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## Higher Education, Socialism & Industrial Development. Dom Mintoff and the 'Worker - Student Scheme'

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# **Higher Education, Socialism & Industrial Development. Dom Mintoff and the 'Worker - Student Scheme'**

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## **Abstract**

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This article focuses on the recently deceased Maltese socialist leader Dom Mintoff (1916-2012) and his introduction of a scheme that was intended to change higher education and develop it ostensibly on socialist lines but, in effect, in a manner intended to facilitate the country's transition from mercantile capitalism to that of productive industrial development. The scheme he introduced, with its immediate socialist echoes but which warrants more careful scrutiny to unveil both its contradictions and real economic purpose, was the Worker-Student scheme, arguably Mintoff's original, albeit much decried and controversial, contribution to higher education thinking. In this paper, I will take a look at the main issues surrounding the concept of the worker-student scheme and the way they were put into practice during the scheme's almost ten year period of existence (1978-1987). I shall analyse them in the context of the Malta Labour Party's then professed socialist politics. What are the contradictions and consistencies regarding what have come to be regarded as key concepts in a socialist politics of education?

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**Keywords:** education, employment and training, state, state socialism, workers, development, capitalism



# **Educación Superior, Socialismo y Desarrollo Industrial. Dom Mintoff y el "Esquema Trabajador- Estudiante"**

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## **Resumen**

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Este artículo se centra en el recientemente fallecido dirigente socialista maltés Dom Mintoff (1916-2012) y su introducción de un esquema que pretende cambiar la educación superior y desarrollarlo ostensiblemente en líneas socialistas pero, de manera que se facilite la transición del país desde un capitalismo mercantil a un desarrollo industrial productivo. El esquema que presentó, con sus inmediatos ecos socialistas pero que garantizaba un mayor cuidado en el escrutinio para desvelar tanto sus contradicciones como el propósito económico real, fue el esquema de trabajador-estudiante, posiblemente original de Mintoff, aunque muy denunciado y controvertido, contribución al pensamiento de la educación superior. En este trabajo, me centraré en las principales cuestiones que rodean el concepto del sistema trabajador-estudiante y la forma en que fueron puestas en práctica durante casi diez años de existencia del esquema(1978-1987). Voy a analizarlas en el contexto del Partido Laborista de Malta, el cual profesaría política socialista. ¿Cuáles son las contradicciones y consistencias con respecto a lo que han llegado a considerarse como conceptos clave en una política socialista de la educación?

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**Palabras clave:** educación, empleo y aprendizaje, estado, socialismo de estado, trabajadores, desarrollo, capitalismo

Dom Mintoff's death on 20<sup>th</sup> August 2012 marks the passing of another prominent post-war postcolonial politician. In his time as Leader of the Malta Labour Party (1949-1984) and as Malta's Prime Minister (1955-58; 1971-1984), Mintoff sought to grapple, among other things, with the complexity of seeking to map out a socialist politics in the context of preparing the small Mediterranean island state's (population circa 400,000) transition from a situation of mercantile capitalism to one of export-oriented, industrial development. This particular situation, born out of the country's postcolonial condition, throws up a number of consistencies and contradictions in his party's and government's professed socialist politics that surface in many fields.

### **This paper**

The field, focused on in this paper<sup>1</sup>, is specifically that of Higher Education conceived of by many postcolonial leaders as an important terrain for the provision of a new cadre of intellectuals and professionals intended to usher in this transition and at the same time serve as a repository of ideas intended to merge the areas of work and education, production and theoretical as well as other reflection, which has long been the staple of socialist experiments in education. Echoes of Marx's polytechnical education, Mao's attempt to destroy the Confucian separation between intellectual and 'mandarin' work from productive work and the central concept of praxis, characterized by the bringing together of theory and practice with respect to production, come into play. Dom Mintoff will be remembered for many things, notably his struggle for the country's self-determination *tout court*, his successful efforts at closing down British military bases on the island, his emphasis on production rather than importation, his government's important contributions to the development of a welfare state (Formosa, 2012), his development of a national infrastructure in the areas of banking, telecommunications and international aviation, the struggle for modernity and therefore the struggle against a deeply entrenched conservatism manifest in ecclesiastical and other forms of reaction (see Pirotta, 2012), as well his efforts to contribute to turning the Mediterranean into a nuclear free zone. Pugnacious, always ready to

knock dignity off its perch and irreverent towards constituted authority, be it colonial, ecclesiastical or related to the social establishment, Mintoff was irascible and indomitable as a change catalyst. Yet he will also be remembered for introducing a scheme that was intended to change higher education and develop it ostensibly on socialist lines but, once again, also and primarily in a manner intended to facilitate the country's transition from mercantile capitalism to that of industrial development. The scheme he introduced, with its immediate socialist echoes but which warrants more careful scrutiny to unveil both its contradictions and real economic purpose, was the Worker-Student scheme, arguably Mintoff's somewhat original, albeit much decried and controversial, contribution to higher education thinking.

In this paper, I will take a look at the main issues surrounding the concept of the worker-student scheme and the way they were put into practice during the scheme's almost ten year period of existence (1978-1987). I shall analyze them in the context of the Malta Labour Party's then professed socialist politics (Mintoff is on record as having spoken, in the build up to the 1976 elections, of a 'socialist generation' and the manifesto for these elections emphasized a socialist Malta). What are the contradictions and consistencies regarding what have come to be regarded as key concepts in a socialist politics of education?

### **Enunciation of the concept**

On Monday, 28<sup>th</sup> November 1977, Maltese Prime Minister Dom Mintoff announced the introduction of reforms in Higher Education centring round a 'worker-student'<sup>2</sup> scheme. In a nutshell, the salient points raised by the Prime Minister were the following:

- There would be two universities; the 'old' university (the University of Malta) and the 'New University' (the former Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology-MCAST-a polytechnic)
- Tertiary education would be tailored to the perceived needs of the economy
- The university student would alternate five and a half months of work with five and a half months of study at University.
- Students were to be provided with a basic wage throughout the year, paid monthly at the same rate during both the study and

work phases as well as during the one-month vacation period.

- Students were to be sponsored throughout their period of study
- Salaried employees were also allowed to join the scheme with the possibility of retaining their salary while carrying out their studies under conditions similar to those for mainstream students.
- Degree programmes offered by the faculties of science and arts will be phased out as new degrees, tailored to the country's needs, will be introduced.

### **Build up**

Well before the introduction of what were in effect 'radical' university changes (Portelli, 1994, p. 256), rather than simple reforms, concerns had been expressed, even by a Royal University of Malta Commission, including distinguished German sociologist, Ralph Dahrendorf,<sup>3</sup> "to consider ways of nudging the university from being an appendix of the professions into a modern place of learning" (Dahrendorf, 1978, p. 30, in Austin, 1981, p. 135). There was, for instance, reluctance, until then, to include applied science courses such as engineering at the university. There were also important pronouncements regarding economic restructuring which had to be carried out with 1979 in mind (the target year for the closure of British military bases in Malta and the end of rent payment for these services). I suspect Mintoff used the 1979 end of military facilities agreement as a target date to put pressure on everyone to expedite the process of restructuring which Labour had taken upon itself to carry out since gaining government in 1971. On 26 March 1972, the Labour Government led by Dom Mintoff in negotiations with British Defence Secretary, Lord Carrington, changed the 1964 agreement between the two countries and signed a new agreement with Britain according to which the UK government was to pay 14 million sterling per annum for the rent of military bases. The agreement was to expire by March 31, 1979. This restructuring was intended to modernise and change what the Labour government must have regarded as antiquated 'pre-industrial' society structures. (see Mayo, 2013).

Mario Vella (2009) wrote "The MLP needed to be seen as a socialist party in order to mobilise sufficient working class enthusiasm for its strategic programme, an enthusiasm it could have hardly worked up had

it presented its programme as what it ultimately and objectively was the modernisation of Maltese society to enable it to sustain the belated development of an export-led industrial capitalism fuelled by foreign investment and technology.” (Vella, 2009, p. 378; see also Vella, 1989, 2012)

This had implications for the University and the rest of the tertiary education sector as the class of relevant professionals had to be expanded. One had to move from that of the mainly traditional coterie of ‘pre-industrial society’ professionals (notaries, lawyers, doctors, priests, teachers, literati – typical of what Gramsci regarded as the subaltern intellectuals of Italy’s southern agrarian bloc- Mayo, 2010) to a broader sector in which doctors become also salaried employees in a national health scheme (Vella, 1989, p. 172) and which comprises engineers, managers, accountants, public administrators (see Vella, op. cit; Sant in Mayo, 1986, p. 15) and eventually, ICT specialists.

In addition to the developments enunciated by Dom Mintoff at the November 28th MCAST meeting, the actual ushering in of the worker student scheme in 1978 led to the following:

- the abolition of the Faculties of Arts, Science and Theology
- the institution of new faculties, such as those of Education and Management, with degrees being offered in education, public administration, business studies and accountancy
- engineering becoming an integral feature of the university, initially at the New University and subsequently at the University of Malta.
- the transformation of the Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology (MCAST) into the New University
- eventual amalgamation, in 1980, of the New University with the ‘Old University.’ Once again they became the University of Malta.

(See Bonavita et al, 1977; Schembri, 1982; Spiteri Campbell, 1984)

### **Sponsorship**

The issue of sponsorship was key to the worker student scheme. It was mainly people from the public sector and state enterprises who benefited from the ‘Worker-Student’ scheme, since the private sector seemed very

reluctant to sponsor its employees and prospective 'worker-students.' (Sant, in Mayo, 1986, p. 15) Here is a breakdown of the way sponsorships were carried out between 1979 and 1985.

1979 Gov 302 state enterprises 37 private 117

1981 Gov 204 state enterprises 57 private 50

1983 Gov 238 state enterprises 64 private 41

1985 Gov 192 state enterprises 41 private 3

(Department of Education 1985)

Reluctance by the private sector to sponsor students, with the exceptions just mentioned, is to be expected. One must here bear in mind the situation concerning training and development within micro-enterprises such as the ones prevalent on the island. In microstates, it is common for the state to shoulder a substantial part of the responsibility for the vocational preparation of persons. Small companies do not enjoy the necessary 'economies of scale' to render in house training a viable option. They also face the danger of 'poaching', possibly a major concern when forking out money to sponsor a University student earmarked for a position within the firm. Furthermore, there is the hardnosed, pragmatic issue concerning the sheer difficulty, if not impossibility, of any large or small employer to be able to pre-plan recruitment 3-4-5 years in advance.

Even large firms in Malta such as SGS Thomson (now ST Microelectronics) would poach fresh graduates in engineering who had been sponsored by the Malta Government or a state enterprise. One can also surmise that fear, on the employers' part, of such a sudden and radical initiative by the government, which rendered the term 'reform' quite a misnomer, as well as their traditional prejudice against anything forthcoming from the MLP camp - overstating this exposes me to accusations of ideological over-determination - must have also contributed to this situation. They, for the most part, formed part of that class of importers who, together with the freewheeling professional, financial, insurance, large retail, landowning sectors (Vella 2009, p. 383) and the rest of the petite bourgeoisie (Sciberras & Vella, 1979, p.19), including shopkeepers and government employees, have traditionally constituted the power base of the Nationalist Party which is historically the political representative of merchant capital (see Vella



1989, p. 166).

### **Rethink?**

The abolition of degrees in the humanities, social sciences and natural sciences is one of the features of the changes brought about by the Labour government in its attempt to render higher education utilitarian. This was, to say the least, a very controversial move, arguably the most controversial aspect of the 'reform'. In his May 1978 reply to Dahrendorf, Mintoff did not mince his words when denouncing the Faculty of Theology and the Department of Philosophy as bastions of conservatism where dogmas rather than new ideas are disseminated, stating that they hardly provided the sort of campus for the free discussion of concepts and ideas. (Schembri, 1982, p. 146).

It was impossible at the time to pursue a degree in the arts and social sciences, or the natural sciences for that matter, unless one studied abroad or else took advantage of the provision made available by the University of London through its External degree programme. As for evening students, it looked as though the 1976/77-81 B.A. evening degree course was the last of its kind, thus seeming to bring to an end an aspect of University Continuing Education (henceforth UCE) provision which dated back to 1960.

Attempts were made to provide short courses in the Arts and other areas. An Extension Studies Board (ESB) was in place in the seventies and early eighties. It offered short courses in a variety of areas. The work of this board however fizzled out in the 80s.

Around 1983, courses in the Arts and in Maths, Logic and Computing were introduced at evening diploma level. The idea for such programmes was communicated to the Rector at a meeting held at the House of Representatives addressed by two Ministers.<sup>4</sup> They turned out to be courses that allowed participants to progress from one diploma level to another. Those who proceeded to the final level finally ended up with a bachelor's degree. The fact that such a development was allowed to occur suggests that the policy regarding the Arts and Sciences at University was not cast in stone and that there was room for negotiation. There might have been a variety of reasons for such a development, possibly a sense of unease, felt in influential political and government

circles, regarding the way the Humanities and Sciences were being handled. One wonders if there was also an up-swell of concerns and protests arising from the labour market as to the sheer difficulty of finding graduates, any graduate, to take up employment? This would sound plausible given that graduates were pledged to employers and indeed a more serious round of poaching was in order (which included payment of fines for abrogated contracts).

### **Socialist principles in education**

Once the scenario surrounding the situation concerning university education 1978-1987 has been laid out, I will now seek to examine to what extent these 'reforms' and related measures have been consistent with a party professing to promote a socialist politics, as was the case with the Malta Labour Party at the time. Much has been written regarding the basic foundations of a socialist education (see, for instance, Castels & Wustenberg, 1979, cited in Livingstone, 1983; Youngman, 1987). There is always the danger, however, that one abstracts when singling out important principles (see Sayer, 1987; Vella, 1989, pp. 200, 201). I will therefore try to extrapolate a few recurring themes in a socialist education bearing this important caveat in mind. Education, as well as political action in general, is context bound. Here are some recurring concepts that seem to have some relevance in the context of the Malta Labour Party's efforts in university education between 1978 and 1987.

- It is common for socialist projects in education to be characterised by the *education-production nexus*. Marx's notion of a 'polytechnic education,' developed in the Geneva Resolution of 1866 (see Castles & Wustenberg, 1979, cited in Livingstone, 1983, pp.186, 187) is a very important source of reference here (see also Marx & Engels, 1998, p. 40; Friedrich Engels' question 18, no. 8, 1998, p. 78). This notion was very common in Third World socialist politics where universities were meant to contribute to the country's development through cooperation in national projects. The classic example here would be the role of the University of Dar es Salaam in Tanzania during the time that Julius K Nyerere served as President (Nyerere, 1979). It played an important role

within the framework of 'education for self-reliance.' Paulo Freire also develops this notion in Letter 11 to Guinea Bissau when he served as consultant to the newly installed revolutionary government in the former Portuguese colony in Africa on its achieving independence after a long bloody war of liberation (Freire, 1978).

- The ideal in the above context is for a *structured relationship* to be developed between education and the world of work. The central idea is for consciousness to derive from contact with and reflection on the real world. In short, there should be no bifurcation between theory and practice.

- What renders the notion of such a relationship distinctive within the socialist tradition, at least in its theoretical formulation, and not always its practice, is the emphasis on praxis, a Greek concept which dates as far back as at least the time of Aristotle. It entails action upon reflection for transformative action. At times, as in Marx's early writings, it refers to action upon the world of one's practical activity –the community, the polis, etc. More distinctively, in *Capital*, the focus is more specifically on reflection upon the world of economic production. This entails a critical engagement with the world of work. The notion of praxis lies at the heart of some major works in the socialist tradition, particularly Antonio Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* (the 'philosophy of praxis' - see Thomas, 2007) and Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

- Major works within the socialist tradition and even those by authors who would not claim to be socialist but who advocate an education for social justice, such as the School of Barbiana students who wrote *Letter to a Teacher*, inspired and directed by Don Lorenzo Milani, would emphasise the *communal and collective* dimensions of learning. Learning is not just an individual activity but also a collective activity. (Borg et al, 2009)

- There is a tendency, within socialist experiments in education, to give prominence to the *social sciences*, particularly political economy, and to a *non-conventional study of the arts and sciences*. This was very much the case with the various activities in Germany, Britain, Italy, Australia and Canada that constituted

‘independent working class education,’ (Waugh, 2009) and the labour colleges and mechanics’ institutes in the UK. With regard to a non conventional approach to the arts, the work of exponents of ‘cultural studies’, became prominent.

- Widening access to education at all levels for underprivileged groups. Trade unions, socialist parties and other organizations connected to both, strove hard over the years to render institutions of higher learning and education in general less exclusionary. They did so through many ways, including the setting up of colleges that allowed access to prestigious universities, one important example being Ruskin College, Oxford. Well known socialists such as R.H. Tawney were active in workers’ education associations intending to render higher learning institutes more accessible to working class persons. These efforts were also complemented internationally by those of left minded and socially conscious priests (Fr Jimmy Tompkins in Antigonish and Cape Breton, NS, Canada) to extend university access to industrial workers, farmers, fishers etc. and to ally university research and education to their immediate communal causes (e.g. Cooperative development in Nova Scotia, Canada).

- Dismantling structures that are perceived to contribute to the reproduction of privilege. The most left wing, Marxist or simply socialist inspired writings in sociology of education, based on empirical research, are intended to indicate how the educational system, and other institutions, help reproduce class and other forms of privilege. It goes without saying therefore that a socialist oriented programme of education would be characterised by attempts to dismantle, as much as possible, structures perceived as reproducing privilege. For instance, the Socialist Education Association, which for seventy five years has been affiliated with and serving as a think tank on educational matters for the Labour Party in the UK, underlines its commitment to an “non-selective education service, which has equality of opportunity and lifelong availability of adequate provision throughout the UK within which compulsory education is free and suitably resourced.”<sup>5</sup>

### **Contradictions and Limitations**

The kind of socialism adopted by the Malta Labour Party during its years in government at the time is generally held to be one characterised by pragmatism (Sant, 2004, p. 113), with its roots firmly embedded in the European socialist tradition but, because of the country's history as a colony, characterised by the presence of an occupying military force (what Edward Said calls 'direct colonialism'), having strong affinities with the type of socialism developed in Third World countries (ibid.). The major contradictions (Schembri, 1982; Spiteri-Campbell, 1984; Department of Education, 1985) include the following:

- EDUCATION-WORK: The major thrust of this reform was to bring university education closer to the world of work. This, as we have seen, has strong echoes of other experiments in socialist education elsewhere. This notwithstanding, evaluation reports indicate that, in many cases, the students were accorded different treatment in terms of tasks assigned (Department of Education, 1986, p. 9). There is also the criticism that the work and study phases appeared as separate components without any connection whatsoever between them. There was no well coordinated project combining the two phases and the report states that there was a separatist attitude among certain departments unconcerned about what goes on outside the study phase (Ibid, p. 10). This would seem to militate against the notion of praxis, that is to say the bringing of theory and practice together and bringing proper reflection to bear on the world of action, in this case, action in the world of work.
- REFLECTION: The study period was not long enough, according to students and lecturers' complaints, to provide proper assimilation and reflection (Department of Education, 1985). Once again, this can serve to undermine any process of praxis that would emerge from bringing the worlds of academia and work together. Interestingly enough, the model of work and study, introduced in China by Mao, allotted more time to study than to work and Mintoff is on record as having stated, in his reply to Dahrendorf of 13 May, 1978, that "...whether the period should be one of six, or of four or of three months is not a fundamental decision but one

of six, or of four or of three months is not a fundamental decision but one of details which should be examined from time to time” (Schembri, 1982, p. 149).

- SERVICE TO THE COMMUNITY According to the 1985 evaluation report (Department of Education, 1985, p.21), students, when interviewed, saw work as just a source of revenue, a means of obtaining the wherewithal to proceed with their studies. That sense of service to community and country’s development, so much emphasized in the socialist tradition, was not being fostered. The top-down manner in which this drastic change to the tertiary level education system was introduced might have been one of the reasons for this.

- CONSENSUS The previous point is closely connected with the issue of consensus. Not enough social consensus was generated to render this a collective effort. This was also aggravated by the degree of party political polarization that characterizes politics on this island. It is a well documented fact that the best socialist projects occurred when a revolutionary momentum was there (see, for instance, Arnove, 1994).

- PATRONAGE: While the statistics earlier on indicate that the State and state funded companies bore the brunt of sponsorship, one must not forget that the original attempt was to seek sponsorship from private employers as well as the State. There was an attempt for the cost of university education to be partly shifted onto the private sector with the implication being that the demands of the private sector would have a bearing on the kind of education provided by the university. This could easily be seen as an attempt at privatization of the Maltese university system, hardly in synch with socialist thinking in the field. Furthermore the student was rendered dependent on the employer with all sorts of ramifications, in terms of being used as strike-breaker during industrial and other disputes (this occurred with student teachers during a teachers’ two day strike in 1978) and in terms of having their potential militancy curbed.

- HOLISTIC REFORM The reform at the top of the educational system was not backed by major reform at bottom and rest of the

system. For this reason, the issue of access remained problematic in so far as provenance of students is concerned. As countless sociological research, especially research in the sociology of education, has shown, much of the social differentiation would have already taken place within the primary and secondary school years by the time students vie for places, in a selective system, at tertiary level. In fact the more selective the system of entry to university becomes, the more likely it is to benefit those who can draw on superior resources, often owing to class background, and who would have made these resources count during the compulsory schooling years.

- ARTS and SCIENCES: Undoubtedly the most controversial measure adopted was that of suppressing the arts and sciences, including social sciences. The fact that there was a rethink later on indicates that this measure did not go down well within certain sections of the Labour camp. The question to be asked is: what role should the arts and sciences play within a socialist vision? We have seen earlier on that there is a whole tradition within socialist contexts regarding the arts and sciences, with a rich literature to boot.

### **Consistences**

- SOCIALIST ECHOES: The worker-student scheme, with its twin project at the state sixth form, the 'pupil worker' scheme, could easily evoke memories of several well known socialist experiments in education. The pragmatic form of socialism adopted by the Mintoff government, which included parallels with third world countries, owing to the Maltese islands' legacies of colonialism and the government's non-aligned stance, immediately echoes the following: Marx's notion of a polytechnic education, as propounded in the Geneva Resolution of 1866 (see Castles and Wustenberg, 1979, cited in Livingstone, 1983, pp. 186, 187); Nyerere's educational programme for Tanzania whereby each school had to develop its own means of subsistence and the university had to contribute directly to the country's development, although departments of Sociology, English etc

were not suppressed (Mayo, 2001); Paulo Freire's advocacy of a fusion between education and production in his advice to the PAIGC leadership in Guinea Bissau (See Letter 11 in Freire, 1978, pp. 99-120); the system in China under Mao which involved a 2-4-2-4 (two months working-four months studying-two months working-four months studying) process (Chu, 1980, p. 79). These ideas immediately come to mind. This notwithstanding, most of the literature that served to evaluate the worker-student scheme indicates that much of the inspiration derived not from these sources but from the North American cooperative university model. Mintoff referred to this model in a parliamentary debate when challenging the accusation that the worker-student model did not work elsewhere. Mintoff singled out Northeastern University Boston<sup>6</sup> as the prototype for universities developing cooperative education programmes, the only difference being that their model of a worker-student scheme is controlled by employers rather than workers (Schembri, 1982, p. 42). One can also mention (see Spiteri Campbell, 1984, p. 11) the model adopted at Canada's University of Waterloo which, at the time of writing, is said to have the largest co-operative education program in the world, with more than 13,000 students enrolled over three semesters. Furthermore, remaining within the Maltese context, one cannot but recall the apprenticeship scheme at the old R.N. Dockyard School and subsequently R.N. Technical College at Senglea (Ghirlando, 1993; Sultana, 1992), the split between study and work occurring not between semesters but within the week.<sup>7</sup>

- CONCERTED DEVELOPMENT EFFORT: An attempt was made to bring all parties (universities, workers representatives and employers) on board to contribute to the development needs of the country. This is in keeping with many socialist experiments especially in former colonies in the so-called Third World. One ought to mention that this period also coincided with the establishment of what is now the Centre for Labour Studies at university (one of its major tasks was to monitor the participatory self-management experiences introduced in different firms). The University was meant to contribute, through staff and students, to



national projects. This was more of a desideratum than a reality.

- ACCESS: The 'reform' represents an attempt to provide access, within a 'meritocratic' framework, to those traditionally left out of university education. This might appear *problematic* in light of sociological research concerning the classic relationship between social class and educational achievement but it could easily be argued that such a change was *important* in a context marked by distinction and alternative access routes to power. The scheme also allowed full time employees to join the scheme while retaining their full salary throughout the whole year. This bold move rendered the university accessible to those who otherwise would not have availed themselves of this institution on a full time basis. It was mainly employees in the public and state enterprise sectors who were allowed to avail themselves of this opportunity. Alas, the private sector was reluctant to 'play ball.' To avoid ideological over-determination once again and offer a more nuanced view, it must be said that the proportion of the 18-24 age cohort that made it to University was still very low. Indeed the 'elimination/upgrade' of MCAST may well have reduced the availability of pre-university /post secondary type technical courses, something meant to be rectified by the re-establishment of MCAST many years later. Malta might well have suffered from a situation where we would have engineers but no technicians, accountants but no bookkeepers and so forth. Employers must have been reluctant to partake of a scheme that obliged them to pre-determine employee needs so much in advance (Malta also had 10% unemployment in 1983-84); as a colleague put it to me neatly, one can ossify labour market dynamics only up to a point, and at one's peril.

- EARNED MONEY and EMPLOYMENT: This change in the university educational system, echoed also at Government Sixth form level and in such vocational education projects as the Extended Skill Training Scheme (introduced in 1979), set the ball rolling for financial assistance being part and parcel of the Maltese tertiary education set up. While dismantling this scheme after obtaining power in 1987, the Nationalist Party still maintained the

idea of financial assistance through the conversion of the worker-student salary into a stipend without any work commitment on the students' part. The salary obtained through the Worker Student Scheme was earned money which, in my view, had some moral justification. It is true that student employees were paid a lesser amount than regular employees in the same job<sup>8</sup> but then one must bear in mind that this salary continued to be paid also during the five and a half month period of study as well as during the one month vacation period. The planning involved in so far as student intake is concerned, though controversial and problematic in terms of the 20 points bonus awarded to those who emerged from the Government sixth form (detractors referred to it as 'obscene'), as credit for their work experience, ensured the availability of a job on successful completion of the university course (Spiteri Campbell, 1984, p. 25). It was a question of not simply 'employability,' as is the case with the present-day international neo-liberal discourse in education, but also 'employment.'

- CHILDREN OF SEMI-SKILLED, UNSKILLED PARENTS: Excellent empirical research by Carmel Schembri (1982) sheds light on the provenance, in terms of social class background, of university students as a result of the worker-student scheme. Although this research confirms international sociological research findings regarding the predominance of students from traditional middle class milieus (including private schools) at university, there has been a noticeable increase in the number of students at university whose parents were either semi-skilled or unskilled and with either only primary or no formal education at all.

- RETHINK OF ARTS, MATHS AND SCIENCES: The reintroduction of courses in Arts, Maths and other areas, via evening diploma courses, made these *accessible* to full time employees who could not attend university on a full time basis. Had the scheme been allowed to develop it would have been interesting to see what shape the arts and sciences would have taken following their gradual reintroduction. Would have they remained the preserve of only full time students at honours degree level or would have honours degree studies in the area been made available to those who could not afford full time studies? On another note

computer studies featured among the courses provided at diploma to degree level, as well as Educational Administration, Journalism, Mediterranean Studies and Communication Studies. There was also a demand for Management and Law. (Sant, in Mayo, 1986, p. 16)

### Conclusion

This was undoubtedly the most far reaching reform carried out in education by the Malta Labour Government in its uninterrupted sequence of periods of office from 1971 till 1987. The reaction in the establishment quarters was largely negative and acrimonious. MLP spokespersons and sympathizers have often argued that there has been a series of attempts, since Labour was elected into power in 1971, to derail any kind of reform being introduced (see Darmanin, 1985; Sant, in Mayo, 1986; Vella, 1989). As Sant (in Mayo, 1986, p. 14) admits,

In the Labour Movement, we are not afraid of self-criticism and we have admitted that our major mistake is namely that of pressing too far forward too soon in implementing reforms; the priority of modernizing and reforming the antiquated structures of this country sometimes lead us to underestimate the importance of organization, and the strength of reactionary forces.

Labour was never the party of the establishment in Maltese society and its leadership, as well as rank and file, knew this only too well. As Vella (1989) states, the reform was not carried out in the most coherent, consistent and well planned manner possible (p. 172). Even Mizzi (1995), who provides quite a balanced view of the reforms and was not prepared to accept Dahrendorf's verdict uncritically, referred to some shortcomings in this regard. This made it difficult for such reforms to garner popular support.

As is almost always the case in a politically polarized society as is Maltese society, detractors and supporters of the system would want to win their games 6-love, 6-love. One rarely obtains a balanced view of the project, heralding its most positive aspects and criticising its most wayward ones. I sought to do this in this paper, tackling the subject not from any neutral standpoint (education is never neutral and research is

never value free) but as someone viewing this project from a socialist perspective, examining the way it can be reconciled or otherwise with a socialist tradition in education and bearing in mind <sup>1</sup> that such socialist traditions are varied and not monolithic <sup>2</sup> that the Maltese brand of socialism was characterised, for the most part, by a pragmatist approach, an approach which should however have taken into consideration the way labour markets operate in small states (all six development plans from 1959 till 1988 are said to have failed in reaching their objectives, either overachieving or underachieving – [Baldacchino, 1998](#)).

The system helped increase the number of students from low SES families (still a minority in relative terms – see data in [Schembri, 1982](#)) making it through to university without being ‘a strain on their parents.’ This is important and laudable from a socialist and equity perspective. This having been said, no higher education reform alone can increase access on the basis of social justice without a proper reform at all levels of the educational system. In my view, this requires a wide ranging reform that ensures that state schools are the best in the business where effective and meaningful learning through different pathways is ensured and followed up. Furthermore, any reform needs to provide parity of esteem between academic and vocational pathways, a problem in a country still suffering from the classic British colonial legacy of a bifurcation between the two streams. Cuba’s much lauded University of Havana with its superb science and medical faculties, is part and parcel of a sound and undifferentiated (private, public) educational system where students excel in such domains as languages and mathematics (see [Carnoy & Marshall, 2005](#)). Its fine doctors and health workers come from across the entire social spectrum.

Furthermore, one must bear in mind the old sociological adage that education on its own does not change things; it is not an independent variable. It can however contribute to social and economic change. In this respect, the idea of a structured relationship between professional education and work experience was a step in the right direction, as was the introduction through the reform of new professional courses at university, including engineering, management, labour studies (albeit part-time) administration, accountancy and education (even though teachers were traditionally included by Gramsci and others among the

class of subaltern intellectuals, specifically however in a *meridionale* 'pre-industrial' society context – once again, one must be wary of the danger of reifying and abstracting). One must ensure, however, that university education entails more than just preparing people for work, however important is this aspect of education. In addition to Dahrendorf's warning to Mintoff ("the notorious difficulties of manpower planning in a changing world" –3/5/1978)<sup>9</sup>, other people, who have critiqued the notion of excessive vocationalisation in education, have argued that formal institutions of learning, encumbered by bureaucracies, are not the most appropriate institutions to cater for the constant fluctuations of the economy (Sultana, 1992, p 298). If anything I would argue that university education ought to prepare people to engage critically with work. People should be formed as social actors rather than just producers or, worse, passive consumers. Otherwise any such proposed attempt will be no different from that which forms part of the current dominant neoliberal paradigm of thinking about education.

The dominant neoliberal paradigm promotes an all pervasive market oriented and strictly instrumentalist approach to education placing the focus on employability which does not necessarily mean employment (Gelpi, 2002); an attempt to turn a 'jobs crisis' into a 'skills crisis' (Marshall, 1997, p. 59). The task for any genuine socialist or social-justice oriented progressive movement, in this day and age, is that of thinking and acting beyond the simply instrumentalist framework. While the economic imperatives of development cannot be discarded, one should conceive of the university, and any other educational institution for that matter, as providing important spaces where one recuperates the notion of and makes valuable contributions to the development of a genuinely democratic and socially inclusive public sphere. They should also constitute spaces where the very nature of past and contemporary production is discussed critically from a social and bio-centric perspective (Milani, 2001). The humanities (including social sciences) and natural sciences (the latter ironically given tremendous importance in countries that served as examples of 'actually existing socialism') have an important role to play in this regard, provided that they are revitalized in terms of present day concerns and issues and

rendered accessible to one and all, irrespective of work schedules, financial situation and social location.

## Notes

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2 See report in *L-Orizzont* 29, Nov. 1977 and in *The Times*, 30th Nov. 1977,

3 He later became Chair of the Commission for the Development of Higher Education in Malta but later resigned from his position on the Malta commission as a result of his disagreement with the Malta government regarding what he felt was its imposition of the worker-student scheme. In a letter dated 6th June 1978, Professor Dahrendorf informed Mr Mintoff that he could no longer advise him on higher education, either informally or as a member of the commission (see Schembri, 1982; Busutil, 2009).

4 I am indebted to Dominic Fenech, Rector's delegate at the time who was present for the meeting with the two ministers, the Minister of Trade and Economic Planning, and the Minister of Education, at the House of Representatives.

5 See first aim of the SEA on its website: <http://www.socialisteducation.org.uk/us.htm> Accessed 30th December, 2010.

6 <http://www.northeastern.edu/experiential-learning/cooperative-education/> See also blogs on <http://www.timesofmalta.com/articles/view/20090620/local/german-sociologist-who-resisted-mintoffs-education-reforms-dies> both accessed 19th January 2011.

7 I am indebted to former apprentice at this college, Victor Mifsud, for this point.

8 Maltese legislation allows for younger workers to be paid at lesser rates than older ones, especially if they are in training. I am indebted to Godfrey Baldacchino for this point.

9 In Schembri, 1982, p. 142.

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