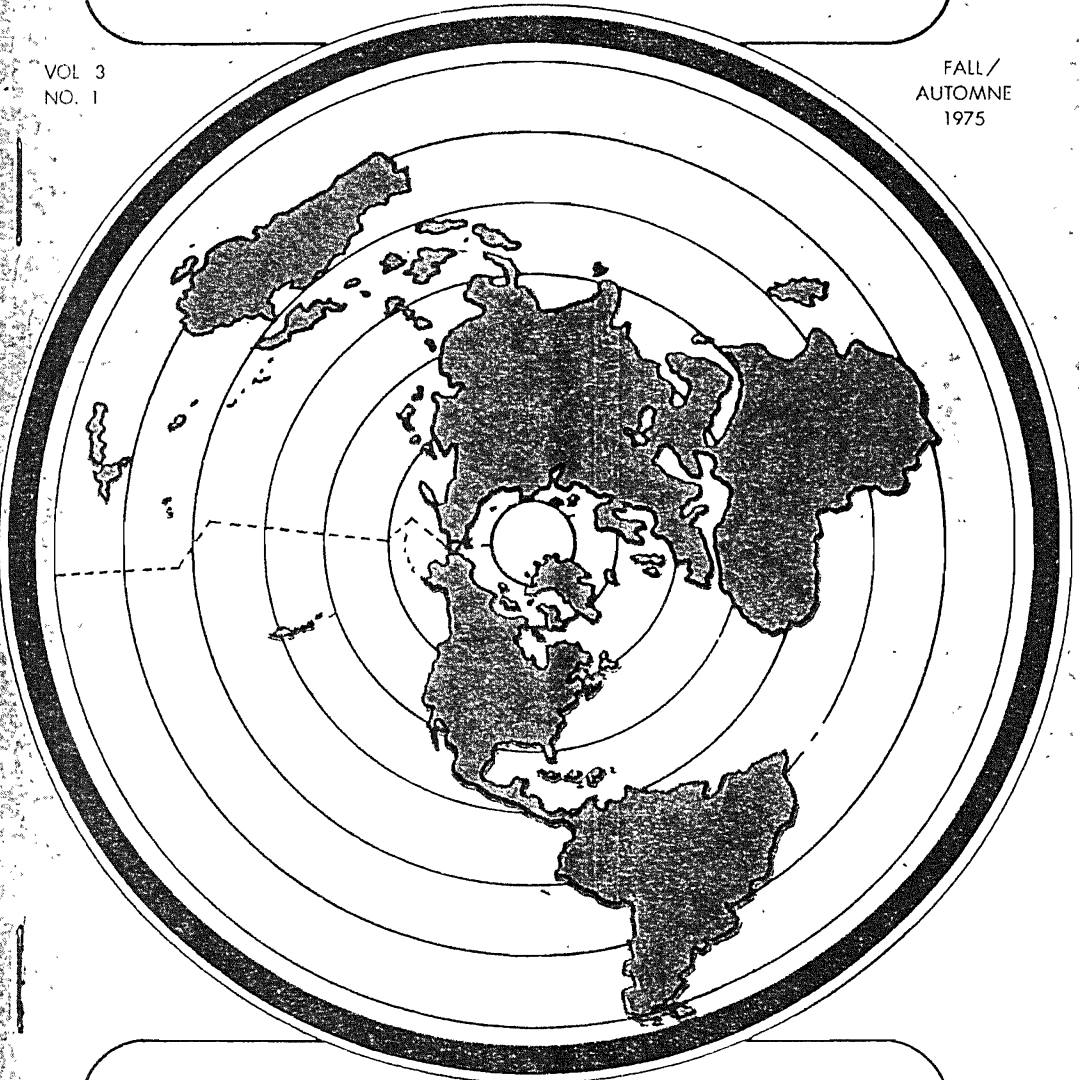


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LANGUAGE AND NATIONALITY IN AN ISLAND COLONY: MALTA

Under the influence of thinkers such as Vico, Herder, and Fichte, we have come to accept and assume that language and culture are what make a people a nation. In his critique of nationalism, however, Kedourie described it as "a doctrine invented in Europe at the beginning of the nineteenth century." ¹ Whereas in recent times nationalism has caused or served the perpetration of excesses, in the preceding century nationalist movements were in many ways inevitable, even heroic expressions of resistance to assimilation and foreign domination, attempts to reinforce cultural awareness and assert political rights. However, it is clear that no instant or static correlation exists between native languages and national cultures, or between ethnic groups and nation states. While it seems natural that a people sharing common experiences and using the same medium of communication should constitute a nation, the relationship of nationality to nationhood may be complicated by a multiplicity of factors — sectarian, social, ideological. More fundamentally, a sense of common nationality may be hindered by different religions or ethnic origins of the inhabitants of a defined area, resulting for example in conflicting language loyalties, as in Canada. The situation appears even more perplexing when linguistic differences do not stem from perceptibly diverse racial origins, yet serve to polarize opinion in a society having common attributes. Nineteenth-century Maltese society is probably a unique example of the case in which trilingualism became a battleground in the successful quest for a national identity. Maltese nationalism rotated in time on this triple paradox: The championing of Italian as a non-Maltese national language; the active promotion of the Maltese vernacular by the British Imperial power as a means of expunging Italian; and the gradual emergence

of Maltese as a national tongue and as the prime expression of anti-British sentiments.

Of Britain's Mediterranean colonies it is Malta that is socially and politically the most interesting. Neither too small, like Gibraltar, to aspire to nationhood, nor, like Cyprus, torn by ethnic-religious strife, the Island was just sufficiently sized, the native population adequately homogeneous, for an intricate language-nationality situation to develop during the period of British rule (1800-1964). "There is surely no other community in the British Commonwealth," wrote an observer in 1937, "whose domestic disputes are entangled so inextricably with the shattering controversies which divide principalities and powers." ² Unlike Tangier, Gibraltar, or the Cape, Malta was not part of a mainland, and her language-nationality conflicts must be seen in the light of her insularity and geographical location — an archipelago only 122 square miles in area, 60 miles to the south of Sicily, and three times as distant from the North African coast.

The Malta language question was comparable to the more current status of South African taal or United Kingdom Gaelic rather than to Québec French. In Malta a common medium of communication existed, neither English nor Italian but Maltese (il-Malti). This local vernacular, spoken by one and all, was, like taal, undeveloped, lacking the literary and prestigious resources of major languages. However much Maltese pro-Italians sang J. B. M. Hertzog's song of language as "a medium of expression for the people's thoughts . . . the form of expression whereby a people can maintain and enlarge its cultural distinctiveness and yearning for autonomy," ³ in reality they were out of tune. Only a small percentage of Maltese speakers, the educated classes, knew Italian. Thus Malta was a linguistic "diglossia" in the extreme, complicated further by the introduction of a third language, English. ⁴

Maltese was not quite a literate, and hardly a literary language (insofar as it had no written tradition), but it had been for ages transmitted orally and was undoubtedly a popular cultural carrier. It was used in ordinary, everyday speech, but, owing to its "vulgar" condition, the extent of "native-like" feeling that it transmitted varied. Neither an Italian dialect nor even a Romance language, Maltese was of Semitic derivation,

using harsh and guttural sounds unknown to Italian, and with an Arabic syntax and morphology. Maltese surnames and place-names amalgamated Italian-seeming and Arabic-sounding words, or vice versa. After much controversy a standard Maltese orthography was officially recognized in 1934, based on the Roman not the Arabic alphabet. ⁵ Thus Maltese culture had an Italo-Arabic duality, epitomized by the language itself and represented best of all by the Maltese-speaking bilingual educated classes. ⁶

The development of Maltese as a rallying point for national identity was further complicated because the Maltese tended to execrate all things Arabic. Arab rule in Malta (870-c. 1090) was associated with tyranny. Arabs were allegedly heretical, dirty, Muslim Africans. Ever since the twelfth-century Norman occupation, Malta had been under European rule. The Knights of St. John (1530-1798) had well burnished this Christian Europeanism, epitomized by the Great Siege of 1565. In the nineteenth century, pro-Maltese language groups, such as the *Società per la Diffusione della Cultura Maltese*, had to fight ingrained anti-Arabic prejudices besides surmounting the difficulty of establishing a truly national language.

After Malta's incorporation into the British Empire, the colonial power inevitably introduced a third linguistic variable, i.e., English. At first the British had to use Italian as the official medium, since few Maltese knew English. Gradually asserting their authority and influence, the British started promoting English-speaking Maltese, mostly for administrative posts. Proficiency in English thus became an asset, and those who could afford to learned the new language. Not content with this voluntary diffusion of English, certain Maltese Anglophiles and the British themselves sought to impose the language on every one. The British endeavour to enforce assimilation and acculturation provoked a vigorous resistance. Ironically, Maltese nationalists waved not the autochthonous Maltese carrier of mass culture as their banner, but the Italian language and heritage, which the Maltese intelligentsia had cultivated for countless generations. Curiously, the British desired to promote the study of Maltese in the schools, mostly as a vehicle to teach and thereby slowly eliminate Italian.

This new British policy coincided with the emergence of

Italy as a unified and increasingly influential state with *irredentismo* as a major political feature. In defending Italian against English, Maltese pro-Italians found moral support in the neighbouring peninsula, and among the numerous Roman Catholic clergy who, besides being naturally linked to the Eternal City, were Italianate at heart both by class and by education. They also suspected the least signs of Protestant infiltration. Until 1880, Italian was the language of education from primary school to university, while Maltese languished. Italian was the language of the law courts (which never adapted to English common law), of the curia (which retained Italian as its official medium until recently), and of the legal, clerical, commercial, and generally literate population. Italian was extensively used in administration and journalism as well as in the Government Council, where elected members usually spoke Italian. As more and more Maltese learned English, the former exclusivity of Italian diminished, although its predominance remained.

The Malta language question occupied, to a lesser or greater extent, the period from 1880 to 1939. Until the 1870s, Maltese political agitation centred mainly on the right to representation. Because Malta was not conquered territory, Maltese leaders since the treaties of Amiens and Paris (1814) felt grieved at being denied representative government. "Was it for this," appealed the nobles, "that we took up arms and made our brave stand against the tyranny of France?"⁷ The Maltese felt "again betrayed."⁸ By 1880, however, a very pregnant grievance had been added to this feeling of political oppression. Anglicization was doggedly embarked upon, expressed mainly through various schemes or projects designed to elevate substantially the role of English in education, justice, the civil service, and other fields. As early as 1813, Bathurst had attempted to pursue such a course. His instructions to Governor Thomas Maitland remained unfulfilled for so long partly because they were impractical. Distance inevitably provided that "the product finally delivered at the frontier" was different from "the blueprint devised in the department;" it permitted the growth of "variants unsuspected at the centre or unknown in the prototype."⁹

When anglicization was irrevocably decided on, the Maltese crown counsel Sir Adriano Dingli labeled it unsuitable to the

Maltese context and unwise, as well as counterproductive. 10 He counseled a policy of 'quieta non movere,' the unimpeded diffusion of English, rather than — as the nationalist leader Fortunato Mizzi put it — "forcing a language upon the people." 11 One Maltese representative told the British governor in 1884:

We are a free people and we have been a civilized people since ancient times, and we were already civilized when another people, who today pretend to have mastered civilization, were in savagery. We have a civilization of which every civilized people may be jealous. 12

Although duly warned, the British introduced their plan.

In 1880, two royal commissioners presented separate but complementary reports aimed at creating a favourable climate for English at the expense of Italian. Patrick (later Sir) Keenan, Resident Commissioner for National Education in Ireland, opposed "half measures" and advocated pensioning all Maltese government-employed teachers who, within one year from the date of his report, had not improved their English sufficiently. "English — and English only — taught through the medium of Maltese" was to be the language of the schools. Italian could be taken, if desired, only as "an extra branch, taught before or after ordinary school hours." 13 Sir Penrose Julyan, a Crown Agent for the colonies, found Italian "useful chiefly as a social ornament." English proficiency was to be considered in new appointments, and all Civil Service books and accounts were to be kept solely in English. He marveled at the "strange custom" of permitting members to address the Governor and his colleagues in Italian. Jurors were henceforth to use English, not Italian, and within some years English would hopefully be the language of the law courts "as a powerful stimulus to the general enlightenment of the people." 14

At this time, too, the Governor appointed a new Director of Education, who was ordered to enforce the Keenan-Julyan recommendations. Sigismondo Savona (1837-1908), an intelligent, English-educated army schoolmaster, became a well-respected teacher and editor of the pro-English newspaper **Public Opinion**. Savona had been an elected Council member since 1875; in 1880 he defected to the official side. He was what Ronald Robinson may well have called an ideal collaborator. 15 Savona believed that, given the stark realities of the

colonial situation, the increased diffusion of English would further mass education, assimilation, and utilitarianism. 16

The chief instigators of the rising pro-English party were members of the colonial administration and a number of local Anglophiles; but support for English developed mainly due to economic hardship and the lack of indigenous natural resources. A *Riformista* party, associated mostly with Savona, came into being to subvert the Italianate status quo, especially in language. It argued that progressive education demanded "a thorough knowledge" of English 17 as a means of inculcating an awareness of "the qualities which had raised Britain to the exalted position it occupies in the international sphere." 18 To persist in the primacy of Italian education was "displeasing and discourteous." 19 "From Australia as from Canada, from Tasmania as from the United States, the cry reaches us: 'Learn English! Learn English!'" 20 It was, said Savona, "for the benefit of all classes . . . that the language spoken in Malta should be the English language." 21 In Joseph Chamberlain's words to the House of Commons, learning English in Malta was "a question of bread and butter." 22

Italianate nationalists, who had condemned political repression before, would not submit to this "bastardization" of their culture, institutions, and traditions, and became **Anti-Riformisti**. Latent patriots now mobilized as a nationalist party that aroused heated discussions in Council and café alike. In 1878, a noisy 'anti-taxation' street riot erupted. In 1879, the first public political meeting was organized. In 1880, the **Partito Anti-Riformista** established an ideological publication, found a redoubtable leader, and began to pioneer Maltese nationalism. In the 1880 elections, Fortunato Mizzi (1844-1905) emerged as the pro-Italian nationalist champion. He successfully weathered his first election and remained godfather of Maltese politics until his death. The son of a magistrate, Mizzi was a Maltese-educated lawyer with an Italian wife. Eventually he was hailed as "pater patriae," 23 his memory more cherished than that of Savona, who resigned his directorship of education and resumed his role as tribune in 1887. Fortunato Mizzi pioneered a political tradition furthered in time by his son Enrico, just as Sigismondo Savona's pro-English views were developed in due course by Sir (later Lord) Strickland (1861-1940).

Maltese nationalists generally did not favour uniting Malta with Italy, but later the younger Mizzi succumbed to jingoism and irredentism. The notion of patria or motherland, a Mizzian foundation-stone, subsequently evolved out of its excessively Italianate shell. Inspired by mottos such as *amor patriae religio est* and *patria et religio*, the Anti-Riformisti held that the Maltese — “un popolo meridionale” 24 — would not suffer losing “la lingua del paese,” their coveted language of education. 25 They did not respect the English “standard of civilization . . . and education,” 26 and they had no desire whatever to introduce “English education,” thereby to ensure that the English nation would be “loved and respected in Malta.” 27 The pro-Italians were often accused of treason. “Certainly,” wrote one Anglophile, “they may realize their intentions by having Garibaldi take possession of these Islands in King Vittorio Emmanuele’s name.” 28 In retaliation, the nationalists scoffed and hissed at “the capitoline geese of an inconclusive and decrepit imperialism,” 29 the lackeys “ill of impotence and clogged in the clasp of a vile and venal servilism.” 30 It was better to teach English, said one nationalist, tongue in cheek, “because with English the sons of our people can be cooks, servants, cabmen and waiters in British homes, and when they will reach total despair, they could go and finish themselves off in Australia.” 31 Last but not least, pro-Italian Maltese feared “English habits and feelings” which would dislodge “the linguistic barrier that served as a constant kindling of their character.” 32 Italian in Malta, like French in Québec, was inextricably linked with the idea of nationality — “notre patrimoine religieux et national” — and became a central part of the broader question of cultural **survivance**. 33

Chamberlain’s revocation of representative government in 1903 — arising mostly from language differences — united practically all political and popular elements in contempt for British jingoism. The unrelenting pro-English policy, with its implied constitutional blackmail, made enemies even of collaborators. Partisans became patriots. Although differing language allegiances also reflected socio-political differences, the Maltese sense of nationality was far more deeply embedded than it might have seemed. However, Maltese nationality appeared to be still half-baked, conditioned and blinded by the absurd political situation in which the country found itself.

Whereas pro-Italian "nationalists" supported one foreign language against another and opposed the native Maltese, pro-English "imperialists" promoted English and Maltese. The nationalists feared that Maltese — "the language of the people," would sooner or later supplant Italian. A national *patois*, they said, was being artificially created to displace Italian and diffuse English instead. **Inclusio unius est exclusio alterius**, said Fortunato Mizzi. How could three languages coexist, especially in the primary schools? 34

By the turn of the century the Colonial Office firmly decided on so-called "free choice." Parents had to decide which of the two foreign languages their children should learn. This system resembled South Africa's, prompting J. B. M. Hertzog to declare that the state, not the parent, should decide the language to be taught: "Education was not for the parent but for the child." 35 But Chamberlain would not "at the dictation of a small minority take away from 80% of the population of Malta their right to learn English and force upon them the necessity of learning a language which they do not wish to learn." 36 F. Mizzi retorted: "Chamberlain tells us that he does not see in Malta but the interests of the fortress, and he forgets the Christians who are the children of these lands: we, in the name and under the banner Maltese, unite to declare that Malta, and Gozo, and Comino, and Cominotto, and that every rock that surfaces here belongs to us." 37 Promoting English in the colonies must have seemed very proper to Chamberlain, who favoured a British **Zollverein**, a Council of Defence, and an Imperial Parliament. Regarding Malta, his dominance at the Colonial Office (1895-1903) and his high-handedness with the language question and the constitution, made "Dante and Shakespeare shake hands." 38

In 1916, Enrico Mizzi (1885-1950) protested when the Government referred to Maltese nationality as British. Malta's annexation, he said, showed "our British citizenship, not our nationality," which contained constituent elements and factors corresponding to territory, race, language, religion, law, customs, history "and, above all, national conscience These elements, natural and moral, clearly show our nationality to be neither English, nor African, but simply and uniquely Italian." 39 Enrico was court-martialled on a sedition charge in 1917, and deported to Uganda during the second world war

because of his beliefs. He too failed to perceive that a separate Maltese nationality existed, just as there was a distinct Maltese language, and that "when the language of a country is discouraged or imperfectly cultivated, the consequence is that people entertain narrow and erroneous views of knowledge, are in general contracted in their minds, and superstitious in their imaginations." 40

Emmanuele Dimech (1860-1921) was one of the first Maltese agitators to equate language with nationality in a purely nationalist sense. A classic epitome of the self-made individual, a convert from crime, for half a century after his death Dimech was the unlamented victim of clericalism, colonialism, and the surreptitious censures of the closed Maltese community. He had begun to muster some working class following before the First World War, but his social, religious, and political views were, like his outlook on language, considered revolutionary or undesirable. The Church excommunicated him, the faithful stoned him, the British exiled him to Egypt, where he died. Dimech wrote:

A Nation and a language are one and the same thing; if one is lost so will the other be lost. Let us therefore cultivate our language, let us not insult it by using some other language instead of it, because when we insult the language we insult the nation, and when we insult the nation, we insult ourselves. 41

Matters came to a bloody head in June 1919 when, in the wake of postwar demobilization and the accumulated nationalist aspirations of a century, intensified by the general nationalist surge following the end of hostilities and the Versailles Treaty, British troops fired on hungry, unarmed demonstrators. They killed four Maltese men on the spot and injured several others. Simultaneously, the newly-constituted *Assemblea Nazionale* drafted a self-government constitution nearby. When a wounded man arrived at the *Giovine Malta* headquarters amidst cries of horror, one delegate dipped a white handkerchief in his blood, held it up, and shouted: "Maltese, here are our national colours!" 42

In 1921, Malta was granted responsible government. Language continued to be a controversial issue until the 1930s. The final exclusion of Italian from the law courts and from other branches of public life was entrusted to a royal commission. Without such British intervention it might have

taken longer to accommodate Maltese in the courts. In 1934, the Malta Constitution (Amendment) Letters Patent removed Italian as one of the two official media. Maltese and English became the principal languages. "It was a hard blow," wrote the Chief Justice. "I felt too oppressed at the prospect of giving judgements in the vernacular after having for a lifetime studied, thought and written exclusively in the language that was being banned." 43

During the Second World War, Fascist Italy joined the Luftwaffe in bombing Malta. Thousands died. Allied propaganda naturally brainwashed the population against Mussolini and everything Italian. Suspected pro-Italians had their houses searched. Several leading personalities, including the Chief Justice, were deported. The war, more perhaps than any other single factor during colonial rule, boosted English and the British, condemned Italian and the Italians. The demise of Prime Minister Enrico Mizzi in 1950 more or less terminated pro-Italian philosophy as a motif in Nationalist Party politics. The increased constitutional power in native hands, Mussolini's wartime atrocities, the much accelerated Anglo-Maltese social intercourse engendered by fighting a common war, and generally the end of empire and the dawning of a new age of national self-determination, all favoured the growth of greater concern and respect for Maltese as a major force of nationality and an indisputable source of nationhood.

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, language loyalties had motivated and mobilized Maltese partisan activity on an unprecedented scale. Language battles may well be said to account for the origin of Maltese political parties. Anglicization could be accomplished only at great cost to human relations inside the colony. But in de-Italianizing Malta, the British forced the birth of a more home-grown product. In resisting assimilation and colonialism, pro-Italians and others engendered a national political consciousness upon which a body politic could feed. Paradoxically, the Maltese language emerged as a synthesis of the pro-English and pro-Italian rivalry. The Maltese vernacular served as a social and emotive bond and became a natural unifier. Both Anglophiles and Italophiles thus contributed, unwittingly, to the success of Maltese nationalism and nationhood.

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