "hunting" questions, would this not have lent rather more powerful support to his four hypotheses (about the effects of colonialism, hierarchism, etc.) than even no (or few) questions?

In fact, asking no questions is quite liable to very different interpretations. For instance, rather than acceptance of any (colonial, ecclesial, etc.) authority's claim to superiority, it could be the expression of a refusal to play the game. It could be opting out of an exchange which assumes that it is up to the authorities to provide the answers! Silence can sometimes be the most challenging response not only to certain questions but also to the expectation of questions, when questioning could be an implicit acknowledgement of the legitimacy of the answerer's status.

I do not think that the Maltese phenomenon is susceptible of any such simple explanation. However, it may be that some more complicated variation of it may be quite relevant. To get such an answer, the question posed by Prof. Boissevain may need some spelling out. As Thomas Aquinas and Wittgenstein among others, would have agreed: to ask the right questions is generally more difficult than giving the right answers. I also agree that the sociological approach is the most promising in order to find the right answer to the question posed, although the path is more complex than that he could follow in the circumstances of writing. In fact, the meaning of the act of questioning is only partly determined by identifying, as I have already said, the kind of question asked; it is determined above all by the cultural context in which it occurs.

I am certainly not as competent and have even less place here than Professor Boissevain to formulate and test any complex theory. Like him, I will only throw out some intuitive - and alternative - guesses for discussion.

Could it be that it is not in the Maltese tradition to accept any statement (or indeed any offer at all) at face-value? We need not think of Freud, Marx, Nietzsche or any other "master of suspicion", nor recall Troy, to know that every gift-horse should have its teeth examined; but it is not deemed polite to do it openly.

I have found personally that hardly any of my students need to be told, as I used to tell them, that they should disbelieve whatever I told them in class until they themselves could prove it to be true. But they do not usually show their acceptance of my pedagogical advice by addressing questions to me. Almost habitually they go to my colleagues - sounding-boards which almost always end up by ricochetting the problem to me. They also look up what the books say and occasionally confront me with the holy-odoured printed pages saying the opposite to what I did. I do not think that this is evidence simply of the Boissevain "four causes" at work.

Might it not be just a rhetorical preference? - A preference for what Kierkegaard called the 'indirect method of communication', for thinking that a lateral deviation may be more appropriate than a straight question.

The interrogative mood is, from a formal logical point of view, reducible to the imperative; yet there seems to be a fetishism associated with the grammatical form of the "question". Yielding to it, I ask: Could it be that our pupils in comparison with their teachers show an inversely proportional tendency to ask questions, *inter alia*, because of a preference for wiliness over simplicity?

Jeremy Boissevain: Reflections and Reactions

I am grateful to the four discussants for finding time to reflect on an article I wrote more than twenty years ago. It was interesting to note that they feel that the analysis still largely holds up. Or does it? I think only partly. The four factors which I suggest inhibit questioning, though still present, are all less pronounced.

While there are still traces of the "colonial heritage", they are not as pronounced. Many still think that what is foreign is better, but their numbers are dwindling. Maltese plays, for example, increasingly share the stage with Pirandello and Shakespeare. There is also a new, often intense, pride in local achievements, like the establishment of Air Malta. This pride in things Maltese is new.

The "hierarchy of infallibility", is still present but has been modified. The recent Socialist regime certainly did not discourage "dependency, submission and conformity". Nor did it encourage questions. It sat very heavily upon those who dared to question it. Today people do not look over their shoulders as often before expressing an opinion. Moreover, the pronouncements of the Church are no longer regarded as infallible. Witness, among others, the increase in contraception, bikinis and raucous external celebrations of parish saints.

Malta's smallness still constrains behaviour. But the many new residential areas are expanding social space. They provide anonymous havens for unmarried couples, whether hetero- or homosexual, and young adults who wish to escape stifling parental pressure.

The "language barrier" is less pronounced. Less English and more Maltese is being spoken. The vernacular has finally become the language of instruction in state schools. But many ambitious parents are still crippling their children's ability to learn to speak correct English by imposing their own version on their toddlers. Numerous private schools continue to cooperate with this malformation. I am convinced that teaching a second language is a task for specialists.

Professor Farrugia suggests that a weak education may explain why "many Maltese students are not comfortable speaking a foreign language." Comfort comes with fluency. The latter requires practice. Malta's English language university is one of its most important assets. Naturally students speak Maltese together out of class. But if more class room discussion were stimulated, it would provide practice and encourage questioning. This would require a new approach to teaching: less lecturing and more discussion. The physical lay-out of class-rooms at the university illustrates my point. How many seminar rooms — where participants sit in the round — are there? None to speak of. Classrooms at Tal-Qroqq resemble those in secondary schools. Students are seated in rows facing the teacher. Teaching is thus structured like a one-way street: information flows from teacher to student. Note taking and memory are the skills required, not thinking, ideas or ability to discuss.

I exaggerate to make my point. I know that tutorials exist to provide opportunity for discussion. But I am also aware of how little time Maltese lecturers can spend on tutorials. Many must rush off after their lectures to other jobs to supplement their university pay to be able to support their families. They lack the time needed to conduct tutorials and seminars, not to speak of research. A university requires full-time teachers. But to obtain full-time commitment, staff must also receive a salary commensurate with its responsibilities.

Professor Friggieri eloquently points to the failure of the media to stimulate thinking. I concur. Malta's leading English language newspapers, because they are independent of government and party control, could do much more. They remind me of well fed pets. They have been taught to bark at politicians and wag their tails at those who bring food. They never chase people. For thirty years I have vainly searched their pages for interesting local news. What a pity that they do not invest their growing advertising revenue in a good investigative journalist. He or she could have a field day: environmental pollution, land speculation, drugs, prostitution, abortion clinics, bureaucratic inefficiency....! This would liven up the papers, inform the public, provoke discussion and so help contain these abuses.

Professor Serracino Inglott, as always, provokes thinking. His points are well taken. The reluctance to ask questions is certainly more complex than my four hypotheses can deal with.

Avoiding confrontation by remaining silent or begging questions is indeed an often used strategy for survival. It is employed, among others, by Mexican Indians, Dutch peasants and wily students everywhere.

Dr. Sant provides an elegant analysis of Maltese society. I find myself agreeing with him on virtually all points. I disagree, however, with his pessimistic conclusion. I do not believe that the social reforms set in motion in the seventies have been undermined. It would be suicidal for a party with a precarious electoral majority to dismantle the Maltese welfare state. Secondly, I believe the basis of the electoral thrust of the winning party in the last election was broader than the "clerical, trading and professional interests." Moreover, both Malta's dominant parties have substantial trading and professional interests that always manage to achieve an accommodation with government, whatever its colour.

I am left with a question. Why, of the various articles and books that I have written on Malta, was this the one to provoke discussion? Was it because it dealt with education? Is this a sign of the times?