

Thinking about the breakdown of care in Maltese society

DR MARLENE CAUCHI

Department of Counselling
Faculty for Social Wellbeing | University of Malta

Abstract

What kind of society perpetuates such horrors as those we have seen in Malta over the last years? Whilst individual psychology may offer some insight into intrapsychic processes underlying specific events or people, it is imperative that we adopt a group psychological view of societal forces promoting such phenomena as structural oppression and silencing of the Other, crass materialism, splitting, and scapegoating. Such dynamics seem to suggest a fracture in the very fabric of society: a dehumanising process whereby the values of solidarity, compassion, and care for other human beings are neglected. They highlight a culture of selfishness and lack of concern for those who are not part of a person's inner circle of relationships. This paper refers to a conference session by the author: during the session, group analytic principles, such as the foundation matrix, basic assumptions, the anti-group, and malignant mirroring were utilised in an attempt to shed light on the breakdown of care in contemporary Maltese society. Whilst this paper presents reflections on the session, it also seeks to propose a way forward and focuses on the questions that we need to ask ourselves as participants in this societal dynamic.

Introduction

I was recently asked to present at the Faculty Conference held last May, 2023. This paper will detail the process involved in the presentation planning and execution.

My first impulse upon seeing my name on the programme was to refuse to present. What on earth could I talk about in relation to care and control? I even had a valid reason to refuse - I had lectures on the day. Yet, something niggled at me, a tension that I had largely ignored for the last six years. Could I? Dared I? Indeed, the question I wanted to address came to mind almost automatically: What is it about Maltese society that perpetuates such horrors as the ones we have experienced in recent years? These events came to mind in quick succession: the assassination of Daphne Caruana Galizia, rampant corruption, construction accidents, numerous femicides, people

left to die at sea, Lassana Cisse's murder, structural abuse of black persons, young people wanting to leave Malta... The fact that most people seemed impervious to such events beyond the initial shock baffled me. My premise was that Maltese society was experiencing a breakdown in care, promoting a widespread culture of selfishness and a lack of concern for persons outside one's inner relationship circle.

Why was it, then, that I hesitated? The breakdown of care in Maltese society: the topic was hugely relevant to the theme of the conference. It was a topic that I was passionate about, yet always in private or in close circles. Surely, I was not... afraid? And yet, that was precisely what I was overcome by. What if I was labelled as partisan, just because I criticised the current state of Malta? Would I be shamed, or even scapegoated? Could I bear it? And yet, were these fears not indicative of something important that seeks to silence diverging minds? By not doing the presentation, I would be safe, but I would also be colluding with such a system.

Other doubts crept in my thoughts. I was no expert in sociology, politics, or history. What if I could not answer my own question? The only explanation that came to mind was splitting, a concept that is often used in group analysis. But splitting was a symptom. What were the origins? The idea to use a group analytic framework to aid my analysis was natural - I am in the process of training in this approach. Whilst it is fundamentally a therapeutic approach, since its inception, group analysis has been used to understand societal and organisational dynamics (Penna, 2022). Indeed, group analysis, originally developed by Foulkes (1948) is rooted in sociology, psychoanalysis, and group dynamics. Each individual carries, as part of their identity, their background. Indeed, the person is social to the core (Foulkes, 1948; Foulkes & Anthony, 1957).

The way we behave as persons within society, therefore, is marked, not just by our own individual dynamics, conscious and unconscious; we also carry a social unconscious. This was a major contribution by Foulkes (1964). This is, perhaps, not surprising. Fuchs was a Viennese refugee who, upon arrival in England, anglicised his name and never spoke about his origins again (Levin & Nitzgen, 2020). His theory, though, revealed his (unconscious?) preoccupation with the fact that our background cannot ever be escaped.

How did our Maltese background and history, therefore, impact our care, or the lack of it, towards our fellow humans? As I pored over books and papers, a major influence became apparent. The oppressor was very much part of our personal and societal matrix. The Maltese were oppressed through the ages due to colonisation, we had a system that encouraged oppression of people who were different from us 'locals', and oppressors seemed to be able to get away with murder, literally. I was also guilty of being part of the system that assuaged its conscience by signing petitions and occasionally participating in public demonstrations. Was the expectation of oppression, also, not at the core of my fear around the presentation?

Regardless of its manifestation, the oppressor-oppressed dynamic clearly pervades our society. Political parties use media to colonise minds and silence diverging thoughts (Dahlin, 2005). We identify with the oppressor when we turn foreigners away from Maltese shores. We may even inadvertently adopt a colonial vision of inclusion through acts of patronage and kindness towards outsiders by those of us who are, or think ourselves to be, already on the inside (Dalal, 2012; Scanlon, 2014). Ideas around authority and domination become so internalised that ordinary "indeed decent men and women accepted their almost metaphysical obligation to rule 'subordinate, inferior, or less advanced' people" (Said, 1993, p. 10). Our self-identity, therefore, is often linked to our group identity (Foulkes, 1975). We have plenty of examples of voices being repressed through the negation of public inquiries, intimidation, harassment, or denigration, as well as the colonisation of certain institutions through the appointment of particular persons.

Corruption was difficult to explain along these terms, until it occurred to me that corruption could also be conceptualised as an attempt to defraud perceived oppressors, be they the British empire (“tar-Regina”; “tal-Ingliži, take it easy”), the government, laws or rules of civilisation. At the core, it promotes a state of mind and the social relation of instrumentality (Long, 2019). It is imbued by a negation of the other’s interest and wellbeing. In true colonial fashion, authority is exercised through domination over persons whose right for clean air and nature, for example, are not respected, but are subject to someone else’s interest. Authority is associated with power over, rather than service for. Is this not a colonial understanding of power?

As I went up to the platform to present at the conference, I suddenly became keenly aware that I was wearing a blue suit. Would that be perceived as making a statement of allegiance to a particular political party? I had been mindful of preparing examples that spanned both political parties and beyond. I scanned people’s faces for any signs of hostility. They had presumably read my abstract and knew what my presentation was about. What had brought them to this particular presentation? Perhaps that meant that we thought on similar lines and would not attack my line of thinking. But why was I also engaging in the splitting dynamic? Could there be no other position, apart from two polarities? And anyway, did I really think I was going to be ambushed during a conference organised by the stalwarts for social wellbeing? The irony was not lost on me, but it solidified my awareness of the extent to which my social unconscious is permeated by the oppressor-oppressed split.

Having completed my presentation, I was naturally relieved. It was over. There was something else, though. I felt empowered. Having expressed my thoughts, I felt I had found my voice. There were no consequences; in fact, conference participants could engage in a fruitful discussion. Was I wrong about my analysis of Maltese society all along then? Is society not really split? Is divergence of opinion not really met with othering? A quick glance at the readers’ comments in local newspapers, though, confirmed my original suppositions. So what had happened at the faculty conference? How was it that I was not ‘othered’ for expressing my thoughts? Freire (1972; 1995) comes to mind. As participants at the conference, we could have a conversation. Empowerment ensues from finding our voice and engaging in dialogue, moving beyond the othering, oppressor-oppressed, and silencer-silenced dynamic. We become citizens, respecting humanity in all its complexity, overcoming the tendency to split (Treacher, 2005).

Conclusion

Maltese society is shifting. Testament to this is the number of individuals, volunteer and civil society groups that are coming together, beyond partisan politics, to call out structural oppression and corruption, and think about the way forward. It is a time of great possibilities. Whilst sitting on the edge of the unknown (Benjamin, 2020), we are riding through the transition from despair to hope, through dialogue (Hernández-Tubert, 2011).

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