

POVERTY

Poverty: The Historical Past

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In two articles, Giovanni Bonello compared two historical periods: that of the Knights of Malta: 1530 – 1798 and the Early Years of British Malta: 1800 – 1850. In his meticulous research, he discussed the different social conditions of Malta in the distant past.

During the times of the Order, visitors and also authors made creditable comments on Malta. The Island seemed to be an affluent country compared to countries along the Mediterranean littoral. The streets were exceptionally clean. They were crowded with well-dressed people who also looked quite healthy.

Of course, Malta did suffer difficulties under the Knights: pestilences, and droughts and bans on commerce from Sicily for political or sanitary reasons and eventually the loss of the Order's revenues to the French. Nevertheless one virtue was that the Knights were committed to provide service to the poor. Hence, though some beggars were evident in the streets, on the 16 December 1732, Manoel De Vilhena established the House of Charity or Ospizio in Floriana as a place of shelter for the aged and destitute paupers. This, however, did not provide for more than a very small number. Still the pro-Knights sentiment flourished among the population.

The government of the Knights, if not strictly paternal, was sufficiently beneficent. The judges and the municipal officers as well as all civil employments including those related to finances were filled by Maltese. The Maltese derived benefits from the rich revenues of the Knights. They were mostly governed 'softly' and protected by the grand masters against abuses by members of the Order. Thus the Knights provided the 'pasture' that made visitors good ambassadors to Malta

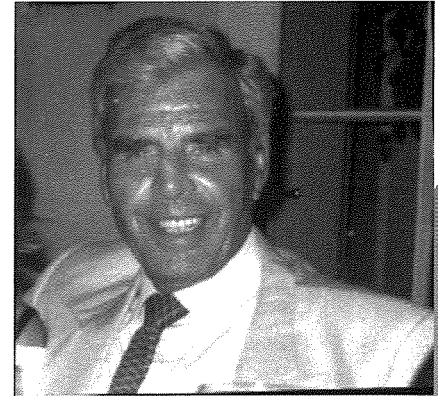
By comparison, authors also commented that Malta was far better under the Knights than under the new colonial rulers. Giovanni Bonello quotes the remarks of visitors to Malta in the early years of British Rule. Words and phrases denigrated Malta as the poorest country and the most destitute in human experience.

Visitors found Malta replete with squalid wretchedness, beggary and woe. For them the indigence of the Maltese was a frightening experience. Numbers died of starvation; others suffered from undernourishment. Their work only earned them a pittance. Parents and children walked in tatters with looks that smacked of despair. An 1819 Government Notice commented on the roofless mendicants and their calls of nature. Mendicants made use of the public streets as toilets. They were threatened with detention if the guilty person could not pay the fine.

Contemporary observers attributed the flawless misery on the greed and mismanagement of the Colonial Masters. Poverty was the prominent feature in Malta. Penury had reached alarming levels. The Colonial Government had no option but to resort to desperate measures.

London felt forced to mint a special coin exclusively for Malta. Everywhere else in the Empire, the least valuable coin was the farthing (one fourth of a penny). From 1827 onwards, the London mint issued a large amount of copper 'one third farthing (one twelfth of a penny) to circulate exclusively in Malta. It was the smallest denomination to circulate in the whole Empire; it represented in value about one fifth of the smallest coin in any other monetary system in Europe. Many Maltese could afford nothing better in the market of hunger and deprivation. One third farthings (habbiet) went on being minted continuously and exclusively for Malta up to 1913. That coin was a testimonial of Maltese misery and the certificate of uncaring colonialism.

The endemic wretchedness of the Maltese townsfolk left its mark on Valletta's streetscape. A flight of steps led from the Grand Harbour landing quay to the Porta di Monte (or Della Marina). The steps were close to what is now Victoria Gate. The British changed the name of the steps to Nix Mangiare Stairs. The name was symbolic of the innumerable tragedies of Maltese families who starved to death; it still looms in the collective memory as another monument to



the long years of famine and utter destitution the working class Maltese suffered in the first half of the 19th century.

All this exposure pointed to the distant past as Giovanni Bonello described it in two consecutive articles in the Sunday Times of Malta.

What follows is a thorough evaluation of the conditions that give rise to 'modern' situations. They reveal that poverty is an endemic problem not yet eradicated. It has defied all social service attempts devised and implemented by successive Maltese governments

The term poverty has been associated with malnutrition, hunger or starvation. When this shocking situation happens on a national scale it constitutes a national emergency. To arrive at a correct evaluation of poverty one must consider all the factors responsible for this social blemish. These include the geographic distribution of malnutrition, the amount of food consumption and the clinical condition of the population. One must take into account the failures or otherwise of the system of education, employment, housing and the support of vocational training and welfare. All these variables change in time with social progress and with unexpected calamities.

Malta suffered outbreaks of bubonic plague in 1592, 1593, 1623, 1676 and 1813. The suffering of starvation in the Second World War nearly resulted in Malta's capitulation to the Axis. My family of ten members like others was in the thick of it. This situation is fully explained in my



book, *Reminiscences of Childhood in Floriana*. The depression of the 1930's was different from that of the widespread unemployment during British Malta when discharges led to massive unemployment following the end of the World War One (1914-1918) and World War Two (1939-1945). In spite of these calamities not everybody sank in despair of poverty.

Relative poverty differs from one country to another and in any one country from one family to another. A low standard of living may not be considered as hard-core poverty. The very poor may include various groups of society: old-age people, women with children and no husbands, multiple family units and now immigrants seeking a new life in the industrial countries of Europe. They are people lacking hope and resources. The problem of poverty is further complicated by lack of agreement on a single criterion for determining who is poor and who deserves financial assistance.

Of course there is substantial poverty in every section of Maltese society. Every occupational category includes a substantial number of persons living just below the poverty line. They may be self-employed manual workers, living in multiple person families whose head lacks even elementary school education. They are housed in cramped conditions and their abodes need repair.

Poverty is linked to other forms of social pathology. They include those suffering from chronic ill-health, from incidence of contagious disease, or having a disabled family member or burdened with some kind of juvenile delinquency. They all need extra costs.

Poverty is relative to the prevailing standards of living in a society and if that standard is constantly changing, the problem of defining poverty precisely turns out to be very complicated. The problem of measuring poverty does not rest on a commonly agreed standard. How can one establish the minimum subsistence budget when many live in 'deprivation' which may be considered as one stage above the poverty line but short of the minimum requirements?

Income alone is arbitrary and does not provide a completely satisfying definition of poverty. It is difficult to come to analyses of the varying

minimum income levels by considering the family size, location, age of the family head, and other indices of family needs and costs.

By far the most significant reason for poverty among non-active ageing is the inadequacy of the welfare and social security programme that they depend upon for their incomes. The pension calculated on retirement salary in 1963 is utterly inadequate in 2013.

There is no doubt that there was more poverty in the past than there is today. However the nature of Maltese poverty has changed drastically over the past years. Most predictions and the willingness of successive Maltese governments to ameliorate the situation have indicated that the rate of poverty is being reduced or slowed down. This has been going on since Malta obtained self-government or more precisely since Independence when Malta no longer suffered the intrusion of Colonial Rulers. Maltese governments have not only established free education but also made available stipends to all students following courses in higher education. By raising the population level of education the hope of Governments in reducing poverty has been successful.

Highlighting the growing figures of people at risk of poverty, Family and Social Solidarity Minister Marie Louise Coleiro Preca, has launched an anti-poverty campaign.

She pointed out that while the definition of poverty is very wide, it mainly has to do with having low standards of living and not being able to afford essential things including decent meals, a computer at home (in families having children), a holiday once a year or a car.

It takes a brave minister to put forward such a progressive idea of the definition and the solution of poverty. If it will be successfully implemented it will be a far cry from the historical past and contemporaneous times.

Sources:

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3. Giovanni Bonello: *Maltese Nostalgia for the Order under British Rule* by Giovanni Bonello, *The Sunday Times of Malta*, 30 June, 2013-0

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Political Viewpoints

All these derogatory attributes are reminders of the sordid achievements of Colonialism when colonial masters were pampered and lived in wasteful luxury at the expense of the Maltese. The Governor drew a salary of £7000 a year from Maltese revenues.

Contemporary observers attributed the flawless misery on the greed and mismanagement of the Colonial Masters. British employed immigrants drew fat salaries from the resources and revenues of Malta, having edged out civil servants and other Maltese out of every lucrative employment or job. The Maltese military Corps numbering 2000 strong was gradually diminished to a contingent of 500,

Well to do Maltese merchants and the nobility gave much support to the British because the navy, by controlling the commercial routes, protected their sources of wealth and profits. Competition from the cut-price British cotton cloth industry almost drove the cotton and weaving industry into bankruptcy by 1840. Other support came from shop owners, boarding houses and cabarets and bordellos all over the harbour towns./ The Maltese found themselves under persistent penury under the colonial masters.

Virtually all the civil and public service posts were taken over by the new overlords. Between the two peoples existed a love-hate relationship that put a dichotomy between the Anglophobe and anglophile? The British had built barriers that disconnected them from the Maltese with limited communication and certainly no association between them. The British absurd prejudices of the natives and their silly habitual reserve of self-satisfied military residents had created a gulf between the two races, who cared not to mix together in society separated by mutual antipathies. With the phasing out of the Continental System disillusionment and unrest stalked Malta.