

Noise, smell and other nuisances: Valletta c. 1880s – c. 1930

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Abstract: During the last thirty years or so, some historians have turned their attention to the human senses other than sight. This paper discusses briefly the noises and smells pervading Valletta during the final years of the 19th and the opening decades of the 20th century. In doing so, it stresses the importance of those who caused such nuisances and those who complained against them. It results that the growing sense of intolerance towards such nuisances was class-bound. The final part proposes to envision these nuisances as an element of what Ranajit Guha calls ‘the politics of the people’.

Keywords: Valletta, nuisances, noise, smells, sensory history, modernity, ‘politics of the people’

Some time ago, I received via email an unsolicited but most welcome attachment consisting of a 16-minute video clip entitled *Ēku ta’ Żmien Iehor (Malta 1933, 1959 to the sound of Brikkuni)*.¹ The soundtrack is a folk-rock song by a Maltese group, as the title shows. The clip portrays scenes from Valletta and environs in 1933 (for the first nine minutes or so) and then 1959.

Against the background of contemporary music run images of Malta’s capital city and environs and the people who daily walked about its streets. Although the original sound is absent, one can still imagine the noise and sounds that gave life to those images. The people waiting for the ferry to cross from one side of the Grand Harbour to the other, presumably haggling prices with the boatmen; the women, some

1 <https://vimeo.com/61053755?outro=1> (I am indebted to Louis J. Scerri, editor of this journal, for sending this video clip); last accessed 6 June 2016.

in the traditional headdress, others not, are accompanied by, talk to, or call friends, husbands, acquaintances, and children; children in care or alone roam the street. They play or simply mill about. The goatherd wends his way through Valletta's entrance with his charges looking for, and getting custom. Dogs and goats obstruct the way of men going about their business. Motor cars, cabs (*karozzini*) and carts wind their way through pedestrians with whom they compete for supremacy of the streets, and a policeman or two in strategic points of *Strada Reale*, Valletta's main thoroughfare, seek to impose order by signs and gestures and perhaps prevent an accident. Later on in the clip is also portrayed a carnival parade with men and women dancing in front of the Governor's palace, watched by passers-by.

This valuable historical document allows us to 'see' bygone Valletta and the men and women who went about, but inevitably leaves perception of the other senses – hearing, smell, touch, and taste – to the imagination. The sounds and smells of the past are gone forever. However, this should not be a good enough excuse for historians to ignore the fact that the past was as noisy and smelly as our present, albeit not with the same noise or smells.

This paper proposes to briefly discuss some of the nuisances, specifically sounds and smells, that accompanied life in Valletta between the 1880s and the 1930s. The period is not chosen at random; it is the period when the old noises of Valletta were gradually being silenced by newer ones. It is also the period when noise and smell in particular, (and, no doubt, the touch and taste of certain things) became fully-fledged nuisances. As newspaper articles and letters show, annoyance with noise and bad smells was becoming more vociferous. Some of the noise objected to had long irritated, or exasperated, some people. Others, though part of the environment for a long time, seem to have become more of a nuisance to a greater number of people during this period. Bell-ringing is an example of the former, the smell of lack of hygiene on persons and of dirt in general of the latter. By the late 1920s calls for the imposition of order, the elimination of nuisances from Valletta's streets had become louder. Awareness of nuisances seems to have gradually seeped through the consciousness of more and more people. And yet we cannot simply register the fact. We need much more than that if we really want to understand the past in all its facets. There

was a feeling that discipline and order should prevail, at least in the more important parts of town.

It is not possible in a paper of this length, to go into details. The object here is to open up a fresh perspective, one that has hardly been broached by local historians. It shows that the visual need not – and should not – be the only sense to guide the historian. Accordingly, it is necessary to identify and distinguish between noise as against sound, and stench as against other less obnoxious smells that characterized the streets of Malta's capital. Of course, the more important question that requires an answer is that which attempts to distinguish between those who caused the noise and those who suffered it; those who protested and those to whom noise and bad smells were part and parcel of everyday life, hardly noticed and no nuisance at all. Towards its end, this paper will also put forward a reading of what the noise, stench and other nuisances represented. Sensory perception, it is firmly believed, is intrinsically class-bound. The subject, however, is far from exhausted here. A more comprehensive account of the sensory experience other than the visual awaits to be written.

Recalling the noises and sounds of the past is not equivalent to reproducing them. We should not aim merely at attempting to reproduce those sense perceptions. Such an exercise would be fruitless from the historical perspective unless we try to understand the how, the why, and the for whom. The past cannot be relived because the actors and situations are gone. In any case, even if it were possible to reproduce sound and smell, we can never manage to reproduce, or to feel, the reactions of those who heard and smelt. As Mark M. Smith observes, 'we need to know ... whose nose was doing the smelling, how the definition of "smell" changed over time and according to constituency'.² The same, of course, can be said of noise and the other senses. It is only through a historical understanding of what these nuisances meant and represented for their contemporaries can we properly study the subject.

Historical interest in the sounds and smells of the past is a relatively recent phenomenon. In 2005, Peter A. Coates noted that '[e]ven a decade ago, history came largely soundproofed as well as deodorized'.³

2 Mark M. Smith, 'Consuming Sense, Making Sense: Perils and Prospects for Sensory History', *Journal of Social History*, Vol. 40, No. 4 (Summer, 2007), 843.

3 Peter A. Coates, 'The Strange Stillness of the Past: Toward an Environmental History of Sound and Noise', *Environmental History*, Vol. 10, No. 4 (Oct. 2005), 636.

This has now changed, particularly since the publication of works by Jacques Attali,⁴ Alain Corbin,⁵ and others.⁶ In Malta, the lead has been given by John Chircop whose paper on bell-ringing in Malta and the Ionian Islands during the nineteenth century is, possibly, the first to analyse the ‘auditory landscape’⁷ of the Maltese Islands.⁸

During the period covered here some sounds and smells were considered nuisances that needed control, abatement, or outright elimination. For some, sound was tantamount to noise and certain smells were declared intolerable. Take noise. It has been said that the pitch of some sounds makes them more likely to be regarded as noise. However, this is not enough. ‘[I]n the final analysis it is the social (and in turn the political) context which deems them acceptable.’⁹

A negative attitude to noise and bad smells was not only a local phenomenon. In some European countries, but also in the United States, it was during the middle to late nineteenth century that movements asking for noise abatement started gaining ground. John M. Picker observes that the paramount preoccupation of London homeowners was ‘a fierce desire to uphold economic and social divisions between lower and middle classes’,¹⁰ the implication being that the former were

- 4 J. Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* (Minneapolis and London, 1985).
- 5 Alain Corbin, *The Foul and the Fragrant. Odour and the Social Imagination* (London and Basingstoke, 1998); id., *Village Bells. Sound and Meaning in the 19th-Century French Countryside* (London, Basingstoke and Oxford, 1999).
- 6 There is a growing body of literature dealing with sounds and smells in history. cf., for example, Hillel Schwartz, ‘Beyond Tone and Decibel: The History of noise’, *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Jan. 1998, B-8; Bruce Smith, *The Acoustic World of Early Modern England: Attending to the O-Factor* (Chicago, 1999); Mark M. Smith, ‘Listening to the Heard Worlds of Antebellum America’, *Journal of the Historical Society* 1 (Spring 2000), 65–99; Mark M. Smith, *Listening to Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill, 2001); Emily Thompson, *The Soundscape of Modernity: Architectural Acoustics and the Culture of Listening in America, 1900–1930* (Cambridge, Mass., 2002); Richard Cullen Rath, *How Early America Sounded* (Ithaca, 2003); Mark M. Smith (ed.) *Hearing History: A Reader* (Athens, 2004); Emily Cockayne, *Hubbub. Filth, Noise & Stench in England* (New Haven and London), 2007; Aimée Boutin, *City of Noise. Sound and Nineteenth-Century Paris* (Chicago, Springfield, 2015). For the Middle East, cf. Ziad Fahmy, ‘“Coming to our Senses”: Historicizing Sound and Noise in the Middle East’, *History Compass*, Vol. 11 No. 4 (2013), 305–15.
- 7 Corbin (1999), p. xx.
- 8 John Chircop, ‘From the Pulse of Social Routine to the Subversion of Normality: The Multiple Use of Bell Tolling in Two Colonial Sites: The Ionian Islands and Malta 1800–1870s’, *Journal of Mediterranean Studies*, Vol. 19, No. 1 (2010), 1–26.
- 9 Dylan M. Jones and Anthony J. Chapman quoted in Cockayne, 113.
- 10 John M. Picker, ‘The Soundproof Study: Victorian Professionals, Work Space and Urban Noise’ *Victorian Studies*, Vol. 42, No. 3 (Spring 1999–Spring 2000), 431.

noisome, dirty, and smelly.¹¹ It was intellectuals or, in any case middle-class exponents who were at the forefront in the fight against excessive noise in the ever-expanding cities. In Britain, such movements had existed since at least the 1840s when regular complaints against street noise began to appear in *The Times* on a regular basis.¹² In 1864 legislation was enacted in an attempt to regulate noise, but this proved ineffective.¹³ However, Emily Cochayne notes that as early as the middle decades of the eighteenth century there was already increasing awareness ‘in the perceived levels of noise nuisance ... especially in London.’¹⁴ It was particularly the rich who objected and complained against the noise of the poor, she continues.¹⁵ In 1901 Germany, it was the German-Jewish philosopher Theodor Lessing (1872–1933) who appealed for intellectuals to propose and lobby for noise abatement reforms and ordinances and then founded the *German Association for Protection from Noise* (1908).¹⁶ In the United States, *The Society for the Suppression of Unnecessary Noise* was founded two years earlier (December 1906).¹⁷ The pioneer in this latter case was Julia Barnett Rice (1860–1929), a medical graduate (who never practised medicine), wife of a lawyer and venture capitalist,¹⁸ also with the assistance of, among others, Mark Twain.¹⁹ In Britain, then, calls for the regulation and abatement of street noises boasted among its proponents Charles Dickens and Thomas Carlyle.²⁰

In Malta, by the end of the nineteenth century and the opening decades of the twentieth, there was an expanding segment of the population which was becoming more affluent and educated. These were the persons who were gradually assimilating and imitating the

11 Cf. also Fahmy, 308.

12 Ibid.

13 Richard Dennis, *Cities in Modernity. Representations and Production of Metropolitan Space, 1840–1930* (Cambridge, 2008), 141–2.

14 Cockayne, 129.

15 Ibid., 130.

16 Lawrence Baron, ‘Noise and Degeneration: Theodor Lessing’s Crusade for Quiet’ *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 17, No. 1 *Decadence* (Jan. 1982), 165–78: 168

17 Ibid., 169

18 Hillel Schwartz, ‘Inner and Outer Sancta: Earplugs and Hospitals’ in Trevor Pinch & Karin Björsterveld (eds.) *The Oxford Handbook of Sound Studies* (London & New York, 2012), 273–98: 281

19 Hillel Smith, ‘On Noise’, in Mark M. Smith, *Hearing History: A Reader* (Athens 2004), 53.

20 Picker.

tastes, customs, and refinements which by then their British counterparts had practised as the norm. These, together with British residents on the island, were among the first to complain against excessive noises and smelly dirt in the streets of Valletta and the other urban centres. That most of this influence was originating from Britain is confirmed by the frequency of articles and correspondents' letters appearing in the English-language press. In the Italian-language newspapers such material is more difficult to come by, the reason being that these were broadly critical of all things British – and also because, necessarily, the problem of nuisances, like many others, tended to assume a political tint. Bell-ringing is the best example. It was a tradition for some and an annoyance for others. When the Italian-language *Malta* published a correspondent's letter critical of excessive bell-ringing, the editor was quick to point out that such a view did not coincide with his own.²¹ Later on, *Malta Taghna*, the Maltese-language companion of the *Malta* published a note signed 'L.B.' This was heavily critical of those who objected to bell-ringing. How dare the British press criticize our bell-ringing, it asked, when we do not interfere with what they do in their own country or, even, with the excessive noise they make in our own country?²²

This growing body of men (but were they only men?) most critical of the excessive noises of Valletta and the other urban centres could be identified with what one newspaper called 'a well-regulated community'²³ – commercial and professional men and their families, upper-level government employees and the resident British, all certainly literate and probably also affluent, those whose senses had become more refined and delicate. They practised charity and were no doubt religious, but as the reference to 'well-regulated' implies, they drew boundaries between themselves and the rest who were undisciplined, noisome, and dirty.²⁴ Valletta with its uncontrolled nuisances – smells and noise in particular – was also, at one time, compared to Oriental cities. There, wrote one correspondent, 'people claim the right to do helplessly just

21 *Malta*, 5 Jan. 1925.

22 *Malta Taghna*, 10 Nov. 1928.

23 *D[aily] M[alta] C[hronicle]*, 9 June 1911.

24 For the drawing up of class barriers, cf. Michael Refalo, *Waking the Dead. Nineteenth-Century Obituaries as a Mirror of Maltese Society (1815-c.1910)*, forthcoming.

as they like'.²⁵ What that newspaper implied was the existence of a neat division between the dirty, noisome masses, similar to the people of 'the east', and those, more educated and disciplined, who objected to such nuisance because they, and their city, were European.

In reinforcing the argument against nuisances in Valletta, the same newspaper would, some months later, confer personality to the capital and its streets. In *Strada Reale*, the main street, 'proprieties ought to be observed ... more carefully than anywhere else'. The town, the newspaper asserted, 'may well be said to feel self-respect and to be able to resent any practice or behaviour which is not in keeping with its just sense of its own dignity and importance'.²⁶ What was left unsaid but unequivocally implied was that the principal thoroughfare of Valletta should really belong to the author of the article and those of his social level – the 'well-regulated community'. In the awareness that Valletta was inhabited and traversed by people coming from all walks of life, it was sought to create a hierarchy of streets. Of course, nuisances such as excessive noise, dirt and their consequent smells were to be condemned wherever they occurred. However, *Strada Reale* was a showcase which deserved better than shouting hawkers and urinating goats. At the same time, there was resigned acceptance that the streets at the lower end of town could not avoid a measure of inconvenience despite the location there of upper- and middle-class residences. *Strada San Marco*, *Strada San Patrizio* and *Strada Stretta* 'suffered defilement with impunity',²⁷ and *Strada Fianco* 'may smell excessively, but several other streets come close ... in untidiness'.²⁸ However, the most malodorous of Valletta streets was undoubtedly *Strada Federico*. The narrow street on the eastern side of the Governor's palace deterred access because of the 'slimy matter' upon which one was bound to step at night or early in the morning.²⁹ Some years earlier, the sorry plight of that street was also highlighted by the *Malta*, which exhorted the government to do something about the public convenience at the lower end of the street and the pungent smell of urine that was

25 *DMC*, 31 Aug. 1903.

26 *Ibid.*, 14 May 1912.

27 *Ibid.*, 31 Aug. 1903.

28 *Ibid.*, 16 July 1910.

29 *Ibid.*, 31 Aug. 1903.

causing nuisance to the unfortunate inhabitants.³⁰ Similar complaints against ‘places of public convenience, as they are euphemistically called’ were directed against the one at the corner of *Strada Stretta* and *Strada Teatro*.³¹

What is interesting is that the Valletta street which came second in importance – *Strada Mercanti* – is never mentioned in connection with nuisances (though the market, located in that street, is). Possibly, the fact that it was a street of shops and, consequently, of merchants, allowed for a higher level of tolerance. Yet, even in this street resided middle-class persons, but still, the voice against nuisances was muted.

There was an awareness that the continuous nuisances – noises and smells in particular – that permeated the capital could only be cleared by better education of ‘the lower classes.’ These, according to one correspondent who signed himself as ‘Householder,’ have no experience of what proper sanitary conditions should be. They have been brought up seeing their parents throw matter in the streets and ‘do not realise that they are acting otherwise than in accordance with the latest approved principles of the most civilised capitals’. The burden lies on ‘the better educated classes of the community’ who should personally reproach miscreants or report infractions of sanitary regulations to the police.³²

Which were the chief nuisances – noisy and smelly ones – afflicting this ‘well-regulated community’? The continuous peeling of church bells had annoyed British residents, naval and military officials included, for a very long time, as John Chircop notes. Late in the nineteenth century, Governor Fremantle interpreted the nuisance in class terms when replying to a complaint from the naval commander-in-chief. The continuous ringing was ‘an intolerable nuisance to all classes, whether Maltese or English, except the lower classes of the former’.³³ Again in 1912, a correspondent wrote to comment that ‘the *vulgus* love noise and the louder it is the better they like it’.³⁴ By the second decade of the twentieth century, complaints against the continuous din of bells became

30 *Malta*, 14 Jan, 1885.

31 *Public Opinion*, 10 July 1897.

32 *DMC*, 19 July 1910.

33 N.A. (UK) CO158/329/16241, Fremantle to Hopkins, 19 July 1898.

34 *DMC*, 25 Oct. 1912.

more widespread. Local correspondents to newspapers objected not so much to the noise *per se* as to the inconvenience this caused ‘visitors’ – tourists – who contributed to Malta’s economy.³⁵

The political, social, and religious intricacies interwoven into the problem of bells, in reality, precluded any hasty or peremptory measures to eliminate it whether these originated from the civil or the ecclesiastical authorities. As one Colonial Office official noted, it was only during the French occupation (1798) that ‘this well-known curse’ was curtailed, and this ‘by stationing sharp shooters on the rooftops’. Now (1899), the governor is reluctant to interfere, and the archbishop, who could, ‘intends to do nothing’.³⁶

The editor of one newspaper noted that regulation of bell ringing was one full of ‘intricacies’. However, in his opinion some moderation and regulation were necessary.³⁷ It was in this vein that Lewis Mizzi, younger brother of politician Fortunato but on the other side of the political fence, proposed that carillons should substitute bells so that the din occasioned by uneducated bell ringers could be converted into a pleasant sound.³⁸ In making such a proposal, Mizzi was once again, seeking to establish ‘European’ as against oriental credentials for Valletta. Accordingly, the models he proposed for such an enterprise were northern European towns. It is these, wrote the reformist politician, which should be emulated. Incidentally, Lewis Mizzi was well aware of the practices (and, no doubt, the inconveniences and nuisances) of oriental cities having spent forty-five years as a lawyer in the Levant.³⁹ More than others, therefore, he could perceive the ‘oriental’ (and southern European) traits of the local lower classes.

Other, lesser nuisances, noises and smells in particular, annoyed both locals and foreigners.⁴⁰ One of these was the continuous shouting and cries of street vendors, beggars, and children. The utterances, shouts, haggling, and cries of these were noise in the ears of those who

35 *Malta*, 5 Jan. 1925.

36 N.A. (UK) CO158/329/16241, Minutes.

37 *DMC*, 22 July 1925.

38 *Ibid.*, 7 Aug. 1925.

39 Michael J. Schiavone, *Dictionary of Maltese Biographies* (2 vols.) (Malta, 2009).

40 The other major nuisance was the smell of drainage and the theories of the harmful effects of miasma. However, this is purposefully being left out because its political implications deserve a more comprehensive treatment than the present writing can afford.

preached order and discipline: these lacked syntax, were disorderly, unregulated, rhythmical, and disorderly, as were those of nineteenth-century Paris.⁴¹

The cries of Malta for frequency and full-throatedness go beyond all the cries of Europe. And everyone who has lungs can use them as he likes, and when he likes: no hour is sacred from three in the morning, when the goatman disturbs a whole neighbourhood, to twelve at night.⁴²

Thus did one newspaper portray the continuous din that reverberated throughout Valletta. As early as 1868, newspapers were lamenting the ‘incessant whining’ of beggars who roamed the streets of the capital. No protection is afforded to ‘one’ whether he is in the street, ‘even while engaged in conversation about important business’ or at home.⁴³

Worse still were the prostitutes. Some of the more important streets of Valletta – *Strada Ponente*, *Strada Forni*, *Strada Stretta*, and *Strada Federico* among others – from where frequent complaints were made by respectable fathers – were inhabited by prostitutes who offended morality not only through the exercise of their profession but also through the ‘uttering expressions of the most impure and revolting nature ... In the interval of from 10 to 15 minutes I have heard some of them utter more obscene expressions than I remember having heard in my whole life.’⁴⁴ By police orders, prostitutes were relegated to a few streets of the capital, away as much as possible from the eyes and ears of the respectable families whose senses could not be tainted by such impurities. This did not prevent complaints in newspaper against the shouting and singing threatening the peace of ‘respectable neighbours’ in later years.⁴⁵ Nor did it seem to prevent prostitutes from engaging in their profession wherever it suited them best. In any case, even in the streets where prostitutes were allowed to keep lodgings there also lived other, respectable people who had to hear, willingly or otherwise, the soliciting of custom by these women.

41 Boutin: 5

42 *DMC*, 9 June 1911.

43 *The Malta Times*, 5 Nov. 1868.

44 *The Malta Observer*, 6 July 1860.

45 See, for example, *Malta Times*, 16 Sept. 1871; *Risorgimento*, 10 July 1877, 6 Aug. 1878, 6 Aug. 1884, and 6 Mar. 1902.

Beggars were among those who most attracted the opprobrium of the community.⁴⁶ The calls for charity, for the giving of alms, for government aid, for the erection of poor houses were, particularly from the beginning of the twentieth century onwards, accompanied by criticism of the toleration of beggars who intruded into the ‘well-regulated community’,⁴⁷ ‘defying the Police with ever-increasing effrontery’.⁴⁸ Children too, particularly those who roamed the streets and entered cafes to beg were considered a nuisance. Whether these were ‘pestering errand-boys’ who stood at the entrance of the market offering their services and ‘shouting and bawling’,⁴⁹ or young girls who followed people in the streets asked for alms,⁵⁰ the cry of newspapers (both editorially as well as through correspondence) was for the meting out of appropriate, and harsh, punishment so that these practices would be stamped out.

Street-vendors added to the chorus of prostitutes, beggars, and children. The streets of Valletta teemed with hawkers’ carts. Not only was the noise a great nuisance but such overcrowding necessarily led to frequent accidents. When one correspondent wrote to a local paper complaining of the overcrowding of *Strada Reale*, the newspaper felt the need to comment: after the hours of business and on feast days, such overcrowding could afford the opportunity to meet and to talk, thus ‘relieving the monotony which menaces our common nature’. Nevertheless, such overcrowding was detrimental to health because of the ‘vitiating air’ that it caused.⁵¹

On feast days and after working hours, the air may well have been vitiating, but what was considered most nauseous was the smell and dirt of the goats daily entering Valletta. The endless controversy as to whether goat’s milk was the cause of the so-called ‘Malta fever’ (Brucellosis)

46 For local 19th-century attitudes to beggars and almsgiving, cf. Michael Refalo, ‘The Discourse on the Problem of Begging and Almsgiving in Late 19th-Century Malta’, in Joaquim Carvalho (ed.), *Bridging the Gaps: Sources, Methodology and Approaches to Religion in History* (Pisa, 2004), 187–209

47 *DMC*, 9 June 1911.

48 *Ibid.*, 21 Mar. 1927.

49 *The Malta Times*, 2 Jan. 1886.

50 *DMC*, 27 Aug., 1927.

51 *Ibid.*, 10 Aug. 1927.

was still far from settled, but falls outside the scope of this writing.⁵² This apart, it was the nuisance caused by the ‘unsavoury, malodorous, jostling herds of goats ... the filth-bedaubed bodies of these beasts’ which most annoyed the respectable people making use of Valletta’s streets.⁵³ Echoing the reference to the ‘well-regulated community’, in 1925, one correspondent called on the government to find a remedy to “The Goats Question” because such dirty animals were rendering ‘our island similar to an uncivilised country’.⁵⁴ At one time it was proposed to prohibit the entrance of goats through *Porta Reale*. When this was actually done, it was felt that, at last, one nuisance was being minimized.⁵⁵ However, within a week the position was back to normal. The goat ‘resumed her former predominance, with added insolence and despotism’. This reversion was attributed to political interests: an approaching election in which the party in government needed the vote of even such a small number of voters as the eligible goatherds.⁵⁶

By the first decades of the twentieth century, novel nuisances were intruding upon the sensibilities of the ‘well-regulated community’. Now, the cries of the goatherd and the street-vendor, the beggar’s lament, the cabs, and the carts which obstructed the streets and annoyed pedestrians, were joined by the motorcar. Motorcars were becoming increasingly popular in Malta. The novelty and the easy payment terms granted buyers, and an assiduous advertising campaign, paved the way for an increasing fascination with, and attraction for, this new means of transport.⁵⁷ However, lack of regulation and the narrow streets of Valletta soon demonstrated the extent to which motor traffic added to the numerous nuisances afflicting Malta’s capital city.

These early decades of the twentieth century could be considered as transitional years: carts, cabs, and the motorcar sought an impossible *modus vivendi* with each other and with pedestrians. The ambition for the speed of the motorcar driver clashed and crashed against the more leisurely pace of the street-vendor’s cart and the horse-driven cab, and

52 On the disease, cf. John Rizzo Naudi, *Brucellosis. The Malta Experience A Celebration 1905–2005* (Malta, 2005).

53 *DMC*, 28 May 1927.

54 *Malta Herald*, 11 Dec. 1925.

55 *DMC*, 28 May 1927.

56 *DMC* 10 Oct. 1927 (notwithstanding which that party lost).

57 One car importer claimed that there was one motor car for every 200 persons in Malta in 1929 (*The Malta Herald*, 31 Jan. 1931).

of course, the pedestrian. The result was not only an increase in the number of accidents but also an added nuisance of street blockages, of shouting, and of cries. Cabs, and cab drivers, were being criticized for the persistent and loud offer of custom.⁵⁸ To compound the nuisance, now cabs were competing with motorcars in racing through Valletta. At night, it was said, *Strada Reale*, 'is fraught with very real danger in the shape of speeding motor cars and recklessly driven cabs'. This, of course, was accompanied by 'much whip-cracking and bell-clanging'.⁵⁹

In the competition between motorcars and cabs, however, the blame for accidents – and nuisance – was generally attributed to the older means of transport. Modernity, or some form of it, seemed to have come to Malta and the nuisances which needed elimination were those which had irritated and annoyed the respectable people of Valletta (and elsewhere in Malta) for decades. Engine-driven traffic 'has come to stay' and the only remedy to the inconvenience – and accidents – caused by them was better regulation and education of the aspiring motor-driver.⁶⁰

Other incipient noises (and, no doubt, also smells) were gradually entering into the 'sensory landscape' of Malta's towns. One comes across references to the nuisance occasioned by the use of 'a wireless set'⁶¹ and, earlier, the gramophone.⁶² As yet, the nuisance of these contraptions was barely brought to the attention of the newspaper-reading public. However, some early laments against the nuisance of loud music heard from houses would soon be heard. At the very least, wrote one correspondent, the police should enforce the rule that by eleven o'clock at night, such music should be silenced. The same could be said for those who, after the closing of wine bars went about the streets singing.⁶³ Nevertheless, as a general rule it was the old rather than the new nuisances that grated. Perhaps, these novel sounds and noises were still too few to occasion disturbance; perhaps their novelty made them more acceptable. To pursue this matter further, would take us well beyond the period covered here. It is, nevertheless, the task which a social historian should pursue further because it opens a vista

58 Cf., for example, *DMC*, 12 Jan. 1927.

59 *Ibid.*, 4 Nov. 1927.

60 *The Malta Herald*, 1 June 1926.

61 *Ibid.*, 31 Aug. 1929.

62 *The Malta Herald*, 17 July 1907.

63 *Malta Taghna* 21 Sept. 1921.

on late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Malta, one which goes beyond the merely visual and pays well-merited, and due, attention to the changing perception of other forms of sensory perception.

John Chircop considers bell-tolling ‘as a language with a multiplicity of meanings’ which, however, has ‘to be examined in a specific social-hegemonic terrain’. In his case that terrain consisted of the two British possessions in the Mediterranean: Malta and the Ionian Islands of the nineteenth century.⁶⁴ He proposes two of these meanings: bell-ringing was a ‘device for the sustenance of the prevailing power structure from above’ and, at the same time, it was an expression of ‘malcontent, contestation, and outright rebellion from below’.⁶⁵ The latter expression may be expanded further to encompass all the noise which the ‘well-regulated community’ perceived as a nuisance. What this implies is that in some form or another, noise was an expression of what Ranajit Guha calls the ‘politics of the people’.⁶⁶ In this reading, what was sound for the subaltern becomes noise for those who believed that some form of discipline should be exercised over the way the lower classes went around their business, whether this was soliciting alms or touting for business. Noise gave voice to the illiterate mass of people who brushed shoulders with the social dominant. As such, noise defied the attempts at discipline which the respectable classes sought to enforce upon their subalterns. These are described as ‘an illiterate & undisciplined set of men & boys, who have no consideration for the feelings of others.’⁶⁷ It was these who vented their feelings, or merely annoyed, through noise, their betters. Noise, then, assume a different political dimension. It became a means through which those at the lower end of the social ladder give expression to, and assert, their voice over that of their superiors. Noise in whatever form violate the sense of respectability and order which the superior, whether political or social, wants to impose as a norm. A third political aspect of noise, hardly stated but nevertheless felt as an undercurrent in all debates about it, is located in the very absence of overt criticism of such

64 Chircop, 2.

65 Ibid.

66 Ranajit Guha, ‘On Some Aspects of the historiography of Colonial India’ in Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Selected Subaltern Studies* (New York & Oxford, 1988), 337.

67 A[rchiepiscopal] A[rchives] M[alta], Pace, Corr 1898 (Vol. VII): Admiral Rodney M. Lloyd (Superintendent of Dock Yard) to Archbishop Pietro Pace, 26 July 1898.

nuisances in the Italian-language newspapers, those that were generally critical of the British administration. There, the fact that Valletta's streets were noisy was subsumed within the recurrent discourse of British versus Italian (hence, Maltese); reformist versus anti-reformist; revolutionary versus traditional.

What is said about noise can be extended to odours. The bodily odours to which there was mounting objection were closely linked to hygiene. This period witnessed a growing awareness of the need to educate the people against dirt and disease. Nevertheless, bodily odours remained as a barrier between the clean and the dirty, the middle classes and the lower. George Orwell may well have exaggerated when he wrote, in the 1930s, that 'the real secret of class distinctions in the West' can be synthesized in 'four frightful words ... *The lower classes stink*.'⁶⁸ However, it is undoubted that in Malta, as elsewhere, there was a continuing and growing criticism against the malodorous persons, beggars in particular, who were a constant nuisance to the middle classes going about town. Equally, the goatherd whose flock contaminated Valletta's atmosphere, encountered the criticism of newspaper correspondents and editors alike, despite the demand for fresh milk (as the video clip mentioned earlier demonstrates).

The growing awareness of nuisances, and the calls for their elimination that increased in volume during the opening decades of the twentieth century is illustrative of the need of the middle classes to establish clear lines of distinction between themselves and their social inferiors. Such distinction, it was felt, needed to be filtered through the geography of Malta's capital. Valletta, its main street in particular, was the political, social, and cultural centre of the Maltese Islands. As such it was perceived to be the domain of the more respectable classes. If bell-ringing was inevitable (because fraught with too much religious and political baggage), the other lesser nuisances should be controlled as much as possible. This could only become possible through the banishing or control of the noisy and the smelly – imposing discipline and order upon the mass of the unenfranchised lower classes whose recalcitrance and reluctance to conform could only be expressed in such nuisances and little else.

68 George Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier*, quoted in Constance Classen, David Hawes & Anthony Synnott, *Aroma. The cultural history of smell* (London and New York, 1994), 161.

The video clip referred to is dated 1933, just beyond the period covered here. It shows that the battle against nuisances was far from over despite the absence of original sound and the impossibility of retrieving the smells of the streets. That clip may well have been silent, needing contemporary song to accompany it. In reality, however, careful attention to what was happening there, assisted by research into the relevant primary documents, helps us to hear and to smell some of the original nuisances against which the ‘well-regulated community’ objected with so much vehemence.