

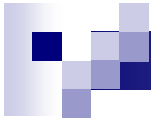


The Left and Civil Society in Malta

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What's Left? Seminar

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Contents

1. Hegemony
2. Hegemony of the Right in Malta
3. Hegemony of the Left in Malta
4. Non-Hegemonic Left in Malta
5. Alliances in Malta Today
6. Case Study: Dockyards' Privatisation
7. Case Study: Environmental alliances
8. Towards a hegemonic Left in Malta?
9. Global Dominance/Global Resistance



Hegemony

Hegemony can be defined as a situation where a historical bloc exerts social authority and leadership over subordinate classes and groups through force and consent, and where unity exists in a social formation (Gramsci, 1971).

‘A situation of hegemony would be one in which the management of the positivity of the social and the articulation of diverse democratic demands had achieved a maximum of integration’ (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985)

A successful hegemonic project is one where there is relative stability and a widely shared common sense of universalistic ideological representation. Therefore, hegemonic formations are characterised by popular identities, which become signifiers of a demand that is more universal than the particular demands that constitute them. Yet, every hegemonic formation must have some form of exclusion, which in turn can result in the creation of counter-hegemonic practices (Mouffe, 2005)

A successful hegemonic project is characterised by relative stabilisation and a widely shared ‘common sense’ (Mouffe, 1993).



Hegemony of the Right in Malta

- Bar a twenty-two month interval, the Maltese political Right has been in power for around twenty years, creating a historic bloc based on the articulation of two main identities – the Catholic and the consumerist, winning support across class lines and amongst different social groups.
- Nationalist administrations were capable of pleasing both business interests and improving the standard of living of workers. Liberalisation and the strengthening of the welfare state enabled the Nationalist hegemony to thrive (Briguglio, M. forthcoming, 1).
- Yet, the Nationalist Party is characterised by contradictions which are commonly found in Christian Democratic Parties. Like a pendulum, such politics can shift from one that fosters a social market to one that moves towards the New Right and neo-liberal economics. In the recent years, liberalisation, privatisation and overdevelopment of land have left their social and ecological impacts (Briguglio, M. forthcoming, 2).



Hegemony of the Left in Malta

- The Labour Party – Malta's largest leftist political organisation, has not been a hegemonic force since the 1970s, when it relied on working class support and an alliance with the General Workers' Union (Briguglio, M. 2001).
- With regard to the downfall of different Labour governments: On the one hand, one reason why Labour was defeated in 1987 could be related to its conflicting economic policies. The inward-looking and protectionist policies did not meet the economic aspirations of certain classes and categories of people. Indeed, Labour experienced conflicts with or lack of support from sections within the middle and working classes such as the upwardly mobile ones (Briguglio, M. 2001).



Non-Hegemonic Left in Malta

- During the 1990s, Labour presented itself as a modernised and moderate party, winning the 1996 elections in the process.
- On the other hand, the austerity measures taken by the Labour Government during 1996 and 1998, did not go down well with people who had become used to a relatively stable and comfortable economic situation brought about by the economic liberalisation policies under the Nationalists. This alienated working-class voters and disappointed the self-employed who expected much more from the new Labour Government. At the same time, Labour inherited a massive deficit from the previous Nationalist administration, and its one-seat parliamentary majority depended on the support of Dom Mintoff, who voted against his own Government in 1998 (Briguglio, M. 2001).
- Labour's opposition to EU membership was branded under its "Partnership" proposal. However, it did not manage to win the minds and hearts of the majority of the Maltese voters.



Alliances in Malta Today

- In contemporary Maltese society, various political alliances are taking place.
- Malta's EU membership process included both pro- and anti-membership alliances.
- Other recent examples include alliances on socio-economic issues (e.g. the water & utility bills alliance of trade unions) and environmental issues (e.g. the alliances against development of a golf courses at Verdala and Xaghra l-Hamra). In these cases, alliances were formally organized.
- However, alliances may also be informal, whereby different organisations are united in a concern but have no common strategy (e.g. the privatisation of Shipyards).
- Broad alliances involving political parties and other civil society organisations may create hegemonic / counter-hegemonic formations.



Case Study: Dockyards' Privatisation

- In the second half of 2008, Malta's Nationalist (Christian Democratic) Government, fresh from a third consecutive electoral victory, decided to privatize Malta Shipyards and reduce its already downsized and ageing workforce from 1,800 to 700 by the end of the year through early retirement schemes.
- This resulted in a series of protests by the workers' representative, the General Workers' Union (GWU), which was supported by the Malta Labour Party, *Alternattiva Demokratika* – The Green Party, leftist NGOs *Zminijietna* – Voice of the Left and *Moviment Graffiti*, as well as by eurosceptic Campaign for National Independence. Malta's highly influential Catholic Church appealed for a just solution to the matter. After a series of discussions between the Government and the Union, agreement was reached whereby retirement schemes were made more generous and whereby Government committed itself to negotiate a work guarantee with the new prospective owner of the Shipyards for a number of years (Brown M. and Briguglio M, 2009).



Case Study: Dockyards' Privatisation

- Consequently, The EU Commission has put pressure on the Maltese Government to declare Malta Shipyards bankrupt and liquidate the company before continuing the privatization process. This has resulted in a hefty increase of Shipyard workers who applied for retirement schemes.
- The Malta Shipyards case shows that, through factors such as social conflict and structural constraints, the identity of its (mostly) ageing workers is the subject of conflicting views, including that of 'surplus', that of a group that requires social protection, and that of a social group that requires employment by right (Brown M. and Briguglio M. 2009)



Case Study: Environmental alliances

- The Front Against the Golf Course – a coalition of seven years was made up of a diversity of environmental, social, cultural, religious and political organizations was successful in stopping the development of a golf course on a large area of agricultural land.
- Nevertheless, Maltese Environmental NGOs tend to prefer forming homogenous alliances, whereby the creation of networks and the assignment of trust concerns ENGOs which are similar to each other in terms of ideology and aims (Briguglio M. and Brown M., 2008)
- Most Maltese ENGOs engage in moderate activism and view Malta's EU accession process favourably, thus implying that they are involved in networking with State agents. On the other hand, a minority of ENGOs are more critical and do not rule out militant activism. It cannot be ruled out that EU membership may result in institutionalisation of Maltese ENGOs in the future, within this new context (Briguglio M and Brown M., 2008)



Towards a hegemonic Left in Malta?

- A hegemonic Leftist movement in Malta must go beyond the narrow interests of each identity and articulate inclusive discourse and strategies within the Maltese context. It is here that progressive alliances representing a wide spectrum within Maltese society can take place.
- Progressive forces should articulate inclusive discourse and strategies. This should respect the identities and traditions of different political and social forces, but should build on what is common amongst different identities. Inevitably, this requires compromises.
- Yet it should be emphasised that no hegemonic force can please everyone at the same time. Every 'us' requires a 'them'.
- It would be a big mistake to use discourse that is alien to people's aspirations and to assume that there is only one voice and one reality in society (Briguglio, M. 2008)



Global Dominance / Global Resistance

- In this day and age of neo-liberal policies based on privatization, downsizing and competitiveness; of postmodern multiple identities based on particular life-styles, experiences and tastes, the universal quest for equality remains a rallying cry for the subaltern. In the particular context of employment, trade unions should work together with social movements against a neo-liberal model and for a European social model. (Brown M. and Briguglio M., 2009).
- The Capitalist globalisation process is indeed affecting various social structures and groups, resulting in great economic inequalities as well as various other problems such as ecological destruction. At the same time global opposition to this process is intensifying itself. Resistance has become as transnational as capital, albeit characterised by a variety of interests and aims (Briguglio, M. 2003)



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