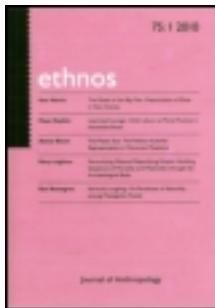


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The Nostalgic Construction of Community: Memory and Social Identity in Urban Malta

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ABSTRACT This paper examines local people's memories of a Maltese urban community that was demolished in the 1970s. The memories create an idealised, nostalgic picture of community harmony and solidarity prior to the demolition, but also apportion blame for its subsequent destruction. The paper argues that in such situations of physical displacement and/or social dislocation, this nostalgic process serves as a strategic resource that not only produces order and identity, but also creates legitimate moral claims against the state. The paper thereby contributes to ongoing debates about the relationship between local identity and wider political and economic processes.

KEYWORDS Malta, community, nostalgia, urban renewal, party politics, the State

Theory in anthropology since the eighties has witnessed a productive dialogue between theories of emplacement, locality, belonging and community on the one hand, and displacement, dislocation, hybridity and globalisation on the other (Appadurai 1988, 1991; Bhabha 1994; Fog Olwig & Hastrup 1997; Hannerz 1992, 1996). At the centre of this debate is the relationship between translocal processes – the movement of capital, commodities and people – and the production of local identities (Appadurai 1986; Lovell forthcoming; Miller 1995).

In the anthropology of Europe, the discussion has centred on the relationship between local community and national or transnational process. In a recent critique of the anthropology of locality in Europe, Knight (1994) has argued that ethnographers, and particularly Cohen, have exaggerated the significance of community in European social life, at the expense of wider process. This paper addresses these criticisms, by focusing on the relationship between political and economic process, and the nostalgic construction of social identity in urban Malta.

The Symbolic Construction of Community

Cohen's *The Symbolic Construction of Community* (1985b) is one of the most influential texts to have emerged from European anthropology since the discipline came 'part way home' in the 1950s and 60s (Cole 1977). The book sought to revise the paradigm of 'Community Studies' by introducing a cultural-symbolic orientation. Where communities had previously been reified as a distinct type of social entity – a unified, homogeneous whole – Cohen argued that unity and homogeneity were features of communities-as-symbolised, as much as communities-as-lived. The power of symbolisation is that it masks internal contradictions or incoherences within the community, presenting a public face of communal unity. The symbolic construction of community, then, presents bounded homogeneous unity in the face of – and because of – the fragmentation of social reality.

Knight's criticism centres on the apparent re-reification of 'the community' in this anthropology of locality. He argues that, in focusing on boundary-construction at a local level, Cohen ignores the wider political economy of state and supra-state institutions, and exaggerates the power of the local. However, in developing his critique, Knight seems to miss an important part of Cohen's argument. Whilst it is true that Cohen focuses on an exaggerated and somewhat stereotyped version of 'community', this exaggeration is derived not from theoretical reflection, but from ethnographic data. In other words, it is not Cohen who is exaggerating, but the people about whom he writes. Moreover, this exaggeration in the symbolic construction of community emerges in direct response to the kinds of wider political and economic processes Knight alludes to. Far from ignoring them, these processes are directly implicated in Cohen's argument.

This paper seeks to defend the proposition of symbolic community, by exploring its symbolisation in urban Malta. The community in question is a small neighbourhood in Valletta, Malta's capital, of which large parts were demolished in the 1970s. I want to examine people's memories of these events in the early 1990s, and how these memories contribute to the construction of community.¹ My focus differs from Cohen's on two counts. First, the community I examine is urban, in contrast to Cohen's principally rural concerns (Cohen 1982, 1985a, 1987). His main argument is that despite the apparent structural incorporation of rural communities into nation-states or regions, symbolic boundaries exist which deny the generalisations of identity that the nation tries to create. The model is also applicable to urban contexts, where a move has been proposed away from metaphors of community to those of

network (Hannerz 1980, 1987; Mullings 1987). In the city as in the countryside, these networks are cross-cut by powerful symbolic boundaries, which construct community distinctiveness in the face of incorporation. Second, although Cohen acknowledges the significance of the past in symbolising community, he is primarily concerned with communities of the present. The community I examine is a community of the past – its buildings are demolished and its people dispersed.

A wealth of recent work has examined the relationships between such physical displacement and the process of memory (Bohlin forthcoming, Koontz 1994; Malkki 1995). In many cases, memory serves to articulate a traumatic past in groups that have been forcibly relocated or persecuted and now live as refugees or in diaspora (Antze & Lambek 1996). Although the case discussed here is rather less dramatic than, for example, that of Hutu refugees in Tanzania (Malkki 1995) or the Holocaust (Kugelmas 1995), the processes can nevertheless be compared. In those cases, as in mine, memories produce an image of the past that creates unity in the face of adversity.

In Valletta, memories of the demolished community present an image of communal solidarity in opposition to the incursions of modernisation and party politics. The community is held up as a kind of Edenic paradise, against which the present is judged, but the memories also reveal a tension between former community members and the agents of its demolition – politicians and the state. The people and the state share a view of the past community as both glorious and essentially flawed. This is characteristic of what Michael Herzfeld has recently termed 'structural nostalgia' (1997). I explore this structural nostalgia in the context of people's memories, that go toward the nostalgic construction of community.

The Community in Question

Malta is a small island state in the middle of the Mediterranean. It is an independent republic, but is part of the Commonwealth, having been a British colony from 1800 to 1964. It is roughly 14 miles long by 9 miles wide and has a local population of about 400,000. Its principal economic activities are those associated with shipping trade and tourism: over a million tourists visited Malta in 1995. Valletta lies on Malta's eastern shore, on a thin peninsula between two natural harbours. It is a small city but operates as the commercial and administrative centre of an almost island-wide conurbation – effectively the 'downtown' area of an island city state.

Valletta was built in the 16th century by the Knights of St John. Originally set up in Jerusalem as a hospital order to tend Christian pilgrims, the Knights were ousted by the Ottomans and after a brief period in Rhodes took over Malta as their new headquarters. They ran the islands as an effective theocracy from 1530–1798. Valletta was their capital, and is still Malta's capital. It was built to a strictly-regimented grid plan, that was superimposed on the existing topography (De Giorgio 1985). This means that many Valletta streets lie on a steep gradient; some even have steps to allow comfortable passage. It also means that some parts of the city lie much lower than others, and a classificatory distinction is made between 'high-town' (*il-fuq* - lit. 'the up') and 'low-town' (*l-isfel* - lit. 'the down').

The distinction *il-fuq* – *l-isfel* is not only a spatial one, but also social. Parts of the city classified as *l-isfel* are 'low' in both topographical terms and in terms of reputation – they are thought of as being relatively low status. This mirrors the observation made by David Boswell about Maltese topography in general – that distinctions of place are also distinctions of status (1994). Within Valletta there are three main areas thought of as 'lower'. The one that concerns me here is known as *L-Arcipierku* ('the archipelago'). It had its centre demolished in the 1970s.

The origins of the name *L-Arcipierku* are somewhat uncertain. The standard Maltese-English dictionary refers to the area as 'a slummy part of Valletta that was destroyed in 1974 [sic]² (Aquilina 1990).' When I was in Malta I heard more creative etymologies. One informant argued that it was called the archipelago because like an archipelago of islands, it had had lots of dwellings in a group, very close to each other.

L-Arcipierku had been a small maze of very narrow streets and alleyways, lying in a hollow at the end of the Valletta peninsula. With the characteristic Maltese balconies overhanging each street, the dwellings were so close you could reach over from the balcony of one to the balcony of another. *L-Arcipierku* had been very over-crowded. In 1964, there were well over 3,000 people living in a space roughly 100 metres square (Parish of St Paul's Shipwreck 1964). With many of the buildings dating back to the seventeenth century, it was ripe for redevelopment in the post-war and post-independence modernisation drive.

The demolition was part of a wider global process of slum clearance and urban renewal common to modernisation projects in many parts of the world. Similar things happened at around the same time in Britain, Canada, India and USA. The results of the clearance were also familiar. Like many

similar projects, the demolition of *L-Arcipierku* had dire personal consequences (Clinard 1966; Gibson & Langstaff 1982). Its inhabitants were initially moved to temporary accommodation, much of which was sub-standard. The result was that many suffered long-term psychological trauma, and some were even said to have died as a result of the move.

When they were rehoused, it was in different circumstances. Some were moved to other parts of Valletta, out of the neighbourhood but still in the city. Many were moved to the new Government housing blocks in the villages and suburbs around the city. Old neighbourhood ties were forcibly severed, and new lives had to be constructed in these new situations. Back in the city, the housing that replaced *L-Arcipierku* was occupied predominantly by people from other parts of, or outside, Valletta. The people of the old *Arcipierku* were replaced by outsiders.

Memory and the Construction of Community

By the early 1990s, the social ties cut by demolition were largely restored. The dispersed inhabitants of *L-Arcipierku* maintained their community through frequent contact in Valletta's social spaces – the food market, the local parish church of St Paul's Shipwreck, and the local bars close to the church. Of particular importance was a small bar called *San Paolo Naufrago* ('St Paul's Shipwreck'). This served as a kind of unofficial club-house for the men involved in organising the saint's feast (*festa*) of St Paul, which itself was a kind of mnemonic of *L-Arcipierku*. Such bars, in Malta, are exceedingly sociable places. Through regular, daily attendance and sociability, men form what are known as *klikek* ('cliques' – sing. *klikka*), which are considered units of trust and co-operation. In practice, members of the same *klikka* meet each other at least once a day, to discuss a shared hobby such as shooting or fishing, or more important topics such as football, politics and *festa*. Much of the talk related to the past. Particularly in the months leading up to *festa*, stories would begin about what had happened in previous years. These stories frequently referred to *L-Arcipierku* and how it used to be.

The relationship between memory and identity has been established by a number of thinkers (Halbwachs 1992; Fentress & Wickham 1992; Samuel & Thompson 1990). The processes of recollecting, discussing and scripting accounts of the past produce both individuals and the social groups within which they live. As Fentress and Wickham have argued, 'Social memory...[is]...an expression of collective experience: social memory identifies a group, giving it a sense of its past and defining its aspirations for the future' (1992:25).

Stories of *L-Arcipierku* served this purpose, creating the ritual constituency of *festa*, and the individuals who were members of that constituency. In particular, it served as legitimisation for involvement in the *festa* – establishing personal credentials for inclusion, in an increasingly dispersed social group. *L-Arcipierku* was regarded as the heart of St Paul's parish, so people who were 'of *L-Arcipierku*' were also 'of the *festa*' and as such had a prior right to be included as fully as possible. Very often, 'inclusion' simply meant being told of how plans for the *festa* were going, but might also mean being allocated a role in the *festa* process – the most prestigious being to carry the monumental statue of St Paul around the parish on *festa* day (Mitchell forthcoming).

Frequently, people would bring photograph albums to the bar, and show to each other photos of the *festa* from years gone by; the 1950s, 60s and 70s. Whenever such photos were produced, people would huddle round to identify who was on them. Most of the people in the photos had been neighbours or relatives in the old *Arcipierku*, and different claims were made about them:

- That's uncle Leli, he used to live by the old well.
- No, no...that's Guzi Chetcuti, he lived on St Nicholas Street.

It was clearly important to link persons to places. The construction of community, as the construction of other social identities, made recourse to a landscape of memory, or memory-scape (Boyarin 1994). Many of these places no longer existed, making the spatialisation of memory more salient. A kind of game emerged, with which members of these friendly *klikek* would test each other about their knowledge – and memories – of *L-Arcipierku* as it had been. This game of testing each other's knowledge was part of a process of establishing the credentials of people's attachment to the community of the past. With that attachment came retrospective neighbourliness, with its corresponding rights and obligations for mutual help and reciprocity.

Of all the men who were regulars at the *Naufago* bar, I became particularly friendly with one called Sandro Mifsud. He and his family had lived in *L-Arcipierku* until its demolition in 1972, when they had been moved to a different neighbourhood. Although the new house was bigger, in his words it was less 'comfortable', because at a remove from former neighbours. He had been brought up in *L-Arcipierku* and missed the area; he had very fond memories of it. The phrases he used most often were *konna flimkien* ('we were all together'), and *konna naqbzu ghall-xulxin*. This last phrase literally means 'we used to jump for each other', but also means that 'we used to help each other out'. There was a collective responsibility to look after each other. Al-

though now no longer a neighbourhood because dispersed, members of the remembered *Arcipierku* nevertheless behaved as if they were still neighbours, through their regular contact, and would still 'jump for each other' if the need arose.

Even younger men, who were too young to remember *L-Arcipierku*, got involved in establishing their membership of the community. A pair of twins, who were only fourteen in 1993, and so were not even born when the area was demolished, would spend hours testing each other about who had lived where, and which shops had been on which street corners in *L-Arcipierku*. Demonstrating this knowledge became the means by which these young men would demonstrate their origins in *L-Arcipierku*, and their membership of its nostalgic community. It was also a process of talking through, scripting and officialising the collective memories of *L-Arcipierku* and its destruction.

One Family, One Household

The scripting process produced an image of unity, completeness and solidarity in *L-Arcipierku*, a kind of nostalgic Eden against which to judge the present. This certainty about the past's glories was pitted against the uncertainty about present and future. The process can be characterised as nostalgia – a term originally used to describe a pathological homesickness, but more recently signifying a wistful or regretful longing for a particular place (Lowenthal 1985; Shaw & Chase 1989). In the case of *L-Arcipierku*, the place was symbolised through metaphors of household and family, as embodied in the physical manifestation of the house itself. This mirrors observations by Bahloul and Bourdieu for whom the house is a primary site of memory (Bahloul 1996; Bourdieu 1990).

Linking *L-Arcipierku* with family and household establishes its moral ascendancy over the present. The family is the primary moral unit in Malta, and uncertainty about the future in general is more often than not framed in terms of anxiety about the future of the family. Since the 1970s, there have been various attempts by academic, church and state authorities to trace, deny or decry the 'decline' of the family in Malta (KANA 1980; Tabone 1987). The family is seen as the bulwark of traditional Maltese life, and the main point of comparison between Malta and Europe. European countries with high rates of divorce and separation are seen as morally bankrupt, and potentially polluting. Divorce is illegal in Malta and separation a matter for the powerful Roman Catholic authorities. Recent moves by the state to introduce divorce have caused concern, and rising separation rates are seen as a sign of impend-

ing social disaster. In the light of these concerns, the use of family to define *L-Arcipierku* as community of the past produces an image of Edenic purity.

Of the women I got to know during fieldwork, one of the most friendly and informative was Carmen Brincat. She was born and brought up in *L-Arcipierku*, and was a prominent figure in people's memories of the area. Her family was large and locally influential. Carmen was 69 in 1993, and still lived in her *Arcipierku* flat. She had been lucky during the 1970s, in that her house had been spared demolition. But her neighbours and friends had been displaced, and she would tell me at length about the affects this had had on the local community. Her memories were framed in terms of family and household, which established rigid boundaries between 'insiders' and 'outsiders' to *L-Arcipierku*.

Family and household in Malta are organised around categories inside and outside, *gewwa* and *barra*, which also relate to classes of people. Those considered 'insiders' *ta'gewwa* (lit. 'of the inside') are generally close kin or particularly friendly neighbours. 'Outsiders', on the other hand – those described as *ta'barra* (lit. 'of the outside') – are less familiar. These divisions are also used to describe inclusion and exclusion at other levels of social identity – from household to community to nation (Dubisch 1993). Foreigners are described as *barranin* (lit. 'outsiders'). By describing to me the glories of *L-Arcipierku*, Carmen was therefore simultaneously marking off a local and a national space of moral ascendancy. *L-Arcipierku* was to present-day Malta as Malta is to the rest of Europe.

L-Arcipierku, she said, had been *bhal familja wahda* ('like one family'), with one set of ideals, and – presumably – one set of political opinions. She also said *qisna bitha wahda* ('we were like one yard/courtyard'). Both expressions convey the message that although the area consisted of many households, many dwellings, it was really only one, with one conceptual boundary, and one set of insiders. This was partly dictated by the physical structure of the most common type of housing in *L-Arcipierku*: the *kerrejja* (pl. *kerrejjiet*).

The *kerrejja* is a kind of primitive Valletta tenement building. Many of them were built in the seventeenth century to house the servants and functionaries who provided service to the city's households and institutions. Built around a central, open courtyard, they comprise a system of small rooms connected by narrow landings, with elaborate buttressing that give them the feel of stepping into an Escher engraving. Each floor has between ten and twelve rooms, so that a four-storey *kerrejja* has over forty rooms. Originally, each room was occupied by a single family, which means that *kerrejjiet* were

extremely crowded. People's memories of *L-Arcipierku* were dominated by the memory of the *kerrejja*, regarded nostalgically as a model of communal living. It was the openness of the *kerrejja* that made *L-Arcipierku* one yard.

The yard, in a Maltese house, is an extension of the inside world of the household proper. It is not usually accessible except through the house, so that access is normally controlled in the same way as access to the house. But in *kerrejjiet* and other types of communal housing, the single yard was open to many different dwellings.

The yard is most commonly a place for doing the washing, and thus a place for the outside performance of domestic tasks by women. In *L-Arcipierku*, however, washing was done not in the private yards of individual households but at one of the communal wells. Here, groups of women would congregate to do their washing, talk and sing together. Carmen particularly remembered the clicking of bracelets that accompanied the singing, as washing was scrubbed in communal activity.

On the streets, outside, but conceptually in the yard, the women of *L-Arcipierku* would perform this domestic work, which was categorically associated with the normally semi-private world of the yard. It was the outdoor version of work which women who lived in separate households, would perform in their own, private yards. But the performance of this task in the communal, outside space of the well, was offset by the classification of that space as part of the communal yard, the communal household, that was *L-Arcipierku*. Thus although the washing was done *outside* the house, it was *inside L-Arcipierku*.

Carmen Brincat didn't just talk about the openness of communal clothes-washing, but also the openness and safety of the area in general. She remembered, for example, how – particularly in the summer – men and children would sleep outside on the streets, in the cooler outside air, and how the doors in *L-Arcipierku* were habitually kept unlocked. This was a common memory. There was no need to close the house, because there was no threat of burglary. This was because the single household of *L-Arcipierku* was also a single family – a single moral unit in which everyone was an insider.

The term 'one family' – *familja wahda* – was also used metaphorically, to denote the unit of obligation and co-operation. Just as members of *L-Arcipierku* would 'jump' for each other to protect the community, so they would help each other out. Even during the war, when a naval blockade had meant there was practically no food, Pawla remembered her mother setting aside a portion from the family's rations to give to the baby next door. This demon-

strated the moral obligation to preserve life in this single family: this *familja wahda*.

L-Arcipierku was remembered as *familja wahda* in a more literal sense. I was often told that *L-Arcipierku* had been characterised by a few large families who had repeatedly intermarried, creating a dense network of kin relations. Members of one family and household were also members of others – sometimes by several connections – such that *L-Arcipierku* had – quite literally – been one family.

Being one family and one household meant that there was no threat of burglary or attack. If it was safe to sleep on the streets, then this was because the streets were seen as being inside the boundaries of *L-Arcipierku*. If the doors were kept unlocked it was because they were internal, not external doors. They were doors through which people designated insiders by virtue of being members of the same, larger, household and family, could freely pass.

This image of family unity, and its extension to the level of the community as a whole, very much conforms to Cohen's picture of the symbolic construction of community boundaries. The boundaries of *L-Arcipierku* are symbolised through appeals to familiar symbols, and particularly the mobilisation of the core institution of Maltese life: the family.

Community Boundary and Political Economy

The project of exploring community boundaries has recently been criticised by Knight, who identifies in Cohen what he calls a rhetorical denial of (national) generalisation. He argues that although Cohen's project is partly an attempt to recognise local particularities within the apparently incorporating and generalised nation-state, his localism serves only to recreate another generalisation, similar to that of the nation, but at a lower level: that of the community itself. According to Knight, the generalised unit is simply shrunk, from the national community to the local:

Cohen's anthropology of locality, while it may claim to dereify the nation in the name of the local, in fact reifies the local at the expense of the nation (Knight 1994: 216).

Central to Knight's critique is his observation that Cohen underplays the significance of structural links between local communities and wider political economy or state apparatuses, in favour of the symbolic boundaries of community that cross-cut them. A similar criticism has been made of the community studies orientation of urban anthropology. In that case, a focus on

networks has been suggested as a more accurate metaphor for urban life (Hannerz 1980). Indeed, it is through networks that people live.

But in both contexts, the critique seems rather to miss the point. It is not that the symbolic boundaries of community are somehow prior to, or exist in spite of, the links between members of a community and wider state structures or urban networks. Rather, those boundaries are constructed directly in relation to – and perhaps even in response to – those links, in particular to the incorporative and often intrusive political economy of the nation-state. Just as people live through networks, they often think, or represent themselves, through the notion of community. This is a primary way in which people themselves describe their social reality. As Cohen writes in his introduction to *Belonging*, the purpose of the exercise is to examine ‘indigenous views of social association; and the impingement of the wider world on local identity’ (Cohen 1982:2). In other words, the focus is the relationship between the symbolic construction of local identity, and the structural conditions in which that construction takes place.

That the construction of community, and wider social structure are causally linked is clear in the case of *L-Arcipierku*. There, the nostalgic construction of community produced a kind of gestalt effect, in which images of unity and cohesion were created in direct response to particular political-economic circumstances, and particular political relations. The memories of *L-Arcipierku* as one family and one household were offered to me as evidence of how safe the place was, compared to the Valletta of the early 1990s. Whereas before, the boundaries of communal identity were seen as certain, now they were blurred. They had been destroyed by the demolition of the physical area of *L-Arcipierku*, which had led to the dispersal of the people who lived there, and the simultaneous destruction of the moral and conceptual unity. *L-Arcipierku* was no longer together physically, and so could no longer be called a single household. Memories of *L-Arcipierku* were set against a prevailing sense of decline.

Decline was not confined to *L-Arcipierku*, but to Valletta as a whole. The city’s population fell by nearly 40 percent between 1964 and 1985 – from 15,000 to just over 9,000 (Piano 1989). This was partly because of changes at a national level. Although Malta had gained independence from colonial rule in 1964, the British fleet did not leave until 1979. For the last few years of its presence, it was gradually reduced in size, and as a consequence, Valletta ceased to perform as a sailor town, with resources and entertainments to service the naval personnel. The bars, dance-halls and night-clubs had been thriving businesses, but by 1980, most had closed down.

The decline in revenue from the British forces was replaced by the development of the tourist economy (Lockhart & Ashton 1991; Mitchell 1996). This meant that the centre of gravity for entertainments moved from Valletta to the coastal resorts of St Julians and Bugibba. Many of the older establishments closed down, and Valletta ceased to be the fashionable hub of Malta.

With improved communications in the form of telephones and buses, and particularly the increase in car ownership, living outside the city became an increasingly viable, and popular, option. Wealthy Vallettans moved out of the city in their droves, and many of the buildings which had been dwellings were taken over for use as stores by merchants or shopkeepers who paid little attention to their maintenance and repair. This, in turn, meant a marked decrease in the numbers of dwellings available for rent, so that less wealthy people were also forced to leave the city. Newly-married couples found it difficult to get a place to live in Valletta, and so moved out to other parts of the island. This meant that the residual population got older, and what used to be a city that had lively and active communities, was now dying.

The ageing population became a target for crime, and particularly crime related to drug abuse. The introduction of drugs during the 1970s had caused not only the social problems of addiction, but also something of a wave of petty crime. Stories abounded in which elderly people were attacked on the streets or were burgled for the smallest amount of money. All for drugs. The days when people would happily sleep on the streets of *L-Arcipierku* were over.

The perceived decline in morality was linked to the increased availability of international mass media which offered alternative moralities to the traditional Maltese Catholicism. Tourism was also blamed for an apparent increase in promiscuity, a rise in the rates of marital separation and a general decline in the centrality of the family. It was against this image of decline that the memories of community, themselves informed by images of the family, were constructed. However, alongside the picture of *L-Arcipierku* as Edenic unity went a complementary recognition of its essentially flawed nature. The nostalgic construction of community is inherently ambivalent.

The Fellowship of the Flawed

Sandro Mifsud, in describing the willingness of *Arcipierku* people to 'jump' for each other, signalled this ambivalence. To 'jump' for somebody has connotations of violence and fighting. It therefore acknowledges a toughness or roughness that contrasts with its morality as a single family. Such roughness

is framed in terms of the spatial categories 'up' and 'down', of which *L-Arcipierku* was the latter. Being part of Valletta's 'low-town' (*l-isfel*) associated it with the moral categories *baxx* ('low'), *pastaz* or *hamallu* ('rude' or 'rough'). *L-Arcipierku* had a reputation for being rough. Men from *L-Arcipierku* carried with them a certain pride, as tough-guys. If they felt they were being ridiculed, they would reply, *jiena mill-Arcipierku!* ('I'm from *L-Arcipierku*'), which was seen as a warning: 'don't mess with me!' It conveyed the sense that not only could the speaker look after himself, but he also had friends who would help him to do so. Being 'from *L-Arcipierku*' was at once a personal and a collective statement of toughness.

Valletta's reputation for violence was related to the memory of gangs of young men who used to spend their time on the streets challenging outsiders, particularly other young men, to fights. The image mirrors Suttles' picture of a 'defended neighbourhood' in which groups of young men 'defend' the physical boundaries of the locality (1971). Sandro Mifsud told me of fights he had had, as a member of *L-Arcipierku* youth club, with young men from other parts of town, in defence of community boundaries.

Here, the image of an Edenic past related not to the moral ascendancy of community 'insiders' but to their ability to defend the unity of their 'single family'. Since the demolition, this defence was no longer possible, not only because there was no community to defend, but also because the grouping of young men together no longer occurred – they had been dispersed with the rest of *L-Arcipierku*. This serves to further emphasise the vulnerability of the community, in the face of the interventions of modernisation.

Such assertions, seen as a strategic resource, contribute to what Herzfeld calls 'structural nostalgia', which lies at the heart of people's relations with the modern nation-state (1997). Structural nostalgia is inherently ambivalent, creating both legitimate authority for, and a means of resisting the intrusions of the state. Both the state and those who seek to resist it refer to an Edenic past, before the state existed. For the state, this justifies intrusion into people's lives. If the post-Edenic present is characterised by a moral fall, then the state must intervene to maintain order. For those who resist, however, the fall was not abated by the intervention of the state but actually caused by it. This means that the Structural Nostalgia for a pre-state Eden can be used as a strategic resource to simultaneously emphasise the state's culpability and its responsibility to make amends in the present. Herzfeld uses his time-honoured example of the Cretan sheep-thieves to demonstrate this process. For them, the state should never have intervened in their lives and practices,

but given that it did, it can now be held responsible and called upon for strategic benefit.

As with Herzfeld's kleptomaniac shepherds, the former inhabitants of *L-Arcipierku* use their nostalgia as a strategic resource to make the state culpable for the present-day decline. But they make the state doubly to blame by referring to the former defence of community boundaries. Saying that 'we used to fight to defend our community' produces what Herzfeld describes as a 'fellowship of the flawed', in which people mobilise a kind of 'diamond in the rough' identity to counter the state's incursions. The suggestion is that before *L-Arcipierku* was demolished, its inhabitants could look after themselves – or each other. With demolition, however, this fellowship has been eroded, and defence is no longer possible. Because the state is responsible for demolishing the community, it is also responsible for protecting its inhabitants now that they can no longer defend themselves. Paradoxically, then, the criticisms of the state's first intervention leads to calls for further intervention to make amends. The nostalgic construction of community *qua* fellowship of the flawed is a strategic practice aimed at goading the state into solving the problems it caused in the first place.

The 1980s and early 1990s saw the rise in direct appeals to the state to intervene in the decline of Valletta. These took a variety of forms, including personal petitions to national politicians, letters to the editors of the daily newspapers, and the organisation of public discussions both in and outside Valletta. The debates led to the founding of the Valletta Rehabilitation Project (VRP), a quango³ charged with revitalising the city both socially and structurally.

At the time of my fieldwork, and up to the present, complaints about the state of Valletta persist. There is a feeling that although the VRP has done some good work on restoring old churches and replacing pavements, the city is still in decline. In particular, the ageing and dwindling population means that Valletta is devoid of night life – what little there remains being centred on a few local bars and a handful of restaurants. The empty night-time streets feed paranoia about crime and the drug problem. The situation is summed up by the title of a public meeting held in 1993: *Kif Nistgħu Verament Nagħtu Hajja Lill-Belt Valletta?* – 'How can we *really* give life to the city of Valletta?'

In the Maltese situation, such appeals to the state are further complicated by party politics. Although a category distinction is made between 'the people' (*il-poplu*) and 'the state' (*il-gvern*), the latter term is used not only to describe the continuous bureaucratic institution of the state, but also the government of the day. In essence, when the government changes, so too the

state changes party. In the case of *L-Arcipierku*, this means that the strategic appeals to the state I observed in the early 1990s were not actually addressed at the same state that had transgressed in the early 1970s. The order for demolition had come from a Labour government, whereas the appeals to *really* give life to Valletta went to a Nationalist government. The former inhabitants of *L-Arcipierku* were able to use this fact to play the past off against the present, and the Nationalist Party against the Labour Party.

Party Politics and Mintoff's Pipe

Maltese party politics is hotly contested, and enters every area of life. It is deeply polarised, and is currently dominated by the broadly socialist Malta Labour Party and the Nationalist Party who are Christian Democrats. Elections are close, with turnouts extremely high, and slim majorities considered 'landslide' victories.⁴ This ensures that the two parties are at permanent loggerheads, with election campaigns often giving rise to violent confrontation (Howe 1987; Schiavone 1992).

Politics is central to people's sense of who they are, and allegiance is related to both genealogy and place. People belonging to particular families, and coming from particular places, are almost inevitably associated with particular political parties. *L-Arcipierku*, and the people who came from there, were predominantly Nationalist supporters. Indeed, it was widely held that the area had been targeted for demolition because it was a stronghold of support for the (then) opposition Nationalist Party. In particular, people felt that the area had been the victim of the vindictive and spiteful policies of the Labour leader: Dom Mintoff.

Maltese party politics in the 1970s and 80s were dominated by the figure of Mintoff. His memory looms large in those of the demolition, for which he was seen as personally responsible. He was leader of the Malta Labour Party from 1949 to 1983, Prime Minister from 1971 to 1983, and is still an MP. He had a reputation for being a rabble-rouser, and charismatic leader of the dockyard workers (Boissevain 1994). Roughly half the national population – the Nationalist half – regarded him as a dangerous and vindictive tyrant.

When Mintoff came to power in 1971, his first act was to raise the rental charged to the British for the use of the dockyards. This led to a protracted discussion between Malta and the Admiralty, and the eventual British withdrawal (Austin 1971; Koster 1984). Mintoff also believed that Malta should bridge the gap between north and south shores of the Mediterranean, and developed strong links with Gaddafi's Libya. My Nationalist informants

argued that the British withdrawal led to economic decline in Valletta, and the links with Libya made drugs more available, thus exacerbating problems of crime. Making Mintoff personally responsible enabled my informants to maintain an image of the 1990s Nationalist government as munificent patrons, whilst at the same time calling on them to remedy a bad situation brought about by Mintoff's abuse of the state.

L-Arcipierku had been razed, they argued, for political reasons: because it was *Fortizza Nazzjonalista* ('A Nationalist Fortress'). This phrase emerged in the national press at the time of the demolition. It suggests that the significance of memories of the area was not only related to the parochial association of people with local community, and the construction of local boundaries, but was also related to wider national debates about party-political allegiance. Remembering this phrase in the 1990s amounted to remembering the fact that the displaced people of *L-Arcipierku* were the victims of party politics.

At the time of the slum clearance projects, arguments raged in the press over whether or not *L-Arcipierku* was a 'slum', and should be demolished. The Nationalist press maintained that the area was not a slum, and should therefore be rehabilitated, rather than demolished. It defended the solidarity, community life, and respectability of the families who lived there. Above all, they defended the cleanliness of the houses, marking a distinction between the respectable households of *L-Arcipierku*, and other 'slums' which should be demolished. These were the slums on the other side of Valletta, in the part of town known as the *Due Balli*. This links up debates about slum clearance with local and party political rivalries between different parts of Valletta.

Valletta is divided into three parishes: St Paul's; St Dominic's and St Augustine's. The two largest, and the two oldest, are St Paul's and St Dominic's which date back to the 1570s. Each of these three parishes has within its boundaries a relatively low-status, and topographically low-lying area, which is conceptually distinguished from the rest of the parish. For St Paul's this is *L-Arcipierku*, and for St Dominic's the *Due Balli*.

The *Due Balli* is *L-Arcipierku*'s most significant 'other'. The two areas have long been involved in a relationship of rivalry and antagonism, framed partly with reference to *festa* rivalry. The two parishes engage in the kind of *pika* ('pique') described in a rural context by Boissevain (1965). *Pika* describes competition between rival political factions that are associated with rival *festa* organisations, and rival brass band clubs. Much of the fighting described by Sandro Mifsud was over *festa pika*.

One of the main ingredients of a Maltese *festa* is the brass band, which plays marches to celebrate the saint. In Valletta, just as there are two main parishes, so there are two main bands: King's Own and La Valette. Whilst King's Own is the band of St Dominic's *festa*, and is therefore associated with the *Due Balli*, so La Valette is associated with St Paul's and *L-Arcipierku*. Most of the people I knew and talked to at the *Naufrago* bar were members of La Valette. But the rivalry between King's Own to La Valette, and by extension the *Due Balli* and *L-Arcipierku* was not just to do with *festa*, or indeed locality. It was also related to party politics. As explained by Sandro:

If you're with St Paul, you just don't go down to St Dominic's feast. You don't go to the King's Own bar either. It's a kind of tradition, I suppose. That's the way it is. You stay with your own feast and your own band...There's a touch of politics in it, too. Actually, more than a touch of politics.

The list of presidents of La Valette reads as a roll-call of prominent Nationalist politicians. Similarly, the King's Own dignitaries are nearly all Labourites. So when, in 1972, the Nationalist press argued that the *Due Balli* should be demolished before *L-Arcipierku*, it was to local, and above all party-political, rivalry between the two areas that they were alluding. The party-political implications of the demolition were made clear when the issue was discussed in parliament. During debates on 17th July 1972, the leader of the Nationalist opposition asked the Labour government why *L-Arcipierku* was to be demolished before the *Due Balli*. According to the banner headline of the next day's *In-Nazzjon Tagħna* ('Our Nation' – the Nationalist daily) the answer was *Għax Fortizza Nazzjonalista*: 'Because [it is] a Nationalist Fortress'.

This phrase linked the national debate in the press during the 1970s, to people's memories of the demolition, during the 1990s. It was a dominant motif in people's accounts. The same phrase appeared over and over in my field notes. It served to draw attention to Mintoff's spiteful and vindictive abuse of state power. Calls in the 1990s for the Nationalist government to rehabilitate Valletta were set against the knowledge that decline was caused by Mintoff and the Labour Party. This element in the strategic use of nostalgia does not signal a simple politics of people – state relations, but a more complex party politics of relations between Nationalists and Labourites, which in turn implicate relations between the different neighbourhoods of Valletta.

The spitefulness of Mintoff's politics was emphasised by a well-repeated story of the events leading up to the 1971 election. It was told to me, among others, by an elderly man called Pawlu Spiteri, whom I interviewed at great

length about this and other events. Pawlu was a life-long Nationalist who when I talked to him was 79 years old. He had kept a stall on the Valletta market for most of his working life, and had lived in *L-Arcipierku* until 1972, when his house was demolished and he was displaced. When I asked him about it, he replied that *L-Arcipierku* had been destroyed *Għax Fortizza Nazzjonalista*.

He described how Mintoff had called a political rally in *L-Arcipierku*. Because it was a Nationalist stronghold, the local people had responded with hostility, and showered him with eggs and flour. Mintoff had to take refuge. He was in the habit of smoking a pipe, and when he regained composure, he felt in his pocket to light up. But he couldn't find it. To add insult to indignity, somebody had stolen Mintoff's pipe. I asked Pawlu if he knew who had done it. He refused to tell me, but by the glint in his eye, it could well have been him. The Labour leader was livid, and promised there and then that the first thing he would do when he got into power would be demolish that *Fortizza Nazzjonalista*. The rest, as they say, is history. Or memory.

Conclusion

This story demonstrates that the displaced people of *L-Arcipierku* were not merely concerned with elaborating a nostalgic image of communal solidarity. Rather, their nostalgia was a strategic political tool for use in their calls for an improved present and future. Far from ignoring the wider political and economic processes within which such communities exist, the nostalgic construction of community was mobilised precisely in order to emphasise their relative powerlessness in the face of such processes.

Similar responses can be seen elsewhere. Malkki, for example, has demonstrated the extent to which Hutu refugees in Tanzania produce mythico-historical narratives which order a disordered and traumatic past and present (1995). She too stresses that the past is not invoked neutrally, but as 'a subversive recasting and reinterpretation of it in fundamentally moral terms' (p. 54). Through memory, Hutu produce themselves as moral in opposition to the immorality and 'malignity' (p. 64) of the Tutsi. In the less dramatic Maltese situation, the former inhabitants of *L-Arcipierku* not only come to terms with, but also use a traumatic past to produce themselves as *il-poplu* (vs. *il-gvern*), Nationalists (vs. Labourites) and above all members of the former *Arcipierku* community.

The nostalgic construction of *L-Arcipierku* highlights two levels of perceived threat: the national threat of party politics and the international threat of

modernisation. The significance of party politics is an immediate one in a society such as Malta, where political allegiance relates to locality and family. As well as being dependent on them, the political process has the power to threaten these central institutions. Family and household are also threatened by the process of modernisation, which is confronted on a daily basis through engagement with international mass media and the steady stream of tourists. These are a constant reminder of the world outside the local, that in Maltese eyes threatens to destroy it. The rise in crime and drug abuse, and the apparent dissolution of the family are seen as indices of this erosive process. The demolition of *L-Arcipierku* was a particular moment in the history of these national and international threats. Remembering that event maintains awareness of their enduring presence.

Whereas Knight has criticised the anthropology of locality, and particularly the notion of symbolic community, for ignoring the incorporative and intrusive power of wider national and international political processes, I have argued that the symbolic – or nostalgic – construction of community is mobilised precisely in order to acknowledge and counter them. Such threats and incorporations lead, in Cohen's formulation, to the symbolic construction and exaggeration of local identity, which pits the community against wider social processes and can be used as a strategic resource against them.

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Notes

1. Fieldwork in Malta ran from 1992 to 1994, since when I have made several shorter return trips.
2. The area was actually demolished in 1972.
3. 'Quasi Autonomous Non-Governmental Organisation'.
4. A case in point was the 1992 election, which saw a Nationalist 'landslide' victory when they captured 51.78 percent of the vote, to Labour's 46.49 percent. 96.08 percent of the electorate voted (Schiavone 1992).

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