

# Neo-colonialism in cultural governance in the EU: a Maltese case study

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## ABSTRACT

The case of cultural governance in Malta will be assessed to throw light on neo-colonialist practices persistent in relations between the European Union (EU) and Member States today. A sense of continuity between British rule in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and current cultural governance in Malta seems to have facilitated EU support of neo-liberal economic approaches to culture. It will be argued that this tension has allowed nationalistic tendencies and the instrumental use of the sector to grow. The term 'culture' is interpreted following Edward Said with regard to the acknowledgment of general social practices together with the struggle for the assertion of identities.

This paper makes the case that the adherence of the EU to the principle of subsidiarity in culture, combined with the prioritisation of economic principles, seem to have compromised cultural development in Malta through the dilution of a critical approach towards cultural practice. This strategic approach seems to have enabled the continuation of a colonial framework by enabling the subtle yet pervasive dominance

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## Introduction: the perpetuation of neo-colonialism in cultural governance

This paper will argue that neo-colonialist practices in the governance of the Island State of Malta are still in existence. The focus of this argument will be on the field of cultural governance. While witnessed elsewhere, in terms of the general governance of the state, culture has been chosen because of the way colonial and neo-colonial mechanisms use this aspect of people's lives in pervasive, and effective, ways (Wa Thiong'o, 1987: 21). The paper will make the case for a sense of continuity between the British period of colonial rule in Malta, stretching from the early nineteenth century to the early second half of the twentieth, and the Maltese political class, maintaining a focus on policies and actions addressing the field of culture. However, its main argument will relate colonial and neo-colonial cultural governance to the last fifteen years of this practice in Malta and the way this period has been influenced by membership of the European Union (EU). Therefore, cultural governance is assessed in relation to British rule, officially ended in 1964 and EU membership, commenced in 2004<sup>1</sup>.

The paper acknowledges the fact that cultural governance does not operate in a vacuum. This means that it will take into account the fact that other factors, not directly stemming from or purposely influencing the cultural field, have a significant, if not more critical and determining role on the development of society. This is particularly true of those areas of governance related to politics, economics, education and finance. However, this acknowledgment will allow the paper to make a strong, because realistic, argument in favour of the continuity, often subtle, and therefore more pervasive, of neo-colonialist frameworks of thinking, and practice, in Malta today. An assessment of similar, arguably stronger and bolder, tendencies within the EU, will help support this argument as ties in cultural governance between Malta and the EU will be explored.

The paper will also acknowledge the ambivalence inherent to EU policies that address social development in the same breath as structural neo-liberalism. It will consider the tension underlying and shaping European approaches and agendas towards the wellbeing of people tempered by economic and financial market priorities. This paper will argue that

the wellbeing of people is ironically not served, but rather hindered, by neo-liberal agendas and practices, with particular attention given to the case of cultural governance. Since parallels between the EU and Malta will be drawn, the paper will try to come to the conclusion that current neo-liberal practices, shot through by contradictions and competing intentions, ultimately favour political caution that supports the status quo, censor what may be considered by the political classes as threatening action by cultural actors, and ultimately, and subtly, encourages cultural actors to censor themselves in order to fit current frameworks and benefit from structures that are, essentially, neo-colonialist in nature<sup>2</sup>.

The nature of this paper is one of critical reflection and analysis aimed at shining a light on a relatively well-researcher theme, namely neo-colonialism, in a context that is somewhat under-represented in literature dealing with cultural policy studies (Malta). It builds its case by making use of empirical data that is both desk-researched as well as directly experienced and observed by the author in his various recent cultural capacities at national and European level.

As a final note to this introduction, it is worth noting that this paper will make use of the term 'culture' in fairly accepted ways by mainstream academic literature. Nevertheless, it is good to remember that, although widely documented in the field of cultural policy studies, the word 'culture' remains one of the most problematic in the English language (Williams, 1976: 76). For the purposes of this paper, the term 'culture' will be interpreted in the light of Edward Said's understanding of the word. This means that on the one hand, this will refer to the popular practice that enables the expression of people's interpretation of their social experiences. On the other hand, attention will be paid to the spaces where people related to different demographics struggle to assert their values and identities (Said, 1994: xii-xiii).

## Culture and the EU

The EU adopts what may be described as another type of double approach towards culture. On the one hand it takes a generic angle at cultural policy; on the other hand it shows deference to the principle of subsidiarity at Member State (MS) level.

<sup>1</sup> Xuereb. (2014: 297) claims that "amid fears of political and economic survival, the Island set out to rediscover its identity only to find itself at a crossroads in the first decade of the new millenium merely forty years later (...) joining the European Union in 2004, after centuries of protectionism, seemed a natural step for the Islanders".

<sup>2</sup> The function of self-censorship as a tool of self-governance and the curtailing effects of apparently democratic approaches to social life are analysed in depth by Michel Foucault (Bennett, 2004).

## **“THE ANALYSIS OF NEO-COLONIAL PRACTICE IN CULTURAL GOVERNANCE IN MALTA IN RELATION TO THE EU NEEDS TO ACKNOWLEDGE THE HISTORICAL MEDITERRANEAN COLONIAL CONTEXT, OF WHICH MALTA IS PART. EUROPEAN INFLUENCE, IN PARTICULAR BRITISH AND FRENCH, (...) HAS BEEN PERVASIVE”**

It has been increasingly observed by critics that the EU attempts to bridge neo-liberal economic priorities with social concerns through various means within its competence. Efforts at achieving a balancing act across different policy areas have led the EU to practice free market regulation while concurrently attempting to address aspects of social inequality and disaggregation through socially progressive policy. This tension between EU economic and social policy is structural. It spans across different territories, both internal and external to the Union (Cafruny, 2016: 9-27). The EU approach towards its economic, financial and political survival and expansion is of an aggressive nature (Marsili & Varoufakis, 2017: 14-17). Instances that illustrate this include its approach to those Europeans who suffered critically from the havoc of the 2008 economic and financial crisis and its irresolute alternation between austerity and solidarity. Another example consists of the programme of economic bilateral trade agreements promoting free trade with third countries, as well as the drive towards securing and securitising neighbouring territories to the east and south of Europe through economic, intelligence and military tools (Bilgin, 2004).

The cultural remit of the EU is of particular interest amidst this conflictual scenario. European cultural initiatives illustrate contradictions that are inherent to the wider EU approach. Therefore, on the one hand, the EU agenda for culture has highlighted the humanist aspect of the Union, which promotes collaboration inspired by interculturality, innovation, and creativity. Moreover, the acceptance of cultural diversity outside as well as within the EU has been portrayed as a key element in all its relations (European Commission, 2018). On the other hand, the emphasis on global engagement on a cultural basis, encompassing different policy areas seeking to achieve economic ends as set out in the Europe 2020 Strategy for growth and jobs, has become a main pillar of the European project (European Commission, 2010).

### **The (un)changing nature of cultural governance in Malta**

The analysis of neo-colonial practice in cultural governance in Malta in relation to the EU needs to acknowledge the historical Mediterranean colonial context, of which Malta is part. European influence, in particular British and French, on various societies that may be identified as European, as well as not, has been pervasive. Effects today may be witnessed with regard to the management of various branches of cultural activity, including heritage management, nation branding and tourism. Ernest Gellner (1983) and Benedict Anderson (1991) claim that nationalism may use heritage in exploitative ways even if this means selecting and creating particular traditions while rehabilitating some aspects but not others. An important element in the development of such trends is nation branding in the age of globalisation, when easier travel and the development of common markets have become relatively more common globally (Gellner, 1983; Anderson, 1991).

From a historical perspective, British rule in Malta from the early nineteenth century gave way to Independence in 1964, concurrent with the divesting of the Empire of many of its territorial possessions to various degrees. Early efforts to maintain close links to the West during this treacherous period of the Cold War, particularly with regard to the UK, the US and NATO, gave way to non-alignment and warmer relations with emerging Third World countries including Arab neighbouring states like Libya. The late 1980s saw Malta seeking fresh ties with Europe, and a distancing from political affiliations with Arab states, while attempting to capitalise on the neutrality and geo-strategic position of the Island (Frendo, 2012). Membership of the EU was sought and eventually achieved in 2004. Since then, Malta has tried to galvanise its role in a global context. It has arguably exceeded economic and financial expectations through the provision of several services

such as gaming, financial investment and passport sales schemes. These have somewhat tarnished Malta's reputation through suspected episodes of corruption and nepotism that are under investigation (Briguglio, 2017).

An analysis of cultural governance throws interesting light when considered in relation to the apparatus of the Maltese state. Its governance structures have been heavily influenced by colonial experience. Two years prior to joining the EU, in view of membership, Malta undertook significant legal changes to these structures. These mainly consisted of the Cultural Heritage Act, which has since then regulated the heritage sector, and the Arts Council Act, establishing a government agency for the arts.

However, this passage from structures dating from colonial rule to emancipated ones is troubled in the following ways. The Cultural Heritage Act led to the establishment of the Superintendence of Cultural Heritage. Nominally, this is the watchdog for heritage. Unfortunately, faced by the onslaught of construction branded by the state as development and regeneration essential to Malta's modernising project, factors such as its chronic understaffing, sidelining and over-ruling in relation to the dominant Planning Authority, the conveyor of construction permits on behalf of the state result in the severe curtailment of its function in the defence and promotion of Maltese heritage (Debono, 2017).

The same act led to the formation of Heritage Malta, the national agency for heritage. Its name is only in English, belied by another trend wherein non-governmental cultural organisations tend to identify themselves with a single name in Maltese<sup>3</sup>. On an operational level, the chair of the organisation is often granted to business or political appointees with little experience of heritage management. For instance, in 2018, the chairperson is a former demoted minister, and is accompanied by the current head of the civil service in a covert position of executive leadership (Micallef, 2018; The Times of Malta, 2018a). This method of management is common across government agencies including and not exclusive to the cultural sector and recalls the experience of postcolonial territories around the world (Nkrumah, 1965).

The influence of the British colonial experience that formed the civil service is evident in the cultural

sector. This is particularly true with regard to the continued presence of the classic role of the "governor", traditionally appointed by the government and to whom allegiance by his staff was owed<sup>4</sup>. In the case of MUŻA, the Museum of Art scheduled to open in 2018 as part of the European Capital of Culture (ECoC) in Malta, yet still only partly completed at the time of writing, the level of success it will attain in delivering its set vision remains to be seen. On the one hand, curatorial preparation has been ground in contemporary reference points spread widely across European experience, as well as other non-European bases. Most notable is the association with NEMO, the network of European museums, and other museums like MuCEM, which like MUŻA acted as a flagship project for its own ECoC in Marseille in 2013. However, the museum seems to be considered as an extension of the heritage agency by its own governance hierarchy, reproducing a civil service mentality loyal to customer care service and political priorities rather than one dedicated to innovation and interactivity with the community it strives to represent (Grech, 2015).

On establishment in 2002, the governance mechanism of the Malta Council for Culture and the Arts (MCCA) sought to forge international links and follow such practices. One such practice adopted was the UK-driven and widely recognized principle in Europe of operating at arm's length. Together with the membership of and close relations with the International Federation of Arts Councils and Cultural Agencies (IFACCA), which brings together arts councils from mostly the Anglophone part of the world, one can observe the recent membership of the European Network of Cultural Institutes (EUNIC), the pan-European collection of cultural institutes. However, as with heritage, it is unfortunate that much progress has been curtailed by the tendency to assert the traditional governor's role in ensuring a somewhat familiar circle of influence and exposure favouring allegiance and rewarding loyalty (Pace, 2017).

The political exploitation and co-option enabled by greater degrees of state funding of the arts has been accompanied by a strategic emphasis on the economic aspect of cultural initiatives, as can be witnessed by the cultural strategy spanning 2016-2020 and the new cultural policy aimed to extend till 2025. In recent years, Arts Council Malta, previously known as MCCA, has followed the EU emphasis on the

<sup>3</sup> Din l-Art Helwa, Fondazzjoni Patrimonju Malti, Fondazzjoni Wirt Artna and Flimkien għal Ambjent Ahjar are interesting examples dating from the 1990s, and hence predating Heritage Malta, on a non-governmental organization (NGO) level. The most recent example refers to the rebranding of St James Cavalier Centre for Creativity to Spazju Kreattiv.

<sup>4</sup> This point was elaborated upon by Charles Xuereb on the Maltese national radio Radju Malta programme Hadd u Kulhadd, broadcast on 4 March 2018: <https://soundcloud.com/john-mallia-44205791/hadd-u-kulhadd-john-mallia-ma-dr-charles-xuereb-pt-1> [accessed 3 October 2019].

generation of economic activity and employment, as part of its funding remit. In so doing, it seems to have reinforced an instrumental approach to culture and the arts that seems to accentuate dependence on state funds rather than help nurture an entrepreneurial spirit (Xuereb, 2017).

Therefore, a focus on economics seems to be infiltrating civil society activities in a way that is contributing to a growing dependence on the state and a lessening of critical approaches towards it (Pulè, 2018 ; Flask, 2018). Cultural operators seem to perform and fulfil a double function that matches neo-colonial functions in cogent ways: they act as extensions of the state in terms of cultural purpose, and refrain from distancing themselves critically from government apparatus. Cultural actors caught up in and benefiting, financially, from this situation seem to have become part of a process such as that reflected upon by Gramscian and Foucauldian perspectives on state co-option of non-governmental players through governmentality and self-censorship (Bennett, 2004).

## **The (un)intended influence of EU action on national cultural policy**

As noted, the EU operates subsidiarity with full respect to the notion that "national cultures (...) have, of course, been the primary frame of reference in which cultural policy agendas have been elaborated in modern Europe" (Meinhof & Triandafyllidou, 2006: 3). Cultural matters dealt with by the Council of the EU and related bodies respect the competences of MS on the basis of national identity in order to allow them all the necessary room within which to implement and monitor progress in ways that safeguard national priorities. While understandable and even laudable in its intention as a mechanism of the cultural governance of such a complex reality as is the EU, the subsidiarity principle may be contributing to a disaggregation of cultural practice and the formation of disconnected islands of culture. This is so because MS are known to shape guidelines, funding and mobilise resources to achieve primarily nationalistic aims. This trend is arguably on the rise (Leydolt-Fuchs, 2018). The results may thus only partially match expectations harboured at the outset as well as justify nationalistic action that contradicts goals for greater cohesion through culture in Europe.

This section, consisting of the main part of the paper, will try to show how an assessment of cultural governance in Malta exposes a neo-colonial social

structure, which in turn throws interesting light on relations between the small island state and the EU. It will be argued that tensions between culture, economics and politics in the former are a reflection of those in the Union itself.

## ***European islands of culture***

The example of the ECoC in Malta in 2018 is indicative of this scenario. The ECoC was established in 1985 by the Greek Minister for Culture and star performer Melina Mercouri, together with her French counterpart, Jack Lang, aiming to highlight European cultural expression in line with Said's dual definition described above. The ECoC sought to bring those elements that can be identified as common, relevant and hence representative of European identity to the fore through the title that chosen cities were granted with. In preparing for Valletta 2018 as ECoC, a great deal of programming and reporting to the European Commission focused on delivering this vision. However, later developments led to "significant concerns" (Ebejer, 2018: 11).

Only a few weeks after the title was conferred in May 2017, and the Melina Mercouri prize of EUR1.5m settled, significant changes to the European dimension of the preparatory phase started taking place. Matters took a turn for the worse during the year itself, with various international figures in the cultural and political fields challenging the claim on European values professed by the Maltese authorities in the light of a disparaging and divisive attitude, fomented by the leadership of the Valletta 2018 Foundation with regard to the murder of investigative journalist Daphne Caruana Galizia, known to be critical of government authorities, in October 2017. Perversely, a former Prime Minister of Malta who had opposed EU membership for Malta, then a Member of the European Parliament (MEP) at the time of the incident described here, claimed it was the Valletta 2018 leadership that was practising European values in expressing its views on the matter, and took critics to task for not respecting the concept of freedom of speech. The invocation of freedom of expression, accompanied by others for the moderation of language and tolerance of opinion, were repeated by the current Prime Minister and the Minister for Culture in a concerted governmental effort to reclaim a European dimension (Xuereb, 2018a). It is pertinent to note that while several members of the selection and monitoring committee appointed by the European Commission to oversee the development of ECoCs expressed their criticism publicly, as did 72 MEPs (*The*

*Times of Malta*, 2018b) and Leeuwarden, the Dutch ECoC for 2018, and regional and national authorities representing The Netherlands, implemented an official boycott of Valletta 2018, the EU itself did not adopt any official position (Xuereb, 2018b)<sup>5</sup>.

This episode, and the shadow it cast on the rest of the ECoC programme in Malta, contributes to expose some of the limits of the EU on matters of cultural significance. It may be correct to assert that "values or conceptions of what is good may vary according to cultural or social contexts" (Sjursen, 2006: 247) and that the practice of normative power cannot be anything other than "the EU promoting its own norms in a similar manner to historical empires and contemporary powers" (Manners, 2002: 240). However, this example from Malta uncovers some of the severe tensions that the EU faces when promoting programmes that take place on a national level, the value of which it seems not to be able to safeguard. Hardwick notes that the idea of a "global common good" (Aggestam, 2008: 1) is tied up in unachievable cosmopolitanism and falls foul to accusations of cultural imperialism, an issue that discredits the EU as a normative power. However, in this case, his claim to "discount the EU as a normative power as it contradicts itself" may not be due to too much influence, but to too little.

It is noticeable that while the majority of projects submitted to the monitoring panel during the preparatory phase were maintained, the communication and logistical efforts during the ECoC year were shifted towards the celebration and glorification of popular crowd-pulling commemorations and rituals with relatively easy appeal, accepted nationalistic

narratives and parochial interests. As may be observed by the publicity material produced during the year, the main items of the programme consisted of the opening ceremony featuring a series of light shows illustrating historic episodes of national importance – rather than European, such as the commemoration of the Great Siege battle against forces of the Ottoman Empire in 1565, and Independence from the British in 1964 (Frendo, 2012: 43). A series of mimetic exercises were also engaged with in the form of the recreation of the procession of boats marking royal anniversaries in Great Britain and the flower carpet, or *inforata*, of Sicilian tradition, among others.

This shallow transposition of a set of island traditions, those of Great Britain and Sicily, to Malta, recalls what contemporary cultural critic Shannon Jackson stated in April 2018 during her keynote speech at Aarhus University referring to Stefan Kaegi's analysis of historical re-enactments<sup>6</sup>. Kaegi says that on such occasions the signifier may be greater than the signified or, in other words, where the event creating the representation of tradition is the meaning of itself, there is little actual value to be found in the way people may relate to the event as a vector of intangible

heritage in relation to a historical happening, or context, of recognised importance. Furthermore, an authority in heritage interpretation, David Lowenthal, accepts that heritage is "not a testable or even plausible version of our past; it is a *declaration of faith* in that past" (1998: 7-8). Therefore, if crafting the means of celebrating a recreation of the past comes through others' heritage models, particularly colonial, Lowenthal's claim that "heritage fosters exhilarating fealties" points us towards

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<sup>5</sup> Jordi Pardo, who was an international member of the evaluation and monitoring panel for the ECoC in Malta was quoted as saying the actions of the chairperson of the Valletta 2018 Foundation "reflect a bigger democratic problem". Pardo noted he signed PEN's open letter expressing its concern to the European Commission in this spirit: <http://www.independent.com.mt/articles/2018-04-26/local-news/Jason-Micallef-situation-reflects-a-bigger-democratic-problem-V18-selection-committee-members-6736188817> [accessed 3 October 2019].

<sup>6</sup> <http://conferences.au.dk/culturesofparticipation2018/keynote-speakers/> [accessed 3 October 2019].

neo-colonial allegiances being reinforced, rather than assessed or even challenged.

## **Communitarianism, or divide et impera**

It is ironic that the concept of community has been exploited by initiatives trumpeted by instruments of cultural governance in Malta in order to achieve the opposite effect. Divide and rule, as per the Latin maxim, has been one of the effects of a celebration of community along the lines of communitarianism, seeking to forge alliances on the basis of traditions and politics, rather than seek novel ways of engagement. In a glaring omission of a sense of identity of place, running counter to the *environment of exchange* professed at bidding stage, the ECoC in Malta organised a large-scale reunion of the four traditional, local, religiously-inspired feasting communities in Valletta, in an event called *Il-Festa l-Kbira*, literally translated as "the big feast" (Valletta 2018 Foundation, 2011). On this occasion, no gesture of recognition or inclusion and sense of welcome along lines of co-existence and collaboration was forthcoming as the rituals and cultural expressions of so many more, including the Greek, Russian, Serbian, Eritrean, Somali and Italian communities were simply ignored as if these were not part of Maltese cultural identity today<sup>7</sup>.

Insightfully, Pia Leydolt-Fuchs (2018) commented on the risk of the political take-over of cultural initiatives like ECoC in a city like Valletta. In an article addressing the limits of how much politics can culture take before risking malfunction and subservience, she notes how certain political behaviour can be very shrewd in exploiting cultural initiatives and titles related to the EU or UNESCO in order to promote, at the end of the day, what is little more than strategic propaganda. Moreover, by being silent about such behaviour, the EU risks endorsing it, and by so doing, it contributes to the devaluation of its own programmes.

## **Culture as political convenience/connivance**

In describing cultural governance as practiced by national authorities and safeguarded by international conventions, the supranational agency for the United

Nations on education, science and culture (UNESCO) affirms "[t]he sovereign right of States to adopt and implement policies to promote the diversity of cultural expressions that are based on informed, transparent and participatory processes and systems of governance" (UNESCO, 2017: 18). However, the continuation of colonial practices in cultural governance in Malta adds complexity to the neutral, prescriptive nature of this observation.

In a neo-colonial context such as that assessed here, culture may be used to contribute to the development of a play of mirrors, or a smokescreen, through the use of resting on one's laurels while covering up the wilful destructive manipulation of cultural heritage. In April 2018, the Minister of Culture for Malta established another board of cultural governance to be added to the various already in existence<sup>8</sup>. On this occasion, the board was set up to safeguard the intangible heritage of the Maltese people, with a view to develop a series of initiatives with which to raise the recognition of Malta's intangible heritage through at UNESCO level (*The Malta Independent*, 2018). The process includes the drawing up of an inventory of intangible heritage, to serve as a resource pool from which to identify the best candidates for recognition of their value to humanity on the basis of UNESCO's criteria. However, at a half-day seminar in March 2018 launching the call for citizens to submit proposals for consideration by the board for evaluation and development as bids to UNESCO, a gap in competence between the UNESCO-nominated expert Marina Calvo Pérez invited to support Maltese preparations by the Ministry for Culture, and members of the local team, became evident.

One may argue that this gap is why people with international expertise are routinely invited to inspire and advise local teams on matters of high-profile, be they UNESCO heritage applications or the ECoC. In the case described here, the gap seemed to lie in a basic conception and understanding of the value of intangible heritage, beyond its political convenience. Whether the heritage is tangible or intangible, what people value is, on the one hand, that special element they invest in the structure, site or monument, and on the other hand, the ritual, celebration or festivity. The loss of one or the other matters not only intrinsically, that is, in the value it carries in and of itself, but more importantly in the lives

<sup>7</sup> It is ironic to note that this is stark contrast to the rhetoric adopted by the Prime Minister as well as the President of the Republic in favour of adopting an open and tolerant approach towards foreign workers in the case of the former, and the acceptance of cultural diversity as part of humanity in the case of the latter.

<sup>8</sup> The list published by the Ministry of Culture on its official site is not comprehensive. <https://culture.gov.mt/en/culture-directorate/Pages/Culture-Boards-and-Committees.aspx> [accessed 3 October 2019].

## “WHILE CALLS FOR CRITICAL APPROACHES TO THE MANAGEMENT OF HERITAGE BY THE NOMINALLY COMPETENT AUTHORITIES ARE CURTAILED, THE RECOGNITION OF THE INSTRUMENTAL POLITICAL USE OF CULTURE (...) GUARANTEES THE SHORT-TERM SUCCESS OF POLITICAL CONVENIENCE AND CONNIVANCE”

of the communities sharing a bond with that outward sign of cultural expression (Brusasco, 2018). It is ironic that during the European Year of Cultural Heritage in 2018, there seems to be little that international organisations entrusted with far-reaching expertise and powers to influence and enlighten. For instance, the EU and UNESCO are ready to risk, seemingly fearful of threading on national competencies in the light of their deference towards subsidiarity<sup>9</sup>. Furthermore, while calls for critical approaches to the management of heritage by the nominally competent authorities are curtailed, the recognition of the instrumental political use of culture, in turn covering up the dearth of critical research, analysis and investment, guarantees the short-term success of political convenience and connivance.

### ***Losing one's legacy***

The establishment of a board such as that described above gains irony in the context of the ECoC in Malta. As Mario Vella, front man for the popular and unruly alternative music band *Brikkuni*, charged the chairman of the Valletta 2018 Foundation with one of the two legacies the capital of culture efforts can be really said to have established has been the gradual erosion of cultural capital in Valletta<sup>10</sup>. The most significant aspect of the regenerational onslaught on the city has been the development of nearly one hundred boutique hotels, which now besiege the small city of less than one square kilometre from within. Some may argue there is nothing wrong with the economic revival of Valletta, while others may disagree, particularly when one takes in consideration the numerous restaurants and bars which have, with legal blessing, taken over

much public space in many roads and on pavements up and down the city.

Possibly, the development which best symbolises the encroachment of space is *Is-Suq tal-Belt*, the old market adjacent to the Grandmaster's Palace, now the Valletta palace of the President of the Republic. In an episode that attracted the attention of activists and artists in May 2018, the space in front of the market was clearly sign-posted as being private property, to the indignation and hilarity of those who, by then, still assumed that the careful urban development of the city would outweigh commercial interests and gentrification. A close-second to *Is-Suq* is arguably Strait Street. The one-time sleepy and seedy depository of memories of knightly duels and colonial cheap entertainment has been elevated to glorified cross-roads of pubs and eateries, all the while fiercely claiming its difference from the more popular and unpretentious nightspot that is touristy Paceville. In a rare case of self-awareness and critique, one of the artistic directors of Valletta 2018 and respected cultural personality, Giuseppe Schembri Bonaci, the economic development of the city has run amok with its cultural dimension. He feels it is the duty of people like him to try to put this right by re-establishing some form of balance through an innovative approach towards the arts<sup>11</sup>.

In an exercise that addressed the planned and economically-enabled destruction of swathes of tangible and intangible heritage in Malta, a small project by an equally small group of artists and activists made a clear statement on the degraded state of many village cores, choosing the once tranquil back streets of Sliema as their site. *Il-Kamra ta' Barra*, loosely translated as “the front room”, turned gutted traditional

<sup>9</sup> Interesting parallels may be drawn with Višnja Kisić's (2013:288) ENCATC 2013 prize-winning research on heritage governance in the Western Balkans and the way European cultural institutions seem to adopt an appeasing attitude to matters of dissonance once a territory draws closer in terms of adhesion to European politics and policies.

<sup>10</sup> The other was ingraining political subservience in the cultural sector, described in what may be described as rather colourful language: <https://www.facebook.com/mario.vella.161> [accessed 3 October 2019].

<sup>11</sup> ARTE. (2018). “Valletta Metropolis”. <https://www.arte.tv/en/videos/083060-000-A/valletta/>, 3:05 [accessed 3 October 2019].



houses inside out, by re-creating the entrance of old family abodes on the street, amid the new architecture of cranes, concrete slabs and swirling dust. The collective Parking Space Events had collaborated with Margerita Pulè, coordinator of the cultural programme for the ECoC, before, like the author, bearing the brunt of institutional and political bullying and manoeuvring and being dismissed unceremoniously a few weeks after having secured the Melina Mercouri prize from the European Commission, and a few months before the start of the year<sup>12</sup>.

### ***The shaping of arts management***

It is felt that among the oft-noted tension that exists between the arts and their management, political opportunism identifies enough space within which to immerse itself with the apparent promise of resolving conflictual issues through acumen in social and political matters. As Maltese poet and academic Norbert Bugeja declaimed to party supporters in thrall of their political leader, or "governor" par excellence, the Prime Minister of Malta, during a rally celebrating his decade at the helm of the *Partit Laburista* (Labour Party) in June 2018, "our heart is in the right place" (Bugeja, 2018). It is ironic that such an expression is generally used to explain away certain issues and problems that are being addressed through grandstanding and technical approaches, but not in the critical way called for in this paper.

Taking note of the neo-liberal context that extends to the operations of the cultural sector, it seems interesting to assess the relationship between methodologies of management, politics and the arts. Our condition of postmodernity, bringing together economic, financial and social conditions which, roughly over the past half-a-century, has ironically brought people closer together from a transactional perspective, involving the making and spending of money, while isolating them in terms of social solidarity (Harvey, 1992). Bauman (2000) employs another physical image, that of "liquidity" in relation to modernity, to describe the condition of constant mobility and change in relationships, identities, and global economics within environments of contemporary society. This is not to imply that this condition is original - it is sobering to read Alexis de Tocqueville's observations, two hundred

years ago, on the degeneration of the social spirit in what he observed as early capitalist America. However, it is true that the entrepreneurial spirit that transpired from the Protestant cultural work ethic as observed by Max Weber with regard to pre-war Europe, and the business-oriented cultural differences commented upon by Edward and Mildred Hall from a post-war US perspective looking towards Europe and Asia, have reached a more densely synergetic and dynamic rate of interactivity in the last few decades (Micklethwait & Wooldridge, 2014).

In relation to the complexity embedded in the activity of culture, Bauman elaborates on the tension between culture and management in a historical context (2004: 64). Theodor Adorno had recognised the "inevitability of the conflict" between culture and administration, while admitting their reciprocal necessity. One suffered because of the other, yet needed the relationship more than doing without: "culture suffers damage when it is planned and administered; if it is left to itself, however, everything cultural threatens not only to lose the possibility of effect, but its very existence as well" (Adorno, 1991: 94). Oscar Wilde's provocation that "culture is useless" suggests culture will resist efforts at its instrumentalisation by institutions, leading to Adorno's observation that the "clash of the two narratives is inevitable" (ibid.).

Amidst this "*sibling rivalry*" (Bauman, 2004: 66), the mantra of solutionism by management is not only uninspired but also misguided<sup>13</sup>. Sometimes, it may also prove comical, although unintentionally. For instance, what was meant to be the main ECoC contemporary art exhibition, focusing on island culture, namely *Dal-Baħar Madwarha* ("The Island Is What The Sea Surrounds"), was first upstaged by one particular venue used for the exhibition in its own promotion, namely an underground cistern, then not promoted heavily in comparison to the contemporaneous Picasso/Miró exhibition at the President's Palace in Valletta, and finally, in spite of this, it still managed to provide an international-PR moment on the occasion of the official opening, but arguably, not in the way it was hoped. The opening took place in front of the above-mentioned cistern entry, in front of the Law Courts in Valletta, and hence just steps away from the Great Siege memorial that has, over the past months, brought together people marking the memory of Daphne Caruana Galizia through makeshift means,

<sup>12</sup> Margerita Pulè runs the blog [www.projectdisintegration.org](http://www.projectdisintegration.org) which collects various of her projects of this critical nature. One particularly apt reflection was provoked by an urban action she managed inviting people to engage with "Not The European Year of Cultural Heritage" and the disregard of heritage as Malta's contribution (accessed 3 October 2019).

<sup>13</sup> The author would like to acknowledge the intellectual debt owed to inspirational critical texts by Richard Hewison and John McGuigan on the challenges posed by New Public Management regimes applied to the arts in the UK in the past decades.

attracting international attention and arguably adding nuances to tourists' perspectives of Malta and its culture<sup>14</sup>.

As has been suggested above, Malta may be considered as a microcosm of the EU. Therefore, one may argue that the European level may be reflected in national realities. One contention by Barnett (2001) can be applied to MS as well:

*the Commission has found a means by which to reconcile the discursive tensions between culture and the economy in the field of cultural action in a way that respects the intrinsic qualities of 'the cultural' while enabling their instrumental deployment in the service of economic and political imperatives of integration*  
(Barnett, 2001: 28).

The management of culture at European and national levels has become very fluid. One may observe a weakening of the distinction between cultural actions as a contributing factor to a European cultural identity on the one hand and the legal and economic regulation of policy on the other. Further ambiguity in terms of governance is noted by Valentine (2018: 157), who asserts that "[t]he limits of the uses of culture are set by the capacity to invent extensions of its ambivalence". Concurrently, the "political logics emerge from the ambiguity of governance [because n]etworks of interest-group collective actors develop and become attached to cultural policy at vertical and horizontal levels of governance and as different degrees of subsidiarity

develop" (ibid.).

This ambivalent approach towards culture is used to define the spaces within which networks that bring together officials and cultural operators may develop positions of influence within the policy process. Valentine (ibid.) argues how this development leads to "a politics of interpretation with respect to definitions of culture and limits to legitimate action and with respect to competing policy agendas such as economics, law and welfare";<sup>i</sup> This process further contributes to the 'free-riding 'gravy train' phenomena through the invention of bureaucratic devices such as committees, working groups and initiatives organised around the essentially conflicting demands of harmonisation and diversity that monitor, measure and evaluate culture (Valentine, 2018: 157), to link subjective aims to objective impacts in order to calibrate "the transformation of the disposition of citizens in line with multiple objectives" (Barnett, 2001: 31).

Valentine (ibid.) also enables us to draw lines between this European scenario and the "wider, global development of the political logics of cultural policy within the hegemonic myth of governance characterised by the emergence of a material

and subjective infrastructure". Such bureaucratic developments reinforce the expediency of culture within relationships between the EU and MS. In turn, these strengthen the colonial instrumentalisation of culture, aiming for categorisation and the establishment of a friendly hierarchy through the motions of granting favour through obedient participation. Yúdice (2003: 13) describes post-colonial frameworks as 'an enormous

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<sup>14</sup> While the Picasso/Miró exhibition surpassed 70,000 visitors, as was to be expected, (<https://www.maltachamber.org/mt/en/over-70-000-people-visited-the-picasso-and-mir-exhibition-in-valletta> [accessed 3 October 2019]), it was reported in private conversation to the author that the ECOC one drew less than 8,000 in spite of featuring high-profile international artists and being curated by established curator Maren Richter. With regard to the PR episode described above, a photo by Darrin Zammit Lupi of 2010 Turner Prize-winner Susan Philipsz lighting a candle at the memorial, steps away from Valletta 2018's leadership, made a poignant impression through Reuters' international distribution of it: <https://www.timesofmalta.com/articles/view/20180324/arts-entertainment/vallettas-hidden-underground-opens-up-to-public-view.674370> [accessed 3 October 2019].

network of arts administrators who mediate between funding sources and artists and/or communities', not dissimilar to operators in international aid, research or business. Yúdice's critique is aimed at the *NGO-fication* of cultural policy and the emergence of a 'UNESCO-racy'. In turn, these networks sponsor and fund numerous projects and firms, both subsidised and for profit, to support their activities, contributing to the creation of "a vast consultocracy" (ibid.). Yúdice highlights the outsourcing of important sections of this process to external contractors which provides observations, for instance in the form of evaluations, a legitimacy of objectivity and disinterestedness. One may note how many of the main stakeholders overlap in their group memberships, further muddying the circulation and exchange of outcomes through close and obscurely exclusive networks.

## **Conclusion: neo-colonial models in the long-term**

This paper has argued that a line may be drawn between the historical colonial experience and the EU membership of Malta, in terms of varying degrees of the neo-colonial legacy on cultural governance. On the one hand, and in a positive fashion, European governance models, already developed by the Knights of St John between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, set structures that sought to efficiently promote excellence in culture and the arts as in other areas. Similarly, the EU has established its own structures with which to support democratic, international and accountable practices.

On the other hand, and in a negative way, cultural governance in Malta seems to approach heritage and the intangible value and meaning of culture as a resource to be exploited with short-term goals. It has been argued that this perpetuates neo-colonialist behaviour in the realm of cultural governance and is exacerbated by the EU's ambivalent approach to cultural development.

By way of example, this can be observed in the little attention paid to sustainable development in the field of urban conservation and human fulfilment to be had in rural and marine environments, other than through speculative approaches towards the land and sea, aiming to extract maximum economic and financial profit from them (Ebejer, 2011: 12). The colonial mentality tuned to exploiting one's governing official structures through clientelism, nepotism and cronyism seems to run deep. Exacerbating such human propensities

at governance, national and European policies based on neo-liberal structures that prioritise economic and financial growth over a fuller appreciation of individual and societal values seem to support a behaviour that is of a shallow nature, even in matters of cultural governance.

In describing the process of colonial acculturation, Pierre Bourdieu uses the term 'symbolic violence' in order to express the imposition of the culture of the ruling forces of society, or establishment, on the population at large. This type of non-physical violence is nonetheless very effective. This is so because it enables the internalisation and acceptance of the imposed culture as legitimate and superior to its own (Bourdieu, 1977). Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1987: 24) notes that culture has a pervasive power in achieving aims of influence, even when compared to more direct and means of coercion. He states: "Colonialism imposed its control of the social production of wealth through military conquest and subsequent political dictatorship. But its most important area of domination was the moral universe of the colonized, through culture, of how people perceived themselves and their relation to the world" (ibid.). As argued by Joseph Nye (2002), the reach of military means alone is less than when coupled with means of persuasion of a cultural kind. He does so when referring to international relations in the political domain. However, this observation also applies to internal affairs, including cases when the governing forces are local and neo-colonial, carrying on the governance structures of past colonialist systems.

To conclude, and as a final example with which to illustrate the argument of this paper, in October 2016, the Maltese Minister for Culture welcomed more than four hundred guests from all over the world for the IFACCA World Summit on Arts and Culture. The occasion had the feeling of his presiding over a new dawn for cultural relations and the way cultural policy matters were managed in Malta, the result of a process of maturity that Malta, after more than a decade of EU membership, seemed to be able to put into practice. Unfortunately, the persistence of a neo-colonial praxis applied to cultural governance has undercut such expectations. This has compromised prospects for a legacy based on European values, including a thirst for innovation and the embracing of diversity. This is ironic in the light of the trumpeting of such a vision on occasions of significance to the whole of Europe. These included the Maltese Presidency of the Council of the EU in 2017 and the ECoC in 2018. Expectations developed in preparations to join the EU in 2004, and

since then, have gone unfulfilled<sup>16</sup>.

Therefore, in assessing the neo-colonial framework in Malta, by which the British imperial experience seems to have changed, but essentially prolonged, through EU membership, this paper has argued that cultural governance has been significantly manipulated by the political elite. It has also argued that in spite of important and sustained efforts at benefiting from its geo-politically strategic position, its history and heritage, as well as its EU status, Malta has seriously compromised such initiatives and their prospects for further development in the future.

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<sup>16</sup> For a deeper reflection on this aspect refer to XUEREB, K. (2017) Can nation branding be a successful tool for the practice of public diplomacy? A Maltese case study. *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy*, 13 (3), 255-263.

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