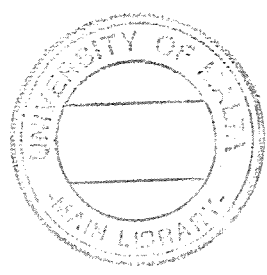


*HITTING THE LIMELIGHT IN LILLIPUT*  
*A CRITIQUE OF EXPERTISE*

G Baldacchino  
University of Malta



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# Hitting the Limelight in Lilliput: A Critique of Expertise

Dr. Godfrey Baldacchino

Workers' Participation Development Centre  
&  
Department of Public Policy  
University of Malta, Msida, MALTA Europe  
FAX: (+356 - 336450)

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## Introduction

Bray and Fergus (1986:94-5) argue that countries with small populations, by definition, tend to have small pools from which to draw the skilled personnel they need. However, they intimate that this imbalance may not be that critical because of the smallness effect, resulting in a disproportionate availability of scholarship quotas and in a stronger competitive urge because of constant public scrutiny and personal rivalry. In this light, they propose, in passing:

"Smallness can also be a major stimulus, for in a small country it is easy to hit the limelight". (*ibid.*)

This paper hopes to critically problematise further the issue of expertise in small jurisdictions. It does so on the basis of comparative fieldwork: First, a series of semi-structured interviews undertaken during summer 1992 with social science academics from the University of the West Indies at Cave Hill (UWICH), Barbados, one of the three main campuses of the regional University of the West Indies (UWI). Quotations in this article are drawn from these interview scripts. Second, a reflexive autobiography, locating the self as an academic based at the University of Malta (UM). The material is culled from completed doctoral research, now looking for an interested publisher (Baldacchino 1993).

## An Ease of Monopolisation

What Bray & Fergus (1986) fall short of analysing is that this achievement of public exposure is not limited to social visibility and transparency. The relative ease of hitting the limelight in Lilliput corresponds to an ease of achieving a condition of expertise, the correspondence on an individual basis of the ease of monopolisation by firms in the micro-economy. As soon as an individual develops even a modest edge in an area of knowledge,

skill or research, s/he may find him/herself proclaimed as an expert and is ascribed with authoritative standing in that area by others.

Such a standing is substantially a function of the monopoly which obtains in Lilliput: There is a social hierarchy with few intermediate rungs in the ladder of social mobility, even though - and this must not be underestimated - the few (often single) competitors in the way may prove difficult to dislodge or overtake (Bacchus 1989:8; Bacchus & Brock 1987:5). Various specialisms also remain vacant and unrecognised until developed and proclaimed by enterprising individuals (Boyce 1991:113; Bray 1992:150; Murray 1985:194; Peters & Sabaroché 1991:133; Rodhouse 1991:219). And with the human resource chain thinly stretched, a single break (through sickness, absence for training, or emigration) can cause disruption and major loss of efficiency (Bray 1991:57,64-66; Coyne 1992:80; Peters & Sabaroché 1991:135-136; Shand 1980:16):

"The person in a small state is like a premier capital good, a premier national resource. You would need an army of experts [in a particular subject] elsewhere. But one person in Grenada would suffice". (economist)

Engendering one's own indispensability is totally rational from the microstate citizen's point of view. After all, there is a general understanding that it is in every producer's interest to distort the market mechanism to one's advantage, shifting preferably from a price taker to a price setter orientation where the milieu permits various degrees of differentiation. The cultivation of expertise is one technique towards such a monopoly orientation; and in the microstate environment such an achievement can be almost spontaneous, even unavoidable, particularly if one is establishing oneself in a new domain of knowledge, competence or responsibility. Expertise can thus be relatively rapidly rewarded by social, economic and political spinoffs, including public recognition and media exposure, increased discretion and authority.

Expertise is achieved almost by default: Presumptuousness pays dividends, because there is no one around to challenge one's bluff:

"When you're in a little pool you could become a big fish fairly rapidly". (educationist)

Critical self-assessment supports these views. I was one of a dozen graduates in the only Bachelor of Arts General Degree Course (full-time) with social studies as a major area of study held at UM in the late 1970's. After a short spell of teaching, unemployment and more teaching, I made an unfortunate attempt at postgraduate training abroad (in educational psychology). I had then identified educational psychology as a potential niche in which there was an obvious demand and in which I was interested. Unknown to me at the that time, however, (and being utterly naive of such workings)

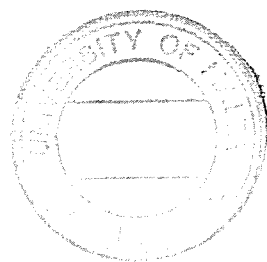
another individual had already been identified and encouraged to pursue postgraduate training in that area. So my adventure failed to generate the necessary support.

I was then approached to carry out social science research at a recently established Workers' Participation Development Centre at UM, initially (1982) on a part-time and subsequently (1983) on a full-time basis. In time, I generated and directed a considerable amount of my own work, in line with the Centre's objectives. I became Malta's specialist on 'Labour and Development' issues following a Master's Degree abroad in 1985/6<sup>1</sup>. I have since then delivered courses on such and related themes to undergraduate diploma and degree students at UM. My M.A. research paper on worker cooperatives, eventually developed into a foreign publication (Baldacchino 1990), has turned me also into a local authority on cooperative affairs.

The same can perhaps be said with regards to issues concerning other realms of knowledge, which have been deployed as other specialisms. An interest in the theory and practice of worker and adult education has meant that I have been approached to speak about this subject in public fora, deliver lectures at UM and contribute articles to local journals<sup>2</sup>. Some experience in survey questionnaire design and analysis has seen me develop into a sporadic consultant on this matter to various students as well as private and public bodies. My interest in Social Studies has enabled me, following an invitation, to write a book which has become the unofficial textbook for students sitting for the subject at ordinary level matriculation (Baldacchino 1988).

A similar development has occurred with respect to my hobby - Astronomy; a significant variant here being that this is a voluntary activity with few financial rewards and where competition is therefore not so intense. I was one of the founding members of a small astronomical circle when still an undergraduate UM student in 1978. By 1984, this had become the national astronomical association at whose helm I served for 4 years. I am intermittently invited to participate on television slots and radio programmes to talk about astronomy related topics, particularly solar and lunar eclipses.

My 'specialist' interest in meteor watching turned me into the local authority on the matter, even though my scientific education was stunted at age 17. A modest cyclostyled publication of mine on this subject (Baldacchino 1980, revised 1984) was not favourably received by foreign reviewers; nevertheless, I was lauded in the local press and ascribed with the honour of possibly becoming "the Patrick Moore of the Maltese Sky"<sup>3</sup>. This remains to date the only local text to focus on shooting stars and their observation. Foreign reviews were, however, not so encouraging<sup>4</sup>. A related project in the drafting phase is to come up with a simple guide to the nature and observation of meteors in the Maltese language. This



project, another first for Malta, is so pioneering that it will involve the coining from scratch of technical terms in the local language<sup>5</sup>.

Possibly, I may be an exceptional individual. But then so would be many of the compatriots I know well enough. Is it not in part the microstate predicament which makes the development of such 'exceptional' individuals all the more possible?

- Heavyweights and Frothblowers

But the empirical and academic baggage behind such an authoritative standing and exceptionality may not always be there. Expertise may grant so many advantages - status, consultancies, public and political acknowledgements, material benefits - that one is easily tempted to contribute to one's own ascription process as expert:

"One does tend to call oneself 'expert'. Many don't want to get over that image. I would feel uncomfortable unless I was competent. But people like the image". (educationist)

The attitude of public and media organisations in their search for statements and comments by 'experts' fuels this ego trip:

"There is definitely that temptation of being a big fish in a small pond. Say, I receive a request from the TV station to speak about the family. I would tend to accept...The ease of achieving expertise is remarkable in a small country". (sociologist)

To the trained eye, there develop two classes of experts in the small society. First, the big fish who would be a big fish anywhere; experts of international stature. Second, and probably more numerous, the big fish who are only so because they operate in a micro-territory. The former have a basis in achievement; that of the latter depends on domestic recognition. Such two clusters have been termed heavyweights and frothblowers<sup>6</sup>:

"A microstate expert may not be of international stature. But every now and then you get a big fish in a big pond, like Derek Walcott [recent Literature Nobel Prize Winner from St. Lucia]". (educationist)

Or:

"Another 'big fish, small pond' issue is that of so called small experts who would become established in the eyes of the public whereas they wouldn't have the capability in larger countries". (economist)

- Being Alone

These big fish in small ponds achieve such a situation of command by exploiting, consciously or unwittingly, the implications of monopoly in a setting of totality: The small size of population; the societal demands for expertise in different branches of knowledge; the relative isolation from peer pressure forthcoming from abroad. Insularity and logistic constraints impede a regular exercise of quality matching and sizing up which occurs readily in larger territories:

"There is nobody to talk to". (management lecturer)

Indeed, this is a serious danger even to those with international stature, who must thus defend themselves from this tendency to lose one's lustre and fall in a rut:

"Like Graham Greene's *Our Man in Havana*, I sometimes feel run down and gone to seed. We get some expatriate traffic but so many come here just for an extended holiday. The sun jet professors, we call them. I've been here since 1975 and in fact I'm getting itchy. I want to concentrate on my area of specialisation. But otherwise it's true: It's easy to atrophy". (sociologist)

It is so easy to accept that you are alone, the acknowledged and absolute keeper of a particular skill or discipline and thus rest on your laurels:

"There is a certain degree of loneliness. I would like to have more people to talk to or discuss things. As it is, I have to discuss things with people in Jamaica and the U.S.A. I ask myself whether I am as competent as people would have one believe". (economist)

Unless one successfully usurps the concept of the physically parochial, there are real dangers of lapsing comfortably into mediocrity:

"The size [of the country] acts as a defence from what goes on outside...And if you don't really do what you should be doing, even your own personal development suffers. If I'm involved in petty affairs, my mind will itself become petty. One should not surrender oneself intellectually. A relative expertise may be seen as the end of the story. When in fact it's only the beginning". (political scientist)

I am all too much aware of these dangers. The inevitable return to Malta and the UM after the completion of doctoral studies means that I must struggle hard to maintain, let alone improve, my intellectual calibre. Discussions with colleagues at UM and elsewhere suggest that it becomes vital to go for some kind of trans-national commitment and profile, especially now that I have

managed to identify and articulate this very real threat of succumbing to Lilliput and devolving into plainness.

Organisations in micro-territories are obvious potential candidates for nurturing a stock of 'second class experts', which can be referred to as mediocrats, members of a bureaucracy of mediocrity<sup>7</sup>:

"Many plodders make it to the top". (Kersell 1987:106)

Or:  
"In small countries, some employees rise higher and faster than similarly [and perhaps even more?] qualified employees elsewhere". (Baker 1992:15)

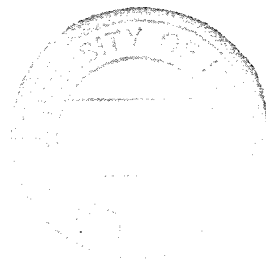
UWICH operates as a monopoly institution in Barbados and the micro-insular, geographical totality of its home territory reduces the more regular interaction and dialogue otherwise available to educational institutions in larger territories. UWI's regional character, with various members of staff hailing from other Caribbean territories apart from Barbados, suggests that there is a second-level, regional totality at work which to some extent takes over the immediate, Barbadian, insular condition. There remains, however, as strong a gulf between UWICH and the metropole:

"To maintain big fish status you need international recognition. But there are problems. The library is not very good. People who talk your language are few. Travel costs are higher. And this makes us look inward on ourselves and makes us big fish. This does not allow us to test our ideas. There is no peer pressure unless you step outside". (Head of Department)

And:  
"It's lonely: I can't discuss my work with other people. I have to wait for a conference and for editorial work on international journals. I also try to participate in journal debates and rejoinders". (sociologist)

UM operates in a similar predicament, with the important difference that the institution enjoys only one level of exit. I have observed some of the implications of this state of affairs in a letter to the local press:

"Malta, unlike Britain, is a small scale society and this tends to inhibit the rigorous and absolute enforcement of standards, regulations and sanctions. Compound these to the nature of a monopoly institution as is Malta's University which - again, unlike Britain - enjoys 100% protectionism from foreign standards and easily affords to slip into mediocrity, given the unlikely prospect both of a rival, second university and of organised, 'user' pressure group movements..."<sup>8</sup>



Such a deficiency has been highlighted by a consultancy report commissioned recently for UM from a foreign team:

"Steps must be taken to terminate the university's isolation from the mainstream of European and international university departments. The university needs a visitors programme that imports academics for short lecture programmes; it needs to participate in international collaboration in research; it needs a larger number of students from overseas and to encourage exchange schemes, ERASMUS-type programmes and study abroad parties from America and elsewhere". (Shattock 1990:4)

- Easy Come, Easy Go

Still, one must not be carried away with ebullient enthusiasm. Agency considerations need to be tempered with structural constraints to get a fairer and more balanced picture.

One of the difficulties faced by heavyweights and frothblowers alike in the small jurisdiction is that their expertise does not in itself evoke other than fickle local recognition. "Monument building" (Murray 1981:253) is thus a challenging possibility to the microstate citizen; but this promise conceals a critical vulnerability. The same ease of achieving public acknowledgement of an expertise means also that it is as easy to lose this acknowledgement, especially if one is a 'pseud', enjoying only local acclaim:

"You may wish to pretend you're an expert. But watch out: You may fall on your face". (management lecturer)

Expertise recognition may be lost or remain unendorsed if powerful individuals and organisations, notably government, refuse to acknowledge. This may occur if one's political and ideological sympathies do not tally with those of the powers that be:

"Politicians in small countries control many aspects of life. Their long hand is there. Critical people often privatise their antagonism. If one does not have a political profile, that means an absence of social credit facilities, delays, and so on. You will be isolated". (management lecturer)

One needs to possess other than anonymous paper academic credentials to gain and/or to hold on to the acknowledgement one may expect. What one knows does not suffice. Considerations of loyalty become paramount, even overriding academic qualifiers:

"You need one qualification: If a plodder wants to reach the top, s/he has to earn the trust of his/her superiors. S/he must not present the image of a disloyal troublemaker.



Otherwise s/he will sing the swan song. You need loyalty, allegiance and general acceptance and must not be seen as a threat". (management lecturer)

Secondly, consideration needs to be given to the extent to which the system permits the deployment of an expertise to the depth and stature considered satisfactory by the incumbent. This space may be conditional also on a process of ongoing societal differentiation. The absence of opportunities for job advancement, further specialisation, the demands of administrative trivia and feelings of being underutilised or undervalued may prove to be key factors causing 'experts' to set their sights onto foreign, greener pastures. My own brother, a professional now permanently settled abroad, is one example of such human capital flight<sup>9</sup>.

Thirdly, there also seems to be a predilection of preferring foreigners to locals:

"Government prefers bringing in foreigners to carry out research. It doesn't think highly of local researchers. It is scared of them, afraid that what they disclose would impact negatively on it". (educationist)

International experts may be of better quality than local ones, but they also may not. It is more likely that the selector is in such matters guided by matters of prestige, access to foreign funds, personnel and skills, international contact-building and the resort to a human resource above local sympathies and political location, and so liable to wider local acceptance:

"Bajans may become experts but their expertise could be only locally acknowledged. Government will shop for international experts...There was a case of asbestosis affecting a school. The expertise existed here; but government brought its experts from Atlanta". (sociologist)

This and similar cases provide me with clear opportunities to understand and appreciate that, rather than simply a prophet being least appreciated in his\her own land, expertise, if academic and scholarly, needs to be laced - perhaps even replaced - by good contacts with power holders as the key form of social capital in the Maltese context. There is nothing to do but resign oneself to accept authoritative figures not so much because of scholarship and academic excellence but because they have captured or forced, via successful mutually reinforcing obligations, a key power holder's respect and blessing:

"So much may depend on the turn of a friendly card, strategically placed". (Baldacchino 1994)

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Notes:

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1. There is only one other Maltese with a similar qualification to date, and he has emigrated to Italy.
  2. There is only one person appointed in this area of instruction at UM: A good friend of mine, he has often suggested I ought to join his department on a full-time basis.
  3. The Times (Malta), 12th November 1980, p.6. Patrick Moore is an authority and prolific writer of astronomy books. Perhaps the contemporary equivalent of an Anthony Giddens in sociology?
  4. Mackenzie, R.A. (1981) 'Review of Meteor: An Observer's Handbook in *Meteoros*, *Journal of the British Meteor Society*, January, pp.37-8.

5. Baldacchino, G. *Stilel Feggejja* (Shooting Stars), mimeograph forthcoming.
6. I acknowledge the origin of these terms to Reverend Andrew Hatch, interviewed on 31st August 1992.
7. Credit for coining this term goes to A.O. Thompson, Lecturer in the History Department, UWICH.
8. Baldacchino, G. (1990) Letter to the Editor, The Sunday Times (Malta), 2nd December.
9. Having pursued specialised postgraduate training abroad, my brother was disappointed at not being accorded enough discretion and recognition at home; and career prospects appeared blocked by one senior, but not as qualified, person. This situation made him switch his sights to a foreign land.