The notion that imperial rule was generated in the metropolis and imposed on the subject people with the sole assistance of a handful of hybrid Anglo-Maltese collaborators still forms part of mainstream historical discourse on British colonialism in Malta. Yet, deepening historical research on the nature of imperialism completely discredits this essentially narrow, nationalistic, post-independence view of history. Drawing on an array of current theoretical approaches and on-going comparative research in imperial studies, this paper treats colonialism as a “dialogue” between the British imperial force, with its own internal military, naval, administrative and commercial concerns on the one hand, and the dominant native social sectors and power institutions on the other. British colonialism in Malta and Gozo is therefore conceived as the product of a complex symbiotic relationship between the British imperial authorities and the domestic social formation. In order to understand the essential, and sometimes unique, characteristics of colonial rule during this period, it is imperative that we undertake a thorough analysis of the power structures of the colonial state - structures which incorporated an assortment of native elite groups along with the British authorities in Malta. This is why Maltese historiography needs to focus more on the shifts in the collaborative partnerships developing in Malta during the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries. An examination of the early colonial collaborative alliance forged between the colonial authorities, the higher reaches of the Catholic hierarchy, the merchant and landowning classes, from the inception of British rule up till the 1860s, has already been made. The present study

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is a follow-up, seeking to analyse the new collaborative colonial alliance which came into being as a result of a major alteration in the identification of interests between the British authorities and a different selection of collaborative elites and power institutions as from 1870 to 1914.

The period from 1870 to 1914 was characterised by intense antagonism between the European industrial powers in the Mediterranean in their scramble to enlarge their colonial possessions. The arms race which accompanied this imperialist rivalry enhanced Malta’s role as a key strategic naval-military station on the strategic route to India via the Suez Canal. The island’s enlarged strategic imperial functions in the British imperial system during this “new imperial phase”, necessitated the construction of an internal colonial infrastructure and an overhaul of its colonial state’s administrative structures, mainly its financial, administrative, repressive-policing and hegemonic institutions.

Framed within this broad scenario of intra-imperialist armed rivalry in the Mediterranean, this research study starts with an exploration of the ways in which subsequent British imperial requirements altered the conditions upon which the previous conservative collaborative alliance – which had kept the colonial state away from making itself present in the domestic social and cultural dimensions – gave way to a new collaborative partnership which drove the state’s process of modernisation in society. The major new components in this post-1870s colonial collaborative partnership were the big contractors and suppliers (mainly to the navy and the army) and the new middle class, itself a complex of social groupings, acculturated in British colonial norms of behaviour, value system and culture which closely identified themselves with the colonial order, and more particularly with the process of modernisation of Maltese society. Characterised by a modernist mentality and reformist aspirations, and eventually being more outspoken and militant in their drive to change or reform the domestic social and cultural landscape than the British authorities had ever wanted, this new middle class became the main dynamic behind the colonial state’s pronounced modernisation designs.

For this reason, this paper seeks to identify the social components forming the new middle class. It will later focus its analysis on the civil service, which became crucial for the continued operation, maintenance and legitimisation of the colonial state and its modernisation. It will become clear that one of the main functions of the Maltese civil services was to mediate the colonial state’s policies of modernisation through the construction of a new internal colonial infrastructure and institutional reforms, the parameters of which were explicited by three British commissioners’ reports during the short 1878-79 period. In substance, the Rowsell, Keenan and Julian reports dealt separately with the administrative, political, cultural and economic problems, and suggested reforms which were required to secure the proper functioning of Malta’s strategic facilities. From the resulting recommendations, the need for a modern fiscal system, which would increase the amount, and facilitate the gathering of local revenue through a more socially equitable system of taxation, was considered imperative if the process of modernisation and the accompanying public works, were to be launched and sustained.

**Financing the modern colonial infrastructure.**

Habitually, the bulk of the colonial state’s revenue was raised from indirect taxation, mainly through an *ad valorem* duty on the importation of grain. This varied from 15 percent in 1855, when the price of grain was high, to 47 percent when its price was low. In effect, the ‘wheat tax’, as it was generally known, raised from about 40 percent to 72 percent of the total annual revenue collected during the first three quarters or so of the nineteenth century. In 1822, Governor Thomas Maitland, pressed by the colonial authorities in London upon repeated requests from the Maltese and British merchants in Malta, had abolished the state monopoly of the *Università dei Granai* and imposed a duty on importation of grain. Taxation on the importation of grain remained untouched even by the Royal Commission of 1836 which abolished a large range of the limited import duties levied in Valletta’s *Porto Franco*. As demonstrated in another study, the ‘wheat tax’ was crucial for the holding together of the early traditional collaborative alliance in power, forged between the British authorities, the top merchant families, the landowning class and the powerful upper echelons of the Catholic Church, during the first sixty years or so of the nineteenth century.


5 “Gross yield of the Grain Tax, showing amount on each kind of grain, for each year since 1836” in Rowsell, “Appendix C.”


7 John Chircop, “A Collaborative Alliance”;
The colonial state’s traditional reliance for revenue on this kind of indirect taxation had other far-reaching social effects. The higher prices of imported grain resulting from the tax had a negative effect on the working classes that were the main consumers of bread. This heavy tax incidence on the poor working classes was recognised in the report written by Cobdenite Commissioner F.W. Rowsell in 1877. Rowsell demonstrated that “the relative proportion of consumption of farinaceous food stands at the lowest as 2 to 1 between the working people and the class above them”. He also calculated that this ‘wheat tax’ had a total incidence of 45 percent more per head on the working class in relation to the middle and upper classes.

Therefore, the constant high price of bread during the first seventy years of the nineteenth century depressed the already low standard of living of the labouring population, even during the pre-war times and during war conditions, which are usually depicted by historians as “thriving periods” for the Maltese. Concomitantly, the growing size and density of the population within the inner and outer Grand Harbour region provided abundant cheap labour to cater for the naval and mercantile labour demands and further depressed the price of labour. As a result, the standard of living of the working classes fluctuated at subsistence levels. An examination of the wages earned, as compared to the prices of basic staples, added to the severe fluctuations in employment, throughout most of the nineteenth century, confirms this trend and makes the low standard of living of the labouring people even more evident.

In this context, after analysing Malta’s fiscal structure, Commissioner F.W. Rowsell recommended the abolition, or at least a substantial reduction, of the ‘wheat tax’ as part of a shift to a modern system of direct taxation. These recommendations were attuned to the surfacing needs of the modern colonial state, primarily the need to generate a substantial increase in the annual revenue so as to be able to pay for the projected colonial infrastructure and, secondly, to secure the subsistence of the labouring classes. The last, especially the naval proletariat in the naval establishment, came to be regarded as indispensable for the continued operation and the efficient functioning of the imperial strategic naval-military and coal-bunkering facilities in the Grand Harbour.

The suggested reforms of government institutions and the proposed new fiscal system were immediately endorsed by the new middle class sectors with a direct interest in the modernisation of the colonial establishment. Made up of an array of social groupings – small traders and suppliers to the British military and naval establishments, a new generation of public servants filling the ranks of the government departments and institutions and groups of Anglophile professionals acculturated in British imperialist norms of conduct, value system and code of behaviour - this new middle class closely identified with the British colonial presence in Malta. The representatives of this new middle class expressed themselves in a colonial modernist discourse, replete with notions of progress and civilisation, articulated in support of the colonial state-driven fiscal, administrative and cultural reforms. Under the leadership of Sigismondo Savona, the Reformists endorsed Rowsell’s fiscal proposals and struggled to eradicate the old fiscal system, which came to be portrayed as a major ‘evil’ in society. But when the authorities attempted to pass the fiscal measures recommended by Rowsell through the Council of Government, they immediately faced strong opposition, not only from the traditional non-collaborative elites and the petty-bourgeois sectors, but also from a substantial proportion of the top merchant class (and up to a point the Chamber of Commerce) and landowners, which had traditionally collaborated with the colonial state. Resistance in the council was followed by quasi-riots in the streets of Valletta and led to the temporary abandonment of the suggested fiscal plans – but not for long.

As the total revenue collected in the late 1870s continued to fall to a minimum, the government, straining to defray recurrent expenditures and pay for the designated infrastructure projects, had every incentive to find ways and means to tap new revenue

8 A. Dingli, The Duty on Imported Cereal Products and the bread making industry in Malta (Malta, 1906), 23.
9 Rowsell, 170.
11 Ibid., 170.
12 Ibid., 20.
13 S. Savona, The Reduction of the Wheat Duty: Letter to Sir M. Hicks-Beach, Principal Secretary of State for the Colonies (Malta, 1879).
15 Rowsell, 4.
sources. At the same time, the colonial authorities were alarmed at the continuing rise in prices of basic consumer articles, fearing social unrest from the labouring classes, mainly from those within the parameters of the British naval establishments. In these circumstances it was clear that an increase in the 'wheat tax', the usual source of revenue, was not an option. It seemed that the only possible way to gather the revenue required to defray recurrent administrative expenditure and to pay for the much needed public works was the imposition of a new revenue system. However, when in 1878 proposals for a revenue scheme to pay for the extension of the drainage system in the Cottonera-Harbour region, which had long been considered necessary for the health of the garrison and the civil population, were brought for approval in the Council of Government, the anti-collaborationists' dissent burst into outright organised opposition.

Then again, for the colonial authorities, it was clear that Malta's strategic new role as a key base on the route to India and the empire, during a period of intense imperialist antagonism, called for a modern infrastructure, one that would secure the reproduction of a healthy, cheap and loyal labour force and at the same time offer the necessary support to military and naval operations. In those circumstances, the wage-dependent labouring classes came to occupy an increasingly important position in the new imperialist mind-set as it was articulated by the utilitarian ideology of the new middle-class Reformist Party. The latter interpreted the modernisation of the state institutions as beneficial to the population in general, and to the rapidly-growing labouring sectors in the harbour area in particular. In the words of Chief Secretary of State Gerald Strickland, these people were "necessary to the Fortress and Dockyard as labourers and artisans [and hence] they must be cultivated". The working classes, therefore, were viewed by the British imperial authorities and the Maltese middle classes as that social class forming the majority of the population upon whose loyalty and industriousness Malta's stepped-up strategic imperial functions depended. For this reason as well as to legitimate the new colonial civil infrastructure, the construction of new schools, hospitals and the sanitary schemes in the Harbour area were highlighted as beneficial for the same working classes by the colonial state and the most ostentatious and politically involved personalities of this new middle class.

For the above reasons, the provision of food and sanitation for the wage-earning labouring classes in the Cottonera-Harbour region, came to occupy a central position in the broader strategic designs of the War Office. In 1898, military experts pressed the Colonial Defence Committee on the importance of securing storage of wheat on the Island. They proposed that at least three months supply of wheat should be kept in reserve for the feeding of the population in war emergencies. The preoccupation with storing wheat to secure the provisioning of the masses of the labouring poor became an official concern. For Governor Fremantle: "Bread is, practically the food of the poor in Malta and perhaps the only article which the Government need bind itself to supply in case of blockade". In this new imperial mindset, burdening the working classes with more taxes, especially as the wheat tax was still in existence, was, to say the least, inappropriate. It would be unproductive and would induce social tensions in the most strategic zone of the island. Faced with these circumstances, the colonial state promulgated a new fiscal system which would tax those social pockets where capital accumulated. This new scheme was supported by the new middle-class Reformist movement which had made the abolition of the wheat tax one of its major concerns. The complex political situation created prompted Adrian Dingli, Chief Justice and key personality of the colonial order in Malta, to warn the local upper classes that they:

Must before long feel the injustice of it [the wheat tax]; and that it is much better for them, as for the Community at large, to resign themselves to Government initiatives than to wait for pressure from below. They cannot be so blind as to see that it is in their interest to refrain from putting the Government under the necessity of looking to the working class for moral support to its just and now unavoidable fiscal measure.
Chief Justice Dingli was reacting to the rigorous opposition which was surfacing even from previously collaborating sectors against the suggested alterations to the fiscal arrangements. In the Council of Government, representatives of the anti-collaborationist elites had already taken an intransigent stand against the passing of expenditure budgets for public works and expressed their opposition to the new colonial state interference in the domestic social landscape. It was in these circumstances, 1901, that chief secretary Gerald Strickland took the lead and tried to push forward the new system of public revenue aimed:

- to improve the public revenue of Malta for the purpose of enabling the Government to make provisions for certain extraordinary works urgently required and for the improvement of the sanitary and general conditions of the island.  

Actually, this Draft Finance Ordinance, published on the 16th February 1901, recommended the total expenditure of £623,152 to be utilised for a series of interrelated projects, including the construction of new schools, drainage and water works, the building of ‘criminal wards’ lunatic and leper asylums, of a new hospital, breakwater in Gozo and the extension of electric light, with the following costs:

1. New Elementary School: £ 73,728
2. New Drainage Works: £303,118
3. New Water Works: £100,000
4. Building of Leper Asylum for Women: £ 8,000
5. Ward in Lunatic Asylum for ‘Criminal Lunatics’: £ 2,000
6. New Hospital: £ 60,000
7. Breakwater in Gozo: £ 10,000
8. Extensions of Electricity: £ 20,000
9. Construction of Wharf at Custom House: £ 16,000

This cluster of public projects indicates the colonial state’s preoccupation with securing health and social sanitation and intensifying surveillance and discipline, with the assistance of the new internal colonial infrastructure. These public projects, commencing with the urgently required extension of the sewage system in the Grand Harbour-Cottonera area, which was expected to take most of the immediate expenditure, would also raise the quality of life of the labouring population, protect the health of the garrison and the naval crews and therefore safeguard the proper functioning of Malta’s strategic naval-military and coal-bunkering facilities on the vital British imperial route crossing the Mediterranean. The fact that these public works would also generate employment would further legitimate the spending on the colonial infrastructure in the eyes of the urban working classes and thus foster greater consent for the colonial order.

The Draft Ordinance under discussion detailed a new revenue scheme and set heavy penalties to prevent evasions. An increase in stamp duties on notarial acts, bills of exchange, insurance policies, sales and a business transactions ad valorem duty, together with a rise of some 20 percent in duties on imported products were to be imposed. These included beer, sugar, tobacco and petroleum, though a duty drawback was allowed on imported tobacco and other primary material used for local manufacture in order to aid domestic manufacture. In all in therefor, this financial ordinance was announcing an increased incidence of taxation on import trade activities and professional-lega! practices and thus led to immediate reactions from business and professional sectors that were represented by the non-collaborative anti-reformist representatives in the Council of government.

With the publication of the Financial Ordinance hell was let loose. The Chamber of Commerce (representing the interests of the import-oriented merchants), voiced its disapproval in an open letter to Strickland himself. It expressed its alarm at the fact that, contrary to the previous mode of taxation, the new Ordinance would create a “permanent systematic” revenue scheme which hindered trade activities.

On the public political level, the already mentioned obstructionist tactics against the passing of the Ordinance, by elected members in the Council of Government,

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24 Ibid..
were immediately followed by popular agitation in the streets. Resistance culminated in the organisation of two large public meetings at Ta' Braxia organised by the Partito Nazionale. The situation reached a deadlock, and the colonial authorities were obliged to resort to an imperial order-in-council. In this way the Governor passed the so-called “Strickland’s financial Ordinance” with minor amendments. The opportunity was also taken to use this order-in-council to give greater powers to the Governor to be able “to issue warrants under his hand for expenditure, not otherwise provided for, which is in his opinion urgent, provided that such warrants do not exceed £10,000 in any one year”. This was intended to facilitate expenditures on the designated public works. The passing of the Finance Ordinance revenue scheme in this manner overturned the Cardwell principle, established in 1864, according to which the opinion of the Maltese elected representatives had to be considered, especially and “above all in money matters”.

Apart from all this, the construction of the internal colonial infrastructure met with various other problems. In a couple of years it became clear that expenditure provided by the Financial Ordinance under discussion had been underestimated. In fact, a constant deficit reached the sum of well over £260,000 by 1911. Facing a wider economic crisis, with the local Treasury funds decreasing by £10,000, the administration asked for authorization to sell a proportion of its stocks. This step created further insecurity and the only alternative sought was that of asking Malta’s leading banks to issue banknotes, which they did. Commenting on the ensuing financial crisis, the Royal Commissioners of 1911 concluded that the previous expenditures were “ambitious” and believed that they had to be curtailed if a financial balance was ever to be reached. The taxation listed in the 1901 order-in-council had been imposed with the condition that it should cease by 1914. Yet by this date, the state of the Maltese Treasury made it necessary that this system of taxation become permanent. War broke out in 1914 and in war conditions, taxation was somewhat considered as justifiable, censorship was imposed, and all formal political resistance was immediately over-ridden.

Brokers and Agents: The Colonial Civil Service.

It was the civil service which came to play a central role in the process of modernisation under review, not least as a broker between the colonial state and the population. The top ranking Maltese public servants, most of them coming from collaborating elite families, were indispensable for the continued functioning of the colonial state’s heavy administrative, financial and charitable machineries, for the deepening of its social control and the fostering of consent. The post-1870s new generation of conspicuously Anglophilic civil servants, characterised by a modernist colonial culture, attitudes and norms of conduct, had a vested interest in the upkeep of the colonial order which was increasingly reflected in their support for institutional modernisation. The latter they interpreted as part of a ‘reformist mission’ which would change the traditional Maltese social fabric and culture. As key power holders, directing and administrating the main establishments of the state, these top civil servants sustained a policy of intensive recruitment of larger numbers of ‘pro-British’ elements, making out of the Civil Service the backbone of the colonial presence in Maltese society. However, while the growth of the public service, particularly from the 1870s to 1910, consolidated the colonial state and facilitated the mediation of its modernisation policies with the population, it was also creating problems on the financial side of things. For British Commissioner Rowsell, already by 1877, there was an enormous
number of civil servants: “more than are necessary” for the administrative requirements of the time.41 Still, the civil establishment continued to grow, from 1,456 persons in 1886 to 3,046 in 1910,42 as illustrated in the following graph.

Graph showing number of Government Servants, Pensionable Officers and Pensioners 1886-1911

Source: Malta Royal Commission Report 1911-12 “Appendix B”

The modernisation and restructuring of the institutions of the colonial state, combined with the political necessity to constantly recruit public servants, worked against expert advice to start reducing numbers in the civil service. As shown by the MacCarthy report in 1908, the whole civil bureaucracy in Malta was becoming so over-staffed that it started to create what this same report described as undue halts “red-tape and waste of time”.43 In spite of all this, the civil service continued to expand leading to what was later to be described as a post-First World War “exhaustion in the civil service” departments mainly because of the inordinate amount of clerks employed. In the words of the key collaborating administrator Henry Casolani “the

bulk degenerate into that undesirable commodity - which causes everybody’s pity - the clerk. How much have I pointed out that nobody needs clerks much less than they are necessarily the leavings of a class”.44 Moreover, This over-inflated civil service was producing a diminishing marginal return because of the expanding cost for its upkeep. It was further loaded with the emergence of an enlarged civil pension scale, as pensioners came to total 433 persons in 1890 and 633 by 1910, as shown in the above graph. The end result of this overextension of the Public Service was the further allocation of increasing percentages of local capital flows into the colonial state’s machinery.

It was obvious to the colonial authorities on the spot that similarly to what was happening in much larger colonies, such as India and the Asian territories,45 Malta could not do without an extensive and overgrown civil administrative structure, not least, it must be stressed, for the legitimisation of its colonial rule. This especially during economic crises, when people were also recruited in its lower ranks to reduce unemployment, especially in the urban areas. This happened during the post-1905 acute economic crisis when the government flooded its departments with new public servants, mostly in the lower grades, in order to stabilise the labour market. Gradually, through competitive exams, the lowest ranks of the civil establishment came to be filled by elements from the working classes who were schooled in the English language and colonial culture. The degree of social mobility that this offered, albeit limited, became crucial for the support of the working classes to the colonial order.

At the higher level, the top civil servants came to exercise control over scarce resources such as job opportunities and the provisioning of tenders. This produced a far-reaching clientelistic network which created further dependence and assured support for the consolidation of the new colonial infrastructure and the public order. As observed in other societies passing through modernisation and increased economic dependency, it was this patron-client relationship, added to the mediator-broker role of the civil servants, which further aroused the animosity of the traditional elites and their intellectuals in the towns and villages,46 against the central state. The traditional


43 Report of Mr. R.H. MacCarthy on the workings of the Customs Department (Malta, 1908), iv, vi.


elites started to feel that the increasing interference of the state in the social and cultural dimensions, through its policies of social reform and modernisation, was diminishing their customary hegemony over their communities. These non-collaborative elites and the traditional ‘organic’ intellectuals in the towns and villages, mostly from the petty bourgeoisie and the Catholic clergy, became ever more antagonistic to the collaborating alliance exercising power through the modern colonial state apparatus and organised themselves in a nationalist anti-reformist block in the 1880s. An examination of this complex anti-collaborative social block does not fall within the research frame of the present paper, yet it suffices here to underline that this anti-reformist movement was cemented by the exclusion of members of the traditional elites, which had previously collaborated, from the colonial state structure.

Gradually throughout this period, the colonial state continued to recruit Anglophile collaborators in key administrative posts in all its institutions and establishments. Civil servants with a colonial reformist and utilitarian mentality were selected to occupy key posts as directors of government establishments and charitable institutions, up to the higher posts of Chief [or Acting Chief] Secretary of State. In this way, the new Anglophile middle class gradually took hold of the state power structure and secured their newly gained social prestige, vested economic interests and cultural influence in the colonial state. At the same time, through its loyal (Maltese) civil servants, the colonial state extended its control and deepened its influence at all levels of the economy, society and culture, enabling it to cater for the emerging strategic functions Malta was to play in the on-going intra-imperialist contest which would lead to the First World War.

47 See A. Koster, Prelates and Politicians in Malta (Amsterdam, 1981).

48 For this transformation in the administrative hierarchy of the educational department see J. Chircop, “Shifting the Colonial Frontier”, 130-132.

49 The list of the few Maltese occupying this high administrative post, during the period under review, would includes G. De Petri, Gerald Strickland and Francesco Vella.